



Creative Intervention

Greetings from the Pink Palace: An Architecturally, Paranormally, and Politically Accurate Ghost Story

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Spring's blossoming forsythia against periwinkle skies were at odds with a withering post-pandemic economy, widespread dissatisfaction with provincial politics, and a labour situation plundered by quiet quitting. After an abysmal start to the second quarter – inflation with a looming recession – the Canadian Premier of Ontario worried. As black overtook the periwinkle sky, he remained in his office in *habitus* of random responses to constituent voicemails. In between calls, he heard a rustle. He thought nothing of it, probably the prayer plant on the bookshelf, making its nightly fracas as it closed its leaves in devotion when the world dims. For a second, he thought he saw a figure, platinum-haired in a flowing white frock, out of the corner of his eye.

“I must be exhausted,” he rationalized, rubbing his eyes and dialing several more constituents before calling it a night.

At first, Dwayne Testani assumed it was a practical joke. But then again, why wouldn't the Premier call him for help? After all, everyone knew that Ontario's Legislative building in Toronto, a terminating pink vista at the end of University Avenue, was the most haunted in the city. If true, this gig could be a career-maker, maybe even the pathway for Dwayne to finally abandon his unfulfilling day job as an unlicensed financial advisor.

As instructed, Dwayne arrived at the Pink Palace loaded down with paranormal investigation equipment at ten o'clock that night. At the back entrance where artificial light struggled with shadow, one of building's gargoyles winked at him. He rapped three times.

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“Remember, son, keep this on the Q-T,” the Premier whispered as he ushered Dwayne through a corridor and handed him a wad of hundreds. “That enough?”

Their footsteps echoed eerily through the vast elegant emptiness of the building along dimly lit grand, oak panelling and marble corridors. As he unpacked various paranormal investigation gadgetry on the office desk, Dwayne stared, realizing that if you were to put backwards-facing sunglasses and a goatee on the platinum-haired Premier, he’d easily be mistaken for a bombastic celebrity chef.

“What?” the Premier looked back at him. “Do I got cheesecake on my –”

A murmur interrupted him.

“You hear that?” he gasped, eyes wide. “Did someone just whisper ‘grandma?’”

The voice definitely said “grammar,” but Dwayne reasoned that’s not the kind of thing you tell your newest customer, especially when he happens to be the Premier.

“Lemme set up some equipment, see what’s going on,” Dwayne suggested. “We can start with the Spirit Box – it’s sort of an electronic Ouija board that helps entities communicate more easily.”

Lights flickered. The Spirit Box emitted a flurry of flashes and beeps.

“This is intense – whatever’s here overloaded my equipment. It’s beyond what the EMF meter can register!” Dwayne thought for a moment, then suggested bringing in a medium.

“How about an extra-large,” the Premier joked.

Dwayne feigned a chuckle, as though he hadn’t heard that line a hundred times. “There’s a woman, she doesn’t like people to know she has ‘the gift,’ but she might agree to help.”

“Give her a call – if she can keep this quiet.”

Not an hour later, Queenie arrived.

“How does this work?” the Premier asked.

Queenie announced she sensed a lot of energy, that someone was trying to come forward. “Give us a sign of your presence.”

A draft blew across the room.

“It’s a female entity – alabaster hair, white flowing robe.”

“I think I seen her one time!” the Premier interjected.

“There’s a lot of history, she lived in this space.”

“This building used to be the Auxiliary Female Asylum in the 1800s,” Dwayne chimed in, eager to share trivia hastily acquired online in preparation for the gig.

Queenie nodded. “Sometimes trapped spirits are unleashed when structures are demolished. She wants to be freed.”

“She’s free to go,” the Premier said.

“She has something to accomplish before she can rest in peace. She was a patient, abandoned here with dementia. It was awful – staff cared for those they believed had a chance of recovery and so-called incurables were left to languish. Neglected.”

"Times have changed," the Premier huffed.

"She believes they have not."

"I don't believe in ghosts."

Queenie grinned. "What about the invisible hand of the market?"

"That ain't no ghost."

"She's caught in an infinite loop," Queenie continued, unfazed. "That's the reason for the haunting. Everything's almost identical to how it was in the 1890s – greater concern for money than people. This entity, she attaches herself to anyone who can make a change – Ministers and Premiers. All three political parties have toed the line when in power while feigning benevolence, just as you are now. She will be relentless until somebody alters the legacies of previous governments."

"Geez. Of all the souls wandering the province, I get some kinda lefty activist ghost?" the Premier shook his head. Like those who came before him, he understood that nursing home policy didn't win votes. After all, he was a populist who rose to power on empty slogans like "buck-a-beer."

"She's showing me imagery: not enough beds, inadequate staff, money going into the pockets of wealthy shareholders, no inspections. Everyone who could make a change looks the other way. She's angry that Ontario is the most privatized nursing home jurisdiction in Canada."

Queenie's face reddened as she absorbed emotions that were not her own. Anger. Agitation. The specter, a quiet and reserved woman when alive, found her voice in death through the medium. Queenie felt injustice in her bones.

"Every Premier she haunts, they go about as though nothing's wrong. Then, they hop on the former-premier-gravy-train, earning millions on nursing home boards, all on the public's tab. She's showing me a suave, finger-snapping man with a golf club, and a leather-faced lothario dressed as Polkaroo."

"What does she expect me to do?"

"I think she's hoping to provoke in you some missionary zeal."

"Friends..." the Premier trailed off, as though he could not fully accept what he heard, oblivious to the idea that nursing homes are social arrangements that never completely die – perpetually bearing the marks of suffering and punishment. Physical straightjackets may be outlawed, but more insidious chemical ones easily replace them. Plus, they're really lucrative.

Long shadows and burnished leaves dotted the pavement as autumn took hold and legislative staff busily prepared for the annual Ghosts of Queen's Park Tour. The sunny days of summer still lingered in the mind, and like fallen petals would soon wither. Neither Dwayne nor Queenie heard from the Premier since that fateful night. They watched in horror as the ruling party bypassed public hearings to swiftly pass legislation that further decimated long-term care.

Ghosts flourish spaces in between imagination and politics. In a utopian future, they can finally rest in peace. But for the time being, the Ontario Legislature remains as haunted as ever.

Exegesis/Explanatory Notes

I have déjà vu of 1998,” said Tamara J. Daly, professor of health policy and equity at York University. “It’s essentially more of the same. The reason it’s shocking is because we know so much more, or we at least have more evidence to show that it’s a failed model [of long-term care]. (Oved et al., 2022, n.p.)

“Greetings from the Pink Palace” coalesces around a supernatural event, in which an unnamed but recognizable Canadian provincial Premier seeks the services of a paranormal investigator, then a medium, to explain anomalies he observed late at night in Ontario’s Legislative building, one of the province’s most haunted structures. The spectral entity – the White Lady – draws attention to century-long inattention to injustices suffered by the province’s most vulnerable citizens. More interested in political popularity than justice, the Premier ignores the pleas of his spectral constituent, whose concerns echo those of real-life long-term care advocacy groups and researchers in the province (see e.g., Armstrong & Armstrong, 2020; Banerjee & Armstrong, 2015). The not-quite-human entity reflects the reality that nursing home employees in Canada describe difficulties in “treat[ing] residents as human beings” within a system of “assembly-line care” that results in physical and epistemological harms (Banerjee et al., 2015, p. 28).

The real-life ghostly lore of Ontario’s Legislative building (Coulter, 2009) interjects the missing and the invisible, their disquieting presence symbolizes realities that have passed. When people feel oppressed and powerless, especially in relation to inequity, reports of hauntings increase (McEwan, 2008). As a result, ghost stories often raise questions about what is missing from cultural politics, where ghostly enchantment delights but does not delude from very real social problems (McEwan, 2008), resulting in ghost stories that are political and therefore potentially transformative. Perhaps that is why stories of the White Lady (among other spectres; Coulter, 2009) haunting the Queen’s Park Legislative building persist in Toronto to this day. “Greetings from the Pink Palace” extends the folklore of the White Lady to create a ghost story of political engagement, a symbolic reworking of resistance. In this story, the ghost represents victims of long-term care neglect. The White Lady apparition, presumably a former resident of the nineteenth-century Auxiliary Female Asylum that was housed in that very building (Coulter, 2009), speaks for past and current victims of inadequate care.

Through Queenie, the medium in the story, the ghost calls attention to the hegemony of for-profit healthcare providers in Canada, which began in the post-war period (Daly, 2015). During the 1990s, Ontario’s privatization-

friendly Mike Harris government (Daly et al., 2016; Pinto, 2012) introduced measures that favoured corporate nursing home chains, pushed out non-profits, and reduced oversight and care quality standards (Banerjee & Armstrong, 2015; Harrington et al., 2017), including the elimination of minimum staffing levels, freeing homes to alter care ratios (Daly, 2015). By 2015, in Ontario, staffing amounted to little more than one personal support worker (PSW) per eight residents on one shift per 24 hours, well below levels recommended by those who study optimal care (Daly, 2015). Former Premier Mike Harris is now the chair of the board of Chartwell, one of Canada's largest corporate chains (the others are Extencicare, Sienna, Rivera and Schlegel) who, together, control 23.8% of beds and 18.9% of nursing home facilities (Harrington et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, Ontario's total annual nursing home spending is approximately \$2.4 billion CDN, representing over three percent of the province's total healthcare budget, with nearly 60% going to private, for-profit entities (Ontario Long Term Care Association, 2018). Successive provincial governments, regardless of political party or ideological orientation, have resisted nursing home bed expansion and failed to reverse problematic legislation (Williams et al., 2016). Yet, governments do not have to go down this path. Elsewhere, for-profit long-term care has been eliminated. For example, Saskatchewan's Provincial Health Authority took over all of Extencicare's long-term care homes, revoking licenses after poor resident outcomes during the pandemic. This was during a period when Doug Ford's Ontario Conservative party received substantial donations from lobbyists hired by corporate long-term care chains, many of whom were former political staffers (Leslie, 2020; Paling, 2020). Private for-profit long-term care corporations operating in Canada continue to post annual revenues of hundreds of millions of dollars while paying out tens of millions in shareholder dividends on the backs of vulnerable Canadians (Graham et al., 2023; Harrington et al., 2017). These are some of the factors preventing the ghosts of long-term care advocacy from resting in peace.

Having spent over a century spent haunting Ontario's Pink Palace, the White Lady, reminds us of past and present injustice, and that only the living can advance politics and policy to transform structures and systems. Until then, we can expect reported hauntings – and stories about them – in Ontario's Legislative buildings to continue.

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