

A Good Old-Fashioned Ghost Story



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Pitch / Synopsis



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VITAL INFO

TITLE: "A Good Old-Fashioned Ghost Story"

GENRE: Supernatural Drama

LOGLINE: **Augustus Goldfinch** returns to his hometown to visit his "dying" **Aunt Julia**, the last surviving member of his family. An eccentric Southern firecracker with a wild past, Julia convinces her staid, straight-laced nephew to spend the night in the local haunted house, which, he learns, is where his mother and father died one tragic, bloody night. It's a good old-fashioned ghost story, with a light touch, some humor, and murder!

RATING: PG-13 (projected) for violence and adult language

EST. LENGTH: 90 minutes

EST. SHOOTING LENGTH: 21 days (Principal Photography)

WRITER/DIRECTOR: Jeff Thelen

PRODUCERS: Jeff Thelen, Joshua Berwald, Rasa Perkunas & Chris Manikowski

PRODUCTION COMPANY: Quixotic Arts www.QuixoticArts.com

THE STORY IN A NUTSHELL

This must be a ghost movie. The good old-fashioned title sequence says so.

Even if we miss the titles, the opening sequence hints that we are in for a good old-fashioned ghost story.

There is the old house at night--such dark devastation at the end of the lane.

A house isolated. Alone. Forgotten.

Dead.

The house is not really so old-fashioned. It is not a Victorian pile of cliches. It sits, moldering, on a quiet lane in a small Southern town, a two-story contemporary design, built maybe 30 years ago. It is a house not unlike our own.

A neighbor, a TOUGH GUY walking his poodle, hurries past a little too quickly, but the dog has business to attend to, and insists on halting at the crumbling mailbox.

Mr. Tough Guy's jitteriness, his stubborn refusal to look up at the house--the dog's pathetic mewwing--more hints that we have arrived at our proper destination.

But if we're still not convinced--

--suddenly there comes the blast of a shotgun from inside that darkened heap--

--the cry of a child from within--

--lights ablaze in every windows upstairs--

--throwing wild shadows on the walls--

--before silence and darkness settle over the house again...

Yes, we are in for it.

"Ask and You Shall Receive."

But first...at a fancy restaurant one night, **Augustus Goldfinch**, Assistant Pastor at The Church 2.0, attempts to propose marriage to his indifferent girlfriend, Helen. Oddly enough, in the middle of his proposal, Helen rushes out of the room to take a phone call--and never returns.

Augustus readily forgives Helen when she later messages him a feeble excuse. Because that's the kind of man he is. Kind, decent, forgiving, passive, meek--all to a fault. It bothers him.

AUGUSTUS

Am I a wimp, Gerard? Am I a doormat? Am I a--uh--

GERARD

Footstool?

AUGUSTUS

How did I become such a weakling? A coward...

In addition to being a wimp, Augustus is also lame. He cannot walk without a cane. His legs were shattered from some terrible childhood trauma--a trauma he has been kept in the dark about.

Before he has time to ponder further his failures as a man, as a pastor, as a prospective mate--Augustus opens a letter from his aging aunt:

"Augie!
Dying! Hurry home!
xox!
Auntie Julia!"

As Augustus remarks to his room-mate, this is a frequent tactic of Aunt Julia to guilt him into a trip home. Aunt Julia has been on her death-bed for decades.

But Augustus cannot simply call the woman, because Julia has never owned a telephone. She has a morbid fear of electricity (her father died of electrocution).

So, Augustus drags himself down south to his aunt's house in the small town he grew up in. And loathes.

The Prodigal Nephew

Needlessly to say, when he arrives at her house, Augustus finds Julia as spry and spunky as ever, cutting rosebuds in her beloved flower garden. Apparently, Julia "got better."

AUGUSTUS

Your letter said you were dying.

AUNT

What letter? Oh, I wrote that weeks ago. I'm feeling much better now, no thanks to you.

AUGUSTUS

You know, if you had a phone like everybody else--

AUNT

Terrible contraption. The worst. If I need to reach out and touch anyone, I do it the old-fashioned way: through dreams. I sent you a message last night, did you get it?

Julia is a bit dotty in the manner of the classic English Aunt. Free-spirited, an eccentric with a taste for amateur mysticism, a Dixie firecracker with a wild past. We gather Julia was likely the life of the party in her youth, before she had to take on the obligation of raising Augustus.

That night, over a gin and tonic (for her) and a milk and cookie (for him), Julia gets down to the business at hand.

AUNT

Believe it or not, after sitting empty the past thirty years, the old haunted house on Montgomery has been sold.

AUGUSTUS

(Searchingly)

Old haunted house... "Murder
Manor?"

AUNT

Is that what the kids call it?

AUGUSTUS

I have no idea what the kids
call it.

AUNT

That is so vulgar. A builder is
going to blow it to smithereens
and put up something ugly in
its place. The wrecking crew
starts in the morning. So
tonight is the night.

AUGUSTUS

For what?

AUNT

To go there of course!

It seems Julia is determined to spend the night in the so-called haunted house--for reasons she is reluctant to articulate.

Augustus loves his Aunt, and he indulges her many whims and eccentricities, but he digs in his heels and shows a rare bit of spine when he learns they will have to break into the house.

AUGUSTUS

Julia... Listen to me. This is
wrong. I'm sorry, but it's
illegal. It's breaking and
entering. Trespassing. What if
we get arrested? Do you know
what would happen to me if the
church found out? We could go
to jail!

Even if we don't get caught--
 I'm sorry but I have to be
 honest--what you're doing here--
 -toying with magic and
 spiritualism--the occult--
 you're playing with fire.
 You're playing in the devil's
 sandbox. It's dangerous, and--
 I'm sorry--it's a sin. I can't
 do it. I'm sorry. I just--

Julia interrupts him with a seriousness completely
 unexpected of her:

AUNT

THIS IS IMPORTANT TO ME!

Augustus shrinks back, astonished.

AUNT

(Pointing!)

And to you too!

AUGUSTUS

Me?

AUNT

I'm going at 10 o'clock. You
 are welcome to come with, but
 if you're scared, I'll go by
 myself.

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The Pockmarked Man

Before their great adventure that night, Augustus takes a
 nap in his old room. It is a sad museum to his sad youth.
 His metallic leg-braces still stand in the closet.

His Aunt has hung up satchels of herbs and strings of
 garlic to exorcise the ghosts of the past.

Augustus awakes from his nap to find a man with a murderous
 pockmarked face standing over him in the dark. In the man's
 hands is Augustus's cane, held like a cudgel, brandished
 like a weapon.

MAN

Bastard!

The man suddenly begins beating Augustus with the cane-- thrashing his legs without mercy. He then chokes Augustus with the cane, pressing his full weight down on the young pastor's windpipe.

Fortunately, this is just a bad dream!

Oddly enough, when he wakes, Julia notices that there are red marks across his throat.

AUNT

Dog collar too tight? I should think it would be...

AUGUSTUS

The Pockmarked Man...

Julia goes white as a ghost.

She stares at him in disbelief.

AUNT

No...

AUGUSTUS

I haven't dreamed of him since... I lived here. It's that room. My old room.

AUNT

I put out some herbs...

AUGUSTUS

It's this house. This town.

AUNT

I am sorry, Augustus.

AUGUSTUS

Something haunts me here, Auntie, and I don't know who or what or why. I don't know anything. I am an ignoramus.

AUNT

"All will be revealed."

AUGUSTUS

What does that mean?

AUNT

(Checks the time)

Oh, we're late for the horror show. C'mon. Let's rip this joint.

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All Will Be Revealed

And there are many things to be revealed--to us, but most especially to Augustus.

As they walk through the sleepy town to the haunted house, the conversation turns to the past.

Augustus laments that he knows almost nothing about his history--about his aunt or his mother or father.

He only now learns that his aunt was married three times--

AUNT

Thrice married, thrice disappointed. After that, I gave up. To hell with it. I'm outta here.

Augustus's entire life has been spent in the dark about his past, particularly about the death of his mother and father when he was just a toddler.

Aunt Julia, who raised him alone, kept the details of that tragedy from him--but she is not completely to blame.

AUGUSTUS

I know nothing about my past. You, or my mother or father...

AUNT

You never asked, honey. You were always too scared to look into that dark attic, chock full of skeletons and ghosts.

Speaking of the past, now seems like a good time for Julia to reveal to Augustus a bit of shocking news: "When you were little, you were not exactly run over... You didn't exactly get hit by that car."

AUGUSTUS

How can that be? I remember it very clearly. I can still see that red Mustang--

AUNT

That was just a fib we told, and it musta stuck. We told a lot of fibs, I'm afraid.

AUGUSTUS

What fibs? And who is this "we?"

AUNT

Me. And you too!

AUGUSTUS

Me?

AUNT

Don't be coy. You told fibs! To yourself, I mean.

AUGUSTUS

Julia, what happened to me?

AUNT

You had a bad fall.

AUGUSTUS

What do you mean?

AUNT

You fell off a balcony.

AUGUSTUS

A balcony? How...?

AUNT

I don't know.

AUGUSTUS

You're not telling me the whole truth.

AUNT

I don't know the whole truth.
Nobody knows the whole truth.
Except maybe you.

AUGUSTUS

Me?

AUNT

You were there, weren't you?
You're the only one left
standing.

AUGUSTUS

Julia, what happened to my
parents?

AUNT

They died.

AUGUSTUS

How?

AUNT

I don't know.

AUGUSTUS

You must tell me. I have a
right to know!

AUNT

I know you do. That's why we're
here...

Just as they arrive at their destination.

They look up at--

--the haunted house, the dark devastation.

AUGUSTUS

What do you mean? What does
this house have to do with me?

She starts up the drive toward the house.

AUGUSTUS

Julia! Whose house is this?
Julia! Who lived here?

At last she turns to look at him.

AUNT

You did.

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"Horrorshow"

All of this comes as a complete shock to Augustus.
He can no longer avoid the dark attic of his past.

What happened to his parents?
How did he fall from a balcony?
Who were his mother and father?
Who is he?

So the aging woman and the awkward young man find their way
into the dark house through the cellar...

...terrified by the flickers of light where no lightbulbs
are...

...working their way up to the kitchen...

...where they find a vase of fresh sunflowers--his mother's
favorite flowers--on a counter...

...assaulted by a hailstorm of rocks inside the empty
living room...

The place is empty, dark, all decay and devastation.

But gradually, as they work their way up the stairs...

...past the balcony--still broken after all these years,
despite the many times the carpenter has fixed it--

--broken again every night--

--the same balcony that he fell from to the stone floor

below!

Gradually, as they go upstairs...

...to the old man's library...

...to the nursery--his nursery!

Gradually, the house is becoming, strangely, room by room, less empty and less abandoned.

Pieces of furniture begin to appear here and there. Shelves of books. A telephone. A chair. His favorite stuffed animal.

Until, when they reach his parent's bedroom, they find the entire room furnished and cluttered as if it were that night in 1990.

Even the bed appears slept in. The closet still holds the shotgun that his mother used to kill his father--still loaded!

On his mother's dressing counter, there is an ashtray bearing a cigarette, still smoking...

Gradually, piece by piece, the night is coming alive again...

...the house is coming alive again...

...that terrible night is coming back to life again...

WHEN SUDDENLY EVERY LIGHT IN THE HOUSE BLAZES TO LIFE.

And the front door slams...

...and the footsteps of the old man are heard pounding up the steps...

THE POCKMARKED MAN

Bastard...!

Oh, yes, we are in for it, alright.

AUTHOR' S NOTES

A Good Old-Fashioned Ghost Story was written for very low budget, with an emphasis on few locations and few characters.

The majority of the film takes place in a single location--the haunted house--my house--over the course of a single night--a stormy night, of course!

Except for a handful minor roles, Aunt Julia and Augustus are the only characters onscreen.

The script has its origins in "The Empty House" (1906) by Algernon Blackwood, a short story about a daffy old Aunt and her nephew spending a few hours in a haunted house where a murder took place. Nothing much in the way of plot occurs in the story.

Blackwood's story is typical of the "good old-fashioned" Victorian ghost story: heavy on atmosphere and some chills --but nothing substantial enough that could be expanded on to greater length (and depth).

Sustaining the supernatural over the length of a novel or a feature film is fraught with difficulty. The problem is essentially philosophical or metaphysical: What is a ghost? If it is malevolent, why is it malevolent? If not, then what does it want? Moreover, what good is it?

Our script starts with that solid "good old-fashioned" foundation: a whacky aunt and her nephew spending the night in a desolate haunted house. But modern audiences demand a

little more than just bumps in the night.

So, atop this foundation, I weaved a psychological drama of Augustus's coming to self-awareness, of his tragic past and its impact on his present (and future), as well as Aunt's Julia's need to expiate her guilt in denying him his history.

I wanted a straight-forward story, as simple as I could possibly make it, yet without recourse to the formulaic. That said, the structure should be comfortably familiar.

I also wanted it, of course, to have some chills. This is not accomplished by beating the audience over the head with sudden shocks (i.e., The James Wan school), but by the slow, steady accumulation of unseen horrors lurking somewhere within the house...

I also wanted a light touch, with quirky characters and some humor. Too many "horror" films today (and this most emphatically is not "horror") are dark, ugly, squalid, loud, predictable--as boring as they are sadistic.

Most of all, I wanted it to be fun. The heavy hand falls hard in the end, but, until then, I wanted the journey to be fun. With an odd couple like Julia and Augustus, I think it will be.