

Ghosts and Monsters

By Gwendolyn Rice

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Actors: 3M, 3W

Characters:

William McGinn – 70s

Celia McGinn – 70s

Penny Burke/Maeve – 40s-50s

Ephraim Setzer/Dr. Wakefield –30s

Sommers/Mayor John Gaffney/O’Sullivan – 40s-50s

Miranda McGinn/Aoife — 8 years old, but should be played by a woman in her late teens or 20s

Act 1, Scene 1. *Morning. The parlor of the McGinn family home — a historic estate outside Boston that was built by William’s great grandfather in the 19th century. It has the feeling of an English manor house, conservatively decorated without a lot of obvious modernization. There are family heirlooms and antiques peppering the house, not because they are valuable, but because they belonged to a relative. Celia is sitting at a table in the kitchen reading the New York Times (paper version) and drinking tea. William is spreading some jam on buttered toast and having coffee, looking absentmindedly out the window. This is a well-worn morning ritual. Celia is dressed in a tasteful but expensive outfit of slacks and a sweater set with a brooch. William is in his pajamas and a bathrobe. They are only half listening to each other.*

Celia

(reading a headline in the paper) “Father has a horrific realization after two year old toddler, goes missing on family’s crocodile farm —”

William

No. *(pause)* Florida?

Celia

Cambodia.

William

Still no. *(pause)* Is it cold in here?

Celia

Not more than usual.

William

I’m going to have someone ’round to look at the heating system again.

Celia

(reading) “Polish activists try to save cows, condemned to death.”

William

How many?

Celia

185.

Williams

Activists or — ?

Celia

Cows. *(pause)* They are a threat to public health and safety, evidently.

William

The activists or — ?

Celia

Doesn't say. But there's a picture of a large dairy herd milling around.

She shows him the picture. He looks at it briefly.

William

No. *(pause)* The banging, the pipes banging, that's gotten better, wouldn't you say?

Celia

I'd say old houses creak and make funny sounds.

William

I suppose.

Celia

And that goes double for this ancient tomb.

William

Oh, it is not ancient.

Celia

Here's something. *(reading)* "Truck carrying 40,000 pounds of bees crashes in Montana."

William

(Looking around for something to spread on his toast.) Are we out of marmalade?

Celia

Yes, I think so.

William

Honey?

Celia

Yes dear?

William

Ha.

Celia

(reading) Millions of the insects were sent flying, halting traffic for five hours in the process.

Hm. **William**

Is that a “no” on the bees? **Celia**

Yes, um, no. **William**

Celia
Well, that’s all I’ve got. *(She folds the newspaper and has some more tea. The grandfather clock in the hall strikes the half hour. It’s 8:30am.)* Dear, are you planning to get dressed?

Yes. **William**

This morning? **Celia**

Very likely. **William**

Celia
How do you feel about being shaved and dressed by nine?

I’m not wild about it. **William**

It’s the first of the month. **Celia**

Ah, we should wind the clocks. **William**

Celia
(Takes the toast out of his hand.) Penny will be here soon.

William
Unless she is detained by swarms of rogue bees, making their way to the east coast from Montana.

And I thought you weren’t listening. **Celia**

William

Penny is not put off by the sight of my pajamas or my unshaven face.

Celia

That may be, but she's bringing someone new and you know what they say about first impressions, —

William

That I don't give a damn about them?

Celia

Yes, I'm sure that's what they say around the office.

William

Why would she drag some executive all the way out here? She knows—

Celia

That you don't like new people, yes, she is quite aware.

William

I've half a mind to find a new agent.

Celia

Which would be a real relief to her, I'm certain, but you won't because you—

William

—don't like new people.

Celia

—don't like new people.

Celia

Please finish your coffee and get dressed darling. It's only once a month.

William

It's such nonsense.

Celia

I'm sure they would stop checking up on you like this if you—

William

Don't say it.

Celia

When did you tell them you'd have a draft to look at?

William

These schedules are built for other people. I never agreed to—

Celia

February?

William

I don't know.

Celia

March?

William

Oh who remembers?

Celia

They do, clearly. Every first of the month.

William

(He gets up from the table) I'm sorry I can't hear you, I've been overtaken by bees on the way to the shower.

Celia

Please hurry darling.

William

Yes, must hurry to talk to people I don't like about news I don't have on a project I don't care about.

Celia

So get it over with. *(He exits slowly. She hears the stairs creaking on the way up to the second floor. Then the creaking stops, mid-stair.)* William? Do you need something?

William

(wearily) Won't be a minute. Just going to . . . uh. . .

Celia

Please don't disappear this morning.

William

(He heads back down the stairs.) No. Plenty of time for that later. I'll just . . .

Celia

I laid out an outfit for you on the bed.

William

You used to do that for the children.

Celia

I did tell them *today* was not-

William

The first of the month?

Celia

Not-

William

A lovely time to get out of the city?

Celia

William.

William

It's . . .

Celia

Maybe we can do something special later. Go for a walk around the garden.

William

It's . . . fine.

Celia

Alright. You've got 11 minutes. I'll stall them. (*They kiss.*)

William

Thanks.

Act 1, Scene 2.

William goes toward the stairs. There's a sound from inside a bedroom door as if someone is throwing rocks at it to get another's attention. He shakes it off, then hears it again. He turns. Puts his head down and listens for it one more time. Then William opens the door to see an incredibly lush, overgrown jungle filled with oversized bugs, magical creatures and fantastical plants. Someone throws a tennis-ball sized object at him and he ducks. When it hits the ground it explodes into many different colors. Suddenly a girl of about 8 appears, dressed like a magic fairy, swinging upside down from her knees from a swing set trapeze. She holds out her hands like claws and roars at him. William jumps back, very surprised.

Miranda

Got you! Got you! Got you!

William

Yes you did. Well done my dear.

Miranda

Raahr!

William

Enough! Come down here and give me a kiss.

Miranda

No.

William

Miranda! *(He playfully grabs hold of the trapeze, helps turn her right side up, and gives her a kiss on the cheek. She jumps down.)* People say I'm letting you grow up wild.

Miranda

But you say I'm growing up brave.

William

Yes I do.

Miranda

Come see what I've discovered.

William

What new, miraculous thing could you have possibly found?

Miranda

Come with me! *(She grabs his hand and pulls, but he doesn't move.)*

William

I'm so sorry punkin. Not right now. I have. . . things I have to do.

Miranda

(Imitating him with a familiar quote) That's the silliest thing I've ever heard, by Jove.

William

I couldn't agree more.

Miranda

Will you come later?

William

Yes, later. *(she frowns)* Soon.

Miranda

You always say that!

William

And I always come back. *(pause)* It's your birthday you know.

Miranda

I know.

William

Oh yes, then how old are you?

Miranda

Eight.

William

What, again?

Miranda

Always Daddy.

William

That's right. Clever girl. Now go have some more adventures. This afternoon I'll be back with cake and candles and maybe even a present.

Miranda

Hooray! Promise you'll hurry! *(She takes off into the jungle.)*

William

I promise.

Miranda

(She comes back briefly and hands him a ridiculous tropical flower she has picked.) This is for you, Daddy!

He takes the flower, then backs slowly out of the room and closes the door, off to his own bedroom to get ready for the day.

Act 1, Scene 3. *A doorbell rings. Celia straightens up a few things in the living room, checks her hair in the mirror before she answers it.*

Penny
Hello!

Celia
Penny, good to see you. Come in, come in.

Penny
Celia, how are you?

Celia
Crazed and a bit behind schedule, as usual. May I take your coat? *(She does)*

Penny
You're too kind.

Celia
I was just straightening up a few things.

Penny
What for? We're hardly company.

Ephraim
Hello Mrs. McGinn. *(He extends his hand and shakes hers confidently)* Ephraim Setzer, e-content strategist for Hawthorne Publishing. How are you?

Penny
I was going to introduce you.

Ephraim
And I already took care of that.

Penny
Ephraim likes to stay one step ahead of everyone.

Celia
Well, isn't that. . .ambitious.

Penny
He's the new marketing manager I was telling you about.

Celia

But you said “e-content?”

Ephraim

A more accurate way to describe—

Penny

Ephraim likes to be one step ahead in adopting corporate buzzwords too.

Ephraim

It isn’t really a, it’s a new way of thinking about communication and media.

Penny

He invented his own title. He’s very proud of it.

Celia

Well, you and William should get along like a house on fire.

Ephraim

Is he a fan of new media?

Celia

No, but he does like making up his own titles.

Ephraim

Mr. McGinn will be joining us? I assume?

Celia

Oh yes, he’s just . . . reviewing his notes, probably, in preparation for your meeting.

Penny

He’s not dressed yet, is he?

Celia

We both got a late start this morning.

Penny

Just as well. I’m still working on my list. *(She sits down and starts looking through a pile of newspapers she brought in her briefcase.)*

Celia

(chuckling) I hope you have more luck than I did.

Ephraim

I’m sorry, list? What list? Was there something else I was supposed to prepare for this—

Penny

No. It's just a silly game we play.

Ephraim

You could have mentioned this in the car.

Penny

I don't think this falls under your purview of . . . book recycling.

Ephraim

Strategy. Content strategy.

Celia

Could I get you some tea? Or coffee while you wait?

Ephraim

Uh, no thank you. But do you have any ice?

Celia

Excuse me?

Ephraim pulls a container out of his messenger bag, it's filled with a green liquid.

Ephraim

I'd love a glass with some ice so I can get the most out of this press.

Celia

Out of . . . ?

Penny

Don't get him started. Last year he project-managed this book—

Ephraim

Multi-media content package.

Penny

And it convinced him to buy a juicer.

Ephraim

It's kale, celery, chia seeds, lemon and ginger.

Penny

I assume the ice dulls the flavor.

Ephraim

The cold helps the juice release the maximum antioxidants.

Celia

Well, I'll get you some ice anyway. Won't be a minute.

As Celia exits to the kitchen William enters from the stairwell.

William

And these "antioxidants," they help you in some way?

Penny

William, always wonderful to see you. *(they embrace politely)*

William

Do they arrest the aging process? Is that why you look like you should be heading off to college this fall?

Ephraim

It's a pleasure to meet you sir. *(they shake hands)*

Celia

(She returns with a glass full of ice and gives it to Ephraim. To William) There you are.

William

Yes. Been quite looking forward to this meeting. Wouldn't miss it in fact.

Ephraim

(trying to make a joke) Couldn't miss it. It's in your living room.

William

What did you say your name was?

Penny

This is Ephraim Setzer. He wanted to come along to our monthly touch base to chat about—

Ephraim

E-content strategy.

William

Very good. If I ever need any of that I'll let you know.

Ephraim

Oh, you do.

William

Excuse me?

Ephraim

All authors do. That's why I'm here.

William

And here I was hoping I could get you to mow the grass after school.

Penny

This is working out well for me. Now there's something you want to talk about less than your new book.

William

I'd say the race is pretty even.

Penny

Well, let's get this out of the way. Any status update?

William

Yes.

Celia

William?

William

Actually no. My update is that I have nothing more to show you than I did the last time you inquired. My progress is well, none. So. Sorry to make you travel all this way for so little reward. See you in four weeks or so. Unless you would find it more pleasant simply to call. I'll make sure I'm out.

He begins to exit.

Ephraim

(Sits down on the couch. Makes himself comfortable.) Actually, I have some things I'd like to discuss. As long as we're here.

William

(he turns, annoyed) Do you?

Ephraim

Yes. Mr. McGinn.

William

(he stares at Ephraim a moment) Well. Please. Commence.

Ephraim

Mr. McGuinn, first let me say that I'm feeling a bit star struck at the moment.

William

Really? Sure it's not all the antioxidants entering your system?

Ephraim

Yes. I grew up reading all your books.

William

Ah, I see.

Ephraim

Gertrude and the Giant. The Fantastical Life of Tortula Jones. The Bee Keeper's Kitchen.

William

Those are mine.

Ephraim

As I'm sure you know, your books have introduced millions of children to magical, upside-down worlds—

Penny

The man knows what he wrote, Ephraim.

Ephraim

(consulting his copious notes) According to a recent poll conducted by the National Institute for Literacy, your books are consistently ranked among the most influential for children, along with classics like the *Harry Potter* series, *Charlotte's Web*, *A Wrinkle in Time*—

Penny

Yes, I'm quite sure he's heard of those too.

William

What's on your mind Mr. Setzer?

Ephraim

We don't have any frontlist titles from you.

William

You getting a lot of new material from E.B. White these days?

Penny

I think what he means is-

William

No, you only have a scant 18 backlist properties, some of which, I'm told, have won awards.

Ephraim

People like what's new.

William

Well, that's the wonderful thing about children's books. They are brand new to every succeeding generation, aren't they?

Ephraim

Yes, but with the live action movie coming out—

William

And all your various tie-ins that did not need either input or approval from the actual author-

Ephraim

In the contract you signed-

William

I know what I signed.

Ephraim

People love you. They love your stories. Old, young, they are hungry for more.

William

Yes. Well.

Ephraim

That was the other contract you signed. With them.

William

I'm sorry to disappoint you and all my adoring fans, but I'm afraid. . . I've nothing to write about.

Ephraim

I don't believe that.

William

(shrugs) Well. . .

Penny

I don't really believe that either, William.

William

As my agent you have a vested interest in my creative output.

Penny

(to Celia) Have you done the—?

Celia

Every morning. If it's any consolation, he's not keeping anything from you. There's just nothing . . . there.

Penny

Alright, just for old time's sake.

William

Oh, please don't.

Penny

I've been keeping a list.

Ephraim

Okay, again. What list?

Penny

Don't worry about it.

Ephraim

If there was something I was supposed to research, I'm not sure why you would keep that information from me.

Penny

Please relax for a minute. *(to William)* Alright. *(Looking at her list in a notebook.)* There's a New Zealand town that's been terrorized for more than a year by a three foot, cat-eating spider.

William

Fascinating. No.

Ephraim

Is this some kind of current events quiz?

Penny

No. Okay. (*Looking at her list again*) It has recently been unearthed that the Nazis were experimenting with dropping malaria-laden mosquitoes on enemy troops.

William

Boring.

Ephraim

Is it word association?

Penny

No.

William

And why does everyone assume I have a soft spot for insects?

Penny

Mmm, *Kelundra*?

Ephraim

The cricket one.

Celia

Probably *Kelundra and the Orchestra of Crickets*?

William

Right.

Penny

Okay, my next two were also about insects.

William

Penny, Mr. Setzer, I'll see you next month. (*he starts to leave*)

Ephraim

You have to write another book by the end of the year or you'll be in violation of your contract. (*pause*) And you will owe Hawthorne Publishing a great deal of money.

William

Is that really how it works? Are you going to come after me with your printing presses and your iphone apps and your virtual content maximization force?

Penny

Ephraim. . .

Ephraim

It's just one more book. You could probably write one in your sleep by now.

William

Excellent advice. I'm going to try that. If you'll excuse me.

Ephraim

We will take you to court.

William

(feigning hurt) You would attack your favorite author? The creator of *Gertrude and the Giant*. *The Fantastical Life of Tortula Jones*. *The Bee Keeper's Kitchen*?

Ephraim

I've seen the papers. I know that you borrowed an unusually large amount of money against your next title. It makes your advance, which you were awarded almost two years ago, look like some kid's allowance.

Celia

William?

William

You can talk to my lawyer about that.

Penny

I mean, there must be something you still have to say. Writers don't just stop. . .thinking, feeling, writing. . .

William

They do actually. They do all the time.

Penny

Did you hear about the solid gold toilet that was recently stolen from an art exhibition?
(William shoots her a look) You said no more insects or animals.

Ephraim

(excited to join in the game) Oh! What about the town in Oregon where they had to close school because every single kid in kindergarten got the measles?

William stops still and his face turns to stone. Penny puts her head in her hands and mouths "I'm sorry" to Celia. Celia looks away and then looks down at the floor.

Penny

I think we better go.

Ephraim

What? I was trying to help. Like you and your mosquitoes thing.

Penny

Please stop talking now and go to the car. *(to Celia)* I'm so sorry.

Celia

No, it's just. . . It's just today. Is the anniversary.

Penny

Oh my god. Please forgive his monstrous stupidity.

Ephraim

Why is mine stupid?

William

(like a bull who's seen red) *(To Ephraim)* Measles?

Ephraim

Yeah. I mean, it's all over the news. Lots of parents are refusing to vaccinate their kids, you know, because it causes—

William

Protection.

Ephraim

No, it causes—

William

Antibodies to grow in the child's system to fight the virus, should they be exposed.

Ephraim

No.

Penny

For the love of god, Ephraim shut up!

A beat.

William

(loudly, as a dare) No. No. Young Mr. Setzer has a point he'd like to make. Please, let him do it.

Ephraim

(to Penny) Okay, now again I feel like there's something you didn't tell me in the car.

Penny

Forgive him, William, he's young.

William

He's an idiot.

Ephraim

I actually know more about this than. . . I worked on a whole content package last year that dealt with the vaccine debate.

William

There is no vaccine debate.

Ephraim

Well, yes. There is. Because there is growing evidence—

William

Was this before or after your foray into the amazing healing properties of organic, cold pressed garden weeds?

Ephraim

A lot of people, researchers, parents, they have proof that it's not safe. They have reports that the drug companies are . . . are acting without any oversight, adding harmful chemicals to the shots. . . That in case after case, the vaccines cause-

Penny

Don't say it.

Ephraim

They cause autism.

Celia

You'll have to excuse me. *(She gets up to go.)*

Penny

Celia—

Celia

Perhaps you should consider having these meetings elsewhere from now on? *(She exits)*

Ephraim

I didn't mean to upset anyone but. . . c'mon, there's some pretty damning evidence that pharmaceutical manufacturers have been in league with the FDA for decades. That the

medical establishment was pushing this dangerous, but very lucrative immunization on perfectly happy, healthy, normal child and then—

Penny

(She turns to William to apologize) William, I'm so sorry—

Ephraim

I understand if you're not up on all the latest research. Read it for yourself in the materials we created last year. Go online, you can download it.

William

I can download it?

Ephraim

I mean, put yourself in these parents' shoes. How would you feel?

Penny

(hissing, to Ephraim) Are you finished?

William

No, he's not finished. I believe he was asking me to imagine how I would feel if groundbreaking biomedical scientist and Nobel Laureate John Enders was able to build a time machine so he could go back several decades and offer my daughter a revolutionary immunization to prevent her from getting the measles.

Ephraim

Wait, I didn't—

William

Because if she had not contracted the measles, like so many other children in her third grade class did, then she would not have developed a staggering fever, causing her to fall into a coma in a matter of hours and die from acute encephalitis shortly before her eighth birthday.

Ephraim

(confused) That's not actually what I . . . I didn't—

William

And in all honesty, I would have to say that yes, I would have liked that very much, even if the completely fictional attendant risks that a small group of criminally ignorant, fear mongering alarmists and snake oil salesmen had concocted were even close to being legitimate. Which they are not.

He looks around the room.

William

Would I like to write a book about the quaintness of children getting the measles, at a time when there is a vaccine readily available that has proven to be so effective, with so few contra-indications, that the entire disease, which was once an unfortunate but inevitable part of childhood, was virtually eradicated in North America?

Penny

We're leaving. *(She moves toward the door)* Tell Celia I'll call her later this week to apologize one more time.

William and Ephraim do not move.

William

(Calm, steely and somewhat threatening) No. No, I think overall I'd rather have my daughter back, you noxious, noisome, grotesque little punk.

William exits.