

## Developing Minds: An American Ghost Story

By Jonathan LaPoma

### Chapter 1

It began as a competition—albeit one in which I didn't know I was a contestant.

“I think the only reason that bitch hired me is ‘cause she’s in the first throes of a midlife crisis. You see the way she kept winking at me? These Cubanos see nothing but sex. You know . . .”

Billy was the first to speak after we exited the East Miami Senior High Library and stepped onto the parking lot. Billy and I had driven together from New York to the American Tropics on a whim. I'd spent the previous five months living in a small Mexican town and had only been back in the country for a few weeks before I was at it again. Within a week of hearing about a three-day teacher recruitment event in Miami, I had my reservation and the car packed. I'd planned to go alone, but a few days before leaving, Billy gave me a call. He was teaching at one of the roughest schools in the New York Public Schools District, PS 490 in Jamaica, Queens, and had no plans to leave. But these were the times . . .

“Miami, you say?”

“Yeah, why don't you come with me?”

“I already have a job.”

“Some fun in the sun?”

“Well, Diego *is* driving me crazy . . .”

For the past year, Billy called me every other day with another story of some terrible thing his students did to him, or other teachers, or each other—or some terrible thing he'd done to himself in retaliation. But that's just the way it was surviving in America's public schools. Every day was a struggle. Every day was psychological warfare, and if you didn't stay sharp, the system would grind you into human pencil shavings.

I'd spent most of the previous year in various Buffalo public schools, either as a student teacher or long-term sub, temporarily replacing a man who'd taken a few months off to nurse a worsening stomach ulcer. I hated the job, but felt chained to it. I didn't know why. I didn't want to teach. After finishing the long-term subbing gig, I was offered a full-time social studies position at the same school, but the day before I was supposed to go in and sign the contract, I bought a one-way ticket to Mexico. I'd only recently gotten back. The darkness had been settling into my life, but something in that small Mexican town, Mariposa, helped me see through it. It was in that light I'd realized I wanted to be a writer.

I'd started a novel almost immediately after my return from Mexico, jumping out of my bed in the middle of one humid Buffalo summer night and upchucking memories and quotes and themes on anything I could grab hold of: tissues, blank pages in books, the front cover of *the White Album* . . . Once I started, I couldn't stop. It felt like an addiction, but of a new sort—one that didn't eat into me as I ate into it. I started writing every day, for hours. It was my obsession, but in giving into it, the pain eased. The stars had aligned, the cows had come home. I'd found my calling. But there was something else calling me . . .

“Don’t forget,” Barbara Sutters, the woman running the recruitment fair, walked outside and bellowed to all us dejected souls wandering to our cars, “tomorrow’s session will be at Sojourner Truth Middle in Homestead. We hope to see you all come back!”

God, I fucking hated teaching. I wasn’t sure what I was even doing at that fair. I was a little more than halfway through my book and knew it’d be shelved the moment I got a job. But I went left after right toward one anyway with a determination equal to that put into my writing.

“So, what’s the name of your school again?” I unlocked the doors and got behind the wheel.

“Little Havana Elementary.” Billy opened his door and sat in the passenger seat. He fanned himself with a copy of the school contract he’d just signed and turned up the A/C before I’d even put the keys in the ignition. “I don’t know what that bitch was thinking hiring me. They got me teaching Spanish and the school’s almost a hundred percent Cuban. And, I don’t know what the fuck I was thinking taking it. But it’s an A school, so it can’t be all that bad.”

“Naw, it’ll be cake.”

I started the car and pulled out into the perplexing Southeast quadrant streets. I took a wrong turn and quickly got lost in the byway of east/west streets and north/south avenues, but I knew where the ocean was, and drove toward it.

“Hey, we should get some work done on our screenplay tonight,” I said. “I can’t wait to finish that thing. Miami is like LA Junior. We need to head out West to the big leagues.”

The day was stifling. Summer heat in Miami could draw sweat from a stone. I dripped into my dark polyester suit. I followed my instincts and made it back to Miami Beach; though our motel was north, I drove south, almost reaching the end of the island. I then began the slow journey north through South Beach.

“Shit, this place is like a gigantic pussy waiting to be fucked,” I said, while driving under the shade of row after row of towering hotels and condo complexes. “We gotta start again on that screenplay soon. My head’s swelling.”

“Yeah . . . hey, would you get a load of all these boys? So tanned, so pretty. This is like a homo’s paradise. After all, you know what a gay man’s favorite food is, right?”

“I dunno, corn dogs?”

“No, papi-cock!” Billy giggled. He seemed pretty pleased with himself.

We passed more pastel colored, pleasure-ship-inspired Art Deco buildings and eventually arrived at the appropriately named Seaside Motel. We went up to our room, changed, and went for a dip in the ocean.

“I really need to step it up tomorrow. Can you imagine living here? This place is paradise. Every weekend is like spring break.” I dipped my head underwater—so warm, so blue—and popped back up.

“Yeah, I can’t believe it’s a part of the US. This city’s like no place else in the country. But I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing here—I mean, I’m still employed

at the NYPSD. PS Four Ninety is expecting my gracious return at the start of the fall term. I signed a two-year contract with Educate America and can incur some pretty stiff penalties for renegeing on my contractual obligations.”

“Fuck PS Four Ninety. You hate that place.”

“There’s no place better than Four Ninety, honey-pie. I can’t imagine what my principal would say if she saw me standing in those lines today. D’nisha Xavier. That bitch is the devil herself, don’t kid yourself otherwise. She’s this emaciated, angry, spite-filled, agro nutcase. The kids used to give her such hell ‘cause she was half-Israeli. They called her ‘Halfrican.’” He started laughing. “And we used to call her Xavier the Savior.”

“I don’t know how you put up with that woman.”

“Whenever shit would get bad, I just made a joke of it—I mean, what else can you do? She used to go on the PA and call me down to her office all the time. ‘Will Mr. Lalina please report to ma’ office.’ Then I’d get down there and she’d be sitting with her veiny, disgusting feet up on her desk, then she’d throw ‘em down all dramatically when I walked in, as if she was startled and disgusted by my presence.”

He acted out the scene as a one-man play, playing both characters with equal intensity.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Lalina?”

“Uh, you called me . . .?”

“Cut the shit, Mr. Lalina. You know I done told you about your excessive use of the chalkboard during instruction. That chalk-n-talk bullshit don’t work in *ma*

school. That's old as jazz. And I ain't gonna have no foo' tootin' his horn in *ma* school. You got it, Mr. Lalina?"

"Yeah, well you know my students have the highest test scores in the school, right?"

"Excuse me. Is you disrespectin' me in *ma* office? Mr. Lalina, I think we gonna need to get you into a pa'fessional development course on basic manners and social skills."

"Yeah, yeah. Look, I gotta go."

"An' what's more, I don't like yo' attitude."

"Eh, whatever . . ."

I gave him a standing ovation. "That bitch sounds like a nightmare."

"Yeah, she was the worst, but I'm convinced it's because of the weight coming down on her from the top. All these schools live and die by their ratings. And PS Four Ninety was an F-. These principals only got so much time to flip their schools before they're out on their asses, and the Savior was on the precipice of her tenure with the NYPSD. She used to hold these meetings with the staff to contrive school spirit, but it would always just end up with her cussing us out while we ripped into her boney ass. She'd say, 'You all ungrateful. This ain't no way to treat a pa'fessional.' God, the woman actually used to say it like that. Pa'fessional. She could barely speak proper English and she was at the helm of a fucking school. We used to give her hell all the time. The black chicks there were tough as shit, but they loved me. I think they knew I was gay, so they took me in on their side. Whenever

the Savior'd be giving a speech, we'd just sit there and heckle her. 'That ain't in my contract, girlfriend.'"

I laughed. "I can picture you doing that, too."

"Oh my god, one time she was going crazy on the chalkboard writing some crap about how chalk-n-talk was dead—with chalk, mind you—and she dropped a piece. Then when she bent down to pick it up, I made this loud fart noise with my mouth and everybody erupted in laughter. D'nisha went crazy and started screaming that she was gonna fire everybody if they didn't learn them some respect." Billy started laughing. "She was the Savior of American Public Education."

"Well, Miami is a chance for you to start over. I mean, look left then look right. White sand as far as the eye can see. This is gonna be the place, man. This is gonna be paradise. I just need to find a job first, and you need to show up to yours."

"Oh my god, what am I doing? I came down here for a vacation, and I walk into a job. I guess I'm just too lovable for my own good."

"Well maybe you could lend me some of that charm, or you're gonna be lovable all by yourself."

"Oh god, I fucking hate teaching." Billy dunked his head underwater and stayed down for a while.

Billy and I had been friends since college. We lived across the hall from each other in the McKinley University dorms. He began as a philosophy major and I as an architect. Together we were going to design America's revolution. It only took one semester before we'd both changed majors and only another after that before I'd

transferred to a different school. But Billy and I continued to wax revolution despite these trivial changes in our lives. We were kindred spirits. We shared the same sense of adventure, the same sense of wonder, the same general curiosity and marvel of life. But we also shared the same detachment, the same exhaustion, and the same lack of tools to survive life in society. Even so, nobody was keeping us down.

Our most recent struggles had brought us to Miami—and the trip seemed cursed from the start. I was living in Buffalo and he in New York. He called me the day before the Fourth of July to tell me about a spontaneous recent trip to visit a “friend” down in Puerto Rico. “Oh my god, I just had to get the fuck outta New York . . .”

Things had been getting tense between him and his boyfriend, Diego, so Billy hopped on Perdido Air and hopped off onto the warm sands of PR. He had a Dominican boy in the City and a Puerto Rican boy in the tropics, so when I said the magic word, “Miami,” he responded, “Whoa, Miami is literally between the two. I could take flights to either place every few weekends. It’d be great!” Though this would take him out of direct contact with either boy toy, it was also the logic of a man who once bought a sixty dollar Greyhound ticket from Buffalo to O’Hare Airport just so he could save fifty bucks on his flight. Perhaps he’d never heard the phrase, “A boy toy in the bed is worth two on the beach?”

Either way, Billy told me to pick him up in New York so we could drive down to the American Tropics together. He’d left his aging Honda in Buffalo when he moved to the City after college and didn’t have another car with him. I agreed, drove



straight through the hilly guts of New York, and met him under an L train in the Bronx. Billy was living in a Dominican neighborhood and sharing an apartment with a Dominican family. The dude was one hundred percent Irish-American, born and raised on the streets of Buffalo, but he was an Hispanic at heart. I hadn't seen him in ages. He'd only recently come out. And when I saw my once-slouchy and ever-lethargic friend standing under that train tall and proud, I almost didn't recognize him.

"Hey, just park somewhere over there." He pointed to a spot down the street.

"You sure it's okay? I hear New York meter maids get a hard on for writing tickets."

"Oh, don't be such a bitch."

I parked, grabbed all my stuff, made sure to lock the doors, and followed him up to his apartment. We went out for a few drinks that night, then popped into a bodega for some malt liquor forties, finished those off in an alley, and smoked some of the stuff he'd swiped from the old Dominican lady he lived with. "She won't mind. Her son supplies the whole block and he leaves dear old mom a green gift each week. She usually just gives it to me anyways."

We woke late the next morning. We'd planned on hitting the road by nine, but that didn't happen. Our goal was to drive halfway, sleep at a rest area somewhere in the Carolinas, then continue down the I-95 to its near end and spend the afternoon at the beach, relaxing before the big show started early Tuesday morning. We walked to the street around noon and encountered a challenge.

"You sure you parked it there?" Billy said.

“Yes, I’m sure! Look, there’s the spray-painted picture of a dick on the sidewalk.”

I called the cops and they directed me to the traffic enforcement squad. The surly woman who picked up told me my car had been towed for being parked in a restricted site and that I wouldn’t be able to retrieve it until the next day. I took down the name and address of the lot where I could pick it up, hung up, and cussed Billy out for his stupidity.

“Eh, whatever,” Billy said. “So we just leave tomorrow instead of today.”

“The teaching fair starts on Tuesday! We’ll never make it on time.”

“We will if we drive through the night.”

Billy’s boyfriend, Diego, stopped over that night and threw a fucking fit after hearing of his lover’s spontaneous plan.

“So you planned on just leaving me like that? Just like that? Just like I am nothing? And who is this asshole you are going with? Does he think he can just replace me?”

Sometime around 2 am, I gave up on trying to convince him that I had no intentions of courting Billy, nor any other guys for that matter, but he just kept coming with it. “What, you think maybe ‘cause you are a teacher and you have some money, you can take my man, well you got another thing coming, *culero* . . .” I left the apartment and walked the streets until about three, and when I came back Diego was cuddled up next to Billy in his bed.

The next morning, I called the lot where my car had been towed to be sure it was there. It was. I gave Billy the address and asked him if he knew anyone who

could drive us. He said no, so we took a cab. I'd cashed in my savings bonds before leaving Buffalo and had about five hundred bucks on me—my total worth. Fifty-five went to the Turkish fellow who brought us to the lot. I walked into the trailer at the impound yard and handed over another \$365 to the ill-tempered bitch behind the counter, who felt the need to give me a lesson before giving me my car. "Don't you know not to park in a restricted zone? Is you stupid or somethin'?"

I didn't respond.

She opened the gate, and Billy and I were off. We hit the I-95 just before 11 am. The teacher recruitment event was scheduled to start at 9 am the next day. We pulled into the East Miami High parking lot that morning at 9:07. People were still shuffling into the school. Billy and I got dressed in the car.

"Yo, man, you got a stick of gum or something?"

Though rushed, I felt fine until we walked through those double doors into the crowded library. I didn't know if it was the size of the crowd or the speech that Barbara Sutters was giving, but something about that scene got inside of me. The walls started vibrating, the books started whispering to me their secrets, the manic stories of all those desperate job seekers swirled in the mix. I started sweating.

Ms. Sutters spoke throughout.

"I want to congratulate all of you for coming down here and seeking employment with the Miami Public Schools District. There are thousands of kids in this city who need good people such as yourselves to help guide them through this crazy adventure called life. We are looking for the leaders among you. The role

models. Those who came here not only for a job, but to start along the path to inspire young minds, as well as your own.”

“Man, we shouldn’t have smoked that shit last night. I feel like I’m gonna puke.” Billy wandered out into the hall in search of a bathroom.

Ms. Sutters continued, “We have representatives from over fifty schools, elementary through senior high, set up at tables in the library.” She pointed out the tables; all heads turned. A low murmur rumbled throughout the crowd. I felt their energy, heard their hushed words, “Today is my day, today is my day!” I wanted to wish them all well, but they were my competition.

“The representatives are all ready and waiting for you. In one moment I’m going to ask you to calmly approach them in an orderly way.”

I could see the springs ready to uncoil beneath their feet and asses. People hung at the edge of their seats like those greedy, rabid shoppers waiting behind closed department store doors in the pitch-dark, pepper-spray Black Friday morning, ready to stampede anyone who’d gotten between them and this year’s vibrating sweat-shop sensation. Billy wandered in just as Ms. Sutters gave the signal. Few paid any respect to her pleas for “calm” and “order.” Even the little old ladies were clawing at their fellow man to be the first to those tables. It made me sick to know I was a part of it all.

“What the hell’s going on here?” Billy wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

“It’s on . . .”

I had no idea what I was doing. The insanity bum-rushed my good sense. I could feel my stomach turn and sweat pour into my cheap suit.

“I guess we should join humanity, huh?” I said.

“Eh, whatever . . .” Billy shrugged his shoulders and we chose two separate tables at random. The scene was a goddamned circus. “I was in line here first!” “No you wasn’t, you was behind me, fool.” A great way to make a great first impression. There were about ten people in line at each table. I wasn’t sure if this was a first-come-first-to-get-the-job type of event, but I didn’t want to invite that kind of dread into my already fragile subconscious, so I assumed it wasn’t. I decided to play the whole thing cool. I struck up a conversation with the guy in front of me, an awkward, overweight and balding man with little, dark hairs curling through what looked like his body’s every unclogged and still-functioning pore.

“So what subject do you teach?” I said.

“Middle school history,” he snickered into his fat hands with what seemed like sick undertones of unconscious sexual depravity. “I specialize in the Age of Exploration and did my dissertation on the Franco-Prussian War . . .”

“Gotta love those Prussians—”

“. . . But my real area of expertise is in my graphic organizers. Those are my true passion. Just as a blacksmith would marvel at a great sword he’s crafted, I too marvel at my organizers. I’ve had several patented by the US Copyright Office . . .”

“Can you patent a graphic organizer?”

“. . . Let me finish. ” The guy was practically frothing at the mouth now. “Well, no, they said no, but I wanted to be certain anyway. Look,” he dug into his pocket and pulled out a business card, “anytime you’re in the market for a good organizer,

you call me. I'll get you what you need. Venn Diagrams, flowcharts, t-graphs—I've got 'em all."

"I'll be sure to file that away." I grabbed the card by its corner with my thumb and pointer, not knowing what hideous things may have been smeared on it.

The lunatic turned away from me smiling as if all that nonsense about t-charts and graphs were the culmination of some weird fantasy he'd pulled me into. I set the card down on a nearby table.

The line I was in was moving much faster than most of the others. I wasn't sure if this was a good sign or not. The graphic organizer guy only got a few sentences into his spiel before the crotchety bitch behind the table sent him away. He walked to another table, mumbling something to himself about her "lack of organization." The woman motioned for me to sit. I obliged and shook her hand.

"So." She folded her hands and set them on the table. Excellent form. "Tell me why you'd like to be a teacher at the Horatio Alger Academy for the Gifted and Talented?"

"Well, uh, I've done some extensive research into your, uh, program and am excited to be part of what you've got going on there . . ." My eyes felt as if they were turning blood red.

"Hmm, yes, of course. So, tell me your experience with data tracking for the F2ST."

"Uh, well, I think it's extremely important to track all your data so you always know exactly where it is. And, uh . . ."

"Do you know what the F2ST is?"

“Well, it’s the, uh, Florida . . . Two . . .?”

“Hmm, no, no it’s not. The F2ST is the Florida State Standardized Test, the most important assessment in the state. Each student in the Sunshine State is tested in English, science, and math and the schools are assigned a letter grade based off the results. You see, Mr. En—”

“—telechy.”

“Yes. You see, Mr. Entelechy, we at the Horatio Alger Academy are an A school, and have been for the past ten years. We only recruit the best and the brightest to educate our young minds.” She pulled down her glasses with her index finger and gave me a look.

“Yeah, loud and clear, ma’am, but I don’t think that my ignorance of the state’s jargon should preclude my application—I mean, what are they doing tossing a random two in there anyways? It’s a test, not a boy band. Wouldn’t it be easier if they just called it the FSST? And I am familiar with state testing, just—”

“We’ll be in touch with you, Mr., uh—thank you.” She held out her hand.

“Wait, did I tell you about my graphic organizers?”

She shook my hand and motioned for the next poor sap to sit. I scanned the room. The place was a battleground of human will. Each time another one of those rejected souls walked away from a table, it looked as if they’d just been told they’d contracted a terminal illness. Conversely, every so often someone would leap up from their seat, clap their hands, and shout something like, “Oh, thank Jesus!” then rush over to the team behind the circulation desk, whose members were handing

out the employment paperwork and manning the fingerprinting machine. The lucky applicants would then continue their celebration as they exited the double doors.

I scanned the room for Billy. He was in an interview with a cheery middle-aged woman from an elementary school. The interview must have been going well because both she and Billy were cracking up. They soon shook hands, and Billy got up from the table. I walked over to him.

“That looked like it went well,” I said.

“Eh, she said all their Spanish jobs were filled, so they’d have no place for me.”

“Then what the hell were you talking about?”

“Remember when me, you, and Dana Samson drove out to Maine that one night just because we wanted to see what a real lighthouse looked like?”

“You told her about that?”

“Eh, no, but I did tell her what it was like skinny dipping in the Atlantic Ocean in the crest of New England spring.”

“And she didn’t give you a job?” I smiled.

“You don’t get it, man. What do you think these tired, old bitches want? Sex. You gotta give ‘em sex, and they’ll give up their own jobs for you. All these dried up, lonely old biddies were once moist little girls with heads full of big, wet dreams. You give them reason to moisten up again, and they’ll give you anything.”

“You’re forgetting something.”

“What’s that?”

“That you’re not exactly the guy to be manning the hose.”



“Hell, for all they know I boned ten Cubanas last night. Just give it a try. Most of the figureheads whoring out their schools here are old hens. And besides, Miami is the City of Sex.”

“Eh, what the hell . . .”

I scanned the room for the frumpiest-looking sweetheart and got in her line. Soon, I was sitting before her.

“So, what brings you to our booth at West Miami High?”

“Well, uh, your big, beautiful eyes, and, uh . . .”

“Uh, excuse me, I don’t know what kind of school you think is West Miami, but we don’t tolerate comments about my eyes. I think you’ll be better suited someplace else. Good day.”

I got up and gave Billy a thumbs down. He smiled. As the afternoon continued, the tension grew. A few brief shouting matches had broken out between candidates, once when a woman took the last croissant from the refreshment table while another claimed to have been “already reaching for it, bitch,” and another time when an older woman confronted a young male for snickering at something she said while she was participating in an interview. Also as the time passed, the candidates’ celebrations were more glorious and their defeats more dispiriting. After being offered a job at a middle school, an older woman threw her arms in the air and said, “Oh praise you, Jesus. Praise your wonderful name.” But rather than leap out of her chair during this exchange with her Great Spirit, she stretched out her arms on the table, folded them together, rested her head in them and wept—her shoulders and back heaving up and down under the pressure of tremendous breaths. It looked as

if she hadn't slept in a lifetime. She continued to praise Jesus, now with her face pointed at his mortal enemy.

Billy approached me after striking out at Coral Gables Middle.

"Christ, Billy, what the hell are we doing? We're poaching jobs from the locals. These people need the work."

"And we don't? It's a fuckin' jungle out there, man." Billy smiled at some thirty-something Latina admin giving him the eye from behind one of the booths. "And I see a tiger that could use some meat."

He walked over and sat in front of her. Time was running out, so I started skipping lines and asking representatives if they had any social studies positions. If not, I didn't even bother waiting. Some people standing in line didn't like this, but fuck 'em. About ten minutes had passed, and Billy was still there chatting it up with the Latina admin. The people standing behind him in line were growing impatient. One woman kept checking her watch and a man was tapping his foot. Time was of the essence—the double doors would soon be closed—but those two just engaged in what seemed like leisurely, flirtatious conversation. She smiled, then he smiled; she ran her fingers through her hair, he did the same. He eventually got up and smiled at me, then walked behind the circulation desk, signed some papers, and got his fingerprints taken.

This sent me into a frenzy. I started dashing for lines with fewer people, but that usually meant the school had fewer availabilities. I looked over at Billy. He was smiling and talking with some guy behind the counter. Fuck! I don't even belong here! Soon, the representatives started closing up their booths.

Billy and I walked into the parking lot.

“I’m never gonna get a job,” I said.

“Eh, whatever. I think the only reason that bitch hired me is ‘cause she’s in the first throes of a midlife crisis. You see the way she kept winking at me? These Cubanos see nothing but sex. You know,” Billy ran his hands through his hair and smiled, “despite my problems with Diego and The Savior, the real reason I said yes to coming down here was to prove I could get a job before you—I win!”