

Gladys, Who Writes the Checks, Has the Flu

by Mel Gilden

When someone called his name, Marvin Goldstein was jolted with almost physical force out of contemplating his precarious future. Alone in his apartment, hearing any voice not his own was a surprise. He glanced beneath his desk where his big gray cat Annabelle was sleeping. Perhaps he'd imagined that one of her snuffling sleeping noises sounded like his name. The cat lifted her head and stared across the dim, crowded room. She hissed.

"What?" Goldstein asked her. All morning he'd been dividing his time between working on his Space Pioneers book and wondering if a check would arrive from the publisher before the rent was due. Annabelle's questioning meow irritated him because he had been about to begin work again after a period of worry.

"Marvin," the voice said, unmistakable this time. The voice was familiar. But no. It was impossible.

Fearing that the constant uncertainty of the freelance life had caused him to lose his mind entirely, Goldstein swiveled around in his chair. Floating in the center of the small room among the stacks of books and manila file folders was a glowing apparition that looked like his father, a man who had been dead for almost a year.

He wore the clothes he'd been buried in, a nice tan sport coat and pleated brown pants. Old Goldstein looked much healthier than he had at the end of his life — certainly healthier than he had appeared in his coffin — a circumstance which the younger Goldstein understood philosophically, but his father's apparent vigor still amazed him.

The ghost didn't float exactly. His lower body just seemed to fade away — his knees were transparent, his feet invisible.

"What's the matter, you never saw a ghost before?"

"I . . ." Goldstein's voice trailed off, failed by his terrified brain. Goldstein noticed he was gripping the arms of his chair. He tried without success to relax, reminding himself that though he and his father had often had their disagreements, they had gotten along mostly.

"It doesn't matter," Old Goldstein said, ignoring his son's discomfort. His voice neither echoed nor whispered. It sounded just as it had in life. "I've come to ask why you keep bothering your mother for money."

It was true that in his desperation Goldstein had been borrowing money from his mother — though they both knew that he was not so much borrowing as he was spending his inheritance.

"Money concerns dead people?" Goldstein asked, his voice quivering.

"It does if it's money I left to your mother."

Goldstein sighed. The fact that his father was now a ghost apparently did not change the essential nature of their relationship. "Kaufman Publishing hired me to write a novel about a TV show called Space Pioneers. I've been working on it almost four months and they haven't yet paid me for signing the contract."

Old Goldstein's face developed a disbelieving expression. "Why haven't they paid you?"

"I get all kinds of excuses," Goldstein explained. He was on more solid footing now, having often recounted to friends the problems he had with various publishers. "Sometimes the editor tells me it's an internal routing problem. Sometimes she tells me that the executive who must sign off on the contract is away on business. Sometimes she tells me that Gladys, who writes the checks, has the flu."

"It's a small company?" Old Goldstein asked.

"No. I'm working with the New York office, but it's a multinational corporation."

"And only one person can write checks?"

Goldstein shrugged. He felt more comfortable as the familiar conversation continued. "I'm only repeating to you what she tells me," he said. "Personally, I think they like to keep the money as long as they can to make the interest."

"That's no way to run a business."

"It's not the way you ran your business."

"It's not the way anybody should run a business," Old Goldstein said, sounding grumpy and disapproving.

Goldstein shrugged again. "The usual writer's deal," he said.

"You're not asking right," Old Goldstein said. He began to fade.

"Wait!" Goldstein cried, suddenly afraid again. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to New York to talk to that editor of yours at Kaufman Publishing. What was her name again?"

"Sylvia Blork," Goldstein said before he thought better of it. "But don't talk to her. If you make her angry I might get paid this time, but I'll never work for Kaufman again."

"For asking for money they owe you? Impossible."

"No. Please, Dad. Don't."

But by that time Goldstein was speaking to empty air.

Annabelle walked to where Old Goldstein lately stood and delicately sniffed the floor.

"Our troubles are only beginning," Goldstein said. He shivered though the room was not cold.

The next day, after completing a chapter of his book, Goldstein felt obligated to call his mother. After all, the ghost had been her husband — perhaps still was. Such a question was for rabbis to answer. He tried to ignore the feeling of preemptive anxiety that came over him as he punched in her number.

"Dad was here," Goldstein said into the phone after each had formally identified the other.

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Goldstein asked after a short understandable silence.

"He appeared to me. And he seemed pretty upset."

"You saw his ghost?"

"Yes."

Through the telephone her slow breathing came softly into his ear. He imagined her sitting alone on the couch where she and her husband used to sit together, her feet robed in white cotton socks and resting flat on the worn carpet.

"I know it's hard to believe — "

"No no," Mrs. Goldstein said, interrupting. "I lived a long time. I seen a lot of things people wouldn't believe. You're sure it was him?"

"I'm sure. He was upset because the publisher isn't paying me. Or because I borrow money from you. Probably both."

Through the telephone Goldstein imagined he could see his mother nodding.

"He'll ruin my whole relationship with Kaufman. He may have done it already."

"He's just trying to help."

"I know, but — "

"Maybe he'll get your money."

"Maybe, but — "

"Why don't you wait and see what happens before you get so excited?"

Goldstein would do as he pleased. Goldstein promised to let her know what happened and hung up, feeling lucky that he had escaped from the conversation so soon. Immediately the phone rang.

"Marv? This is Sylvia Bork."

If it was possible for blood to run cold, Goldstein's became icy up at that moment. "The book is moving right along," he said quickly. "I should have it for you on schedule."

"That's nice, Marv, but I didn't call to ask about the book."

"No?"

"I'm calling about your father."

"My father has been dead for almost a year," he said, trying to sound confused.

"So I gather. His ghost has been haunting the office all day."

"Oh?"

"This needs to stop, Marv. I'm doing my best to get you your money, but your father floating around the office pestering everybody doesn't help."

"I had very little control over my father when he was alive. Dead, I have even less."

"He isn't helping your career any," Miss Bork said.

"I know and I'm sorry. Maybe I suggest something?" He hoped he wasn't making a big mistake. "He might go away if you pay me."

After a long silence, Sylvia Bork replied stiffly. "I will pass along your suggestion," she said and hung up without saying good-bye."

Goldstein stared at the telephone for a long time while he wondered if anybody would hire him once word of the haunting circulated. He got up only when Annabelle came demanding food.

Goldstein worked most of the next day on his Space Pioneers book with Annabelle curled up at his feet as usual. She hissed and Goldstein looked down at her. She was staring across the room.

"All right, Dad," Goldstein grumbled as he turned in his chair. He was surprised to see that the ghost floating in the center of the room was not his father.

The apparition was a man, but dressed in the double-breasted business suit of an earlier era. His maroon bow tie with white polka dots was the only spot of color. His hair was a bushy mound, and his beard fell in gray and black curls half way to the gold watch chain that swagged across his belly.

"My God," Goldstein exclaimed. "It's Mr. Kaufman!"

Kaufman had been dead much longer than Old Mr. Goldstein, but the younger Goldstein had seen his photograph at the publisher's website. Mr. Kaufman was frowning with disapproval, just like his picture.

"That's right, young man," Mr. Kaufman said, his stern voice thundering. "And I am here to protect my interests."

"Interests?" Goldstein was so shocked by this second ghostly visit — and by a stranger, yet — that he could barely think.

"I understand your father has been haunting my New York offices."

"So I also understand."

"Of all the damned cheek," Mr. Kaufman remarked. "Can't have haunted offices. It upsets the staff. Your father will stop haunting my offices immediately."

"All right," Goldstein said as agreeably as he could considering that he was terrified — not only to be talking to another ghost, but because Mr. Kaufman would have frightened him under any circumstances.

Mr. Kaufman studied him through squinted eyes. "Very well, then," he said. "We'll say no more about it." Mr. Kaufman folded his arms and quickly faded.

Badly shaken, Goldstein got up and went for a glass of water. Annabelle followed him to the kitchen. When Goldstein got there, Mr. Kaufman was floating in the center of the room, his fists balled, his face red. "Don't play me the fool, young man," he said threateningly.

"Sir?"

"Your father is still there, moaning and dragging chains."

"Did you try talking to him?"

"If I wanted to talk to him," Mr. Kaufman shouted, "I would not have come to see you. Besides," he went on more quietly, "he refuses to listen. When I try speaking to him he just moans and jangles more loudly."

Goldstein thought about suggesting Mr. Kaufman's company pay him — what did he have to lose? Goldstein was convinced that his life could not be more complicated. He suggested the plan to Mr. Kaufman.

"Is that what all this is about?" Mr. Kaufman bellowed. "Money?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll have to be patient, then," Mr. Kaufman said. "Kaufman Publishing always pays its bills. I'm sure the company will pay you in God's good time."

"Well, then I guess that's when my father will stop haunting your New York offices."

"Of all the damned cheek!" Mr. Kaufman said, exploding again. "Make your father stop or I'll see that you're never paid." Mr. Kaufman glanced at the big gold watch he pulled from his vest pocket, and snapped it closed. "Good day," he said, and disappeared with a popping sound.

Goldstein got his glass of water and sipped it slowly. He had been a freelance writer for a few years and he knew that the life was not always easy. It was a toss-up which was more difficult, finding work or getting paid for it. But he never thought his problems would be so, he searched for the right word, metaphysical.

Carrying his glass of water he walked back to his office with Annabelle underfoot. He was surprised to find the door closed. He put his hand on the knob and felt it vibrating. He put his ear against the door and heard the long boom of rushing air. Metaphysical, he thought fearfully. Soon he would need an exorcist.

He turned the knob and pushed hard against the door with his shoulder. It opened a slit, allowing a flurry of papers to escape, blown by a strong wind. He let go of the door knob and the door banged shut. Inside the office the hurricane continued.

"Mr. Kaufman!" Goldstein called over the noise.

"Damned cheek," Mr. Kaufman replied angrily. His voice was no longer normal. It echoed from inside the office, much louder than before, making the

door shake with every word. "As long as your father continues to haunt my New York offices I will stay here with you."

"I won't be able to finish my project for your publishing company. I'll miss my deadline."

"That, young man, is your problem."

"But I — "

Goldstein was interrupted by what sounded like thunder rolling around inside his office.

Determined to stop being a victim of dead men, Goldstein marched to the kitchen where he searched through drawers and cupboards for something he could use to break down the door. The most dangerous object he found was a steak knife.

"Meow?" Annabelle suggested.

Goldstein nodded and sank into a kitchen chair. If he broke down the door the entire apartment might fill with wind. And his landlord would certainly make him replace the door. There had to be another way to solve his problem.

As the sun went down the kitchen darkened along with Goldstein's mood. His office continued to rumble with Mr. Kaufman's angry presence. Annabelle demanded food and mechanically Goldstein fed her. Did he have any leverage at all against Mr. Kaufman? It occurred to him that he might, if the bio on the Kaufman Publishing website was in any way accurate. Maybe. Possibly. While Annabelle eagerly chomped on her "chicken liver delight" he called his mother.

"You want to do what?" she asked with astonishment.

"A séance, Mom. I think your house is the place to hold it because Dad actually lived there."

"I still live here," Mrs. Goldstein reminded him.

"Another good reason to hold the sv©ance at your house," Goldstein persisted.

"All right. When?"

Goldstein's office door was rattled by the shrieking wind inside the unfortunate room. Who knew what damage Mr. Kaufman had already done? "As soon as possible, Mom. Tonight."

His mother agreed. Goldstein collected candles and matches, scratched Annabelle behind the ears, and left for his mother's house.

While his mother watched worriedly, Goldstein set up a card table and folding chairs in the living room, a large bright cave crowded with objects Goldstein had known since childhood — furniture, photographs, dust-collecting bric-a-brac whose origins and importance were lost in the mists of time. In the middle of the table Goldstein set up a two-armed candle holder. He tried to project a light-hearted bravado, but in truth he was more than a little nervous. Despite — or perhaps because of — his recent experiences, ghosts still frightened him. When he lit the candles his hands shook.

"What are you doing?" Mrs. Goldstein asked as she lifted glasses to her eyes from where they hung around her neck on a chain. She was a small neat woman with a mild and pleasant face. She dressed simply and for comfort.

"I have no idea," Goldstein admitted. "I'm going by what I've seen in movies and on TV."

"Movies and TV aren't real," Mrs. Goldstein reminded him.

"Before yesterday I would have said the same about ghosts. All right. Let's begin." He would have given a lot to be somewhere else at that moment.

They turned out all the electric lights in house except the light over the sink, which Mrs. Goldstein insisted remain lit. Goldstein directed his mother to sit across the card table from him. They held hands around the candle holder.

"Go head," Goldstein said.

"Go ahead and what?" his mother asked. "I don't know what to say."

Goldstein didn't either. "Just talk to him the way you used to," he suggested.

"All right." Mrs. Goldstein took a deep breath. "Sid?" she called. "Sid, are you there?"

Nothing happened and Goldstein encouraged his mother to try again. A moment later Mr. Goldstein solidified hovering over the card table. He carried a megaphone and a length of thick chain. Oddly, he looked astonished. "Riva, is that you?"

"It's me, Sid. How are you?"

"How should I be? I'd dead." He looked at his son. "Did the momzers pay you yet?"

"Not yet, Dad," Goldstein said. "But I — " Old Mr. Goldstein started to fade. "Wait, Dad!" Goldstein called. "I want you to talk to somebody."

"Somebody who?"

"Just wait, Sid," Mrs. Goldstein said. Her eyes were wide, but she was bearing up well.

Old Mr. Goldstein nodded. He laid aside his megaphone and chains somewhere in the air and they disappeared.

"Mr. Kaufman," Goldstein called.

"Kaufman?" old Mr. Goldstein asked. "The ones who don't pay you?"

"That's right, Dad. Hang on a minute. Mr. Kaufman?" Goldstein called into the air again.

Gray mist gathered next to old Mr. Goldstein, and soon it took on the form of Mr. Kaufman. He glanced around. "Where the hell am I?" He noticed Mrs. Goldstein. "Pardon the language, madam." He glared at old Mr. Goldstein. "You!" he cried. "Of all the damned cheek!"

"You haven't seen cheek yet!" old Mr. Goldstein roared back at him.

The ghosts reached for each others throats.

"Wait!" Goldstein cried.

Goldstein was surprised when the ghosts waited, both staring at him angrily.

"You two have a lot more in common than you think."

"He should have on his bones what we have in common," old Mr. Goldstein said.

"Damned cheek," Mr. Kaufman said.

Mrs. Goldstein glanced at her son worriedly.

This wasn't going very well. Unless it went better, one way or another he was doomed.

Goldstein sighed and started again. "Dad, tell us about how you used to run the grocery store."

"What? Now? Here?"

"Please, Dad."

"It was a grocery store. What more can I say?"

Mr. Kaufman looked bored. If he'd had a toe he would have tapped it.

Goldstein was losing his audience. He tried again. "You didn't have a cash register, did you?" he asked.

"Of course I did. It was a first class store. But I used to add up orders with a stubby pencil on a brown paper bag. I could add up the longest column of figures, one-two-three. Just like that." He snapped his fingers.

Goldstein nodded. "Sound familiar, Mr. Kaufman?"

Mr. Kaufman looked uncomfortable. "Damned cheek," he grumbled. "Yes," he went on, "it does. I ran a bookstore, not a grocery. But the theory is the same."

"You had to treat your customers right or they wouldn't come back," old Mr. Goldstein explained.

"Correct, my good man. I treated my creditors the same way. No time payments. Cash on the barrel head."

And they were off, telling stories of how people used to do business in the good old days. Goldstein nodded at his mother and smiled. She seemed bewildered, but not unpleasantly so. Goldstein, himself, could not relax just yet.

"Mr. Kaufman?" Goldstein asked after a while.

"Yes, my boy?"

"What about me? What about the other writers?"

"What do you mean?"

"You don't pay your writers," old Mr. Goldstein said. "My son has been waiting for months, your New York office should pay him."

"God's own good time," Mr. Kaufman said, sounding embarrassed.

"That's not the way we did business in the old days. Cash on the barrel head." Old Mr. Goldstein pounded on something invisible with the flat of his hand and made a loud thump. He winked at his son, giving Goldstein a strange good feeling. He was sorry his father had never winked at him while alive.

"I'll see that you're paid immediately," Mr. Kaufman said. He jabbed at old Mr. Goldstein with a finger. "But you must promise to stop haunting my New York offices."

"You pay my son."

"Damned cheek," Mr. Kaufman said as he faded. "Good meeting you, Goldstein. Come see me."

When Kaufman was gone, old Mr. Goldstein looked fondly at his wife. "You look good, Riva."

"I'm all right," Mrs. Goldstein said.

"Come be with me."

Goldstein held his breath. He didn't like the way this conversation was going.

"Not yet, Sid. I'm not ready."

Old Mr. Goldstein nodded as he faded. "Get a real job," he ordered his son before he was entirely gone.

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