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Title: *Disposable Ghosts*

Format: original drama (excerpt from full-length 90 minute play)

In my creative work as a playwright, I frequently return to ghosts and the supernatural, and the resonances between age-old ghost stories and contemporary politics. Ghosts remind us of the histories we create and the stories we tell ourselves, and all the erasures that are left to linger in ghostly palimpsestic traces. My play *Disposable Ghosts* was inspired by recent protests in the American South over the presence of Confederate statues, and uses the supernatural to represent the collective trauma of a community, and I use “ghost tours” as a recurring motif throughout the play as a way of walking through the violence of local history and allowing people to grapple with the spirits of the past. In this play, Deacon’s Grove, Massachusetts, is celebrating its 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of colonial settlement with a big Deacon’s Day celebration. Dahlia Atkinson leads the Historical Society. The day’s plans are interrupted when the young Bea Harris, a recently-returned resident of the town, starts a protest calling for the removal of the statue of Arthur Deacon, due to his slave-owning past. This protest unleashes ghosts and half-buried secrets from all the residents. In the excerpted scene I have included from Act I, which include the opening moments as well as later scenes, the sighting of a ghost, and the subsequent discussion of it and whether the ghost can be “believed,” becomes a representation of unspoken/unspeakable historical and personal trauma.

Keywords: ghosts, cemeteries, history, ghost tours, trauma, statues, memorials, slavery

**DISPOSABLE GHOSTS**

*A drama in one act*

*[Excerpt]*

## CHARACTERS

DAHLIA ATKINSON	Late 50s, female. Director of the Deacon's Grove Museum of Local History. Her husband, Vic, died three years ago. She grew up in Deacon's Grove, as did both of her parents, and she wants to be able to properly celebrate the town's people.
TIM ATKINSON	Mid 20s, male. Dahlia's only child. Lives at home after taking a year off from college that turned into five. He gives ghost tours of the town for the Local History museum to earn money and keep himself entertained.
BEA HARRIS	Late 20s, female. Recently returned to Deacon's Grove to care for her mother. Possibly distantly related to Arthur Deacon, the town's founder.
ROSALIND HARRIS	Mid 60s, female. Bea's mother. Has dementia. (Doubles as WOMAN in opening scene and COUNCIL MEMBER.)
MARCIA DONNEGAN	Mid 40s, female, mayor of Deacon's Grove. Has aspirations to become involved in county or state politics.
ANDY HARRIS	Early 30s, male, Bea's older brother. (Doubles as RAFI, Marcia's assistant, and WAR REENACTOR LEADER.)
ARTHUR DEACON	40s-60s, male. Ghost/reenactor (Doubles as MAN in cemetery/additional SOLDIER REENACTOR.) <i>*non-speaking</i>

## ADDITIONAL SOLDIER REENACTORS AND PURITANS

## SETTING

Present day. The suburban town of Deacon's Grove, Massachusetts. Population: 20,021, per the last census.

## SYNOPSIS

Deacon's Grove, Massachusetts, is celebrating its 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of colonial settlement with a big Deacon's Day celebration. Dahlia Atkinson leads the Historical Society. The day's plans are interrupted when the young Bea Harris, a recently-returned resident of the town, starts a protest calling for the removal of the statue of Arthur Deacon, due to his slave-owning past. This protest unleashes ghosts and half-buried secrets from all the residents.

ACT [1]

SCENE [1]

*(On the right side of the stage is a large bronze statue of a man, Arthur Deacon. The statue stands on a high pedestal and is dressed in colonial garb, and holds a bible in his left hand, his right resting on his hip. It has turned green from age and weather.)*

*(A young woman, BEA HARRIS, approaches it, slowly. She looks up at the statue, then down at her feet.)*

BEA

The earth doesn't need any more people. We've already polluted and generated enough trash to kill the planet a hundred different ways, and there's more than enough that have lived throughout history that still haven't fully gone away. *(Points to the statue.)* Like him. Who needs new people when he's always here for us to think about.

This statue is probably the only thing in this town that people care about. It's a local landmark, the only interesting sight we have besides the green pond and that one weird house with all the garden gnomes in the yard.

*(She points to the plaque at the base of the statue.)*

Arthur Deacon. One of the first settlers to Massachusetts, came over with nothing but his family, his books, and a few enslaved women. He named the whole town after himself: Deacon's Grove.

I've heard the statue's whole story a million times before. It was first made in England, commissioned by some of Arthur Deacon's descendants in the late 1800s. But it was lost at sea on the trip over here, so they had to make another one. Then, when it finally got here, it was removed from the house after a fire in 1922. That was actually the second time the house burned down. You'd think people would learn that the statue is cursed. *(Beat.)* Just kidding. I don't believe in curses. I don't believe in ghosts. I don't believe in anything, really. *(Beat.)* That's not really true either. But we'll just have to wait and see. In a billion years or five the sun will

explode and the world will cease to exist, unless we self-destruct before that. And while everything will be incinerated and we'll all be gone, somehow this statue might manage to survive forever.

*(BEA exits. DAHLIA enters from the opposite side.)*

ACT [1]

SCENE [2]

*(On one side of the stage, DAHLIA introduces a group (which is unseen) to the Deacon's Grove Historical Society and Museum, which is located in an old mansion. The other side of the stage is dark.)*

DAHLIA

If you could gather around me, please. Apologies that it's a bit disorganized around here. We're very busy, preparing for the upcoming Deacon's Day festival— which, if you haven't seen all the fliers, is only two days away! *I'm* always busy, but everyone is busy right now, and so they all finally know what it feels like. Anyway.

*(She clears her throat.)*

Welcome to the Deacon's Grove Historical Society and Museum. My name is Dahlia Atkinson, the Executive Director. How many of you have been here before?

*(Beat.)*

Wonderful. I'm happy to welcome you back. We begin at the town's beginning. Deacon's Grove was founded by and named after Arthur Deacon, an early Puritan settler to colonial Massachusetts. The bronze statue out front? That's him. The historical society was established here in his former home after it was bequeathed to the town by his great-great-granddaughter, who donated it under the condition that the society preserve and honor the legacy of her ancestor and the other townspeople throughout history. This home, constructed in 1651, is a rare example of First Period American architecture, and was considered quite luxurious for Arthur Deacon's day. Entering this house is like stepping backward in time. Now, this room we're standing in was actually burnt down in a battle against Native Americans during King Phillip's War. This adjacent room is where—

*(Lights up on TIM on the other side of the stage, leading a group, which is also unseen, around the Deacon's Grove cemetery. He wears a black cape.)*

TIM

This is where Arthur Deacon's spirit comes to haunt on the full moon. Some might say that it is only a legend, but I have seen his ghost myself. You all believe, don't you? Belief is very important this evening.

DAHLIA

Thanks to the generosity of the Deacon family, we have been able to properly restore this historic home. I am overjoyed to share our commitment to local history with all of you today.

TIM

Take a look at this mausoleum. The Briggs Family Vault. The Briggs were once the tenth-largest landowners in the whole United States. The remains of family members were first interred in 1703. When the crypt was reopened in 1713 to bury another body, the three other coffins were found to be standing upright!

DAHLIA

In the period rooms, which include the dining room and sitting room, our staff has ensured that each object has been carefully placed to reflect how it was when Arthur Deacon, his wife Mercy, and their twelve children lived in the home.

TIM

There was no sign of forced entry or flooding. No... it was something *within* that caused them to move. Maybe some of the bodies were buried alive, and they were just trying to make their escape, but how can anyone know for sure? That's just one of the many unexplainable phenomena in Deacon's Grove.

DAHLIA

In our galleries, we also have household goods, photographs, and artifacts from the many families and individuals that formed the foundation of this town.

TIM

We have dark secrets: grisly murders, apparitions that feed on the souls of the living. This cemetery may even contain the Gates to Hell.

DAHLIA

And in only two days we have our annual Deacon's Day celebration, where we celebrate the heritage of our community.

TIM

... and the spirits can, even for a short while, roam the world of the living once more. Some of you here are probably skeptics, and are here for entertainment. But keep an open mind, and you may be surprised about what lurks in the darkness. There is nothing entertaining about these ghosts' tragedies.

DAHLIA

This year marks 350 years from when the town was first established, so it's a big one!

TIM

If you feel a ghost with us tonight, please alert me immediately. We can never be too careful when dealing with the paranormal.

DAHLIA

In addition to founding the town, Arthur Deacon also played a key role in establishing the first school and the first general store in the area, both of which now bear his name. After he died at the age of eighty-three, his descendants became instrumental to the settlement of a number of other towns around the Massachusetts Bay Colony and throughout New England. Succeeding generations would eventually push West, settling the frontiers of Ohio, Kansas, Wyoming, even Oregon. But it all started right here.

*(Suddenly, the voice of a WOMAN from offstage calls.)*

WOMAN

Excuse me? Excuse me!

*(Both DAHLIA and TIM turn to look, trying to find the source of the voice.)*

DAHLIA

If you could just hold your questions until the end, please. I'm almost finished.

WOMAN

Excuse me! Don't you people have any respect for the dead?

TIM

I'm sorry, we have every right to be here, we have permission from the town—

*(The WOMAN bursts on stage, and walks over toward TIM. She is carrying flowers.)*

WOMAN

I am trying to visit my husband, and here *you* are, prancing about in this group.

TIM

I'm sorry, ma'am, this is just a.... We won't be long... The tour will be over soon, we have a—

WOMAN

Look at what you're doing. You confused me. Now I can't find it...I can't find where he is...what did you do...

*(She starts to wander off, and Tim and Dahlia pause a moment before resuming talking.)*

DAHLIA

Our mission here at the Historical Society is not to provide an argument about how to view the past, but simply to preserve the history in as much fullness as possible, and allow the visitors to draw their own connections with the past.

TIM

I'm sorry...

*(He turns to his tour group.)*

I'm sorry for this. Next stop on Haunted Deacon's Grove is the abandoned well. Let's just be on our way.

DAHLIA

Let us enter the first restored room, the bed chambers of Arthur Deacon, and feel ourselves placed into the past.

WOMAN

*(disoriented)*

How am I supposed to go about my business with all of you here?

TIM

Follow me, everyone!

WOMAN

What am I supposed to do if I can't find it? If I can barely hear myself think?

## DAHLIA

*Please, hold your questions until the end!*

*[Some intermediary scenes have been intentionally excluded]*

ACT [1]

SCENE [11]

*(DAHLIA is sitting in the living room, watching TV. TIM returns home from his ghost tour, looking a bit shaken. He sets his bag and pint of fake blood on the coffee table.)*

DAHLIA

How was the tour?

TIM

Fine. Totally fine. *(Beat.)* It was weird.

DAHLIA

*(not turning from the TV)*

Great.

TIM

What are you watching?

DAHLIA

Just a re-run of an antiquing show.

TIM

How many times have you seen this one? *(Beat.)* I need... Do we... do we have anything to eat?

DAHLIA

I'm not cooking for you again.

TIM

I wasn't asking you to. *(Beat.)* And what do you mean "again?" When was the last time you cooked for me?

*(He sits down on the couch next to her.)*

Maybe I'll order something.

DAHLIA

Why don't you order from Santoni's? Haven't eaten there in a while. How about a pizza half with pineapple?

TIM

Gross. No.

DAHLIA

You used to eat that all the time—

TIM

Yeah. When Dad ordered it.

DAHLIA

Well, I kind of like it too.

TIM

Great. I still don't. *(Beat.)* Can we turn the TV off?

DAHLIA

I want to see the end of this.

TIM

It's just kind of irritating. And I... I don't know, something really weird just happened.

*(Tim starts moving around papers and other assorted stuff from the cluttered coffee table.)*

It's disgusting in here.

DAHLIA

It's not like you ever clean up.

TIM

I really can't stand listening to the TV all the time.

DAHLIA

I'm just trying to relax a bit before tomorrow. If you hate it so much here, then why don't you move out?

*(A tense silence.)*

TIM

I think... I think I saw a ghost. During the tour.

DAHLIA

*(not really listening)*

Sure.

TIM

I'm serious.

DAHLIA

Don't you "see a ghost" every night?

TIM

No. I think... it was real.

DAHLIA

What did this ghost look like? White sheet, or powdered face?

TIM

No. It was just a man.

DAHLIA

Then it was probably just a man. Not a ghost.

TIM

No. It's weird, but it looked... it looked like Dad.

DAHLIA

That's impossible. If your father was going to be haunting anyone, it would be me.

TIM

I'm not crazy. I know I'm not.

DAHLIA

I never said you were.

*(She returns her attention to the TV.)*

TIM

Mom?

DAHLIA

What?

TIM

Are we going to talk about this?

DAHLIA

What is there to talk about? Even if you *did* see a ghost, the only way to make them go away is to ignore them. Eventually they'll get bored and leave you alone, and you'll forget all about it.

TIM

That's not how it works.

DAHLIA

If you can't choose to forget it, you can choose to stop paying attention to it.

*(Silence. Tim finds something to eat.)*

TIM

Can we *please* turn this garbage off? I just want to be able to eat in peace. It's not like we ever have a quiet dinner.

DAHLIA

Do you want to eat together?

TIM

No, I don't want to.

*(Dahlia turns the TV off.)*

DAHLIA

If you want to talk, let's sit and talk. We can clear some things off here—

TIM

No, I don't want to, I'll eat by myself—

*(Both are reaching at the stuff on the coffee table—Dahlia is trying to help move things but Tim is resisting her. Tim knocks over the little pint of fake blood. It spills all over the coffee table.)*

Shit!

*(He frantically looks around for something to wipe it up with.)*

DAHLIA

What a mess. This is why I told you to get rid of this—

TIM

Can you shut up for a second? I'm trying.

DAHLIA

Let me do it—

*(She wrestles for the rag.)*

TIM

*Stop.* I can handle it.

DAHLIA

Shit. You're making it worse—

TIM

No, you're making it worse—

*(He wipes it up as best he can, before throwing the blood-covered towels onto the floor.)*

DAHLIA

Can you get the Swiffer and wipe down the floor?

TIM

I'm not doing that right now, it's non-toxic anyway. What the hell is wrong with you?

DAHLIA

I'm sorry that I want my floor to be clean--

TIM

No, I mean, why won't you listen to me? You think you know what I saw better than I do. You think you're always right, and get that smug look on your face when you're in an argument with anyone.

DAHLIA

Because I know I'm right that you didn't see a ghost.

TIM

See? You don't even think for a second about what I'm feeling. You're probably doing the same thing with the whole protest, acting like you're listening with absolutely no intention of changing your mind even a little.

DAHLIA

Please, can't I have five minutes where I don't have to think about politics.

TIM

I'm so glad that you have no qualms about sitting there and only thinking about yourself.

DAHLIA

Why don't you think about someone other than yourself? This is hard for me, too. For someone to say that what I've dedicated my life to preserve is something that needs to be challenged, to be destroyed?

TIM

I don't care. I'm going to go take a walk.

DAHLIA

Right now? It's late.

TIM

I need to get out of here.

DAHLIA

Uh, okay. But if you're not at the historical society by 9am sharp tomorrow.

*(Tim grabs a jacket and exits quickly.)*

ACT [1]

SCENE [12]

*(BEA sits in front of the statue, head resting on her knees. A rustling sound. Maybe an animal, maybe just some leaves— but enough to make Bea pick her head up and look around. Nothing. She straightens up a bit. After a moment, the sound of footsteps.)*

BEA

Hello?

*(Nothing. Then—a figure seems to move in the shadows.)*

Is someone there? I have the right to peaceful protest.

*(No sound.)*

You can join my cause... if you want?

*(A ghostly figure dressed like Arthur Deacon emerges from the shadows. BEA screams.)*

I don't know what kind of joke this is, but it's not funny.

*(She starts to stand up in fear.)*

What the *hell* is going on. Get away from me! Shit!

*(The ghost does not move.)*

Well, perfect timing, I was just about to head home anyway...

*(Bea starts to hastily gather her things. The ghost wordlessly retreats. TIM enters just as Bea is about to dash away.)*

TIM

Hey! Wait!

BEA

What?

TIM

Where are you going?

BEA

Home. I gotta get out of here. I think I saw—

TIM

--a ghost?

*(Bea freezes.)*

Yeah. Me too.

BEA

I don't think— I don't know what it was. Who it was. Anyway, I'm leaving for the night.

TIM

Why do you keep leaving the statue?

BEA

Because I have things I need to do. Work. Responsibilities at home. I'm trying to come here when I can, but I can't spend all night out here.

TIM

Makes sense. (*Beat.*) So you're like a reverse-vampire.

BEA

A what?

TIM

You only are out during the day. And then as soon as the sun sets, you have to go inside.

BEA

What the hell is a "reverse-vampire"? Don't you just mean I'm a normal human? (*Beat.*) Do you really believe in ghosts?

TIM

I think so. I don't know. I try to make myself believe, otherwise that means everything I tell people each night is a lie. (*Beat.*) Who was your ghost?

BEA

What?

TIM

The ghost you saw. Who was it the ghost of?

BEA

Oh. I'm not totally sure.

TIM

Mine kind of looked like my dad. He... died a few years ago. Committed suicide.

BEA

Oh. Uh. I don't... I don't know what to say. I'm sorry. My dad also died when I was little.

TIM

How did he die?

*(An awkward pause.)*

BEA

Uh... he died in a car accident. .

TIM

Sorry. I don't know why I asked that, I didn't mean— It's weird, maybe it's morbid, but talking about how my dad died helps me deal with it, I guess. Better than the way my mom deals with it.

*(Beat.)*

BEA

Yeah. My mom.... *(Beat.)* When my dad died, it was almost a relief. I mean, I barely remember him, but he was... I never saw anything myself, but I know my mom was afraid of him. *(Beat.)* But the strange thing is, I used to have this dream that he wasn't actually dead. I never saw his body or anything, so sometimes I was convinced that the whole accident wasn't real, and that one day he might walk through the front door.

TIM

Is it only you and your mom now? Do you have other...

BEA

I have my brother, Andy. He's here right now, and I still think we don't really know how to interact with one another. But otherwise, that's it. *(Beat.)* My mom used to always say that her side of the family is descended from Arthur Deacon if you go back far enough. But I'm becoming increasingly convinced that she made it all up. I don't know if anything she told me was ever true.

TIM

Huh.

*(A pause.)*

Actually... I want to help with the protest.

BEA

Is that why you came here?

TIM

Sort of, I wasn't sure if you'd still be here, but... I was going to head to the cemetery for a walk. I... uh... that's where I saw the ghost, and I wanted to check it out again.

BEA

I hate cemeteries. They're a waste of space. The dead don't need all that land.

TIM

I like them. Nobody to bother you there. Except ghosts, I guess. *(Beat.)* Do you want to come? So we can talk about the protest. We need a plan for tomorrow.

BEA

Sure. As long as I'm not about to get murdered.

*(Tim leads BEA offstage. The scene transforms to a CEMETERY, and they re-enter.)*