



**University of
Sheffield**

**American Nightmare:
Situating Stephen King within the
Haunted House of the American Gothic**

M. Hackett

A PhD submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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For all those lost, and the one I found, during the completion of this PhD.

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Abstract

This PhD consists of two parts, a creative element and a critical element, which together examine Stephen King's place within the American Gothic genre.

The first part is a collection of four short stories which each engage with themes and ideas frequently explored in the writing of King and other American Gothic authors, such as domesticity, trauma, masculinity and the past returning to haunt the present. In 'The Doberman's Grin', 'The House on Montrose Avenue', 'The Legend of Robert Jacobson' and 'The Milk Carton Kids' — like in so much of King's work — a glimpse of the "American Nightmare" that must surely run parallel to the "American Dream" is offered.

The second part is a thesis which, through close readings of novels by King, Shirley Jackson, Robin Cook and Toni Morrison, examines how these authors use place and setting as a source of terror in their novels, as well as how their writing reflects on wider American societal issues. Chapter one looks at how the temporarily adopted 'home' becomes a site of haunting for the central character — both in the supernatural sense, and by reminding them of their own traumatic past — in King's *The Shining* (1977) and Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). Chapter two examines the ways in which both extremities of the consequences of American capitalism are represented in King's *Salem's Lot* (1975) and Cook's *Coma* (1977), thus reducing the human body to a commodity for a capitalist-like figure. Chapter three focuses on the union between trauma personally experienced by the main character and a shared national trauma integral to the history of America, whether that is colonialism or the Atlantic Slave Trade, in King's *Pet Sematary* (1983) and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).

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Part One: Short Story Collection

The Doberman's Grin and Other Stories

The Doberman's Grin

Things were never supposed to turn out like this. It wasn't a masterpiece, he knew that. But it wasn't trash either. Half the spots on the bestseller lists these days were taken up by crime novels, so why wasn't his there with them? There was no way in hell that *The Mangled Heart* wasn't at least on a level with, if not better than, those flimsy thrillers whose plots fell apart quicker than their binding. He had even done his research, with the help of his old professor, so that nothing about the crimes had been half-assed. And then there was his main protagonist who was nothing less than a stroke of genius if he dared say so himself (which he did): a recently discharged cop who was diagnosed with agoraphobia after his wife was shot on their own front lawn. Yet, it wasn't *his* name he saw on the spines of the paperbacks those upstate yuppies hid their faces behind in the coffee shops downtown. It was a small freelance agency in Boston, New York which had first accepted his manuscript, but Moira the redhead had known someone who knew someone in Manhattan and so *Liberty Press*, sitting within the top ten biggest publishing houses in the country at that time, had agreed to take him on. *The Mangled Heart* was published on Tuesday, November twelfth with an initial (and ultimately single) run of six thousand copies. Even with a Johnny Fortress interview – the king of afternoons on 79.5 FM – and a fleeting mention in *The New York Times'* Saturday Book Review (Moira really *did* know people), *The Mangled Heart* had dropped like a boulder in a swimming pool. It had never even made it to paperback.

He thumbed the front cover now, tracing the raised print of his own name. There were at least a few dozen copies stacked up in an old shipping box in the corner of the garage; another five hundred Moira had convinced the publishers to let him keep (before they were destroyed) were sitting in a rented lockup downtown. He had never told his wife about this — he anticipated that Stacey wouldn't be too happy about him handing over a hundred and fifty dollars a month just to 'hold onto the past', as she liked to put it. It had been over a decade since twenty-five-year-old Michael Arnold, young, naïve and drunk on the praise from his professors on the Master of Fine Arts writing program he had moved to the city to finish, had first held that copy of *The Mangled Heart*. It was a feeling more intoxicating than trying a cigarette at fourteen behind the bleachers or making out with Stacey for the first time in the backseat of his grandfather's old Lincoln on prom night. The truth, although he didn't dare ever admit it to Stacey, was that he just could *not* let go. *The Mangled Heart* was more than just his past. Bouncing the heavy novel in his open palm, it was as if part of his own heart were contained within the pages.

'Michael!'

He looked up. Stacey was standing in the garage doorway, wide eyes fixed on a spot by his feet. It took him a moment to realise that it wasn't just the sight of him with *The Mangled Heart* clasped in his hand again that had unnerved her. Michael looked down just in time to catch their son from pulling the box of his books down on top of him.

'Woah, kiddo!'

Michael stooped down to pick up Jonah, suffocating the toddler in tickles until he had dissolved into laughter. The book was still tucked under Michael's right elbow.

'So how was work?' he called over Jonah's giggles.

Stacey didn't smile as she crossed the room and pulled Jonah into her own arms. For a second, her eyes seemed to linger on the edge of the book just visible under his arm.

'Ashleigh's waiting to show you something she did at school today.'

She turned and marched out of the garage and back into the house. Michael dropped *The Mangled Heart* back amongst the rest of the books, and was about to follow Stacey out when he spotted two yellow eyes peering out from between the piles of boxes.

'Get out!' He slapped his hand down on one of the box's lids and Cartwright, the cat who belonged to the old woman who lived next door to them, came darting out.

Mrs. Perkins, Cartwright's owner, was constantly coming round asking if they had seen it. And, more often than not, the cat *had* always managed to find its way into some hidden corner of their garage. How Cartwright managed to get in, they had no idea. Michael's hands tightened around the cat's scrawny stomach and, starting to hiss and attempting to claw him, he carried it through the house and to the front door. As he threw Cartwright onto the welcome mat it made to run straight back into the house, but Michael was quicker.

'You almost got my kid squished back there. Stay away from my house, fur ball.' He slammed the door in its ugly face.

He found Ashleigh sitting on the sofa.

'Daddy! Look what I got!' She jumped into his arms and he spun her around twice, as she thrust a crumpled piece of paper under his nose. He barely had time to look over it before she yelled, 'It's a certificate! I got all of Miss Howard's spelling test right, even "elephant"! It's E-L—'

'Woah, kiddo!' He let Ashleigh slide out of his arms and onto the sofa, and beamed down at her. 'When I was in second grade, I'm pretty sure I could barely spell "dog".'

'Plus, I even got this,' she pulled a medal made out of gold foil attached to a red ribbon from her pocket, holding it up to show him. 'It's got chocolate inside. But Mommy says I have to wait until after dinner to eat it.'

He dropped down onto the seat next to her.

'Watch out for Mr. Fuzzy!' She pulled her old stuffed bunny out from behind her father's back.

'Well,' he lowered his voice, pretending to pet Mr. Fuzzy. 'Perhaps Mommy doesn't have to know...'

'And perhaps Mommy sets rules for a reason.' Stacey had appeared in the doorway, her face set in that dangerous expression he knew all too well.

The kids were the only ones to perforate the silence over dinner. Ashleigh was still spelling out all of the words she had got right in her test between forkfuls of spaghetti, proudly wearing her chocolate medal around her neck. Jonah had taken to copying his sister, repeating the letters he had managed to pick up on. It was only after Ashleigh had excused herself from the table to go and eat her chocolate that Stacey turned to Michael.

'They've asked me if I'd like to switch to full time hours at work, Michael. Stefani Morton's moving to Cincinnati; her husband got a promotion down there.'

This statement seemed to sit more heavily on Michael than the plate of carbonara that had just hit his stomach. He finished chewing, slowly, then spoke, 'And what did you say?'

'I didn't say anything yet. I was waiting to speak to you first.' She pushed her plate away and lifted her glass of wine to her lips. Before taking a sip, she added, 'It would mean

you watching the kids everyday, if I *did* say yes. And you'd only be able to help out at Hillview on the weekends. You do know that, right, Michael?'

It felt like he was being castrated right there, live, in front of his own son. Suddenly those late nights sitting behind his old typewriter in that tiny dorm room all those years ago came back to him. The taste of whisky and that burning desire he had felt running up and down his fingers as he typed... He could feel it now, the thirst to prove that he was somebody. His head had been filled with stupid ideas, appraisals from old Doc Brown that he was the most talented student he had had in years. And where had that got him? Stuck with a crate full of books no one wanted; in debt to his prissy father-in-law because he hadn't been able to keep up with the mortgage repayments on the three bedroom townhouse in suburbia his wife had insisted they needed; and teaching ex-cons and middle aged truckers how to read at the local community college. All because he had chosen a worthless writing program that didn't mean shit in the real world. Of course, to Stacey this wasn't even a real job — it was just *helping out*. And now — *oh, it got better* — now he couldn't even feed his own family. It had all been a Goddamned waste of time.

But that anger with himself soon dissolved into resentment — resentment for Stacey. Who had been the one pushing for the dream home and the kids and the perfect little life like her sister had? Her. If she had just given him more time, time to work out what went wrong with the first book and how to perfect the second one... Maybe he could have even worked things out with the publisher. But instead she had made him quit, not with force, strong and final, like a man, but with pressure, consistent and cumulative, breaking him down little by little, the way only a woman could. It started with the threat of talking to her father about finding him a job at his place. To hell if he, Michael Arnold, was ever going to work for his wife's old man. Then she had started working on the front desk at one of her girlfriend's law firms uptown. 'It's just three days a week', she had told him. 'Just to feel like I'm contributing something', she had said. When none of this had worked in making him give up on the second novel, she had done the next best thing to killing him and ripping the manuscript out of his cold hands: she had fallen pregnant. How this had happened when she was supposed to be on birth control was some kind of medical mystery ('no drug is a hundred percent effective, Michael'). So, when Ashleigh had come along, *The Scattered Grave* (working title) had been shelved indefinitely, alongside his dreams of becoming a somebody.

Well, one day he would prove them all wrong. One day Michael Arnold would make a name for himself.

'Michael?' Stacey was staring at him over her glass of wine.

He ran his thumb along the metal clasp of his watch on the opposite wrist, avoiding her eyes. He really had no solid defence, he knew that. Her pay was better than his. Working at the community college was only ever supposed to have been a temporary thing anyway, until something better came along. Plus, she worked for lawyers.

'I say go for it, honey.' He rose, still avoiding her eyes, and kissed her on the cheek. 'I'll go get the kids ready for bed, get them used to Daddy being around more.'

He was at the foot of the stairs, a struggling Jonah gripped tightly in his arms, when she said it.

'Maybe you could clean out the garage this weekend, make it a bit more kid-friendly now that Jonah's walking.'

He knew what was coming next. He closed his eyes, as if blocking her out of his vision might also shut out her voice.

‘And now might be a good time to get rid of those old books too, Michael. I saw you looking at them again today... No more holding onto the past. A fresh start.’

He realised his hands were still shaking as he pulled Jonah’s pyjamas over his head.

‘Hold still, damnit!’

The toddler’s lip trembled and guilt washed over Michael. It had come out harsher than he had intended. *Don’t turn into your father, Michael*, he gave himself a mental warning. In part to ease his own conscience, he stayed with Jonah until he fell asleep, making up a story for him, hand gestures and all, about a boy who, while trying to find his lost dog, ended up on the moon. Getting Ashleigh to fall asleep was a lot less hard work; as long as she had Mr. Fuzzy, she was content.

‘Daddy, I want Mr. Fuzzy to be there at my birthday party.’

Her eyelids were already flickering. Mr. Fuzzy’s mottled grey face, one ear fraying and tucked under Ashleigh’s arm, was just sticking up over the bedsheets. Michael remembered when the rabbit used to be pink and didn’t smell like the kitchen of a greasy spoon.

‘He goes with you everywhere, honey. I’m pretty sure there’ll be a party hat for Mr. Fuzzy—’

‘No, Daddy, I mean that I want Mr. Fuzzy to *really* be there. Like when Sara Hernandez had Huggles the Bear at her party last year. Do you think he’ll be able to come?’

Ashleigh was looking up at him, the yellow glow of the nightlight illuminating her face so that in that moment, she looked just like her mother. He felt himself smile. He remembered one of those corny ancient proverbs Stacey had hung in the hallway of their first apartment, printed on a canvas in a green font that you could barely read, something about not being able to change the past but having control of your future. He had made a terrible author and an even worse husband, even if most of that was beyond his own control. But now, looking into his daughter’s eyes, he acknowledged that he could blame no one but himself for being a crappy father these past few years. Thankfully, there was still time to change that. Even if it meant dressing up in an Easter Bunny suit.

‘I’m sure that Mr. Fuzzy will be able to make it, honey. I’ll invite him myself.’

‘And maybe Mommy will let me have chocolate for breakfast on my birthday, too.’

He leant over to kiss her goodnight. ‘I’ll keep working on that one, kiddo.’

She smiled and closed her eyes.

The room was still in semi-darkness when Michael got up the next morning. When he had heard Stacey changing in the bathroom the night before, he had pretended to be asleep, amplifying his fake snores as she climbed into bed next to him. He must have really fallen asleep soon after, though, because the clock beside his bed now said five fifty-eight a.m. when he opened his eyes. Now, he looked across at Stacey. The soft skin of her right shoulder was exposed under the thin strap of her silk nightdress and her hair spilled out across her pillow, as if caught in water. Usually, he would lean across and kiss her warm, smooth neck. Today, instead, he simply pulled on his jeans and a shirt and made for the door. His wife was

just feet away from him and he couldn't even make the effort to touch her. Things had settled in his mind overnight, he was going to make an effort for the kids but, regarding their marriage, the ball was in Stacey's court. A line from *The Mangled Heart* suddenly came to him: *You could fill in a chip in a vase and most people would never notice it, but when a vase is made up of nothing but tiny chips you better not expect it to hold water.* Right now he couldn't even reach across to touch her without resentment creeping up inside his brain like the dense fog that seemed to cling to his windshield on late fall mornings. It was the situation with his second book again but only worse; this time there wasn't the fact that she was pregnant with his child to assuage him. The only thing Stacey bore now was the steely ambition she had inherited from her father and the urge to humiliate him.

Well, one thing he had learnt from all these years was that it was either Stacey Reed-Arnold's way (the name thing still irked him) or the highway. With this in mind, he made his way through the house into the garage where he started piling copies of *The Mangled Heart* into the trunk of his car. Later, he planned to drop them off at second-hand book stores throughout the city. At least, then, someone might read them. Soon, just one lonely copy sat atop a shelf that had previously housed a fake plant on the back wall. That copy was staying. Marriage was about compromise: something Stacey would have to learn sooner or later. Then he placed his old typewriter, the one that had seen him through college, on the shelf next to it. He had always dreamed of having a writing nook in the house, but a shelf would have to suffice; for now, at least.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur. Spurred on by two cups of black coffee and the *80s Hits* CD he had found, Michael had managed to clear the majority of the garage by the time he heard Stacey and the kids coming downstairs. He had re-hung all of the tools in their rightful places on the workstation, away from the roaming hands of Jonah, and now just two neat trash bags were sitting by the door; he had put another small box of junk for the thrift store with the books in the trunk. Stacey pretended to faint with shock as she stepped inside the garage, dramatically holding onto the doorframe.

'Wow. Look at you taking instruction. What did you do with my husband? There's hope for you yet.'

Michael made a concerted effort not to smile, but when she walked over to him and kissed his lips he felt the animosity he had been harbouring start to melt away immediately.

'You know,' she was standing so close to him that their bodies were touching. 'I could have sworn that you weren't really sleeping last night when I got in bed.'

He couldn't help but return her smirk. 'I just had a headache.'

'Quit using my excuses.' She was so close to him that he could feel her breath against his ear now. 'You know that I only want the best for us, and for the kids, Michael.'

'I know, honey,' he said, and realised that he meant it.

'Maybe I could talk to Rachel, tell her I can only work four days a week now. That way you can do Fridays and Saturday mornings at Hillview, you always said they were your favourite classes.'

He *had* always said they were his favourite classes. As he looked at Stacey, it was like he was seeing her for the first time again. He felt his eyes hungrily roving over her face, taking in the barely visible freckles around her cheeks and the eyes that were like cut sapphires and the small, neat teeth just visible behind her lips. In that moment he was

reminded why he put up with all of her delicately worded demands and veiled need for control. It was the same reason he had married her: because he truly loved her. No matter how much she pissed him off, she was always able to reel him back in. He felt his hands close around her waist, as if acting on their own accord, and then his mouth was against hers. He didn't want to come up for air, he just wanted to kiss her until that metaphorical distance that had been growing between them these past few weeks was little more than a bad memory. They only parted when Michael felt a soft slap below his knee and they looked down to see the kids staring up at them.

'G-r-o-s-s!' Ashleigh sang as Jonah hit Michael again.

Michael finally let go of Stacey and they both laughed.

'C'mon honey,' Stacey tapped Michael on the arm. 'I want you to drive me to work. Remind the other girls of the hot guy I married.'

He knew that she was only stroking his ego, but it was working. After they had waved Ashleigh off on the school bus, he strapped Jonah into his infant safety seat in the back of the car and then climbed into the driver's seat.

As she slid in next to him, Stacey said in a low voice, 'And make sure to take some aspirin this afternoon. I do *not* want you having a headache tonight.'

Once he had dropped off Stacey at work, Michael drove Jonah to a small diner downtown where he ordered them both breakfast. He didn't feel much like cooking, but in his newly-lifted mood he realised that he was starving. Michael soon finished off his bacon with another coffee, while Jonah played with his eggs and toast. After breakfast, he took the car around the back of the plaza on Thirty-Fourth Street. This place had the reputation of being the so-called 'trendy' part of town — he knew this because he and Stacey had once made a wrong turn down there on their way home shortly after moving into the new house — lined with thrift stores and coffee shops. It was the former he was interested in. He managed to unload at least half of the books, in stacks of fives at a time, in the second-hand book stores that sat on every corner. It made him smile to think of some hippy flipping through *The Mangled Heart*, expecting a pretentious European crime thriller with a neat ending imported from France or Britain. Michael couldn't be sour with Stacey anymore, this *was* pretty therapeutic. Of course, knowing that he still had his secret lockup filled to the brim with his books made him feel even better. It was in the last store they went in that he saw it. The girl behind the desk, sporting a nose piercing and a tie-dye t-shirt, had just told him that they didn't accept book donations but that he could try down the street when he had felt Jonah tugging on his hand. Michael had turned to scoop the child up when he spotted it on the back wall: the Doberman pinscher head.

It felt as if someone had opened a door in the store, letting in a cold breeze. The skin on Michael's bare forearms had started to tighten, tiny white goose-pimples spreading up over them like a rash. The dog's blank eyes were set, fixed on an invisible target. And its mouth... Underneath its flat nose, the two lines of the mouth dropped down in identical slopes. No teeth were exposed (did it even have teeth?) but it looked as if it was grinning. After a second, though, the creepiness (because that's what it was) had started to subside. And Michael found himself smiling back at it. It wasn't real (had he really thought it was? Perhaps, just for a second). It was the head from a suit, the type someone would wear to a costume party or for Halloween. Michael still hadn't moved, it was as if his shoes were stuck

to the store's stained carpet. There was something familiar about the dog's face; the longer he stared at it, the more he recognised it. And then he realised what it reminded him of: Mr. Fuzzy. It took Michael a moment to remember where he was, and that he had a struggling toddler and three heavy books balanced in his arms. When he was back to his senses, he turned to the girl behind the desk.

'That Doberman pinscher head, do you have the suit as well?' He nodded towards it. She was hunched over the desk, one finger playing with the stud in her nose. 'It's on the rack.' She didn't even look up at him.

Jonah screamed all the way home. Nothing would work; not promises of ice cream or a new dinosaur toy, or even the old nursery rhymes CD that Michael had found in the glove compartment — Michael vaguely remembered them buying it to help Ashleigh sleep on long car rides to Stacey's parents' house when she was younger than Jonah. It hadn't worked then, either.

'Look, kiddo. What am I supposed to do? What do you want? We'll be back home soon. Just try to...'

Michael trailed off. He had turned around in his seat to try and calm Jonah down and there, on the floor of the car below the child's feet, was the Doberman's head. But he had put the full suit, head and all, in the trunk; he distinctly remembered doing so. He reached backwards with his right arm, his left hand still on the wheel, and grabbed the head. It shot out of his hand and bounced off the window, before falling limply, like some overly large, dead furry critter, onto the passenger seat beside him. Jonah had stopped screaming but taking the place of his wails, Michael suddenly realised, was the long, drawn-out sound of a truck's horn.

'FUCK.' Michael looked up just in time.

He had only taken his eyes off the road for a few seconds and already the car was starting to drift outwards, right into the path of a monstrous semi-truck. Whispering a prayer to a God he didn't truly believe in, he managed to pull the car back into the right lane. He flexed his white knuckles on the wheel and tried to steady his shallow breathing. As soon as they got back home he was going to join Jonah in his afternoon nap, Michael told himself. He wasn't in his twenties anymore, he couldn't exist on five hours sleep like he used to. For the rest of the journey home he didn't take his eyes off the road again, but he was constantly aware of the Doberman's head grinning across at him from the passenger seat.

Once they were back home Michael didn't go to sleep like he had told himself he would. Instead, he left Jonah sleeping on the sofa and went back out into the garage, armed with a large black coffee to keep him awake. There was still a little while until Ashleigh would be back home, and he wanted to make a start on the Mr. Fuzzy suit for her birthday party. Looking down at the dog's head and the suit lying out on the workbench, he was tempted to throw it straight into the trash can. Now, he realised that it didn't actually look much like Mr. Fuzzy at all and, just as he had imagined during the car ride home, he felt as if the dog's eyes were watching him. But, he saw, inching his face closer to its snout, it didn't even *have* eyes. Instead of those smooth, round plastic beads like Mr. Fuzzy had for eyes, there were just two holes cut into the fabric so that the wearer could see out. Still, it was as if there was someone

looking back at him. Michael laughed to himself, the shrill noise echoing around the empty garage. He *really* needed sleep. Soon he would be screaming like Jonah over a stupid Halloween costume made to look like an old mutt. He swiped his hand down his face and took a swig of his coffee. It just needed a good wash, maybe even in bleach, and for some pink retouches to its nose and ears — maybe Stacey had some old fabric and a needle and thread hiding in that sewing box her grandmother had left her — and Ashleigh and her little friends from second grade would believe that Mr. Fuzzy had eaten all his carrots and grown big and strong (and *alive*). He heard that last word in his mind even though he hadn't thought it. Before opening up *Michael's Crafting Corner*, though, he would have to try it on first. Even if it creeped him out just a little bit (which, if he was honest, it did), he would only have to wear it for an hour or two during the party and then he would never have to look at it again. Besides, at ten dollars, it was only a fifth of the price (if not less) of renting a suit from one of those overpriced party stores. He could get the whole party sorted without needing to ask Stacey, or her parents, for a dime.

Although the suit had looked huge hanging on the rack in the store, he realised that he couldn't get it on over his jeans. He pulled them off, as well as his shirt for good measure, and managed to slip into it in just his socks and underpants. Michael had never worn a wetsuit in his life, but he imagined that this is how one must surely feel. The suit clung to his skin as if it was lined with leather or plastic, instead of the soft cotton that was the underside of the dog's fake fur. Although it was slightly constricting, it simultaneously felt almost freeing — as if he were naked, or engulfed in water. When he moved, he felt like he wasn't in control of where his limbs landed; as if his body were resting *on top* of gravity, rather than being pulled down by it. As such, he imagined himself moving across the garage like Armstrong on the moon: not walking but bouncing. As he went to pick up the Doberman's head he noticed that Mrs. Perkins's cat had found its way in again. Cartwright was crouched down in its usual corner (though now devoid of books and boxes), its eyes fixed, unblinking, on the dog's face as if debating whether to pounce or to run.

'This dog doesn't bite', Michael said out loud, a smile curling the corners of his lips, as he slipped the Doberman's head over his own.

The next thing he remembered was the sight of his own reflection in the side-view mirror of the car. He was still dressed in the Doberman suit; the only part of himself that was visible were his two dark eyes peering through the holes where the dog's should have been. He was kneeling on the hard floor of the garage, he realised after a moment. It was a feeling like waking up suddenly from a deep slumber, only he didn't remember ever falling asleep. His eyelashes were coated in sweat running down from his damp forehead as he blinked, his gaze still fixed on the image of himself in the mirror. He needed to pull the stifling suit off him but he still couldn't move yet. If he were lying down he would have said it was sleep paralysis, though he had never experienced it before. Then he realised that there was something heavy in his right hand and when he looked down, he had to stop himself from yelling out loud. Cartwright was sprawled on the floor between his knees, covered in blood — as was the spanner gripped in his right hand. It dropped to the floor with a clang and Michael found that, finally, he could move again. He jumped to his feet and pulled off the head and then the suit, before stumbling backwards into the front bumper of the car. He lowered his trembling thighs

onto the car's hood until he was perched on the edge. His heart was hammering against his chest and it felt like there was something lodged inside his throat. The pool of blood from the dead cat seemed to be growing, getting closer to him. Looking down, he saw that his white socks were already sodden with red. He leant over and vomited onto the garage floor. His whole body was trembling as he sat there, unblinking, staring at Cartwright. The only sounds were the tick of his watch and Jonah's snores from inside the house. Slowly, his state of shock began to subside and awareness came flooding through his body. His mind, momentarily blank, was filled once again with thoughts and questions. He needed to get up, to move the cat.

Had he killed the cat? He tore off his blood-soaked socks and pulled his jeans and shirt back on, then he ran through the house to the kitchen. The hallway wall smacked into his arm as he took the corner too fast. There was no one else in the house except Jonah, and he had found the spanner in his *own* hand. But how could you kill something — or someone — without knowing you had? He pulled open the cupboard under the sink and began searching for trash bags. His hand closed around the roll of bags and he tore off three, as well as picking up a bottle of bleach and a couple of dish rags. It was the suit; he didn't know the hows or the whys but all he knew was that he needed to get that thing out of the house. He raced back into the garage, shoved the cat into one garbage bag and the suit and dog's head into another. Then he started on the floor, scrubbing away the blood and the vomit until all he could smell was bleach. He then threw the rags and his stained socks into the last bag and piled all three up in the corner, before scouring the spanner and hanging it back on the workbench. It was just after two-thirty. Ashleigh would be getting off the school bus in about thirty-five minutes. He needed to move fast. Outside in the backyard, he lit a small fire in the shade of the towering beech tree and burned the rags and socks, using the trash bag and a pan full of water to douse the flames afterwards. Next, he threw the bag containing the Doberman costume and head into the trash can by the side of the house, pushing it down until it was hidden under the rest of the trash. Finally, feeling like he wanted to puke again, he went down the street to knock on Mrs. Perkin's door. She let him in and, refusing her offers of coffee and fruitcake, he took a seat in her living room that smelled like a mixture of mould and lavender.

'Mrs. Perkins, I, um... You know how Cartwright always finds his way into our garage?'

'Yes', she smiled across at Michael. 'I have no idea how the little devil does it.'

'Well, when I was reversing the car into the garage this afternoon I didn't see him and I don't know how to say this, but I hit him', he lied. 'I'm so sorry.'

He wasn't prepared for her to start crying. He stood up, not knowing whether to put his hand on her shoulder or not. After hovering for a few seconds he sat back down, flicking the tassels on one of her velvet sofa cushions to occupy his hands. He watched her blow her nose into a handkerchief before finally meeting his eyes again.

'Did he suffer?'

'Oh no, no-no', he shook his head. 'It was instant, painless.'

In his mind he saw the image of the cat with blood and God knows what else pouring out of it and he swallowed hard.

'I think it would be best, though, if you let me bury it- *him* for you. I'll do it tonight, after dinner. That way you can remember Cartwright as he was.'

Mrs. Perkins was still crying into her handkerchief when he closed the front door behind him and made his way back home. When Stacey got home he would talk to her about bringing her a serving of whatever they were having for dinner around later.

‘Hey, Jonah.’ He called out when he got inside. ‘You awake kiddo?’

He reached the sofa and froze. Jonah wasn’t there.

‘Jonah!’

Michael ran across to the kitchen and scanned under the table and through the window looking out onto the backyard. There was no sign of him. He was about to head upstairs to check the bedrooms when he heard a noise coming from down the hallway in the garage. He found the child crouching down behind the car, rolling the bottle of bleach Michael had left there across the floor.

‘Woah Jonah, you don’t touch that, Okay?’ He scooped him up. ‘And stay out of this garage from now on, you hear me?’

He closed the door to the garage behind them, making a mental note to get some kind of child-safe lock for it the next time he went downtown.

It was seven-fifteen that evening when Michael went back around to Mrs. Perkins’ house. As she accepted the plate of tuna casserole and green beans from him, Michael was relieved to see that she had stopped crying. She headed back inside and he went around the side of the house to get started on Cartwright’s burial in the backyard; it would have felt wrong to carry the cat’s corpse through the house. She had picked a spot for the grave right next to the back porch, and even selected a stone she wanted him to place on top of it. The sky was already dark as Michael started digging the hole. He had brought his own spade and he worked in silence, trying not to think about the events of that afternoon. He had given Stacey the same story he had told Mrs. Perkins, albeit with a few embellishments: that he had reversed the car into the garage and felt it hit something which, at the time, he had thought was just an old box he had left behind. It was only later, after he had carried the sleeping Jonah into the house, that he had gone back to investigate and found poor old Cartwright flattened on the garage floor. Any mention of the dog suit or their near-miss with the truck on the way home was also omitted. Both Michael and Stacey had agreed not to tell the kids about the cat as they had no idea how they would react to such news. In a few weeks time, they would just tell them that Mrs. Perkins’ cat had either ran away or died of old age (the truth was that Michael had zero idea about the cat’s age, and felt it too insensitive to ask Mrs. Perkins now). And at the weekend, Michael told himself, he would drive out to the mall and pick out a new costume from one of those overpriced party stores for Ashleigh’s party. *Anything that didn’t resemble a Doberman...*

His arms were aching by the time he had finished digging the hole and put the mound of dirt back on top of the cat’s body, but he was glad he had done it. It was the least he could do under the circumstances. He smoothed the top layer of earth with his bare hands then placed the rock Mrs. Perkins had picked out and a single rose that had fallen off one of the nearby bushes on top. Then he stood up and stretched out his back. Looking down at the sight of Cartwright’s grave he felt that he should say something but he wasn’t quite sure what.

‘I, um, I’m sorry big guy, and I hope you’re somewhere now where no dog can ever get you again.’

All of a sudden he started to laugh, loud and uncontrollable. The sound was feral, like a strangled coyote or hyena and his shoulders shook as he laughed. He couldn't stop himself and he was scared that Mrs. Perkins or one of the other neighbours would hear him.

He pierced the skin of his forearms with his fingernails to try and gain control of himself again, muttering 'What is wrong with you?'

The final note of laughter caught in his throat and he coughed, swallowing a mouthful of sobering night air. Picking up the spade, he let Mrs. Perkins know that he was done (she started to cry again) and then marched back home. He didn't even shower or kiss the kids or Stacey goodnight before climbing into bed, rolling over onto his right side and falling straight to sleep.

Streams of sunlight blaring through the open curtains and straight into his face woke him up the next morning. He moaned, groggily, and turned over.

'Michael.'

Stacey was standing at the foot of the bed, already dressed in her work blazer and pencil skirt. She had her hands on her hips and her hair was only half-styled.

'It's past eight.'

He didn't answer but instead, sitting up into a kneeling position, reached forwards and grabbed her hands, pulling her onto the bed with him. Her body landed on top of his and at first he thought she was going to get mad at him but then she dissolved into giggles.

'I'm pretty sure you didn't even shower last night, so these,' she lifted his hands from around her waist and shoved them behind his own back, 'can stay there.'

He was staring up at her. Their faces were so close that he could count every one of the faint freckles on her face; see each tiny sapphire engraved in the gold heart earrings he had given her for her thirtieth birthday and that matched the colour of her eyes exactly. She put them in for work every single morning. He pulled his right hand free from behind his back and gently smoothed the lock of hair back behind her ear that had fallen out of place. Their eyes met as she lowered her lips to his and kissed him. In that moment Michael wanted to disappear inside of her embrace. He wanted her to keep holding him, and kissing him, until he had forgotten about what had happened yesterday; until the image of Mrs. Perkins' dead cat and the Doberman suit were erased from his memory forever. But fifteen seconds later Stacey had untangled herself from him and was standing up again.

'That's two nights in a row you've gone to sleep before me, so I suggest you sip on some coffee after dinner tonight, and we can have an early night *together*,' she smiled down at him. 'Now shower, and get these sheets changed while I'm at work. I'll make sure Ashleigh gets on the bus. Okay?'

'Okay.' He slowly pulled himself up and headed for the bathroom.

He had just switched off the shower when he heard the *beep* of the garbage disposal truck down on the street. Quickly, he wrapped his towel around his waist and pulled open the blinds. The truck was already moving down to Mrs. Perkins' house. Relief pulsed through his body. The dog suit was gone and he would never have to look at it again. He strolled into the bedroom whistling to himself, dressed in his favourite blue t-shirt and slacks, and went to wake up Jonah. Once they were downstairs, he sat the child in front of his favourite cartoons

and went to fix them some scrambled eggs. He turned on the radio as he cooked. It was all just a memory now: that strange, almost arousing feeling as he had slipped his nearly naked body into the suit, and the time during which he had blacked out after putting the Doberman's head on. There would be no more cats turning up dead in the neighbourhood now because the mutt had been sent to the pound. He laughed to himself as he served their breakfast, joining Jonah on the sofa.

'Don't tell Mommy we didn't eat at the dinner table, Okay little guy?'

'*Otay*,' Jonah didn't take his eyes off the TV while he ate.

After breakfast, Michael drove Jonah out to the park. It was a clear morning and he let him play on the swings before teaching him how to toss a baseball back to him — or, rather, Michael threw the ball to Jonah, and Jonah aimed it into the bushes for his father to run over and find each time, much to the amusement of the toddler. Afterwards, they headed to the grocery store on the way back home. He bought Jonah a chocolate milk as a treat and the child fell asleep on the car ride home, spilling it down himself and the backseat of the car. Michael left him sleeping on the sofa, the door to the garage now safely locked with the new bolt he had just attached, as he went to put away the groceries and strip his and Stacey's bed. *Well, ain't you the sign of a real man?* The sound of Michael's father's voice rang through his head as he was pulling off the pillow cases. He froze and looked around their bedroom, half expecting to see the ghost of his now long dead father hobbling towards him from the open door of the hallway.

All at once, it was as if he was sixteen again and stuck in his father's living room during one of those afternoons that Michael knew he would never forget.

Ernest Arnold had never approved of his eldest son's dream of becoming a writer. 'You think you the next William Fauwk-na? Well he was a candy-ass, just like you', he had taken great pleasure in telling his teenage son frequently, pelting him with hard candies from the bag he always kept hidden down the side of his chair to the rhythm of his own taunts. Usually these little acts of humiliation were enough for Ernest, but then Michael's mother had left and things suddenly became much worse. Ernest no longer had his wife to take his frustration out on. It was a Saturday afternoon when it first happened. He had risen, slowly, from his high-backed maroon chair in front of the television set, supported by his walking cane and still gripping his bottle of Irish whiskey, and then began to shuffle towards his son. Michael, who had been working on a first draft of a short story that ultimately never saw the light of day at the dinner table, had closed his notebook. He could easily have outrun his father, but he had known that when he next saw him the punishment would surely have been much worse. He had nowhere else to go. The old man moved like a hunting dog, slow but dangerous, his nose guiding his way. Michael hadn't looked up as his father had finally reached the dining table, propping his cane up against it and grabbing the back of Michael's chair to support himself. 'Well, ain't you the sign of a real man?' Ernest had spat down at his son, before knocking the pen out of his hand with the base of his bottle. Then he had taken his hand off the back of Michael's chair, and Michael had somehow known what was coming next. He had closed his eyes as he felt the first strike of the cane across the back of his neck.

Now, Michael felt his hand automatically reaching up to massage his neck. He stopped himself, and finished pulling off the rest of the sheets. He bundled them up and headed back downstairs to what Stacey had christened the laundry room, despite it being little

larger than a closet. He had to close the door behind him to have enough space to get inside. He bent down to pull open the washing machine door and shove the sheets in when he noticed that there was already something inside. Perhaps Stacey had put a load in before work, he thought to himself. But when he put his hand inside he felt the flesh on his arms begin to raise as his fingers closed around that familiar furry suit. He closed his eyes, a line of sweat starting to form along his back. It was impossible; he had thrown it in the trash and the garbage truck had taken it away that morning. When he opened his eyes the washing machine would be empty, he told himself. But when Michael finally dared to look inside the open door of the ringer, the suit and the dog's head were staring back at him.

'This isn't happening.'

He jumped up, dragging the dog costume out of the machine, and kicked open the door leading back into the kitchen. He marched across the tiled floor and threw open the sliding doors to the backyard. There, he opened the lid of the outdoor grill and dropped the suit and head down on top of it. He stomped back inside before appearing again a minute later with a box of kitchen matches and a bottle of oil. It caught ablaze immediately. He stood back and watched the fur shrivel and then disintegrate under the flames. All at once the Doberman's face seemed to come alive as Michael looked on, horrified, but then he realised that it was just the flames dancing behind its dark, empty eyeholes. Even as the smoke billowed into his face making him choke, he didn't move until the last flame had died out, extinguished by the afternoon's breeze, and all that remained of the suit was a charred pile of ash.

That night Michael didn't sleep, even as Stacey snored beside him, her arms around his waist. Instead, he lay awake until dawn imagining that his father was downstairs in the kitchen waiting for him with his cane, dressed in the dog suit.

'You didn't tell me you got this!'

It was Saturday morning and Michael was reading the book reviews in *The New York Times*, nursing a cup of lukewarm coffee. He looked up and the cup slipped from his hand, staining the sheets he had only put on two days earlier. Stacey was standing by the open closet and in her hand, hung on a wire hanger, was the Doberman costume. Michael felt as if a heavy weight had been dropped into his stomach.

'The head is kind of evil-looking, so it will definitely pass for Mr. Fuzzy.'

He watched as she put her hand inside the closet and pulled out the dog's head. For one horrifying moment he was sure that she was going to put it on, but then she threw it across the room at him. It landed on the bed the right way up, its eyeless face fixed on him. Michael blinked. His vision was starting to blur, and he was sure that he was going to pass out.

'Mommy!'

Ashleigh's calls for her mother came from her own bedroom down the hallway. Stacey went out to her, gesturing for Michael to hide the suit again as she left the room. He rubbed his hand, roughly, down his face. He had watched it burn, how could it be back? He pulled his leg out from under the bedsheets and kicked the head. His foot landed squarely in the dog's nose and it toppled over onto its side, but didn't fall to the ground. There was no getting rid of it. *Unless...* The thought occurred to him and he stood up, grabbing the first

things he saw in the closet and pulling them on. Next, he pulled down one of the large, square paper shopping bags Stacey kept on top of the closet with her most expensive purses and shoes in and tipped them out onto the floor. Then he stuffed the dog suit and head into it. Minutes later, he was pulling out of the garage and making a left for the highway, the bag containing the suit in the backseat. He arrived at the shopping mall just before eleven and headed straight to the costume store. There, he picked out a bunny suit that resembled Mr. Fuzzy and paid the cashier for it. Then, looking around to make sure that no one was watching him, he slipped the Doberman suit and head out of the shopping bag and onto the clearance section on the back wall of the store.

Grey clouds were gathering above the city as Michael started the drive back home. He switched on the radio for background noise and rolled down his window to get a few last breaths of fresh air before the inevitable rainfall. Automatically, he checked the rear-view mirror. There was no sign of the dog suit in the backseat and the shopping bag on the passenger seat still contained the new bunny costume. Did he dare hope that it was finally over, that his plan had worked? It was a story his grandmother on his mother's side had told him as a child which had made him think of it. She had grown up in Peru, and the stories of her childhood had never failed to enrapture Michael. He remembered how he used to sit, cross-legged, on her living room floor while she perched on the edge of her chair to recount those tales, and how he had started writing himself as a way of emulating his grandmother. It was the tale of her friend's cursed shoes, though, which had always stuck with him the most. The girl's name was Luciana and, according to Michael's grandmother, after being caught stealing *lúcuma* from their trees, she had been cursed by witches from the Cachiche community so that her feet grew rapidly as her shoes continued to shrink. The only way that Luciana was able to reverse this curse was to pass the shoes onto another girl, after which her feet returned to their normal size. Now, as an adult, Michael understood how preposterous his grandmother's tale seemed, but after what had happened to him over the past few days, he felt that he was in no position to judge the feasibility of someone else's story. And he was willing to try anything to make sure he never had to look at that suit again. He was all too aware of what could happen if someone else bought it and took it home, but he couldn't have it happen to his own family, not to Stacey or Ashleigh or Jonah. Fire hadn't destroyed the costume, but passing it on might have also passed on whatever *curse* (he couldn't believe that he was actually thinking that word in his head) was attached to it. Rain was starting to bounce off the windows of the car and had already soaked his exposed left arm without him realising. He rolled up the window and set the wipers going.

In the days that followed, Michael found himself obsessively checking the house for any sign of the Doberman costume. He would start each morning by looking in the shopping bag hidden in the closet while holding his breath, to make sure that it still contained the new bunny suit. Each time, relief would pulsate through his body that there was still no sign of the dog suit anywhere. By the morning of Ashleigh's birthday party, he was sure that his plan had worked.

'Ashleigh's friends will be arriving from noon, so wait at least an hour for them to finish the first game and to have eaten something before coming out as Mr. Fuzzy.'

Stacey was arranging plates of cupcakes and little cheese and ham sandwiches on the dining table, now adorned with a sparkly tablecloth, wearing a look of intense concentration on her face.

‘Yes, honey’, Michael said monotonously, reaching over to grab a handful of potato chips from a bowl on the far side of the table. ‘You’ve only told me this fifty-seven times so I’m glad of the reminder.’

She smacked his arm with the back of her hand. ‘And stop eating! It’s for the kids.’

‘You know, honey,’ Michael dropped into the chair closest to where Stacey was standing, pulling his jeans straight as he sat down. ‘I was thinking of giving the kids a reading of *The Mangled Heart* after Ashleigh blows out her candles. There’s so many scenes to pick from! Either the first murder, the second murder, the part where Crendall discovers the killer in the morgue...’

Stacey dropped the handful of plastic spoons she was holding and blinked down at him. Michael managed to keep a straight face for at least three seconds before dissolving into a fit of hysterics, his shoulders shaking as he let his arms drop down by his side.

‘You should have seen your face,’ he managed between laughs.

‘You idiot! Even after seven years of being married to you, I can never tell if you’re joking when it comes to that book.’

She playfully hit him with a pile of paper napkins decorated with rainbows, so he retaliated by cupping his arms around her waist and leaning up to kiss her.

‘G-r-o-s-s.’

Ashleigh was standing in the doorway of the living room wearing her party dress — a sparkly pink and silver number with a giant bow on the back, and a hemline she almost tripped over when walking — and carrying Mr. Fuzzy, whom Stacey had made a matching pink and sparkly bow tie for.

‘D-i-s-g-u-t-s-i-n-g.’

Michael smiled, ‘Keep working on it, kiddo.’

Ashleigh shuffled over to her parents and Michael hauled her up onto his knee.

‘How’s my birthday princess?’

‘Daddy,’ she turned around to face him, brushing the curls her mother had worked on all morning out of her face. ‘I hope Mr. Fuzzy comes today. I mean, the big Mr. Fuzzy, like when Sa—’

‘Sara Hernandez had Huggles the Bear at her party last year,’ he finished for her.

‘You’ve mentioned it a couple times, honey, so I’m sure good old Mr. Fuzzy will have got the invite by now.’

Stacey shot a grin at Michael and he smiled back at her, despite the first tingles of anxiety that were starting to form in the pit of his stomach.

About forty-five minutes after the last of the kids had arrived Michael went upstairs to get ready. He slid open the closet door and reached inside for the bunny costume. His eyes suddenly widened in horror. The Doberman suit was back, and the new costume was nowhere in sight.

‘Nonono,’ he mouthed to himself.

He slid the hangers back and forth on the rail, frantically searching between his own and Stacey's clothes for the distinct pink, furry suit. After a few minutes he began ripping the clothes off the hangers and throwing them onto the bed. He even reached up and knocked down the pile of boxes and bags that sat on top of the closet. Soon it was completely bare except for the Doberman's head that sat in the bottom of the closet, sneering up at him as if to mock him; as if to say that it had won. He picked it up and threw it across the room. It bounced off the window pane then fell upright onto the carpet just feet away from him. He collapsed onto his knees, punching the ground.

'AARGH!' he screamed, spit flying from his mouth. 'FUCK YOU!'

His heart was thumping in his ears as he fell forwards into the foetal position, his arms looped around his knees. He had tried everything he could think of to get rid of it and each time it had found its way back to him. There was nothing else he could do. He would have to go downstairs and tell Ashleigh that Mr. Fuzzy couldn't make it. All at once he imagined Stacey's face, disappointment creasing her brows and pursing her lips as she consoled a crying Ashleigh. He wasn't even capable of providing the entertainment for his daughter's sixth birthday party, she would think. She would probably call her mother to tell her, who would then tell her father. And then there were the other kids' parents downstairs who had decided to stick around. What would they think? Juan Hernandez had managed to give his daughter the party she had wanted, complete with a visit from Huggles the Bear. Juan Hernandez also had a job as the CEO of an advertising agency and could afford to take his family to Europe every summer.

Tears began to form in the corners of Michael's clenched eyes and drop down onto the carpet. He had always hidden his tears when his father used to beat him with his cane, but one time he hadn't been quick enough. As Ernest Arnold had looked down at his eldest son, whimpering in his seat like some old dog that needed a bullet to the brain, he had been filled with so much rage that he had cracked his bottle of whisky on the back of Michael's skull.

'Well, ain't you the sign of a real man?'

It took Michael a moment to realise that the voice wasn't coming from inside his head. He stood up — his movements were jerky and too-slow, as if he wasn't the one controlling his own actions — and stripped out of his slacks and button-up, pulling on the Doberman suit over his underpants. He was laughing, a harsh, dry sound that didn't sound like him, as he dropped the dog's head down over his own. He didn't shut the bedroom door as he stepped out onto the hallway and stomped towards the staircase, a pair of scissors tucked inside his fur-covered, closed fist.

Stacey swilled orange juice around the paper cup clasped in her closed hand. What *was* he doing? She had heard a bang from upstairs at least five minutes ago but he was still yet to materialise. She had left the bunny costume, head and all, hanging in the front of the closet, alongside the little bowtie she had made to match the one she had put on the real Mr. Fuzzy. Arranging her face into a smile, she glanced around at the other parents. They were talking amongst themselves, spread out across both sofas, and all at once it felt like she was back in high school. Were they talking about her, judging her house or her dress or her husband? She ran her tongue along her upper teeth. And maybe you're just being paranoid, Stacey, she told herself. The stairs started to creak and relief spread through her body, warming, as if she had

taken a sip of hot coffee. Sometimes that man infuriated her, but he was *her* man and she knew that he would never let down their children, not on Ashleigh's birthday. She placed her cup of orange juice down on the table and stepped out into the small hallway that separated the staircase from the rest of the house.

It took Stacey a few moments to realise what she was seeing. She reached for the handrail to steady herself as her breath caught inside her throat. Michael was lurching down the staircase towards her, but he wasn't dressed in the new costume he had bought. Instead, he was wearing that tatty old Doberman pinscher suit he had told her he had returned to the thrift store. And in his left fist, tucked inside the dog's paw, was the pair of scissors from her grandmother's sewing basket that she kept on top of the closet. She wanted to scream but she stopped herself. Instead she put one shaking leg in front of the other until she was standing on the bottom step. And it was in that moment, staring up at the figure coming towards her, that she realised that it was not her husband's eyes looking out from the dog's head.

Her actions were instinctive. She closed her hands around his wrist before he even had time to look down at what she was doing. Then she squeezed them together, hard, and with all of the strength she could muster. He was caught off guard and the scissors dropped out of his grip and fell down the stairs. Taking advantage of his momentary surprise, she swung her left fist across at him, aiming it at the side of his neck. His head flew sideways, colliding with the wall mirror and his whole body began to wobble as if he were about to topple over. She started to back down the staircase slowly, unsure of whether he would fall backwards or forwards. Suddenly, she saw his hand tighten around the bannister. She began to mentally prepare herself to lunge herself at him to try and knock him backwards if he started down towards her. But then she saw his free hand dart up towards his neck and began to peel off the dog's head. She reached down and grabbed the pair of scissors, pointing them at him. She didn't know what she would see underneath that Doberman's grin. What she saw, however, was the face of her husband, pale and bleeding. As she met his eyes, those dark eyes she could recognise anywhere, she knew that he was back.

'What the hell's going on out here?'

Stacey whipped her head around. The other parents were gathered at the foot of the hallway, horrified looks on their faces. She realised then that the music coming from the living room had been turned off.

Michael was slumped over the dining table, taking alternate sips of coffee and Irish whiskey as he attempted to swallow the aspirin Stacey had poured into his hand. She was seeing the cops out; they had only agreed to leave once she had called her uncle who worked on the force. Ashleigh had closed herself in her bedroom as soon as her friends had left and was still refusing to come out, and Jonah was chasing a balloon up and down the house, smacking the back of his father's chair for good measure each time he passed. They had put the costume in the garage.

Stacey reappeared in the doorway and took the seat across from Michael. She leaned forwards, 'I still don't understand why you didn't tell me before.'

He had told her everything after the guests had left. Now, he lifted up his pounding head to return her gaze.

‘Yeah, and how would that have gone down? Honey, I bought a costume for our kid’s birthday party but it possessed me when I tried it on and I kind of accidentally smashed our neighbour’s cat to a pulp.’

‘Well, all I know is that whoever was looking out from that fucking dog suit wasn’t my husband, so...’ She trailed off, then reached over to pick up the bottle of whiskey, ‘And that won’t help.’

Stacey stood up, stroked his shoulder and then crossed over to the sink. She paused for a moment.

‘Michael, I think you should stay at your brother’s place tonight.’ She didn’t meet his eyes as she said it.

Michael threw the bag containing his clothes and toothbrush into the backseat, reversed the car out of the driveway and set off down the street, although he had no intention of going to his brother’s house. It was only just after six p.m. but it already felt like the day had lasted about a week. Stacey had her own car and her cousin was going to call in on her but he wished he could stick around and watch her and the kids, too — although he understood why she didn’t want him there, not tonight. He had thrown the dog suit into the trunk of the car; there was no way he was going to risk leaving it at home. What he really wanted, and what they all needed, was answers. And he hoped that tonight he was finally going to get some. He stopped the car after driving for barely more than ten minutes and got out. He jumped up onto the curb and huddled into the pay phone booth. Reaching into his wallet, he poured the contents out into his opened hand. There were at least a dozen quarters and he inserted them all, one after the other, into the slot then dialled the number he still had memorised. He prayed that someone would answer. The telephone rang five times before the receiver at the other end of the line was picked up.

‘Hello.’

Michael hadn’t heard the voice in almost eight years, since the day of his and Stacey’s wedding, but he recognised it immediately.

‘Dr. Brown. It’s Michael—Michael Arnold.’

‘Michael!’ Brown couldn’t hide the note of surprise in his voice. ‘We haven’t spoken in, what, it must be almost a decade. But I always get your Christmas card and scotch every year, much appreciated. How are you?’

‘Not good, Doc. That’s the reason I’m calling. I need to ask you something: call it a favour, or advice, or whatever, but I didn’t know who else to ask.’

There was a pause on the other end of the line before Brown spoke again.

‘I’m not sure I’m the best person to ask, Michael. I’ve been retired from the university for over three years now. If it’s about your writing, I might be able to put you in touch with an agent I know up in Maine—’

‘It’s not about that. I gave up on all that a long time ago, Doc,’ Michael closed his eyes and looked up at the ceiling of the booth, unsure how to proceed. ‘You know how you helped me to research those cases when I was working on *The Mangled Heart*; that Philips guy in Michigan who killed his—’

‘Killed his own fiancée, yes I do remember, Michael. And I’m sorry that other people weren’t able to see what I saw in *The Mangled Heart*, but I don’t understand where you’re going with this. You just told me that you’re done with writing.’

Michael could picture Doctor Brown now, standing in his kitchen with his hand in his pocket the way he always did. He had probably been in his office when he heard the telephone, pouring over a book with a glass of scotch with ice and a plate of foul-smelling cheese, his eye glasses resting on the tip of his nose. The man never changed, just as he never seemed to age; there had been no more grey in his rust-coloured hair on the day that Michael had last seen him than the day that the two men had first met.

He decided to just come out with it: ‘Do you know of any cases — murders, crimes, whatever — where the perpetrator dressed up in a dog suit?’

‘Do you mean like the McMahon case?’

The name wasn’t ringing any bells for Michael.

‘What was the McMahon case, Doc?’ He rearranged the receiver in his hand, hoping that he wasn’t going to regret asking to hear this story.

On the other end of the line Michael heard the faint scraping of a stool against a tiled floor. In his mind he could see Brown getting comfy at the kitchen counter, the way he always did at his desk when telling a story in class.

‘Sean McMahon was an Irish immigrant who came to the States in the late fifties from across the pond, much like yours truly; which is why his story so-fascinated me — well, that and the ghastly details of his case.’ Brown paused for effect, and the familiarity of it brought a half-smile to Michael’s lips. ‘Well, on his arrival in the country he began working at a department store in a town not far from where I’m sitting right now. He was the cashier on the top floor: the toy department. Witnesses — old colleagues and former customers — state that he was much-loved by the children he served, and that he was extremely fond of them in return. McMahon had grown up in Dublin with seven younger siblings, you see, so this is hardly surprising...’

Michael cleared his throat. Brown had a way of *going around the houses* (an expression he had picked up from Brown himself) when telling a story.

‘Well, anyway...’ Brown started again, slightly flustered. ‘The manager of the department store had planned a grand celebration for Thanksgiving; he apparently fancied his store as somewhat of a rival to *Macy’s*, sources say. Well, on the day before Thanksgiving he scheduled a major sale and toy giveaways for the children who turned up to the store wearing the best costumes; as well as a raffle for the parents — apparently the top prize was a new microwave oven. There were balloons and cupcakes, and even a marching band that gave their rendition of ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ on the hour, *every* hour. And he also got his staff to join in with the festivities, each one dressing up in a different costume for work that day. McMahon was a dog, a Water Spaniel I believe. Or could it have been a—’

‘A Doberman Pinscher,’ Michael cut in.

‘A Doberman — that’s right! So you have heard the story?’

‘No Doc, I just, er, had a hunch. Go on, please.’

Michael wrapped his jacket tighter around his body. Outside the booth it was getting dark, and colder.

‘Well, it’s almost too gruesome to speak of, but around three o’clock in the afternoon — some say it was *exactly* three o’clock — a handful of customers reported to the manager that they were sure that they had heard screaming under the sounds of the band. So the manager had gone up to the top floor to investigate — bear in mind that all of the customers were on the first floor watching the festivities at this point — only to find McMahon, still dressed in the Doberman suit, in the act of slicing up the young boy whom had won the best Thanksgiving outfit competition with a bow saw he had taken from the workshop at the back of the store! The police soon found the bodies of three other children, all runners-up in the costume competition and all strangled to death, hidden in that very workshop. He had lured them there on the pretence of handing over their prizes like pigs to the slaughter.’

Michael closed his eyes. The surface of his arms had broken out in gooseflesh under the sleeves of his jacket. Outside the booth, a gust of wind rattled the windowpane. He wondered what Stacey and the children were doing at that very moment.

‘Michael, are you still there?’

‘Yeah, Doc.’ His mouth was dry as he answered. ‘So what happened to him: McMahon?’

‘Well, the dead childrens’ parents fought to have him get the electric chair treatment, but they were too late; he hanged himself in his cell before his sentencing. That fate was too good for the bastard in my opinion, going out on his own terms. I would have liked to have seen him rot behind bars for the rest of his miserable life, I tell you that!’

‘And what about his costume, the dog suit? What happened to it after he died?’

‘No one knows. It disappeared from the evidence room the same day that McMahon killed himself. There have been dozens of rumoured sightings of a man wearing it, of course; it even grew into the urban legend that one could find a man dressed like a dog offering out toys in the children’s section of every department store up and down the country! But that was a few years ago, and people have well and truly moved on from the strange case of McMahon’s vanishing dog costume by now.’

Five minutes later Michael placed the telephone receiver back down after thanking Brown and promising that he would drive up to see him one day with Stacey and the kids. He collected the two quarters the machine regurgitated and stepped out of the booth and onto the street. The streetlamps were already starting to flicker into life and he could see the top of the moon over the outline of the city. He didn’t know where to go now. He was probably going to end up checking into some sleazy drive-in motel like a creep on a pretend business trip: *Your finest room, please. I’m not here to screw, I’m here to outwit the cursed dog suit that once belonged to a child killer and is now haunting my family.* Michael didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. Burning it and passing it on hadn’t worked, but there *had* to be a way. He walked over to his parked car and opened up the trunk. Michael’s yells echoed throughout the empty street. The suit wasn’t there. He was barely aware of what was going on around him as he jumped into the car and drove back home. Twice he nearly ran a red light but he didn’t slow down until he turned the corner of his own street and pulled into the driveway. There were no lights on in the house. He started to panic as he slammed the car door shut and raced up the front path. The front door was unlocked and he ran inside.

‘Stacey!’

There was no reply. He ran the length of the house, then took the stairs two at a time to check upstairs. The entire house was empty, and there was no sign of the dog suit either. Back downstairs, he rifled through Stacey's telephone book and called her cousin who lived in the same neighbourhood as them and then, somewhat reluctantly, her parents' house. Neither answered. He felt like his chest was starting to tighten, a thousand images of what could have happened started to flash in front of his eyes. Trying to regain control of himself, he slipped back outside into the cold evening air and took a long, slow breath.

'Daddy!'

Michael saw Ashleigh even before he heard her, silhouetted against the glow of Mrs. Perkins' open front door, and still wearing her party dress. She broke free of the old woman's hand and ran across the front yard to him. He scooped her up in his arms.

'Where's Mommy and Jonah, honey?'

'Jonah got sick so Mommy had to take him to the doctor, but she wanted me to stay with Mrs. Perkins.'

He had to force himself to remain calm and speak slowly.

'Sick, honey? What was wrong with Jonah?'

She looked up at him with Stacey's round, blue eyes and he could tell that she was hesitating.

'He said his neck hurt, Daddy. Like he couldn't breathe.'

Inside, Mrs. Perkins went to fix them some hot drinks in the kitchen while Michael used her telephone to call the paediatric clinic. Ashleigh was sitting on the bottom stair while she waited for her father, her hands in her lap and her head down. Michael noticed that she didn't have Mr. Fuzzy with her.

A female voice answered almost immediately and Michael told her why he was calling. She went to check some details then came back to the telephone.

'Sir, your son is currently being looked at by a doctor but he's doing just fine.'

She spoke in a monotone Southern drawl and Michael couldn't tell if she was being flippant or not.

'*Just fine?*' he repeated back to her.

'Well, sir, his breathing has already greatly improved since your wife first brought him in here. I can pass her a message to give you a call back on this line once the doctor is through looking at your son if you'd like.'

'Yes, please.' He thanked her and hung up.

Mrs. Perkins came shuffling into the hallway and passed Michael a coffee and Ashleigh a hot chocolate. She tried to offer them a slice of apple pie or some chicken soup but they both refused. All three of them headed into Mrs. Perkins' living room and Michael sat down on the same sofa he had broken the news about Cartwright to the old woman on. It felt like it was another lifetime ago, despite it being barely more than a few weeks. Ashleigh dropped down onto the sofa next to her father and huddled in close next to him. He put his arm around her and kissed her forehead.

'Jonah will be Okay, kiddo. The nurse said he's doing much better on the phone.'

She nodded up at him.

'And when he's up to it we're gonna go to Disney World, me, you, Mommy and Jonah. And it will be like your birthday all over again.' He had just thought of it, and he

swore to himself that he was going to make it happen. God, those kids need something to look forward to, he told himself. 'How does that sound?'

Ashleigh half-smiled up at him then stared off into the distance again. Michael could tell that there was something wrong. Had she seen something of what had happened on the staircase back at home earlier? Stacey had told him that none of the kids had seen anything. But maybe she was just pissed off about her party being ruined. Yeah, that must be it, he tried to convince himself.

'Hey, where's Mr. Fuzzy, honey? Did you leave him at home?'

Ashleigh made no attempt to acknowledge that he had spoken to her. Across the room, Mrs. Perkins was starting to doze off in her chair. Her head kept falling forwards, her chin hitting the top of her chest, and then she would lift up her head again, eyes still closed, and repeat the process. Michael reached over and picked up his cup of coffee. He took a sip and screwed up his eyes in disgust; she must have loaded it with at least three spoonfuls of sugar. He put the cup back down on the coffee table and slipped his arm around Ashleigh again. She kept looking over at Mrs. Perkins, who was now gently snoring.

'Daddy?' Ashleigh's voice was little more than a whisper.

'Yes, honey?'

'I don't think Jonah was sick.'

'What do you mean, honey?'

She sighed and then turned to face him. She spoke so quietly that he had to lean forwards to catch what she was saying.

'After you left to go to Uncle Paul's, and Mommy was on the telephone with Grandma downstairs, I came out of my room to go to the bathroom and I saw that the door to yours and Mommy's bedroom was open. And when I got closer I could hear Jonah crying from inside but I couldn't see him, not right away.'

Michael didn't want to interrupt her, now that she was finally talking, but she had paused, looking off into the distance.

'Go on, honey.' He tried to speak softly, matching her tone. 'Had Jonah fallen down and hurt himself, is that what you saw?'

She shook her head, gulped and then started speaking again.

'I walked right to the end of the hallway until I got to yours and Mommy's room, and I called out to Jonah but he didn't answer me. So I went inside, and... I saw something.'

A sensation of freezing cold began to spread down through Michael's chest and into his stomach. Ashleigh was staring up at him now, her eyes wide.

'Ashleigh.' He gently squeezed her shoulder, encouraging her to go on, despite the fact that he wasn't sure he was prepared to hear what was going to come next.

'Daddy, Jonah wasn't on his own. There was a man, dressed like Mr. Fuzzy but all different and *wrong*; with short ears and scary eyes and a long nose. He looked like a wolf, like the ones in that storybook Miss Howard showed us in class. But he was all grey. And he was hurting Jonah, he had his hands around his neck like that,' she demonstrated to him by pretending to strangle herself. 'And Jonah was crying, and then the wolf saw me and tried to get me but I screamed and Mommy came up the stairs and then he was gone. But I'm scared the wolf's going to get me again, Daddy. Oh don't let the wolf get me please—'

Ashleigh began to sob, her tiny shoulders heaving up and down and tears splashing down onto her sparkly dress. She collapsed into her father's arms and he began to cradle her like he used to when she was an infant. He wanted to say something reassuring to her, to tell her that everything was going to be Okay, but he couldn't speak. His throat felt tight and all he could manage was a low mumbling. After a few minutes Ashleigh's sobs began to slow down and eventually she was still, except for the slow raising and falling of her chest. She had fallen asleep in his arms. The room had begun to spin as Michael had listened to Ashleigh finishing her story, but now he could see clearly again. His mind was no longer a jumble of disconnected thoughts. He knew what he needed to do.

Gently, Michael slipped his sleeping daughter off his lap and onto the sofa, then he stood up. He saw that Mrs. Perkins was still snoring, too. Quietly, he walked out of the living room and into the hallway and pushed open the front door. The night was pitch dark now, and even colder than it had been earlier. He closed the door behind him, pulled his jacket closer around his body and set off across the black lawn back to his own deserted home. Once inside, he went straight into the garage and switched on the light. Slowly, it crackled into life. The harsh white, overhead light was blinding compared to the purple satin lamps in Mrs. Perkins' living room. Michael blinked until his eyes were accustomed to the light then proceeded over to the workbench against the back wall. His hand tightened around the same spanner he had bludgeoned Cartwright the cat to death with and he pulled it off its hook. Then, he hit the switch to open the garage door and reversed the car in. He was going to end this in the same place that all his trouble had begun in the first place. Michael had planned it all out in his head. All that he had to do now was wait. He was going to sit in the car until McMahon showed up again, then he was going to surprise attack him with the spanner. He just knew that it had to happen here, in the garage, and with the spanner, otherwise it wouldn't work.

'I know your name, McMahon!' he shouted out to the empty garage. 'You don't scare me now I know what you are. Maybe stick to terrorising little kids, you sick fuck!'

No sooner had Michael spoken the last word did the fur-covered hands close around his throat. He fell forwards, his forehead smashing against the steering wheel, and then the garage dissolved into black around him.

He was aware of something hard underneath his body. Michael rolled over onto his side, a spasm of pain shooting across his neck. As his vision focused again, he realised that he was lying on the garage floor. The car was still parked by the far wall, and the door leading into the house stood ajar.

'Stacey.' His calls were feeble, coming out as little more than murmurs. 'Ashleigh.'

He groaned and tried to sit up, but he soon realised that he hurt too much to move. His head dropped forwards until his chin was grazing the floor.

'Well, ain't you the sign of a real man?'

The words escaped his lips before he could stop himself and he started to snicker. Soon, his whole body was shaking with laughter and a tear fell down onto his nose. He had to try to compose himself and get up, he told himself. *Now isn't the time to lose your head or you soon might quite literally, Michael;* he heard it in Doc Brown's voice inside his mind.

Suddenly, he remembered about the spanner. It must have fallen out of his hand when he was knocked unconscious. Had McMahon seen it when he had dragged him out of the car?

‘Come out, come out, McMahon!’ He had already regained some of his strength and he managed to raise his voice this time. ‘Are you a man, or a dog?’

At that moment a figure appeared in the garage doorway, but it wasn’t McMahon.

Ashleigh was wearing the Doberman’s head over her party dress as she walked towards her father. The grey, furry fabric came down over her shoulders and there was nothing but darkness visible behind its eyeholes. In her hand, she gripped a bow saw.

‘Daddy’s gonna be *d-e-a-d!*’ The sound was coming from her but it wasn’t Ashleigh’s voice.

Lying on the floor, Michael’s eyes grew wide in horror. He wanted to scream, to yell, but he was frozen. In his mind, he wished he could pass out again so he wouldn’t have to witness the image of his little girl like this for one moment longer. But there was no time to pause. He had to move. He managed to pull himself up onto his knees and he began to shuffle backwards, away from her. Her movements were clumsy and slow but she was slowly gaining ground. Suddenly, his back hit one of the car’s wheels and a thought raced through his mind. Both times he had blacked out after putting on the suit, the first thing he had remembered seeing after coming to was the sight of his own reflection; first in the side mirror of the car, and then, only earlier that day, in the mirror above the staircase. The wearer seeing his or her own reflection seemed to break the suit’s possession of them! It was the only answer. If only he could lure Ashleigh into looking into the car’s side mirror, like he himself had done... The thought came to him clearly, but at that moment she was already only feet away from him. He managed to get to his feet and shuffle around the side of the car, whispering prayers to a God he still didn’t know if he truly believed in.

‘Please, things were never supposed to turn out like this.’

The House on Montrose Avenue

Everyone knew there was only one name you needed if you were trying to sell your home in Brooke County. Minnie Carlisle could sell Thanksgiving to a turkey (as her boss liked to put it) and she had the awards to prove it. She had never been to college because you couldn't get a degree in selling houses, but if you could she would have graduated top of her class.

Besides, her skills were honed in the real world, face to face, and not inside a classroom.

There had never been a house that Minnie Carlisle couldn't sell. That is until the Montrose Avenue file landed on her desk. At first she had thought that it must have been a mistake: their office only dealt with homes in downtown Brooke County, and Montrose Avenue, she knew roughly, was up north towards the mountains, almost on the county line. And so she had gone to talk to the Big Guy Upstairs about it.

The elevator doors slid open and Minnie stepped out. The sound of the heels of her slingbacks hitting the highly polished floor rang out across the empty hallway. When she reached the boss' door she straightened her blazer then knocked once, entering without waiting for a response. Gary Price was a large man, and the button-ups he wore (either muted grey, blue or purple, depending on the day) only just managed to contain the belly that protruded from his middle like some gigantic, water-filled balloon. The only parts of his body that were visible, his round face and chubby hands, were hairless and ruddy, making him appear like some overgrown baby — except for the rust-coloured mop that sat on top of his head. Word around the office was that this was a toupee. Now, he was lounging back in his chair, emptying the crumbs from an empty box of donuts into his open mouth. He saw Minnie and started, almost falling sideways off his seat.

'Minnie!' he choked, straightening his tie and knocking the crumbs off his front.

'What can I do for you, my Employee of the Month, *every* month!'

'Gary, what is this?' She threw the Montrose Avenue folder down onto his desk. 'You know I'm helping old man Gilman sell his house this month before his move to Vermont, as well as finding a place for the Baxters, which they need *before* the holidays, on top of my usual list which is as long as my arm. And then I find *this* on my desk. *Who* wants to buy a house on Montrose Avenue? It's practically a retirement community out there, Gary. I'm a realtor, not a miracle worker.'

'Minnie, honey,' he stood up, slowly edging around the desk towards her. 'I gave you this house because you're the only one I can trust with it. An old buddy of mine had that place on his books for nearly a decade, and his team couldn't manage to book one single showing in all that time: *not one*! So you know what I did? I went ahead and took it off his hands. He told me I'm crazy! You know what I said back to him? I said, I know just the girl to work her magic on it, and her name's Minnie Carlisle. She's a big deal 'round these parts. If you don't know her name yet, you will soon.'

Minnie felt her hostility towards him begin to melt away. A smile began to play at the corners of her mouth.

'You sell this house, Minnie, and no one in the office will be able to question my decision in giving you your *own* private office next to mine.' He made to put his hand on her

waist then stopped himself; Gary knew that Minnie, unlike some of the girls in the office, would not put up with any crap like that, even if a promotion was on offer.

‘You’re considering *me* for the promotion?’ She looked up at him, unable to disguise the excitement in her expression.

‘I already know you’re ready, Minnie, but selling the Montrose Avenue place will prove it to *everyone else*, too.’

After grabbing a coffee and a chicken salad on sub (extra tomatoes and hold the onion; on Friday afternoons carbs for lunch were permitted), she had set off for Montrose Avenue. The familiar surroundings of downtown Brooke County soon began to slip away as she guided her little maroon Sedan further up towards the mountains. As she drove, she thought about what Gary had said. All she had to do was sell this house, something she had done countless times in her life, and then she would get the private office on the top floor and the salary to match. With this promotion she would be helping the Big Guy Upstairs scope out properties to sell and liaising with private sellers across the state. She would be more like Gary’s business partner than his employee, and that prospect made Minnie extremely happy. Lucinda Garcia also had her eye on the promotion, Minnie knew, but Lucinda Garcia hadn’t sold half as many houses as Minnie had. Nor was she the one Gary had personally assigned the Montrose Avenue house to. Minnie wasn’t far from the county line now, and all she could see was the green blur of empty fields beyond the window. It seemed that the further up she got, the less cars she saw passing her in either direction. The clouds overhead had begun to turn grey, and suddenly the radio she had switched on for company fizzled out. It had lost its signal.

‘Great,’ she spat sarcastically, and switched off the dial.

It was then, as the car turned a corner, that she saw it: the *Montrose Avenue* street sign and, just below it, a yellow *Dead End* sign. She pulled into the cul-de-sac, following the bend of the street, checking the identical-looking mailboxes for Number Six. The house seemed to appear out of nowhere, looming up ahead like something out of those Hitchcock movies her husband had taken her to see at the drive-in theatre when they were still dating. Number Six sat at the far end of the cul-de-sac, and was set back from the street with a pale lawn and low chain link fence. Surrounding this was a tangle of sharp-looking, but dead, rose bushes. The sides of the house were white panel, and its roof and windows were a shade of prussian blue so dark they looked almost grey. Its small front porch was protected by a low, sloping roof and held up by a series of white columns, their paint crumbling away. On the left side of the house stood a largely bare sycamore tree.

Minnie sighed as she pulled up by the side of the curb and killed the engine. Anyone with eyes to see could understand why it wasn’t getting any attention. Number Six stuck out like a pig in a beauty pageant compared to the other houses in the cul-de-sac, with their hanging baskets and front porch rocking chairs. It was a wonder the other residents hadn’t banded together to call the city and get it torn down before now. In her mind, though, she was already imagining what it could look like with a little TLC. The porch columns needed repainting, certainly, and the yard needed some work, but the structure of the house looked sound — at least from here. What Number Six, Montrose Avenue needed was largely

cosmetic: a mani-pedi and a new 'do. Men always failed to take care of the little details, but luckily *Minnie's Beauty Salon* was open for business.

As she stepped out of the car she began to smile to herself, the first tingle of excitement forming in the pit of her stomach at the prospect of a new challenge: this wasn't just a house, it was also a project. But the smile soon died on her lips. An elderly woman was peering out at her from a window of one of the houses across the street, her net curtains pulled to one side and her face set in a grimace. Minnie waved at her. *I come in peace*, she said wordlessly. The old woman, however, simply continued to stare back at her, her expression even more thunderous, before making a shooing gesture in the direction of Minnie with the back of her hand.

'I hope all the neighbours are so friendly,' Minnie said to herself, locking the car door and pulling the strap of her purse up over her shoulder.

She stepped up onto the sidewalk and walked through the open gate of Number Six. The front lawn was littered with fallen leaves and, she noticed, dead patches of grass. The *FOR SALE* sign post had broken across the middle, and the top half of it was now sitting in the middle of a bush. She walked around the side of the house and her initial impression was confirmed: the structure of the house seemed fine. The siding needed a good whitewashing, but there were no signs of mould or structural instability, and none of the windows were broken. The backyard was fairly large and still contained an old swing set and a black, ancient-looking outdoor stove, now both covered in strings of common ivy wrapped around them like cobwebs. Suddenly, she felt a fat splat of rain hit her shoulder. Seconds later, the backyard was being pounded with a heavy downpour; the dark grey clouds that had been gathering above her all afternoon had finally opened up. She ran back around the side of the house, covering her hair with her purse, and pulled out the front door key Gary had given her before she left the office. She slipped it into the lock and pushed open the door.

Minnie stepped inside the house and immediately began to feel along the side of the wall for the light switch; most of the downstairs windows were so covered with grime and weeds growing outside of them that she could barely see more than a few inches in front of her face. She found it and, fully expecting it not to work, flicked the switch with her finger. To Minnie's surprise the dim ceiling light above her flickered into life, casting a red glow over the entire house due to the fact that the bulb was enclosed in a scarlet, velvet lamp shade.

'Let there be light,' she called across the empty floor, slowly making her way forwards as she began to take in the interior of Number Six.

It felt as if Minnie was stepping back in time by at least two decades. Aside from the fireplace and kitchen counters and large appliances, the first floor had been stripped of any furniture, but the walls were still covered with a ghastly yellow and chocolate-coloured geometric wallpaper that reminded her of the one her own grandmother had had. She could almost picture the striped sofa and old television set encased in a wooden unit, as well as the paintings on the walls (probably of flying birds), that had likely once adorned this house — a typical seventies eyesore. In her mind, though, she could already see what needed to be done here: the walls would have to be painted a solid colour and the old appliances taken out. It would be contemporary, but tasteful, once she was finished with it. A blank slate for its new owners. She would talk to Gary about getting some guys in to get started right away; whether

he would listen to her, however, was a different story. When it came to business, Minnie's own motto was 'you have to speculate to accumulate'; Gary's, however, was 'how quick and how cheap?' Well, if selling this house was what it was going to take to convince him that she was ready for that promotion, she would rip off the wallpaper and clear out the yard herself.

As Minnie finished her walking tour of the first floor and was about to head upstairs, she glanced out of the rain-speckled window that looked out onto the backyard. The swingset outside was swaying on its own in the wind. At that moment, Minnie suddenly shuddered. It was a feeling as if someone had just opened a door and let a draught in, or as if she had stood under the shower without letting it run warm first. The cold spread down over her arms and she felt the tips of her fingers begin to tingle. Someone was watching her, she knew it without turning around. Her fingers closed around the zipper of her purse, slowly, soundlessly, pulling it open. She reached inside, searching for the small pouch with her nail scissors in. As she found it, Minnie raised her eyes and looked at her own reflection in the window, expecting to see someone else in the house standing behind her. Perhaps she had interrupted a squatter who had made Number Six their home, it wouldn't be the first time she had done such a thing. But when she looked up there was no one there. Minnie was a rational woman; she didn't call up the psychic every Tuesday like her sister did, she didn't pray — although she attended the synagogue on the last night of Passover with her father, and lit her Menorah during Hanukkah (things done more out of tradition than faith for Minnie) — and she didn't believe in ghosts because all of those things were, to her at least, a waste of both time and energy. But now, standing alone in this abandoned house, it was a feeling unlike anything else she had ever experienced in her life. Without thinking about it, she turned and began to walk towards the front door, her hand still closed around the small pair of scissors inside her purse. Less than twenty seconds later she was back outside, standing in the front yard of Number Six, a heavy rainfall drenching her through. She had not even checked the upstairs of the house. Composing herself, she walked purposefully back to her car and got inside. Without looking back at the house or to check if any of the neighbours were watching her, she started up the engine and set off, putting as much distance between herself and Montrose Avenue as she could.

It was almost four-thirty when she got home. After taking a shower and changing into her sweatpants, she made herself a green tea and called The Big Guy Upstairs, telling him that she wasn't going back to the office that afternoon but that she *would* take on the house. He agreed to get some guys in to start on the *minimal* (he emphasised this part) renovations next week, and made Minnie promise that she and her husband Drew would join him for dinner and champagne at a restaurant of her choosing when the house was sold to discuss her promotion (she had the sneaking suspicion that Gary wouldn't be bringing his wife to dinner, not after Minnie had once walked in on him unbuttoning Natalie Taylor's blouse while she was perched on his desk). She told him she would see him at the office on Monday morning then hung up. Minnie sighed and sprawled out on the sofa. She knew she should call her father, but she would do that later. There was a trashy talk show on TV and she watched as a woman named Mary-Lou was grilling her husband over calls to Florida she had found on the telephone bill. As she stared at the television screen, not really listening to what was being

said she loosened the towel she had wrapped around her wet hair and began to rub it dry. She remembered how it had felt, standing in front of the window in Number Six, feeling as if someone was watching her. What if there had been someone upstairs? Or out in the backyard, hidden amongst the trees? Next time she went back, she told herself, she was taking Aaron the intern with her. Gary had positioned Aaron on the desk in front of hers, and asked Minnie to take him under her wing, but the truth was that he was more of a hindrance than a help whenever he tried to assist her with a house. She had shown him how to organise files and make phone calls, to get him out from under her feet, but most of the time she caught him admiring his own biceps instead of working. He was only supposed to have been there for the summer, but Gary had let him stay on during the fall for no other reason than the fact that Aaron was his nephew. Minnie would put those muscles to better use at the Montrose house, though; maybe she would even get him to start on cleaning up the front yard.

Suddenly the front door was thrown open from the outside and calls of '*Moooooom!*' rang out from the hall. Minnie rolled her eyes, switched off the TV with the remote and stood up. A tall boy trudged into the living room, still wearing his baseball uniform.

'Where's your brother?' she demanded.

Jackson dropped down onto the sofa and looked up at his mother. 'He went up to his room right away because he said I hit him with my bat on purpose but it was a frickin' accident!'

Drew had appeared in the doorway. Minnie looked over at her husband, wordlessly demanding an explanation.

'I don't know what happened,' he held up his hands. 'Joshua started crying as they were both getting in the car but Jackson says his bat slipped out of his hand.'

'Why does no one ever believe me!?' Jackson yelled, crossing his arms and throwing his head back. 'You only ever believe that frickin' baby!'

'That "baby" who was born exactly seventeen minutes after you?' She reached over the back of the sofa and pulled Jackson's baseball cap off before heading for the stairs. 'And no hats in the house!'

Outside of Joshua's room, Minnie gently called his name and knocked on the door. A mumbled reply came from inside so she went in. Joshua was lying on his front beside his bed, pouring over a comic book and still dressed in his baseball jersey and pants. She crossed the room to sit beside him and put a hand on his back.

'I've heard Dad's and Jackson's accounts of the story so now I want to hear yours.'

He sat up onto his knees and shuffled backwards until their sides were touching.

'We were in the parking lot and Jackson kept teasing me because my aim is bad—'

'Your aim isn't bad, honey, you just have to keep practising with Dad.'

Joshua looked up at his mother, wide-eyed, 'I accidentally hit Coach with the ball today, Mom.'

She wasn't able to suppress her snort and soon they were both laughing, loud and full-throated. After a few minutes they had regained control of themselves and Joshua continued his story.

'So when we got to Dad's car he asked us how practice had gone, and Jackson started swinging his arm around, pretending to be me throwing the ball.' Joshua was mimicking the

movement for his mother right now. ‘But he was holding his bat and it flew out of his hand and hit me right here on my shoulder.’

‘So your brother didn’t purposely hit you, honey?’

‘I guess not, but if he wasn’t being mean and teasing me—’

‘Then it never would have happened,’ she finished for him.

He nodded and Minnie smiled to herself. Sometimes, Joshua would say things that sounded exactly like something Minnie, herself, would say — like just then, when he had told her about Jackson teasing him. Even Drew commented on it; he would joke that they both shared the same brain. While Jackson was his father’s son through and through, Joshua was, certainly, more like his mother. He was creative — the wall behind her desk at work was covered with pictures he had made for her, decorated with dried pasta and glitter — and, just like Minnie, he liked his own company. He even had his mother’s brunette hair (Jackson was blond like his father). Minnie liked to think that she treated both of her sons exactly the same, but she couldn’t help but be just that *little bit* more overprotective with Joshua: she had never told him, but when Joshua had come out of the womb he had not been breathing. She knew about birth asphyxia, having read all of the parenting journals she could get her hands on while pregnant, and she had mourned for her youngest twin in those minutes that seemed like hours as the doctors tried to resuscitate him, pushing down onto his tiny chest, convinced that she had lost her second baby before she had even met him. But by some miracle he had started to cry, and when the nurse had pressed his warm, wrinkly skin against Minnie’s chest, she had promised him that she would always protect him, and his brother, with her life.

Minnie blinked until her eyes were dry again then leaned over and kissed Joshua’s shoulder better. ‘Come on honey, let’s order in a couple pizzas tonight.’

It was exactly three a.m. when Minnie sat up, bolt upright, in bed. Drew was snoring beside her, his warm body spilling over onto her side of the bed, the entire sheet wrapped around his legs. She looked around the dark room, now wide awake. The dream had been so vivid that it had awoken her. She was driving along a deserted highway and Joshua was sitting in the passenger seat beside her. They were arguing about something, although she couldn’t now remember what, but then she had turned around only to find that she was now standing in the middle of the house on Montrose Avenue and Joshua was gone. He wouldn’t answer her calls for him, and so she had headed up the stairs to try and find him. And it was there, standing in the upstairs hallway, that she had seen the face that had made her start and wake herself up. Now, she reached over to her bedside table and picked up her glass of water, taking a long sip. Her father had always told her that eating cheese at night led to bad dreams, and she had shared Joshua’s margherita pizza with him that evening (Drew and Jackson liked pepperoni). As she laid back down and tried to sleep, untangling the sheet from around Drew’s heavy limbs and wrapping it back around herself, she told herself that she would get the Montrose Avenue place sold as quickly as she could; she was counting down the days until she would never have to set eyes on it again.

True to his word, Gary called in his usual team (they were his usual team only because they offered the lowest rates in town) to start on the renovations the following Wednesday. He wanted Minnie to be there to show them around, and so she had made Aaron the intern,

dressed today in a particularly tight, short-sleeved poplin shirt, accompany her. At first the conversation felt forced as Minnie drove them up to Montrose Avenue, but then they got onto the topic of the rumours Felicia Simpson spread around the office's watercooler every lunch hour, and any awkwardness between the two soon slipped away (although Minnie made sure not to bring up any of the stories she had heard concerning Aaron's own love life, of which there were many).

'Did you hear the one about David Smith?' Aaron asked her.

'That he stuffs the front of his pants with toilet paper? Yeah, I heard that one alright.'

They were both still laughing as they pulled up beside the construction truck outside of Number Six. Minnie stared up at the house, an anxious knot forming in the pit of her stomach. Knowing that she would not be heading in alone this time, however, made her feel slightly more at ease as they walked over to the front gate.

After they had finished their tour of the upstairs (the most exciting thing they found was a working portable TV set in one of the bedrooms), Aaron had taken Minnie's car to grab them salads and a couple of takeout cappuccinos while Minnie finalised the plans with the renovation crew. She watched their truck disappear around the corner of the cul-de-sac, now laden with the old refrigerator, stove and dishwasher they had just ripped out of Number Six — as well as that tacky velvet lamp shade Minnie had personally asked them to take down — then went back inside to check that they had switched off all of the wall sockets. As Minnie withdrew her hand from the now empty gap between the kitchen counters, she saw that blood was running down her finger. The cause of this, she soon realised, was the large, fresh gash running across the length of her palm. There was a small but jagged piece of glass sticking out of it. She managed to pull the shard out of her hand (thankful that it had not worked its way into the flesh any deeper) and then ran over to the sink. Blood swirled around the basin, caught in the running water, before being swallowed down into the drain. It made her feel queasy and she looked away. After the bleeding had started to slow down, she switched off the faucet and dried her fingers on the side of her skirt then began searching in her purse for a bandaid or at least some Kleenex. She found neither. Behind her, the front door slammed shut. Minnie stopped dead, her hand still inside her purse.

'Aaron?' she called over her shoulder.

There was no reply. The entire house was silent. Despite the fact that mid-fall sunshine was streaming through the window at the top of the staircase, it felt like someone had dropped an ice cube down the back of Minnie's blouse and it was now melting along her spine. In the pulp thrillers she sometimes read in bed or on vacation, the bad stuff only ever occurred at night (particularly *rainy* nights), but she had watched enough true crime shows when the twins were sleeping to know that this wasn't how it worked in the real world. Just because the sun was shining it didn't mean that the rapist wasn't watching you from the bushes outside the window, or that the killer wasn't waiting in the closet for you... Minnie thought back to the face she had seen in her dream that weekend. The more she tried to put it out of her mind, the clearer she could see it again.

She knew that she had to move from where she was standing, although it suddenly felt as if her legs each weighed two-hundred pounds. With one trembling step after another, though, she eventually found herself standing beside the front door. Her hand closed around the doorknob and she pulled. It wouldn't open. It was jammed shut as if someone had locked

it, and it was then that Minnie realised that the key was no longer in the lock where she had left it. Now, Minnie began to yell and slam her fists against the doorframe. When it didn't budge, she took a step backwards and then kicked the door with as much strength as she could muster. The wood trembled but it still didn't swing open. She felt like her throat was closing in. Suddenly she was six years old again, trapped in the upturned white Ford by the side of the highway while her mother bled out beside her.

'Miss Carlisle?' Aaron's muffled voice came from the other side of the door. 'Are you Okay? What—'

'Aaron! I'm stuck inside the house and the door won't open!' She smacked the door with her fists again.

She heard his footsteps moving across the front porch.

'Stand back!' he yelled.

The door shook as his vast shoulder collided with it once, then twice. On the third attempt it flew open. Minnie ran past him out onto the front porch, ignoring his calls after her, and didn't stop until she had collapsed onto the lawn. She stared up at the sky, it was now a perfect mild blue, and began to take in deep breaths of fresh air until her hands had stopped shaking. After a few minutes Aaron dropped down beside her onto the grass, folding his legs in front of him and surveying her as if she had just received a terminal diagnosis. Then he did something that surprised her: he put his hand on top of hers.

'That house creeps me out too, Miss Carlisle,' his tone was sincere.

At that moment the sound of a truck's engine pulling up to the curb made Minnie glance up, thinking that the renovation guys were back already. Instead, it was Drew's plumbing truck parked on the street in front of Number Six. He had his arm hanging out of the driver's window, and his eyes had fallen on Aaron's hand, which was still resting on top of Minnie's. After a few seconds Drew lifted his gaze to stare into Minnie's eyes. She could not read his expression.

'I drove by the office and Gary told me you'd be here. The hospital called. It's your Dad.'

Ten minutes later Minnie was sitting in the passenger seat of Drew's truck while he was staring straight ahead at the road, gripping the wheel with white knuckles. She had asked Aaron to lock up (they had found the key by the front porch) and drive her own car home for her. The twins were in the backseat of the truck, squashed between Drew's plumbing tools; he had picked them up from school on the way to collect Minnie. They were arguing but Minnie wasn't listening properly. She had her head resting against her window, watching the bumpers of the cars passing them.

Drew finally spoke. 'So does the male stripper come with the house or do you have to pay extra?'

She slowly turned her head to look at him. 'I can't believe you're acting like this when my father could be *dead* by the time we get there.'

She had tried to speak quietly so that the kids wouldn't hear, but she realised that her voice had risen as resentment took hold of her.

Joshua wailed, 'Grandpa's gonna die!'

She closed her eyes in exasperation, then turned around in her seat so that she was facing him. 'No, honey, of course not. But Grandpa *is* really sick, so that's why Dad picked you both up from school early. Seeing all of us will make him better, I'm sure of it.'

Minnie smiled weakly and stroked Joshua's knee then turned back around to face Drew. A muscle was twitching in his jaw.

After a few minutes he spoke again, softer this time, 'I'm sorry but what do you expect me to think when I catch you and Mr. Muscles holding hands on the lawn?'

Minnie tapped her fingernails on the dashboard of the truck. She was trying to remain calm, but it was difficult. The boys had fallen silent in the backseat.

'He's half my age and I'm about ninety-nine percent certain the kid's gay, Drew. If you can't handle your wife working with other men then that's your issue, but don't put your insecurities on me.'

Drew didn't respond, but he loosened his grip on the wheel.

'*Mooom!*' Joshua's calls came from the backseat. 'Jackson keeps calling me "gay"! What does "gay" mean?'

Oren Drachman was still alive when his grandsons and eldest daughter came rushing into his hospital room. He was propped up in bed with the extra pillows he had charmed the nurse into bringing him stuffed behind his back. He took in his daughter's disbelieving face and smiled.

'I had a heart attack, Miryam, I didn't drop dead! You don't have to plan my send-off just yet.'

Minnie laughed through her tears and threw her arms around him. The boys were climbing up onto the bottom of his bed and he assured Minnie that they were fine, despite her insistence that they had to get down. Then Drew appeared around the edge of the door.

'*Ah*, here's the big guy!' Oren took his son-in-law's outstretched hand and shook it.

'Good to see you up and, er, looking so well, sir.'

Oren told them the full story of what had happened to him: how he had reached for the telephone when he had felt his chest tightening up, knocking the entire end table over as he fell to the floor. It was this bang which the guy next door, through Oren's open window, had heard as he was finishing up his cigarette on the front porch, prompting him to go around and check on Oren. The boys were still perched on the bottom of his bed, listening intently, and Minnie and Drew were standing by the window; Drew had his hand around Minnie's waist. The old man's eyes were beginning to close before he had even finished his story, and soon the nurse came in to remind them that he needed his rest. The twins went on ahead with Drew after saying their goodbyes, but Minnie lingered in the doorway. She didn't want to leave him.

'Miryam.'

His voice was low and weak, but Minnie heard his call. She walked back over to her father's bed and placed her hand over his.

'Papa?'

His eyes were still closed when he spoke again. 'Do not go back to that house, Miryam. It holds nothing but death and suffering.'

He let out a loud snore and Minnie pulled her hand away from his as quickly as if his flesh was on fire.

‘Do you think there’s any truth to these?’

Minnie looked up. Aaron was sitting at his desk facing hers, holding up the fortune cookie he had received in his takeout box of beef noodles. She had done nothing but stare at the phone all morning: the Montrose Avenue place had been fixed up and ready for its first showing since the end of last week, but the calls still weren’t coming in. Although part of her was relieved that she didn’t have to return there any time soon (her father’s warning still rang in her ears, regardless of how hard she tried to block it out), she was starting to panic: her promotion rested on selling this house.

She sighed and reached inside the drawer of her desk for an emery board; she needed something to occupy her hands with. ‘I guess it depends on if the message is something you *want* to believe.’

He cracked open the cookie on his desk. A little scrap of paper fell out and Minnie leaned over to read it: *Everyone seems normal until you get to know them.*

‘I thought it might have given me a hint about my romantic prospects, but that doesn’t sound very promising,’ Aaron said, sweeping the broken cookie into the trash can underneath his desk.

‘Ask Felicia Simpson if any of the other guys working in the office are gay,’ Minnie said, examining the nails on her right hand. ‘She’ll know before they do.’

They both snickered. Aaron propped the message up by the side of the telephone which, at that moment, began to ring. They exchanged significant glances and then Minnie picked up the receiver.

‘Hello, Minnie Carlisle speaking,’ she tried to steady her shaking voice. ‘You’re through to *New Brooke County Realtors*, East Prospect Street; how can I help you today?’

‘I’d like to speak to someone about the house on Montrose Avenue,’ a light, female voice on the other end of the line said, and Minnie suddenly regretted the caesar salad she had eaten for lunch as she felt her stomach tighten behind the belt of her pencil skirt.

Minnie pulled up outside of Number Six, Montrose Avenue at just after ten-thirty the next morning. She had arranged the house showing for eleven. Aaron had wanted to accompany her but she had insisted that she was fine — she knew she had to do this on her own; a private office and an extra ten grand a year depended on it. She got out of the car and headed through the mended front gate. The lawn was a far healthier shade of green now, and the house itself seemed to sparkle under the weak morning sun now that it had been newly whitewashed. Minnie herself had been the one to replace the old and broken *FOR SALE* sign with a nice new one, despite the fact that she still could not imagine ever feeling comfortable inside of that house, let alone actually choosing to *live* there — although she was counting on her lucky stars that *someone* would. Now, she unlocked the front door and was about to step inside to do her usual last minute sweep of the house when something made her hesitate, her hand still on the doorknob. It was as if her feet would not allow her to take another step forwards, as she realised that she could not face heading inside on her own. She made her way back down the porch steps to try and get some air, hoping to talk herself around. And it

was then that she saw the figure standing on the sidewalk just beyond the front gate of Number Six.

Minnie straightened her blazer. 'Miss Jones?'

The plump woman turned around to face her. She was wearing a floppy hat and dark sunglasses, although it was the beginning of October. From her face (or at least what was visible of it) Minnie placed the woman in her mid-to-late sixties, and noted that she had a kind smile. It was only when Minnie looked down and saw the walking cane in her hand that she realised that the woman was blind.

'Yes,' the old woman smiled. 'You must be the realtor I spoke with on the telephone. I realise that I'm a little early...'

'I am. Minnie Carlisle, ma'am. And please, don't worry, you're perfectly on time,' she lied.

Minnie offered Miss Jones her arm as they took the porch steps, but she insisted that she was fine.

'As you can see—' Minnie started as they reached the top step, and then stopped herself; she felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment. 'Oh my goodness, I'm sorry I—'

'It's fine, dear. My hands are my eyes,' Miss Jones smiled, beginning to feel along the railing that ran the length of the porch. 'But a physical description may help me to visualise the space better, if you would.'

'Of course,' Minnie said, relieved she hadn't offended her. 'The front porch has ample space for a rocking chair or an outdoor loveseat, perfect for those warm summer evenings spent outside enjoying a glass of cold lemonade. Now, if you'd like to step inside...'

Minnie pushed open the front door she had already unlocked and they stepped over the threshold of Number Six together. She reached for the lightswitch automatically. As she looked around the house now bathed in dim red light, her eyes growing wide, she had to stop herself from screaming; the fact that Miss Jones was standing next to her, calmly waiting for a description of her surroundings, was the only thing that stopped her from doing so. The interior of the house was back to looking the way it had when Minnie had first stepped inside of it on her first drive up to Montrose Avenue all those weeks ago. The walls, which had not long ago been painted a shade of cream named *Summer Gardenia* that Minnie had picked out, were once again covered in that ghastly yellow and brown wallpaper that reminded her of her grandmother's house. The old refrigerator, stove and dishwasher that she had witnessed being ripped out were sitting amongst the kitchen counters in spaces that should have now stood empty. And above Minnie and Miss Jones hung the same scarlet lamp shade Minnie had thrown into the back of the renovation crew's truck herself. For some reason — for some inexplicable, dumbfounding, headache-inducing reason — the inside of the house had transformed back into its old state as if it had never been touched, as if the hours spent transforming it had never even happened. To ensure that she wasn't hallucinating, Minnie reached out and touched the surface of the wallpaper, tracing the indented geometric pattern with her fingers: she wasn't.

'Well, can you describe it to me?' Miss Jones smiled at her.

Suddenly Minnie had a vision in her mind of all of the house's old furnishings descending upon Montrose Avenue like something out of a kid's movie, headed for the open

window of Number Six, returning from the dump and slotting back into their rightful places: the streams of wallpaper, floating in the air like a pack of synchronised swimmers, making elaborate, moving, circular patterns; the refrigerator, stomping from its left side to its right side as if on feet, old and tired but determined; and the scarlet lamp shade, rolling across the neighbours' front lawns so it wouldn't damage itself, looking like a giant tomato or something else that didn't belong in a kid's movie (something like a decapitated head).

Minnie held onto the side of the wall to steady herself. Her legs were starting to tremble and she was worried that they might give out from under her. She swallowed, hard, and then started to describe the house for Miss Jones as it now appeared before her; although part of Minnie wanted to describe the house how it *should* have now looked, devoid of its appliances and with its new wall paint, she knew that this would only confuse Miss Jones as she felt her way around. As she was speaking, Minnie suddenly realised that the refrigerator was emitting a low humming sound, despite the fact that none of the appliances had been working before they were stripped out. She wondered, as she crossed the floor to examine it, would there be a light inside?

'The kitchen is the heart of a home, don't you agree, Minnie?' Miss Jones called across to her, feeling along the counter tops.

Minnie readied herself then pulled open the handle of the refrigerator. The light came on.

'I certainly do,' she grimaced.

By the time that they had taken a stroll through the backyard and around to the front again (Miss Jones decided that she had no need to head upstairs) Minnie had the sale in the bag, so to speak. Miss Jones told Minnie that the asking price was lower than most of the bungalows she had been considering, so she would section off a portion of the downstairs for her own bedroom, and then her daughter and grandchildren could use the upstairs as their living quarters when they visited during the summer and Christmas. Minnie stared at the woman, taking in the consistent smile that never faltered and the way her hands (looking more lined in the daylight than Minnie had first realised) closed around her cane.

'Are you really sure about this, Miss Jones?' Minnie couldn't believe that the words were coming out of her mouth. 'We have some other great properties that I can show you. They're a little further away from here, but they are truly stunning.'

Miss Jones held up her hand. 'I don't need stunning, but I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Minnie. I have *seen*' (her smile grew wider as she said it) 'several houses, but none I like so much as this one. There is something about the energy of this house that... Well, that simply appeals to my nature. I have made my decision, and I am willing to offer over the asking price to make sure that I get it.'

Minnie's palm was sweating as she shook Miss Jones' hand and told her that she would be in touch to finalise the sale once the paperwork had come through. She offered Miss Jones a ride home but she refused, telling Minnie that a neighbour was already waiting for her around the corner. Minnie went back to lock up the house and when she returned the other woman had gone. She saw no further sign of Miss Jones, even as she pulled out of Montrose Avenue and started to head back to Brooke County.

It was a little over a week later when Minnie got the phone call. Gary never called on the weekend, so she was surprised to hear his voice on the other end of the line.

‘*Min-nie!* How is my employee of the month, every month? *Especially* this month!’

He told her that Miss Jones’ cheque had just cleared and the old girl (Minnie doubted if Miss Jones was much more than five years Gary’s senior) was already moving into her new place as they were speaking (Minnie gave a small shudder).

‘I know it’s short notice and all, but my old buddy’s in town tonight and he wants to meet *the* Minnie Carlisle who managed to sell the old Montrose Avenue place! You and Drew can make it, right? Seven-thirty? The new Italian joint on Thirty-Fourth?’

Minnie distinctly remembered Gary telling her that *she* could pick the restaurant when the house was sold, but she didn’t bother reminding him. She was still trying to watch her carbs, but she didn’t anticipate that she would be eating much tonight anyway; she had suddenly lost any appetite she had. Reluctantly, she told him they would be there.

‘Perfect! And don’t forget, Minnie, honey, me and you gotta talk on Monday morning about your new office!’

She hung up and sighed. She was in no mood to celebrate, despite the fact that the house was finally out of her hands. The image of Miss Jones stuck there, alone and defenceless, kept playing across her mind. She hadn’t mentioned what had happened during the showing to anyone — she had been *that* close to arranging a session with the therapist she sometimes spoke to about her mother’s death, but had stopped herself — how could she without sounding insane? If something happened to Miss Jones, though, Minnie would never be able to forgive herself...

Still, when the clock struck five p.m. she went upstairs to shower and get ready. She picked out her go-to: a black sequined cocktail dress (she liked it because it held in her waist), then blasted her hair dry until her natural waves had dissolved under the heat and applied some of the good makeup her sister had given her for her birthday (she didn’t waste it on days spent at the office). By six forty-five she was climbing down the stairs carrying her stilettos in her hand. Drew, she saw, was still slouched on the sofa watching the football game dressed in his t-shirt and cargo shorts, Jackson by his side.

‘Seriously, Drew?’

He took in her warning glare and scuttled up the stairs to get ready, but not before telling her how beautiful she looked.

The doorbell rang and Minnie went to answer it. The twins’ usual babysitter had gone off to college at the end of August, and there was no way her father was up to sitting them yet (although he was, thankfully, back home and getting stronger each day) so she had asked Aaron if he minded watching them.

‘There are pizza rolls in the oven — Joshua, the shortest, likes plain cheese, while Jackson, the blonde one *and* the troublemaker, likes pepperoni — plus there are salad sticks and grapes in the refrigerator. Keep the soda to a minimum, especially after nine o’clock. And help yourself to whatever you want, but just save me some wine because I have a feeling I’m going to need some when we get home.’

Drew came into the kitchen then. He had dressed in a button up and some slacks and his tie was hanging, loose, over one shoulder.

‘Do you think the tie is too much, or...?’ he started, then stopped when he saw Aaron.

‘Hey, Mr. Carlisle.’

Aaron held out his hand and Drew looked him up and down before taking it.

‘Good to meet you under better circumstances, *son*.’ Drew emphasised the last word, sticking out his chest and drawing himself up to his full height so that he towered over Aaron.

Minnie fixed Drew’s tie for him, kissed the boys goodnight (giving a whispered warning to Jackson to behave himself) and then they headed out to the car. Gary and his old buddy (who introduced himself as Pete Ryder) were waiting for them in the restaurant, tucked away in a corner booth, having already made a start on a couple of whiskeys and a tray of appetisers. Pete’s hand lingered on Minnie’s waist longer than she cared for as he embraced her, ringing her hand and kissing her cheek at the same time. She flicked Pete’s hand away and shot a look at Drew but he hadn’t noticed; her husband seemingly only cared when it was a man who made *him* feel emasculated giving her attention, rather than a man who clearly made *her* feel uncomfortable, she thought bitterly to herself. She ordered a lemon drop martini and the lasagne while Drew had a Coke (he was driving) and the spaghetti and meatballs. When their meals arrived Minnie watched Pete sleaze over the young waitress who was serving their table and had to bite her tongue to stop herself from saying anything to him.

‘You need to get that nephew of yours around some skirt like that, Gary,’ Pete nodded in the direction of the waitress. ‘Straighten the kid out. Is he still playing house with that fag from New York?’

Minnie could feel her cheeks flushing with anger, now. It was getting more and more difficult to keep her mouth shut. She glared across at Gary, tapping her freshly painted nails on the tablecloth. He just shook his head and then stared down into his plate of food. Why had he not said anything back to Pete? After a few minutes she started to pick at her own food with her fork, trying to calm herself down. Drew offered her a slice of his garlic bread but she declined then went back to nursing her lemon drop. Gary was the next to speak again. Likely for no other reason than to fill in the icy silence that had fallen over the table, he asked Drew how his plumbing business was going. Drew was in the middle of answering him when Pete said it.

‘So how *did* you do it, Minnie? How did you sell the Montrose Avenue place? I’ve gotta know.’ He had his arm resting on the high back of the booth seating, his smug grin highlighted by the bright overhead lights. ‘Did you spin the old wrench some thread about how the story was just some kids’ make-believe tale?’

Minnie blinked at him. ‘What are you talking about?’

Gary’s eyes had grown wide and he was pulling at the collar of his button-up that was pressing into his fat neck. ‘Hey-hey, Pete, stop. He’s just kidding, Minnie, it’s nothing.’

‘I said, *what* story are you talking about?’ Minnie directed the question at Pete, ignoring Gary’s nervous gibbering and Drew’s confused stare.

‘You know, the story of the crazy little bitch who killed her own folks there, what, twenty years back — it was in all the papers. That’s why the house has been abandoned all this time. I’m guessing you *didn’t* tell old woman Jones that before you sold it to her: not that *she’d* know even if the killer was standing right behind her. *Ha!*’ He slammed the table with his hand and Minnie’s glass toppled over, its contents spilling into her lap.

Her chair screeched against the polished floor as she pushed herself away from the table. She stood up, flapped the bottom of her dress so that most of the cocktail was released

onto the tablecloth, tucked her purse under her arm and started towards the exit. She ignored Gary's pleading for her stay and Drew's calls after her, and didn't stop until she was outside in the cold night air. Minnie pressed her thumb and forefinger against the bottom of her forehead. Her vision was swimming in and out of focus. Lights from passing cars were surrounded by bright halos, as if she were viewing them from a rain-smeared window. He had used her, and then he had bragged about it to Pete. She and Aaron were nothing more than pawns in Gary's quest to make a quick buck. Gary knew that if Minnie was aware of the history of the house she never would have sold it, especially to someone like Miss Jones, living on her own, so he had kept it from her — deceived her. There was something wrong with that house, Minnie had sensed it from the very start, and now she had helped to trap a woman there, alone and unable to defend herself. The bitter taste of lemon rose up in her throat and mixed with the few mouthfuls of lasagne she had swallowed. She spat onto the sidewalk, her hand resting on the wall of the restaurant. She felt a pair of strong hands around her waist and turned around, dropping her head into her husband's chest. Drew began to stroke her hair as she sobbed into his tie. He knew how much she had put into getting the house sold, how much it had meant to her.

'Come on,' he held her hand as they walked to the car and he helped her into her seat.

The car ride home passed in a blur. She played with the wet hemline of her dress to occupy her hands and answered Drew's questions in one-word answers. She just wanted to climb into bed and sleep so that she could stop thinking. There was a headache forming in the front of her temple and she knew that it was going to be a killer. Before Drew had even killed the engine she was unbuckling her seatbelt and pushing open her door. As soon as she got inside the house she kicked off her shoes and went to get a glass of water and some pills for her head. On the way to the sink, though, she froze. Joshua was lying on the sofa, blood smeared around his mouth and down his t-shirt. The taste of lemon was rising in her chest again and she felt that there would be no stopping it this time.

'Are you Okay, Miss Carlisle?' Aaron was standing across from her, drying a plate with a dish towel.

She looked at Joshua again. His chest was rising and falling and tiny snores were escaping from his semi-open mouth. It wasn't blood on his face and chest, she realised, but just tomato sauce from the pizza rolls — it was greasy and more orange than red. She backed away from her sleeping son and started to climb the stairs towards her bed, towards sleep. Behind her, she heard Gary and Aaron's low voices.

When Minnie woke up on Sunday morning she didn't recall any bad dreams, and she was glad about that. Her head felt better, and the mental fog from last night seemed to have cleared. She realised that she was starving, so she made a stack of pancakes and drizzled them with syrup and the boys helped her finish them. She did not call Gary back, despite the fact that he had left at least a dozen messages asking her to. After breakfast she told Drew that she was going to visit her father, but instead she drove out to Montrose Avenue. Her intention was to knock on the door and check on Miss Jones, but when she saw the house from across the street she knew that she would not be able to make herself get any closer to it. Something had changed inside Number Six already; whatever was there before had now grown stronger. There was little more than a light late morning breeze, but the dead tree in

the corner of the yard was swaying violently from side to side as if caught in a storm. Inside each window of the house she could see nothing but blackness. It was as if death itself had found Number Six and now held it in its grip. There was no life to be found there. Minnie got back into her car and drove back home. She prayed, hoped, and wished that nothing had happened to Miss Jones. Not yet.

Aaron was waiting for her outside the office the next morning. He asked if they could go for a walk around the block, and Minnie said yes: she needed time to prepare what she was going to say to Gary.

‘Drew told me what Pete said in the restaurant. I called Uncle Gary and I was practically screaming at him but all he kept saying was that he was sorry, and that he didn’t mean for you to find out like that. I guess he just wasn’t thinking, and—’

‘Oh, he was thinking all right,’ she cut him off, ‘thinking that I am a hysterical woman who needed shielding from the truth while I did his dirty work for him.’

‘Uncle Gary doesn’t have the same conscience that you and I have, not when it comes to money or business. But he really *does* value you and what you do for him — he says you’re his best employee all the time.’

Minnie sighed.

‘Oh, Aaron... I don’t want to listen to you trying to defend him.’ She wondered how Aaron would feel if he knew about ‘Uncle Gary’ failing to challenge Pete over his quip about his nephew in the restaurant. ‘He lied to *you* as well as me. Gary knows where I am. Let *him* come and find me himself if he wants to speak to me; he’s certainly big enough to fight his own battles.’

She turned on her heel and started back towards the office.

‘I’m not defending him, Miss Carlisle, I swear!’ Aaron darted after her, quickly catching her up. ‘He can go to hell for all I care, that’s probably where he’s headed anyway, but I wanted to show you something. Look.’

Minnie stopped and turned to face him, her lips pursed.

‘I spent the whole afternoon in the public library yesterday, the one about four blocks away from Montrose Avenue. Remember, we saw it when we were driving up there?’

She nodded.

‘Well the librarian was starting to get annoyed with me because I kept asking questions, but I told her that I was a college student working on my thesis about local history and then she seemed to warm to me.’ He put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a small stack of folded paper. ‘When word gets out around the office I can only imagine the sorts of rumours Felicia Simpson will start, so I thought it was best for us to get the facts first.’

He held out the stack of paper and Minnie took it from him, unfolding it. A photograph of Number Six, Montrose Avenue stared back at her, black and white and grainy but unmistakable. It had been photocopied from the front page of a newspaper which was dated from over twenty years ago. She began to read:

LOCAL TEEN KILLS PARENTS IN OWN HOME

Sixteen-year-old Jennifer Graham confessed to the brutal murders of her mother and father yesterday in a case Mayor Fischer described as 'an unspeakable and grotesque tragedy' in a press conference late last night. The murders occurred last Friday, October twenty-first, in the quiet cul-de-sac of Montrose Avenue, just twenty minutes away from Baldwin High School which Graham has attended for the last two years. Police Chief Anderson Wilson was first on the scene, responding to a disturbance reported by neighbours of the Grahams, and he recalls 'the unnaturally calm demeanour' of the teenager as she sat in the same kitchen as her dead parents she had slain only minutes before, the murder weapon — a carving knife — next to her. The investigation...

Minnie skimmed through the rest of it. There was very little new information about the actual murders, as it soon transformed into a character study of the teenager: she was a loner, the kids at school bullied her, she volunteered at the local animal shelter... Minnie flipped to the next page. It was another front page of a newspaper, but the photograph that accompanied this one was of a pale girl with dark hair and even darker eyes. This, she realised, was Jennifer Graham. The article itself, however, only regurgitated the same details as the first, as did each subsequent one that Aaron had photocopied and stapled together.

'Teenage girls who volunteer at the doggy shelter don't just snap and murder their parents because they have no friends.' Minnie folded the stack of paper in half.

Aaron's eyes met hers, and when he spoke she knew that he was selecting his words carefully. 'That day, when the door got stuck and you were trapped inside... Did you — I mean, I know it sounds stupid, but — did you see something?'

How could she answer that question? *I didn't see anything, no, I was just reminded of the time I was trapped in a car wreck with my dead mother as a child. And I sure as hell felt like I was being watched whenever I was alone in there.* And then there was the face she had seen in her dream, and the fact that the interior of the house had transformed back into how it used to look during Miss Jones' showing. Not to mention the growing sense of dread she had felt the last time she had driven up there... She opened her mouth to speak, thinking that perhaps she *could* tell him; perhaps he wouldn't call the men in white coats to come and fetch her. But she knew it was a risk she couldn't dare take.

She shook her head. 'No. Why, have you? Seen *something*, I mean.'

Aaron told her that he hadn't, and Minnie knew that he was telling her the truth. She looked back down at the photocopies in her hand again, and an idea suddenly occurred to her. It was a long shot, certainly, but maybe it could work...

'I have a headache and I really don't feel like facing Gary today,' she lied. 'Cover for me, tell him I don't feel good and that I'll talk to him tomorrow. I'm going to head home.'

Aaron looked at her. 'Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?'

He knew that she was up to something.

'I'll see you tomorrow, Aaron. Call me tonight if Felicia has any interesting stories.' She slipped the papers into her purse and fished out her car keys.

As she was driving back home (she *hadn't* lied about that part, although it was only going to be a fleeting visit) it occurred to her that Aaron was the first real friend she had ever made at the office, despite working there for almost seven years. Working in a realtor office was like competing in a competitive sport, and Minnie could never be satisfied with second

place. With Aaron, though, there was no rivalry; he was seemingly happy with his position as office intern or Minnie's assistant, depending on her whim for the day. And, for obvious reasons, there was no awkwardness around Minnie being friends with another man despite being a married woman — even Drew was starting to come around to him now. Someday, Minnie told herself, perhaps she could open up her own real estate business with Aaron. That way neither of them would ever have to handle Gary's dirty dealings again.

The early morning traffic had largely died down by that point and so Minnie soon found herself pulling into her own driveway. She took the steps up to the front door two at a time and, once inside, slipped off her purse and knelt down beside the end table the telephone sat on. She yanked open the cabinet door and spotted it immediately because of its size and colour: the telephone directory Drew kept for work. It was heavier than a boulder but she dropped it onto the floor in front of her and reached into her purse for the articles Aaron had photocopied at the library. What was the name of the detective the newspaper had quoted: *Watson; Wilfred*? She found it — *Police Chief Anderson Wilson*. She flipped the directory open to near the back and began searching through the 'W' listings. What if he had retired and moved to Florida by now; or died; or had a paranoid wife who insisted that they remain unlisted (like her own mother had done)? She found Wilson and then she found Anderson — there was only one in the whole of Brooke County. *Could it really be this easy*? She reached up and grabbed a pen then scribbled the telephone number and address of Anderson Wilson on the back of the photocopied articles, shoved them into her purse and started towards the door. She had a feeling that she would have more luck catching Wilson (if he really was *the* Wilson she needed) with an unexpected visit rather than a phone call out of the blue — it would show that she was serious. Plus, the address was only a short drive away. And so, twenty minutes later, Minnie found herself standing outside of Anderson Wilson's front door. She knocked, quietly at first and then louder. After a minute or two the door was pulled open from the inside. A broad man around her father's age with thinning white hair and a lined face looked up at her from his wheelchair.

'Mr. Wilson?'

He nodded.

'Police Chief Wilson?'

'You better come inside,' he said in a hoarse voice, and rolled back his wheelchair to let her inside.

Minnie followed the man over to his kitchen. He switched off the small television set on the counter and covered the sandwich he had laid out for himself with a clean plate from the draining board.

'I'm sorry to have interrupted your meal, sir.' Minnie stood nervously off to the side of him.

'It's alright. I eat out of boredom, not hunger, these days. I'd offer you a drink but I guess I should ask what you came here for first — as if I don't already know.'

Mr. Wilson parked his chair by the counter and gestured for Minnie to take a seat on one of the stools. She did, resting her purse in her lap.

'Mr. Wilson, my name is Minnie Carlisle.' She paused, considering whether to lie and say that she was a journalist, but she realised that there was nothing to be gained from being

dishonest with him. ‘I’m a realtor from a firm downtown, and I was recently asked to sell a house without being given prior information on the *history* of that house.’

‘The Montrose Avenue place.’

She nodded. ‘Yes, sir. And I was wondering if—’

‘If I could tell you all the details the papers left out?’

‘Well, yes, sir, if you don’t mind talking about it. I know that you were the first on the scene.’

Mr. Wilson suddenly pushed himself forwards in his chair and for a moment Minnie was worried that he was going to show her to the door. But he instead wheeled his chair around to the counter behind him and switched on the coffee maker.

‘Do you take milk?’

His question caught her off guard. ‘Oh, yes please.’

‘Sugar?’

‘No thank you, sir.’

As Minnie watched him making the cups of coffee she hovered nervously above her seat, debating whether she should offer to help him. After a minute, though, he was already sliding Minnie’s cup across the counter to her. He then parked his seat back across from her, taking a sip of his own coffee. She thanked him and sat down again.

‘It was seven p.m. almost exactly when the call came in. I remember looking up at the clock because it was a slow night, slow for a Friday night in the fall, anyway. People think summer or winter is the busiest time for crime-bustin’ but it’s not. Everyone’s too busy enjoying the fireworks and the cookouts in the summer, or preparing for the holidays in the winter, to be killing and robbing each other; plus they’re either too hot or too cold. But there’s something about the fall, particularly in a small town like this, that makes *everything* go up: domestics, robberies, even homicides. Well, anyways, me and Gill — that was my partner at the time, I say partner but I was meant to be training him up — was watching some John Wayne picture on the TV and it had just come back on after the commercials when the phone started hollering. Gill was heating up his old woman’s lasagne in the microwave oven and it started spluttering all over the glass because he couldn’t get to it in time. He hangs up and tells me that it was a lady out in Montrose Avenue on the line, she says she heard screamin’ coming from her neighbour’s house. Number Six. So we get in the car and I drive us, expecting to find some sonovabitch beating his wife. When you’ve been a cop for as many years as I was, you soon find out that the real lowlifes aren’t the ones peddling dope on street corners and beggin’ for dimes, like the papers and the government wants you to believe. It’s the fellas who hide inside their big houses and behind the wheels of their expensive *Range Rovers* — probably makin’ up for other inadequacies, if you catch my drift — that you gotta watch out for. The CEOs and the career politicians of the world.

‘Well, anyways, I pull up outside Number Six and we get out. I reach for my heater, Gill does the same, and we go inside. And what we see...’ Mr. Wilson’s hands were shaking as he took another gulp of coffee and then wiped his mouth. ‘Well, we couldn’t work out exactly *what* we were seeing at first. There’s this young ’un — of course I later found out she was sixteen but at the time I placed her about fourteen, no older — sitting on a stool like you are now, calm as you please, and with hair like two dark curtains around her face. And slumped in the stool next to her, his newspaper folded over his face, was the pops. Blood was

spreading out over the newspaper, soaking it through, so I knew he was dead. And Gill must've known it, too, because he let out a scream like a kid stung by a pack of wasps. Or maybe he'd seen the mom. The mom was the worst, at least for me. She was propped up by the kitchen counter like one of those store mannequins in her long dress, only she wasn't standing tall and stiff like those mannequins do. Her ankles were bent at unnatural angles and she was slumped forwards over the sink, as if she was doing the dishes; except the dish towel was thrown over her head — like the newspaper was over the pop's — almost like a lamp shade. And there was blood soaking through that, too.'

Minnie felt coffee-flavoured saliva rising up in her mouth and she stood up. 'Can I get a glass of water?' she asked him while already striding across the kitchen to the sink.

She picked up a glass from the draining board, filled it with cold water and then drank until it was empty. The image of the scene he had just described to her played across her mind like a movie on a screen that she couldn't switch off, made all the more vivid because she knew how the house looked, had been inside it herself...

'I'm sorry if I upset you, miss, I just thought you wanted to hear the story how it was.'

She shook her head, 'You didn't upset me, and I absolutely do. It's just... it's a lot to take in.' She sat back down.

'You're telling me. I've seen more murder scenes than I ever hoped I would, but none have ever haunted me the way that one does. The way the Graham girl was *so* calm, almost nonchalant, with the knife she had just carved up her own folks with next to her... It wasn't normal. She confessed to it all two days later, sounding about as excited as if she was reading the weather forecast for that afternoon. The papers started printing stories about how she had no friends so maybe that's what made her do it: but I knew different. There was something behind her eyes, something that didn't belong there...'

Minnie nodded, she had said the same thing to Aaron.

'And what happened to her after that?' she asked; none of the articles she'd read had mentioned Jennifer Graham's fate.

'Well, she was put in one of those centres for young 'uns: an *institution*,' he drew air quotes around the word as he said it. 'And within a week she was dead; slit her wrists on some jagged glass in her room.'

Minnie traced the scar on her own palm from where she had cut it on the loose shard of glass in Number Six. Now, she felt like she needed some cold air on her face, but she still had questions she wanted to ask Mr. Wilson. Minnie opened her mouth but Mr. Wilson spoke first. He was staring off into the distance, and his voice sounded like it had risen at least an octave higher.

'Six months after that day we found the Graham folks slaughtered, Gill jumped off the roof of his apartment block. Thirty years old. His wife had just lost the baby she'd been carrying for eight months. Gill had never been able to get over what we saw that day, I reckon it put stress on all three of them. But you know what else I reckon? Gill didn't jump. He wouldn't leave his old woman like that, not after what she'd just been through.'

Minnie twisted her hands together in her lap. There was a lump in her throat and she coughed until it had gone.

'Want me to tell you how I got put in this damned thing?' he smacked the side of his wheelchair, and then continued without waiting for a response from Minnie. 'I fell down the

stairs of this very house about five years back, only I don't know if I really did *fall*. I'd just stopped, my foot on the top step, because I was sure I could feel somebody watchin' me, even though there was nobody else in the house. And then I felt a hand on my back and the next thing I know I'm kissing the rug at the foot of the staircase. It's not the first time something like that happened to me, and I don't reckon it'll be the last, either. Only one of these days I'm not gonna be so lucky. Jennifer Graham may have died, but whatever I saw behind her eyes didn't. Something inside her lived on in that house. And it's gonna get me, sooner or later, just like it got Gill, and my Ada. She died of the cancer, they said. Lungs. Just last March. Fifty-two years of marriage and it's over just like *that*. No kiss goodbye, just a freezin' hand to hold one last time.'

Tears were swimming in front of Minnie's eyes now. She stood up and put a hand on Mr. Wilson's shoulder, wiping her face. He tapped her hand appreciatively then looked up into her face.

'It's found you too, hasn't it?'

Thankful that she could, finally, tell someone else about what had happened (or what she *thought* had happened) without them thinking her insane, Minnie launched into the stories of what she had seen and felt in the house on Montrose Avenue. Her voice was shaking as she spoke, pacing the tiled floor, but she continued, telling Mr. Wilson about the time she had felt someone watching her; then how she had cut open her hand and found that the door was jammed shut, trapping her inside; and finally about how the house had transformed back into its former state during the showing.

'The way you just described the wallpaper and the lamp shade is the way it looked the day me and Gill found the Grahams dead,' he nodded his head. 'You can't control evil. You can try and get a hold of it, to twist it into a shape that helps you sleep at night or lets you forget about it long enough to carry on with your day, but it will always spring right back up just as ugly and as Godless as it was before. Sometimes even uglier.'

Minnie dropped down onto the stool in front of Mr. Wilson again. She didn't know how long she had been there, the two of them talking, and it felt almost like a waking dream. She was her father's rational daughter, she didn't believe in ghosts, but here she was, listening to him and believing every word. It was the only explanation for what she had experienced.

'But listen, miss, 'cause this is important,' Mr. Wilson leaned forward in his chair. 'These things you can't explain, they've only ever happened to you *in* the Montrose Avenue house, right?'

'That's right,' Minnie nodded.

'Then that's good.' Mr. Wilson's face broke out into a broad smile. 'That's real good! It means that it hasn't found you yet, not properly. It hasn't followed you home like it did me and Gill. It's only when you feel it inside your *own* house that you've gotta start worryin'. But you're one of the lucky ones. Just promise me that you won't ever go back to that stinkin', Godforsaken place again; do you hear me?'

How could she promise him that when she had helped to trap Miss Jones there? There was no way that she could leave her there, in the grip of that house, on her own, Minnie thought to herself.

Mr. Wilson had spotted that she was hesitating. 'You got children, miss?'

‘Two sons. Twins.’

‘And you’d do anything for them? Anything to keep them safe?’

‘I’d give my own life for them,’ she answered truthfully.

‘Then stay away from that house.’ His voice was quiet. ‘All my Ada ever wanted was a child of her own, but the Good Lord decided it wasn’t meant to be. But you do, so do it for them. Don’t play with something you can’t see, because it will *always* find you first.’

Mr. Wilson’s words echoed in Minnie’s head as she drove home. He was right, even if she didn’t want to admit it to herself. She needed to protect her own family above all else. There was no way she could allow it (whatever *it* was) to attach itself to Jonah or Joshua or Drew like it had done to Mr. Wilson’s and Gill’s families, tearing them apart. She had tried to talk Miss Jones out of buying the Montrose Avenue place but she had been insistent, and now Minnie had the horrible feeling that it was too late to try and save her anyway. Surely it had already found her, spending night after night sleeping under its nose... It was time to put Number Six, Montrose Avenue out of her mind for good, Minnie decided, for the sake of her family as well as her own sanity. Minnie had everything that she needed in life: her family and her career. There was no space in her world for anything that she could not see or touch. Tomorrow she would go back to work as normal and she would do what she did best: sell houses. And when she received next month’s salary she would use it to pay for a deposit on a family vacation, somewhere hot and next to the ocean. God knows she needed it. Maybe she would even invite her sister to come along.

She stopped off at the grocery store on the way home and bought the ingredients to make fajitas with beef and bell peppers, and nachos as a starter: it was both the boys’ favourite dinner (except perhaps pizza rolls) and was one of the ways she could get Jackson to eat vegetables without him complaining about the fact. She would even *make* the guacamole from scratch instead of buying it from the store to make Drew happy. And for dessert she’d get ice cream, the good kind that was at least six dollars a tub: that was *her* favourite. As she prepared it all that evening, Minnie realised that she missed this part of her life; she and her father had always cooked together when she was growing up. Now, though, it was usually one of two options she ended up picking from after a long day at the office: either quick meals or takeout food.

The twins didn’t argue once during dinner that evening because they were too busy shovelling it into their mouths as quickly as they could. Before dessert, Jackson gave them a reenactment of how Joshua performed in gym class that afternoon and they all laughed, even Joshua. She had to start making time for family dinners again, Minnie told herself. She brought out the ice cream and let the boys eat theirs on the sofa while they watched cartoons, while she and Drew shared one bowl with two spoons as if they were teenagers again in *Frankie’s Diner* on Spring Avenue.

‘There, now we really *could* be back there.’ Drew brought in a candle from the living room and lit it, placing it in the centre of the table amongst the dirty plates and empty dishes.

He slid back into his chair and put his arm around Minnie’s shoulder. She let her head fall back onto his chest and smiled up at him. ‘I missed this.’

‘I missed this, too. And I missed *you*.’ He leaned forwards and kissed her lips. ‘You’ve been really caught up in work lately, baby.’

‘I know I have, and I’m sorry, but it’s all wrapped up now. I promise. The only thing that matters now is the boys and you and me.’

‘I’m glad to hear it. And tonight, I want to show you exactly how much I’ve missed you...’

Drew brushed her hair out of the way and began kissing down her neck, slowly and tenderly. She closed her eyes and arched her back. She hadn’t felt her husband’s touch in weeks, not like that. But then his hand started playing with the strap of her dress and she sat up, giggling.

‘Seriously, Drew, stop. The kids are on the sofa. You clear the table and I’ll make sure the kids wash their faces properly before bed, and *then* we can pick up where we left off.’

He jumped up and made a military salute with his hand. ‘Yes, m’am!’

She smiled and paused by the dining table. ‘And *you* better wash your face, too, because I’m pretty sure that’s salsa all round your mouth.’

When Minnie reached the sofa she saw that Jonah was still spread out, his eyes glued to the TV, but Joshua had seemingly grown bored of the cartoons and was now sitting on the floor, drawing a picture.

‘Whatcha drawing, honey? Something nice for momma’s desk at work?’ Minnie leaned over and put her hand on Joshua’s back.

He tried to hide the picture from view, spreading his arms around it, but she was quicker than he was. She grabbed the drawing out of his hand. Minnie heard her own heartbeat thumping inside her ears as a wave of sickness passed over her.

‘No, no,’ she began to mutter, shaking her head.

The child had drawn a large room, its walls decorated with yellow and brown wallpaper, and a bright red lamp shade hanging down from its ceiling. In that room he had also drawn the figure of a woman wearing a dress and a dish towel over her head, as well as a man with a newspaper covering his face. There were pen splodges, in the same shade of scarlet as the lamp shade, dripping down from both of these figures. Minnie dropped the picture and grabbed Joshua by the shoulders. Without thinking what she was doing, she began to shake him.

‘What is this? Where did you see this? Joshua! JOSHUA!’

He stared back at his mother through wide eyes, unspeaking, his head wobbling from side to side. Spit flew from Minnie’s mouth and into her son’s face as she screamed his name again and again, shaking him harder. His eyes began to roll into the back of his head. Jackson had stood up now and was slowly backing away from this scene. Suddenly, two firm hands closed around Minnie’s arms and Drew pulled her away from their son.

‘What the hell is going on!’ he yelled.

Joshua was staring ahead blankly, still rocking on the spot despite the fact that she was no longer shaking him. Jackson was crying in the corner. Minnie began to cry too, and she broke out of Drew’s grip and fell to the floor, crawling towards her youngest son. She wrapped her arms around his waist and looked up at him.

‘I’m sorry, baby, I’m so sorry.’ She stroked back his hair and kissed his forehead. ‘But you have *got* to tell me where you saw this scene, honey. Why did you draw this picture?’

His voice was little more than a whisper. 'The girl told me it's what she did to her parents.'

It felt like Minnie had been plunged into a freezing swimming pool and she couldn't catch her breath. Her legs began to shake underneath her. *It had found her.*

'What girl are you talking about, Joshua?'

'The girl who comes to my bedroom sometimes to talk to me at night. She tells me stories about what she's done, and what she's gonna do.' He reached down and picked up a stack of other pictures he had drawn. 'She told me not to tell you, that she'd get mad if I did.'

Minnie reached out a trembling hand and took the sheets of paper from her son. The first drawing showed a tall grey building dotted with windows and the figure of a man suspended in the night air halfway down from it, the sidewalk underneath him. *Gill*. The second was of a man laying in the middle of a green rug, an upturned table and a telephone scattered around him. Horrified, Minnie realised that this was meant to be her father. She took a deep breath and then flipped over to the next picture. A plump woman was sprawled out at the bottom of a wooden staircase, blood dripping down onto her face and her cane laying next to her on the floor. *Miss Jones*. Minnie wanted to stop looking, to tear up her son's pictures and take them out into the backyard and burn them. But she knew that she couldn't stop. She continued to flick through them; there were at least a dozen in total and she saw one that had to have been Mr. Wilson and then his wife, as well as Gill's wife's baby (Minnie quickly turned over this one). Finally she reached the last picture: a broad-shouldered man was hanging from a ceiling fan by a rope around his neck. There was an overturned chair on the floor underneath him, and Joshua had taken the time to colour his face purple. The man was wearing a short sleeved, white poplin shirt and his blond hair was brushed back out of his face.

Minnie felt the pictures slide out of her hand and fall to the floor. The walls and ceiling seemed to have grown and stretched out of proportion all around her as she got to her feet. Drew said something to her as she passed him but she couldn't understand what. She realised that she was sobbing. She felt along the side of the wall to steady herself as she made her way over to the telephone. Aaron had once stood in her house as she gave him instructions on how to serve pizza rolls. She had planned to invite him around again for dinner at the weekend, but now she was probably never going to see him again.

Minnie reached the telephone and picked up the receiver, then dialled Aaron's number. She realised that she had pressed an eight instead of a seven and so she dialled it again, this time without making a mistake. It began to ring but no one was picking up. Trying to remember to breathe, she decided to call Gary next. If something had happened to Aaron, surely he would know. Someone picked up on the third ring.

'Hullo?' It was Gary's voice.

Minnie was barely able to speak through her sobs. '*Have you seen Aaron?*' she managed.

'Minnie, honey, is that you? Are you Okay? Aaron? He's right here, honey.'

Feeling began to return to Minnie's legs. She took a sobering breath. 'He is?'

There was a *clink* on the other end of the line as Gary passed over the receiver. Minnie held her breath.

'Hello, Miss Carlisle? Are you Okay? It's Aaron.'

On hearing his voice, relief pulsed through Minnie's body as if she had just been hooked up to an IV drip.

'Aaron! Oh my God, I thought you were dead. I'm so glad you're Okay... But listen, *do not* go home tonight. You need to stay at Gary's house.'

'You thought I was dead? What are you talking about? What's going on, Miss Carlisle?'

There was no time to beat around the bush, even if he thought she was crazy. 'The Montrose Avenue place: there's something wrong with it, Aaron. Whatever was inside Jennifer Graham lived on in that house; it latched onto the cops who first investigated her parents' murders and now I think it's found me and you, too. It's already got Miss Jones, I'm sure of it, but I'm going to put an end to it tonight. You just have to promise me that you won't go home!'

'I really don't understand, Miss Carlisle—'

'You don't have to understand! I'll explain it all to you tomorrow. Just swear to me, Aaron, that you won't go back to your apartment tonight.'

'Okay, Okay! I swear on it.'

Before hanging up, Minnie gave him her sister's phone number: she was going to send the boys, Drew and her father there tonight because it was the only safe place she could think of (it had already found her father and her own home, clearly, was no longer safe). Drew was looking at her as if she was insane, but he didn't object as she told him what to do; he had heard what Joshua said and, even if he didn't fully understand it all, Minnie knew it had frightened him too. When they were all out on the front lawn, Minnie kissed both of the trembling twins as she bundled them into the backseat of Drew's truck then ran around to her own car.

'What the hell are you doing?' Drew grabbed her wrist. 'You're coming with us!'

'I'm ending this, Drew! This can't go on. I'm not letting it destroy our family, too!'

She yanked her arm from his grip and slid into the driver's seat of her car before he had time to try and stop her again. She managed to close the car door just seconds before he reached the handle. He was pounding on her window, screaming for her to stop, as she reversed out of the driveway.

As she got out onto the road she lowered her window and yelled over her shoulder to him, 'Just stay with the kids at Talia's, I'll meet you there soon! And don't forget to pick up Papa on the way!'

The night was pitch black as Minnie zig-zagged across town. At first she kept glancing into her rear view mirror to check that Drew wasn't following her, but she soon realised that she was being paranoid. There was no way that he would have been able to follow her every twist and turn. When she felt that she had put enough distance between them, she pulled into a deserted side street across from a gas station and got out. The plan was fully formulated in her head now. She knew what she had to do. The gas station was still all lit up, the artificial shine of its sign bathing the dark sidewalk out front in a washed out glow. Minnie pulled the handle of her purse up onto her shoulder, tussled her hair with one hand, then ran across the street. The doors slid open and she stepped inside. The kid behind the counter looked no older than seventeen, with red hair and freckles. He blushed when he saw her and hid the magazine he had been reading under the counter.

‘Oh sir!’ Minnie yelled, running up the deserted aisle towards him. ‘Sir, my truck gave in about three streets back — the engine’s all out — and I’m supposed to be up in the mountains already. I’m visiting my dad up there, you see, he had a heart attack just last month. *Please* tell me you have a jerry can I can borrow? I have cash, for the gas, I just need something to carry it in.’

He looked back at her, slightly startled, before speaking. ‘Oh, s-sure lady. Let me get you one.’

He disappeared behind the counter and Minnie heard clinks and bangs as he was searching. A few minutes later he reappeared, looking slightly dishevelled but with the red can in his right hand. He passed it to her and gave a nervous smile. She took it, thanked him, then went outside to fill it up. As she paid for the gas she also bought a box of matches.

‘I’m supposed to be quitting, but what ya gonna do?’ she smiled as she took the matches from him.

When she was back in her car, Minnie propped the jerry can up in the passenger seat, securing it with the seatbelt, then started the engine back up. From there, the journey seemed to be over in no time. Before she had time to fully prepare herself for seeing it again, she was pulling up outside of Number Six, Montrose Avenue.

As she sat in her car, Minnie pulled down the glove compartment and withdrew the Torah her father had given her after her mother’s death. While Drew knew that she kept it in there, she had never told him her reasoning for doing so. The truth, although she would never admit it to anyone else, was that Minnie liked to believe that it protected her while she was driving. Now, she stroked the cover before putting it back. Despite being a rational woman, Minnie knew that, in this moment, what she needed more than anything else was protection. She had survived, unscathed, the car wreck that had killed her mother when she was six years old. She only hoped that she would be so fortunate tonight.

Minnie could almost smell the stench of evil as she got out of the car and stepped onto the sidewalk, the box of matches in her pocket and the jerry can grasped tightly in her sweating palm. If it had been bad the last time she saw it, it was even worse now. The dark face of the house was fixed on her, its many windows like the black eyes of a spider. The front porch, she realised suddenly, was almost like an open mouth: the gap between its low roof and the foundation ready to engulf her, its newly-painted columns like fangs. As she pushed open the front gate (up which black vines were now starting to creep) with her free hand, Minnie knew that she was walking directly into its lair like a fly gliding into the web of a black widow, offering herself readily to it. Mr. Wilson’s warnings from that morning rang in her ears, even though it now felt like a lifetime ago that she had sat in front of him and listened to his story. She was doing this for the sake of her children, she kept telling herself. The cycle had to end tonight.

It had been just before ten p.m. when Minnie had checked the time in the gas station. Now, each of the houses on the cul-de-sac had their curtains drawn as far back as Minnie could see; she was sure that most of the residents of Montrose Avenue would now be in bed (it was a Monday night, after all) but she still needed to move quickly. She unscrewed the lid of the jerry can and poured a line of gasoline from the front gate, across the lawn and up the steps and onto the porch of Number Six. She hesitated as she stood outside the front door, but she knew that the longer she waited, the harder it would be to make herself go inside again.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door (it was unlocked, just as she had known it would be) and stepped inside, purposely splashing gasoline onto the threshold. It was as if Minnie had stepped into a walk-in cooler. Even under her jacket, she felt the flesh on her forearms rise up in pimples. Her breath escaped her mouth in silvery-white clouds. The cold was bitter. Minnie reached for the lightswitch beside her and all at once the house was bathed in that familiar red light again. And that was when she saw Miss Jones.

It was just like in Joshua's picture. She was sprawled out at the foot of the staircase in a pool of her own blood. Her walking cane was just a few feet from her. Minnie ran towards her and knelt down beside her body. She had known that she would find her dead, had felt it in her stomach ever since she had looked at Joshua's drawing; but there had been a part of Minnie that had longed for it not to be true, that Miss Jones could still be alive like Aaron was. It felt like someone had stuck the sharp hook of a fishing line into her gut and ripped her insides open. This was all her fault.

'I'm so sorry.'

Minnie collapsed forwards and slapped the ground with her open palms. Part of her wanted to stay there, lying in the middle of the floor like Miss Jones, so that she didn't have to see or feel anything else, but she knew that she had to stand up; for the sake of Drew and her father and Aaron, as well as Mr. Wilson, but most of all for Jackson and Joshua. She got back onto her feet, promising herself that she would drag Miss Jones' body out of the house before lighting the match, and picked up the jerry can again. Starting back up where she had left off at the threshold of the front door, she continued the line of gasoline down the middle of the house. She tried not to look at her surroundings as she worked; the walls were little more than an orange blur as she circled the house, dousing each corner in gasoline. She took particular care to drench the kitchen counters: if the house's evil had a heart, then it was surely this spot where Jennifer Graham had slaughtered her parents and arranged their bodies like they were ghastly versions of store mannequins. After a few minutes Minnie realised that she had to stop and save enough for the upstairs. She stepped over Miss Jones' body and then started up the stairs, pouring gasoline over the threadbare runner as she climbed. When she reached the upstairs hallway she gave the jerry can a shake — it was almost empty. She still needed to douse each of the upstairs rooms, yet Minnie knew that every minute longer she spent inside the house was risky; it would not stay dormant for much longer, not when it could sense her inside its walls...

As she was debating what to do next, Minnie saw something moving out of the corner of her eye down by the foot of the staircase. She froze and fear began to flood through her body. She reached out a trembling hand and grabbed the rail to support herself, before forcing herself to look down. Her mouth fell open but the scream was caught in her throat. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. Miss Jones was sitting up, but her movements were unlike the way Minnie had ever seen a human body move before. It was as if she was being operated by strings like a marionette: her back did not curve as it was lifted off the ground, her arms flopping by her side and her head lolling forwards, until she was in a sitting position. And then, suddenly, her movements changed, no longer wooden and clumsy but quick and erratic. Miss Jones, now resting on the soles of her hands and feet, threw her body back and pushed her stomach up into the air as if she was about to do a headstand. Her body seemed to stretch outwards as it bent into a curved shape, the joints of her elbows turning

unnaturally in on themselves. And then she dropped her head back and her eyes flew open. This time, Minnie did scream. Even upside down she was able to recognise that face; it was the same one she had seen in her dream the night after her first visit to the house. As Minnie looked on at it, unable to even blink, it was as if she was staring into the eyes of death itself.

The figure — for it was no longer Miss Jones, if it ever truly had been — started to move again. It took its hands off the ground and bent its body upwards until it was standing. While it was moving it had transformed itself right in front of Minnie's eyes. Gone was the round body and short, curly hair of Miss Jones, and in its place stood the skinny frame of a teenage girl with long dark hair, although its wicked face remained the same. Understanding flooded through Minnie. Jennifer Graham had returned to her old house, and Miss Jones had simply been the disguise she had used to help her acquire it. It had all been a trap and Minnie had fallen for the bait. She was rooted to the spot.

Jennifer Graham cocked her head to one side and continued to stare at Minnie. 'I was waiting for you to come back.'

Then she fell forwards and began to crawl across the floor on her hands and feet, slowly, and like a spider with only four legs. Once she reached the staircase, though, she sped up. Minnie watched on in horror as Jennifer scuttled up the stairs towards her, as if she were watching a VHS tape stuck on fast-forwards. This wasn't a movie, though, Minnie realised, managing to break her brief spell of paralysis. She leaned forwards and poured the last of the gasoline over Jennifer's face as she was descending down upon Minnie. Jennifer stopped and took a step backwards. Taking advantage of the fact that she was distracted, Minnie aimed the empty jerry can at her. It hit the side of Jennifer's head and she began to tilt on the spot. Minnie started to back away from her down the hallway and towards the door closest to her. Within a few minutes, though, Jennifer had regained her composure and was gaining on her again. Minnie's hand was on the doorknob as Jennifer stopped and surveyed her.

'I have been watching you, Miryam Carlisle, and waiting. You may have escaped my grip so far, but this time I have you.'

Suddenly she dropped to the ground and began scurrying towards her again, but Minnie was quicker. She pulled open the door and hurried into the empty bathroom, slamming the door in Jennifer's face. She slid the latch across with her shaking fingers and then threw her head back against the doorframe, panting. Minnie heard Jennifer pacing the floor on the other side of the door, and occasionally she would rattle the door knob. She was safe for now, but the door wouldn't hold for long. In her head, Minnie tried to make a plan for what to do next. There was no way that she was going to let her boys grow up without their mother like she and her sister had done. She had to end this. If she lit the match and threw it at Jennifer's face as soon as she opened the door, she might have enough time to make it downstairs before Jennifer caught her. The rational part of her brain, however, told her that this was suicide. Outside the door, Jennifer's rattling of the door knob was becoming more frequent. She had to move fast. Minnie crossed the room and yanked open the window then looked out. The roof of the front porch was directly below the bathroom window! She would be able to jump down onto it, and then the front lawn was only a few feet below that. It would be a tight squeeze getting out of the window, but she was sure that she could make it. This settled it for Minnie. She took a deep breath and pulled the box of matches out of her pocket. She struck two to be on the safe side, then unlatched the door. The twisted face of

Jennifer Graham appeared in front of Minnie's, their noses almost touching. Minnie jumped backwards and aimed the flames at her. The fire began to spread over Jennifer's face and hair and she started to scream. The sounds were not human. Minnie was almost at the window now. Jennifer was gaining on her, but slowly.

'Leave my son alone!' Minnie screamed, then scrambled out of the window and onto the roof of the porch.

The cold night air whipped her face and she steadied herself on the uneven shingles. Looking out at the street, she saw two headlights getting closer, just beyond the front yard. The dark truck hit the fence of Number Six with a smack and Drew jumped out of the driver's seat. Warm relief pulsated through Minnie at the sight of him. She called his name and he darted up the front lawn, spotting her on the porch roof. She threw the box of matches down to him and told him to light up the gasoline trial by the front gate. Before she jumped down, Minnie risked a last look back over her shoulder. Her mother stared back at her from the open window, blood running down both sides of her face. She held out her hand towards Minnie.

'Help me, Miryam.'

Minnie stared into her mother's familiar brown eyes and felt like she was drowning in them. She remembered how soft her mother's hands had always felt. Beneath her, the flames were spreading across the yard and up the steps of the front porch, and Drew was shouting for her to take his hand and climb down. Minnie reached out her hand.

The Legend of Robert Jacobson

As soon as Madison West heard the police sirens outside she knew she had made a mistake by coming. She untangled Trayven Thornton's arm from around her shoulders then jumped up from the sofa and dashed over to the window. Behind her, the twenty or so other bodies crowded into Alana Sanchez's parents' small living room did the same. Someone had turned off the music.

'We're cool, they're just going across the street!'

'Keep quiet, dumbass!'

Madison ignored the voices behind her and leaned closer to the window pane until her nose was touching the damp glass. The windows were smeared with rain so that the lights on the police cruisers looked like they were surrounded by glowing halos. And then the ambulance pulled up. Unaware of the faces now peering out from every house on the block to watch what they were doing, two EMTs climbed out of the back and proceeded up the dark front lawn of number one-two-six carrying a stretcher. When they came back out five minutes later it was covered with a lumpy white sheet.

'Oh shit...' Tray said in Madison's ear.

The ambulance had gone but the police cruisers were still parked across the street when Madison and Tray eventually left Alana's party. A cop stood on the doorstep of one-two-six (its front door now covered in yellow *CRIME SCENE* tape) consoling a sobbing middle-aged woman. Madison felt her insides squirm and wished she had only had one cup of punch. Tray still had a red cup filled with it tucked in his hand as they trudged along the wet sidewalk, and he leaned over to whisper to Madison between sips.

'I heard Alana say it was a kid who went to our school, a freshman, who lived there with his mom. Only started this fall. Man, just think about it: we were right across the street from a murder going on! Maybe the killer's still out here, looking for some other teens to slash up...' He flicked his cup into an open trash can as they passed.

Madison looked back at the house. They were out of earshot of the cop and the grieving woman now. 'Tray, no one knows what *really* happened, or who was under that sheet, not even Alana. It could have been an accident for all we know.'

Despite her attempts to rationalise the situation, Madison still found herself looking back over her shoulder. She had hated Halloween from being a kid; this was, she suspected, at least partially due to growing up with a deeply religious mother who frequently warned her of its 'satanic nature'. But Tray had convinced her to go along to Alana's party with him, and now they were out, alone, in the dark and next to a crime scene on Halloween night. She wiped the fake blood from her lips (she had come as a vampire, but now it just seemed wrong) and crossed her arms above her chest to try and warm up, wishing that she had bought a cape to wear over her thin countess dress. Tray saw her shivering and put his arm around her, pulling her closer to him as they walked. He didn't have a coat either, and he had pushed his plastic alien mask up to rest on top of his head.

'Well, even if there *is* a killer, he's gotta get through me first. And nothing's gonna stop me from getting you home safely.' Tray drew his free hand into a fist and punched the air like a boxer, making her giggle.

As they reached Madison's apartment block, she stopped under a streetlamp and reached up on her toes to kiss him goodnight.

'Thank you for walking me home. I'll see you at school tomorrow.' She smiled at him and made to start crossing the street, before realising that he was still holding onto her hand.

'But I've got to walk you to your front door!'

'Not when my mom's home, you don't.'

Madison laughed and pulled her hand from his, then ran across the street. He was still standing under the streetlight watching her so she threw him a wave before stepping inside. She took the dark stairwell up to their apartment two steps at a time, then stepped over the lit pumpkin on their welcome mat. The apartment was in complete darkness except for the glow of the TV set. Madison's seven-year-old sister was kneeling in front of it, covering her eyes as the screen showed a horde of zombies tearing into a pair of cheerleaders. Madison switched off the TV and reached for the lightswitch on the wall.

'Sierra, you know you're not supposed to watch those kinds of movies! Where's Mom?'

Sierra jumped up and ran towards Madison, throwing her arms around her waist. She was wearing her pyjamas and still had on her witch's hat and the wart Madison had drawn on her nose with eyeliner.

'Maddie! Mom promised me she'd watch *Casper* with me when we got back from trick-or-treating but then she fell asleep, and I don't know how to work the VHS. Did you bring candy? Miss McWarren was the only person who opened her door on the whole block and she only ever gives out—'

'Chocolate covered raisins,' Madison smiled. 'I remember. Well, lucky for you I got you this earlier.'

She reached up and pulled down the candy bar she had hidden on top of the refrigerator.

'Oh wow, a *Reese's*!' Sierra tore open the wrapper and took a bite. 'Thank you, Maddie!'

Madison looked out of the window and down onto the street but Tray was already gone.

'You're welcome, Si-Si, but don't eat it all tonight, Okay? I'll get you a glass of milk and we can watch *one Casper* before bed.'

Sierra was asleep before the first episode had ended. Madison carried her into their shared bedroom and, before turning in for the night herself, made sure that the apartment door was double locked. She glanced over to the window again. She hoped that Tray had made it home safely.

Madison's mother had the news on while she was ironing her waitress uniform the next morning. Madison stared at the screen as she put two slices of bread into the toaster. A news reporter was standing outside of a house she recognised from last night as one-two-six, a sober expression on his face.

'...Thomas was a freshman at the local North Walton High School...'

Her mother shook her head. 'Lord, what's the world coming to? Baby's killing themselves now...'

Madison stared at her. 'He killed himself?'

'That's what he just said,' she nodded towards the television. 'Did you ever see him 'round school?'

A photograph of a teenage boy with a round, freckled face sticking out of a mop of red hair flashed on the screen.

'I don't think so,' Madison answered truthfully, but the photograph stuck in her mind all day.

At school, everyone who had been in attendance at Alana Sanchez's Halloween party the night before were being treated like celebrities. Alana herself was telling anyone who would listen (including Mrs. Allbright in math class) that she had known it was Ryan Thomas under the sheet from the moment she had seen the EMTs wheeling the stretcher out of the house, *and* that he had been in her backyard only two days ago playing basketball with her brother. He had seemed quiet but not *hanging himself* quiet, according to her. Madison took her usual seat at the back of the class and listened but didn't join in. They were talking about Ryan Thomas as if he were a movie they had all seen instead of a real person who was now dead. After class she found Tray waiting for her at their favourite table in the cafeteria. At almost eighteen, he was a senior (Madison had turned sixteen just that year and was a junior). She knew that her mother would kill her if she found out about them dating, so they only got to see each other at lunchtime and (rarely) after school. She slid in next to him and he kissed her.

'You Okay, Mads? After last night?' He brushed a dark strand of her curly hair out of her face.

She hesitated and picked at her fish sticks with her fork. 'I guess so. You?'

He nodded. 'Yeah... Hey, what's going on?'

Madison looked around the cafeteria that had suddenly fallen eerily silent. All around them, other people were doing the same thing. Those on the tables closest to the doors were craning forwards to look out into the hallway. And then the screaming started, followed by the sound of a hundred benches scraping against the polished floor. As they joined what felt like the whole school shuffling out of the cafeteria and into the adjoining hallway, Tray grabbed Madison's hand so that they weren't separated in the crowd. Sandwiched between lockers on one side and a dozen other bodies on the other, Madison couldn't see anything but the backs of people's heads. Tray, though, towered above almost every other student in the school. He told her that the principal and some of the other teachers were circling around the girl's bathroom at the bottom of the corridor, and that there was a girl throwing up against the wall.

'OUTSIDE! MOVE OUTSIDE, PEOPLE! NOW!'

Principle Pearman's voice came booming from up ahead. Madison held onto Tray's arm tightly as they were carried away in the swell of people up the steps and towards the front doors leading outside. A whisper was making its way down from the front of the crowd, and it reached Madison and Tray as they were passing through the open double doors.

'A freshman slit her wrists. Lauren Blain found her in the end cubicle, dead!'

Tray looked down at Madison, his eyes wide. 'Seriously? Another one?'

Madison felt as if she was suffocating in the sea of bodies. She elbowed her way forwards until she had broken free of the crowd. She had lost grip of Tray's hand but he soon found her again, catching her breath under the leaning elm tree by the front of the school.

'Mads,' he put his hand on her back. 'Are you Okay?'

They were let out of school early, although no one was *actually* going home; the whole school was packed onto the front lawn, watching the ambulance and the police cruisers pull up. Madison, however, had no desire to see a rerun of last night, so she kissed Tray goodbye and set off for her apartment. The first of November had brought with it a bitter cold. She pulled up the zipper on her coat and tucked her hands into her pockets, passing countless pumpkins left out on doorsteps, carved faces already wilting. Nothing about what had happened made sense. What were the chances of two freshmen at the same school killing themselves only a day apart? Not to mention the fact that both suicides were *actually* successful. The odds were astronomical, Madison told herself; they *had* to be connected somehow. Not wanting to think about it anymore, she started to count the pumpkins she passed. She had only reached number five when she saw that someone was watching her. She stopped.

The guy was standing on the other side of the street, and was dressed in a sweater vest over a white button up and cream slacks. He was not much older than a senior, she estimated, perhaps college-aged, and the sharp eyes behind his round eyeglasses seemed to cut into her. His face was so pale that it almost looked as if it were glowing underneath his thick, dark hair.

'I'm looking for South Lloyd Avenue.'

Although she had seen his lips move, it was almost as if she had heard his voice inside of her own head.

'Oh, well, if you turn back around and take a left and then another one you'll find it. There's this big old church on the corner, so you can't miss it.' Madison knew the street because Tray lived only a block from it.

He nodded, then turned around and started walking in the direction she had just pointed him in. When Madison reached the end of the street she looked behind her before turning the corner, but he had already gone. She almost walked right into her mother backing out of the corner store, a paper bag stuffed with groceries tucked under each arm. Madison took the bulkiest looking one from her.

'Why aren't you in school?' her mother snapped, surveying her suspiciously.

'Something happened, Mom.' Madison hesitated, unsure if she should tell her the truth, but then she realised that her mother would find out soon enough, whether from the news or someone at the restaurant where she worked. 'A girl killed herself at school.'

Her mother put her hand to her chest. 'Lord. Another one? I need a smoke...'

She reached into the grocery bag she was carrying and fished out a box of *Marlboro*, stuffing one into her lips. Madison helped her mother light the cigarette with her free hand, and watched her take a long puff from it. They crossed the street together.

'It's these movies about zombies and demons sending the kids crazy, I'm telling you! Two babies dead the day after Halloween, and you think it's a coincidence? *Get outta here.*' Her mother waved her hand holding the lit cigarette dismissively, dropping tobacco ash into the bag of groceries as she did so. 'It's satanic.'

They had reached the door of their apartment block. Her mother handed Madison the other bag of groceries then sprayed herself liberally with a bottle of perfume from her purse.

‘Mr. Lawler hits the roof when I come back to the diner smelling of smokes. I’ll be back home about six. Make a start on the patties for dinner, and *don’t* mention anything to Si-Si about why you finished school early. Lord knows her little mind don’t need filling up with all that.’

Madison watched as her mother started to cross the street before jumping back onto the sidewalk as a police cruiser came speeding around the corner; her cursing was drowned out only by the sound of its siren. Her mother drew the sign of the cross over her chest and then set off again.

Inside their apartment Madison put away the groceries and, since her lunch at school had been interrupted, prepared herself some grilled cheese. Whenever her mother made it for them it came out perfectly, with the cheese bubbling and the edges of the toast a golden-brown colour. Madison, however, had managed to burn hers. Still, she thought, it tasted just fine smothered in ketchup. As she was washing up her plate the telephone began to ring.

‘Hello.’

‘Is this *Pablo’s Pizza Place*?’ It was Tray’s voice on the other end of the line.

Madison smiled. Whenever he called her, he acted as if he had got the wrong number in case her mother was home.

‘My mom’s at work, Tray. We can talk.’

‘Oh my God, Mads, listen! I just got home and there are cop cars and an ambulance parked just around the block; y’know, on South Lloyd Avenue?’

She froze. ‘Did you just say on South Lloyd Avenue?’

‘Yeah! People are saying they heard a gunshot. Do you think there’s been another one, a suicide?’

Madison twirled her finger around the telephone cord until it was so tight that it felt like it was going to stop the blood supply. She saw that guy with the dark hair and glasses in her mind again, asking for directions to South Lloyd Avenue.

‘Madison?’

‘I dunno, Tray. This is all really weird now and I just want it to stop. My mom’s not back until six so call me if you hear anything else. But I’ve gotta go now because Sierra will be home soon.’

They gave each other their usual air kiss into the receiver and then Madison hung up. Any thoughts about the mysterious lost guy or the suicides were pushed from her mind for the remainder of the afternoon, though. When she got home from school, Sierra managed to talk Madison into building her a house for her *Barbie* dolls out of an old cardboard box. She had been asking her to do it for weeks, ever since she didn’t receive the expensive plastic *Dream Home* she’d wanted for her birthday and now, with no homework, Madison couldn’t find an excuse not to. She covered the inside of the box in pink wrapping paper leftover from Sierra’s birthday, and then cut a small rectangle into it for a window. Turning the box onto its side, she started to fill it with makeshift furniture: an empty *Kleenex* box for a bed (complete with a new dishrag sheet); an overturned plastic cup for a dining table; and the lids from her own hairspray and mousse as chairs. Then she cut out a picture of a fireplace and a TV set

from an old catalogue and stuck them to the walls. Sierra squealed when she saw it completed.

‘Oh, thank you Maddie!’ She threw her arms around her sister’s waist and grinned up at her. ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you! You’re the best sister ever.’

Madison smiled but felt a pang of guilt in her chest; it had taken her less than an hour to make and now, seeing how happy it made Sierra, she felt bad for putting it off for so long. The empty cardboard box had been sitting in their closet for almost a month.

‘You’re welcome, Si-Si, and I know the perfect finishing touch.’

Maddison crossed the floor and pushed open the door to their bedroom. A few years back, her mother had bought her a jewellery box shaped like a miniature chaise lounge for her thirteenth birthday. She kept it on the end table by her bed, and sometimes she would find its lid put back on lopsided after (she suspected) Sierra had been playing with it with her dolls. Now, she emptied out her necklaces into a drawer and placed the tiny chaise lounge in the corner of the dollhouse. It was the perfect size. Sierra squealed again.

Madison knelt on the floor next to her sister. ‘Which *Barbie* do you want me to play with, Si-Si?’

Sierra was ecstatic not just with her dollhouse, but with the fact that she had someone to play with, too. After about a half hour of playing, though, she fell silent and put down her doll. Madison looked across at her sister, who was now staring off into space.

‘What’s up, Si-Si? You know Mom really wanted to get you the *Dream Home* you asked for on your birthday, but she just couldn’t afford it. The diner doesn’t pay well, and—’

‘It’s not that, I *love* this house,’ Sierra tapped the roof of the cardboard dollhouse. ‘Maddie, what does “sewer-side” mean?’

Madison blinked. ‘Where did you hear that word, Si-si?’

‘At school.’ She looked up at her. ‘Corey Michaelson said a big kid committed sewer-side last night on Halloween.’

Maddison leaned sideways and put her arm around Sierra, pulling her closer to her.

‘Si-Si, suicide is another word for dying but...’ She chose her next words carefully, ‘But it means when dying isn’t because of an accident or when someone’s sick, like when Grandma died from cancer. It’s different to that. Only, it’s not a nice word for kids to say. Don’t say it in front of Mom, Okay?’

‘Oh, so it’s a bad word? Like,’ Sierra leaned over to whisper in her ear, ‘*ass*?’

Her warm breath tickled the inside of her ear and Madison began to snicker.

‘Yes, Si-Si, like *ass*. Or even *shit*.’

Sierra started to giggle at that and soon they were both sprawled out on the rug, caught in a fit of contagious and uncontrollable laughter.

The front page of the *Hinsdale Tribune* the next morning showed the black and white photographs of three teenagers under the headline:

TEEN SUICIDE SPATE SPARKS HORROR, MOURNING IN COMMUNITY

Madison recognised the first as Ryan Thomas as it was the same picture they had shown on the news; the second was a young-looking girl with black hair called Jasmine Chen; and the

third was a smiling boy wearing a baseball cap named Aubrey Scott. At just fourteen years old, they had all been freshmen.

Madison folded the newspaper in half so that she didn't have to stare at their faces any longer than paid for it and the box of eggs her mother had forgotten yesterday. As she stepped out of the corner store and onto the sidewalk, she pulled the hood of her coat up over her head. It was starting to snow. They were just tiny little flakes right now, but it was the sort that worked together to wet you through by the time you had reached the end of the sidewalk. The school receptionist had called their apartment first thing that morning to say that school was out for the rest of the week after what had happened. Their mother had told Sierra it was because of a gas leak. Despite Sierra's prayers that her school, too, would be closed (when she had seen the snow coming down outside her window, she had thought that God had heard her pleas), Hinsdale Elementary remained, unfortunately for her, open. The school bus was pulling away from the sidewalk as Madison reached their apartment. She waved to Sierra — who seemed to have cheered up, showing the girl sitting next to her what outfit her *Barbie* was wearing today — through the window and then headed inside. Her mother left for work five minutes later.

With the apartment to herself, Madison spread the newspaper out on the dining table. In a clean notebook she had taken from her backpack, she wrote the names of the three teenagers (she had almost written *VICTIMS* but had stopped herself) and all of the details about their deaths that she either knew or was able to glean from the newspaper. Ryan Thomas had been the first to die and so, if the suicides *were* connected, as she suspected, his death had set off the chain of events that had followed. He had hanged himself in his own bedroom on the night of Halloween. Alana had said that his own mother had found him and, although she had called the ambulance right away, she had known he was already dead. It had been around ten p.m. when they had seen the ambulance pull up from Alana's living room window. The next to die was Jasmine Chen, not even a full day later. Lauren Blain had found her in the end cubicle at school with her wrists slit about ten minutes into lunch break, and she too was already dead. It had only been around an hour later that Aubrey Scott's brother had heard the gunshot and found him dead in their backyard, the gun still tucked in Aubrey's hand. In less than twenty-four hours three teenagers from the same school, *and* in the same year, had killed themselves, yet very little about their suicides was the same: not the method by which they had taken their own lives, nor where they had chosen to do it. If it had been some sort of pact, surely they would have all done it in the same place and at the same time, she thought.

Madison suddenly remembered about the weird guy asking about South Lloyd Avenue. It could only have been about ten minutes before Aubrey Scott had killed himself, going off the time in the newspaper and what Tray had told her, that she had seen him. She also knew from Tray that Aubrey lived on South Lloyd Avenue. Would those ten minutes have been enough time for him to have reached Aubrey Scott's house and shoot him, only to make it look like a suicide? What if he was some kind of serial killer and Madison had given him the directions to his next victim, she thought to herself. She had not heard a single mention of a suicide note in any of the news articles or rumours from school, either. But the gun in Aubrey's hand had been his own father's, Tray had told her that, so it *had* to have been a suicide. Something wasn't adding up, but the more Madison thought about it the more

she felt her head start to throb. Three suicides of teenagers barely two years younger than herself were tragedies enough without having to attach other meanings and motives to them. It was just a coincidence that she had happened to see that guy asking for directions, nothing else, she tried to convince herself. And even if they were connected somehow, if both of the guys had been in love with the girl in some love triangle like a twisted *Romeo and Juliet*, then the cops or their parents would figure it out. They didn't need the help of a sixteen-year-old Nancy Drew-wannabe with too much time on her hands.

Madison closed her notebook and stuffed the newspaper into the trash can.

By Friday, the sidewalks were fully covered with a thick layer of snow so that the city resembled a cake coated in frosting as Madison looked out on it from the apartment window. The weather guy claimed that it was at least five inches deep but Madison's mother said it was more like seven; she had trudged to work through it only to be told by Mr. Lawler that he wasn't even opening up the restaurant. Sierra's school, too — much to her delight — was also closed. Madison took her outside to build a snowman together on the sidewalk and then they had a snowball fight. When it felt like they could no longer feel their noses and ears from the cold, they had gone back up to the apartment and their mother had made them both a hot chocolate topped with whipped cream.

After playing with her new dollhouse for a while, Sierra convinced Madison to help her practice for the play her school was putting on. It was their take on *Humpty Dumpty*, and Sierra had the role of a member of the jury whose job it was to decide if Humpty had indeed fallen from the wall. Now, she was standing in the middle of the apartment, pretending the little rug in front of the sofa was her stage.

'What if I forget my lines, Maddie?'

Madison had to stop herself from laughing.

'Well, according to this, Si-Si, you only have one line.' She tapped the play script, which Sierra's teacher had highlighted her part in. 'I think you'll be able to remember it.'

Sierra pulled the script from Madison's hand and flicked through it. 'Okay, but you have to help me learn it, Maddie!'

Madison nodded. Sierra cleared her throat dramatically, and then looked down at the script.

'Did Humpty Dumpty fall, or was he pushed?' she bellowed, raising her hands out by her sides.

'You're gonna be the best Jury Member Number Four ever,' Madison smiled.

Her smile began to grow thin as she watched Sierra go through her line again and again *and again*, however, each time trying out new hand gestures or a different tone of voice. By the time evening had started to set in, Sierra had also grown tired of practising.

'I'm *boooored*,' she yelled from the sofa. 'I'm just *soooo boooooored*.'

'Watch *Casper*, then,' Madison called from behind the stove; she was helping her mother prepare the macaroni and cheese for dinner.

'I've watched it a hundred times, and it's not even Halloween anymore!' Sierra was now sitting upside-down on the sofa, her hair dangling on the floor.

Every Friday after dinner, Madison took Sierra to the video store down the block to rent a new VHS as Tray worked there on Friday nights. Madison, however, wasn't sure if it

would be opened tonight so she called to ask; she had memorised the number long ago from calling under the pretence to ask if they had particular movies in stock, although this was really just an excuse to speak to Tray while he was working.

‘Hello and you’re through to *Video Planet*. Our movies are out of this world! Trayven speaking. How may I be of assistance to you this evening?’

Madison smiled to herself, turning so that her back was to her mother who was now setting the table. Whenever he picked up the phone at work, he always sounded as if he was reading from a script and with about as much enthusiasm as a bus driver asking which stop you needed to go to.

‘Oh, hi Trayven. I was just checking if your store was open this evening?’ In a whisper she added, ‘It’s me.’

‘Mads! I didn’t know if you were still gonna come tonight. Yes, we’re open and it’s dead in here, so *please* come and talk to me. I can’t spend much longer alphabetizing these same movies.’

‘Thank you very much, Trayven.’

She hung up and joined her mother and Sierra at the dining table, then started to load her plate with macaroni and cheese and collard greens.

‘Maddie likes Trayven from the video store, Mom.’ Sierra looked across at her mother as she tore a slice of bread in half. ‘He’s a senior.’

Madison tried to kick her under the table, but Sierra was quicker: she pulled her legs up under her so that Madison’s foot collided with the solid wood of her chair leg.

Outside, the edges of the sidewalk were already starting to ice over. Sierra skipped off in front, her scarf billowing behind her, while Madison shuffled through the deepest line of snow so that she didn’t slip, her own breath visible in front of her in the freezing night air. They were both relieved when they reached the sliding doors of *Video Planet* and stepped into the warm store. Sierra ran straight over to the kid’s section while Madison made her way towards the back of the store. Tray leaned over the counter and kissed her.

‘You weren’t lying about it being dead.’ Madison pulled off her gloves and began rubbing her hands together.

‘Do you know who that is?’

Tray nodded towards the corner of the store and she turned around to look. There was a guy, not much older than Tray, staring at one of the shelves of movies. Madison hadn’t even noticed him standing there when they had come in.

She shrugged. ‘No. Should I?’

‘It’s Aubrey Scott’s brother.’ Tray’s voice was little more than a whisper. ‘He was the one who, y’know, found him...’

A wave of pity came over her. ‘Oh, wow... Did he say anything to you when he came in?’

He shook his head. ‘He just put his head down when I tried to say I was sorry for what happened to Aubrey, so I just left him be.’

Madison wanted to go over and talk to him but she knew that she shouldn’t. What would she even say to him if she did? *Did you notice anyone suspicious hanging around the day you found your little brother’s dead body?* She had told herself she needed to let it go,

but it kept coming back to her like a nagging thought or something she needed to remember: the image of the ghostly pale guy watching her from the other side of the street. Three kids were dead now; what if there was about to be a fourth? The doors of *Video Planet* slid open and Aubrey's brother stepped outside. The decision had been made for her. Madison told Tray to watch Sierra then raced across the store and out onto the street. He was just up ahead.

'Hey!' she called, realising that she didn't even know his name. 'Excuse me!'

He turned around to face her. In the dim glow of the *Video Planet* sign his face looked hollow.

'I know you don't know me but I went to school with Aubrey.' She left out the part about never having spoken two words to him before, as well as not even knowing his name until his picture had appeared on the front page of the newspaper. 'I'm really sorry for your loss.'

He turned away again but she ran after him, or, rather, she skidded on a patch of ice until she was standing directly behind him.

'Wait, wait! I'm sorry but please don't walk away from me again.'

'What do you want from me?' He turned around to face her again, his shoulders slumped forwards. 'My brother is dead.'

'I know, and I'm so sorry, but I wanted to ask you about that. About what happened when Aubrey died, and if you thought it was connected, y'know, to the other two kids.'

He looked at her.

'You know, don't you?'

Madison blinked. 'I know what?'

He licked the corner of his mouth, frustration playing behind his brown eyes.

'Look, all I know is that Aubrey and his friends were playing around under Jacobson Bridge on Halloween night and then twenty four hours later they're dead, all three of them. I also know that my brother wouldn't even have known where to start with pulling the trigger on a gun.'

He turned away again and marched off in the snow. This time, she didn't even attempt to chase after him.

Madison spent most of her weekend trying to find out where — and what — Jacobson Bridge was. Neither her mother nor Tray knew (although she didn't tell them why she was asking after it), and when she bought a city map from the corner store, she was unable to find a bridge or even a street name called Jacobson. She wondered if she had heard him wrong and he had said something else entirely, perhaps Jacobson Ridge or even Jacob Stone Bridge. Either way, she found nothing. Her investigation was interrupted by school being back in session on Monday morning. The roads had all been cleared and no further snow had fallen since the early hours of Friday morning. Several of the sidewalks, however, were still littered with brown snow and ice. Cautiously avoiding any slippery patches, Madison was almost ten minutes late by the time she reached school but Mrs. Meadows didn't seem to mind much; she told Madison that homeroom, like the entire school, was practically empty as it was Ryan Thomas' funeral that afternoon. Madison wasn't aware that it was the funeral today, but even if she had known, she would not have attended. She felt that his family should be allowed to grieve privately without the entire school (most of whom had never even met Ryan) gawking

at them from the chapel lawn. When she reached English class, there were only three other students in attendance: the two Collins brothers; and Alana Sanchez, whom Madison was surprised to see was not at the funeral.

She turned to look at Madison as she entered the classroom. ‘My mom told me I *had* to come to school, even though I *should* be at Ryan’s funeral — he was practically my brother’s best friend.’

Madison gave her a nod that she hoped came off sympathetic as she unzipped her backpack.

After about fifteen minutes of trying to get them to engage with his original lesson plan (they were currently looking at the rabid dog as a symbol for the town’s racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*), Mr. Spencer gave up. English was usually Madison’s favourite class, and Mr. Spencer was certainly the teacher she liked best at school, but she, like the others, didn’t feel much like learning today — her mind was still occupied with what Aubrey Scott’s brother had said (or, rather, what he had *not* said).

Mr. Spencer perched on the edge of his desk and folded his arms. ‘I know things have been really, really tough lately. We lost Ryan, Jasmine and Aubrey just last week. And if any of you need to speak to someone, remember that Miss Fontana, the school counsellor, is always—’

Alana raised her hand.

‘Alana?’ He gave her a kind smile.

‘Mr. Spencer, I went to the library before class this morning.’

He smiled again, perhaps thinking that she was about to bring the topic back to literature. ‘I’m glad to hear that, Alana! The library provides a wealth of knowledge and enjoyment—’

‘Not for school. I was looking for stuff about suicide, y’know, facts and statistics, because of something my dad said. And the librarian helped me find those *Social Studies* journals; y’know, the ones Mr. Lincoln is always trying to get us to read.’

She looked around at Madison and Madison nodded.

‘Well, there was an article about suicide prevention, and I wrote this part down.’

Alana opened up her notebook and pointed to a line of her own scrawling hand-writing. “‘Most statistics show that for every *successful* suicide, there are around twenty-five *attempted* suicides.’” So it doesn’t make sense that Ryan, Jasmine and Aubrey were *all* successful, does it?’

She looked up at Mr. Spencer and he blinked, shifting uncomfortably on the edge of his desk.

‘Statistics aren’t rules, Alana. Nothing is exact. I understand that this situation is *really* hard for all of you, and for us staff, too, but we have to accept that what happened to Ryan, Jasmine and Aubrey were terrible, terrible tragedies. And we just have to make sure that nothing like that ever happens at this school again.’

Madison raised her hand before she had time to talk herself out of it.

‘Mr. Spencer, do you know anything about Jacobson Bridge?’

‘It’s just a story, Madison, but right now we’re focused on a different story called *To Kill a Mockingbird*. So if you could take out your books—’

‘Mr. Spencer!’ It was Alana who spoke up, sounding scandalised.

Mr. Spencer was the youngest teacher in the school and had the reputation of being a pushover, so none of them were used to him trying to act authoritative.

He closed his eyes in exasperation. ‘Okay, but *do not* mention this conversation to Principal Pearman, or anyone else. I’m not supposed to talk about this stuff with you. But a couple years ago, a guy called Ro— actually, I’m not telling you his first name. A guy with the last name Jacobson, a college student, fell — er, well he *jumped* from a bridge somewhere downtown — no, I’m not telling you where that bridge is, Alana — and after that, a rumour was started that if you say his name under the bridge at the exact date and time that he jumped then he’ll come and... get you. That’s why it received the name “Jacobson Bridge” from locals who knew about the story. But that’s just what it is: a story. An urban legend like that dog suit man who hunts for little kids in department stores, or that house that burnt down entirely except for the exact spot where a murder once took place. There was a whole show on TV last week about different urban legends across the country. I’m guessing that’s where you heard about Jacobson Bridge, right, Madison?’

‘Mm-hmm,’ she lied.

The lunch ladies were giving out triple helpings in the cafeteria to try and use up all of the food they had prepared but one scoop of hot dog casserole was enough for Madison, thank you very much. She took her food over to an empty table (almost all of the tables in the cafeteria were empty today) and slid in. Tray was nowhere in sight, so she suspected that he had gone to the funeral — she didn’t recall him mentioning it over the weekend, but she *had* been preoccupied with other things. When she had eaten as much of her lunch as she could stomach, she cleared her plate into the trash can then stepped out of the cafeteria. There was a photograph each of Ryan, Jasmine and Aubrey set up on a table under a banner saying ‘In Loving Memory’ along with their names out in the hallway. Madison stared at it for a moment and then continued down the corridor. It was deserted. The girl’s bathroom at the end of the hallway, where Jasmine killed herself, had been blocked off by the school janitor — his idea of blocking it off involved parking a cleaning cart in front of the door and attaching an *OUT OF ORDER* sign to it. Without hesitating or looking around to see if anyone was watching her, Madison stepped around the cart and pushed open the door.

She held her breath, expecting the room to feel cold or somehow different to the last time she had been inside, but she felt nothing. It was exactly the same as always, from the mirror with the crack in it to the faucet that constantly dripped no matter how tightly you turned it off. Still, she went on. Lauren Blain had discovered Jasmine in the end cubicle so if there was anything to be found, it would be in there. She pushed open the cubicle door which had swung shut, and was relieved to see that all of the blood had been scrubbed away. It now looked like a perfectly ordinary cubicle. Whatever she had hoped or expected to find inside, it was not there. It was only when Madison turned back around, intending to sneak back out of the bathroom, that she saw it: a small carving in the centre of the cubicle’s door. She leaned forwards to get a better look. It seemed to be a letter ‘F’ followed by a half-formed ‘A’ — it was missing the horizontal line between the two diagonal ones. Madison managed to exit the bathroom without being noticed. She slid the cleaning cart back into place and then raced down the corridor to her locker. Inside her notebook, she sketched a copy of the symbol as best she could before it went out of her head:

F/

It could also have been an arrowhead instead of an incompleted 'A', she realised, flipping her notebook on its side. Although, deep down, she knew it probably meant nothing, just a piece of graffiti from years back, Madison felt her heartbeat start to quicken under her sweater. She had finally started to get some answers in her investigation, and inside her head she was already formulating a plan of what she had to do next. The first step of that plan involved buying a camera. She picked up a disposable *Kodak MAX* from the drugstore on her way to school the next morning and, during lunch hour, sneaked back into the bathroom to get a snap of the symbol she had found. The school was back to its usual bustling self, so getting out unnoticed was more difficult than the day before. But as she pushed the cleaning cart back into place, she let out a sigh of relief. She had done it. Or, at least, she thought she had.

'Madison!'

Madison cursed under her breath, hoping that the shape of the camera wasn't obvious in the pocket of her jeans. Mr. Spencer came marching up the corridor towards her, the stack of worn *Romeo and Juliets* balanced in his arms wobbling dangerously.

'Mr. Spencer, I—'

'You know that bathroom is blocked off to students, Madison. If Principal Pearman found out... What *were* you doing in there, anyway?'

'I just wanted to, um...' She looked around the hallway for an excuse, and her eyes landed on a poster of the phases of the moon some freshmen had put together. 'Well, if you really want to know Mr. Spencer, it's just that it was the closest bathroom and it's *that* time of the month and I'm *not* talking about the full moon.'

'Oh, right, er...' Mr. Spencer stuttered and she could tell that he didn't know quite how to respond. Eventually he said, 'I get it, but please just try and stay out of there in future. Okay, Madison?'

'Okay, Mr. Spencer.'

She nodded then raced off towards the cafeteria to eat lunch with Tray. After school, he wanted her to hang out with him but she had things she needed to do — things she couldn't tell him about.

'My mom's working late and she needs me to get home for Sierra,' she lied. 'But I promise we'll do something tomorrow.'

'Okay,' he shrugged, clearly crestfallen.

'Don't be like that.'

She reached up to kiss him and cupped his chin in her hand. He laughed and wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing her back.

'Promise me we'll hang out this week, Mads. And *not* just at *Video Planet* on Friday night with your sister watching us.'

'I promise!' she said, and she meant it.

Although it was still freezing out, Madison didn't feel the cold as she marched along the frosty sidewalks. By the time she had reached Alana Sanchez's street, she had actually broken a sweat under the fluffy collar of her coat. She pulled down the zipper on her coat and looked up the street at number one-two-six, Ryan Thomas' house. Although Madison didn't share the same fanatical level of faith as her mother did, she still prayed to God that He

wouldn't strike her down for what she was about to do. Then she crossed the street and knocked on the door. A few moments later a large, middle aged woman with swollen eyes appeared in the doorway. It was the same woman Madison had seen crying to the cop on Halloween night — she had to be Ryan Thomas' mother. Madison knew from school that Ryan had no siblings and that his father had moved out the previous year.

'Mrs. Thomas, my name is Madison West. I go to— *went to* school with Ryan. I live just a few blocks away, and I wanted to come and pay my respects as I wasn't able to attend the funeral yesterday. I am so sorry for your loss. And I brought you these.'

She slid open her backpack and pulled out the small bunch of carnations wrapped in plastic she had bought from a gas station on the way over. They were already starting to wilt. Mrs. Thomas looked down at the flowers and began to cry, and then she flung her arms around Madison.

'Thank you so much, honey. It's so nice to meet one of Ryan's friends,' she managed through sobs. 'I sometimes see kids staring at the house from across the street, but they never come across. I don't blame them, who would know what to say? Even at the funeral the kids all just watched with their heads down, but it's so nice to actually *speak* to people. I don't get many visitors, just those vulture reporters.'

She pulled away from Madison and composed herself, wiping her eyes and nose on a Kleenex she had pulled from the waistband of her skirt. Madison noticed that she was wearing a crucifix around her neck like her own mother did.

'Please tell me you'll come inside for a moment? I have hot tea or coffee or soda, as well as a plate of brownies — although they're store bought, I'm afraid. I haven't felt like cooking.'

'Of course,' Madison said, although it came out as little more than a whisper.

As she followed Mrs. Thomas into the house, her insides began to squirm with guilt. She felt as if she was trespassing and had landed a front-row seat to a scene she really didn't want to see, up-close and unobstructed. Mrs. Thomas' reaction had been one of pure and genuine appreciation mixed with grief, and one she had not been expecting, making her feel even worse about the *real* reason she had knocked on her door in the first place. She looked around Mrs. Thomas' home, taking in the school photographs of Ryan and the empty spaces on the wall, reserved perhaps for his graduation and college pictures, that would now never be filled. Madison swallowed until the lump in her throat was gone. The mantel was already covered with flowers, but Mrs. Thomas still arranged Madison's pathetic-looking bunch into an empty vase of water and stood it amongst them.

'I'll be running out of vases soon,' she gave a weak smile, and gestured for Madison to take a seat at the small dining table by the window.

Madison accepted a glass of orange soda and sat down.

'So, how did you meet Ryan?'

Madison felt her cheeks flush. She thought that they were friends, and had said as much; how could she tell her otherwise?

She took a large gulp of her soda and then set it down again. 'Well, I'm a junior, and at the start of the school year I volunteered to show the new freshmen around — to give them a tour of the sports field and tell them where their classes were and stuff.'

Although this was true, Madison had only volunteered to do it as Mr. Spencer had convinced her that it would look good on her college application, and she did *not* recall a Ryan Thomas being in her group.

‘And I remember Ryan, with his red hair and freckles,’ she lied. ‘He was very sweet and polite whenever he spoke up.’

Mrs. Thomas was wiping her eyes again. Madison drained the last of her soda so that what she said next seemed more believable.

‘I’m so sorry to ask this, Mrs. Thomas, but please may I use your bathroom? I should *not* have finished that full glass so quickly!’

‘Of course, honey. It’s upstairs, the first door on your right.’

Madison’s heart was pounding in her chest as she climbed the staircase. She could feel the shape of the camera in her pocket pressing against her thigh as if it weighed a thousand pounds. She reached the upstairs hallway and looked down it: there were three doors, and two stood ajar. She discounted the first on the right, which she knew was the bathroom, and then peered into the half-open door next to it. She saw a hint of blue, striped wallpaper and a *Nirvana* poster on the wall. It was Ryan’s room. As gently and as (she hoped) soundlessly as she could, she pushed open the door and proceeded inside, the fluffy grey carpet muffling her footsteps. There were still stacks of books and loose papers all over the desk, and clothes strewn across the floor. It was as if Ryan was just at school and would be returning home soon, instead of now being stuck in the slumber of eternal rest in a churchyard across the city. She checked behind the door first, as that is where the symbol had been carved in Jasmine Chen’s cubicle. There was nothing there. A line of cold sweat was forming across her forehead. She didn’t know how long she had already been upstairs but she knew that she needed to get out before Mrs. Thomas caught her. But first she needed to look for that symbol... All at once, it came to her. She knew that Ryan had hanged himself, and there was only one place in the room he could have done that. Madison stared up at the ceiling and the exposed wooden beam above her. She felt a feverish, clammy wave of sickness come over her as she imagined how the rope would have looked tied to it, swinging back and forth...

The chair he must have climbed on to do it was still there, although now standing upright and pushed into a corner, and Madison realised it was one of the same spindly wooden ones as she herself had sat on downstairs. Perhaps his mother had not been able to bring herself to move it yet, she thought. Madison stepped carefully up onto the chair and looked up. It was there, carved into the beam, the same symbol she had seen in the cubicle: like a letter ‘F’ and a wide arrowhead. Her hands were shaking as she pulled out her camera and snapped a picture of it.

Back downstairs, she listened to Mrs. Thomas’ stories about Ryan for another fifteen minutes before insisting that she had to get home to help her mother make a start on dinner. As soon as Madison got outside she took several long, sobering gulps of fresh air. She was still shaking. There was no question in her mind now that the symbol meant something. The one in the cubicle at school could have been rationalised and explained away, but the fact that it was also carved into the beam that Ryan Thomas had hanged himself from meant that it *was* connected to the suicides — although she was now starting to question if they actually

were suicides. Madison had stumbled upon something that she wasn't sure she wanted to know where it led to, but she couldn't stop now.

The sky was already growing dark by the time she turned the corner onto South Lloyd Avenue. As she started down the sidewalk she suddenly realised that she did not know which house was Aubrey Scott's. She kicked a solid patch of icy concrete out of irritation. She was *so* close and now something *so* obvious she had managed to overlook was going to stop her! But then she saw a figure on the front lawn of one of the houses across the street. Even from where she was standing she recognised him from the video store. It was Aubrey's brother.

'Excuse me!' The heavy books inside her backpack smacked painfully against the square of her back as she ran towards him. 'Please, wait! I need to talk to you.'

He wheeled around to face her. 'You again. Don't you know that stalking someone is illegal in this state?'

'Yes, it's me again. And no, I'm not stalking you.' She put her hands on her thighs, trying to catch her breath. 'At *Video Planet* on Friday night you said to me "you know, don't you?" Well now I think I know what *you* thought *I* knew, and that *I* think *you* know, too — if you know what I mean.'

He looked at her as if she had just spoken in another language.

'You saw a weird symbol, like letters, near Aubrey's body the day you found him, didn't you?'

He blinked. 'How did you know that?'

She pulled the camera out of her pocket.

'Because I've seen it, too. At school, in the cubicle where Jasmin Chen was found. I even got a picture of it.' She left out the part about sneaking into Ryan Thomas' bedroom under false pretences.

She could tell that he was considering what she had just said.

'How do I know that you're not messing with me? You might be working for the papers or the feds, trying to make me look insane so that you can pin me for my brother's death...'

Madison stared at him. 'I'm *sixteen*. I'll show you the picture when it's developed. Plus I can describe the symbol to you. It looks like a letter 'F' next to a half-formed 'A' or an arrowhead.'

That description seemed to have been enough to convince him.

'Okay. Come here, quick.' He gestured for her to follow him.

They walked around the dark lawn by the side of the house and through to the backyard. He stopped and Madison did too.

'Wait there,' he called and ran towards the backdoor of the house.

'What?' She wheeled around. 'How do I know you're not calling the cops on *me*?'

'I'm getting a flashlight, dumbass!'

And, sure enough, he emerged from the house a moment later carrying one.

'Look down,' he demanded, shining the beam onto a patch of lawn just in front of her feet.

Madison did as he said and gasped. It was the same mark she had seen scratched into the cubicle door and onto the ceiling beam, but here it seemed to have been scorched into the ground. She snapped a picture of it.

‘Do you want to see something even more weird?’

She nodded, despite the fact that she wasn’t quite sure that she *did* want to. He marched back around the side of the house and onto the driveway, Madison trying to match his striding footsteps. When he started to pull open the door of the dark car parked in front of the house she froze.

‘Wait, it’s not just something *here*, in the yard? We have to *drive* there?’

She imagined what her mother would say about her getting into a car with an older guy whose name she didn’t even know, not to mention what her boyfriend would think if he found out. Tray didn’t have his licence yet because he was waiting to save up enough money to be able to buy a car first, but they had already talked about where they wanted to go together when he did.

‘Well, unless you want to walk about fifty blocks then yes, we have to drive there.’

He got into the driver’s seat and slammed the door. After hesitating for a moment she climbed in next to him and clipped her seatbelt into place, stuffing her backpack between her feet. He steered the car evenly and didn’t ram his foot down on the gas, even when the road was empty up ahead, but Madison still felt nervous. She linked her hands together in her lap. Soon they were heading across town towards the highway, but then he suddenly turned left and Madison saw it: an old railroad underpass looming up ahead. Immediately, Madison knew where they were. The bridge was a rusted maroon colour, held up by three metal columns on either side of the road that ran under it. There were yellow and black caution signs attached to these columns, warning vehicles of the maximum height that could safely pass under it. Most of the numbers had now faded or been graffitied over, but in her mind Madison had pictured it taller, and wider, almost like the Brooklyn Bridge in New York.

She couldn’t hide the disappointment in her voice, ‘*That’s* Jacobson Bridge?’

He nodded, pulling into the empty parking lot of an old office building with a *FOR LEASE OR SALE* sign in its window that sat just to the side of the underpass. They both got out. Apart from the occasional car that passed them the area seemed deserted.

‘Follow me,’ he said.

She tried to keep up with him as he trudged out of the parking lot and along the narrow sidewalk towards the underpass. The sidewalk continued underneath the bridge, separated from the road beside it with a thin strip of lawn and the columns keeping the bridge up. He stopped just beside the first column and Madison did the same.

‘Robert Jacobson jumped from that bridge at exactly seven minutes past seven on Halloween night five years ago.’ He spoke in little more than a whisper, and she had to lean forwards to hear him properly. ‘If he had landed on the grass or the sidewalk where we are standing right now, he most likely would have survived. But, instead, he fell right into the path of a truck. He had just turned twenty years old — my age now, coincidentally.’

Madison began to shiver. She shoved her hands into her pockets, wishing that she was back at home in their apartment. All at once she heard Sierra’s voice in her head for some reason, practising her lines for the school play, even though the words weren’t exactly right: *Did Humpty Dumpty jump, or was he pushed?*

‘The story is that if you say his name three times at exactly seven minutes past seven on October thirty-first, standing *right* where we are now, then you’ll be dead within twenty-four hours.’ He continued, ‘And that’s what happened to my little brother and his friends. I

saw them, hanging around here, on Halloween. I screamed at them; made them get in the car with me, but they just laughed at me. And now they're dead. And you wanna know the worst part? They wouldn't have known anything about the story if I hadn't made Aubrey sit down with me and watch that *stupid* show about urban legends. He started asking questions and I told him, filling in the details they left out on TV, because I used to think it was a joke, too... But now I know.'

He wiped his eyes and Madison looked down at her own feet. After a few moments of silence he spoke again.

'Look up,' he lifted his hand, gesturing to a spot just beyond her head.

Madison turned around and, as her eyes fell upon the spot he was pointing to, she gasped. On the underside of the bridge where Robert Jacobson had once jumped, graffitied in white spray paint that seemed to glow against the dark rust, was the same symbol that Madison had found in the spots where Ryan, Jasmine and Aubrey had each killed themselves. She pulled out her camera and aimed the lens at it, hoping that it wouldn't turn out too dark for it to be visible on the photograph. *Did Robert Jacobson jump, or was he pushed?* The words echoed through her mind as a car came speeding past them, sounding its loud, drawn-out horn. Madison hadn't realised how far out she was leaning as she angled her camera to get the best shot. Aubrey's brother pulled her back just in time.

As they were making their way back to the car, Madison catching her breath as she walked, another car pulled into the parking lot just feet away from them. The driver's side door was flung open and Mr. Spencer jumped out.

'Madison!'

She didn't argue as she climbed into the backseat of Mr. Spencer's car.

'...So irresponsible. Practically hanging off the sidewalk so that you could take a picture! You're lucky that it was me who saw you, Madison, and turned back around. I told you not to go looking for that bridge; it's nothing but a stupid story and you're a smart girl! Who was that guy? Did he talk you into this?'

Madison remained silent. She had grabbed her backpack from Aubrey's brother's car and told him to go home so that he didn't get dragged into whatever was about to happen. Luckily, Mr. Spencer didn't seem to know that he was Aubrey's brother.

'First I find you sneaking into the bathroom where Jasmine... where Jasmine died, and now this! I'm going to have to tell your mother, Madison. You told me that you want to go to college and study journalism. I'm not going to let you throw that opportunity away for... what? Some guy, or a stupid story — which is it?'

She wondered if it was worth trying to tell him the truth, or even bargaining with him — he *had* told them the story of the bridge in the first place when he wasn't supposed to. But, either way, she knew it was pointless; he had her over a barrel, and trying to escape his grip would just cause her to drown quicker. And so she sat silently as Mr. Spencer and her mother talked in the kitchen, and, once he had left, as her mother began to scream at her. Besides going to school, she was grounded for two weeks and she was no longer, under any circumstances, allowed to see 'that Godless boy' from the video store — her mother was under the impression that the guy whose car she had rode in to Jacobson Bridge was Tray.

‘Caught by a teacher trying to summon demons... My God! Not while you’re under my roof, girl.’ Her mother put her hand to her chest. ‘Now look what you made me do: taking the Lord’s name in vain!’

At school the next day, Tray was annoyed with her when she told him that she wasn’t going to be able to hang out with him again that afternoon, *or* for the foreseeable future. She told him that the reason for her grounding was because she and her mother had argued about her not helping out around the house enough. He barely spoke to her for the rest of the afternoon and, when she went to look for him by her locker for their usual end of day kiss, he wasn’t there. It was only when she got out of the school doors that she saw him, walking ahead with a group of his friends, laughing. It felt like someone had punched Madison in the chest. She sauntered home, tears rolling down her face and not caring who saw her. That night she cried herself to sleep, ignoring Sierra’s concerned questioning of if she was Okay. Why had she gotten herself involved in something she didn’t even truly understand?

Although there was a part of her that wanted to throw it away and never look at it again, Madison kept the camera she had bought from the drugstore in her backpack. It would be at least two weeks until she would be able to get the pictures developed, if she ever did; she hoped and prayed that the whole thing would be forgotten about by then, and that it would be nothing but a distant and surreal memory for her. But on Thursday afternoon in history class, Madison realised that this was never going to be the case. She was staring out of the classroom window as Mr. Peters droned on about the Civil War when she saw him. He was standing under the elm tree at the front entrance of the school: the guy who had been asking about South Lloyd Avenue the day that Jasmine Chen and Aubrey Scott died. His eyes, sharp and magnified under his glasses, were fixed on Madison in her seat. The sight of him again made Madison feel as if she had just stepped under a freezing shower. She looked up at the clock. Two thirty-five. That meant the front doors would already be open because some of the seniors left thirty minutes before the rest of the school.

‘Mr. Peters?’ She raised her hand.

He looked up at her, his disbelief that a student had actually spoken in his class apparent on his face. ‘Yes, Mikayla?’

She didn’t bother correcting him. ‘May I be excused, Mr. Peters? I need the bathroom.’

‘Oh, yes. You may go.’ He nodded.

She thanked him and crossed the classroom to the door. When she was out in the hallway she raced across the floor to her locker and pulled on her coat and backpack. As she left through the front doors, she pulled up her hood in case the school receptionist was watching and recognised her as a junior. He was still standing in the same spot under the tree when she got outside.

‘Hey!’

He stared at her but didn’t answer, then turned around and began walking along the sidewalk. For a reason Madison couldn’t even explain to herself, she knew that she had to follow him. He moved quickly, always putting a safe enough distance between them so that she couldn’t even attempt to overtake him. She had to rush to make sure that she didn’t lose sight of him. She tried calling to him again but he either could not hear her or chose to ignore

her. He was leading her in the direction of their neighbourhood, she realised, and she hoped that she was not going to come face-to-face with her mother. They had been walking for around ten minutes when he stopped outside a store whose sign read *Timmy's Electronics*. He turned to look into the window and Madison, over his shoulder, did the same. Amongst the various lamps and radios was a small, portable television set in the middle of the shelf playing the news. Although she could not hear the sound through the glass, the headline at the bottom of the screen read *RAILROAD BRIDGE JUMPER IDENTIFIED* before the screen suddenly changed. It now showed a photograph of a young man with the name *Robert Jacobson* underneath it. That man was the same one who now stood in front of Madison. He turned to face her.

‘You’re Robert Jacobson?’

He nodded. It felt as if Madison’s head was spinning with a thousand questions. She reached for the pole of a streetlight to steady herself.

‘But you’re dead,’ she managed to say. ‘Aubrey’s brother told me that it was five years ago that you jumped...’ Then something else occurred to Madison. ‘And why was your death only just on the news?’

But when she looked in the store window again, the TV was now playing an old black and white movie. She blinked.

‘I’m dreaming,’ she told herself, circling the sidewalk. ‘I’m asleep and in any minute my mom’s gonna wake me up for school screaming in my ear, or Sierra’s gonna jump on me...’

A warm hand closed around her wrist. ‘You’re not dreaming.’

Madison turned on the spot to stare into the green eyes of Robert Jacobson. She began to tremble under his touch, feeling breathless now.

His lips barely moved as he spoke. ‘I want to show you something, Madison West.’

She felt her eyes close involuntarily.

The dim glow from the portable television set that would one day sit in the window of *Timmy's Electronics*, now brand new and showing a muted football game between the Dallas Cowboys and Philadelphia Eagles, was the only light in the small dorm room. Two figures were strewn across the single bed by the right-side wall, their still fully clothed bodies intertwined as their lips continued to find each other in the dark. Suddenly, the dorm room door was pulled open from the outside. White light from the hallway spilled across the carpet and one of the figures jumped up from the bed. The guy standing in the doorway, so tall and with shoulders so wide that he almost took up the entirety of the door frame, looked on, open-mouthed. He was dressed up like a zombified quarterback.

‘*Robert Jacobson!*’ Chris Anderson shouted in his loud, bellowing voice, his face breaking into a grin. ‘I didn’t think you had it in you, man! I need to teach you the trick about putting a sock on the doorknob — although, if I’m honest, I never thought you’d need it.’

Robert was trying to push Chris out of the door. ‘Please, Chris, just go. I need you to leave *right* now... I thought you were at the party.’

Chris, still grinning, remained where he stood. He held Robert back with one outstretched hand on his chest, and cocked his head around Robert’s slim frame to look in the corner of the room at his bed.

‘Is she hot? Is she...’

The smile died on his face. Although the room was so dark that he was only able to make out a pair of jeans-covered legs leading to white-sneakered feet, it was enough for Chris to know.

‘What the fuck?’ He shoved Robert, hard, in his shoulder.

For a few seconds it seemed as if he was contemplating what to do next, a vein bulging out of the side of his temple. For a terrible moment Robert believed that he was going to barge past him and march over to his bed, but then Chris turned back into the hallway and slammed the door behind him. Robert felt his legs give out and he collapsed, cross-legged, onto the carpet. He leaned over to try and steady his breathing. Although they were alone again, neither of them spoke. After a few minutes, the guy on Robert’s bed stood up and crossed the room to the door. Now alone, Robert dropped his face into his hands. There was no coming back from this. He knew what he had to do.

Fifteen minutes later, Robert sat behind the wheel of his blue Ford that had once belonged to his father as he made his way across the city. Sidewalks swelling with kids dressed in Halloween costumes blurred past the window. Something made Robert look up, and what he saw in the rearview mirror made him almost lose control of the wheel. Chris’ white SUV, instantly recognisable from the black vinyl skull sticker he had adorned the hood with, was behind him and closing in, fast. Chris began to blow his horn, and then he leaned out of his window to shout to Robert. Robert quickly lowered his window to hear what he was saying.

‘We just want to talk, Robert! Pull over, man!’

We? From the mirror, Robert wasn’t able to see anyone else in the car except Chris. Whoever was with him must have been sitting in the backseat. Quickly, Robert tried to decide what he should do next. If he didn’t stop, they might try and run him off the road. Would he be able to lose them on a side street? Possibly, but it was risky. Just before reaching the underpass, Robert pulled up onto the curb beside a construction company office and stepped out. Behind him he heard the SUV’s engine make one final grunt as it was killed and then two car doors slam shut. Robert wheeled around. Chris was proceeding towards him and, behind him, was Neil Spencer.

‘So you’re a fag, Robert! It’s Okay, I’m pretty sure most people already knew.’

Chris’ shouts seemed to echo through the deserted streets. There were barely any other cars around because most people were either out with their kids trick-or-treating or at Halloween parties themselves. Robert began to walk backwards, trying to put as much distance between himself and Chris as he could without taking his eyes off him.

‘But you know who didn’t know?’ Me.’ Chris jabbed a thumb into his thick chest. ‘So how do you think I feel when I find out you’ve been screwing dudes in *our* dorm room, in the bed across from mine? I can’t believe I’ve been sleeping in the same fucking room as you, not knowing you’re a little fag, Robert Jacobson!’

Chris looked Robert up and down, the expression on his face as if he was surveying a dead rat he had just seen by the side of the road. Then he leaned over and spat onto the sidewalk before pulling something out of his pocket. As soon as Robert saw the glint of the knife in Chris’ large fingers he began to run. There was no time to get back to the car and pull open the door now. He pushed his body forwards, the sound of heavy footsteps behind him.

Robert wasn't as strong as Chris, but he was quicker. He soon realised that there was nowhere else to go but up and over the bridge, unless he wanted to find himself cornered in the underpass, succumbing to the embrace of Chris and his little instrument. He scrambled up the sloping lawn that jutted out from the sidewalk and up towards the side of the bridge, grabbing hold of a bush to help pull himself up. When he reached the top, he found himself standing in the middle of the railroad tracks that ran above the underpass. He moved forwards along the bridge, carefully, listening for any sounds of movement in either direction. There was no way in hell that Chris would follow him up onto the tracks, he thought, and so he continued onwards. But that was when Robert felt the clammy hand around his neck.

Chris shoved him up against the low metal wall that ran along the side of the bridge, one hand still tight around his neck. With his free hand he pulled up Robert's sweater, exposing his naked stomach to the cold air. Then he pressed the knife into his flesh. Robert winced but didn't make a sound. He tried to aim kicks and punches at Chris' face and groin but he missed as Chris' grip on his throat tightened. Pain seared across Robert's stomach again and he felt his vision starting to darken. His glasses were sliding down his nose as he managed to look down. Chris had carved an 'F' into his abdomen and was now making a start on the next letter.

'Now the whole world will know what you are: a fag.' He spat into Robert's face, grinning.

'Chris, stop!'

Robert's eyes were closed now but when he heard Neil's voice he opened them again. Everything around him looked black.

'What the fuck did you just say to me, Neil?'

'I just mean he's learnt his lesson now,' Neil stuttered. 'I think we should l-let him go.'

Suddenly the sound of a police siren cut through the quiet night air, distant but growing closer.

'Oh shit!'

Robert felt the knife being pulled from his stomach. He looked down again; after the 'F', Chris had only managed the two diagonal lines of the letter 'A', missing the horizontal line between them as well as the entire letter 'G'. Robert felt the grip on his neck loosen and he began to choke, catching his breath again. *He was going to let him go.* The realisation began to spread through Robert's body, fast-moving and warming, that he wasn't going to die, despite him being so sure that he was going to only seconds before. Colour began to return to his surroundings as his vision focused again. He was going to see his parents' and his brother's faces again. Instead of a funeral, his mother would be able to organise his birthday party the following month, with the blue frosting cake and the little ham and cheese sandwiches that she had made every year since he was five years old. And his father would probably present him with a watch, like the one he had given Robert's brother when he turned twenty-one.

That was what Robert Jacobson thought about as his body was flung over the bridge to land on the concrete below, right into the path of the truck speeding towards him. His eyes were still wide open as the underside of the vehicle engulfed him, the man behind the wheel starting to yell and jam his foot down onto the breaks.

Madison opened her eyes. They were swimming with tears and she blinked until Robert Jacobson's face came into focus again. His hand was still grasping hers. She had not seen the memory from Robert's viewpoint, but as if she was standing just feet away from him at all times, like a disembodied onlooker who could neither move nor intervene. And it had all felt so real, as if she had truly been there as it was happening around her; she had even felt the breeze of the truck passing by her. She began to replay it again in her head, and one particular image continued to make its way to the front of her mind: the face of Neil Spencer. Even though the five intervening years had aged him rapidly, and he now bore a goatee over his sharp chin, Madison had recognised him instantly as the man who taught her English every Monday and Thursday morning. Mr. Spencer, the teacher everyone at school liked and who Madison herself had trusted enough to talk to about her own plans for college, had once stood and watched as his friend killed someone, too cowardly to step in.

'You didn't jump.'

Robert shook his head. 'I was never going to. I was driving to my parents' house when they got me.'

As Madison reached out her fingers to touch the place under his shirt where the letters had been carved, she realised that her hands were now gripping nothing but cold air. The only thing standing in front of her was a streetlight. He was gone. She let out a deep breath. Finally feeling that she could move again, she set off home.

Madison had been just eight years old the first time it had happened: the first time she had seen someone 'from the other side', as her grandma used to put it. She had woken up from the general anaesthesia in Mr. Freeman's office after two molar extractions only to find an older boy staring at her who had not been there before. As they had gone back out into the dentist's waiting room for Madison's mother to settle the bill with the receptionist, the boy had led Madison over to the kid's play tables piled with picture books and building blocks and told her that he wanted her to pass on a message to his father, Mr. Freeman. And so Madison had.

'Steven says you have to stop blaming yourself for the accident, and he wants you and his mom and Janey to know that he loves you all.'

At this, Mr. Freeman had toppled backwards, knocking his tray of instruments to the ground as he hit the floor. Similar things had happened to Madison in other places: the playground, a diner, and even once in her grandmother's own house. At first, she had not been able to understand why people always reacted the way that Mr. Freeman had; she thought that she was simply delivering a message from a loved one who was too shy to say it themselves. It was only as she got older that she began to realise that no one else could see these people. After the incident in her grandma's house, when a man she did not recognise asked Madison to tell her grandma that he wasn't upset that she had found someone else, and that he wanted her to be happy, she had sat Madison down and explained to her what her mother would not: that she could communicate with people from *the other side*. Although the spirits were never malicious — they only ever wanted Madison to help them bring comfort to the family and lovers they had left behind, so that they themselves could find peace in death — Madison's mother would not speak of her daughter's ability; she thought it a gift from the devil himself. In reality, Madison came to understand that the source of her ability likely

stemmed from that very afternoon sitting in the dentist's chair. Her grandma had shown her an article in a magazine about a man who claimed that he could see ghosts after coming around from general anaesthesia, during which he had been pronounced dead for almost five minutes. Madison did not know if she herself had been dead at any point during the extractions, but it seemed the most likely explanation.

Madison's brushes with *the other side*, though, had become less frequent the older she got — although she realised that she was likely to blame for this herself. She was thirteen when her grandma died, and she had spent the weeks following her death praying to see her again, to receive a message that she was at peace and wanted Madison, Sierra and their mother to get on with their lives. But that message had never arrived. Hurt by the fact that her grandma had not returned to her, Madison had tried to close off her ability. She started to ignore the spirits that appeared to her, not wishing to bring peace to strangers when she herself had received none and, after a while, they began to quieten. Sometimes she still saw figures in the periphery of her vision, but when she would turn her head to look at them she would find that there was no one there. Robert Jacobson, she now realised, had been the one exception to this rule. He had appeared to her so vividly the first time she saw him that she had been unable to ignore him. And now he had returned to her, to show her a fragment of his own past — something none of the other spirits had ever done to her. Although he had not explicitly stated to her what she must do for him — unlike the others, such as the boy in the dentist's office — Madison knew, instinctively, what she had to do.

In order for Robert Jacobson to find peace in death, the *real* story of how he died had to be told.

That night, while Sierra slept in the bed across from her, Madison stared at the dark ceiling of their bedroom. Thoughts whirled around in her head like a tornado picking up everything in its path. She could think of nothing else but what she had seen that afternoon. Had Chris and Mr. Spencer been able to outrun the cops, or had the cops simply looked the other way? And what had become of the man driving the truck that hit Robert? She also wondered if Mr. Spencer was still in contact with that Chris guy now, and if they ever thought about Robert Jacobson — and what they had done to him. As she turned onto her side, though, pulling the sheet tighter around her body and clenching her eyes shut, other questions began to permeate her brain. She saw the faces of Ryan Thomas, Jasmine Chen and Aubrey Scott from the memorial table at school, and the front page of the newspaper, on the inside of her eyelids. Had Robert Jacobson *truly* murdered them, or was the curse (because what other word for it was there?) beyond his control? And would bringing Robert peace by telling his story make sure that what happened to Ryan, Jasmine and Aubrey never happened to anyone else again?

Madison must have finally been able to doze off because she woke up just before seven a.m. as her mother stood in the bedroom doorway clanging two pans together. She got ready and ate breakfast without speaking one word, then set off for school. She forced herself to sit through homeroom and math class and then, finally, the lunch bell rang. She didn't even stop off at her locker to drop off her books as she raced across the hall and up the stairs to Mr. Spencer's classroom. He was sitting behind his desk, looking through a pile of reports and working his way through an apple when she opened the door. She closed it behind her and he looked up.

‘Madison, what—’

‘I know about Robert Jacobson.’

He sighed, then put down both the paper and his half-eaten apple. ‘Madison, I have been patient with you but you need to stop now. It’s a story, that’s all. You need to drop it, unless you would like me to speak to your mother again?’

Madison narrowed her eyes and crossed the floor towards his desk.

‘You can speak to my mother, Mr. Spencer, but *I* will be speaking to the police.’

He blinked. ‘And what does that mean?’

‘It means that I know what you did to Robert Jacobson, Mr. Spencer. You stood there watching as your friend carved letters into his stomach and then threw him over the bridge into the path of a truck, you coward!’

Before Madison could take a step backwards, Mr. Spencer was up out of his chair. He grabbed her wrist. ‘What did you just say to me?’

He was hurting her but she didn’t let it show on her face. ‘I said that I know that you and your friend Chris are a pair of dirty little murderers.’

Something flashed behind his eyes, an emotion Madison couldn’t quite place. ‘For your information, Chris was never my friend. And *I* am not a murderer.’

‘You’re as good as one!’ she screamed at him. ‘You stood there and didn’t stop him!’

‘I didn’t stop Chris because if I’d have tried to he would have killed me, too, you stupid girl! Do you think it didn’t destroy me?’ He jabbed at his chest with his right hand, his left still around Madison’s wrist. ‘I had to watch the person I was in love with die in front of my eyes.’

Mr. Spencer’s eyes grew wide as he realised what he had just said.

Madison stared at him, finally understanding. ‘You were the guy in Robert’s dorm room, weren’t you? Oh my God. You loved him and you let him die without saying anything just to save your own skin... You’re even more of a coward than I first thought!’

He reached out with his right hand and grabbed her other wrist, then pushed her backwards. A searing pain ran up her back as it collided with the hard surface of one of the desks. He had her pinned down. She tried to kick out at him but missed.

‘Don’t you *ever* call me a coward,’ he spat through gritted teeth. ‘You don’t know anything about what happened.’

‘I know because I saw it,’ she managed to say through her laboured breathing. ‘And soon everyone else is going to know, too.’

Madison’s eyes widened in horror as he removed his right hand from her wrist and clamped it around her neck. She tried to scream and pry his hand from her throat but found that she was unable to do either. The classroom was starting to grow darker around her when suddenly she felt his grip loosen. She managed to look up and what she saw flooded Madison with a mixture of both relief and nausea. Robert Jacobson was standing behind Mr. Spencer and had attached a rope around his neck. Mr. Spencer’s face began to turn scarlet as his feet were lifted off the ground: the other end of the rope was attached to one of the long, metal fittings that housed the fluorescent ceiling lights above them. Madison managed to look away in time before she heard the snap and the high, muffled scream. When she dared to look up again, Robert was writing something on the chalkboard in Mr. Spencer’s handwriting. She could only make out the first line so far:

I couldn't live with the guilt of what I did.

It was less than a week later when the body of Chris Anderson was found in the bank downtown where he worked. Mrs. Martin, the cleaning lady was the one who discovered him, slumped in the end cubicle of the men's bathroom with his wrists slit. She had needed two smokes and a cup of black coffee before she was able to talk. In her state of shock, she hadn't even noticed the suicide note next to his body, confessing to a murder from five years ago, or the fact that the marks on his wrists seemed to be in the shape of a letter 'F' and 'A' — although the latter was missing its horizontal line. What Mrs. Martin did notice, though, as she stepped out of the bank to light her cigarette, was a teenage girl with dark, curly hair loitering across the street. She kept looking over at the bank as if she was waiting for someone, even though it was outside of opening hours.

The Milk Carton Kids

It was the middle of April when Little Jimmy Craig's face started showing up on the side of the milk cartons. He had been missing for almost three weeks by then, enough time for every other kid in Deadwater Cove to convince themselves that they were going to be next. Maximilian Rodderick surveyed the picture of Jimmy as his grandmother packed their groceries at the checkout of *Traylor's Family Market*. The quart of milk disappeared into a brown paper bag.

'Are you gonna help your grandma carry the groceries out, kiddo?' The checkout girl smiled down at him, folding the last of his grandmother's coupons into the open cash register.

Max stared at her from behind his eyeglasses as he picked up one of the grocery bags. He opened his mouth to tell her that four-and-a-half feet was a perfectly normal height for a twelve year old — Doctor Linroy had told him so — but Grandma Marge was already folding up her receipt and sliding her purse back onto her shoulder. He put his head down and followed her out of the store. As they were walking across the parking lot to her grey Buick, she reached across and took his free hand in her own.

'Grandma!' He tried to pull away but her grip was inescapable.

She didn't let him go until he was safely buckled into the front passenger seat. After dropping off the groceries on the kitchen counter and quickly feeding a treat to Bingo, Grandma Marge's pet Beagle, he raced out into the backyard. Max tapped on the fence in the exact spot above Grandma Marge's purple coneflowers. A few seconds later, a plank of wood was pushed upwards and Jaylen squeezed his way through the gap in the fence. He leapt over the flowerbed.

'What took you so long?' Jaylen asked, sliding the plank back into place.

'Grandma Marge got to talking with someone at the store.' Max pushed his glasses up his nose. 'Did you call the others?'

Dakota was already waiting for them up in the treehouse, but Max had to use his walkie-talkie to call for Isaac again. When he finally appeared at the top of the ladder, panting and red-faced, Jaylen and Dakota helped pull him up into the treehouse and they all gathered around Max. Max was the shortest of the four, but he had taken on the role of the leader of their club — it was *his* treehouse after all (it was the last thing his grandfather had made him before he passed away). He picked up the cork noticeboard he left resting against the back wall (displaying the treehouse rules and posters he had torn out of his *Monsters! Monthly* comic books) and flipped it around. It now displayed a picture of Little Jimmy that Isaac had managed to salvage from a used milk carton from his mother's kitchen, and a sign above it (written in a red *Sharpie* by Jaylen, who they all agreed had the best handwriting in the group) which read: *Clues and Stuff in the Case of Little Jimmy Craig*. Dotted around the board were several yellow post-it notes, although all were blank except two.

'Okay,' Max began, clearing his throat and pushing his glasses up his nose again. 'We have two clues so far. The first—'

Jaylen raised his hand. 'You didn't say "I officially announce this meeting has begun."'

‘Oh, well you just said it, but Okay: *I officially announce this meeting has begun.* Let’s start by reviewing the two clues we have so far in the disappearance of Little Jimmy Craig. The first is the shoe—’

Jaylen quickly darted across the floor and reached his hand into a crate housing a pair of baseball bats and various-sized balls. From the bottom, he pulled out a single white sneaker with red stripes then, after joining Max by the window, held it up for the others to see. The truth was that none of them were actually certain that the sneaker truly *did* belong to Jimmy, but Dakota, who lived next door to the Craigs, had found it in their backyard, which seemed to be proof enough for him.

‘Found by me,’ Dakota jabbed a finger in his own chest and looked around smugly.

‘Found by Dakota,’ Max repeated. ‘And our second clue is an eyewitness account, from Dakota’s sister.’

‘Is she here?’ Isaac looked around the treehouse excitedly, as if he were expecting her to jump out from behind the noticeboard.

‘Nope, but as the person closest to her present here right now, I will retell her story.’ Dakota puffed out his chest. ‘On the night that Little Jimmy went missing, my sister Ally says that she saw what looked like smoke above the Craigs’ backyard while —’

‘While she was taking a bath,’ Jaylen finished for him. ‘You’ve told us this story about a dozen times, Dakota.’

‘I wish I could see Ally in the bathtub,’ Isaac sighed.

Dakota looked angrily from Jaylen to Isaac, and then pulled a thumbtack from the noticeboard and aimed it at Isaac’s forehead. Ignoring what was going on amongst the others, Max picked up the top copy of *Monsters! Monthly* from the stack by his feet and flipped to a page near the back.

‘There is only one explanation for what Ally saw and what happened to Little Jimmy.’ He turned the comic book around to show them a double-spread of a flying saucer silhouetted against the night sky, a still from an old black and white movie. ‘It wasn’t fire that got him, but—’

‘Aliens,’ Jaylen, Dakota and Isaac said in unison: they had heard Max’s hypothesis a dozen times already.

‘Exactly! It was the beam from a UFO Ally saw that night, sucking him up into the saucer. It was probably spinning so fast that it looked like smoke. And, obviously, his shoe fell off on the way up there.’

The others exchanged sceptical glances.

‘I still think it’s sex perverts that got Little Jimmy.’ Isaac had found the barrel of cheese balls Max left in the corner of the treehouse and was now unscrewing the lid. A few littered the floor and he bent down to grab them, popping them into his mouth. ‘The type that picks up little kids in their car.’

Max looked at him over his glasses. ‘There are no sex perverts in Deadwater Cover.’

‘Oh yes there are!’ Dakota shouted. ‘Ally told me about this old guy who showed her his weiner on the bus one time!’

‘Mm-hmm,’ Isaac nodded, his cheeks bulging with cheese balls. ‘It’s why my mom won’t let me walk home alone after dark.’

A wave of irritation washed over Max. ‘If it was sex perverts that got Little Jimmy then *what* was that thing Ally thought she saw in the Craig’s backyard?’

None of them had an answer for him. Isaac filled in the pause in their conversation by offering them each a handful of cheeseballs. Other than the sound of their combined munching, they were all silent until Jaylen finally spoke again a few minutes later.

‘I don’t know who got Little Jimmy, but there is *no* way in hell I’m letting them get me too.’

The others murmured in agreement.

Dakota spoke next. ‘We need a name, something to call our club.’

‘How about “The Milk Carton Kids”?’ Isaac suggested, licking cheese powder off his fingers.

‘That’s exactly what we’re trying *not* to be,’ Max shot back at him.

‘Which is why it’s so genius,’ Jaylen slapped Max on the shoulder. ‘Think about it, it makes perfect sense.’

Max didn’t see how this made perfect sense, or any sense at all, but he wasn’t going to labour the point.

‘What would *you* prefer we call ourselves, Max: “The Martian Hunters”?’ Dakota scoffed.

Isaac snorted and Max rolled his eyes.

‘The only thing *I* care about is finding out what happened to Little Jimmy and making sure that none of us join him wherever he is.’ He flipped the noticeboard back around and hid the lone sneaker back inside the crate of balls (Grandma Marge didn’t know about their investigation, and he planned to keep it that way). ‘And I say what we should do next is go talk to Ally and let *her* tell us what *she* saw, for herself this time. Who’s with me?’

Isaac was the first to stand up, followed by Jaylen and, eventually, Dakota. Five minutes later the four of them had set off to Dakota’s house with Bingo in tow — Grandma Marge told Max that it made her feel better to know that they had the dog with them, despite the fact that it was only two blocks away and the worst thing that Bingo had ever done to a stranger was to lick them.

‘I still can’t believe your grandma called her dog “Bingo”,’ Dakota called back to Max, marching up ahead to match the dog’s pace.

Max, who had picked the name himself, felt personally insulted.

‘And I still can’t believe your parents gave you a girl’s name,’ he quipped back.

Dakota’s cheeks had flushed pink at this. ‘It is *not* a girl’s name: it’s unisex!’

They left Bingo downstairs, receiving a belly rub from Dakota’s father, then headed up the stairs behind Dakota. He stopped at a door decorated with a pink letter ‘A’ at the end of the hallway, and was about to push it open when Jaylen stopped him.

‘Your dad said you *had* to knock first, remember?’

‘Ugh, fine.’

Dakota knocked on the door and, after a few moments, it was yanked open from the inside. Ally stared down at the four twelve-year-old boys standing outside of her bedroom door, her hair pulled back in a large scrunchie and an *ADVANCED MATH* textbook tucked inside her folded arms. Isaac let out a soft sigh.

‘What?’ She was chewing gum.

‘*He* wants to ask you something,’ Dakota said, pushing Max to the front of the group.

Max nervously pushed his glasses up his nose and stared up into Ally’s face. She was at least half a foot taller than him and wore an expression like a stern teacher. ‘I — we wanted to know if you could tell us what you saw on the night Little Jimmy Craig went missing?’

He slipped his tiny black *REPORTER’S NOTEBOOK* out of the pocket of his pants and flipped it open, then extended the point of his pen with a small *click*. He had picked both of these up from the post office just last week when Grandma Marge was buying stamps, deciding that it was time to get serious with his investigation, but telling her that they were for note-taking in school.

Ally looked down at him and smirked. ‘Who are you, Lois Lane?’

‘I’m just trying to figure out what happened to Little Jimmy so that it doesn’t happen to any of my friends next and we can help him get back home,’ he answered truthfully.

Ally’s expression softened.

‘Well, I guess I can tell you what happened. It was about eight p.m. and I was just about to take my bath when I realised that *someone* had opened the blinds when they were brushing their teeth.’ She shot Dakota a look who shifted his feet guiltily. ‘So I went to close them again, and that was when I saw it. There was smoke coming up out of the Craigs’ backyard, but it wasn’t like normal smoke, not like anything I’ve ever seen before, anyway. It was spinning, and it kinda looked like... Well, kinda like a tornado. I would have been convinced it *was* a tornado, if it wasn’t for the fact that—’

‘There haven’t been any recorded tornadoes in the state since last August,’ Max finished for her.

‘Exactly.’ Ally surveyed him. ‘Hey, what’re you doing hanging out with my brother? You’re too smart for him, kid.’

With that she turned on her heel and closed the door in their faces.

Standing in Dakota’s darkening front yard minutes later, Max’s hands were sweating as he scribbled down what Ally had told them. Now that he had heard her explain it for herself, he was more convinced than ever that what she had seen, mistakenly thinking it was a tornado, was the beam from a UFO!

‘We have to keep a lookout, all of us. It’s only a matter of time before it comes back again. *Don’t take your eyes off the skies!*’ he told the others, repeating one of his favourite catchphrases from *Monsters! Monthly*. ‘We’ll meet again after school on Monday, in the treehouse. And in the meantime, we all have our walkie-talkies if anyone discovers something new.’

Max spat into the palm of his hand and held it out in front of him; it was their version of a secret handshake. The others did the same until all four of their outstretched hands were touching, their bodies forming a circle on the shadowy lawn.

It was after ten on Saturday night when Max saw the lights. His bedroom was in the attic of the house and faced out over the Permadesco River, whose mouth emptied into the Atlantic Ocean around one mile from Deadwater Cove’s public square, and a huge rock formation the locals called ‘Herman’s Ridge’ sat just beyond that mouth. Once, during the previous summer, Max and Jaylen had attempted to swim out to Herman’s Ridge. They had barely made it past the fishing harbour when Grandma Marge had caught them, however. She,

alongside Jaylen's mother, had then gone on to warn them of the flesh-eating eels that dwelled just beyond the Permadesco River. Neither of the boys truly believed this story, but it had been enough to stop them from venturing out again.

Now Max was sitting bolt upright in bed, his comic book and flashlight discarded to one side of him, and Bingo sprawled out to the other. He had slipped his glasses back on, and his eyes were fixed on the distant outline of Herman's Ridge. There was a cluster of five green lights hovering just above the surface of the tallest rock. They were unmoving, and arranged in a pattern that looked as if they could be joined up to make a slightly distorted letter 'M'. Max rubbed his eyes and checked that the lights were still there (they were) and then reached for his walkie-talkie that he kept by the side of his bed while he was (meant to be) sleeping.

'This is Maximilian. Come in, come in! Over.'

Max released his finger from the button and waited for a response. None came.

'I repeat: this is Maximilian. Come in! Over.'

The lights were still there, but who knew for how much longer.

'H-hello.' It was Jaylen's voice, low and groggy. 'I'm trying to sleep. Over.'

'Jaylen! Look out the window, towards Herman's Ridge. Quick! Over.'

Max waited, the walkie-talkie still grasped in his hand.

'Woah! I see them!' It wasn't Jaylen's voice but Dakota's. 'Over.'

'Dakota!' Max called into the walkie-talkie. 'Why didn't you answer me before? Over.'

'Well I was in the middle of a level and I couldn't pause the *Genesis* until I killed this boss! Did you see the lights, Jaylen? Isaac? Over.'

'Man, that *has* to be a UFO!' It was Jaylen again, and any trace of tiredness had left his voice. 'Do you think they're picking someone else up, Max? Over.'

Max stared at the green lights; they still hadn't moved and there was no sign of a beam coming from any of them. 'But who would be out at Herman's Ridge? And they don't usually travel in packs. Maybe that's their homebase and where they took Little Jimmy...'

Max trailed off. There were footsteps coming up the stairs towards his bedroom door. He lay back down and dragged his sheet from under Bingo's paw to pull over his own head. He just had time to turn off the flashlight when the bedroom door was pushed open.

'Maximilian, are you still awake? I thought I heard you talking to someone.'

He tried to keep perfectly still as Grandma Marge took a step closer to his bed. Suddenly, Jaylen's voice came blaring out of the walkie-talkie again.

'Max, hello? What were you saying about where the aliens took Little Jimmy? Over.'

During the bus ride to school on Monday morning, Max and Jaylen explained to Isaac what they had seen above Herman's Ridge (Dakota's parents let him ride his bike to school).

'Man, I wish I'd seen it!' Isaac was leaning over the back of his seat to talk to them. 'I sleep through everything.'

'Well, Grandma Marge caught me using the walkie-talkie and hid the batteries when she found out we were talking about Little Jimmy. But what she doesn't know,' Max pulled open the zipper on his backpack and withdrew a new pack of batteries, 'is that I have these.'

By the start of Social Studies class that afternoon, they had exhausted the topic of the lights over Herman's Ridge. While Max had been able to convince Jaylen of his UFO theory, Dakota and Isaac, owing to their belief that it was child abductors who had got Little Jimmy and not aliens, were less easily swayed.

'It could have just been an airplane,' Dakota suggested as they took their seats at the back of the classroom.

'Yeah, or even Chinese lanterns,' Isaac offered.

Max gave them both the side eye he had picked up from Grandma Marge whenever she was irritated by someone. Miss Peterson came in then, pushing the school's TV cart in front of her. She knelt down to plug it into the wall outlet beneath the chalkboard.

'Okay class, as you know, a big part of Social Studies in seventh grade involves Sex Ed.' Miss Peterson looked almost as uncomfortable saying these words in front of them as Max felt on hearing her say them. 'So today we are going to watch a video on puberty and some of the changes and feelings you might be experiencing. And I want you all to be sensible and mature this week.'

Her eyes lingered on Isaac who, the last time she had made them watch such a video, had loudly added his own commentary to it.

'I wish your sister was the one teaching me Sex Ed., Dakota,' Isaac whispered to the left of Max.

Max reached into his desk and pulled out a copy of *Monsters! Monthly* he kept hidden there for such emergencies. He was scanning through it, looking for an article he hadn't already read a hundred times, when he heard the sound of a desk scraping against the floor. Looking around, he saw that Dakota was out of his seat and was now trying to wrestle Isaac to the ground. Jaylen jumped up and managed to pull Dakota, arms still swinging, away from Isaac; Isaac had slipped lower into his seat, and had somehow managed to get his large stomach stuck in the gap between his desk and chair. Reluctantly, Max stood up and helped Isaac pull himself loose. The entire class was now hanging over the backs of their seats, staring open-mouthed at them. Miss Peterson's face turned from shocked to furious in less than two seconds.

'Out into the hallway, all four of you, now!'

'We didn't even do anything!' Max and Jaylen called in unison.

'I said NOW!'

She put them all in detention that afternoon. When Isaac began to cry that they would miss the school bus home and there was a kidnapper on the loose, Miss Peterson called each of their mother's (or grandmother, in the case of Max) and told them what had happened. Grandma Marge agreed to pick them all up after detention and drop them off home. They had to wait out in the hallway until the bell to signal the end of the school day rang and then, after being subjected to their classmates' laughter and taunts as they filed out towards home and freedom, were led back into Miss Peterson's empty classroom.

'You will spend your detention watching the video you *should* have watched in class, if you hadn't caused that little ruckus,' she told them, inserting the VHS back into the machine.

She turned out the classroom lights then sat down at her own desk, burying her face into a Stephen King paperback. The video started, and Isaac snickered beside Max as the

opening music came on, the screen showing the familiar logo of *Green's Educational Series*. Max squirmed in his seat then took off his glasses, that way whatever horrors were about to appear on the screen would at least be out of focus. He was able to make out the outline of a cartoon boy against a white screen.

'This is Tommy,' the voice over began. 'Tommy has noticed some changes in his body lately. Have you noticed some changes in your own body, too?'

This was enough for Max. He pulled his comic book back out and turned to an article about Bigfoot sightings in Oregon, although he was unable to concentrate on the words in front of him. He felt anger pulsate through his body, both at Dakota and Isaac for landing them in detention, and at Miss Peterson for making them sit through that stupid video. They should be getting settled in the treehouse for another one of their meetings right now, not still stuck in school. He glanced up at Miss Peterson to check that she wasn't watching him *not* watching the video. After a minute, she put down her book and stood up.

'I'll be back in a couple minutes. Mr. Jason is just down the hall, with his door *and* his ears open, so don't move, any of you.'

With that, she turned on her heel and walked out of the classroom. The door swung shut behind her.

'Miss Peterson didn't want to be in the same room as Isaac when the video started talking about boners,' Dakota called across the row of desks.

Max's hand formed into a fist by his side. He whipped around to face Dakota and Isaac.

'You two are the reason we're even in detention, so shut the hell up before Miss Peterson comes back!'

Dakota made a sarcastic *whoooo* sound behind his back, and Max opened his mouth to retort when Jaylen spoke.

'Hey, Max — look at the screen!'

Max slipped his glasses back on and stared at the TV. Tommy was walking down the street holding a girl's hand, the shape of a love heart beating exaggeratedly against the front of his shirt. But behind the newly-pubescent lovebirds, Max saw, his eyes widening, was a tornado quickly gaining on them. It was the most bizarre sight Max had ever seen in his life. The two characters, and the city behind them, were badly-drawn cartoons, filled with static and blurry around the edges due to how old the VHS was. But the tornado was not animated, nor was it at all grainy — it looked as real as if Max was staring at it out of the window right now. It was as if someone had spliced real footage of a tornado onto the video, but how: and why?

'Tommy feels his heart beating faster and his hands start to sweat when he looks at Cindy-Lou,' the voice over continued, seemingly unaware of the tornado now getting closer to the screen. 'That night, Tommy will wake up from a dream about Cindy-Lou and he—'

Max heard anguished voices and chairs scraping against the floor behind him but he couldn't move. His eyes were fixed on what was happening in front of him. The tornado was no longer on the screen, it was now moving across the room towards him. It filled the entire classroom from floor to ceiling, swirling ropes of thick grey air that moved like water stuck circling the drain. This had to have been what Ally had seen in the Craigs' backyard. The

sound was like a high pitched scream gaining volume. Posters and pictures stuck to the walls began to flutter violently, caught in its gusts.

‘Max!’ Jaylen clamped his hand around his arm.

Jaylen’s touch managed to break Max’s brief spell of paralysis. He got up and stumbled after Jaylen on legs that felt too heavy. Isaac and Dakota were at the back of the classroom, their backs up against the wall.

‘We can’t stay in here, move!’ Jaylen shouted, crossing the floor to pull open the door. ‘Now!’

Max and Dakota were halfway towards the door when Max realised that Isaac wasn’t behind them. He spun around. Isaac was still cowering against the back wall of the classroom as the tornado continued to inch closer to him, his hair and shirt flapping against his skin.

‘Isaac!’ Max took a step towards him but Dakota stopped him before he could get any further.

‘You wanna get sucked up in that thing, too?’

‘We can’t leave him!’ Max shot back.

‘He’s right!’ Jaylen shouted, pushing them both aside. ‘We can’t go without him!’

But as they turned to try and pull Isaac out of the classroom with them, it became all too apparent that they were too late. Isaac’s round face was still set in the silent scream that Max knew would haunt his dreams for the rest of his days as the swirling grey mist engulfed him. The next second he was gone, and so was the tornado.

The sheriff spoke to each of them individually, and then as a group, before seeing them on their own again. After speaking to Max alone for the second time, Max had to wait while Grandma Marge and Sheriff Martinez talked some more. He looked around at the wood panel of the little sheriff’s office, and the *MISSING* poster of Little Jimmy with the same details on as the milk carton had. Soon, there would be a similar one with Isaac’s face on. His mouth felt too dry and he swallowed.

‘After experiencing a traumatic event it’s normal for kids to dissociate, to make up things as a way to try and forget about the true horrors of what happened to them.’ Sheriff Martinez’s deep voice sounded across the small office. ‘My wife is a therapist, Mrs. Day. I think it would be a good idea for the boys to speak to her, if you agree.’

‘I— I guess you’re right, Sheriff,’ Grandma Marge sighed.

‘We’ll be in touch, ma’am.’

Max didn’t speak as Grandma Marge led him out of the office and to her car. She slid in next to him and turned to face him.

‘Maximilian, honey... Please, please talk to me.’

He met her eyes. ‘I’ve told you a hundred times, just like I told Sheriff Martinez and Miss Peterson. Isaac got taken by the—’

‘Tornados don’t just appear out of television screens, Maximilian. And they don’t abduct small boys before vanishing into thin air. Miss Peterson found you, Jaylen and Dakota in the janitor’s closet. Did *he* take Isaac? If he threatened you not to say anything — if he touched you — God help me, I’ll—’

Max punched the side of his seat. ‘He wasn’t even there! We went in there to hide!’

After the tornado had got Isaac, they had rushed out of the classroom and through the first door they had reached — convinced that the tornado might come back for them — which just so happened to have been the janitor's closet. Jaylen had stacked buckets and cleaning supplies in front of the door, and they had been huddled in there, together, when Miss Peterson had pulled open the door to investigate who was screaming (it was Dakota). And then Mr. Wagner, the school janitor, had returned to put his mop away while they were still explaining to her about what had happened to Isaac. When Sheriff Martinez and his band of reckless men had arrived on the scene, they had put Mr. Wagner into handcuffs without even questioning him or the boys first. He was now in a holding cell on the outskirts of town.

Grandma Marge surveyed him. 'Once we're home, I think I'd better call your mother Maximilian.'

'Buttload of good that will do. She doesn't care about me.'

'That's not true, honey, and you know it. Your mother loves you.'

'Oh, really? She couldn't even come visit me on my birthday. That's how much she *loves* me.' Hot tears were threatening to spill down Max's face now. 'She's just like Dad. She only cares about herself.'

He hunched over to wipe his eyes, pretending to stare out of the car window. After a few minutes Grandma Marge started up the engine. Even if she wouldn't admit it, she knew that Max was right. After his father had abandoned them to live with his new family in Portland, his mother hadn't been able to cope. Max had only been eight at the time, but he still remembered those nights watching her drink until she passed out on the couch. Eventually, when even she knew that things couldn't go on like that any longer, his mother had allowed him to be whisked away to Deadwater Cove to live with her parents. Max hadn't even been given a say in it. Grandma Marge had bought him Bingo, and Grandpa Don had built him a treehouse, but neither one managed to fill the hole in his heart that his mother had left.

That night, Max dreamed that he could see Isaac's and his mother's and father's faces in the green lights over Herman's Ridge. They were close enough to touch, but each time that he reached out his fingers they would disappear again and he would wake up.

He didn't try calling for Jaylen or Dakota, but he kept his walkie-talkie by his bed as usual — just in case.

They had only been back at school for a little over a month since Isaac's disappearance when summer vacation came around. Mr. Wagner was still in a holding cell, and the fact that no other kids had gone missing during that time seemed to confirm in the minds of Grandma Marge, Sheriff Martinez and practically every other person in town that he *was* the one who had taken Little Jimmy and Isaac. Despite repeatedly explaining what had happened in detention that afternoon, no one believed Max, Jaylen and Dakota about the tornado; even Ally, who had been the first one to see it all those weeks ago, had convinced herself that they were all suffering from some kind of psychosis and the tornado wasn't real. For Max himself, the events of that afternoon had made him rethink his theory that it was aliens that had got Little Jimmy. He had witnessed the tornado escape the TV and sweep up Isaac himself; had felt the power of its gusts on his own skin. And there had been no UFO in sight. Jaylen's theory was that Isaac had been zapped into another dimension — that the tornado was a

portal to some alternative universe — but that just sounded like the plot of some terrible Saturday morning movie to Max. Even *Monsters! Monthly* didn't give page space to interdimensional travel. If he was honest, Max didn't know what to believe anymore. All he knew was that Isaac was gone and he was probably never coming back. All he had to remember him by was his picture that now covered the sides of the town's milk cartons, and the image of his face forever caught in that silent scream that continued to haunt his nightmares.

'Be careful not to cut over the lines, honey.' Grandma Marge jabbed at the newspaper in his hand with her finger. 'And keep your eyes peeled for any money off mustard, this one's expired already.'

Max leaned back in one of Grandma Marge's old wooden dining chairs and sighed. She had forced him into helping her scour stacks of old magazines and newspapers for money off coupons when all he really wanted to do was sit and watch old vampire movies by himself. Most of the afternoon had already slipped away and there was a red mark around his fingers from where the handle of the scissors pressed in. Usually he was excused from joining her in her favourite hobby of couponing, but she was in charge of buying the food for the town's Fourth of July cookout and so needed some help in procuring all of the discounts she could lay her hands on.

'Twenty-five cents off hot dog buns.' He held it up for her to check the smallprint.

'Hey, good eye — and this one can be doubled up!' She ruffled his hair. 'I'll make a couponer out of you yet.'

The sun was already starting to slip lower in the sky outside the bay window on the front of the house by the time they had finished. Max was gathering up the pile of coupons to give to Grandma Marge when he realised that she had fallen asleep, her chin resting on the front of her bosom. Taking advantage of this fact, he began to creep upstairs to get his walkie-talkie to arrange a last minute treehouse meeting. Despite Grandma Marge's relief that Mr. Wagner was off the streets, she had barely let Max out of her sight all summer, so discussing anything related to Isaac or the tornado proved nearly impossible. His foot was on the top step when he heard Bingo bounding up the stairs behind him, chasing him.

Max turned around to face him. 'Hey boy, be quiet, Okay?'

He held up his hands and Bingo, thinking that this gesture meant he was about to get a treat, started to yelp excitedly. Hearing this, Grandma Marge coughed and snorted herself awake in her chair.

'Maximilian!'

He cursed under his breath and slumped back down the stairs, Bingo still following him.

'We need to go to the store now, honey, before it gets too late.' She was already taking down her car keys from the hook by the door. 'I asked Mr. Traylor to put some supplies to one side for me, and I swear to God if that man utters *one* complaint about my coupons I will leave my cart in the middle of the store and take my custom to the *Walmart* down in Biddeford. You just watch me. What I'm doing is a public service.'

She went on like that the whole car ride there. Mr. Traylor, however, did not complain once as he came out of the back of the store laden with the buns, meat and salad he had put to one side for her. The checkout girl, though, was not so friendly as she was forced to scan

coupon after coupon while Grandma Marge checked that the new total was right each time. Spurred on by a mixture of both boredom and embarrassment, Max wandered over to the sliding doors at the front of the store. There were two vending dispensers back there that gave you a little plastic toy in a capsule if you inserted fifty cents and turned the handle. He reached inside the pocket of his pants for a coin to put into the slot, hoping for a yo-yo or a finger skateboard, when someone banged on the window above his head. He looked up. Jaylen had his nose pressed against the glass.

‘Jaylen?’

At that moment Dakota appeared beside Jaylen, gesturing for Max to join them outside. He looked around the store — the checkout girl was still working through Grandma Marge’s coupons, and she didn’t seem to have noticed he wasn’t still standing beside her yet — then stepped through the sliding doors and onto the street. Dakota and Jaylen came around the corner of the building, each pushing their bikes.

‘Max! We tried to call for you on the walkie-talkies but you didn’t answer. And when you weren’t home we guessed you’d be here with your grandma. Listen,’ Jaylen clapped a hand on Max’s shoulder. ‘The lights are out over Herman’s Ridge again, and there are *six* this time!’

‘Six?’ Max blinked, thinking back to the night he had first seen them. ‘But last time there were—’

‘Five!’ Dakota interjected. ‘So maybe it has something to do with—’

‘Isaac.’ The word slipped from Max’s mouth before he could stop himself.

‘Exactly! He could be out there, near Herman’s Ridge. Maybe it’s another portal, like the tornado, or it could even be where it leads to!’

‘C’mon, get on!’ Jaylen jumped onto his bike and gestured for Max to climb on behind him. ‘Before they disappear again.’

‘I brought some binoculars from dad’s store.’ Dakota tapped the string around his neck. ‘So we can get a closer look once we swim out there.’

Max pushed his glasses up his nose. ‘I don’t know, guys. Maybe it’s not a good idea to go poking around out there. Grandma Marge is waiting for me in the store, and tomorrow is the Fourth of July cookout...’

They both stared at him.

‘Are you serious, Max?’ Dakota propped his bike up against a streetlight and started towards him, his jaw set. ‘After all the meetings we had trying to find Little Jimmy but now that Isaac is gone, too, you wanna give up? Did you forget we were “The Milk Carton Kids”? I thought you were meant to be our leader. A leader wouldn’t give up on his friend.’

Max scraped the sole of his sneaker along the sidewalk. The truth was that investigating what happened to Little Jimmy had felt like an adventure, as if he was stuck in one of the ‘Weird But True’ articles he loved reading in *Monsters! Monthly*. But he had always remained positive that Little Jimmy *would* turn up again — that he would walk back into town with a story about being picked up in a stranger’s truck, while Max alone would know that he really meant that he had spent the past few weeks in a UFO. But after what had happened to Isaac, this wasn’t a game anymore. It wasn’t fun. It was all too real, and Max — though he didn’t dare to admit it to the others — was scared. He had lost one of his best friends, he didn’t want to lose another one. Or himself.

‘Max?’ Jaylen’s tone wasn’t accusatory or full of bitterness like Dakota’s. ‘What do *you* think we should do?’

Jaylen had been the first person to speak to Max when he had still been an outsider in town; had offered him a seat next to him on the school bus when no one else would. He had managed to single-handedly banish Max’s fears around being the new kid almost completely and, along with Isaac and Dakota, had also helped him to understand what true friendship really meant. Max, unlike his parents, did not just abandon the people he cared about. He suddenly realised what they had to do.

He spat into his hand and held it out in front of him. ‘I think we should go find our friend.’

Jaylen’s face broke into a grin and he did the same, Dakota soon joining them. Max glanced back through the store window — Grandma Marge was now looking around for him — then climbed onto the back of Jaylen’s bike.

By the time they had rode through the town square and were headed towards the fishing docks, the sun was already dropping into the Permadesco River, the horizon a golden shade of orange. The sight made Max’s stomach squirm. He was reminded of the countless summer evenings they had spent hanging out by the water, Isaac lagging behind the rest of them while they swam the length of the pier. From the first summer that Max had moved to Deadwater Cove, it had always been the four of them. They hadn’t taken out their bikes since Isaac had been gone (Dakota even started riding on the school bus again) and now, seeing the blur of the town and feeling the breeze on his face, Max almost felt as if it was one of those carefree, joyful evenings again. That is until he blinked and remembered that one of their group was missing, bringing with it that familiar numbing tingle of loss again.

‘We’ve gotta stick together so nothing happens to any of us this time, Max: me, you and Dakota.’

‘I know,’ Max called to Jaylen, his arms clamped around his waist.

It was then that the last of the trees cleared and Max saw it. Even in the final moments of daylight, the lights above Herman’s Ridge looked brighter than on that night he had seen them from his bedroom window. Six green orbs were suspended in the air, perfectly still and arranged in two parallel rows.

‘Do you think we should...?’

Whatever Dakota was about to ask if they should do, they never found out. Max turned around to look at him. Dakota’s mouth had fallen open, his eyes fixed on a spot somewhere back beyond the trees.

‘Holy crap,’ Dakota whispered, his bike coming to a stop.

It took Max a few moments to realise that the breeze on his face was not because of the bike moving forwards: Jaylen had stopped pedalling and was now frozen in place like Dakota. Instead, it was due to the swirling grey tornado now moving out of the gap in the trees and towards them.

‘Not again!’ Jaylen yelled, clamping his feet onto the pedals and setting the bike back into motion.

Max held on tight to him as they gathered speed, passing over the smooth lawn that sloped towards the fishing docks. As they flew downwards, Max risked a look back over his

shoulder. Dakota was closing the distance between their bikes but he was not fast enough to outrun the tornado that was now gaining on him.

‘Dakota!’ Max screamed. ‘Come on!’

Dakota gritted his teeth and pushed down onto the handlebars with all his might. As he surged towards them, Max urged him on. Even if he had to drag him by the front of his shirt, he was not going to let him go. But then Jaylen’s bike hit the corner of a vast slab of stone and the back wheel was lifted off the ground. The bike lurched forwards and began to nosedive down the hill and towards the docks, bringing Jaylen and Max (now holding on for dear life) along with it. Within a few seconds Jaylen had lost all control of it, and Max realised that they had to get off the bike or it was going to bring them with it, crashing into the Permadesco River below. He let go of Jaylen and jumped sideways, yelling at him to do the same. After rolling down the hill for a few yards he landed on his back onto the warm grass. He registered a stinging pain in his left elbow but didn’t dwell on it, scrambling back onto his feet.

‘Jaylen! Dakota!’ he called into the rapidly darkening sky.

‘I’m Okay!’ It was Jaylen’s voice from a few feet away, winded but conscious.

Max wheeled around, searching for some sign of Dakota. He saw his bike first, strewn just a bit further up the hill from the spot where he was standing. And then he saw the tornado. As it snatched up Dakota’s body, his white sneakers were lifted off the ground and he was spun around in its thick ropes of grey air. Max had just enough time to make out his pale, terrified face before the tornado was gone again, just as abruptly as it had appeared, taking Dakota with it. The dark realisation came to Max, sitting heavy on his chest and now spreading wide across his body: Dakota was gone, too. He pulled at the collar of his t-shirt, struggling to breathe. It had happened again, and he hadn’t been able to stop it. There was only him and Jaylen left now. That thought seemed to sober him up, though, as he remembered Jaylen was still lying on the ground somewhere. Max took a deep breath of salty evening air then marched over to look for Jaylen. He found him and helped him to his feet.

‘He’s gone, Max.’

‘I know.’ Max kept his hand on Jaylen’s back as he took his first step forwards. ‘Can you walk Okay?’

He shook his head. ‘I hurt my ankle. I think maybe I sprained it.’

Max guided Jaylen over to a large boulder and told him to sit down, then he climbed up the hill to grab Dakota’s bike (Jaylen’s was now, presumably, floating somewhere along the river). After a quick check over he saw that the wheels were still fine.

‘Time to switch positions: you get on the back and I’ll ride,’ he told Jaylen. ‘We’ll head back to the town square, try and find Sheriff Martinez or someone who’ll listen. They have to believe us about the tornado this time. If they don’t—’

‘I believe you, because I saw it too.’

The gruff voice sounded out across the silent hill. Both Max and Jaylen whipped their heads around to see who had spoken. A tall man, bearded and broad shouldered, stepped forwards. He surveyed the two boys with dark, bespectacled eyes from under his yellow hat.

‘The name’s Roddy,’ he gestured to himself with a large hand. “Roddy the Fisherman” is what most people call me, amongst other things, even though I’m no fisherman. I work down on the docks, making sure everything is going smoothly out at sea.

Anyway, I was watching those lights over Herman's Ridge when I heard screaming coming from up here. So I turn my binoculars around and what do I see? Some scrawny little kid being whisked up in a tornado like a fly rolled up in a spider's web. Only that wasn't no normal tornado. Not the way that thing disappeared into thin air along with the boy.'

Max and Jaylen stared at each other, both thinking the same thing: *could he be trusted?*

'What were you three doing up here alone, anyways?' Roddy the Fisherman who wasn't actually a fisherman asked them. 'You know two kids have already gone missing in Deadwater Cove this year, right? Now your friend went ahead and made himself the third.'

Max knew that they couldn't ignore him forever.

'You said you saw the lights over Herman's Ridge, sir. We saw them too.'

Roddy nodded. 'I've worked on the docks since I was fifteen years old, and some of the things I've seen out in Herman's Ridge would turn even your fair hair grey, boy. There's something strange about those lights, something... wrong. It's not a good sign. Something's happening out there in Herman's Ridge if you ask me, something bad.'

Max and Jaylen both looked at Roddy, horrified.

'What do you mean?' Jaylen shifted his injured leg on the stone. 'What kinda stuff have you seen out there?'

'The type of thing that you've only seen in your worst nightmares.' Roddy pushed his glasses up onto his nose. 'Come on, it's getting dark. I'm taking you two home.'

Jaylen didn't have time to resist before Roddy had picked him up and flung him over his shoulder as easily as if Jaylen weighed no more than an empty sack. Max set Dakota's bike back onto its side in the grass then raced after them, trying to keep up with Roddy's strides as he headed down the hill and towards the docks.

'Hey sir!' Max shouted into the semi-darkness.

'My truck's down here,' Roddy called over his shoulder. 'Keep up, kiddo.'

Max was relieved to see that the truck *was* there when they reached the bottom of the hill; it was the same type of truck Granda Don used to drive. Roddy bundled Jaylen into the backseat and then climbed into the driver's seat. Max slid in next to him, after glancing out towards Herman's Ridge: the lights were gone now.

'Hey, what about Dakota's bike?' Jaylen asked from behind them.

'You can get it yourselves tomorrow. Besides, it's evidence now.' Roddy already had his thick hands on the wheel and his foot on the gas. 'My job is only to get the pair of *you* back home in one piece.'

The truck was winding its way up the dirt path towards the town square now, and Max looked across at Roddy who had his eyes fixed on the road. There was something familiar about him, Max had sensed it from the very first moment he had seen him, but he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. There was something in his voice, or maybe his eyes, that Max recognised. In a strange way, Roddy almost reminded him of his father. The truck continued to speed through the dark streets and, when Max looked out of the window again, he saw that they were already at the corner of Grandma Marge's street. Roddy slowed the truck to a stop by the sidewalk in front of her yard.

Max almost tripped over his own feet scrambling to get out of the truck. 'Thank you for the ride, sir.'

He ran around to pull open the backdoor and help Jaylen out onto the sidewalk.

‘That was weird.’

‘I know,’ Max said, supporting Jaylen as they made their way up the front yard. ‘I thought he was gonna lock us in his trunk or something.’

‘No, I mean how he knew *right* where your grandma’s house was without even asking.’

Max stopped. ‘Wow, you’re right...’

The two boys were unable to give it any more thought, however, as the front door of the house was thrown open and Grandma Marge appeared, silhouetted against the orange glow from inside. Max had never seen her look so pale.

What followed felt like a case of *déjà vu* for Max and Jaylen. After they had been checked out at the hospital (Jaylen *had* sprained his ankle), they were both made to speak to Sheriff Martinez again, just as they had done after Isaac had gone. And, just like that time, neither of them were believed about what they had seen happen to their friend. Sheriff Martinez, however, did seem interested in Roddy the Fisherman. When it turned out that none of the men working on the docks knew of a man named Roddy — and neither did anyone else in town have any recollection of such a man — the sheriff decided that he must have been an accomplice of Mr. Wagner using a fake name. He drove out to question Mr. Wagner in his holding cell that very evening. There was talk of the Fourth of July celebrations the next day being cancelled, but instead a compromise was made: there would be an increased police presence around town, and there would be a seven p.m. curfew enforced for kids to be out on their own. Max and Jaylen, they were told, would spend their morning talking to Sheriff Martinez’s wife, the therapist. Max, however, had different plans for them.

He didn’t speak to Grandma Marge when they got home from the sheriff’s office that night, and instead went straight up to his room. There, he pretended to be asleep until he had heard that she herself had gone to bed. He waited almost a full half hour after hearing Grandma Marge’s bedroom door close, then crept over to his closet. He pulled out his walkie-talkie he now kept hidden in an empty shoe box, and called for Jaylen.

‘I’m here, Max.’ Jaylen didn’t sound as if he had managed to get any sleep either. ‘Are we heading out now? Over.’

They had quickly gone over Max’s plan when Grandma Marge was talking to Sheriff Martinez, but there were still several details that needed to be agreed upon — *and* a hundred things that could go wrong. Max decided that now wasn’t the time to think about those things, though. They just had to focus on getting out there, and hope for the best.

‘I’m going downstairs to get some supplies, then I’m bringing my bike around to your place,’ Max answered, glancing out of his window at the lights shining above Herman’s Ridge again. ‘Get ready and be waiting on the sidewalk in ten minutes for me. Over.’

Max stripped out of his pyjamas and pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater — even though it was July, it was the middle of the night, and where they were headed would most certainly be cold. Then, he stuffed his walkie-talkie and a flashlight into his backpack and headed out of his bedroom. He had to make his way down two flights of stairs to reach the kitchen, the first the steps down from his attic bedroom, and then the staircase that led to the first floor of Grandma Marge’s house. His stockinged feet moved lightly and soundlessly

over the carpeted stairs. He was relieved to hear deep snoring coming from Grandma Marge's bedroom. Eventually, he found himself in the dark kitchen where he gathered supplies for himself and Jaylen: a barrel of cheese balls, six candy bars, some string cheese, half a box of cereal, an unopened carton of milk (he packed this at the bottom so he wouldn't have to stare at Isaac's face whenever he opened his backpack); and two berry sodas each. There was more than enough for when they (hopefully) found Dakota and Isaac, and maybe even Little Jimmy, too. He pulled his now bulging at the seams backpack onto his shoulders and slipped on his sneakers. Bingo was sleeping on the rug in front of the bay window, and even though Max desperately wanted to go over and pet him he knew he couldn't risk waking Grandma Marge up.

'I'll come back for you, boy, no matter what happens,' he whispered, then let himself out of the front door.

The night air hit him and he was surprised at how mild it still felt as he made his way across the dark front lawn. He always left his bike propped up against the side of Grandpa Don's old truck he used to deliver refrigerators in before his death. Before setting off, Max looked back at his treehouse one last time. He wanted to stare at it, engrain the image of it onto his mind, in case he never saw it again. But he shouldn't think like that, he told himself. With only the yellow glow of the streetlights guiding his way, Max peddled forwards along the empty streets. He saw a dark figure leaning against a fence post as he turned the corner, and was about to double back when he realised that it was just Jaylen.

'At first I thought you were a cop or something,' Max told him, coming to a stop and helping him climb onto the back of the bike. 'How's your ankle?'

'Bad. I had to practically shuffle across the lawn on my butt.'

Max pulled off his backpack and gave it to Jaylen to wear, so that Jaylen could hold onto his waist while he was peddling.

'Did you pack some of your grandma's PB&J sandwiches? I'm starving.'

'No, sorry,' Max answered, setting off again. 'But I did bring cereal. And I remembered the milk.'

'Did you remember spoons?'

Max cursed under his breath.

He stuck to riding around the outskirts of the town square, hidden by the shadows of the taller buildings, rather than heading directly through it; even if there were no cops on patrol yet, there would be people out getting the town ready for the celebrations tomorrow. When they reached the hill where the tornado had taken Dakota just hours earlier, it was now covered with fireflies. Max was reminded of the evenings the four of them had spent collecting them in glass jars, talking about setting an army of them on their eighth grader bully Damon Parker (Isaac had tried to convince them that fireflies had razor sharp teeth and became feral once they were fed sugar).

'Dakota's bike's still there,' Jaylen called.

By the glow of the fireflies, Max was able to make it out in the dark grass where he had left it. Neither of them had told Sheriff Martinez the exact spot where the tornado had got Dakota, and they were glad the cops hadn't found his bike yet.

'We'll come back for it later, *with* Dakota and Isaac,' Max said, then steered his own bike down the hill towards the fishing docks.

Herman's Ridge came into view, just beyond the pier. The green lights seemed to hang in the black sky like giant stars just above the surface of the rocks.

'Hey, Max.' Jaylen's voice came from behind him. 'How many lights do you see?'

Max looked up again. Jaylen was right: there were seven now.

'After the tornado took Isaac, there were six—'

'And now it got Dakota, too, there are seven,' Jaylen finished for him.

As they reached the bottom of the hill, they saw that Roddy's dark truck was parked in the same spot it had been earlier. Jaylen pointed out that Roddy was asleep inside it, his stockinged feet resting on the dashboard.

'Maybe he could help us,' Max suggested to Jaylen.

'Do you think we can trust him?'

There was something inside Max that now told him that the answer was *yes*.

'There's only one way to find out, I guess.' Max slowed his bike to a halt and banged on the truck window. 'Hey, Mr. Roddy!'

Roddy started and his eyes flickered open.

'W-what?' he stuttered.

'Will you help us take a boat out to Herman's Ridge?'

The tiny wooden rowboat shuddered from side to side as the three of them climbed into it. Max helped Jaylen sit down, then squeezed in next to him. Roddy was sitting at the front of the boat, his knees reaching his chest. He had the oars clamped in his fists and, once the boys were settled inside, started the boat forwards. The surface of the Permadesco River was still as they moved across it, caught in the flow of its current. The night air was colder out on the water, and Max was glad that he had dressed in a sweater.

'Do you really think you'll find your friends out here?' Roddy's face was almost touching Max's as he leaned forwards to push the oars out behind him.

They had filled him in on their plan as they had made their way towards the docks.

Max stared at him. 'It's the best hope we have of getting them back.'

'It's our *only* hope,' Jaylen corrected him.

'Well, no matter what happens out here, stay with me. Both of you,' Roddy told them, his expression growing grave. 'I've seen things out at Herman's Ridge that... Well, let's just say you wouldn't want to face them alone.'

Jaylen raised his eyebrows at Max, but Max didn't return the look. For something to do with his now shaking hands (both from the cold, and the prospect of what they were about to do), Max pulled open the zipper on his backpack and withdrew the pack of string cheese. He offered one to Jaylen who shook his head.

'I wish you'd brought your grandma's PB&J sandwiches, instead.'

'I have peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.' Roddy kicked his metal lunch pail across the boat towards them. 'Help yourself.'

Both boys stared at him.

'They're not going to poison you. If I was planning to do something to you, don't you think I would have done it when I had you both in my truck earlier? And, in case you didn't realise, you're alone in the middle of the water with me right now. If I wanted to, I could have drowned you both five minutes ago.'

‘I guess he’s right...’ Jaylen whispered.

Max pulled open the lid of the pail and took out the saran wrapped sandwiches then divided them between them both. He and Jaylen took their first bite together.

‘They taste *just* like your grandma’s,’ Jaylen managed through a mouthful of bread.

‘Yeah, they do...’

Max pulled the two slices of bread apart. Grandma Marge always drizzled a thin layer of honey on the top slice — she was the only person he knew who did this — and Roddy had done the same. Weird, he thought to himself. They finished their sandwiches in silence, the only sound the slap of the oars against the water.

‘Hey, what are all these, Mr. Roddy?’

Max looked down at Jaylen who was rifling through a handful of newspaper clippings inside Roddy’s lunch pail, and leaned over to read the top one:

HUNT FOR MISSING GIRL, AGE SIX, GOES ON IN DEADWATER COVE

‘Hey!’ Jaylen called as Max pulled the clippings from his hands.

‘These are all the kids who ever went missing in Deadwater Cove.’

Max flicked through them. Alongside the girl, Little Jimmy and Isaac, there were three others.

‘That means seven kids have disappeared in Deadwater Cove over the years: these six and Dakota,’ Max felt his heart racing underneath his shirt. ‘And there are seven lights above Herman’s Ridge!’

Jaylen’s eyes grew wider. ‘You were right all along, Max. You always said those lights had something to do with Little Jimmy! But what about the tornado? Do you think it got them all?’

‘I don’t know, Jay. Maybe, but...’ Something suddenly occurred to Max. ‘Why would someone carry these around with them in their lunch pail? Unless they were—’

‘—Admiring their handiwork,’ Jaylen finished for him.

Without thinking what he was doing, Max stood up.

‘It *was* you!’ he raised a finger to Roddy. ‘You’re the one who’s been stealing kids. I should have known it from the moment you *just so happened* to see the tornado take Dakota this afternoon. Gimme a break! How did you do it? Who are you? Or, should I say, *what* are you?’

Roddy’s expression did not change from one of calm concentration. ‘I didn’t touch any of those kids and you, more than anyone, should know that. Now I suggest that you sit down unless you want this boat to overturn.’

‘Oh, is that a threat?’ Max pushed his glasses up his nose as anger flushed his cheeks red. ‘You may have gotten Isaac and Dakota but there is no way in hell you’re getting me and Jaylen. We’ve outrun your tornado twice now, we can do it a third time if we have to! Right, Jay?’

Jaylen got to his feet, wincing, and held onto Max to support himself. The gentle shaking of the little boat turned into violent shudders.

‘That’s right, Max. You’re not getting us, sir.’

‘I said, SIT DOWN.’

Roddy's bellows echoed across the silent water but he was too late. Jaylen's bad ankle gave out and he toppled sideways, out of the boat and into the freezing Permadesco River, taking Max with him.

Max woke up to the soft lap of icy water against his face. He felt something hard sticking into his back, groaned, then sat up right. Looking down, he realised that he was in Roddy's rowboat again. *But how?* Thoughts and questions began to swim through his mind. Where was Jaylen? And where was Roddy? Someone had secured the boat to a small rock behind him with a rope, and now it was stranded in the middle of the water. Reaching behind him, Max saw that it was Roddy's lunch pail he had been asleep on top of. There was no sign of his own backpack in the boat.

Carefully, and trying not to overturn the boat in either direction, Max got to his feet. He began to shiver, pulling his sodden clothes from his pimply flesh. There were a few inches of water in the bottom of the boat, the feel of that against his face must have been what had awakened him. He held onto the bumpy surface of the rock beside him then managed to turn around. The sky was lighter now, caught somewhere between a pale blue and a washed out pink. He could see the silhouette of Deadwater Cove off in the distance. And that was when Max realised where he was: the rock the boat was tethered to was part of Herman's Ridge.

Without hesitating, Max jumped off the boat and onto the rock, the vast outline of Herman's Ridge looming above him. Something told him that this was where he had to go: up. Its surface was slippery and he almost fell, but he managed to catch his balance. The next stone was larger and flatter, and he stepped onto it with ease. The surface of the rocks had been weathered into what resembled large, rough steps, he soon realised, leading up (almost in a spiral) to the highest point of Herman's Ridge; it was only once you reached so far up that you saw it. He continued climbing upwards for what must have been at least fifteen minutes without pausing once. From down below in the boat, he had been sure that the lights had gone out. But from here, as Max neared the top, he saw them again, though dim against the now lightening sky. And there were still only seven, he realised with relief. Which meant there was still hope for Jaylen yet. As Max climbed up, finally, onto the largest rock and highest point of Herman's Ridge, he had to stop himself from turning back around and jumping into the boat to sail back to Grandma Marge's house. He had come this far, there was no turning back now. Not if he wanted to find Jaylen and Dakota and Isaac. They were here, something in his bones told him so. But where was he supposed to go now he had reached the top?

As if in answer, the patch of rock he was standing on began to vibrate under his feet. Max scrambled to one side just in time as, all at once, a hole began to open up in the very spot he had been standing just moments before. The hole continued to double in size before, finally, the surface of the rock became still once more. The gap that had appeared was large enough for someone twice Max's size to climb into, and he leaned forwards to stare into it. He could hear the sound of water whooshing below, but could see nothing down there but blackness. Wishing he still had his backpack with him containing his torch, he lowered his body down onto the rock. Lying on his chest, he poked his head through the gap in the rocks and shouted.

'JAYLEN!'

His own voice echoed in his ears. Holding his breath, he waited for a reply. None came.

‘DAKOTA! ISAAC! JIMMY!’

The only response was the sound of the water bubbling beneath him. Feeling slightly light-headed, Max pulled his face up out of the gap and sat up again while he decided what to do next. As he tried to stand up, the rubber sole of his right sneaker slipped on a smooth patch of stone. He fell forwards, and then, scrabbling at the rocks, found himself slowly slipping down and down into the dark hole. The time that it took him to hit the water below, though little more than a few seconds, was long enough for Max’s mind to cycle through each of the imagined horrors that might greet him: flesh-eating eels, a crashed UFO, the tornado, or even the corpses of his best friends. All that was down there, however, was icy water surrounded by more rocks. He scrambled out of the water and onto one of the larger boulders, catching his breath. He wrapped his hands around his knees and huddled forwards, trying to maintain as much body heat as he could, and contemplated stripping out of his dripping clothes, but decided that might only make him freeze to death quicker. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, his surroundings became clearer to him. Max was in some sort of small cavern, and he realised that he had to now be *inside* of Herman’s Ridge because of the fact that he had fallen straight through the middle of the largest rock; it was almost as if it had been hollowed out. There were two other round openings, like tunnels, and tall enough to pass through, cut into the stone walls on the other side of the water. Those tunnels were his only way out now; there was no way he would be able to climb back up to reach the hole he had slipped down. But what dwelled beyond these two new openings Max did not know: would they lead him back out to the boat, or did they instead contain some unknown horrors, lying in wait for him? Max knew that sitting where he was and not moving would mean certain death, whether from the cold or hunger or whatever came to find him. Moving through one of those tunnels, though, would at least give him the *chance* of getting out; of living to see another day, and maybe even finding Jaylen. And so, he stood up.

Wading through the water again didn’t feel half as bad as the first time now that he knew what to expect. After a few minutes, he reached the other side of the cavern and hoisted himself up to where the entrance to the tunnels were. He knew that you were supposed to hold up a lit match when you were faced with more than one exit to find out which way the wind blew, and thus which would lead you outside. He had seen it happen in movies, as well as in *Monsters! Monthly* comic strips. Max, though, had nothing with him but the wet clothes that clung to his body. Not wanting to waste any more time, he started towards the closest opening. In his mind, he hoped he wouldn’t regret his decision.

The opening led to a low tunnel. Anyone taller than Max would have had to crouch down to walk through it, but he managed to stand upright without any difficulty. The narrow walls were covered in moss, and there seemed to be water underfoot. Perhaps he had made the right decision after all, he thought. Suddenly, the tunnel curved towards the left and Max bumped into the wall. He composed himself then set off again and, as he walked, the tunnel seemed to become brighter. Questioning if he was just imagining it, his steady walk became a run. It soon became apparent that the tunnel *was* certainly growing brighter. Wherever it was leading to was somewhere with light! All at once, the tunnel opened up into another cavern. Although this one was larger than the previous one and was much, much brighter. Max

clamped his eyes shut, the light hurting his eyes. Would he be able to make it outside from this cavern? All he had seen was the bright glow before he'd had to close his eyes. After a minute he felt ready to open them again, and what he saw made them widen with horror.

Just beyond the stony ground he was standing upon was a large body of water and, in its centre, frothing and swirling as if someone had pulled the stopper out of a giant bathtub, was a whirlpool. It moved violently, descending into a never ending spiral that led out of sight, resembling a tornado, only made out of water instead of air. And all around the cavern, suspended in mid air above the water, was what Max could only describe as cocoons made of green light: seven of them in total, each containing a child. These were the exact same shape as the lights they had seen over Herman's Ridge. With a pang of despair in his chest, he recognised Isaac and then Dakota, as well as Little Jimmy and the children from the newspaper clippings in Roddy's lunch pail. Whether they were alive or dead, he could not be sure. Their eyes were closed and their faces were set in an expression that made them appear like rubbery masks. Max wanted to scream or to yell but no sound would escape from his throat. A loud gurgling sound made Max look down again. He hadn't noticed it before — or perhaps it had not been there then — but there was now a figure caught in the middle of the whirlpool, spinning on the spot. He knew who it was, even before he took in the wide brown eyes and the black tufts of hair: Jaylen. Without hesitating, not even for a second, or stopping to think what he was about to do, Max lurched forward so that he was crouching by the edge of the water and threw out his hand.

'JAYLEN!' he screamed into the swirling water.

His arm wasn't long enough to reach Jaylen, he realised, so he stood up to look around for something else in the cavern to help him. A stick, or even a wide stone. Anything... But then *they* appeared, and any other thought was driven from his mind.

Max didn't realise what he was seeing at first. It almost looked as if the rocky walls were starting to shift and vibrate, like the rock he had stood on at the entrance to Herman's Ridge. But then he realised that it was not the walls that were moving, but the things scuttling down them. It felt as if Max had been submerged into the icy water of the first cavern again. If hell existed, then surely these were what dwelled there. Their eyes roved around the cavern hungrily, and Max was sure that they were going to set upon him, but then they started to crawl into the water towards Jaylen. If it didn't feel as if he could not move, as if his eyelids were pinned back and the soles of his sneakers were glued to the stony floor, Max would have clamped his eyes shut again, or tried to make a run for it. But instead he stood where he was, looking on as the first *thing* (for that's all he could describe it as) threw back its head and opened the dark hole where its mouth should have been, and then as the rest of them did the same. As they fell upon Jaylen Max did scream, loud and unwavering, before he passed out.

Maximilian Rodderick was fifteen years old when he moved out of his Grandma Marge's house and took to sleeping in his Grandpa Don's old truck by the Permadesco River. She let him take Bingo with him. He was hired by the city to work on the docks, watching the water — sort of like a lighthouse worker, if Deadwater Cove *had* a lighthouse, that is. He was given a wage and a shack by the water to live in. He barely ever left that shack — except to drive to *Traylor's Family Market* to buy bread and milk — which meant that most of the kids in town,

and the fishermen who worked on the docks, thought he was some kind of creep. ‘Roddy the Weirdo’ is what they chanted when they saw him (the kids had worse names for him). Years passed but Roddy (the name had stuck by that point) never stopped watching Herman’s Ridge for the lights. There had been eight the last time he had seen them, which was the night he had managed to escape the Ridge himself (he still had no idea how he had managed to do it). All he knew was that when the lights came out again, it meant there was going to be trouble.

Now, Roddy settled by the window of his shack that gave him the best view of the water. He picked up the metal lunch pail that, like his truck, had once belonged to his Grandpa Don and searched amongst the newspaper clippings for his sandwiches. They were made to his Grandma’s Marge’s recipe, with a squirt of honey, just how he liked them. He then poured himself a large glass of milk. Roddy thought he saw the face of someone he had once known on the side of the milk carton, but when he looked again, it was gone. He pushed his glasses up onto his nose. By the door to the shack, he had hung Bingo’s old collar (he was long dead now) and a poster from an old comic book. It read: *Don’t take your eyes off the skies!* As he took the first bite of his sandwich, his eyes settled on Herman’s Ridge. There were terrible things out there. Things that could make a man — or a kiddo — go mad. But as long as those lights never came out again, then things would be Okay. He was sure of it.

Bridging Statement

My first proper introduction to the American Gothic came in my second year of university, as part of the ‘Gothic House’ undergraduate module I was taking. I soon realised that my own writing, so often focused on the intersection between domesticity and repressed trauma in a small town USA setting, could be housed neatly within this genre (prior to this, as a young writer who wrote only for himself, I had given very little thought to what ‘genre’ or ‘style’ my work could be categorised as). Certainly, my decision to invariably set my stories in America (adopting American English words throughout them) led to some confusion amongst my lecturers and classmates (as well as my family members, when I eventually allowed them to read some of my writing) as to why I, as a Briton who had only vacationed in the USA once in my entire life, did this. During a workshop, one of my fellow students gave me the feedback that she always enjoyed my ‘dramatic, American stories’ and I think this perhaps best helps to answer the question as to why I did originally begin setting my writing in the USA. It was easier, and even more feasible, to imagine the dramatic events I had conjured up taking place against the backdrop of America, so often at the forefront of the world stage, than the grey streets of Sheffield I myself walked down everyday. As I began to read more works by American Gothic writers, however, thus deepening my understanding of the genre, I realised that what is distinct to the American Gothic is what was also, without fail, the source of terror or disquiet in my own stories. For Eric Savoy, this can be described as ‘a profound anxiety about historical crimes and perverse human desires that cast their shadow over what many would like to be the sunny American republic.’¹ Drawing on the parallels between the repressed conflict and sordid secrets of my fictional characters and the very real problematic history of the country they lived in, I so often married personal, individual trauma with trauma on a wider scale (whether within a household, workplace or community) in my own stories. This trauma would eventually return to the surface to expose the corrupt nature of what was thought of from the outside as perfect or wholesome: an American nightmare, if you will. This aforementioned ‘Gothic House’ module also exposed me to the writing of Stephen King and Shirley Jackson for the first time, two writers who have since had a profound impact on my own writing and whose work my own research into the American Gothic is centred on (as well as Toni Morrison, whose work I can happily say I discovered for myself).

My original plan for the creative element of this PhD was to rework and expand on the idea of a short story entitled ‘Bill 47’ I had previously written as an undergraduate, adapting it into a novel. The story begins when a new, free healthcare system is introduced in America; followed soon after by the passing of a law allowing people to rent a corpse on Halloween night (these corpses belong to the people who have been allowed to die in order to harvest their organs as part of the new healthcare system). The plot then follows Brock Tucker, a young police officer, as he goes undercover to infiltrate a nearby small town in order to discover which household the body of his late mother will be sent to so that he can

¹ Eric Savoy, ‘The rise of the American Gothic’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 167-88 (p. 168).

rescue it. The macabre ‘Bill 47’ was born out of my anxieties surrounding death and the human body (as well as a desire to understand both of these things more) after almost losing my father before he received life-saving transplant surgery in 2017.

I wrote and submitted my PhD proposal in the middle of 2019. What I could not anticipate at that time is that, just months later, the entire world would become consumed with the topic of sickness and death; nor that, almost simultaneously, there would be a reckoning with police brutality in the United States (and beyond) on a scale not before seen. As I began my PhD in October 2020, then, I started to question what ramifications the events of that year would have for the novel I had originally set out to write. Would it still be conceivable to write a novel in which the corpse is treated so flippantly in society, even coming to be regarded as a form of entertainment; or in which the hero is an all-American cop? Although I did begin to plot and write this novel, it became clear to me after my confirmation review that it was simply not working. Here, several questions arose around the feasibility of the law permitting the renting of corpses, as well as surrounding the healthcare system introduced in my novel. Simultaneously, I began to feel that I was simply retelling the same story (using the same town, characters and overall premise) as I had already told in ‘Bill 47’, and that extending the short story to become a novel was adding nothing to the narrative. As the research I undertook for the critical component of my PhD was informed by the creative element, I also felt that, by continuing with my original plan, my thesis would be disjointed and lack a cohesive line of argument: the original subject of the third chapter of my thesis would have been the American healthcare system, which neither related to the previous two chapters nor built on my study of the American Gothic.

In order to improve the focus and overall cohesion of my thesis, I decided to build on the research I had started in the first chapter by continuing to consider the role of space and setting in the works of King and the wider American Gothic. I set out to answer the question: ‘Does the work of Stephen King still have a place within the figurative haunted house of the American Gothic, as the genre expands to include the voices of those once left out?’ In order to do this, I paired one King novel with a novel by a different author within the American Gothic genre in each chapter of my thesis (Jackson, Robin Cook and Morrison respectively). This allowed me to offer a new reading of each of the texts as I looked at how place and space functioned within them as a site of the Gothic, while simultaneously considering the genre’s commentary on various aspects of American society (such as gender, capitalism and race).

This research led me to think about the link between place and terror in my own writing, and so I conceived of the short story collection I ultimately came to write. Central to the element of horror or uneasiness in each of my stories is place and setting, whether it is a home, a department store, an old bridge; or a rock formation in the middle of the ocean. ‘The House on Montrose Avenue’, as my attempt at a haunted house narrative, is perhaps the most vivid example of this. For King, ‘the truest definition of the haunted house would be “a house with an unsavoury history”’.² I explored this idea with Number Six, Montrose Avenue, as its dark past returns, quite literally, to haunt the present. This story was also informed by the research I had done on Shirley Jackson’s writing surrounding domesticity and trauma for

² Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (London: Warner Books, 1993), p. 300.

women (particularly in *The Haunting of Hill House*, 1959). While, in my story, Minnie Carlisle thinks of her home as a safe place for herself and her family, even going so far as to realise that she misses the domesticity of her home life while she is out at work, this is juxtaposed with the image of the monstrous Montrose Avenue house (and, later, she even finds her own house transformed into a source of danger).

Like in the King novels explored in my thesis, the spectre of masculinity haunts the narrative of each of the four stories in my collection. Only one of the four boys who make up the titular club in 'The Milk Carton Kids' will reach manhood, and it is the very figure of his own older self who accompanies Max Rodderick on the journey that will ultimately result in his isolation and descent into madness. In 'The House on Montrose Avenue', it is Gary Price's greed and thirst for power that leads Minnie into the lair of Jennifer Graham. It is in 'The Doberman's Grin', however, that this is most apparent. Michael Arnold is tormented by his late father's accusations that he is not a 'real man' and resents his own wife and children for keeping him from his career as a writer. There are intentional and clear parallels here between the characters of Michael and Jack Torrance in King's *The Shining* (1977), a novel explored in my thesis. Unlike Jack, however, Michael is not the one to ultimately tear his family apart: symbolically, it is his young daughter instead, thus reclaiming her father's power as her own.

The expectations of traditional manhood are also explored in 'The Legend of Robert Jacobson'. Savoy writes that the American Gothic frequently 'gives voice to the dark nightmare that is the underside of "the American dream."'”³ Here, then, I wanted the figure of Robert Jacobson to come to represent all those persecuted because of their sexuality, rising up as a reminder of America's own violent homophobia — the fact that, like each of the short stories in my collection, 'The Legend of Robert Jacobson' is set in the 1990s allowed the hate crime (and the response to it) to feel more believable. As I worked on this story, I was also inspired by my research surrounding the African American Gothic, and how African American writers have used the genre (such as the motif of the returning dead in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, 1987, as explored in my thesis) to remind American society of the past crimes it would rather remained hidden: namely the effects of slavery. While, in recent years, the study of same-sex attraction and relationships within Gothic texts has expanded, giving rise to 'the Queer Gothic', a lot of this remains speculative, as very few explicitly homosexual characters can be found within the genre. Further, the 'Queer Gothic', as explored by William Hughes and Andrew Smith, can be argued to be 'predicated upon something more pervasive and, at times, more elusive than sexual identity', encompassing all those somehow 'Othered' by society.⁴ With the titular character in 'The Legend of Robert Jacobson', as well as Aaron in 'The House on Montrose Avenue', though, I wanted nothing about their sexualities to simply be implied or suggested. I also used the character of Aaron to subvert preconceived notions surrounding gay men and masculinity, when Minnie's husband finds his own masculinity challenged by him.

³ Savoy, 'The rise of the American Gothic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Hogle, p. 167.

⁴ William Hughes and Andrew Smith, 'Introduction: Queering the Gothic', in *Queering the Gothic*, ed. by William Hughes and Andrew Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 1-10 (p. 3).

At the end of each of the stories in my collection, I intentionally left the central character alive (even if, in the mind of the reader, this may only be momentarily). There is the potential — regardless of how slim it may be — for Michael, Minnie, Madison and even Max to move on from the horrors they have faced and begin again. While my impetus in completing this PhD was a desire to further my understanding of death and express my own anxieties surrounding it in a creative way, my research helped me to understand that life is just as important to the American Gothic as death is. In the epilogue of King's *The Shining*, Danny Torrance and Dick Hallorann, having survived the murderous Overlook hotel, look forward to a summer that has yet to come; just as, in Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe and Paul D realise that they 'need some kind of tomorrow' after 124 Bluestone Road has fallen silent again.⁵ Thankfully, too, my own father is still here to see the completion of this PhD. Instead of death, then, I decided to focus on surviving as the recurrent theme of my collection.

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⁵ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Picador, 1988), p. 273.

Part Two: Thesis

Introduction

Pioneering the American Gothic

In 1781, New York farmer James Yates ‘ritually murdered his wife and four children after hearing the command of religious “voices.”’ It was this ‘bizarre and unaccountable’ atrocity, according to Eric Savoy, which inspired the writing of ‘the first major novel to adapt the conventions of British Gothic to American circumstances’: Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* (1798).⁶ Indeed, Brown would even go so far as to reference the story of Yates in newspaper advertisements for the novel, giving credence to its impact on him.⁷ Echoing Savoy’s sentiments, Leslie A. Fiedler also names Brown as ‘the American pioneer in gothic fiction’, despite the fact that his novels did not achieve much commercial success in his lifetime.⁸ But what Brown did, as chronicled by Fiedler, is twofold. Firstly, he writes, ‘Brown established in the American novel a tradition of dealing with the exaggerated and the grotesque... as they correspond in quality to [the American’s] deepest fears and guilts’.⁹ Secondly, Fiedler continues, he set the American Gothic ‘well on the way to becoming a Calvinist exposé of natural human corruption rather than an enlightened attack on a debased ruling class or entrenched superstition’, as was true of the European Gothic novel. Brown was able to accomplish both of these things, then, by replacing ‘the corrupt Inquisitor and... the haunted castle and the dungeon’ with the figure of the Indian and the savage wilderness of the American forest, respectively.¹⁰ Indeed, Brown, in his own words, states the following as he addresses the reader in the preface to *Edgar Huntly* (1799):

America has opened new views to the naturalist and politician, but has seldom [sic] furnished themes to the moral painter. That new springs of action, and new motives to curiosity should operate; that the field of investigation, opened to us by our own country, should differ essentially from those which exist in Europe, may be readily conceived... Puerile superstition and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimaeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness, are far more suitable; and, for a native of America to overlook these, would admit of no apology.¹¹

In his exploration of ‘the western wilderness’ as a source of Gothic dread, then, Brown ‘essentially invent[ed] the American Frontier Gothic’, according to Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, as both the wilderness and the frontier would come to be ‘defining and

⁶ Eric Savoy, ‘The rise of the American Gothic’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 167-88 (pp. 171-2).

⁷ Rowland Hughes, “‘Wonderfully Cruel Proceedings’: The Murderous Case of James Yates’, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 38.1 (2008), 43-62 (p. 44) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3138/cras.38.1.43>>.

⁸ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 2nd edn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 144.

⁹ Fiedler, p. 155.

¹⁰ Fiedler, pp. 159-60.

¹¹ Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly: Or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, 1st edn (Ashland: The Kent State University Press, 2012), p. 3.

intrinsically Gothic elements of both American literature and American identity.’¹² Returning to Fiedler, he writes that Brown’s impact can be felt in the gothic nature of the early Frontier American novel even outside of those categorised *as* Gothic texts, such as Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), with their ‘trappings of terror’ as the result of the Faustian bargain. This focus on the gothic distinctive of American literature, then, is the result of ‘certain special guilts’ unique to the American experience, namely the Atlantic Slave Trade and the colonisation and displacement of its Native peoples. For, as Fiedler asks: ‘How could one tell where the American dream ended and the Faustian nightmare began’?¹³

Alongside Brown, Allan Lloyd-Smith also names Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne as ‘the three great originators of American fiction’, as each came to be instrumental in helping to develop what he defines as the ‘four indigenous features’ of the American Gothic: ‘the frontier, the Puritan legacy, race and political utopianism.’¹⁴ Interestingly, however, as Lloyd-Smith notes, ‘Poe, for the most part... turned his back on specifically American settings and used, rather, a quasi-European setting for his Gothic tales.’¹⁵ Despite this, Charles L. Crow notes that it was Poe who ‘gave a face to American Gothic’, as stories and theories surrounding his life and death merged with his fictional Gothic tales, thus presenting Poe as a Gothic figure *himself*.¹⁶ On his place within the American Gothic, Tom F. Wright writes the following:

Poe’s gothic is at once the most canonical and the most surprising in the American tradition. His tales handle all of the major themes that make up the particular texture of the gothic tradition: the concern with frontier, political utopianism and the spectre of race. Yet whereas Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne or even Washington Irving used gothic techniques as a means through which to interrogate society and the state of the nation, Poe’s is a notably more inward sensibility. Rather than presenting a depiction of specific sites of historical haunting, his is the Gothic of agonised introspection, dramatising the fragility of personality and sanity, obsessively preoccupied with the ways in which the mind betrays itself and its capacity for evil.¹⁷

As such, Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow go on to name Poe’s short story ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ (1839) as ‘the Ur-text of the Southern Gothic’, even in spite of the fact that Poe rarely, if at all, used the South as the setting for his work.¹⁸ In comparison to

¹² Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *Charles Brockden Brown*, 1st edn (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 30.

¹³ Fiedler, pp. 142-3.

¹⁴ Allan Lloyd-Smith, ‘Nineteenth-Century American Gothic’, in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 109-21 (p. 109).

¹⁵ Lloyd-Smith, ‘Nineteenth-Century American Gothic’, in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by Punter, p. 113.

¹⁶ Charles L. Crow, *American Gothic* (Cardif: University of Wales Press, 2009), p. 38.

¹⁷ Tom F. Wright, ‘Edgar Allan Poe and the Southern Gothic’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, ed. by Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 9-20 (p. 10).

¹⁸ Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow, ‘Introduction: Down at the Crossroads’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, ed. by Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1-6 (p. 3).

both Brown and Poe, though, it is Hawthorne who ‘demystifies Gothic representations of a haunting past and associated superstitions lingering in the present to look at the play of sunshine and shadow in family and society’, as Fred Botting writes. This is evident in both *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) as ‘the spectre of Puritan intolerance and witchcraft trials hangs over the community that condemns [Hester]’, Botting continues; as well as in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) as, ‘[h]arking back to the early days of American colonisation, the story centres on the theft of the land on which the house was built.’¹⁹

Expanding the American Gothic

Crow names the founding of the International Gothic Association in 1991 as ‘[a] defining moment in contemporary Gothic Studies’, heralding a surge of interest in the Gothic genre and its criticism; and leading to the establishment of ‘Gothic Studies’ in both British and American universities. Crow continues, writing that this ‘growing understanding of the Gothic has begun to reshape the larger disciplines of American Studies and American literature’, ultimately giving way to the Gothic now being ‘seen as essential to understanding [America’s] literature, and indeed [America’s] national project.’ Elaborating on this, he states:

The dominant, sanctioned history of the United States has been a narrative of social, economic, and technological progress. This narrative also asserts the doctrine of American exceptionalism, the belief that the country’s essential innocence and its destiny place it above the constraints and judgments of other nations and of history. In contrast to this triumphant story, the Gothic is a counter-narrative, an alternative vision, recording fear, failure, despair, nightmare, crime, disease, and madness... The Gothic thus is the natural medium for expression of our great national failures and crimes, such as the enslavement of Africans and the displacement and destruction of indigenous peoples.²⁰

Jerrold E. Hogle echoes Crow’s sentiments here, as he posits that the ‘revival of the American Gothic’s importance’ is a result of both the rise of psychoanalysis and Marxism, as well as because of such marginalised groups beginning to reclaim the narrative:²¹

A major reason has been the dominance in literary studies since about 1980, especially in America, of the “New Historicism” begun initially in English Renaissance scholarship, which has itself come to be combined with the more Marxist “cultural studies,” so much that both of them have swept in dimensions of gender and queer theory, Lacanian– Kristevan psychoanalysis, and Derridean “intertextuality,” along with critical race theory, eco-criticism, and disability’ studies, to make them all

¹⁹ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 117-8.

²⁰ Charles L. Crow, ‘Preface’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. By Charles L. Crow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. xvii-xxii (p. xviii).

²¹ Jerrold E. Hogle, ‘The Progress of Theory and the Study of the American Gothic’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 3-15 (p. 7).

functional within the multiple challenges of these movements to Old Historicism, among them an interest in the Gothic that Old Historicism disdained.²²

Through the Gothic, then, those ‘Othered’ by American society — African Americans, women, Indigenous peoples; and those with same-sex attraction — are able to make society, with its monstrous prejudices, the terrifying ‘Other’ instead, and thus, in the process, offer an alternative view of the American narrative.

African American Literature is perhaps the best example of this. As Liliane Weissberg writes: ‘Afro-American literature responds to the white tradition in and by subversion; by a renaming and retelling of the story.’²³ Echoing Weissberg’s thoughts here, Teresa A. Goddu, in her exploration of the impact that the legacy of slavery has had on the American Gothic, states that the genre ‘registers slavery as the cultural contradiction that haunts the Atlantic world’s myths of freedom’, with many of the Gothic’s key tropes drawing on the all too real horrors of slavery.²⁴ While the Gothic was hijacked by anti-abolitionists as a way to further demonise African Americans, ‘identifying “blackness” with moral degeneration and dread’, in time it too became an outlet for former slaves to recount their harrowing experiences.²⁵ It is Toni Morrison (one of the subjects of the third chapter of this thesis, and a key figure of the African American Gothic), as she combines the slave narrative with the Gothic in *Beloved* (1986), who ‘makes explicit the way the two genres remain intertwined’, according to Goddu.²⁶ Anya Heise-von der Lippe also comments on *Beloved* as she likens it to Morrison’s *Love* (2003), in that they both ‘share a common narrative approach towards the Female Gothic body as a symbol of corporeal violence’. She continues:

Beloved and *Love* focus on the black, female, Gothic body as a site of corporeal memory, marking both individual transgressions, like murder or sexual deviance, and the collective-historical past of slavery, exploitation and racial injustice.

It is the female body, Heise-von der Lippe writes, which ‘has been at the centre of the definitions of the Female Gothic since Ellen Moers coined the term in 1976’.²⁷

It was in *Literary Women* (1976) that Moers conceived of this ‘Female Gothic’ label, offering the following simple definition: ‘work that women writers have done in the literary mode... called the Gothic’ (the Gothic being that which ‘has to do with fear’).²⁸ This term, however, is itself fraught. As Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith point out: ‘there has been

²² Hogle, ‘The Progress of Theory’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. By Crow, pp. 11-12.

²³ Liliane Weissberg, ‘Gothic spaces: the political aesthetics of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*’, in *Modern Gothic : A Reader*, ed. by Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd-Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 104-120 (p. 116).

²⁴ Teresa A. Goddu, ‘The African American Slave Narrative and the Gothic’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 71-83 (p. 71).

²⁵ Goddu, ‘The African American Slave Narrative’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, pp. 72-3.

²⁶ Goddu, ‘The African American Slave Narrative’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 82.

²⁷ Anya Heise-von der Lippe, ‘Others, Monsters, Ghosts: Representations of the Female Gothic Body in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Love*’, in *The Female Gothic : New Directions*, ed. by Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 166-179 (p. 166-7).

²⁸ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: Women's Press, 1978), p. 90.

considerable debate over the usefulness of the ‘Female Gothic’ as a separate literary category or genre.’²⁹ Anne Williams, though, argues that such debate ignores the fact that ‘the most oppressive antifeminism is encoded in Male Gothic, organised around a “female” “other” both victimised and demonised.’ The necessity of Female Gothic texts, and their appeal to women readers, then, is due to their reclamation of this ‘Othered’ figure, as they work to ‘not only affirm the possibilities of “feminine” strength; they also sketch in the outlines of a female self’, she goes on to say.³⁰ Faye Ringel also comments on this, writing that, historically, ghost stories allowed female writers the opportunity to write about ‘such dangerous subjects as abusive husbands... resentment over women’s limited options, madness and same-sex desire’, disguised within supernatural narratives, and still be published.³¹ Charlotte Perkins Gilman is one such example of this, with Lloyd-Smith naming her short story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892) as ‘a powerful expression of the Gothicism inherent in the experience of patriarchal society.’³² Shirley Jackson (a subject of the first chapter of this thesis) is another, a fact which is particularly evident in her most famous works ‘The Lottery’ (1948) and *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). As Andrew Smith writes, it is through Jackson’s work ‘examining motherhood through a Female Gothic idiom which reveals how an inherent Gothic narrative haunts domestic spaces during the period’ of the 1940s to 1960s.³³

Stephen King and the American Gothic

While the American South is undeniably tethered to the American Gothic, a place where ‘ghosts and men in white sheets are real’, as Street and Crow write, the Southern Gothic being a result of ‘the area’s often violent and traumatic history’, it is New England which Ringel names as the birthplace of the American Gothic.³⁴ She writes:

The Puritans transplanted Europe’s nightmares to the New World, fearing the indigenous people as devil worshippers in the forest. Believing themselves to be the special targets of Satan for invading his kingdom, they reacted with paranoia directed against European settlers of other religions, women, and Blacks.³⁵

Indeed, Joyce Carol Oates points out how the titles of Puritan works — consisting of the likes of ‘Day of Doom’ and ‘Groans of the Damned’ — ‘might be the titles of lurid works of

²⁹ Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, ‘Introduction: Defining the Female Gothic’, in *The Female Gothic : New Directions*, ed. by Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1-12 (p. 1).

³⁰ Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness : A Poetics of Gothic*, 1st edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 1.

³¹ Faye Ringel, *The Gothic Literature and History of New England : Secrets of the Restless Dead* (London: Anthem Press, 2022), p. 41.

³² Lloyd-Smith, ‘Nineteenth-Century American Gothic’, in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by Punter, p. 120.

³³ Andrew Smith, ‘Children of the Night: Shirley Jackson’s Domestic Female Gothic’, in *The Female Gothic : New Directions*, ed. by Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 152-165 (p. 164).

³⁴ Street and Crow, ‘Introduction: Down at the Crossroads’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, ed. by Street and Crow, p. 2.

³⁵ Ringel, *The Gothic Literature and History of New England*, p. 6.

gothic fiction, not didactic sermons, prose pieces and poetry.’³⁶ For Ringel, the Salem Witch Trials of the seventeenth century are ‘the best-documented manifestation of New England’s Gothic history because here the supernatural intersected with common law.’³⁷ Certainly, the Trials have served as a source of inspiration for numerous American writers, both from the New England region and outside of it. It is the work of Perkins Gilman and Jackson, particularly, Ringel writes, which ‘define a female strand of New England Gothic... reflect[ing] the guilty secrets and unwholesome traditions that characterise the Gothic vision of New England’s history.’ The work of the region’s male writers, she continues, naming the likes of Cotton Mather, John Greenleaf Whittier and H.P. Lovecraft, among others, ‘transformed New England’s supernatural history and legends into Gothic narratives.’³⁸ It is one writer in particular, however, who Ringel names as the best example of this:

The 1970s also saw the advent of Stephen King and a “horror boom” inspired by his success. Before this, Lovecraft had imposed his own fears of dissolution and devolution upon an imagined New England of abandoned farms and decaying seaports. It took King’s stories and the films derived from them to make New England the locus of terror in the popular imaginary. For almost fifty years, Stephen King has portrayed a haunted New England, reflecting its history and folklore of Puritan paranoia, racism, class divides, abandonment of farming and industry, distrust of outsiders, and resistance to change. He is arguably America’s best-known writer, shaping the way the world sees this country.³⁹

Certainly Stephen King, a native of Maine, New England himself, frequently sets his Gothic novels and short stories in fictional towns within his home state: from Castle Rock, first appearing in *The Dead Zone* (1979), to *IT*’s (1986) Derry.

Despite the enduring popularity of his work and their frequent adaptations, King remains a contentious figure in criticism on American Literature. On this, Tony Magistrale writes:

The combination of being pigeon-holed in the academically disreputable horror genre, and his popularity, wealth, and celebrity status has set up a hostile polarity between those critics... who will never be able to reconcile popular writing with literature...⁴⁰

King’s reception in Gothic criticism, however, has been more favourable; in recent decades discussion of his work has appeared in (amongst others) *Modern Gothic* (1996) edited by Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd-Smith, Crow’s *American Gothic* (2009) and *A Companion to American Gothic* (2014) edited by Crow. In 2016, *Stephen King and Philosophy* was

³⁶ Joyce Carol Oates, ‘Introduction’, in *American Gothic Tales*, ed. by Joyce Carol Oates (New York: Plume, 1996), pp. 1-9 (p. 2).

³⁷ Ringel, *The Gothic Literature and History of New England*, p. 27.

³⁸ Faye Ringel, ‘New England Gothic’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 139-50 (p. 139).

³⁹ Ringel, *The Gothic Literature and History of New England*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Tony Magistrale, ‘Why Stephen King Still Matters’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 353-65 (p. 354).

published, edited by Jacob M. Held and including contributions from Elizabeth Hornbeck, Garret Merriam and several others, with each chapter offering a different perspective on King's numerous titles through the lens of various philosophies. Magistrale's own *Landscape of Fear* (1988), though, was one of the first extended considerations of King's work, and since then he has followed it with several other books dedicated to the author and his writing. For Magistrale, the element of horror in King's fiction is less to do with the monstrous presence of supernatural creatures (of which there are many), but rather due to the fact that 'his deepest terrors are sociopolitical in nature, reflecting our worst fears about vulnerable western institutions'.⁴¹ As such, Magistrale continues, King frequently '[aligns] his excursions into the Gothic supernatural with breakdowns in the American social fabric.'⁴² For David Punter, *The Tommyknockers* (1987) exemplifies a 'Ur-plot of King's'. He writes:

It hinges psychologically on a swing between two different world-views, which we can conveniently assign as the views of the child and adult. Those apparently alien forces which swamp the child in terror are revealed to the adult as things of mystery no longer: the power which keeps the child transfixed is at best a concerted affair, and only seems omnipotent because of the shortage of vision — the psychic analogy of King's archetypal US small town — typical of early experience.⁴³

This, he continues, demonstrates how a key to the 'essence' of the Gothic 'lie[s] in the dual nature of the imagination', with the formation in childhood of both 'the bright imagination and the dark imagination'.⁴⁴

While discussion of his work has increased in recent years, particularly in criticism on the American Gothic, a majority of what is written about King examines his texts only within the context of, and in relation to, his own vast body of work. When his work is compared to that of other writers, they are usually the early male figures of the American Gothic such as Hawthorne, Poe and Lovecraft, and not his more diverse (both in characteristics such as sex and race, as well as subject matter) contemporaries from the latter half of the 20th century. Of course, exceptions do exist. Dara Downey and Darryl Jones contributed a chapter to *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy* (2005, edited by Bernice M. Murphy) in which they discuss Jackson's work alongside King's, and the inspiration Jackson has provided for him (a fact King readily admits to himself).⁴⁵ Yet such comparisons are the exception, and not the rule. As such, the position that King's work occupies within the contemporary American Gothic appears to be somewhat liminal, caught between life and death (a periphery several of his own tales explore), as it were; Magistrale points out that some of his critics go so far as to

⁴¹ Tony Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear : Stephen King's American Gothic* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988), p. 2.

⁴² Magistrale, 'Why Stephen King Still Matters', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 357.

⁴³ David Punter, 'Problems of recollection and construction: Stephen King', in *Modern Gothic : A Reader*, ed. by Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd-Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 121-40 (p. 121).

⁴⁴ Punter, 'Problems of recollection and construction', in *Modern Gothic : A Reader*, ed. by Sage and Lloyd-Smith, p. 138.

⁴⁵ Dara Downey and Darryl Jones, 'King of the Castle: Shirley Jackson and Stephen King', in *Shirley Jackson : Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Bernice M. Murphy (North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 2005), pp. 214-36.

‘relegate King’s place in American popular culture to an ephemeral commodity... that carries no real significance beyond its moment in time’.⁴⁶ For, despite their popularity in the modern age, the fact remains that King’s novels and short stories (particularly his earliest) appear closer to what the American Gothic *used* to be than what the genre is (slowly but hopefully) *becoming*. As such, when Weissberg compares King’s work to Morrison’s in terms of the motif of the returning dead, only to then elaborate how Morrison uses this motif not simply as a Gothic function, but to aid her in ‘reworking the white tradition of Gothic literature in writing the history of its ghosts’, one cannot help but be reminded that, rather than giving a voice to the voiceless, King’s work instead echoes the ones that have always held the power in the genre.⁴⁷ Certainly, King’s work has faced criticism not simply based on its lack of artistic merit (for some), but also in regards to his depiction of female and black characters. Gail E. Burns and Melinda Kanner (amongst others) have argued that the female characters in his novels are based on stereotypes and assumptions about womanhood.⁴⁸ Further, Regina Hansen echoes several others in her observation that King engages with the ‘magical Negro’ figure — described by Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham as ‘a "magical" or spiritually gifted Black lead character’ based on racist stereotypes — in both *The Shining* (1977) and *Green Mile* (1996).⁴⁹ Hansen also points out that King invariably favours ‘white, straight, able-bodied males’ for both his protagonists and secondary characters, most often fitting within ‘the trope of the white underdog hero’.⁵⁰ As the genre expands to include the voices of those once left out, shifting its view, finally, of what — and who — is truly the monstrous ‘Other’, as chronicled by Crow and Hogle, and explored earlier in this introduction, one must consider if the work of Stephen King still holds a relevant place in the contemporary American Gothic. This thesis works to argue that the answer is ‘yes’. By considering King’s novels alongside works by authors such as Jackson and Morrison, particularly in how place and setting functions within them as a site of the Gothic, as well as through the lens of Marxism and colonialism, and by consulting a diverse body of criticism on the discussed authors as well as the American Gothic at large, this thesis argues that some of King’s most famous works offer a critique of American idealism encoded in their Gothic plots.

Thesis Outline

In addition to this introduction, this thesis consists of three chapters and a conclusion. Each chapter examines one Stephen King novel alongside one other novel by a different author

⁴⁶ Magistrale, ‘Why Stephen King Still Matters’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 355.

⁴⁷ Weissberg, ‘Gothic spaces’, in *Modern Gothic : A Reader*, ed. by Sage and Lloyd-Smith, p. 116.

⁴⁸ Gail E. Burns and Melinda Kanner, ‘Women, Danger, and Death: The Perversion of the Female Principle in Stephen King’s Fiction’, in *Sexual Politics and Popular Culture*, ed. by Diane Raymond (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 158-72.

⁴⁹ Cerise L. Glenn, and Landra J. Cunningham, ‘The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film’, *Journal of Black Studies*, 40.2 (2009), 135–52 (p. 135)
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0021934707307831>>.

⁵⁰ Regina Hansen, ‘Stephen King’s IT and Dreamcatcher on Screen: Hegemonic White Masculinity and Nostalgia for Underdog Boyhood’, *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 10.2 (2017), 161–76 (p. 162)
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.3828/sftv.2017.11>>.

within the American Gothic genre. By examining King's novels alongside works published in similar decades (all texts were published in the later half of the twentieth century), and by exploring the points of contact between novels that have not previously been compared together, this thesis aims to further the understanding of King's place within the American Gothic. In addition to the two primary texts, each chapter will also engage with several secondary texts as well as consulting relevant criticism, concepts and (where appropriate) psychological or spatial approaches.

The first chapter examines the primary texts Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and King's *The Shining* (1977) as I argue that, in both novels, the temporarily adopted 'home' becomes a site of haunting for the central character in two ways. Firstly, they are confronted with unexplained and seemingly supernatural occurrences. Secondly, they are simultaneously haunted by the past returning to the surface. I also argue that, as the character's history becomes intertwined with the house's history, they are thus transformed into the ghost that previously haunted them. In this chapter I engage with commentary by Steven Bruhm, Dara Downey, Darryl Hattenhauer, S.T. Joshi, Tricia Lootens, Roger Luckhurst, Tony Magistrale, Judie Newman, John G. Park, Faye Ringel, Eric Savoy, Andrew Smith and Michael N. Stanton. I build on this existing criticism by offering a new comparative reading of *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Shining* as I examine the 'unhomely' nature (both in architecture and atmosphere) of both buildings at the heart of these two novels through the psychoanalytical and spatial theories found in a range of Sigmund Freud's writings (namely surrounding the uncanny) and Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992). In this chapter I also consider the secondary texts E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' (1816) and 'Councillor Krespel' (1818), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), L. G. Moberly's 'Inexplicable' (1917); and Jackson's 'The Lottery' (1848), *Life Among the Savages* (1952) and *Raising Demons* (1957). The transformation of the familiar or the trusted into a source of danger (whether it is a home or the figure of a neighbour or a doctor), as introduced in this chapter, serves as a foundation for the discussion in the next chapter.

In chapter two, the focus is on the primary texts King's *'Salem's Lot* (1975) and Robin Cook's *Coma* (1977), as I argue that both extremities of the consequences of American capitalism are represented in these two texts, with King's ghost town acting as the inverted and opposite image of Cook's hypermodern hospital. I also argue that the characters in these novels are reduced to the unconsenting providers of a commodity for a figure symbolic of the capitalist. Following on from the discussion in the previous chapter around the transformation of the home from a source of safety into one of danger, I similarly explore how the dependable figure of the neighbour or the doctor changes into a monstrous one here. In this chapter I engage with the work of Marc Augé, Catherine Belling, Chris Baldick, James E. Hicks, Alexandra Hillman, Avril Horner, Manali Karmakar, Joanna Latimer, Luckhurst, Lootens, Magistrale, Franco Moretti, Bernice M. Murphy, Avishek Parui, David Punter, Ringel, Nikolas Rose, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Richard M. Titmus, Paul White and Sue Zlosnik. I contribute a new reading of *'Salem's Lot* not found in this existing criticism through my exploration of the figure of the vampire in the novel as not simply a monstrous symbol of the Gothic, but as a metaphor for capitalism. Similarly, by offering a new comparative reading of *'Salem's Lot* and *Coma* I articulate how both novels express anxieties

surrounding the effects of capitalism on American society, as I engage with various Karl Marx writings on capitalism and industry. In this chapter I also engage with the theories on medicine and spatiality found in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958), and Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963) and *Of Other Spaces* (1967); as well as exploring the real life legal cases of John Moore and Karen Ann Quinlan. I also consider Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Jackson's 'The Lottery' (1948), Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954), and King's 'Graveyard Shift' (1970) and 'The Mangler' (1972). The idea of the liminal nature of the 'undead' vampires in *'Salem's Lot* and the brain dead patients in *Coma*, caught in the periphery between life and death, explored in this chapter leads onto the discussion of the dead returning to some semblance of life as found in the next chapter.

Chapter three looks at the primary texts King's *Pet Sematary* (1983) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), as I argue that these texts centre on the union between trauma personally experienced by the main character and a shared national trauma integral to the history of America, whether it is colonialism and the displacement of the Indigenous population, or the Atlantic Slave Trade. I also argue that the Gothic image of the resurrected dead comes to symbolise the return of these repressed traumatic histories in both novels, building on the idea of the liminality between life and death as explored in the previous chapter. In this chapter I engage with criticism by Katherine Allen, Kathleen Brogan, Bruhm, Paula T. Connolly, Kevin Corstorphine, Mary Ferguson, Teresa A. Goddu, Anya Heise-Von der Lippe, Anne-Christine Hornborg, Magistrale, Erin Mercer, Hock Soon Ng, Mary Ferguson Pharr, Natalie Schroeder, John Sears, Valeria Smith, Liliane Weissberg and Maisha L. Wester, as well as Anthony Vidler's theory on spatiality in *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992), and explore the real life case of Margaret Garner. I contribute a new, more optimistic reading of *Beloved* not found in this existing criticism through my exploration of the significance of the patchwork quilt within the novel, and how it symbolises Sethe's ability to reconcile with her past and imagine a future for herself. Similarly, by offering a new comparative reading of *Pet Sematary* and *Beloved* I express how both novels marry personal and national traumas to offer an alternative view of the "American dream". In this chapter I also consider Philip Freneau's poem 'The Indian Burying Ground' (1787); as well as the texts Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Home* (2010); and King's 'The Woman in the Room' (1978) and *Thinner* (1984). The idea of the American Gothic offering a medium in which to atone for America's forgotten crimes and sins, as in texts such as *Pet Sematary* and *Beloved*, explored in this chapter is built upon in the conclusion to this thesis.

The conclusion offers an overview of the role of the house in the American Gothic, particularly in relation to women, African Americans and Indigenous communities, by consulting criticism and writings by (amongst others) Charles L. Crow, King, Ringel and Savoy. The conclusion ends with a consideration of how this thesis has explored the relationship between space and narrative in the texts discussed.

Bridging the Gap: Entwining the Creative with the Critical

The research undertaken as part of the writing of this thesis has had a major impact on the short stories I wrote and submitted for the creative element of this PhD, particularly

surrounding my exploration of place and setting as a source of Gothic terror; as well as the themes, narratives and characters found within the studied texts.

The first chapter of my thesis is dedicated to places that don't function as they should: temporarily adopted homes that stalk and hunt their inhabitants, ripping families apart instead of bringing them together. I explored this idea in the first two short stories in my collection. In 'The Doberman's Grin', Michael Armstrong unknowingly invites evil into his own home when he brings back the cursed dog costume. Despite his best efforts he is unable to banish it, as it continues to find its way back into the house, hunting his family and playing on his worst instincts; mirroring the Overlook hotel's seduction of Jack Torrance in King's *The Shining*. In 'The House on Montrose Avenue', realtor Minnie Stewart becomes so entangled in the titular house's dark history that it ultimately manages to trap her there; much like Eleanor Vance in Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*. In each of these stories, the home is transformed from a place of shelter and solace into one of Gothic dread.

'The Legend of Robert Jacobson' takes inspiration from both Cook's *Coma* and the research I undertook surrounding the African American Gothic: namely Morrison's *Beloved* (subjects of the second and third chapters of my thesis respectively). My short story focuses on Madison West's investigation into a spate of suicides at her high school, mirroring Susan Wheeler's hunt to discover the truth behind the patients who have fallen into comas during routine operations in Cook's novel. Both young women eventually end up becoming embroiled in sinister conspiracies, although their outcomes are quite different. With 'The Tale of Robert Jacobson', I also wanted the titular figure and his tale to act as a reminder of America's past homophobia; in the process transforming a gay hate crime into a Gothic haunting, much like African American writers such as Morrison have used the genre to remind American society of its historic (and recent) crimes against black people.

In King's *Salem's Lot*, as explored in chapter two of this thesis, the residents of a small town are transformed into the undead, picked off by a shadowy 'Other': the vampire Kurt Barlow. Much like in King's *Pet Sematary* (a subject of the third chapter of this thesis), where the Creed family are targeted by the spirit of the Wendigo that resides in the woods behind their home, it is the close knit nature of the residents of Jerusalem's Lot that makes them prime targets for Barlow: vampirism spreading from wife to husband, and child to parent. In my short story 'The Milk Carton Kids', I also explored this idea of an outside threat feeding on the close proximity of its victims, as an alien force begins abducting the children of a small town. I focused my narrative on one particular friendship group in the town, the namesake Milk Carton Kids, as they attempt to solve the mystery of the missing children — the source of which, unfortunately, manages to tear them apart in the process.

The stories in my collection were written as a homage to King's tales studied in this thesis, focusing on the liminal space between life and death, and exploring how the places that make us feel most safe (a home, a school or even a family) can suddenly transform into a source of Gothic dread. Yet, simultaneously, it was also my intention to represent what the genre is becoming (and has, in some ways, long since been): a voice for the voiceless. The collection starts from the perspective of Michael Arnold, a character inspired by Jack Torrance in *The Shining*: a writer who resents his family for standing in the way of the success he believes he deserves, and who is still haunted by the ghost of his abusive father. Yet, at the end of 'The Doberman's Grin', it is not Michael whom the sinister dog suit

bestows its deadly power to. Instead, the fate of their family is left in the hands of his young daughter. The next two stories are told from the perspectives of female characters, and feature gay male characters — voices, historically, shunned or even ridiculed in the genre. In order to bridge this gap between the past and present of the American Gothic, I employed a ‘speculative’ approach to my stories: the time period is suggested but never confirmed; the exact geography of my settings alluded to, but not pinpointed.

In so much of the Gothic, the source of disquiet or terror comes from catching a glimpse of the familiar amongst the unknown — like seeing the eyes of a loved one shining from the face of a monstrous ‘Other’.

Chapter 1

Hallways of the Mind: The Unhomely House as a site of Possession in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and Stephen King's *The Shining*

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter I argue that the 'unhomely' home acts as a site of possession and consequent destruction of the self for the traumatised inhabitant in the primary texts Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977). I begin the first section of this chapter with a consideration of how Jackson's adult life in the provincial town of North Bennington, and the backlash she received from the publication of 'The Lottery' (1948), led to her exploring the home and its associated domesticity as a source of danger for women in her subsequent novels. This leads into an exploration of Eleanor's restrictive homelife in *The Haunting of Hill House* as I consult criticism by Faye Ringel and Darryl Hattenhauer. I then explore the Gothic architecture of Hill House as I argue that this contributes to the feeling of unhomeliness experienced by its guests, engaging with Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny, Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992) and the secondary text E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'Councillor Krespel' (1818). This is followed by a consideration of Jackson's two domestic memoirs *Raising Demons* (1957) and *Life Among the Savages* (1952) and how their focus on the way space is occupied by female inhabitants is similar to that found in *The Haunting of Hill House*, as I consult criticism by Andrew Smith, Dara Downey and S.T. Joshi. I then explore how Jackson's early drafts of the novel changed, eventually leading her to focus on the dark history of the Crain family. I go on to examine how Eleanor and Theodora act as doubles in the novel by engaging with criticism by John G. Parks, as well as engaging with Tricia Lootens' reading of their relationship as a romantic one. After exploring the novel's conclusion, I then consider it through Judie Newman's feminist psychoanalytic theory. I conclude this section by comparing *The Haunting of Hill House* to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892) in their treatment of women and mental health.

I begin the second section by exploring the impact Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* has had on Stephen King's writing, as well as King's definition of a haunted house as one with 'an unsavoury history'.⁵¹ This is followed with an examination of the 'unhomely' nature of the Overlook hotel in *The Shining* through Freud's theory of the uncanny. I then engage with Steven Bruhm's theory that the American Gothic is often concerned with the oedipus complex, as I argue that its presence in *The Shining* is associated with Danny's psychic ability. Following this, I explore the uncanny nature of independently moving objects in *The Shining* as well as in the secondary texts Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' (1816) and L. G. Moberly's 'Inexplicable' (1917). Next, I argue that the repressed traumatic histories of Jack and the Overlook hotel begin to converge within the novel, and that the Overlook's criminal

⁵¹ Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (London: Warner Books, 1993), p. 300.

past can be seen to represent the history of America. Here I engage with criticism by Tony Magistrale, Michael N. Stanton and Eric Savoy as I argue that the hotel's boiler comes to represent Jack's own temper. As I explore the novel's conclusion, I examine the significance of hallways as I argue that they come to represent both physical spaces *and* mental ones, and I engage with criticism by Roger Luckhurst on this topic. Concluding this chapter is a consideration of the similarities between the two primary texts regarding the home as a site of possession.

1.2 *The Haunting of Hill House*

Shirley Jackson's years in the small village of North Bennington read like a witch hunt. Her neighbours would mail her hate-filled letters voicing their disapproval of her stories, some would even go so far as to empty their trash bags onto her front lawn, and certainly none would speak to her as she queued in the village post office to send off her manuscripts.⁵² This polarised reaction to Jackson's work was not unique to the village she now called home, however. The 1948 publication of her most famous story 'The Lottery' in *The New Yorker* prompted mass cancellations of the magazine, an outpouring of written complaints and even the disapproval of Jackson's own mother.⁵³ What about this particular story, penned by a mother of four who regularly wrote for *Good Housekeeping* magazine, could have elicited such a response from Middle America? 'The Lottery' takes place on a warm, late June day as the residents of a small village are preparing for their annual lottery. This tranquillity soon dissolves, however, when we learn that this namesake lottery picks not the winner of a prize, but the person who will be stoned to death by their fellow townsfolk. This fact is made all the more disturbing by the way the villagers treat the ritual, nonchalantly hoping that they will finish in time to get home for dinner and allowing their children to pick out the best-looking stones.⁵⁴ As Dara Downey writes, the visceral reaction to 'The Lottery' stems from Jackson's decision to present the forces of evil in the story 'as an inherent part of the everyday life of 1950s America.' Rather than villainizing some foreign or made-up 'Other' she is reflecting a mirror back onto her readers here, thus 'rendering explicit the lurking horror that suburban life both created and denied' for women, just as so much of her future work would also come to do.⁵⁵

Although Jackson has never publicly stated where the unnamed village in 'The Lottery' is set, Faye Ringel writes that its 'characters' willingness to follow old customs they no longer understand and slaughter innocent scapegoats recalls Puritan history' and so suggests a New England setting.⁵⁶ Certainly, the same unfettered paranoia and groupthink

⁵² Darryl Hattenhauer, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic*, 1st edn. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 21.

⁵³ Abram Trosky, 'Jumping at Our Reflection: American Dystopia and Reflection in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"', in *Short Stories and Political Philosophy: Power, Prose, and Persuasion*, ed. by Erin A. Dolgoy, Kimberly Hurd Hale, and Bruce Garen Peabody (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), pp. 213-44 (p. 213).

⁵⁴ Shirley Jackson, 'The Lottery', in *The Lottery and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 291-302 (pp. 300-1).

⁵⁵ Dara Downey, 'Not a Refuge Yet: Shirley Jackson's Domestic Hauntings', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 290-302 (pp. 292-3).

⁵⁶ Ringel, 'New England Gothic', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 144.

that prompted the story's public stoning of Tessie Hutchinson (whose surname calls to mind the real life figure of Puritan-turned-reformer Anne Hutchinson) is also what led to the burning of accused women during the legendary Salem Witch Trials of the seventeenth century. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock observes that, unsurprisingly, this 'foundational American trauma... possess[es] a special hold on the American imagination', inspiring (whether directly or indirectly) numerous works by American writers.⁵⁷ Jackson herself wrote a non-fiction book for children about the Trials, published in 1956 and titled *The Witchcraft of Salem Village*. Here, Jackson recounts 'the seeming madness that swept Salem village in 1692' and offers her young readers an explanation as to *why* it did.⁵⁸ Perhaps 'the reactionary small-mindedness' Jackson faced in North Bennington (itself located in Vermont, New England) gave her a unique understanding of the New England Puritans' paranoia surrounding anything satanic. For Jackson's neighbours not only disapproved of her stories, but also of her lifestyle; their 'provincial racism' and anti-Semitism (the town often put on plays featuring black face) at odds with Jackson's racially diverse friendship group and marriage to a Jewish man.⁵⁹ This treatment from her fellow townsfolk led to Jackson developing agoraphobia in the years before her death, the house becoming her sanctuary; an ironic fact given that much of her fiction warns of the dangers of the home and its associated domesticity for women.

This is particularly true of Jackson's most discussed novel, 1959's *The Haunting of Hill House* (shortened to *Hill House* throughout the rest of this chapter), the opening paragraph of which concludes by informing the reader that 'whatever walked there, walked alone'. Even before the reader is introduced to any of the characters in the story, they are met with this description of the titular house on the very first page; a house that, even as its 'walls continued upright, [and] bricks met neatly' was 'not sane... holding darkness within'.⁶⁰ It is the promise of this 'darkness' that lures Dr. Montague to Hill House as he begins his investigation into its supposedly supernatural nature, handpicking assistants from a list of those thought to possess some sort of psychic gift. As Downey points out, though, and as the reader will come to discover, '*Hill House* is essentially a novel about a haunting rather than a haunted house' (*italics in original*).⁶¹ The victim of this 'haunting' is the first member of Dr. Montague's party Jackson introduces. As a child, Eleanor Vance experienced a shower of falling stones onto her family home, only stopping once she and her sister were removed from the house. While this unexplained event has largely been forgotten about by the two sisters, both now adult women, the traumatic memories of the intervening years are far less easy for Eleanor to let go of. At thirty-two years old, Eleanor has no friends and finds it difficult to talk to other people, having spent the entirety of the past eleven years caring for her sick mother. Now, living with her sister and brother-in-law whom she despises, Eleanor does not delay in accepting Dr. Montague's invitation, feeling that, all her life, '[she] had

⁵⁷ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 'American Monsters', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 41-55 (p. 46).

⁵⁸ Shirley Jackson, *The Witchcraft of Salem Village* (New York: Random House, 2011), p. 134. Kindle Edition.

⁵⁹ Hattenhauer, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic*, p. 21.

⁶⁰ Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 3.

⁶¹ Downey, 'Not a Refuge Yet', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, pp. 295.

been waiting for something like Hill House'.⁶² Eleanor's escape to Hill House will not be an easy one, though, as the reason for her resentment towards her sister Carrie becomes clear. Just as her mother did before her, Carrie tries to control Eleanor and treat her like a child, forbidding her from taking the car she helped to pay for. Carrie even remarks that she is 'doing what mother would have thought best' by keeping Eleanor there.⁶³ In a rare act of defiance, however, Eleanor travels to the city garage in the early hours of the morning to take the car. What follows is a joyous, almost dreamlike sequence, as Eleanor sets off on her journey to Hill House. As she experiences freedom for the first time on the open road, the car 'a little contained world all her own', Eleanor is reminded of the summers of her childhood as she fantasises about setting up home in one of the houses she passes; or just wandering off 'past the trees'; or even keeping driving until she reaches 'the end of the world'.⁶⁴ Yet it is the image of Hill House that keeps pervading Eleanor's mind, interrupting these fantasies, along with the reminder that she is expected there. Even away from the controlling grasp of her mother and sister, Eleanor does not know how to accept freedom. In a highly symbolic scene, Eleanor stops at a roadside café where she witnesses a little girl refusing to drink unless she can do so from the 'cup of stars' she has at home. While Eleanor wordlessly encourages the child to settle for nothing less, and acknowledges that she too would like her own 'cup of stars', she does not heed her own advice.⁶⁵ Instead of living out her fantasy of running away, Eleanor has managed to convince herself, while ignoring the omens and warnings along the way, that Hill House is where she desires to be as it is where she is *expected* to be. She is being influenced by the demands of the house even before she has arrived there, as it begins to take on the familiar role of her controlling mother (a role briefly adopted by her sister until Eleanor's escape that very morning). Eleanor, tragically, seems destined to repeat the cycle of servitude she so resents. Her eventual arrival at Hill House appears only to confirm this as she is overcome with 'the vivid feeling that it was waiting for her, evil, but patient', mirroring her own earlier admission that she had always been waiting for 'something like Hill House'.⁶⁶

As she catches her first glimpse of the 'towers and turrets and... Gothic spires and gargoyles' on its roof, Eleanor cannot help but think to herself that '[t]hey made houses so oddly back when Hill House was built'.⁶⁷ What soon becomes apparent is that the *oddness* of the house is not simply due to the era it was built in, however. One of the defining and recurrent features of Hill House, with its maze-like hallways and hidden, windowless rooms within rooms, is its uncanny architecture. So much so that it 'seemed somehow to have formed itself... fitting itself into its own construction of lines and angles'.⁶⁸ Staring down one of its never-ending hallways, Eleanor surmises that the people who constructed the house had worked as quickly and simply as possible, 'probably after realising what the house was

⁶² Jackson, *Hill House*, pp. 6-7.

⁶³ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 12.

⁶⁴ Jackson, *Hill House*, pp. 16-7.

⁶⁵ Jackson, *Hill House*, pp. 21-2.

⁶⁶ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 36.

⁶⁷ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 32.

⁶⁸ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 35.

going to be, whether they chose it or not'.⁶⁹ When she is shown to her bedroom for the first time, Eleanor is shocked by the 'unbelievably faulty design' of the room as in one direction the walls appear 'longer than the eye could endure' yet in the other 'less than the barest possible tolerable length'.⁷⁰ Later, sitting with the rest of Dr. Montague's party, Eleanor notes how the 'unpleasantly high ceiling' and 'narrow tiled fireplace' of one of the house's sitting rooms makes it feel cold, even with a lit fire; demonstrating how, despite possessing many of the features of one, Hill House does not feel like a home to its inhabitants.⁷¹ One theory that is frequently employed in criticism on the Gothic, particularly in explorations of the unsettling nature of space, is Sigmund Freud's explanation of the uncanny, which he defines as 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known'. Freud traces the semantic history of the uncanny back to the German word 'unheimlich', or its etymologically equivalent English word 'unhomely'.⁷² Of interest, he also notes, is the fact that the German word for the familiar or 'homely' ('das Heimliche') can also be used to describe the 'unhomely' (the aforementioned 'das Unheimliche'), supporting his theory that the uncanny is routed in the 'well known'.⁷³ It is this unhomeliness that the occupants of Hill House find so unsettling about it, even before the occurrence of any supernatural events. While it has the recognisable structure of a house, Hill House is littered with errors and strange design choices, almost as if the house is pushing back against the constraints of its own architecture, twisting itself out of shape until even its walls appear *off* and unnatural. Whatever it *is* that walks Hill House, as first posited by Jackson in the novel's opening, it is not an external force nor something that can be exorcised from the house (contrary to Dr. Montague's best intentions), it seems, for 'Hill House would stay as it was until it was destroyed.'⁷⁴ To put it simply, the horror of Hill House *is* the house itself. The fact that this horror is all encompassing but neither definable nor locatable makes it all the more uncanny, as Eleanor is able to sense that Hill House is a 'vile... diseased' place yet is unable 'to locate the badness'.⁷⁵ This is not a weakness unique to Eleanor, however, as in one of the novel's most unsettling early passages Jackson writes '[n]o human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house'.⁷⁶

In his 1992 book *The Architectural Uncanny*, Anthony Vidler explores the history of so-called 'uncanny' buildings and structures. He notes that, in literature, 'the house has provided a site for endless representations of haunting, doubling, dismembering, and other terrors' since at least the late eighteenth century.⁷⁷ Part of the enduring popularity of haunted house narratives, he goes on to say, is due to '[the house's] role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort sharpened by contrast the terror of invasion by alien spirits.'⁷⁸

⁶⁹ Jackson, *Hill House*, pp. 37-8.

⁷⁰ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 40.

⁷¹ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 59.

⁷² Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 124.

⁷³ Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 148.

⁷⁴ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 35.

⁷⁵ Jackson, *Hill House*, pp. 33-5.

⁷⁶ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 34.

⁷⁷ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny : Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1992), p. ix.

⁷⁸ Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 17.

Vidler traces the use of uncanny architecture in literature back to writer and ‘amateur architect’ E. T. A. Hoffmann, who ‘made the uncanny a genre of his own... [through his] almost systematic exploration of the relations between the homely and the unhomely.’⁷⁹ Freud, of course, himself named Hoffmann ‘the unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature’, using his 1817 short story ‘The Sandman’ as evidence for this.⁸⁰ It is Hoffmann’s 1818 short story ‘Councillor Krespel’ which Vidler favours, however. ‘Councillor Krespel’ begins as the eccentric titular character pays for a house to be built according to his design, only for his hired builders to find that, instead of referring to a drawn-out plan, their work was to be done ‘according to Krespel’s directions as given on the spot.’ As he tells them where to place a door or to finish off a wall, the other townsfolk gather to watch its construction, and soon enough ‘there stood a fully-finished house, which had the maddest appearance certainly, from the outside’. On the inside, however, the narrator is surprised to find that the house is ‘a marvel of comfort and convenience within.’⁸¹ This disparity between its inside and outside, Vidler observes, supports ‘Freud’s intuition that from the homely house to the haunted house there is a single passage’. Krespel’s house, though, inverts the usual process of the homely interior which in time transforms into an uncanny space atypical of the haunted house story as, just like Hill House, it ‘makes no attempt to hide its uncanniness on the exterior.’⁸²

A year before the publication of *Hill House*, in a letter dated January 14, 1958, Jackson begins by asking her mother and father if they still have any of her grandfather’s old books on architecture, particularly on ‘big old california gingerbread houses’. The reason for this, she explains in the letter, was that her new book was ‘about a haunted house’ and that the New England ‘square, classical’ houses she was surrounded by ‘wouldn’t be haunted in a million years’.⁸³ This new book, clearly, was *Hill House*. While the architecture surrounding North Bennington may not have been haunted, Jackson’s family life there *did* inspire her two domestic memoirs (both originally composed as short stories, before being collected and adapted into full books). The latter, 1957’s *Raising Demons*, serves as an unexpected companion to *Hill House* in terms of Jackson’s exploration of the uncanny nature of houses. The memoir opens with Jackson recounting her realisation that her family had grown too big for ‘the big white house’ they had rented for nine years. This discovery seems to come abruptly and all at once for Jackson as she tries to fit a box full of her children’s sports equipment into each of their bedrooms, the attic, garage and cellar respectively, only to find that ‘there was no room for it’ anywhere and that, ultimately, ‘the house was full’. Thus, the family have no choice but to move into ‘another, bigger white house’.⁸⁴ This plan, however, is soon hindered by the fact that their new home is still occupied by the families currently renting it as apartments, and once again later when the moving company seems reluctant to actually deliver their furniture back to them. When the family have finally been able to move

⁷⁹ Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 27.

⁸⁰ Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 141.

⁸¹ E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Councillor Krespel* (New York: Paperless, 2016), pp. 1-2. Kindle edition.

⁸² Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 32.

⁸³ Shirley Jackson, Laurence Jackson Hyman, and Bernice M. Murphy, *The Letters of Shirley Jackson*, 1st edn (New York: Random House, 2021), pp. 284-6.

⁸⁴ Shirley Jackson, *Raising Demons* (London: Penguin, 2021), pp. 1-3.

into their new home, Jackson takes a detour on the way to the grocery store to get a look at their old house. Jackson's personification of the old house here, as it greets her like 'an old friend who has dyed her hair' (its new owner having painted it bright yellow) is not unlike the way she would later also attribute human behaviour to Hill House.⁸⁵ As Eleanor first arrives at Hill House in the novel, she feels it looking down on her 'with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice.'⁸⁶ Parallels with *Hill House* can also be found in Jackson's first domestic memoir, 1952's *Life Among the Savages*, as she recalls the difficulty she and her husband had when looking to buy a new home. As Andrew Smith writes, the new house 'appears to have its own internal geometry, one that asserts the rights of its previous occupants' so that Jackson's own furniture will not fit within it.⁸⁷

For S.T. Joshi, the power of Jackson's domestic life writing 'rests in its manipulation of very basic familial or personal scenarios' as she subverts them to create almost Gothic-like tales.⁸⁸ Certainly, the way Jackson writes about the domestic rituals she undertook to keep her house in order in *Raising Demons* – like the painstakingly detailed list of chores she recounts completing before an old school friend's visit, or the way certain chores are given specific days for their completion each week – is not unlike the housekeeper Mrs. Dudley's fanatical rigidity in keeping meal times to their set schedule, and ensuring that everything is put back in its rightful place, in *Hill House*. This also includes closing all of the doors in the house, something Mrs. Dudley does herself 'so as not to come along and find them shut by themselves'.⁸⁹ Downey comments on Mrs. Dudley's role in the novel, observing that the fact that she does not even live in Hill House yet is still responsible for its upkeep mirrors 'the condition... of many women toiling endlessly in homes that they could never hope to own for themselves' during and before Jackson's lifetime. This enforcement of 'endless, all-consuming labour demanded by domestic ideology', she continues, is one of the reasons that 'Hill House is... a particularly dangerous place for women'.⁹⁰ Despite their differences in style and genre, what both Jackson's sunny domestic musings in *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons* and the Gothic hauntings of *Hill House* share is a focus on the relationship between dwelling and female inhabitant, and the often uncanny way that space is occupied. As Downey writes, 'Jackson's work articulates the fear that the spaces inhabited by her female protagonists are not merely beyond their control, but are themselves controlling these isolated, beleaguered women.'⁹¹

Almost eight months after asking her parents about stimulus for her new haunted house novel, Jackson sent a letter to her agent Carol Brandt in which she gave her an update on the book, telling her that 'a general air of disaster [was] slowly settling over Hill House.' In this letter, she goes on to say that: 'It's always such a strange feeling—I know something's

⁸⁵ Jackson, *Raising Demons*, p. 66.

⁸⁶ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 34.

⁸⁷ Smith, 'Children of the Night', in *The Female Gothic*, ed. by Wallace and Smith, pp. 156-7.

⁸⁸ S.T. Joshi, 'Shirley Jackson: Domestic Horror', in *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Bernice M. Murphy (North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 2005), pp. 183-98 (p. 188).

⁸⁹ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 114.

⁹⁰ Downey, 'Not a Refuge Yet', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 296.

⁹¹ Downey, 'Not a Refuge Yet', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 290.

going to happen, and those poor people in the book don't; they just go blithely on their ways' (underlining in original).⁹² Tricia Lootens chronicles how Jackson's first drafts of *Hill House* (now stored in the United States' Library of Congress) developed into the novel we know today, offering a fascinating view of how the author came to find 'the source of Hill House's peculiarly intimate brand of horror'. As Lootens explores, Jackson's vague notes on the house's dark history and unhomely appearance gradually became more specific, turning it into the 'travesty of a family home' found in its published form. Perhaps one of the most vivid examples of this is how she changed the door knocker Eleanor (originally named Vancey) is greeted with on her first arrival from a lion's head to a child's face. Its interior, too, is transformed as '[w]arped to fit the mind of the vicious patriarch, it is furnished with symbols of the destructive power of motherhood.'⁹³ Even Jackson's decision to place Hill House slotted 'comfortably into the heavy, pressing surrounding hills' evokes the idea of, according to Lootens, 'the original womb/tomb, with all the comforts of home.'⁹⁴ As its architecture became more uncanny with each succeeding rewrite, so too did the house's history, becoming 'one of death, betrayal, and homelessness, especially for women.'⁹⁵ Dr. Montague first recounts this scandalous history to Eleanor and the rest of their party on their first night there. Built by a man named Hugh Crain over eighty years ago, all three of his wives would come to meet their demise while living there, the first dying just moments before seeing the house for the first time as her carriage overturned in the house's driveway. The 'impressive list of tragedies' associated with Hill House was still to continue as, after the death of the eldest of Crain's two daughters as an old woman, her younger companion (plagued with the accusation that she had somehow turned to illicit methods in order to inherit the house) had hanged herself from one of its turrets.⁹⁶ Even as she hears these monstrous tales of its backstory, sitting with Dr. Montague and the other two members of the investigative party he has put together — Luke, the nephew of the current owners of (and heir to) Hill House; and Theodora, a young woman with a reputation of exhibiting clairvoyance during laboratory experiments — Eleanor cannot help but feel like she belongs somewhere for the first time in her life now that she is at Hill House and finally has friends. It is not long, though, in the aftermath of their first true paranormal encounter, until the new friends realise that the house is determined to separate them.

When Eleanor is awoken by a loud banging and someone calling her name, it takes her a moment to realise that it is not her mother knocking on the wall to her like she used to do. Remembering that she is in Hill House, Eleanor goes next door to Theodora's adjoining bedroom to investigate what is happening. The noise, accompanied by a terrible coldness, soon finds them; moving from the door of the nursery at the end of the hallway — a location the party had only investigated that day, discovering an inexplicable cold spot between its

⁹² Jackson, Hyman, and Murphy, *The Letters of Shirley Jackson*, pp. 305-6.

⁹³ Tricia Lootens, "'Whose Hand Was I Holding?': Familial and Sexual Politics in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*", in *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Bernice M. Murphy (North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 2005), pp. 150-68 (pp. 156-7).

⁹⁴ Lootens, 'Familial and Sexual Politics', in *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, p. 158.

⁹⁵ Lootens, 'Familial and Sexual Politics', in *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, p. 160.

⁹⁶ Jackson, *Hill House*, pp. 78-81.

steps which Dr. Montague christened the ‘heart of the house’ — to outside their very door.⁹⁷ As the locked door’s handle is tried, Eleanor reminds whatever is outside that it cannot get in, prompting it to grow angry, crashing against the doorframe before finally leaving them alone with nothing more than the echo of a ‘little gloating laugh’.⁹⁸ Soon after, Luke finds a message written in chalk on one of the hallway walls reading ‘HELP ELEANOR COME HOME’, unnerving Eleanor that the house can name her personally.⁹⁹ When this same message appears again some time later, although this time in Theodora’s ransacked bedroom and seemingly written in blood, Theodora accuses Eleanor before later apologising to her. Eleanor, however, is unable to move past this accusation, fantasising about hitting Theodora with a stick or rocks and, most alarmingly, watching her die. Hill House is beginning to succeed in its goal of dividing them; the rift between Eleanor and Theodora worsening each time it exposes its true nature to them. When, as the supernatural forces of Hill House terrorise them outside their bedroom door once again (although this time in the voice of a hurt, crying child), the two women sit holding hands in darkness in a scene some time later, the reader might assume that the pair have put their differences aside in a moment of shared fear. However, as the lights go on and Theodora sits up in bed asking what is wrong, Eleanor is left frantically questioning out loud *whose* hand she was actually holding. It is in the aftermath of the third and final time that Hill House comes to life, though, that Eleanor and Theodora’s fraught relationship is truly and irrevocably broken. As doors are banged on up and down the corridor once again, followed by that familiar coldness, it is not long until it becomes apparent that, this time, things are far worse than both previous hauntings as the house seems to be being broken apart all around them. Eleanor fears that she is ‘disappearing inch by inch’ into the house as, inside her head, she is able to hear each new noise before it actually begins.¹⁰⁰ Here, as Lootens writes, ‘Eleanor can no longer differentiate herself from the haunting.’¹⁰¹ Just as she feels that she is finally ready to offer herself to the house, however, it becomes still once more.

Before experiencing this series of supernatural incidents together, Eleanor and Theodora shared a close comradeship, both being similar in age and possessing suspected psychic tendencies, even going so far as to joke that they were cousins. Despite the parallels between the two women, however, their differences were always evident. Theodora, Jackson writes, was ‘not at all like Eleanor’, her life full of ‘delight and soft colours’.¹⁰² As such, on their first meeting Eleanor could not help but notice that Theodora’s suitcase was much larger and ‘considerably more luxurious’ than hers, thankful that her own possessions were ‘put away out of sight’.¹⁰³ Later, Eleanor wishes that she ‘were lovely’ like Theodora, and lies about living with her sister in order to make it appear that she has her own apartment like Theodora does.¹⁰⁴ In the novel, Theodora seems to act as a double for Eleanor, representing

⁹⁷ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 119.

⁹⁸ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 131.

⁹⁹ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 146.

¹⁰⁰ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 201.

¹⁰¹ Lootens, ‘Familial and Sexual Politics’, in *Shirley Jackson : Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, p. 166.

¹⁰² Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 8.

¹⁰³ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁴ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 47.

all that she wants, but cannot have. John G. Parks echoes this, noting that Theodora's character represents 'what Eleanor might have been if her life had not been so restricted'.¹⁰⁵ Because of this, she is stuck in the repetitive cycle of either resenting or deifying Theodora. After the final and most unnerving haunting that the two women experience together, Eleanor is caught in the adoration phase of this cycle when she tells Theodora that her plans are to go and live with her after their time at Hill House. Although Theodora is at first gentle as she tells Eleanor that this cannot happen, she soon becomes exasperated with her insistence. Just as Hill House is exploiting the feeling of inadequacy towards Theodora in Eleanor, Theodora is simultaneously pushing Eleanor away because of her increasing instability and needfulness. For Theodora, though, the desire to separate herself from Eleanor is also an urge to prove her own sanity; for every time she has borne witness to an unexplained occurrence at Hill House, she has been in Eleanor's company. Several critics have commented on the suspected romantic and sexual undertones of Eleanor and Theodora's relationship in the novel. Exploring this, Lootens writes that Theodora comes to represent not only Eleanor's pining for a sister and a lover, but also her desire 'to assert a new sexuality and sense of self as a way to challenge the rigid family structure that has so far controlled her life'.¹⁰⁶ Lootens points to the scene where Theodora paints Eleanor's toenails red as a key example of Eleanor's repressed sexuality. As she looks down at her bright nails, she thinks 'it's *wicked*' (italics in original).¹⁰⁷ This passage, Lootens observes, is placed shortly before the scene in which Dr. Montague's party finds Crain's obscene book filled with lessons on 'morality' for his daughter, creating a 'juxtaposition of Eleanor's sexual self-hatred and Hugh Crain's teachings'. Although Eleanor does bring red clothing to Hill House, despite worrying what her mother would say, 'to glory in her own sexuality' would be a step too far for her. This, then, Lootens writes, is why 'she will pursue Theodora as an intimate companion, but will shrink in disgust from her touch.' The scene in which Theodora finds her clothes covered in (what seems to be) blood is a further example of this, she goes on to say, in its 'unmistakable' allusions to menstruation here, 'Hill House echoes and amplifies Eleanor's hatred of "dirty" female bodies, including her own'.¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, of course, the house manages to separate the two women, claiming Eleanor for itself. In doing so, then, it manages 'to cut Eleanor off not only from Theodora but also from her own timid dreams of becoming more colourful'.¹⁰⁹ With Eleanor separated from Theodora the house is able to manipulate her more easily, playing on her isolation just as it does on the trauma of her past and, ultimately, singling her out for itself.

Some time later, Eleanor hides out of sight in the grounds of Hill House as she listens to Theodora and Luke's conversation. Witnessing the two mocking her seems to be the final step needed to break her fixation on Theodora and allows her, finally, to become one with the

¹⁰⁵ John G. Parks, 'Chambers of Yearning: Shirley Jackson's Use of the Gothic', in *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Bernice M. Murphy (North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 2005), pp. 237-49 (p. 247).

¹⁰⁶ Lootens, 'Familial and Sexual Politics', in *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, p. 162.

¹⁰⁷ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁸ Lootens, 'Familial and Sexual Politics', in *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, pp. 163-4.

¹⁰⁹ Lootens, 'Familial and Sexual Politics', in *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, p. 165.

house. Rather than joining in on the conversations of the other members of the party, she instead becomes consumed with listening for the disembodied footsteps and songs coming from elsewhere in the house, happy that only she can hear them. That night, Eleanor sneaks out of her bedroom and proceeds to re-enact the hauntings that had previously kept her awake, pounding on the doors of the house and trying their handles. Thus Eleanor has *become* the ghost of Hill House, moving soundlessly through its halls as she, unseen, terrorises its residents. Downey comments on this, writing that Hill House has continued to manipulate Eleanor until ‘she eventually takes on the role of the ghost haunting [it]’.¹¹⁰ As she ascends the tower leading to the turret where the eldest Crain daughter’s companion once hanged herself, Eleanor seems destined to repeat this tragic sacrifice, now ‘in the straining grip of the house’.¹¹¹ Once up on the balcony she feels that, finally, she is home, and it is only when the other members of the party catch her and manage to coax her back down that she is flooded with understanding. Eleanor’s reclamation of her own mind is brief though as, after Dr. Montague insists that she must return home to her sister for her own safety, she drives her car into a tree outside Hill House, echoing the doctor’s earlier warning that ‘Hill House... seemingly dislikes letting its guests get away’.¹¹² Darryl Hattenhauer points out that direct comparisons between the house and Eleanor are made from early on in the novel, immediately signifying their connection. One such scene occurs when Eleanor, on her arrival there, sees the reflection of her hand ‘going down and down into the deep shadows of the polished floor’, almost as if she is disappearing into it.¹¹³ Hattenhauer writes that this scene illustrates that Hill House ‘is both a mirror reflecting Eleanor and a window in which she sees herself in the depths of the house.’ Just as the house is made up of rooms within rooms and labyrinthine hallways, ‘she cannot see the inner self from the outside; she must go there.’¹¹⁴ While Lootens suggests that Eleanor’s repetition of a line from Feste’s song in William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* throughout the novel could signify her desire for Theodora, it is worth noting that Eleanor first thinks of this line not when meeting the other members of Dr. Montague’s party, but when looking at Hill House for the first time.¹¹⁵ The refrain ‘[j]ourneys end in lovers meeting’ begins to pervade her mind more frequently as she falls deeper under the house’s influence, and she even finds herself repeating it just moments before sacrificing herself on its altar.¹¹⁶ Just as Feste’s song reminds Olivia that her true love is waiting for her in *Twelfth Night*, it would seem that the titular house (and not Theodora) was the one that was always waiting for Eleanor like a lover in *Hill House*, signifying that, tragically, Eleanor’s journey was at its end from the very moment of their meeting.

From the start of the novel, Hill House affects Eleanor more profoundly than any other member of Dr. Montague’s party, preying on her need to belong and the familial trauma in her past. Just as, later on, she is able to hear sounds that the others cannot, she too is the

¹¹⁰ Downey, ‘Not a Refuge Yet’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 297.

¹¹¹ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 231.

¹¹² Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 67.

¹¹³ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 37.

¹¹⁴ Hattenhauer, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic*, p. 160.

¹¹⁵ Lootens, ‘Familial and Sexual Politics’, in *Shirley Jackson : Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, p. 153.

¹¹⁶ William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 29.

only one who is ‘overwhelmed with the cold air of mold and earth’ in the entrance of the library, feeling that she cannot enter it.¹¹⁷ As we come to learn, the tower the library is hidden in leads to the balcony where the eldest Crain sister’s companion once hanged herself. Similarly, the library is home to the grim memory book Luke finds, left by Crain for his youngest daughter and made up of ghastly images clipped from other books as warnings for his daughter not to let the world’s ‘lusts and ingratiitudes’ corrupt her, its final page containing Crain’s signature written in his own blood.¹¹⁸ Eleanor appears to be able to recognise the horrors of Hill House’s past, just as it is able to sense the trauma in her own. As we later find out, Eleanor blames herself for her mother’s death as she did not wake up when her mother was banging on the wall for her medicine. Hill House plays on Eleanor’s guilt during its haunting episodes, as doors are banged up and down the corridor outside her bedroom, reminding her of her mother. Later, as Eleanor adopts the role of the ghost of Hill House herself, she calls for her mother as she runs across its dark corridors, seemingly expecting to find her there, just moments before also asking Hugh Crain to come out and dance with her. The pasts of Eleanor and Hill House have become one, intertwined and indistinguishable from the other. Spurned by Theodora, Eleanor is seduced by the house and the wordless understanding that they have both been waiting for each other. As Downey notes, Eleanor yearns for somewhere to belong, as well as her own home, a desire Hill House recognises as it ‘convinces her that it actively *wants* her.’¹¹⁹ Lootens also touches on this point, writing that the house singles her out because, unlike her companions, ‘Eleanor cannot even pretend to herself that she belongs anywhere else.’¹²⁰ Ultimately, it is her need to fulfil the house’s desire for her to stay with it, a need that Eleanor believes only she can satisfy, that pushes her to drive her car into the tree and become, just like the other women the house preyed upon before her, another victim of Hill House. Lootens writes that, in this scene, Eleanor has (like so many females before her) ‘sacrificed her own identity to hold her “family” home together.’ She also queries whether Eleanor actually had a choice in her own death — which would, of course, change the incident from a suicide to a murder — as she ponders the question: ‘can a woman sacrifice herself if she has never really had, or perhaps wanted, a self?’¹²¹ Eleanor’s thoughts just before hitting the tree, as she momentarily seems to regain her own mind, would seem to support this theory, as she questions: ‘*Why* am I doing this?’ (italics in original).¹²² Eleanor’s death, then, can be seen as ‘the dramatic accomplishment of a domestic murder that began long ago.’¹²³ What makes Hill House’s seduction of Eleanor even more cruel is that, even in death, it still does not allow her to join it as, mirroring the novel’s opening, Jackson ends *Hill House* by stating that ‘whatever walked

¹¹⁷ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 103.

¹¹⁸ Jackson, *Hill House*, pp. 169-71.

¹¹⁹ Downey, ‘Not a Refuge Yet’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 296.

¹²⁰ Lootens, ‘Familial and Sexual Politics’, in *Shirley Jackson : Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, p. 151).

¹²¹ Lootens, ‘Familial and Sexual Politics’, in *Shirley Jackson : Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, p. 166).

¹²² Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 246.

¹²³ Lootens, ‘Familial and Sexual Politics’, in *Shirley Jackson : Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, p. 166).

there, walked alone.’¹²⁴ Downey comments on this, writing that, in the novel’s ending, ‘only Hill House’s desires, and not Eleanor’s, are fulfilled... [as] nothing has been added by the blood sacrifice of [her] death’.¹²⁵

In ‘Shirley Jackson and the Reproduction of Mothering’, Judie Newman explores *Hill House* through the lens of feminist psychoanalytic theory. As such, Newman considers female gender identity as ‘shaped throughout life by the fluctuations of symbiosis and detachment from the mother.’ For women who grew up with unaffectionate mothers, then, relationships with other women in adulthood help ‘to recapture some aspects of the fractured mother-daughter bond.’¹²⁶ This, she explores, offering an alternative theory to Lootens’, could be the source of Eleanor’s infatuation with Theodora instead of romantic attraction. Newman also goes on to look at Hill House’s association with motherhood throughout the novel, comparing it to Eleanor’s relationship with her own mother. Both on a physical and psychological level, Newman writes, Hill House is ‘an ambivalent maternal enclave.’¹²⁷ Jackson herself seems to draw on the house’s maternal nature in the novel, as Luke claims that, with its ‘soft’ and ‘padded’ furnishings, ‘[i]t’s all so motherly’.¹²⁸ Despite Luke’s claims, however, Hill House has historically been a motherless house. After losing their mother in childhood, the Crain sisters also lost each of their subsequent step-mothers, leaving them to grow up in a house without a maternal figure present. Newman points out, then, that ‘the house is simultaneously associated with mothering and motherlessness’; with its past, much like Eleanor’s own, involving both ‘a dead mother... [and] two warring sisters’. Thus, this helps to create ‘a psychic configuration between the two.’¹²⁹ Eleanor, as Newman explores, both feels that she lost out on her youth by caring for her mother ‘in the forced assumption of the mothering role’ but also ‘feels guilt at not having mothered adequately.’¹³⁰ This, then, is why the library and nursery in Hill House are particularly significant rooms for her, the former associated with the mother (due to the fact that Eleanor was forced to read to her mother during her last days) and the latter with ‘the unmothered child’. Hill House’s library, of course, has another connotation for Eleanor, as it acts as the entryway to the tower where the Crain sister’s companion hanged herself. Lootens goes on to draw parallels between the Crain sisters and Eleanor and her own sister Carrie, writing that the former’s ‘struggles over the house echo the conflict that forced [Eleanor] to reach Hill House by “stealing” a car that was half her own’.¹³¹ Hill House’s chairs, then, which look so ‘embracing’ to Luke yet ‘which turn out to be hard and unwelcome... and reject you’ can be

¹²⁴ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 246.

¹²⁵ Downey, ‘Not a Refuge Yet’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, pp. 297-8).

¹²⁶ Judie Newman, ‘Shirley Jackson and the Reproduction of Mothering: *The Haunting of Hill House*’, in *Shirley Jackson : Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Bernice M. Murphy (North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 2005), pp. 169-82 (p. 171).

¹²⁷ Newman, ‘Shirley Jackson and the Reproduction of Mothering’, in *Shirley Jackson : Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, p. 174.

¹²⁸ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 209.

¹²⁹ Newman, ‘Shirley Jackson and the Reproduction of Mothering’, in *Shirley Jackson : Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, pp. 174-5.

¹³⁰ Newman, ‘Shirley Jackson and the Reproduction of Mothering’, in *Shirley Jackson : Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, p. 175.

¹³¹ Lootens, ‘Familial and Sexual Politics’, in *Shirley Jackson : Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, p. 160-1.

seen as physical representations of the lack of maternal nurturing in the novel, both for Eleanor and the Crane sisters.¹³²

Similar themes are explored in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper', a text which, like *Hill House*, focuses on an examination of women and madness. As detailed by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, the story was inspired by Gilman's own experience suffering a nervous breakdown and the treatment she received. This breakdown was the result of the conflict Gilman felt between wanting to be a wife and a desire for autonomy in her own life, as she pursued a career as a writer.¹³³ In 'The Yellow Wallpaper', Gilman details an unnamed female narrator's stay in the nursery of a colonial mansion — a stay organised by her husband as a form of bed rest, hoping to cure her of her postnatal depression — as she grows to become fixated on what she believes she can see within its tatty, yellow wallpaper. Initially repelled by its 'revolting... smouldering, unclean yellow', the narrator comes to credit it for her growing fondness of the room and her improving mood as, forbidden from writing by her husband, examining the wallpaper becomes her only pastime.¹³⁴ Just as Eleanor's fear of Hill House seems to slip away as she finds herself deeper within its grasp, so too is the same happening here. Eventually, the narrator convinces herself that there is a woman behind the wallpaper who, although able to escape during the daytime — as she spots her 'creeping up and down' in the grounds outside her window — is trapped there during the night as she 'crawls around fast', shaking the wallpaper and thus making its pattern change.¹³⁵ The narrator devises a plan to free her by ripping off the wallpaper at night but, in the process of this, convinces herself that *she* is the woman from the wallpaper herself, and that she will have to return to it when night falls again. Much like Eleanor becomes the embodiment of the ghost that haunts Hill House, running soundlessly through its halls and banging on its doors, by the end of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' the narrator 'is now fully the woman she imagines she has freed from the paper', Horowitz writes, as she crawls along the floor of her room, her bewildered husband looking down on her.¹³⁶ Before witnessing this, the narrator's husband, a physician who 'scoff[ed] openly at talk of things not to be felt and seen', did not even believe that his wife was sick, telling her that 'the very worst' thing she could do was think about her condition.¹³⁷ There are parallels here to the way Eleanor's fears were treated in *Hill House* as, more than once, she is left feeling that 'conversation was being skillfully guided away from the thought of fear', with the other members of the party allowing her to speak only so that she could become the 'vehicle for every kind of fear' and, thus, unburdening themselves of the humiliating act of giving voice to their own.¹³⁸ Dr. Montague, similarly, is more concerned with maintaining the 'scientific and exploratory nature' of his study than he is with investigating the source of Eleanor's fears.¹³⁹ Melanie R. Anderson comments on this, writing that it is Dr. Montague's rational and almost paternal

¹³² Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 209.

¹³³ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Wild Unrest: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Making of the Yellow Wallpaper* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 1-3.

¹³⁴ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper & Herland* (London: HarperCollins, 2022), p. 4.

¹³⁵ Gilman, pp. 15-6.

¹³⁶ Horowitz, p. 186.

¹³⁷ Gilman, pp. 1-2.

¹³⁸ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 98.

¹³⁹ Jackson, *Hill House*, p. 69.

demeanour, as he insists on providing scientific explanations for Hill House's supernatural occurrences, which makes him unable to see 'Eleanor's real struggle as she attempts to find a home in a society that does not value her as an unprotected and unattached woman.'¹⁴⁰ Just as both Eleanor and the unnamed narrator in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' become consumed by the new home in which they find themselves, so, too, do they both have male figures diminishing their fears and anxieties, illustrating, sadly, how very little had changed in the perception of women and mental health despite the almost seven decade difference between the publication of Gilman's and Jackson's works. As Ringel writes, 'in the haunted house... the possessed subject continues to be female, the exorcist male, and the process... provides entertainment for the communal gaze.'¹⁴¹

1.3 *The Shining*

At just over halfway through Stephen King's 1977 novel *The Shining*, its central character worries that he and his family could end up 'like insubstantial shades in a Shirley Jackson novel', although instead of 'flitting' through Hill House, he thinks, they would be trapped in the Overlook hotel where, making reference to *Hill House*'s opening, they most certainly would not be alone.¹⁴² King makes his appreciation of *Hill House* apparent, also referring to it in 'Salem's Lot' (1975) and, in his 1981 non-fiction book *Danse Macabre*, saying this of its opening paragraph: 'I think there are few if any descriptive passages in the English language that are any finer than this'. For King, *Hill House* is an exemplar of his definition of a haunted house as 'a house with an unsavoury history', elaborating that, even more than spectres and dark cellars, what such spaces need is 'a historical context'.¹⁴³ Jackson's novel, he states, also complicates his theory that horror novels can usually be divided into two categories: 'those that deal with 'inside evil'... and those that deal with 'outside' or predestinate evil'. The classic Gothic novels that King names as examples of these two categories are Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* for the former, where the source of evil derives from the self; and Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula* for the latter, in which evil arrives in the form of an invading force. *Hill House*, however, evades either of these classifications, according to King, and is a novel which is successful in its 'blurring' of the source of its evil.¹⁴⁴ Another example of such a book is King's own *The Shining*. Remaining arguably his most discussed novel (perhaps due, at least in part, to Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film adaption), it too focuses on a present dominated by the residue of 'unsavoury' histories better off forgotten, as, to use King's own terms, the 'outside evil' of the building that houses him, and the 'inside evil' of the repressed violence and trauma within him, work together to make one man the physical conduit for their combined monstrosity. As Tony Magistrale writes, what makes the novel 'truly unsettling' is not simply its ghosts or

¹⁴⁰ Melanie R. Anderson, 'Perception, supernatural detection, and gender in *The Haunting of Hill House*', in *Shirley Jackson, Influences and Confluences*, ed. by Melanie R. Anderson and Lisa Kröger (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 35-53 (p. 36).

¹⁴¹ Ringel, *The Gothic Literature and History of New England*, p. 38.

¹⁴² Stephen King, *The Shining* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), p. 309.

¹⁴³ King, *Danse Macabre*, p. 300.

¹⁴⁴ King, *Danse Macabre*, p. 294.

uncanny occurrences, but its centring on ‘a man who loses control of himself, and, as a consequence... his family.’¹⁴⁵

The Shining begins as Jack and Wendy Torrance, along with their young son Danny, are preparing to spend the winter, alone, in the Overlook hotel during its closed season. Jack has agreed to be the hotel’s caretaker, hoping that these months spent in the Overlook will afford him both the time and the motivation to finish the play that he dreams of writing. The hotel’s location up in Colorado’s Rocky Mountains (King interestingly forsakes his trademark Maine setting in *The Shining*) isolates it from much of the outside world during the winter months, which, the Overlook’s manager reminds Jack, are ‘fantastically cruel.’¹⁴⁶ Despite his father’s enthusiasm over his position as caretaker of the Overlook, Danny cannot help but feel apprehensive about their new temporary home as his ‘shining’ — the psychic ability he conceals from his parents, and the novel’s namesake — alerts him to what may be waiting for them there. In fragmented snatches, Tony, the older boy who appears to Danny before psychic episodes, warns him of various dangers involving a wasp’s nest, a bathtub, and the looming figure of a frightening yet familiar ‘madman’ pursuing him down an unlit hallway.¹⁴⁷ Danny’s concerns are seemingly confirmed when, on their arrival there, he meets the Overlook’s chef Dick Hallorann who tells him that (through a ‘shining’ similar to Danny’s) he has witnessed peculiar goings-on in the hotel. Soon, as its staff and the last of its lingering guests depart, the Torrance family are finally left alone in the grip of the Overlook; Hallorann’s promise to Danny that he can use their shared ‘shining’ to call to him for help being the child’s only comfort. Although little occurs during their first days at the Overlook, settling in poses a challenging process for the family, particularly for Wendy. Accustomed to the limited space of their Boulder apartment on Arapahoe Street, and before that ‘the small neat brick house in Stovington’, she is now forced to make a home of a hotel with over a hundred guest rooms.¹⁴⁸ Just as with the titular home in Jackson’s *Hill House*, Freud’s theory of the uncanny, as that which leads back to the familiar but etymologically corresponds to the word ‘unhomely’, helps to demonstrate that it is the Overlook’s surface level familiarity which ultimately makes it so unnatural to Wendy.¹⁴⁹ While the hotel does possess many of the same functioning rooms as their old house, they lack the same domestic comfort and homeliness. As Wendy steps into the Overlook’s enormous kitchen for the first time, she feels overwhelmed by its three stoves and ‘breadboard as big as their Boulder apartment’s kitchen table.’¹⁵⁰ Similarly, sitting down to dinner in the hotel’s dining room amongst the dozens of other empty tables feels to Wendy like an experience straight from a Horace Walpole novel.¹⁵¹ As she thinks to herself that the hotel’s jungle-print hallway carpet was ‘definitely not anything she would chose for her own home’, Wendy is articulating what makes their stay feel so uncanny to her: despite their best attempts to adopt it as their own,

¹⁴⁵ Tony Magistrale, “‘Truth Comes Out’: The Scrapbook Chapter”, in *Discovering Stephen King’s The Shining : Essays on the Bestselling Novel by America’s Premier Horror Writer*, ed. by Tony Magistrale (Maryland: Wildside Press, 2006), pp. 39-46 (p. 39).

¹⁴⁶ King, *The Shining*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁷ King, *The Shining*, p. 35.

¹⁴⁸ King, *The Shining*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁹ Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 124.

¹⁵⁰ King, *The Shining*, p. 78.

¹⁵¹ King, *The Shining*, p. 184.

the Overlook hotel can only ever be a perverse imitation of a home.¹⁵² While she does feel more comfortable in their small living quarters, going so far as to think of the space as ‘almost inviting’, this is not a feeling that ever lingers for long in the Overlook.¹⁵³

Steven Bruhm likens readers of the Gothic to ‘observers in [a] highly oedipal and traumatised house’ as we are repeatedly exposed to an unending and repetitive cycle of the same stories, the same horrors and the same trauma. The reason we continue to return to put our faces up against the metaphorical window, he posits, is for ‘the necessary assurance that the victim is not us.’¹⁵⁴ What makes the (particularly contemporary) Gothic oedipal in its nature, Bruhm explains, is its focus on a longing for the ‘lost object’ — whether literal or metaphorical — and the unspoken understanding that replacing this object ‘carries with it the threat of punishment’.¹⁵⁵ The parallels with Freud’s explanation of the oedipus complex here are unmistakable. Based on his model of the male child, Freud describes how the young boy begins to develop a libidinal attachment, or ‘object-cathexis’, with his mother; this cathexis originating from the child’s dependency on his mother’s breast in infancy, and thus ‘the earliest instance of an object-choice’. Simultaneously, the child begins ‘identifying himself’ with his father. It is once the boy’s ‘sexual wishes in regard to the mother become more intense’, thus rendering the father ‘an obstacle to them’, that the child instead wishes to expel the father in order to ‘take his place with the mother’.¹⁵⁶ Intimately linked to this model is the formation of the ‘castration complex’ in the male child, as he begins to fear the loss of his penis at the hands of the father as a way of ‘putting a stop to his early sexual activities’, according to Freud.¹⁵⁷ *The Shining*, Bruhm writes, offers ‘an especially textbook case’ of this oedipus conflict.¹⁵⁸ Indeed, Danny’s ‘shining’ is often tied to sexuality, specifically pertaining to his parents, by King. As the child explains to Hallorann, using his gift to read his parents’ minds would, to him, be like ‘peeking into the bedroom and watching while they’re doing the thing that makes babies.’¹⁵⁹ On more than one occasion in the novel, too, after Danny *has* read her thoughts, Wendy is left feeling exposed as though naked or, even more alarmingly, as if her son had ‘caught her in a masturbatory act.’¹⁶⁰ It is the scene in which Danny explores the Overlook’s sinister Room 217, however, which most explicitly demonstrates the oedipal nature of *The Shining*.

Despite Hallorann’s specific warning for Danny to avoid it, the child finds himself outside of Room 217 twice in the novel. This room, Hallorann explained to Danny, was the site of an unpleasant incident in the hotel some time ago, leading to it garnering a reputation amongst the hotel staff, with one maid even claiming to have witnessed some sort of apparition within it. From the outside, however, the door of Room 217 appears ‘perfectly

¹⁵² King, *The Shining*, p. 100.

¹⁵³ King, *The Shining*, p. 104.

¹⁵⁴ Steven Bruhm, ‘The contemporary Gothic: why we need it’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 259-276 (pp. 272).

¹⁵⁵ Bruhm, ‘The contemporary Gothic’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Hogle, pp. 263.

¹⁵⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego & the Id* (New York: Dover, 2018), pp. 23-4.

¹⁵⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures On Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), p. 229.

¹⁵⁸ Bruhm, ‘The contemporary Gothic’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Hogle, pp. 263.

¹⁵⁹ King, *The Shining*, p. 90.

¹⁶⁰ King, *The Shining*, p. 327.

normal' to Danny and not unlike any other door on the corridor.¹⁶¹ It is on his second visit that he eventually does decide to venture inside of it, although not before hesitating to worry about the consequences of disobeying his father, having taken the room's passkey without Jack's knowledge. Drawing on Freud's theory of castration anxiety in his exploration of this scene, Bruhm writes that boys such as Danny 'rigorously imitate masculine identity precisely because they fear the father will rob them of the marker of masculine entitlement... if they do not.'¹⁶² Wendy had recounted earlier how, even from infancy, she had known Danny 'was his father's boy', with the child even going on to develop some of Jack's habits as the novel progresses.¹⁶³ It is Danny's subconscious desire to be like his father, then, who explores the hotel without trepidation in his role as caretaker, that pushes him to overcome his conscious fear of disobeying Jack and enter Room 217. Once inside Jack's presence is felt even though he is not physically in the room with Danny, as if reminding his son not to trespass any further, as the child notes that the room's darkness was due to his father having closed the hotel's shutters. Danny goes on, though, as he senses that whatever it was he needed to find in Room 217 would be in the bathroom. Before pulling back the shower curtain, the child hopes that he will find 'something nice... Daddy had forgotten or Mommy had lost'; something to bring them both happiness.¹⁶⁴ Danny's sudden desire to locate within the room that which had been forgotten or lost, while understanding that his actions come with the risk of punishment from his father, vividly articulates Bruhm's earlier comments on the oedipal nature of *The Shining* and, by extension, the contemporary Gothic at large. What Danny hopes to find in the bathroom of Room 217, then, Bruhm elaborates, is something that will 'heal the family' and halt his father's already-worsening descent into barbarity and madness.¹⁶⁵ What the child actually finds is the reanimated corpse of a grinning and naked woman slumped in the icy cold water of the bathtub. Like most of the victims the Overlook claims, the backstory of the woman in Room 217 is one full of deception and scandal. After checking into the Overlook with a young man at least four decades her junior, she is later found dead in her room from an apparent overdose, leaving behind a husband and the young lover who has not been seen since the previous night. This type of occurrence, the hotel's regular caretaker Watson tells Jack, is far from uncommon in the Overlook; the physical exertion of their chosen activity leading to heart attacks or strokes in these 'old types that want one last fling.'¹⁶⁶ It is this repressed sexual nature of the woman's hotel stay — and indeed the many illicit check-ins of guests that came before and after her — that the Overlook captures and presents to Danny in the bathroom of Room 217. This is particularly evident in the way King emphasises the details of the woman's naked body, such as her breasts and pubic hair, as the child looks on. Similarly, when Danny is later recounting the details of this event to his parents, he pushes himself 'tighter against his mother's breasts', articulating his desire to regress from his 'object-cathexis' with his mother to the 'object-choice' of her

¹⁶¹ King, *The Shining*, p. 183.

¹⁶² Bruhm, 'The contemporary Gothic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Hogle, pp. 264.

¹⁶³ King, *The Shining*, p. 58.

¹⁶⁴ King, *The Shining*, p. 239.

¹⁶⁵ Bruhm, 'The contemporary Gothic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Hogle, pp. 264.

¹⁶⁶ King, *The Shining*, p. 26.

breast from infancy as a result of his trauma.¹⁶⁷ While Danny does not receive a punishment from his father for trespassing in the hotel, Jack cannot help but think that his son's fright, and near-fatal strangulation, at the hands of Room 217's tenacious guest was in fact the boy's 'just deserts' for disobeying him.¹⁶⁸ Here, the Overlook's grip on Jack's mind is already beginning to tighten.

One anxiety key to the arousal of 'feelings of the uncanny', Freud writes, building on the work of German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch, is the uncertainty around an object's status as either animate or inanimate; and particularly 'whether the lifeless bears an excessive likeness to the living.'¹⁶⁹ Dolls are one such example Freud gives as a source of this anxiety. This is certainly true of Hoffmann's highly oedipal 1816 short story 'The Sandman'. As Nathaniel contemplates the peculiar behaviour of the character Olympia, who sits at the same table for hours while staring at him with 'an unvarying glance', he later comes to understand that the reason for this is due to the fact that she is actually a doll.¹⁷⁰ Another text that Freud names as successfully exploiting the uncanny nature of the inanimate seemingly coming alive is L. G. Moberly's 1917 short story 'Inexplicable', first published in 1917 in *Strand Magazine*. The story centres on a young couple who, on moving into their new house, come across a small table decorated with sculptures of highly detailed alligators that possess 'an extraordinary look of life'.¹⁷¹ What follows is a series of strange occurrences as the couple's frightened cook and perplexed houseguest describe hearing the sound of scales sliding across the floor and smelling the distinct stench of an alligator swamp respectively. Eventually the couple themselves see what appears to be the shapes of huge alligators gliding across the floor towards them, prompting the husband to take the table outside and burn it. There are parallels here to the hedge animals found within the grounds of the Overlook in *The Shining*, seemingly becoming animate whenever the viewer is both alone and unaware.

As he is finishing up his work on the hotel's topiary, clipped to look like various animals including a rabbit, a dog and lions, Jack cannot help but think that turning 'a plain old hedge into something that it wasn't' was a somewhat 'perverted' practice to him.¹⁷² Soon, however, the uncanny nature of these hedge animals becomes even more apparent. All at once Jack is overwhelmed by a sense of unexpected foreboding as he stands in the hotel's playground. Gradually he realises that the animals are slowly moving towards him, yet only when he is not directly looking at them. As they converge around him, 'no longer protecting the path' but now blocking his only route back up to the hotel, Jack puts his hands over his eyes, assuring himself that what he is seeing cannot be real.¹⁷³ When he eventually does dare to look again, the hedge animals are all back in their original positions. King's first allusion to the topiary being alive comes much earlier in the novel. As the Torrances are walking the hotel's grounds on the day of their arrival at the Overlook, Jack points out the hedge animals

¹⁶⁷ King, *The Shining*, p. 273.

¹⁶⁸ King, *The Shining*, p. 276.

¹⁶⁹ Freud, *The Uncanny*, pp. 140-1.

¹⁷⁰ E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Sandman* (Denmark: SAGA Egmont, 2022), p. 27. Kindle edition.

¹⁷¹ L. G. Moberly, 'Inexplicable', in *Strange Tales from The Strand*, ed. by Jack Adrian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 183-95 (p. 184).

¹⁷² King, *The Shining*, p. 223.

¹⁷³ King, *The Shining*, p. 228.

to Danny, telling him that they were what ‘made Uncle Al think of [him] for the job’ due to the fact that Jack worked for a landscaping firm during his college years. Here, we are already seeing parallels being drawn between Jack’s and the Overlook’s histories: a major theme throughout the novel. It is in this scene that Jackson remembers something Watson said to him during his first tour of the hotel: ‘*they creep*’ (italics in original).¹⁷⁴ Although Jack reminds himself that Watson was actually referring to the Overlook’s boiler’s dials, it is significant that Jack associates his warning with the hedge animals. While the explosion of the hotel’s boiler at the end of the novel may signify the irreversible union of the Overlook and Jack’s psyche, it is that first glimpse of the moving hedge rabbit which marks both ‘the general and gradual coming to life of the Overlook’, as well as ‘the absorption of Jack Torrance’s identity into that of the hotel.’ As Michael N. Stanton observes, it is Jack’s encounter with the hedge animals, too, that has ‘reinforced the habits of thought or misperception he had as an alcoholic.’¹⁷⁵ Indeed, during this episode with the topiary Jack admits to himself that ‘he had always been afraid of something like this happening’ when drunk, but ponders: ‘What did you call it when you were cold sober?’ The answer he gives himself is ‘insanity’.¹⁷⁶ While Jack attempts to forget about his run-in with the hedge animals, the memory does not remain repressed for long as, soon, the other Torrance male experiences a similar encounter. Alone in the hotel’s playground, Danny finds himself trapped within one of its concrete rings as he senses something in the tunnel behind him, suddenly envisioning the spectre of a child with its head cut open. We come to learn, through Hallorann, that the playground was indeed the scene of yet another Overlook death, as a child died while experiencing a convulsion on the concrete rings. Just like the woman in Room 217, the spirit of this young victim has remained, sensed only by Danny. Although he manages to escape the tunnel and entity within it, the Overlook is not done with Danny yet, as the hedge animals begin to pursue him on his way back to the hotel. As Stanton remarks, ‘[t]he topiary is now far more active and aggressive’ than it was with Jack; not only threatening him, but pursuing him.¹⁷⁷ Danny is trapped between the haunted playground and hunting topiary, with the Overlook looking down at him ‘as if [it] were some sort of contest in which it was mildly interested.’¹⁷⁸

Just as inanimate objects which resemble or act like the living invoke a sense of the uncanny, so too, Freud writes, do objects which are ‘credited... with independent activity.’¹⁷⁹ Danny encounters such an object in the Overlook’s fire extinguisher. On his first sight of it, the child is immediately reminded of a snake, curled up in slumber. While he tries to avoid the fire hose while traversing the hotel, he is eventually forced to confront it again. As Danny tries to sneak past it, as if it truly *were* a dozing snake, its nozzle falls off, landing in a way that seems to point at him. Just as he decides to face his fear and run past it, ‘some trick of the

¹⁷⁴ King, *The Shining*, p. 74.

¹⁷⁵ Michael N. Stanton, ‘Once Out of Nature: The Topiary’, in *Discovering Stephen King’s The Shining : Essays on the Bestselling Novel by America’s Premier Horror Writer*, ed. by Tony Magistrale (Maryland: Wildside Press, 2006), pp. 11-18 (p. 15).

¹⁷⁶ King, *The Shining*, p. 228.

¹⁷⁷ Stanton, ‘Once Out of Nature’, in *Discovering Stephen King’s The Shining*, ed. by Magistrale, p. 16).

¹⁷⁸ King, *The Shining*, p. 318.

¹⁷⁹ Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 150.

light made the nozzle seem to move' as if striking him. Even as he continues to put distance between himself and the hose, Danny hears it pursuing him like a snake 'slipping swiftly over the carpet's dry shackles.'¹⁸⁰ What this symbolises is the Overlook hotel's perverse need to take that which is supposed to protect, whether it is a fire hose or a father, and invert it, so that it becomes the very source of danger that it was originally meant to defend against. This is particularly evident when Danny, after his ordeal in the playground, makes it back to the hotel and into the arms of Jack only to receive a strike across the face instead of comforting or understanding. This slap is in response to Danny's insistence that his father knew that he was telling the truth about the topiary because he, too, had seen it move. Despite the fact that Danny is able to use his 'shining' to read his father's mind, Jack cannot admit the truth because doing so would inadvertently acknowledge the hold the hotel now has over him. Instead, he continues to lie both to himself and to his family. It is significant that, shortly after, Wendy makes the comment that '[i]t's a regression'.¹⁸¹ As Stanton points out, although Wendy seems to be referring to the fact that Danny has started to suck his thumb again, this comment 'can apply equally to Jack' who had previously not hit his son since his days as an alcoholic.¹⁸² When Wendy catches Jack standing over the hotel's broken CB radio — having just destroyed their only means of communication with the outside world — she is reminded of the time he broke Danny's arm, when drunk, in their Stovington home. Here, she sees 'his true face, the one he ordinarily kept so well hidden.' To Wendy, it is 'the face of an animal'.¹⁸³ Some time later, when Jack's descent into madness is almost fully complete, Wendy once again sees him as animalistic, this time in a direct reference to the topiaries: "He was up on his hands and knees now, his hair hanging in his eyes, like some heavy animal. A large dog ... or a lion."¹⁸⁴ Perhaps, then, it was not simply the knowledge of Jack's past employment which made Al Shockley think of his old friend when looking at the Overlook's hedge animals, but actually his suspicion that both suppress something monstrous within themselves.

Indeed, when, early on in the novel, Hallorann attempts to use his 'shining' to read Jack's mind, he senses that there is 'something he was holding in so deeply... that it was impossible to get to.'¹⁸⁵ It is later, when Jack is up on the Overlook's roof ripping away its rotting shingles, that the novel begins to hint at what it is he is 'holding in', as he thinks back on the troubled years prior to his arrival at the hotel. It is significant that King uses this scene to access Jack's backstory, then, as he is quite literally searching below the Overlook's surface as he thinks back on his own dark history, establishing a link between the man and the hotel through their shared act of repression. It is significant, too, that Jack uncovers a wasps' nest below the hotel's roof in this scene, signalling that nothing good will come from digging up things that should remain hidden, or, as Jack thinks, sticking 'his hand into the Great Wasps' Nest of Life.'¹⁸⁶ But Jack does dig up the past, thinking back on 'the whole

¹⁸⁰ King, *The Shining*, p. 190.

¹⁸¹ King, *The Shining*, p. 323.

¹⁸² Stanton, 'Once Out of Naturey', in *Discovering Stephen King's The Shining*, ed. by Magistrale, p. 16).

¹⁸³ King, *The Shining*, p. 251.

¹⁸⁴ King, *The Shining*, pp. 415-6.

¹⁸⁵ King, *The Shining*, p. 95.

¹⁸⁶ King, *The Shining*, p. 118-9.

range of unhappy Stovington experiences' such as the time he broke his son's arm or attacked one of his students in the parking lot of the school he taught at. Yet even here, with time and distance between them, he is still unable to take responsibility for his actions, thinking that 'things had been done to him', and not the other way around.¹⁸⁷ Overshadowing what will ultimately happen to him at the hands of the Overlook in the novel's conclusion, Jack imagines himself, in these situations, as transforming 'from college-educated man to wailing ape', believing that there is something 'broken' inside of him.¹⁸⁸ Jack's memories of his father — the father who beat his children and violently attacked his own wife at the dinner table, we come to learn — are the ones he represses most relentlessly, yet are also the ones that have most profoundly affected him. It is these echoes of childhood trauma which are responsible for the 'broken switch' he feels inside of himself in adulthood, destining him, alongside the encouraging forces of the Overlook, to repeat the same cycles of violence and alcoholism as his father.¹⁸⁹ It is sadly ironic, then, that at the end of this chapter, Jack thinks to himself that the hotel was 'surely' the place he could get better.¹⁹⁰

We see the Overlook's manipulation of Jack never more explicitly enacted than when it presents him with a scrapbook detailing its murderous past at about one-third through the novel. It is this scrapbook, according to Magistrale, which helps to establish a collusion or 'marriage, of sorts' between the man and the hotel. Having gone down to the hotel's basement to check on the boiler, he finds the scrapbook sitting amongst piles of old boxes. Opening it, the book's pages are filled with newspaper clippings providing a timeline of the Overlook's unsavoury history: filled with criminality, gangs and even murder. As he progresses through the scrapbook, its pages become more troubling; tales of deception and bankruptcy give way to those of suicide and mafia shootouts. Here, Magistrale points out, 'the Overlook is filling the darkest chambers of Torrance's mind with details of its darkest moments in history' as he sits, alone, in its dim cellar.¹⁹¹ The purpose of this, then, is to not only 'involve' him personally in its past, but 'to make him [an] intimate and integral part of its ongoing history' as well.¹⁹² It is something innate within Jack that responds to this invitation, sensing in the hotel's poorly buried past a reminder of his own, tying them both together, but most importantly feeding an urge in him that never quite went away. This is evident in Jack's response when Wendy almost catches him reading the scrapbook, reacting 'almost guiltily, as if he had been drinking secretly' and automatically hiding the book from view.¹⁹³ It is here that Jack also redevelops the habit of rubbing his mouth again, either with his hand or handkerchief, from his days as an alcoholic. Wendy notices this, remembering all too well the consequences of her husband's drinking days. Earlier in the novel, Jack acknowledged to himself that 'he had been an emotional alcoholic just as surely as he had

¹⁸⁷ King, *The Shining*, p. 117.

¹⁸⁸ King, *The Shining*, p. 119.

¹⁸⁹ King, *The Shining*, p. 117.

¹⁹⁰ King, *The Shining*, p. 126.

¹⁹¹ Magistrale, 'The Scrapbook Chapter', in *Discovering Stephen King's The Shining*, ed. by Tony Magistrale, p. 41.

¹⁹² Magistrale, 'The Scrapbook Chapter', in *Discovering Stephen King's The Shining*, ed. by Tony Magistrale, p. 43.

¹⁹³ King, *The Shining*, p. 181.

been a physical one'.¹⁹⁴ Aware of this, the Overlook works to fill in that void left by Jack's sobriety, giving him something else to keep from his family by presenting him with the scrapbook and thus embroiling him in its dark history. As Magistrale notes, Jack 'prefers the lie to the truth, repression to disclosure.'¹⁹⁵ King's naming of the Overlook hotel is, of course, not insignificant: the hotel both overlooks everything that the Torrance family does at any given moment, as well as encourages Jack to overlook his responsibilities to his work and family. Sidney Poger comments on the relationship between the man and the hotel, observing how the scrapbook's recasting of the Overlook's history from 'shining American Dream... to nightmare parallels Jack's transformation from loving father into shuffling monster'.¹⁹⁶ While Jack had previously seen their stay at the Overlook as an opportunity to finish his play, he abandons it in favour of working on a book informed by the hotel's corrupt backstory as detailed in the scrapbook. This transformation, then, is already underway. Significant, too, as Magistrate notes, is the parallel between 'the hotel's noisesome past and America's current story of violence and corruption.'¹⁹⁷ Indeed, Jack himself makes the admission that he thinks the Overlook 'forms an index of the whole post-World War II American character.'¹⁹⁸ As Eric Savoy writes, central to the American Gothic is a 'profound anxiety about historical crimes and perverse human desires that cast their shadow over... the sunny American republic.' This anxiety, he says, is often embodied in the Gothic figure of the spectre, signalling 'the return of the repressed' within the collective American psyche.¹⁹⁹ Certainly this is true of *The Shining*, the Overlook's malignity stemming from the unatoned sins of its founders.

Not without significance, too, is the location the Overlook decides to leave the scrapbook for Jack to find in. Returning, once again, to Freud, he explains that our understanding of the unconscious originates 'from the theory of repression', as it stores that which is latent or repressed.²⁰⁰ As home to the hidden scrapbook detailing the hotel's repressed history, then, the hotel's basement can be viewed as the Overlook's unconscious — just as being down in the basement seems to tap Jack's own unconscious, triggering the return of memories he would prefer to forget. Indeed, it is down in the basement on his initial tour of the hotel with Watson that King first chooses to access Jack's backstory, instantly setting up a connection between Jack and the Overlook's cellar. No sooner has the image of Danny's arm, hanging in the way that 'no arm was meant to hang... in a world of normal families', played across his mind, does Jack find himself in the boiler room with his familiar desire to drink.²⁰¹ Just as that which is rooted in the familiar is key to the frightening nature

¹⁹⁴ King, *The Shining*, p. 118.

¹⁹⁵ King, *The Shining*, p. 45.

¹⁹⁶ Sidney Poger, 'Character Transformations in *The Shining*', in *Discovering Stephen King's The Shining: Essays on the Bestselling Novel by America's Premier Horror Writer*, ed. by Tony Magistrale (Maryland: Wildside Press, 2006), pp. 47-53 (p. 49).

¹⁹⁷ Magistrale, 'The Scrapbook Chapter', in *Discovering Stephen King's The Shining*, ed. by Tony Magistrale, p. 41.

¹⁹⁸ King, *The Shining*, p. 205.

¹⁹⁹ Savoy, 'The rise of the American Gothic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Hogle, p. 168.

²⁰⁰ Freud, *The Ego & the Id*, p. 3.

²⁰¹ King, *The Shining*, p. 19.

of the uncanny, so too ‘is something that has been repressed and now returns’.²⁰² The figure of the double, either through identical physical appearances or a shared telepathy, where ‘one becomes co-owner of the other’s knowledge, emotions and experience’, is but another source of the uncanny, Freud writes.²⁰³ Certainly, it is this latter example which exemplifies the sinister relationship that Jack and the Overlook share in *The Shining*, with Jack coming to think of himself and the hotel as ‘*simpático*’, and the hotel’s basement acting as the physical representation of their shared unconscious (italics in original).²⁰⁴ Also housed within the Overlook’s basement is the hotel’s boiler, an object that comes to represent Jack’s spiralling mental instability yet, ultimately, will also be responsible for his — and, by extension, the Overlook’s — demise. While the boiler appears just like any other to Jack, it is Watson’s constant reminder that it ‘creeps’ (referring to its pressure dial) that unsettles him.²⁰⁵ Jack’s checking of the boiler’s pressure becomes ‘a ritual’ to him, mirroring the way he obsessively pores over the found scrapbook. As such, Jack begins to spend so much time down in the basement that it takes a physical toll on him: ‘Confinement had leached his skin of its autumn tan... his reddish-blond hair tumbling untidily over his head, he looked slightly lunatic’.²⁰⁶ Wendy, noticing Jack’s rising temper and phantom alcoholism, likens the former to the hotel’s boiler. She thinks to herself that it would be a cause for relief if he were to ‘blow off steam’, wishing he too had a ‘pressure gauge’ that she could check, like the boiler.²⁰⁷ Jack’s fixation on locating every last piece of the Overlook’s history is inching him closer to insanity thus, as Magistrale writes, rendering him ‘both the victim of an evil design and an active participant in his own self-destruction.’²⁰⁸

Roger Luckhurst dedicates his 2019 book *Corridors* to that titular ‘quintessentially modern space’ as he explores both the history and purpose of the corridor, as well as its enduring presence in visual media.²⁰⁹ In his chapter on the hotel corridor, he writes that the sight of this ‘vast vanishing perspective of identical doors receding into the distance’ is enough to give the viewer a feeling of what he defines as ‘*corridor dread*’ (italics in original). This layout, he elaborates, is made all the more uncanny due its ‘identical spatial distribution of cellular private lives along a semi-public passageway.’²¹⁰ Interestingly, Luckhurst goes on to offer his own hypothesis here as to why King was famously not a fan of Kubrick’s film adaption of *The Shining*, writing that the novel was ‘all about verticality’ (naming Jack’s ‘basement discoveries’ and ‘wasps’ nests in the attics’ as such examples), whereas the film instead focused on ‘the horizontality of the hotel corridors’.²¹¹ However, the importance of the corridor (or hallway) should not be overlooked in King’s original text, either. As his father forces their old car up into the mountains on the day of their moving in,

²⁰² Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 147.

²⁰³ Freud, *The Uncanny*, pp. 141-2.

²⁰⁴ King, *The Shining*, p. 275.

²⁰⁵ King, *The Shining*, p. 21.

²⁰⁶ King, *The Shining*, p. 235.

²⁰⁷ King, *The Shining*, p. 210.

²⁰⁸ Magistrale, ‘The Scrapbook Chapter’, in *Discovering Stephen King’s The Shining*, ed. by Tony Magistrale, p. 40.

²⁰⁹ Roger Luckhurst, *Corridors : Passages of Modernity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019), p. 7.

²¹⁰ Luckhurst, *Corridors*, p. 127.

²¹¹ Luckhurst, *Corridors*, p. 263.

Danny catches glimpses of the Overlook and knows that it is the place Tony had warned him about back in Boulder. This was the place, he knew, where ‘some hideously familiar figure sought him down long corridors carpeted with jungle’, setting up the hotel’s hallways for what they are to later become: spaces of terror in the physical world, and the linking corridor to the ‘dreamland’ of Danny’s ‘shining.’²¹² Indeed, is it not long after their arrival at the Overlook that hallways begin to constantly permeate his visions, despite making little sense at first. The child finds himself constantly fleeing the ‘boom’ of a roque mallet down ‘twisting mazelike corridors’, as he attempts to remember something forgotten (*italics in original*). Running through corridor after corridor, he eventually finds himself in a cul-de-sac of sealed doors which ‘frowned down at him from three sides’, mirroring the layout of the hallway in the Overlook’s west wing (here Danny is experiencing his own version of Luckhurst’s ‘corridor dread’). The novel’s frequent descriptions of the hotel’s jungle-patterned hallway runners are also made significant here, as Danny sees the figure pursuing him as like a ‘tiger [which] walked on two legs’.²¹³ King also establishes a connection with corridors and the Overlook’s past in the novel, as Danny thinks that the halls of the hotel ‘now stretched back through time as well as distance’.²¹⁴ Similarly, Wendy later hears the fading chants of ‘*Unmask!*’, the last echoes of a bygone party, ‘as if down a long corridor of time’ (*italics in original*).²¹⁵

As Danny’s visions begin to converge with reality towards the end of the novel, it is the corridor that continues to link the two; this convergence culminating in the child finding himself within a ‘hall that was neither a part of real things nor of the dreamland where Tony sometimes showed him things.’ This hall, Tony tells Danny, is ‘a place deep down in [Danny’s] own mind.’ Thus it is a part of the child, just as Tony himself is.²¹⁶ King’s first reference to this hallway in Danny’s mind, interestingly, comes just after the child first hears mention of the hotel’s boiler and the fact that it ‘*creeps*’: ‘the words echoed down a long and silent corridor in his mind, a corridor lined with mirrors where people seldom looked’ (*italics in original*).²¹⁷ As this corridor gradually dissolves around him, transforming back into the familiar hallway of the Overlook, Danny’s visions are finally rendered reality, as he is forced to flee through the hotel’s all-too-real hallways while the ‘hideously familiar figure’ of his father pursues him. And it is here, ‘looking at the right angle where the hallways joined’, facing the evil of the Overlook hotel as it masquerades as his father like a ‘bad joke’, that Danny — the corridor in his mind no longer silent, its mirror finally looked in — is able to remember what his father forgot: the boiler.²¹⁸ As the boiler’s pressure, left unchecked for days, reaches the point of no return, it explodes, destroying the Overlook and the transformed Jack in the process, while Wendy and Danny are helped to safety by Hallorann (having heard Danny’s calls for help). In the story’s climax, then, King’s oedipal tale is finally concluded;

²¹² King, *The Shining*, p. 69.

²¹³ King, *The Shining*, pp. 142-3.

²¹⁴ King, *The Shining*, p. 359.

²¹⁵ King, *The Shining*, p. 440.

²¹⁶ King, *The Shining*, pp. 464-5.

²¹⁷ King, *The Shining*, p. 106.

²¹⁸ King, *The Shining*, p. 473.

Danny has located the lost object, thus accomplishing what his father could not: protecting his own family.

1.4 Conclusion

Both Eleanor Vance and Jack Torrance arrive at their new temporary homes with the hope that their stays there will present them with a chance to enrich their lives and allow them to move forwards, whether through finding independence and friendship, or by working on a long-delayed project and healing the bonds of family. Rather than being offered a reprieve, even if brief, from the traumas they are escaping and the houses that hold so many damaging memories they are leaving behind, however, they instead find themselves in the grip of a looming, monstrous construction that is anything but ‘homely’; a construction that, just like them, possesses a chilling past better left repressed. As the histories of house and woman, and of hotel and man, come together, merging so tightly that both become indistinguishable from the other, Eleanor and Jack, too, are transformed into extensions of the buildings which they occupy. With their minds no longer their own, Hill House and the Overlook hotel, respectively, are able to complete the process of claiming their new inhabitants for themselves, thus trapping them so that they can never leave. And so, these uncanny buildings become both the site of Eleanor’s and Jack’s possessions *and* of their deaths. As is so frequently the case with the American Gothic, in *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Shining*, what is found within the four walls of a home, just as within the structure of the family, is not a refuge but a place of peril. As such, the figures which are supposed to make us feel most safe — whether it is a father, a neighbour or a doctor — are oftentimes the *very* people that we should fear the most, a fact that the next chapter also demonstrates.

Chapter 2

Currencies of Blood: The Gothic Spectre of Capitalism in Stephen King's *'Salem's Lot* and Robin Cook's *Coma*

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I argue that the effects of capitalism are pivotal to the source of horror in the primary texts Stephen King's *'Salem's Lot* (1975) and Robin Cook's *Coma* (1977), as the characters in both novels are transformed into unconsenting providers of a commodity. I begin the first section of this chapter by exploring the legend of the vampire native to nineteenth century New England, as I argue that Puritan beliefs and paranoias (particularly around Salem being the New Jerusalem of the Bible) are reflected in King's novel, as I engage with criticism by Faye Ringel. Next I begin to examine the titular town in *'Salem's Lot* and the way that it conceals dark secrets below its surface level provincialism, as I engage with criticism by James E. Hicks, Tony Magistrale, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik. I argue that the history of the Marsten House is central to the town's foreboding nature, and is an exemplar of King's theory that the haunted house is one 'with an unsavoury history' (as explored in chapter one of this thesis).²¹⁹ I move on to examine the prevalence of childhood fears in King's writing and how Ben is considered an outsider in town, as I engage with criticism by David Punter. Next, I argue that the figures of Richard Straker, Kurt Barlow and Larry Crockett evoke Karl Marx's allusions to capital as a vampire, as well as consider Marx's frequent use of Gothic imagery in his criticisms on capitalism and industry. Here, I argue that similar metaphors for capitalism and industry can be found in King's 'Graveyard Shift' (1970) and 'The Mangler' (1972). I also explore the commodity Gothic and engage with Tricia Lootens' criticism on this, as well as Chris Baldick's and Franco Moretti's writings comparing capitalism and the figure of the vampire. I argue that vampirism is able to spread through Jerusalem's Lot due to the close nature of both the town and its residents, as I look at Bernice M. Murphy's definition of the Suburban Gothic as here (like in chapter one of this thesis) 'home is seldom the safest place to be.'²²⁰ After arguing that the vampires of the novel represent conformity and mob mentality as I engage with the secondary texts such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery' (1948), and Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954), I then consider Jerusalem's Lot as a ghost town by engaging with Martin Procházka's definition of them as American ruins. I argue that Jerusalem's Lot was a ghost town even before the arrival of the vampire due to loss and abandonment as a result of the effects of capitalism and that, mirroring this, Barlow legally acquired the town like a capitalist figure.

I begin the second section by considering bodily autonomy and the commodification of human blood, organs and cells in the United States medical industry by looking at the real

²¹⁹ King, *Danse Macabre*, p. 300.

²²⁰ Bernice M. Murphy, "'Identical Boxes Spreading like Gangrene': Defining the Suburban Gothic", in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. By Charles L. Crow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 315-327 (p. 321).

life case of John Moore and the prevalence of paid blood donations in the US, as well as the rise in global organ harvesting and the change in the legal definition of death (shifting from the heart to the brain). Here, I consult work by Richard M. Titmus and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, as well as Nikolas Rose's idea of 'biocapitalism' as a result of the expansion of the medical industrial complex.²²¹ I then explore how this has affected the Gothic genre, giving rise to biomedical horror texts, as chronicled by Roger Luckhurst. I begin my consideration of Cook's *Coma* by looking at the way patients are not treated as people in the novel, as I engage with Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963). I then move on to an exploration of how the Boston Memorial Hospital in *Coma* engages with the idea of verticality, as put forward by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958). As I examine the Jefferson Institute as a front for organ harvesting, I argue that braindead patients are dehumanised within the novel. Here, I engage with criticism by Manali Karmakar, Avishek Parui and Catherine Belling and I examine how the real life case of Karen Ann Quinlan affected American society around the time of *Coma*'s publication. Moving on from this, I then examine the two hospitals in the novel through the lens of Foucault's concept of heterotopias as outlined in *Of Other Spaces* (1967). Here, I examine a study by Paul White, Alexandra Hillman and Joanna Latimer on the hospital system as a complex heterotopia. I move on to argue that liminal and in-between spaces in *Coma* mirror the liminal nature of its patients, as I engage with Marc Augé's definition of non-places before looking at Cook's author's note from *Coma*, and his warning that the events of his novel could be made possible in the modern age. Concluding this chapter is a consideration of the similarities between the two primary texts in regards to the effects of American capitalism.

2.2 'Salem's Lot

At the start of the nineteenth century, New England found itself victim to the attacks of, what were believed to be, vampires. As its population was ravaged by what was then called consumption, it was observed that soon after one member of the family died of the disease, other members would then also become afflicted with it, leading to the assumption that the deceased were maintaining some semblance of life by 'feeding' on those they had left behind. As such, it became common practice to exhume the bodies of dead relatives in order to check that the corpse's heart or other organs were not filled with 'so-called fresh blood': an indicator of its suspected vampirism. Such organs were then removed and burnt, with their ashes sometimes being consumed by the remaining suffering family members in order to heal them.²²² Today, consumption is known as tuberculosis, and scientific advancements have helped us to understand that its contagious nature is due to the fact that it is spread through the air, rather than because of an 'undead' loved one.²²³ Yet, New England's association with the macabre persists. In *The Gothic Literature and History of New England* (2022), Faye Ringel notes that this superstition of the vampire specific to New England has not elicited

²²¹ Nikolas S. Rose, *Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 21.

²²² Michael E. Bell, 'Vampires and Death in New England, 1784 to 1892', *Anthropology and Humanism*, 31.2 (2006), 124–40 (pp. 124–5) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/ahu.2006.31.2.124>>.

²²³ Carol Dyer, *Tuberculosis* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood, 2010), p. 3.

much notable inspiration for writers from that region, especially when compared with tales based on or inspired by the legendary Salem Witch Trials of the seventeenth century. Stephen King's 1975 novel *'Salem's Lot* remains the most famous example of the former.

Interestingly, Ringel states that when she asked King if he was aware of this 'New England vampire belief' after the release of *'Salem's Lot*, in which the titular, small Maine town becomes overrun by vampires, he told her that he was not.²²⁴ A New England native himself, many of King's novels and short stories are set in fictional towns within his home state of Maine, so much so that Ringel names him 'the exemplar of New England Gothic since the 1970s.'²²⁵ His Gothic tales, she writes, have helped to 'make New England *the* locus of terror in the popular imaginary... reflecting its history and folklore of Puritan paranoia' — even if this last point is sometimes accidental (*italics in original*).²²⁶

The short prologue of *'Salem's Lot* (set towards the very end of the novel's narrative) follows a yet unnamed man and boy who, having fled Jerusalem's Lot, are crossing the country in order to put as much distance between themselves and the town, while still searching scavenged newspapers for any mention of it. This opening symbolically inverts the arrival of the Puritans to, what they considered to be, the new Jerusalem of the Bible. Cecelia Tichi recounts how the Massachusetts Bay Colony, led by John Winthrop and spurred on by the story of the Second Temple's construction, worked on a 'divinely-directed Puritan reconstruction of a New Jerusalem', building structures just as they hoped to build order and society out of one they believed to be 'spiritually crumbling'.²²⁷ The etymology of the name 'Jerusalem' can be traced to the Hebrew words 'Yerusha' and 'shalom', coming together to make 'a heritage of peace.'²²⁸ This contrasts the number of native worship sites across New England containing the word 'devil' which, Ringel notes, led to many Puritans 'fear[ing] that they had arrived not at the New Jerusalem but in Satan's kingdom'.²²⁹ Certainly this is true of King's novel, for what his characters find in 'salem's Lot (as its locals call it) is neither peace nor the 'holy city'.²³⁰ Despite King's assurance that '[n]othing too nasty could happen in such a nice little town', Jerusalem's Lot is shrouded by darkness long before the arrival of its 'undead' newcomer.²³¹ As James E. Hicks writes, 'the horror of *'Salem's Lot* is its readers' realisation that... small town America is not a bulwark against depravity.'²³² From the milkman Win Purinton's secret glee that his wife is dead, to the Reverend John Griggins' fantasies about the girls' Bible Class he teaches, there are secrets lurking behind almost every front door in the Lot. At the Sawyer household, what begins as an act of sordid infidelity

²²⁴ Ringel, *The Gothic Literature and History of New England*, p. 64.

²²⁵ Ringel, 'New England Gothic', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 139.

²²⁶ Ringel, *The Gothic Literature and History of New England*, p. 9.

²²⁷ Cecelia Tichi, 'The Puritan Historians and Their New Jerusalem', *Early American Literature*, 6.2 (1971), 143–55 (pp. 143–4).

²²⁸ Kristine Haglund, 'How to Build a Paradox: Making the New Jerusalem', *Dialogue* (Salt Lake City, Utah), 49.3 (2016), 211–19 (p. 211) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5406/dialogmormthou.49.3.0211>>.

²²⁹ Ringel, 'New England Gothic', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 140.

²³⁰ Revelation 21. 2.

²³¹ Stephen King, *'Salem's Lot* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), p. 42.

²³² James E. Hicks, 'Stephen King's Creation of Horror in *'Salem's Lot*: A Prolegomenon Towards a New Hermeneutic of the Gothic Novel' in *The Gothic World of Stephen King: Landscape of Nightmares*, ed. by Gary Hoppenstand and Ray B. Browne (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), pp. 75–83 (p. 76).

soon transforms into a nightly ritual of abuse. After catching his wife cheating on him with the telephone repairman, King reveals that Reggie Sawyer has beaten and raped her every night since. Across the Lot at the Town Dump, its custodian Dud Rogers lives alone in a shack, largely shunned from society because of his appearance. Described as ‘a hunchback with a curious cocked head... [and] arms which dangled apelike almost to his knees’, Dud enacts his revenge by shooting the rats that plague the dump while imagining that they are the teenagers who mock him.²³³ It is his obsession with one girl in particular, however, which is most alarming. Ruthie Crocket appeals not only to Dud’s fantasy of revenge but to his sexual desires, too, as he lingers over the fact that she does not wear a bra to school.

One of the town’s darkest secrets is the one hidden behind the corrugated walls of the McDougal family’s trailer. At just seventeen years old, Sandy McDougall resents the life that she has. After dropping out of high school and giving up on her dream of becoming a model, her days are now dedicated to maintaining their home and looking after their ten-month old son, Randy, while her husband is at work. As Tony Magistrale observes, in King’s texts ‘there exists the possibility for anything to transform into a prison’, including a marriage or a home.²³⁴ One morning, consumed by these feelings of resentment and entrapment, Sandy slaps the crying infant, experiencing ‘a horrid surge of gratification, pity and hate in her throat.’²³⁵ Soon, Sandy is regularly beating her son. When she is eventually caught by her husband, his reaction is almost as disturbing as the act itself. For Royce McDougall, the fact that his dinner is not yet ready for him is more of a concern than the sight of his bloody-nosed son. What *‘Salem’s Lot* ultimately does, as Hicks writes, is ‘quickens its readers’ horror as it widens the gap between their notions of small town America and their perceptions of its incomprehensible evil.’²³⁶ Even Mabel Werts, the old woman who spends her time listening in on her neighbours’ telephone conversations and spying on the town’s goings-ons through her binoculars, ‘her memory [stretching] back over five decades of necrology, adultery, thievery and insanity’, is unaware of the true depths of Jerusalem’s Lot’s depravity.²³⁷ For, as King writes, ‘[t]he town has its secrets, and keeps them well.’²³⁸

Yet there *is* one person in Jerusalem’s Lot who is privy to its residents’ more taboo secrets. While he listens to the confessions of the likes of Sandy McDougall as she admits to hitting the baby he once baptised, Father Callaghan is able to feel ‘the actual presence of evil in the confessional, as real as the smell of old velvet.’²³⁹ As Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik write, the town ‘is haunted by memories of its own recent violence’.²⁴⁰ Looming above the town, overlooking each of its daily occurrences from the mundane to the depraved, is the most vivid example of this violence: the Marsten House. If King defines a haunted house as one with an ‘an unsavoury history’, as explored in the previous chapter, then the house at the

²³³ King, *‘Salem’s Lot*, p. 82.

²³⁴ Magistrale, ‘Why Stephen King Still Matters’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 359.

²³⁵ King, *‘Salem’s Lot*, p. 67.

²³⁶ Hicks, ‘Stephen King’s Creation of Horror’ in *The Gothic World of Stephen King*, ed. by Hoppenstand and Browne, p. 76).

²³⁷ King, *‘Salem’s Lot*, p. 113.

²³⁸ King, *‘Salem’s Lot*, p. 198.

²³⁹ King, *‘Salem’s Lot*, p. 218.

²⁴⁰ Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, ‘Comic Gothic’, in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 242-54 (p. 249).

centre of the evil in *'Salem's Lot* certainly joins that rank.²⁴¹ One morning, after being unable to deliver any more letters into its overflowing mailbox, the mailman had gone up to the Marsten House to investigate, finding Birdie Marsten, seemingly shot in the head, lying dead in the kitchen. When the town constable arrived on the scene soon after, it was discovered that Hubie Marsten was also dead, hanged from a rafter in one of the upstairs bedrooms. For the residents of Jerusalem's Lot, unaware of their own neighbours' sordid proclivities, the story of the owners of the Masten House 'was the closest thing the town had to a skeleton in its closet.'²⁴²

Childhood fears are key to the element of terror in many of King's tales', from the titular monster in the closet in 'The Bogeyman' (1973) to the shapeshifting Pennywise the Dancing Clown in *IT* (1986). In *'Salem's Lot*, too, much of the dread the town's residents feel towards the Marsten House stems from childhood stories and experiences. As a girl, Susan Norton and her friends 'tortured themselves deliciously with the stories they had gleamed from their elders' while sitting in their playhouse.²⁴³ Similarly, as Hank Peters is about to enter the Marsten cellar to deliver a padlock for its new owner, he thinks back to 'all those stories about Hubie Marsten that they had laughed about as kids... and the chant they had teased the girls with.'²⁴⁴ Ben Mears' fear of the Marsten House is the most visceral, however, due to the fact that it is not simply based on rumours and stories but what *he* actually saw there as a boy. As Ben's initiation into a club of older boys, he was dared to enter the Marsten House and retrieve a memento of his visit. Ben does manage to take a snow globe containing a miniature version of the House, but not before coming face to face with the ghost of Hubie Marsten, still swinging from the beam he hanged himself from. In *Danse Macabre* (1981) King reveals that it was one of his own childhood nightmares which inspired this scene.²⁴⁵ Despite the fact that the memory of Hubie Marsten's corpse still haunts Ben, it is his preoccupation with the Marsten House which leads him back to Jerusalem's Lot as an adult as he plans to write a book about its history. As he is driving back to the town where he spent four formative years as a child — the intervening years having dealt him both good (finding moderate success as a writer) and bad (the recent death of his wife in a motorcycle accident) — he is overcome with 'a sudden blackness' at the sight of the now unoccupied Marsten House from between the trees.²⁴⁶ Yet he still goes on to request the room directly facing it in Eva's Miller's boarding house. There, he sets up his desk with his typewriter and the snowglobe he took from it as a child. As he writes, he watches the house, mirroring the model inside the snowglobe on his desk, now reduced to the size of a dollhouse from the view of his window: 'a size that could be coped with.'²⁴⁷ As Ben notices a light on in one of its windows, though, it is not long until the Marsten House once again becomes a home to evil, justifying his earlier concern that 'houses absorb the emotions that are spent in them'.²⁴⁸

²⁴¹ King, *Danse Macabre*, p. 300.

²⁴² King, *'Salem's Lot*, p. 48.

²⁴³ King, *'Salem's Lot*, p. 51.

²⁴⁴ King, *'Salem's Lot*, p. 135.

²⁴⁵ King, *Danse Macabre*, p. 104.

²⁴⁶ King, *'Salem's Lot*, p. 21.

²⁴⁷ King, *'Salem's Lot*, p. 97.

²⁴⁸ King, *'Salem's Lot*, p. 55.

For David Punter, the novel's close knit community demonstrates 'the interchangeability of openness and closure'. He continues, 'openness to the behaviour of others, knowledge of their whereabouts and of their daily habits, is a simultaneous closure to the possibility of change.'²⁴⁹ Indeed, before the new occupants of the Marsten House present themselves to the townsfolk, Ben remains the newcomer, and thus outsider, in Jerusalem's Lot. Despite the fact that he spent several years there as a child, the other residents of the Lot view Ben, with his 'foreign car and his job as a writer', as 'different' to them, Horner and Zlosnik note.²⁵⁰ He is the town's 'Other' even before the arrival of the vampire. Not every resident of the Lot is so wary of strangers, however. After a chance meeting with Susan in the town's park, where she recognises Ben from the dust jacket of his book she has loaned from the local library, friendship and then love quickly follows. She and Ben bond over tales of Jerusalem's Lot's folklore, from the infamous fire of '51 — the 'biggest damn thing that ever happened to this town' — to the dark history of the Marsten House. Like Ben was able to, Susan wishes to escape the repressive nature of the small town and her overbearing mother, dreaming of pursuing a life as an artist in New York. 'Things don't change here', Susan remarks.²⁵¹ At that very moment, however, the vampire's impending descent onto Jerusalem's Lot is growing closer, bringing with it a stark transformation of both the town and Susan.

This transformation is preceded by the unremarkable yet symbolic arrival in town of Richard Straker. Despite his peculiar appearance — described as completely bald, 'sweatless' and with eyebrows like 'a straight black slash' — his choice of attire is anything but: wearing a 'sober three-piece suit' and carrying a briefcase, Straker is *the* image of the typical businessman.²⁵² Sent by his elusive master Kurt Barlow, Straker intends to purchase the unoccupied Marsten House and a disused laundromat in town on his behalf, with the pair planning to relocate to Jerusalem's Lot to set up an antique shop. This business, however, is simply a front for their real aims. As we come to learn that the purpose of Straker's visit is in fact to prepare the town for the vampire Barlow's inevitable takeover, his introduction here, briefcase in hand and posed to make his land grab, calls to mind Karl Marx's analogy of capital as a vampire. As Magistrale observes, King's stories 'reflect deeply and critically on the social topography of late twentieth- and twenty-first century capitalism.' This critique, he continues, is one that reflects the 'subversive nature' of the American Gothic, 'which... has served as a conscience to the consequences of unbridled capitalism devoid of sufficient morality.'²⁵³

Marx's writings on capitalism are themselves frequently laced with Gothic imagery and allusions, from his famous example of the dancing table, transformed from wood into a

²⁴⁹ Punter, 'Problems of recollection and construction', in *Modern Gothic : A Reader*, ed. by Sage and Lloyd-Smith, p. 137.

²⁵⁰ Horner and Zlosnik, 'Comic Gothic', in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by Punter, p. 252.

²⁵¹ King, 'Salem's Lot', pp. 31-2.

²⁵² King, 'Salem's Lot', p. 86.

²⁵³ Magistrale, 'Why Stephen King Still Matters', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, pp. 356-7.

commodity; to his proclamation that a ‘spectre is haunting Europe’ in the opening of *The Communist Manifesto* (this ‘spectre’ being communism).²⁵⁴ On this, Chris Baldick states:

...some of the most gruesomely archaic echoes of fairy-tale, legend, myth, and folklore crop up in the wholly unexpected environment of the modern factory system, stock exchange, and parliamentary chamber: ghosts, vampires, ghouls, werewolves, alchemists, and reanimated corpses continue to haunt the bourgeois world, for all its sober and sceptical virtues.

These references to the gothic are more than just stylistic choices for Marx, using them to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the bourgeois world: a society which has rid itself of all of its past superstitions and folklore, only to invent itself a new bogeyman in the form of the ‘contrived scare’ of communism, Baldick continues.²⁵⁵ It is Marx’s repeated allusion to capitalism as a form of vampirism, then, which is the ‘most vivid representation of the bourgeoisie’s doomed state of possession by irresistible forces’.²⁵⁶ If the driving force behind capital is surplus labour, according to Marx, then capital is ‘dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour’. Thus, the capitalist himself is also not unlike the vampire, as he ‘consumes the labour-power he has bought from [the worker]’ during the working day.²⁵⁷ Even as the capitalist increases this production of ‘labour-power’ by extending the working day through shift cycles, this still does not satisfy him as it ‘only slightly quenches the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour’, Marx continues.²⁵⁸ Baldick echoes his thoughts here, concluding that ‘it is the inherent restlessness of the bourgeoisie... which condemns it to a thirst that can never be quenched.’²⁵⁹

There is significance, then, in the fact that Larry Crocket, ‘without doubt, the richest man in ‘Salem’s Lot’ and the town’s only land dealer, is the one Straker presents his opportunity to.²⁶⁰ Larry made his two-million-dollar fortune selling trailers, financed at a twenty-five percent interest rate, to unsuspecting ‘lower-middle-class blue- or white-collar workers... who could not raise a down payment on a more conventional house’. While ‘the money rolled in’ for Larry, the bank accounts of the already-poor residents of Jerusalem’s Lot were bled dry and their lives were made all the more miserable, as the stories of Larry’s customers across the town, such as the McDougall family, demonstrate.²⁶¹ It is this insatiable thirst for money that convinces Larry to accept Straker’s terms, exchanging him the Marsten House and the laundromat for the promise of the deeds to a plot of land worth upwards of four million dollars and sizable enough to build a shopping centre on. Yet, in the aftermath of

²⁵⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2018), p. 6.

²⁵⁵ Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein’s Shadow : Myth, Monstrosity and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), pp. 121-2.

²⁵⁶ Baldick, p. 128.

²⁵⁷ Karl Marx, Ben Fowkes, and David Fernbach, *Capital : a Critique of Political Economy Volume One* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 342.

²⁵⁸ Marx, Fowkes, and Fernbach, *Capital*, p. 367.

²⁵⁹ Baldick, p. 129.

²⁶⁰ King, ‘Salem’s Lot’, p. 121.

²⁶¹ King, ‘Salem’s Lot’, pp. 124-5.

his meeting with Straker, he is left ‘thinking about deals with the devil.’²⁶² It is ironic that Larry Crocket, the man whose vampiric greed contributed to the economic and moral degradation of Jersulam’s Lot year on year, is the one to hand-sign the deal that will come to mark its death sentence, as its residents are physically, and one by one, bled dry.

If it is this conflict between the bourgeoisie capitalists and proletariat workers that lies at the heart of Marxist theory, then industry is crucial to that concept, with the discovery of America acting as the inciting incident for the expansion of industry.²⁶³ King’s first short story collection *Night Shift*, published just a few years after *Salem’s Lot* in 1978, includes several stories in which the (often industrial) workplace acts as the backdrop to terror. ‘The Mangler’, first published in *Cavalier* magazine in 1972 before being collected in *Night Shift*, is one such example. The short story takes place in an industrial laundry where a series of workplace accidents all involve the same press machine: ‘the Hadley-Watson Model-6 Speed Ironer and Folder’, later coming to be known as the namesake ‘mangler’.²⁶⁴ While the herculean industrial machinery found in Marx’s critique of industry ‘operates only by means of associated labour’, the mangler inverts this idea, coming alive to stalk the women who work in the laundry.²⁶⁵ The reason for this, we learn, is that the machine has become possessed by a demon determined to kill all who cross its path, a result of its consumption of its first victim’s spilled virgin blood. The horror of ‘The Mangler’ plays on fears frequently found in the commodity Gothic, a genre which itself builds on Marx’s idea of the transformed commodity. As an example of how materials are changed into a commodity through human labour, giving them a purpose and thus exchange value, Marx names the table, transformed from a block of wood into something with an independent life; something which ‘stands with its feet on the ground... and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will’.²⁶⁶ Objects found in the commodity Gothic, then, ‘while retaining the transcendent claims of commodities... resist, and perhaps avenge their subjection to abstraction, by laying bare the now-hidden, “grotesque idea” of their own now occluded material, even corporeal origins’, Tricia Lootens describes. An idea frequently explored in such texts, she elaborates, is when ‘would-be consumers of the products of slavery find themselves consuming enslaved bodies instead’.²⁶⁷ In ‘The Mangler’, however, despite originally promising them an aid to their labour, the namesake commodity instead turns against the very women whose human labour endowed it with its ‘free will’. Just like the vampire (whether in its literal or figurative form), the mangler’s life force is dependent, quite literally, on feeding off of its victim’s blood.

‘Graveyard Shift’, originally published in *Cavalier* magazine in 1970, is another of King’s tales set in the industrial workplace from *Night Shift*. Here, a young man named Hall finds himself working night shifts for minimum wage in a small town textile mill after drifting across the country. For Marx, night shifts are emblematic of the capitalist’s desire to

²⁶² King, *Salem’s Lot*, p. 95.

²⁶³ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 8.

²⁶⁴ Stephen King, ‘The Mangler’, in *Night Shift* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012), pp. 128-55 (p. 129).

²⁶⁵ Marx, Fowkes, and Fernbach, *Capital*, p. 508.

²⁶⁶ Marx, Fowkes, and Fernbach, *Capital*, pp. 163-4.

²⁶⁷ Tricia Lootens, ‘Commodity Gothicism’, in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic. Volume I, A-K*, ed. by William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 132-4 (p.132-3).

extract as much ‘labour-power’ as he can from his workers, as he aims toward a ‘24-hour process of production’.²⁶⁸ It is the offer of double pay in exchange for his labour which persuades Hall to agree to help clear out the mill’s abandoned basement, despite the fact that it has become infested with the thing he hates most about the job: rats. After finding a concealed trap door in the basement which he believes leads to the root of the infestation, Hall informs his jobsworth foreman Warwick, tired of his quips about Hall being a ‘college boy’, that there are zoning laws in the town surrounding vermin which could lead to the mill’s closure.²⁶⁹ Reinstating his dominance in the situation, Warwick fires Hall, only for Hall to remind Warwick that Warwick himself has a boss, the town commissioner, who would likely fire *him* if news of the rats got out. Realising that he has him trapped, Warwick revokes Hall’s sacking but sends him down to investigate what is behind the trapdoor as punishment, though offering him the chance to pick another member of the team to accompany him. Exacting his own revenge, Hall choses Warwick. What dwells beyond the trapdoor is the grotesque sight of a queen rat, eyeless and legless and the size of a dairy calf. After witnessing it devour Warwick, Hall believes that he is safe, making his way to the exit, only to be swarmed and eaten himself by the queen’s many children. The monstrous queen rat appears in the story like the physical embodiment of Marx’s description of capital: a swollen mass of dead labour growing fat on the living labour it has consumed. Although Warwick’s position as foreman may temporarily have afforded him power over the other workers, as he and Hall enter the trapdoor, ultimately walking to their deaths, they are equals: both workers sacrificing themselves for a paycheck that can never be cashed in; both just rungs on the capitalist’s ladder. While ‘Marx’s casting of the workers in the role of modern Prometheus is... to subvert the capitalists’ Titanic self-image’ in his own writings, the workers in King’s stories are usually not so lucky.²⁷⁰ Whether succumbing to Thor-like machinery or at the hands of treacherous night shifts, here the individual is no match for the behemoth that is capitalism. As Baldick writes, ‘[t]he truth of capitalist production lies not in the open market but in the enclosed, secret lair or workshop, like all the best... Gothic terrors.’²⁷¹

In *Signs Taken for Wonders* (1983), Franco Moretti, like Marx, likens capitalism to the vampire, namely the titular vampire from Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*. Dracula, he writes, is impelled not by a desire for bloodshed like so many other creatures of the Gothic, but by a *need* to consume blood. His existence hinges solely on his ability to extract from the living; by transferring another’s strength to ‘*his strength*’, much the same way as the capitalist could not grow rich if not for the worker’s labour creating this capital in the first place (*italics in original*). And, just as with capital, ‘Dracula is impelled towards a continuous growth, an unlimited expansion of his domain’; for the victim of Dracula — just as the victim of Kurt Barlow — is ‘*his for ever*’ (*italics in original*).²⁷²

This ‘unlimited expansion’ is also seen in *Salem’s Lot*. Just weeks after Barlow makes Ralphie Glick his first victim, vampirism has spread throughout the town like

²⁶⁸ Marx, Fowkes, and Fernbach, *Capital*, p. 367.

²⁶⁹ Stephen King, ‘Graveyard Shift’, in *Night Shift* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012), pp. 73-97 (p. 88).

²⁷⁰ Baldick, p. 124.

²⁷¹ Baldick, p. 126.

²⁷² Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders : Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 91-2.

consumption did in nineteenth century New England, as parent is turned by child; husband transformed by wife; and friend converted by friend. Barlow's plan would have been impossible to enact outside of a close knit community such as Jerusalem's Lot for, just as with consumption, it is the very *closeness* (both in the terms of proximity and familiarity) of its victims which allows it to spread so rapidly. Punter also comments on this:

The conjuring of the dark Other thus becomes the ambiguous counterpoint to the problems of community and proximity which are encoded in small town USA: in a world where everybody knows everybody else, then the only way of protecting a 'secret', of holding onto whatever is in the crypt, is through a proliferation of the self.²⁷³

Ergo, Jerusalem's Lot does not need to keep this newest secret for the whole town is in on it. This 'closeness' is also central to what Bernice M. Murphy defines as the suburban Gothic, which, she makes clear, are not 'just Gothic texts set in suburbia, but Gothic texts *about* suburbia' and the way it has changed American society.²⁷⁴ If the suburb itself is an 'in-between' space — in between the city and the town, or the urban and the rural — she continues, then that contradiction is a perfect setting for the Gothic which 'so often arises from the gap between what something *is* and what it is *not*' (italics in original).²⁷⁵ This is certainly true of *Salem's Lot*, in which the liminal nature of the vampire, neither truly dead nor truly alive, reflects the status of the town itself, still retaining some semblances of life but largely laying dormant (a fact true even before Barlow's arrival there). Similarly, the warning at the heart of the Suburban Gothic is one echoed in King's novel: the caution 'that our loved ones and neighbours are those we should fear most of all, and home is seldom the safest place to be.'²⁷⁶ This is a fact that Mabel Werts comes to learn. As she finally closes the cap on her binoculars, the Lot is 'rife with a deadly gossip she did not want to listen to.'²⁷⁷ Yet she too is soon part of that 'deadly gossip' as the newly-turned Glynis Mayberry knocks on her door, pretending to ask her friend for shelter from the horrors outside. As Hicks points out, 'Barlow perverts friendship and uses it to infect more and more of the villagers.'²⁷⁸

For Magistrale, the vampires of '*Salem's Lot*' can also be seen as metaphors for the constricting nature of conformity and 'groupthink'. As they 'stamp out the possibility for independent thought while feeding on the corruption of the group's collective morality', Barlow acts as their totalitarian leader.²⁷⁹ This idea, reminiscent of the Puritan hysterics that led to the Salem Witch Trials and the aforementioned New England vampire myth, is also frequently explored in American literature, particularly in the work of writers from the New England region. From Hester Prynne's public humiliation in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The*

²⁷³ Punter, 'Problems of recollection and construction', in *Modern Gothic : A Reader*, ed. by Sage and Lloyd-Smith, p. 137.

²⁷⁴ Murphy, 'Defining the Suburban Gothic', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. Crow, p. 315.

²⁷⁵ Murphy, 'Defining the Suburban Gothic', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. Crow, p. 317.

²⁷⁶ Murphy, 'Defining the Suburban Gothic', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. Crow, p. 321.

²⁷⁷ King, '*Salem's Lot*', p. 251.

²⁷⁸ Hicks, 'Stephen King's Creation of Horror' in *The Gothic World of Stephen King*, ed. by Hoppenstand and Browne, p. 79.

²⁷⁹ Magistrale, 'Why Stephen King Still Matters', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, pp. 358-9.

Scarlet Letter (1850), to the ritualistic stoning of Tessie Hutchinson in Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery' (1948), they are the terrifying results of mob mentality. Richard Matheson also engages with this idea by subverting it in his 1954 novel *I Am Legend* when, at the end of the book, Robert Neville looks at the vampires who have overtaken earth and realises that he is the last of his kind. By his exclusion from this new race, he is thus transformed into that which he had previously spent the novel's entirety hunting: 'black terror to be destroyed.'²⁸⁰ For the characters who remain alive at the end of '*Salem's Lot*', however, King's ending is not so bleak. As Magistrale notes, what King's protagonists must typically do in order to defeat the monstrous foe who is terrorising their domestic space is 'separate from the single-minded corruption of the larger community', often destroying or abandoning this domestic space in the process.²⁸¹ This can be seen in both '*Salem's Lot*'s predecessor *Carrie* (1974) and successor *The Shining* (1977), as the telepathically-gifted adolescents in these novels use their powers to help them destroy (quite literally) their restrictive homes and, in the process, their abusive parents, as well as in '*Salem's Lot* itself.

Magistrale writes that 'the single most compelling feature of the King hero-protagonist is... a satisfying evolution from selfishness to teacher and nurturer.'²⁸² While the aforementioned *Carrie* and *The Shining* are two novels devoid of positive father figures, King reverses this trend in '*Salem's Lot*'. By the novel's conclusion, Ben has lost every person in Jerusalem's Lot he cares about, including Susan, as they are transformed into vampires. So, too, has the young Mark Petrie, who was made an orphan at the hands of Kurt Barlow personally. United in their grief and desire to see his monstrous reign ended, Ben takes on the role of Mark's adoptive father at the end of the novel. After managing to defeat Barlow with a stake through the heart, they leave the Lot together. In the days that follow, Ben briefly returns, alone, to bury the bodies of Mark's parents. Surrounded by the now-undead residents of Jerusalem's Lot, sleeping in the daylight, Ben heads to his old room at Eva Miller's boarding house. There, he burns the manuscript he was working on about the Marsten House and smashes the glass snow globe he once took from it as a child. These are symbolic gestures as Ben is letting go of his childhood fears, so often represented by the House, so that he can become the parent Mark needs him to be. Before he smashes the snow globe, however, it taunts Ben for one last time, as he imagines a face, 'pallid and hungry', peering out from one of the windows of the miniature model of the Marsten House.²⁸³ As Hicks writes, in '*Salem's Lot*' 'horror is the realisation of childhood terror in adult reality.'²⁸⁴ Ben soon realises that the face is simply the reflection of his own, though, and that he has the power to banish it, just as he and Mark did to Barlow. He drops the snow globe and leaves the Lot without looking back, starting his journey 'toward Mark, toward his life.'²⁸⁵ For Ben and Mark are the previously-unnamed man and boy from the novel's prologue, travelling the country together as they search newspapers for word on the fate of the town.

²⁸⁰ Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend* (London: Gollancz, 2007), p. 160.

²⁸¹ Magistrale, 'Why Stephen King Still Matters', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 360.

²⁸² Magistrale, 'Why Stephen King Still Matters', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 362.

²⁸³ King, '*Salem's Lot*', p. 583.

²⁸⁴ Hicks, 'Stephen King's Creation of Horror' in *The Gothic World of Stephen King*, ed. by Hoppenstand and Browne, p. 81.

²⁸⁵ King, '*Salem's Lot*', p. 585.

The epilogue of *'Salem's Lot* begins where this prologue ends, as Ben and Mark decide to return to the Lot together. For Hicks, this return acts to 'complete the cyclic pattern from childhood terror to adult horror.'²⁸⁶ When Ben arrived back in Jerusalem's Lot at the start of the novel, he felt that he was 'trying to recapture something that was irrevocably lost' from his childhood.²⁸⁷ Now, however, as he returns for the last time with Mark, he does not wish to retrieve anything from the Lot but to *destroy* it; thus, in the process, simultaneously ridding himself of the source of both his childhood *and* adult fears. In the very bush where the town's infamous fire of '51 began, as he explains to Mark, Ben drops a lit cigarette. And, mirroring that same fire, 'urged by the autumn wind that blew from the west', the flames spread to engulf Jerusalem's Lot and its sleeping citizens.²⁸⁸ Two years after the release of *'Salem's Lot*, King published the short story 'One for the Road' as a sequel to the main novel and set just a few years after its events (originally published in *Maine* magazine in 1977 before later appearing in *Night Shift*). It begins as a tourist enters a local bar asking for help, having abandoned his car and family in a nearby town during a snowstorm. This town, we discover, is the now mostly-burnt down Jerusalem's Lot. Knowing the reputation of the Lot, the bartender Tookey and another local try to warn the man away from returning there. Reluctantly, however, they accompany him back, only to find that the man's wife and young daughter have been transformed into vampires. Booth, the narrator of the story, ends his tale with a warning to the reader: 'Whatever you do, don't go up that road to Jerusalem's Lot.'²⁸⁹ Despite Ben and Mark's best efforts, then, the cycle of terror initiated by Barlow in *'Salem's Lot* is seemingly destined to continue indefinitely, trapping more and more people in its invisible tomb of the 'undead', even as the Lot is now a ghost town.

Before returning to Jerusalem's Lot to destroy it, Ben finds a newspaper article about the town bearing the headline 'GHOST TOWN IN MAINE?' While the reader knows that the Lot's residents are now members of the 'undead' and spend the daylight hours sleeping in the very houses they once occupied, the article details how Jerusalem's Lot seems to be America's latest town to simply 'dry up and blow away', citing the unaccounted for disappearances of nearly all of its 1,319 residents.²⁹⁰ The American 'ghost town syndrome' is a very real phenomenon, and something Martin Procházka defines as a specific type of American ruins. On the difference between American and European ruins, he explains that while the latter are usually places with 'spiritual significance' and strong ties to the country's former heydays, the former would instead seem to attest to 'the failures of modern economic or technological power' in the United States.²⁹¹ Just as the figures of ghosts and spectres 'mark the essential discontinuity of time', complicating our view of what has been and what is yet to come, Procházka goes on to say, then so, too do, the towns which share their namesake. For the American ghost town is a place where '[m]ost of its "life" is restricted to

²⁸⁶ Hicks, 'Stephen King's Creation of Horror' in *The Gothic World of Stephen King*, ed. by Hoppenstand and Browne, p. 81.

²⁸⁷ King, *'Salem's Lot*, p. 21.

²⁸⁸ King, *'Salem's Lot*, p. 598.

²⁸⁹ Stephen King, 'One for the Road', in *Night Shift* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012), pp. 447-69 (p. 469).

²⁹⁰ King, *'Salem's Lot*, p. 7.

²⁹¹ Martin Procházka, 'American Ruins and the Ghost Town Syndrome', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 29-40 (pp. 29-30).

tales of the past', yet which still 'haunts' the present and our vision of the future.²⁹² Just as the American Gothic offers 'a counter-narrative' to the story of the American dream, chronicling its fears and failures, then so too does the ghost town, presenting an alternative view of the consequences of American capitalism.²⁹³ As Ringel chronicles, by the 1920s New England's industrial cities 'seemed left behind by history' as urban industry moved south (just as farming previously had), taking with it the region's workers.²⁹⁴ Its local writers such as H. P. Lovecraft articulated anxieties surrounding this abandonment of their home region, she notes, 'project[ing] their fears of loss of position, decline, and devolution onto other scapegoats—vampires, immigrants, the poor', just as the Puritans did before them.²⁹⁵ While King also explores this abandonment here in '*Salem's Lot*', he does not name the vampire, or any other scapegoat, as its cause.

For Jerusalem's Lot was a ghost town long before Kurt Barlow robbed it of its residents, leaving its stores boarded-up and its houses vacant; just as it was before Ben Mears burnt those same abandoned buildings to the ground. Failed by a broken economic system and left behind by shifting industry, there is little difference in the way passers-by view this 'dead little place' before and after Barlow's appearance, mirroring just how very little life changes for its residents between being alive and 'undead'.²⁹⁶ This is most perfectly illustrated when, at almost exactly halfway through the novel, King describes a day in the Lot that could belong to any one of its many characters. Here, an unspecified character returns home from thankless, back-breaking work to a similarly thankless homelife. In such a life as this, where everyone has 'got you' — from the bank, car dealership and department stores, to their own wife and children; and even the very town itself — there is, actually, *little* life to be found. As King writes himself, at the end of this section, '[t]here is no life here but the slow death of days'.²⁹⁷ Magistrate echoes this as he writes:

For the villagers of 'Salem's Lot, the vampire's kiss is almost a welcome relief, since the wholesome facades of the American pastoral and small town America have collapsed under the weight of pervasive boredom and triumphant evil.²⁹⁸

At the start of the novel, Ben recalls his Aunt Cindy's joke that someone should attach a 'Bring Money' sign to the water tower leading into town.²⁹⁹ It is this unwritten request that Barlow and Straker promise to fulfil as their admission into Jerusalem's Lot. Unlike Larry, who agrees to Straker's terms purely out of self-interest and greed, the other townsfolk hope that the new antique shop and its promise of rich tourists will breathe new life into their tired town, bringing with it money and opportunity. Despite usually being unwelcoming to outsiders, their distrust of the peculiar Richard Straker begins to waver because of these

²⁹² Procházka, 'American Ruins', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, pp. 30-1.

²⁹³ Crow, 'Preface', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. xviii.

²⁹⁴ Ringel, 'New England Gothic', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 144.

²⁹⁵ Ringel, *The Gothic Literature and History of New England*, p. 54.

²⁹⁶ King, '*Salem's Lot*', p. 581.

²⁹⁷ King, '*Salem's Lot*', pp. 297-8.

²⁹⁸ Hicks, 'Stephen King's Creation of Horror' in *The Gothic World of Stephen King*, ed. by Hoppenstand and Browne, p. 77.

²⁹⁹ King, '*Salem's Lot*', p. 20.

promises, echoing his earlier threat to Larry that ‘[s]oon they will accept us.’³⁰⁰ Just as a vampire must be invited into the home of its prey before it is able to turn them, so too did Barlow need to be welcomed into town, by extension of Straker, before he could begin his transformation of its residents. Barlow’s attack on Jerusalem’s Lot was not an ambush, it was an acquisition. Like Larry Crocket before him, Barlow took advantage of an illegitimate economy in order to drain the little life that remained in ‘saalem’s Lot, all the while operating under the pretence of reviving it, and thus completing its transformation into a ghost town.

2.3 Coma

In July 1988, California doctor David Golde and his partner Shirley Quan were sued by one of Golde’s patients after patenting the cell line he had isolated from a sample of the patient’s spleen. The patient, John Moore, had previously been treated by Golde for hairy cell leukaemia, making a full recovery after the removal of his spleen.³⁰¹ With the cells Gold and Quan curated from Moore’s enlarged organ they created the ‘Mo-cell Line’, from which they were able to develop a number of different products, including a potential treatment for AIDS. Their patent for this cell line was approved in 1984, with it soon being bought by two biotechnology companies for a sizable amount of money. Moore objected to this on the grounds of (amongst other things) his lack of informed consent and, after a court appeal, ultimately won the case against Gold and Quan, receiving a percentage of what they had earned from the sale of the cell line.³⁰² Moore’s case is just one of many in the United States which have brought into question whether a person’s cells are actually their property or not. There is similar contention around paid blood donations, with critics arguing that blood is not, nor should ever be, a commodity to be sold. While it remains illegal to pay blood donors in the United Kingdom, it is a common practice in, amongst other countries, the United States. Richard M. Titmus details how the expanding demand for human blood in the Western world is due to the rising number of surgical procedures which now require it (namely organ transplants). Interestingly, while paid blood donations have increased in the United States — from 1957 to 1967 the nationwide figure doubled — voluntary donations have decreased, falling from 20 percent to about 1 percent in that same decade.³⁰³ One explanation for this Titmus offers is the introduction of the ‘blood supply market’ in large cities like New York, where pharmaceutical companies began opening their own commercial blood banks with the understanding that the incentive of payment would attract the already limited number of donors away from doing so voluntarily.³⁰⁴ As Nancy Scheper-Hughes writes, ‘markets are by nature indiscriminate and inclined to reduce everything... to the status

³⁰⁰ King, *‘Salem’s Lot*, p. 91.

³⁰¹ George J. Annas, ‘Whose Waste Is It Anyway? The Case of John Moore’, *The Hastings Center Report*, 18.5 (1988), 37–39 (p. 37) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3562222>>.

³⁰² Hartwig Von Schubert, ‘Donated blood—Gift or Commodity?: Some Economic and Ethical Considerations on Voluntary Vs Commercial Donation of Blood’, *Social Science & Medicine* (1982), 39.2 (1994), 201–6 (p. 201) <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(94\)90328-X](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(94)90328-X)>.

³⁰³ Richard Morris Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship : from Human Blood to Social Policy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 110.

³⁰⁴ Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship*, p. 74.

of commodities', whether it is human cells, blood or organs.³⁰⁵ And what accompanies 'this intensive commodification of life is a parallel commercialization of death', Roger Luckhurst writes, noting that in 2012 the trafficked human corpse was worth around 100,000-200,000 US Dollars.³⁰⁶ Much of Scheper-Hughes' work focuses on this black market trafficking and 'transplant tourism' (which sees people travelling overseas to buy organs), as she herself helped to set up a Task Force tracking its growth to become what is today a global 'medical business driven by supply and demand'.³⁰⁷ All of this is part of what Nikolas Rose defines as the rise of 'biocapitalism'.³⁰⁸ This 'new economic space', for Rose, is central to contemporary biopolitics and has been filled with both newly-formed biotechnology companies and newly-transformed pharmaceutical corporations, who value 'science on the one hand and stock markets on the other.' The result of this, he goes on to say, is that '[l]ife itself has been made amenable to these new economic relations, as vitality is decomposed into a series of distinct and discrete objects'.³⁰⁹

Luckhurst chronicles the influence that this ongoing 'technoscientific, biomedical revolution' has had on the Gothic since the 1960s. Of particular interest to him is the way that its progress has complicated the previously distinct boundary between life and death, thus introducing 'the new undead' to the cultural imagination.³¹⁰ This 'New Death', as he and others define it, is for Luckhurst the result of our modern preoccupation with death — a preoccupation inspired not only by the previously discussed rise in 'biocapitalism', but also by some of the worst tragedies of the last century: just as the Second World War 'de-ritualized' mourning in society, the concentration camps of Auschwitz burned the image of 'the living corpse' onto public consciousness.³¹¹ It is the change in the medical definition of death in the late 1960s, though, which Luckhurst names as the true dawn of the 'New Death'. As the modern day Intensive Care Unit emerged, so too did equipment such as artificial respirators allowing those pronounced 'brain dead' to be kept breathing. These advancements, however, led to legal repercussions for doctors who switched off the life support machines of such patients, due to the fact that death was still legally defined as 'the cessation of the heart-beat'. As such, a small group of doctors at the Harvard Medical School 'set out to relocate death from the heart to the brain' in 1968. Thus they came to define what they named the 'irreversible coma', a condition 'marked by a complete absence of responsiveness'. It is from the creation of 'this interval between brain death and biological

³⁰⁵ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, 'The Global Traffic in Human Organs', *Current Anthropology*, 41.2 (2000), 191–224 (p. 193) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/300123>>.

³⁰⁶ Roger Luckhurst, 'Biomedical Horror: The New Death and the New Undead', in *Technologies of the Gothic in Literature and Culture : Technogothics*, ed. by Justin D. Edwards (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2015), pp. 84-98 (p. 87).

³⁰⁷ Scheper-Hughes, 'The Global Traffic in Human Organs', *Current Anthropology*, 41.2, 191–224 (p. 193).

³⁰⁸ Rose, *Politics of Life Itself*, p. 21.

³⁰⁹ Nikolas S. Rose, *Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 19.

³¹⁰ Luckhurst, 'Biomedical Horror', in *Technologies of the Gothic in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Edwards, p. 84.

³¹¹ Luckhurst, 'Biomedical Horror', in *Technologies of the Gothic in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Edwards, pp. 85-6.

death', then, that the genre Luckhurst defines as biomedical horror came to be.³¹² Unlike the early Medical Gothic texts of the likes of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* and Lovecraft's 1922 short story 'Herbert West–Reanimator', Luckhurst explains that the biomedical horror novel is not concerned with eccentric doctors wishing to play God by re-animating the dead. Instead, it focuses on 'the traumatic erosion of the boundary between life and death, and... a newly intensive medical-industrial complex', which, like the liminal nature of the 'New Death', simultaneously commodifies life and commercialises death.³¹³ Despite the fact that it has received little attention in criticism on the Gothic at large, Luckhurst names Robin Cook's 1977 novel *Coma* as the 'pivotal' biomedical horror text.³¹⁴

Coma follows third-year medical student Susan Wheeler as she begins working at the Boston Memorial Hospital only to discover that, just days before her arrival, a patient slipped into a coma during a simple medical procedure, seemingly due to anaesthesia complications. Susan finds Nancy Greenly, a young woman of around her age, in the corner of the ICU, motionless and silent except for 'the rhythmical hiss of the breathing machine' that she is attached to.³¹⁵ The sight of the comatose Nancy affects Susan more profoundly than the rest of her fellow medical students, and certainly more so than it does their group's supervisor, the resident Dr. Mark Bellows. Bellows' sole concern is the implications Nancy's potential death would have for him and his job, something he admits to. On hearing this, Susan realises that he and the other medical staff 'were not thinking of Nancy Greenly as a person' but more like a challenge, keeping her alive simply the end goal.³¹⁶ Manali Karmakar and Avishek Parui describe Bellows here as 'an embodiment of the Western hegemonic biomedical knowledge' as he fails to recognise Nancy as a human being.³¹⁷ In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), Michel Foucault explores this very idea, tracing how the introduction of the clinic (or teaching hospital) changed how doctors view the human body, giving rise to, what he terms, the 'medical gaze':

By operating a process of selection, it alters in its very nature the way in which the disease is manifested, and the relationship between the disease and the patient; in the hospital one is dealing with individuals who happen to be suffering from one disease or another; the role of the hospital doctor is to discover the disease in the patient; and this interiority of the disease means that it is often buried in the patient, concealed within him like a cryptogram. In the clinic, on the other hand, one is dealing with diseases that happen to be afflicting this or that patient: what is present is the disease itself, in the body that is appropriate to it, which is not that of the patient, but that of its truth.

³¹² Luckhurst, 'Biomedical Horror', in *Technologies of the Gothic in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Edwards, pp. 87-8.

³¹³ Luckhurst, 'Biomedical Horror', in *Technologies of the Gothic in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Edwards, p. 90.

³¹⁴ Luckhurst, *Corridors*, p. 283.

³¹⁵ Robin Cook, *Coma* (London: Pan Books, 1976), p. 51.

³¹⁶ Cook, *Coma*, p. 92.

³¹⁷ Manali Karmakar and Avishek Parui, 'Embodiment and Entangled Subjectivity: A Study of Robin Cook's *Coma*, Priscille Sibley's *The Promise of Stardust* and Alexander Beliaev's *Professor Dowell's Head*', *The Journal of Medical Humanities*, 41.3 (2020), 289–304 (p. 295) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10912-018-9511-7>>.

Through this ‘medical gaze’, then, the doctor views the human body not as a part of his or her individual patient, but as ‘the transitory object that [disease] happens to have seized upon.’³¹⁸ Certainly, this objectification of the body helps to establish the terms for its same commodification, as explored earlier, with its cells, blood and organs viewed not as the property of the patient but as altogether separate: tools or resources for the collective good of mankind. In *Coma*, this ‘detached’ reality of clinical medicine feels ‘too cold’ for Susan, a fact only emphasised when, soon after, she discovers that one of the patients she tended to that very morning has succumbed to the same fate as Nancy Greenly.³¹⁹ After a routine knee surgery, Sean Berman has transformed from the tanned, physically fit man Susan met earlier into a pale, lifeless figure kept alive by a machine. Abandoning her hospital duties, she begins her investigation into uncovering what truly happened to Nancy and Sean, thinking of them not as patients, like Bellows, ‘but rather as people.’³²⁰

Susan’s quest for answers leads her to explore both the highest and lowest levels of the hospital within her first day there. In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard examines architecture through the human reaction to, and lived experience within, a space, rather than by exploring its origins, thus engaging with the method of phenomenology. The verticality of a house or inhabited space, he writes, ‘is ensured by the polarity of cellar and attic’, with both of these opposite ends eliciting very different emotional reactions that ‘oppose the rationality of the roof to the irrationality of the cellar’. Elaborating on this, Bachelard states that ‘near the roof all our thoughts are clear’, as the sight of the ‘carpenter’s solid geometry’ on the exposed framework of the attic serves as a reminder that ‘[e]ven a dreamer dreams rationally’. The cellar, in contrast, is ‘foremost the *dark entity* of the house’ where, regardless of the time of day, ‘we see shadows dancing on the dark walls’ due to its subterranean location (*italics in original*). In such a place, then, dreams ‘are in harmony with the irrationality of [its] depths.’³²¹ This theory can be applied to the vertical structure of the Boston Memorial in *Coma*. Beginning her journey at the hospital’s computer centre, Susan requests a printed copy of each case of a patient falling into a coma unexpectedly and with no prior medical history. Just as Bachelard theorises that a house’s attic represents the rational part of one’s dreams, the Boston Memorial’s computer centre (possessing access to all of the hospital’s data and information) is located on the top floor of the Hardy wing ‘above everything else in the hospital’; and evoking the phrase ‘with a little help from above’ amongst the medical staff who frequent it.³²² It is just a few hours later that Susan then proceeds to the hospital’s pathology lab to sit in on the autopsy of a patient who died after previously and unexpectedly falling into a coma. Here, Susan heads to the lab without any ‘favourable anticipation’, noting its location ‘within the bowels of the hospital was sinisterly appropriate.’³²³ Much like the cellar of a house in Bachelard’s theory, the pathology lab plays

³¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic : an Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 59.

³¹⁹ Cook, *Coma*, p. 92.

³²⁰ Cook, *Coma*, p. 119.

³²¹ Gaston Bachelard and Maria Jolas, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Penguin, 2014), pp. 39-40.

³²² Cook, *Coma*, p. 132.

³²³ Cook, *Coma*, p. 144.

on Susan's fears both because of its location and what occurs within it. However, this location is not the Boston Memorial's only 'dark entity'.

Operating Room 8, Susan discovers, is where Nancy Greenly, Sean Berman and each of the other patients who had unexpectedly fallen into a coma during surgery had been operated on. Although she is finally making progress in her investigation, Susan soon realises that her search for answers is now also gaining unwanted attention as Bellows — who, despite his earlier callousness, Susan is now sharing a romantic relationship with — warns her that the senior hospital staff are aware that she is abandoning her duties. Later, even more alarmingly, she finds a hired hitman in her dormitory who threatens both her own life and her brother's if she does not give up on her investigation. Despite this, Susan proceeds to Operating Room 8 to explore it herself. While it appears just like the other operating rooms in the hospital, with 'nothing abnormal or even mildly curious about [it]', Susan is not happy with this conclusion and, using the lockers and wastepaper basket in the nurse's locker room to help her reach a loose ceiling tile, decides to investigate the space above it.³²⁴ Up in the ceiling space, she finds that the oxygen line which leads down into Operating Room 8 possesses an extra T-valve that none of the others do. This valve, she realises, could be used to feed gases other than oxygen to the patient. With this information, Susan travels to the privately run intensive care facility she knows Sean Berman has been moved to: the Jefferson Institute, an extraordinarily modern building which towers above the shabby city that surrounds it. Its only windows, Susan notices, are so high up that one cannot see into them from the street below. The reason behind this becomes clear to her once she is inside. After passing through a room that resembles a typical intensive care unit housing five beds but only one patient, her guide informs her that patients are only transferred to this room when they are being visited by family members. For in the next room, Susan discovers that comatose patients at the Jefferson Institute are not usually kept in beds, but are instead suspended, naked, from the ceiling by wires attached to their skulls and bones, as well as the metal frames that surround them, like 'an impression of grotesque, horizontal, sleeping marionettes'; watched over not by doctors and nurses, but by a computer which controls everything from their temperature to their body weight.³²⁵ For Karmakar and Parui, this demonstrates 'the reified status of the brain-dead patients who are considered to be outside the legal framework of personhood'.³²⁶ While Susan's guide and the introductory film she is forced to endure explain that by keeping comatose patients this way hospitals are able to save both time and money, she is horrified by the guide's belief that they are no longer people but simply 'brain stem preparations', referred to not by their names but instead by their assigned number. For the Jefferson Institute is not a hospital but a front for an organ harvesting operation, just as its suspended occupants are not patients but unconsenting donors, 'maintained' only until a buyer for their organs has been found.³²⁷ As Catherine Belling writes, '[t]he abiding horror in *Coma* concerns the dehumanisation of patients deprived of

³²⁴ Cook, *Coma*, p. 251.

³²⁵ Cook, *Coma*, p. 287.

³²⁶ Karmakar and Parui, 'Embodiment and Entangled Subjectivity', *The Journal of Medical Humanities*, 41.3, 289–304 (p. 295).

³²⁷ Cook, *Coma*, p. 289.

normal deaths.’³²⁸ Susan discovers the truth of this as she witnesses two surgeons (though her presence is unbeknownst to them) removing the kidney from one of the Institute’s still suspended, comatose patients as they discuss the payment they will receive for it. Scheper-Hughes believes that ‘commercialised transplant medicine has allowed global society to be divided into two decidedly unequal populations – organ givers and organ receivers.’ While the former are a ‘discredited collection of anonymous suppliers of spare parts’, she continues, the latter possess ‘proprietary rights over the bodies and body parts of the poor’.³²⁹ Certainly this is true in the Jefferson Institute. Aware that the Institute’s guards are now searching for her, Susan slips into the ceiling through a loose tile — mirroring the earlier scene in which she investigated the space above Operating Room 8 — and manages to escape by dropping down onto the top of one of the trucks transporting the harvested organs across the country. After Susan informs Dr. Stark, the Boston Memorial’s Chief of Surgery, of her findings at the Institute (which she has now linked to the secret valve in Operating Room 8) he sedates her with a spiked drink, and offers her the opportunity to join the Institute’s operation. When she refuses, Stark schedules Susan for an immediate appendectomy in Operating Room 8. The novel ends as Stark, in the process of Susan’s surgery, realises that someone has tampered with the secret gas valve in the ceiling space above, before being interrupted by Bellows and a trio of police officers. Cook, however, does not reveal whether Susan has indeed met the same fate as Nancy Greenly and Sean Berman.

Belling writes that the real life case of Karen Ann Quinlan ‘haunts the public’s reading of *Coma*’.³³⁰ In 1975, Quinlan fell into a coma at just twenty-one years old, experiencing irreversible brain damage which led to her entering a persistent vegetative state. Despite her parents’ objections, she was kept on life support until, almost a full year later (and just a year before the publication of *Coma*), the judge ruled in favour of their decision, allowing their daughter to be removed from her ventilator in order to die naturally. For Belling, Quinlan’s case ‘inhabits two liminal zones: between life and death, and between medical and lay authority over end of-life decision-making.’ She continues:

When Quinlan unexpectedly continued to breathe after her ventilator was removed, the case resonated even more deeply with public concerns about death determination. While questions of brain death and organ procurement were never directly applicable to Quinlan, the case raised questions about medicine’s accounts of death at the same time as it moved the onus of decision-making onto patients, families, and the public. People were anxious. Suspense fiction thrives on actual anxiety—and fear, in turn, thrives on fiction.³³¹

In *Coma*, certainly, Cook gives voice to these anxieties surrounding the medical determination of the end of life and bodily autonomy. Belling also notes how Cook

³²⁸ Catherine Francis Belling, ‘The Living Dead: Fiction, Horror, and Bioethics’, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 53.3 (2010), 439–51 (p. 447) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/pbm.0.0168>>.

³²⁹ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, ‘Bodies for Sale – Whole or in Parts’, in *Commodifying Bodies*, ed. by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Loïc Wacquant (London: SAGE, 2002), pp. 6–12 (p. 8).

³³⁰ Belling, ‘The Living Dead’, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 53.3, 439–51 (p. 446).

³³¹ Belling, ‘The Living Dead’, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 53.3, 439–51 (pp. 441–2).

seemingly references Quinlan's case in the novel when Stark, as he attempts to justify what they are doing in the Jefferson Institute, tells Susan the country's legal system cannot be trusted as 'they cannot make a decision to terminate a patient even after it is certain that his brain has turned to lifeless Jell-O.'³³²

Just as the patients transferred from Operating Room 8 in the Boston Memorial to the hanging metal frames in the Jefferson Institute are themselves liminal, caught somewhere between life and death, so too are these very hospitals at the heart of Cook's novel; operating both as a hospital and as a black market organ dealership, their intended purpose and their true purpose incompatible yet simultaneous. In *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault explores the nature of such sites or spaces which 'have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralise, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate'. He then separates such spaces into two categories: utopias, which are 'unreal' spaces that 'present society itself in a perfected form'; and heterotopias, which are 'counter-sites' that act as an 'effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites... are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.' As Foucault goes on to offer a set of principles to help define this latter category, he states that such spaces can be divided further, either acting as 'crisis heterotopias', such as boarding schools or hotel rooms, where crises like passing from adolescence to adulthood or the consummation of a marriage can be resolved 'elsewhere' instead of in the home; or 'heterotopias of deviation' (which, he notes, are replacing the latter in society) such as hospitals or asylums, which house individuals whose behaviour deviates from that of wider society.³³³ Drawing on Foucault's theory, a 2012 study in the United Kingdom by Paul White, Alexandra Hillman and Joanna Latimer examined the hospital system through its processes of access and dismissal as an example of a complex heterotopia. The authors argue that the hospital can be designated as a heterotopia due to the 'incompatible logics' present in the interplay of its governance and care for patients, as well as its 'illusion of openness', found most explicitly in its entrance, which can momentarily change from offering either inclusion or exclusion, dependant on the patient's classification or service required. Offering further elaboration on this latter point, they state that the spatial dynamics used to arrange a hospital, with its 'marked and crossed' boundaries, are what 'make up the hospital as a heterotopia', naming the A&E and its 'ordering work', from which patients are either 'moved, transferred, stalled, parked or otherwise ejected' across pre-drawn lines in order to reach their corresponding destinations, as the most evident example of this.³³⁴ The hospitals in *Coma*, then, both possessing their own 'incompatible logic' and adhering to several of Foucault's principles, can also be defined as heterotopias.

According to Foucault, one principle of the heterotopia is that it is capable of juxtaposing 'several sites that are in themselves incompatible' in a single real place, naming the example of the garden, which can house different plants from all over the world in just one space.³³⁵ The Boston Memorial, even aside from the secret horror found in Operating

³³² Cook, *Coma*, p. 322.

³³³ Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 22–27 (pp. 24-5) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/464648>>.

³³⁴ Paul White, Alexandra Hillman, and Joanna Latimer, 'Ordering, Enrolling, and Dismissing', *Space and Culture*, 15.1 (2012), 68–87 (pp.69 -70) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1206331211426063>>.

³³⁵ Foucault and Miskowiec, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16.1, 22–27 (p. 25).

Room 8, is itself made up of various sites that seem to contradict one another. It is difficult to imagine, for example, the ICU, described as ‘a surrealistic alien environment’ haunted by the ‘rhythmical beep of cardiac monitors’ within any proximity of the hospital gift shop.³³⁶ This latter space appears like a ‘cottage smack dab in the middle of a busy hospital’, its mullioned windows facing the main corridor of the hospital.³³⁷ The Boston Memorial’s private rooms are another example of this, their closed-off placement in the hospital making them appear almost like private residences, so much so that it even influences the behaviour of people interacting with the room. As Susan is starting her rounds by checking on her patients, she hesitates before entering Sean Berman’s room, wondering whether ‘she should knock or just walk in’.³³⁸ Similarly, as she arrives at the tenth floor of the hospital where its conference rooms are located, she immediately feels the atmosphere shift, becoming one that feels more personal and even homely when compared to the rest of the hospital. For the tenth floor, instead of being covered with worn vinyl squares like elsewhere in the Boston Memorial, is decorated with carpeted floors, gloss-finished paint and tables adorned with lamps and *New Yorker* magazines. This latter space is particularly symbolic. While the places within the hospital that are used for the treatment and care of its patients are all uniformly worn-down, this tenth floor, a dedicated space only for the medical staff, is one immoderately furnished, echoing the way that Stark and the staff at the Jefferson Institute grow rich on the harvested organs of the Boston Memorial’s patients, whom they view as little more than potential commodities to make money from.

Another principle of the heterotopia is that such sites are not usually ‘freely accessible’, possessing ‘a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable.’³³⁹ The Jefferson Institute, constructed ‘in an area that seemed isolated from life’, is protected by ‘an eight-foot-high hurricane fence’ and a door which has neither a doorknob nor ‘openings of any kind.’³⁴⁰ Susan is only permitted to enter once she explains that she is a medical student wishing to attend one of its tours, yet, through her very *entering* of the Institute, she is simultaneously *penetrating* it, for her intentions are evidently not what she claims them to be. The final trait of the heterotopia, Foucault goes on to state, is its ability to ‘create a space of illusion that exposes every real space... as still more illusory’.³⁴¹ The Jefferson Institute is quite literally a ‘space of illusion’, masquerading as an intensive care unit yet treating its patients as cattle who are preserved only long enough to be harvested from. As the guide explains to Susan, this ‘illusion’ is maintained for visiting family members by transferring the patient to a bed, along with additional other patients to fill the other beds, ‘so that the area looks like a normal intensive care unit.’³⁴² Further, it was Susan’s discovery of the ‘illusion’ of Operating Room 8, as she found the valve used to administer deadly gas to patients during surgery, thus harming them instead of healing them, which

³³⁶ Cook, *Coma*, p. 48.

³³⁷ Cook, *Coma*, p. 108.

³³⁸ Cook, *Coma*, p. 60.

³³⁹ Foucault and Miskowiec, ‘Of Other Spaces’, *Diacritics*, 16.1, 22–27 (p. 26).

³⁴⁰ Cook, *Coma*, p. 283.

³⁴¹ Foucault and Miskowiec, ‘Of Other Spaces’, *Diacritics*, 16.1, 22–27 (p. 27).

³⁴² Cook, *Coma*, p. 287.

helped to expose to her the subsequent ‘illusion’ of the Jefferson Institute; for it was that discovery which prompted her to investigate where its comatose patients were being sent to.

In *Coma*, however, it is Cook’s frequent use of locations which are themselves liminal in the fact that they *exist* as places yet are not *truly* dedicated or named places which best evoke the similarly liminal nature of the patients (diagnosed as ‘brain dead’ but still classified as ‘alive’) at the heart of the story. Marc Augé defines ‘transit points and temporary abodes’, in which human interaction is both fleeting and largely anonymous, as ‘non-places’. Such spaces, he continues, are not ‘concerned with identity’ (existing as *spaces* but not *places*) and are exemplified by the process in which ‘people are born in the clinic and die in the hospital’.³⁴³ Susan finds herself in such ‘non-places’ — or, to put it another way, spaces *between* places — several times throughout the novel. During her first day at the Boston Memorial, Susan discovers a brief reprieve from the stress of the hospital in its stairwell. Despite its ‘mildly disquieting atmosphere’, lit only with a single bare bulb, she is afforded the chance to reflect on her first morning and encounters with the other medical staff due to the stairwell being the only place in the hospital devoid of other people (its other staff and patients favouring the elevators).³⁴⁴ Susan even returns there after a difficult encounter with a senior doctor, the stairwell being ‘the only haven she could think of’.³⁴⁵ Later, after being followed to the underground train station by a mysterious man, Susan drops down onto the train tracks, hoping to lose him in the station’s tunnels. Similarly, as she finds the man (now revealed to be a hitman hired to prevent her from continuing her investigation of Operating Room 8) waiting for her in her own dormitory, he pursues her through the stairwells and tunnels of the various college campus buildings. Susan eventually manages to hide from him in the freezer of the anatomy hall, concealing herself amongst the suspended cadavers. Yet it is Susan’s journeys up into the ceiling spaces of the Boston Memorial and Jefferson Institute respectively — existing, literally, as spaces between places — as discussed earlier, which are the best examples of this, placing her on the periphery of named and existing space.

Cook concludes *Coma* with an Author’s Note reminding the reader that, despite the novel being a work of fiction, its terror lies in the fact that its events are possible, if not also ‘probable’.³⁴⁶ As proof of this, he cites a classified advertisement appearing in a 1968 California newspaper (just less than a decade before the publication of *Coma*) in which a man offers to sell organs — though he does not elaborate as to *whom* these organs belong to or, indeed, *which* organs they are — for payment. Cook states that this advertisement is just one of many that have appeared in newspapers across the United States. The global prevalence of black market organ trafficking attests to Cook’s warning here, and is one echoed by Scheper-Hughes as she writes that, spurred on by global capitalism and biotechnology, ‘new medically incited ‘tastes’... for human bodies, living and dead’ have been unleashed. This practice of organ harvesting, she believes, is akin to a modern version of human sacrifice:

³⁴³ Marc Augé, *Non-Places : Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 78.

³⁴⁴ Cook, *Coma*, p. 69.

³⁴⁵ Cook, *Coma*, p. 163.

³⁴⁶ Cook, *Coma*, p. 329.

‘disguised as a ‘gift’... rendered invisible by its anonymity’.³⁴⁷ Whether in *Coma* or in reality, this ‘gift’ is one that is never given voluntarily, however.

2.4 Conclusion

While blood-thirsty vampires and barbaric doctors may represent the faces of evil in *Salem’s Lot* and *Coma* respectively, both novels are also haunted by another spectre common to the American Gothic: that of the effects of American capitalism. It was Larry Crocket who first leached from the residents of Jerusalem’s Lot, trapping them in a cycle of poverty and despair, and thus helping to rob the town of its remaining life even before the vampire’s arrival. This, along with the Lot’s neglect and abandonment by a shifting and illegitimate economy, was what transformed it into a ghost town ready for Barlow to claim his first victim. The monstrously modern Jefferson Institute, then, exists as the antithesis to Jerusalem’s lot, representing both the outcome and the opposite margin of this illegitimate economy. For it was the commodification of the human body, brought about long ago by the dawn of the medical industrial complex, which made the Institute’s illicit organ harvesting operation possible. Both Dr. Howard Stark and Larry Crocket are men impelled not by the desire to hurt, but by greed. Stark, just like the vampire, is motivated by an urge to accumulate rather than one to extinguish life. As such, they require a steady supply of victims in order to provide them with the commodities they so desire. Like the suspended patients at the Jefferson institute, the role of the residents of Jerusalem’s Lot never changes, regardless of whether the vampire is literal or metaphorical, the currency either blood or money: they are the unconsenting donor. In both King’s and Cook’s texts, this donation-by-force results in the victim being caught in the liminal space between life and death, a periphery which the next chapter will also explore.

³⁴⁷ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, ‘Commodity Fetishism in Organs Trafficking’, in *Commodifying Bodies*, ed. by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Loïc Wacquant (London: SAGE, 2002), pp. 30-55 (p. 49).

Chapter 3

A Patchwork of Trauma: The Haunting Union of Personal and National Trauma in Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I argue that both personal and national trauma combine to haunt the present day narratives of Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* (1983) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). I begin the first section of this chapter by examining how *Pet Sematary*'s focus on death is a result of King's own experience of almost losing his son, and how death becomes a cause of contention early on in the novel between Louis and Rachel due to their conflicting viewpoints. I then contrast King's exploration of death in *Pet Sematary* to that in 'The Woman in the Room' (1978) before moving on to argue that Louis's desire to conquer death has always been present in the character, but only transforms into an obsession on the loss of his son. Here, I engage with criticism by Katherine Allen and Steven Bruhm, Toni Magistrale, Mary Ferguson Pharr and Natalie Schroeder. I move on to argue that the burial ground in the novel, offering resurrection but instead returning a transformed, monstrous 'Other', reflects a key function of the American Gothic: transforming dreams to nightmares. Here, I compare the character of Louis to Eleanor in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and Jack in King's *The Shining* (1977), engaging with criticism by Mary Ferguson. I then examine how the ideas of passed on stories and secrets within the novel are cyclical in nature, and argue that the symbol of the spiral in the Sematary reflects this, representing infinity. Here I also engage with John Sears's criticism of how the 'magical circle' of family within the novel simultaneously protects and enables Louis to destroy the Creeds from within.³⁴⁸ I conclude my examination of *Pet Sematary* by examining the Indigenous myth of the wilderness and how it represents both wilderness and cannibalism, and argue that King's Micmac tribe was influenced by the real life Mi'kmaq. As I engage with criticism by Kevin Corstorphine, Bruhm, Erin Mercer and Anne-Christine Hornborg, as well as Philip Freneau's poem 'The Indian Burying Ground' (1787) and King's *Thinner* (1984), I argue that the secret burial ground in *Pet Sematary* can be seen as a metaphor for colonialism.

I begin the second section by examining how the real life case of Margaret Garner inspired Morrison to write *Beloved*, as I consult work by Mark Reinhardt, Roger Luckhurst and writings from Morrison herself. I then move on to consider the role of 124 within the novel, as I argue that the house is one way that Morrison begins to develop a link between Sethe's personal trauma and the shared national trauma of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Here I engage with criticism by Andrew Hock Soon Ng and Valeria Smith, as well as Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992), and the concept that a space's 'uncanniness' is 'a

³⁴⁸ Stephen King, *Pet Sematary* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), p. 128.

representation of a mental state of projection'.³⁴⁹ Following this is an examination of the relationship between the home and its African American occupants in Morrison's *Home* (2010) and *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Engaging with criticism by Liliane Weissberg, Anya Heise-Von der Lippe and Maisha L. Wester, I then explore the way that African American literature and the slave narrative subverts white traditions and gives a voice to black history. Here, I also engage with some of Morrison's own non-fiction writings from *The Source of Self-Regard* (2019). I move on to examine how *Beloved*, in her corporeal form, gradually transforms back into the destructive figure of the ghost she once was, reflecting Morrison's observation that ghosts embody 'both what we yearn for and what we fear'.³⁵⁰ As I begin my examination of the novel's conclusion, I explore how the character of *Beloved* represented the ghosts of enslaved African Americans through her description of the Middle Passage, as I engage with criticism by Valeria Smith and Kathleen Brogan. I also explore how the function of ghosts differ in African American literature, recounting a history that is usually left out of the story of America. I conclude my discussion of *Beloved* by arguing that the title character helped her family to confront their pasts in order to face the future, and that the significance of the expansion of the patchwork quilt within the novel represents the inherited trauma of slavery. I engage with criticism by Paula T. Connolly here. Concluding this chapter is a consideration of the similarities between the two primary texts in their marriage of personal and national trauma.

3.2 *Pet Sematary*

Almost twenty years after the 1983 publication of *Pet Sematary*, Stephen King added a new author's introduction to the novel. Written in 2000 and included in all subsequent printings, it is in this introduction that King provides an answer to one of the questions most often put to him:

When I'm asked (as I frequently am) what I consider to be the most frightening book I've ever written, the answer I give comes easily and with no hesitation: *Pet Sematary*.³⁵¹

Part of his reasoning for this answer, he states, is that it was his own young son's near miss with a heavy truck that inspired him to make the same happen to the main character Louis Creed's son in the novel — only this fictional child is not as lucky as King's son was. King says that, here, he did not just find himself 'thinking the unthinkable, but writing it down', too.³⁵² *Pet Sematary* is a novel haunted by loss and grief, but what is perhaps most striking about it — as King himself notes, calling it 'the book's most resonant line' — is that its

³⁴⁹ Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 11-2.

³⁵⁰ Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard : Selected Essays, Speeches and Meditations* (New York: Vintage, 2020), p.284.

³⁵¹ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. xi.

³⁵² King, *Pet Sematary*, p. xiii.

events seem to affirm Louis' warning from his new neighbour that 'sometimes dead is better'.³⁵³

Pet Sematary opens as the Creed family are moving into their new home in the small town of Ludlow, Maine. Louis, husband to Rachel and father to Ellie and Gage, follows in the footsteps of Jack Torrance in *The Shining* (1977) and Ben Mears in *'Salem's Lot* (1975; both characters examined in the previous chapters of this thesis) by fitting King's trope of the male writer, although Louis, a doctor, writes medical papers instead of novels. What differentiates Louis from these other King protagonists, though, is his lack of repressed family trauma. While we *do* learn that he lost his father at a young age, this loss is rarely touched on again in the novel (outside of the fact that Louis starts to see his new elderly neighbour as a father figure) and certainly does not affect him in the same way that Jack's memories of his abusive father, or the motorcycle accident which killed Ben's wife, does. As Mary Ferguson Pharr notes, at the start of the novel Louis 'has little concern with anything beyond life.'³⁵⁴ Indeed, his matter of fact attitude towards death becomes a cause for contempt between him and his wife; for in *Pet Sematary*, inverting King's usual style, the novel's familial trauma instead belongs to Rachel.

As a child, Rachel's sister Zelda (just two years her senior) was kept in the back bedroom of their parents' home 'like a dirty secret'.³⁵⁵ The reason for this, we come to learn, was that the child suffered from spinal meningitis. Rachel had to care for Zelda, feeding and cleaning her as she watched her 'degenerate day by day... [seeming] to shrivel' and, just as she was starting to look like one, 'she was starting to *be* a monster' too, purposely soiling her bed and touching Rachel with her hands 'like birds' feet'.³⁵⁶ By the time the pain medication had stopped having any effect on her, she had become nothing more than, in the eyes of eight-year-old Rachel, a 'foul, hateful, screaming *thing* in the back bedroom' (italics in original).³⁵⁷ Rachel was alone with Zelda in the house when she died, choking on her own tongue, and it is the trauma of this that has followed her into adulthood. Rachel's almost obsessive fear of death, however, stands in complete opposition to the way Louis regards mortality: 'as a doctor, he knew that death was, except perhaps for childbirth, the most natural thing in the world.'³⁵⁸ It is this tension between the couple which leads to their first major argument in their new home.

Shortly after their arrival in Ludlow, the Creeds are led up into the woods behind their house by their new neighbour, Jud Crandal, where he introduces them to the pet cemetery (misspelt 'PET SEMATARY') hidden away up there; a spot where local children have been burying their dead animals, usually killed on the dangerous highway next to the Creed's house, for decades.³⁵⁹ It is after this visit to the Pet Sematary that Ellie begins asking questions about her own cat Church's mortality, a fact that does not concern Louis, believing

³⁵³ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. xiv.

³⁵⁴ Mary Ferguson Pharr, 'A Dream of New Life: Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* as a Variant of *Frankenstein*', in *The Gothic World of Stephen King : Landscape of Nightmares*, ed. by Gary Hoppenstand and Ray B. Browne (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), pp. 115-25 (p. 121).

³⁵⁵ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 223.

³⁵⁶ King, *Pet Sematary*, pp. 224-5.

³⁵⁷ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 226.

³⁵⁸ King, *Pet Sematary*, pp. 52.

³⁵⁹ King, *Pet Sematary*, pp. 36.

it ‘a necessary thing’ for children to learn about death.³⁶⁰ As Natalie Schroeder notes, however, ‘death terrifies Rachel, and this terror manifests itself in her violent fury when Louis tries to discuss death rationally with her.’³⁶¹ The couple shortly reconcile, though, and as a way to put ‘this whole nonsense of Pet Semataries... and death-fears behind them’ for good, Louis make plans to get Church neutered as a way to deter it from wandering off and thus avoiding any potential accidents.³⁶² What Louis does not know at this point, however, is that the presence of death is only just starting to gather over his family’s new home as it prepares to claim not only Church, but also, amongst others, his own son. It is this last tragedy which, ultimately, helps Louis finally understand his wife’s fears. For, as Katherine Allen writes, ‘death itself, mundane and terrible, is the true antagonist’ of *Pet Sematary*.³⁶³

While death stalks the majority of King’s tales as a (un)natural consequence of their ghastly goings-on, it is not often that he writes so viscerally about its devastating effects as he does here in *Pet Sematary*. 1978’s ‘The Woman in the Room’ is a short story that, like *Pet Sematary*, explores the way that illness and grief touches the human psyche. Yet the conclusions of both stories act almost as mirror opposites of each other. ‘The Woman in the Room’ centres on a man named Johnny visiting his mother in hospital who is extremely ill, so much so that she will ‘be bedridden for the rest of her life’.³⁶⁴ To help lessen the traumatic ordeal of seeing his mother in this state, he begins visiting her while drunk. For in ‘The Woman in the Room’, the source of terror is not ghosts or vampires or Wendigos like in so many of King’s tales, but the all too real consequences of disease and suffering. As King himself notes in *Danse Macabre* (1981), for horror writing ‘[t]he most obvious physiological pressure point is the fact of our own mortality.’³⁶⁵ As the sight of his deteriorating mother becomes too much for him, Johnny offers her relief in the form of euthanasia; passing her painkiller after painkiller until she tells him that she will ‘sleep a little’.³⁶⁶ He then leaves the hospital, after making it look as if she has administered them herself. While Louis, ultimately, sacrifices everything he has (including his own mind) trying to bring his son back from the dead, Johnny, in an act of stark contrast, is the one *to* bring his mother to death’s door. For Johnny, when compared to the unrelenting grip of a disease that takes its cruel time — and just as Jud tries to help the Creed family understand — death, certainly, *is* better.

In *Pet Sematary*, Louis will come to understand with hindsight that ‘the nightmare really began’ on the morning that a gravely injured student was brought into the university infirmary where he works.³⁶⁷ Louis knows instantly that, due to the extent of his injuries, Victor Pascow will die in his care; not a common occurrence for the doctor, having

³⁶⁰ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 50.

³⁶¹ Natalie Schroeder, “‘Oz the Gweat and the Tewwible’ and “The Other Side”: The Theme of Death in *Pet Sematary* and *Jitterbug Perfume*’, in *The Gothic World of Stephen King : Landscape of Nightmares*, ed. by Gary Hoppenstand and Ray B. Browne (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), pp. 135-41 (p. 136).

³⁶² King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 65.

³⁶³ Katherine Allen, “‘Sometimes Dead is Better’ : King, Daedalus, Dragon-Tyrants, and Deathism’, in *Stephen King and Philosophy*, ed. by Jacob M. Held (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 47-70 (p. 58).

³⁶⁴ Stephen King, ‘The Woman in the Room’, in *Night Shift* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012), pp. 470-88 (p. 480).

³⁶⁵ King, *Danse Macabre*, p. 86.

³⁶⁶ King, ‘The Woman in the Room’, in *Night Shift*, p. 488.

³⁶⁷ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 68.

pronounced only twelve patients dead in the entirety of his career.³⁶⁸ Pascow's death is not the most disconcerting part of that morning however as, just moments before he dies, his broken head still leaking onto the carpet of the infirmary, he addresses Louis by his name, a grin spreading across his face, as he tells him that '[i]t's not the real Sematary' (seemingly referring to the Pet Sematary behind the Creed's house).³⁶⁹ While Louis is initially able to pass off his distress in the wake of this as mourning for his lost patient, it becomes more difficult when, that very night, Pascow appears to him in a particularly vivid dream where he leads him back to the Pet Sematary. There, the deadfall that Louis remembers from his first visit suddenly transforms into a pile of animated bones as Pascow warns him not to go beyond it, as '[t]he barrier was not made to be broken.'³⁷⁰ When Louis wakes up the next morning he is horrified to find his feet covered in dirt and pine needles, as it becomes apparent that Pascow's visitation was not merely a dream. This realisation, however, does not deter Louis from ignoring Pascow's warning when, after being informed by Jud that he has found Church dead on his lawn, the two men return once again to the Pet Sematary, only this time crossing the pile of deadfall.

As Louis follows his silent neighbour up into the woods again, the plastic bag containing Church's corpse by his side, his view of death is already starting to shift. Thinking about Ellie's inevitable distress over losing her cat, he realises that, despite what he told Rachel, accepting death becomes a lot more difficult when it is a member of your own family to '[get] a call on the Bone-Phone.'³⁷¹ While Louis intends simply to bury Church amongst the other dead animals of Ludlow, Jud has other plans. After witnessing him climb the deadfall like 'a man who knows exactly where his next step is coming from', Louis finds that, miraculously, he too is able to do the same.³⁷² Although he thinks back briefly to Pascow's warning not to pass the barrier, it is soon pushed from Louis' mind when, on the other side of the deadfall, Jud offers him a warning of his own. Surrounded by the 'strong and charged' air, the old man tells him to 'just look the other way' if he sees or hears anything peculiar going forwards.³⁷³ Despite Jud's assurance that it is just the work of loons, Louis is still flooded with fear as they hear 'something big' coming towards them in the swamp, soon followed by 'a shrill, maniacal laugh' before finally fading away.³⁷⁴ The two men finally reach their destination after climbing a series of steps carved into the rock: a 'weird, flat-topped mesa' that Louis cannot help but think looked 'so odd in the context of New England's low and somehow tired hills'. The reason for this, Jud explains, is that its top was 'sanded off' by a Native Indian tribe named the Micmacs, who believed that the hill held magical powers, to create 'their burying ground'.³⁷⁵ This, it becomes clear, is 'the real Sematary' Pascow told Louis about in his dying breath; a cemetery with the power to resurrect what is buried there (although Louis does not discover this latter information until

³⁶⁸ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 28.

³⁶⁹ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 73.

³⁷⁰ King, *Pet Sematary*, pp. 87-8.

³⁷¹ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 129.

³⁷² King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 136.

³⁷³ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 139.

³⁷⁴ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 141.

³⁷⁵ King, *Pet Sematary*, pp. 143-4.

later). As Louis is digging the hole to bury Church in, Jud explains to him that the site was abandoned by the Micmacs after they claimed to have seen an evil spirit in the Little God Swamp the two men had just passed through; to which Louis asks if this means ‘the ground’s gone sour’.³⁷⁶ This assessment is all too accurate when, only the day after being buried there, Church returns to the Creed home feeling ‘too slick’ and smelling of ‘sour earth’.³⁷⁷ Its temperament is different, too, as it starts leaving the bloody remains of its catches in Louis’ garage when it had never killed before. In the aftermath of Church’s resurrection, Jud tells Louis that the reason he took him up to the Micmac Burial Grounds was because ‘kids need to know that sometimes death is better’, a lesson that he hopes Ellie (and Rachel) will learn.³⁷⁸ His plan seems to have worked when Ellie, able to sense the changes in her pet, confesses to her father that she could accept it if Church were to die now. This lesson, however, is one that Louis is still yet to learn.

It is in the aftermath of Gage’s death that Jud recounts the story of the one human resurrection he witnessed to Louis. Timmy Baterman, a young man killed while fighting in the Second World War, was brought to the secret burial ground by his father. The other residents of Ludlow began to fear Timmy on his return, with Jud remembering how he ‘even *walked* wrong’ and ‘stank of the grave’ (italics in original).³⁷⁹ When he spoke, sounding ‘like he had gravel down his tubes’, he repeated some of the more sordid goings-on within Ludlow to its residents, reminding them only of their wrong-doings.³⁸⁰ While Jud intended this story to serve as a warning to Louis, it does nothing to deter Louis from trying to repeat it. Even during Gage’s funeral, Louis is consumed with the thought of bringing back his son, his previous sentiments about death being ‘the most natural thing in the world’ long forgotten. Tony Magistrale comments on this:

His disciplined attitude is merely a veneer that is shattered when his own child is killed. When confronted with the reality of his child’s death, Creed displays his inherent inability to maintain a rational perspective towards immortality.³⁸¹

Schroeder echoes Magistrale’s point here, writing that, ‘to Louis death is no longer a natural part of life, but rather an evil villain’, one that he hopes to defeat by bringing back his son.³⁸² Louis attempts to rationalise his plan to resurrect Gage, asking Rachel if she could have still loved Gage if his suspected hydrocephalus as a baby would have affected his physical or cognitive development, readying himself for the inevitable changes in his son. Similarly, he assures himself that he is thinking like a doctor as he intends to ‘*make a diagnosis*’ of his resurrected son, telling himself that he could kill Gage again if he became a danger to others,

³⁷⁶ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 147.

³⁷⁷ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 163.

³⁷⁸ King, *Pet Sematary*, pp. 180-1.

³⁷⁹ King, *Pet Sematary*, pp. 302.

³⁸⁰ King, *Pet Sematary*, pp. 303.

³⁸¹ Tony Magistrale, ‘Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary*: Hawthorne’s Woods Revisited’, in *The Gothic World of Stephen King : Landscape of Nightmares*, ed. by Gary Hoppenstand and Ray B. Browne (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), pp. 126-34 (p. 127).

³⁸² Schroeder, ‘The Theme of Death’, in *The Gothic World of Stephen King : Landscape of Nightmares*, ed. by Hoppenstand and Browne, p. 137.

and later, as he is putting his plan into action, he approaches the act of digging up his son's body with the precision of surgery (*italics in original*).³⁸³ As Jud posits to Louis earlier in the novel, 'bringing back the dead to life... that's about as close to playing God as you can get, ain't it?'³⁸⁴ Magistrale comments on this, noting that 'Creed fails to acknowledge... the inviolable distinction separating human idealism from the limitations of reality.' In his desire to play God, then, he 'succeeds only in perverting life and his own healing skills', Gage's return as little more than a depraved caricature of the toddler he once was serving as testament to this.³⁸⁵

Louis' fixation on conquering death was evident in his work as a doctor even before he discovered the cemetery's powers of resurrection, illustrating how it merely tapped this desire to 'play God' already inside of him. Just as he memorises the number of patients lost in his care before Pascow, when Louis manages to revive Jud's wife Norma after her first heart attack, he thinks to himself, '*Won one tonight, Lou*'; a mantra he repeats after helping a group of students in the infirmary after a toboggan incident (*italics in original*).³⁸⁶ It is ironic, then, that when Gage returns, resurrected by his father and still wearing his dirt-covered burial suit, it is with his father's own medical scalpel that he slaughters Jud and his mother. Before murdering them, he plays on the fears and worst memories of his victims, just as Timmy Bateman did. To Jud he speaks in his wife Norma's voice, reminding him of his own infidelity and telling him that his wife slept with his best friends; whereas for Rachel he appears 'hunched and twisted' like Zelda, as he screams that he will twist her back, too.³⁸⁷ Allen writes that the scene in which the resurrected Gage is feeding on his dead mother's flesh and blood (thus warping the way an infant feeds on its mother's milk) serves as the novel's most vivid reminder that 'bringing back the dead to life leads to the vicious perversion of familial norms'. What truly makes death monstrous, then, as she goes on to state, is when it is 'denied and kept a secret, reviled and hidden from view', likening the way Zelda's parents hid her away to Louis' denial of Gage's death.³⁸⁸ Steven Bruhm echoes Allen's earlier sentiment, writing that the burial ground's offer of the 'dream-come-true of having our loved ones return... is less dream than nightmare,' as is so common in the Gothic. What returns from it, ultimately, 'is the direct opposite of what we believe we have buried' there.³⁸⁹ Louis repeated the actions of Timmy Bateman's father, convincing himself that, through his precision and planning, the outcome would be different. He even went so far as to imagine a new life for himself and his freshly resurrected son working together to save the lives of tourists at Disney World, outsmarting the numerous (both common and rare) causes of death. Instead of reviving his son, however, Louis' actions instead resulted only in him losing both his wife and friend, demonstrating, as Eric Savoy states, that 'the various kinds of

³⁸³ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 348.

³⁸⁴ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 183.

³⁸⁵ Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear*, p. 59.

³⁸⁶ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 115.

³⁸⁷ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 439.

³⁸⁸ Allen, 'King, Daedalus, Dragon-Tyrants, and Deathism', in *Stephen King and Philosophy*, ed. by Held, p. 60.

³⁸⁹ Steven Bruhm, 'The Ghost of the Counterfeit Child', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. By Charles L. Crow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 366-77 (p. 367).

trauma represented by the gothic... constitute both a return and a loss'.³⁹⁰ Even with this knowledge, Louis still returns to the burial ground once more at the end of the novel hoping, this time, to resurrect Rachel (despite the fact that her death was the result of his last visit there), demonstrating both Louis' desperation to conquer death, as well as 'the growing power' of the secret burial ground.³⁹¹ Magistrale comments on this, writing that while Louis may have first visited the burial ground 'because of an altruistic love for his daughter and the desire to spare her the pain of grief over a lost cat', this is not the reason he continues to return there; instead 'he is more interested in continuing his misguided experiment under the irrational premise that eventually he will discover a way to dominate death.'³⁹² Magistrale goes on to compare Louis to the characters of Eleanor Vance in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) as well as Jack Torrance in King's own *The Shining* here (both texts explored in chapter one of this thesis). Drawing parallels with the former, he writes that both characters 'surrender to the persuasive powers of the supernatural' despite possessing the knowledge that there are 'less destructive options' available to them. Just as Eleanor offers herself to Hill House for what she believes will be eternity, Louis continues to return to the secret burial ground until it has finally ripped apart his entire family. Here, he writes, both authors are engaging with the belief that 'the victim's psychological orientation is essential for the supernatural to exert any controlling effect [over them]', an idea he traces back to Puritan literature.³⁹³ Going on to liken the protagonists of two of King's most famous novels, Magistrale observes that, like Jack, Louis has 'relinquished his body, as well as his mind, to powers that ultimately betray him', and in doing so, fails both his responsibilities and his family.³⁹⁴ As Pharr concludes, Louis' story can have no conclusion because '[d]reams never do'.³⁹⁵

Louis' suspicion at the end of the novel that the burial ground feeds on grief would seem to be accurate. Just as both Rachel and Jud sense that it is a force from within the ancient cemetery that is preventing them from reaching Louis in time to stop him from attempting to resurrect Gage, so too is it responsible for the loss the Creed family — as well as the other residents of Ludlow — experiences. Mirroring the way he himself would go on to tell Louis to bury Church there, Jud recalls that he was told about the burial ground's ancient powers by the local Stanny B (whose grandfather was told about it from the Micmacs themselves) after the loss of his dog, Spot. Jud compares the passing along of the story of the Micmac grounds to like being stuck in a hall of mirrors, watching yourself in 'a mirror that's been set up right across from another mirror'.³⁹⁶ Just as the story was passed from grieving resident to grieving resident before him, Jud is just another part of that cycle. Magistrale

³⁹⁰ Eric Savoy, 'The Face of the Tenant: A Theory of American Gothic', in *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, ed. by Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), pp. 3-19 (p. 11).

³⁹¹ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 364.

³⁹² Magistrale, 'Hawthorne's Woods Revisited', in *The Gothic World of Stephen King: Landscape of Nightmares*, ed. by Hoppenstand and Browne, p. 131.

³⁹³ Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear*, p. 58.

³⁹⁴ Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear*, p. 71.

³⁹⁵ Pharr, 'A Dream of New Life', in *The Gothic World of Stephen King: Landscape of Nightmares*, ed. by Hoppenstand and Browne, p. 124.

³⁹⁶ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 180.

echoes this, writing that '*Pet Sematary* is a novel about secrets': secrets which are only ever acknowledged 'in the stony soil up in the old Micmac burial ground'.³⁹⁷ Just as Louis and Jud keep the secret of the grounds' powers, the town and its inhabitants also hide it from the prying eyes of outsiders; not dissimilar to the way that Rachel and her parents kept the disfigured Zelda closed away in the backroom of their house, as if operating under the belief that rendering something unseen will in fact make it disappear. In the uncanny works of Stephen King, however — as in much of the American Gothic — repression only makes that which is concealed more powerful. Jud goes on to confirm Louis' earlier suspicion that his decision to show Louis the grounds had not been entirely his own when he tells him that the reason he introduced him to it was because 'it gets hold of you'.³⁹⁸ Later, Jud worries that it was this decision to lead Louis to bury Church in that 'evil, curdled place' which inadvertently caused Gage's death, as it 'turned [his] good wish to its own evil purpose'.³⁹⁹ It would appear that the burial ground *did* have some hand in Gage's death as, despite his clean record, the driver of the truck that killed him confesses that 'when he got to Ludlow, he just felt like putting the pedal to the metal'.⁴⁰⁰ Crippled by the loss of their son, the Creeds become consumed by their own grief. Both Rachel, starting to look like a 'living skull', and Louis, obsessed with replaying the accident which killed Gage and wondering how he could have saved him, are so fixated on their dead child that they begin to ignore their remaining living child: the now silent Ellie, who carries a photograph of her brother even to the breakfast table.⁴⁰¹ It is this grief that leads Louis up to the ancient burial grounds, just as it did Jud and Timmy Bateman's father, and the countless others that came before them, whether trying to save a pet or a loved one. This cycle, destined to repeat itself again and again, would not end with Louis. Towards the end of the novel, after the Creed family has been torn apart by the hidden burial ground, King writes that their now empty house sat, once again, 'waiting for the new people to arrive'; people who would 'congratulate themselves on their lack of superstition' and the cheap price they paid for it, and would 'perhaps... have a dog'.⁴⁰²

Just as actions are repeated over and over again in *Pet Sematary*, cyclical and recurrent in nature, so too is the use of circular imagery in King's description of the titular cemetery. Built on 'an almost perfect circle of mown grass', its gravestones are 'arranged in rough concentric circles'.⁴⁰³ This layout, Louis comes to understand, 'mimed the most ancient religious symbol of all: diminishing circles indicating a spiral leading down... to infinity', and symbolising 'that twisty bridge which may exist between the world and the Gulf'.⁴⁰⁴ It is only once he has made his way up to the Micmac Burial grounds for the second time, on a night brighter than his initial visit with Jud, that he realises the cairns built there were also arranged into a large spiral; a pattern he will later also find himself drawing in the freshly raked dirt of Gage's

³⁹⁷ Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear*, p. 60.

³⁹⁸ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 182.

³⁹⁹ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 307.

⁴⁰⁰ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 329.

⁴⁰¹ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 256.

⁴⁰² King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 448.

⁴⁰³ King, *Pet Sematary*, pp. 36-7.

⁴⁰⁴ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 321.

grave, his fingers seemingly ‘moving by themselves’.⁴⁰⁵ If this spiral symbolises infinity and that which is beyond the world, then the ‘Gulf’ is the hidden burial ground, its deadfall entrance the barrier Pascow long ago warned Louis not to cross. Magistrale also comments on the symbolic nature of the spiral in *Pet Semetary*. He posits that, similar to how circles seem to signify the act of telling stories, repeated and passed on, spirals come to represent how ‘the wrong-doings of one man can, and soon enough, will be the evil of the next man.’ Although Louis may have been unaware of the consequences that his actions would cause as he, under Jud’s encouraging eye, buried Church in the ancient burial ground, by the time he is burying Gage there (acting completely of his own volition) he has become ‘a willing participant in, and a connecting point for, the spiral’s mystical properties.’⁴⁰⁶ As observed by John Sears, circles have yet another significance in the novel. It is a circle that seems to mark what is within and a part of, as well as outside and excluded from, the Creed family, as Louis thinks to himself that ‘Church wasn’t supposed to get killed because he was inside the magic circle of the family.’⁴⁰⁷ Despite Louis’ hope that this ‘circle’ should protect his family, ironically it also seems to ‘contain, rather than protect against, that which threatens the family’, Sears points out, as Louis will become the one to destroy it himself.⁴⁰⁸ This, he concludes, is evidenced in the way the Creed family is ‘violently dismantled by external, supernatural forces which yet find insistent expression *within* the family structure’ — namely, in the figure of Louis.⁴⁰⁹

These ‘external forces’, lying just beyond the deadfall, not only feed upon grief, but ‘[their] touch awakens unspeakable appetites’ in others, too.⁴¹⁰ Earlier in the novel, Jud had explained to Louis that the Micmacs had abandoned their burial ground after sightings of a Wendigo, something Louis only knew ‘was supposed to be a spirit of the north country’.⁴¹¹ Jud came to elaborate on this story further, however, as he explained that the Micmacs believed that the Wendigo had touched them while sleeping, giving them ‘a taste for the flesh of their own kind’ as, during long winters, they would find themselves facing the choice of either starving to death or cannibalism.⁴¹² It is only later when he happens upon the scene of Gage feeding on the blood of his own mother’s corpse that Louis finally understands that it is this spirit which is now occupying his son’s body — the same Wendigo he had caught glimpses of earlier on his journey to the Micmac burial grounds, standing ‘better than sixty feet high’ and with eyes like ‘twin yellow-orange sparks’.⁴¹³

The myth of the Wendigo is one ‘prevalent throughout the indigenous- peoples of northern North America’, with the term referring to either one of two types of creatures:

⁴⁰⁵ King, *Pet Semetary*, p. 325.

⁴⁰⁶ Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear*, p. 61.

⁴⁰⁷ King, *Pet Semetary*, p. 128.

⁴⁰⁸ John Sears, ‘Fathers, friends, and families: Gothic kinship in Stephen King’s *Pet Semetary*’, in *Gothic Kinship*, ed. by Agnes Andeweg and Sue Zlosnik (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 97-114 (pp. 99-100).

⁴⁰⁹ Sears, ‘Gothic kinship in Stephen King’s *Pet Semetary*’, in *Gothic Kinship*, ed. by Andeweg and Zlosnik, p. 103.

⁴¹⁰ King, *Pet Semetary*, p. 453.

⁴¹¹ King, *Pet Semetary*, p. 147.

⁴¹² King, *Pet Semetary*, p. 170.

⁴¹³ King, *Pet Semetary*, p. 412.

The first is a spirit, sometimes a giant, that is a personification of hunger and starvation. The second is a human being that either has eaten human flesh, and has thus transformed into a wendigo, or has become possessed by a wendigo and is thus driven to eat human flesh. In other words, the wendigo is a malevolent spirit that is driven by hunger to eat human flesh, a hunger that will never be satisfied, and also has the power to transform humans into insatiable cannibals like itself.⁴¹⁴

While King never refers to the resurrected as ‘Wendigos’ in *Pet Sematary*, it would appear that at least some of this insatiable hunger has transferred to them, with Church becoming uncharacteristically violent in his hunting of smaller creatures, and Gage feeding on his own mother’s flesh. Magistrale writes that the Wendigo in King’s novel ‘thrives on the doctor’s inability to discipline his curiosity and to recognise the distinction between saving lives and playing god.’⁴¹⁵ This, he continues, results in Louis himself being ‘transformed into an extension of the amoral Wendigo.’⁴¹⁶ For Schroeder, too, the Wendigo and the returning dead ‘are symbolic metaphors for uncontrolled grief and its potential for self and community destruction’ in *Pet Sematary*.⁴¹⁷ In his chapter on the Wendigo, Kevin Wetmore Jr. goes on to say that the myth of the creature ‘has been appropriated... as the source of a (mis)diagnosis to explain cannibalism in indigenous communities’ in literature, as well as being ‘employed as a metaphor for colonialism and imperialism’.⁴¹⁸ While King is certainly guilty of the former, as the story passed on from the Micmacs to Jud demonstrates, there are elements of the novel that appear to support his engagement with (or at least acknowledgement of) the latter point, too.

While the majority of the real life Mi’kmaq are now settled in Eastern Canada, interestingly, there is at least one known reserve in Northern Maine.⁴¹⁹ This reserve may have offered inspiration for King’s Ludlow Micmacs in the novel. As Faye Ringel explores in *The Gothic Literature and History of New England*, it is not uncommon for the work of writers from that region to explore anxieties related to colonialism and the displacement of its native inhabitants, particularly in the Frontier Gothic subgenre, ranging from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘Roger Malvin’s Burial’ to Lydia Maria Child’s 1824 novel *Hobomok*, which details the forbidden marriage between a young Puritan woman and an indigenous man, as ‘memories of New England’s original inhabitants are preserved as ghosts’ (whether literal or metaphorical) in such texts.⁴²⁰ One further example, particularly relevant to this section, is American poet

⁴¹⁴ Kevin J. Wetmore, *Eaters of the Dead : Myths and Realities of Cannibal Monsters* (London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2021), pp. 139-40.

⁴¹⁵ Magistrale, ‘Hawthorne’s Woods Revisited’, in *The Gothic World of Stephen King : Landscape of Nightmares*, ed. by Hoppenstand and Browne, p. 129.

⁴¹⁶ Magistrale, ‘Hawthorne’s Woods Revisited’, in *The Gothic World of Stephen King : Landscape of Nightmares*, ed. by Hoppenstand and Browne, p. 131.

⁴¹⁷ Schroeder, ‘The Theme of Death’, in *The Gothic World of Stephen King : Landscape of Nightmares*, ed. by Hoppenstand and Browne, p. 138.

⁴¹⁸ Wetmore, *Eaters of the Dead*, p. 137.

⁴¹⁹ Anne-Christine Hornborg, *Mi’kmaq Landscapes : from Animism to Sacred Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 2.

⁴²⁰ Ringel, *The Gothic Literature and History of New England*, pp. 19-20.

Philip Freneau's 1787 poem 'The Indian Burying Ground', in which he seems to express admiration for traditional Native Indian burial practices as they signify not merely an end to life, but also the beginning of the afterlife. While the Indigenous corpse is 'seated with his friends', not resting but ready for 'ACTIVITY, that knows no rest', the burial of the European corpse within the earth, symbolically arranged in a sleeping position, marks only its 'soul's eternal sleep' (capitalisation in original).⁴²¹ As Ringel goes on to write, while the Canadian wilderness and Australian outback lend themselves most effectively to the Frontier Gothic subgenre, it is 'narratives of cabin fever lead[ing] to madness' which signify the American Frontier Gothic, with the men at the heart of such tales often referred to as 'going Wendigo' when they finally succumb to this madness. The Wendigo here is 'the wilderness personified as a spirit... that can possess or madden human intruders'.⁴²² Kevin Corstorphine writes that, while houses are built with the specific purpose of protecting against the wilderness, the Creed's house, ironically, becomes a 'symbolic gateway' to an indigenous wilderness, the path behind it leading to the Micmac burial ground. These tribal forces it unleashes (yet was constructed 'to banish in the first place'), he elaborates, are, then, both 'supernatural and supremely natural'.⁴²³ What is at the heart of *Pet Sematary*, he goes on to say, is the theme of guilt: both Louis' personal guilt in blaming himself for Gage's death; and a collective, national guilt over stolen Native land.⁴²⁴ Michelle Burnham echoes this, writing that the American Indian remains a central figure in the American Gothic, 'providing a source of horror, guilt and trauma'.⁴²⁵ Interestingly, Bruhm and Erin Mercer offer different readings of *Pet Sematary*. For Bruhm, the burial ground 'functions not so much as the return of the repressed Micmac culture as it does a literalization of the paradoxes of paternal love in New England history', building on the idea of Puritans prematurely grieving for their children, while still alive, due to high infant mortality rates of the time.⁴²⁶ Mercer, however, shifts her attention to the dangerous highway that claims the lives of Gage and Church and sits beside the Creed's house, writing that it symbolises 'an American modernity that poses as much threat to the Creeds as the ancient force that inhabits the Native American burial ground'.⁴²⁷ While these are both valid discussions, they are largely beyond the scope of this chapter. As much of the criticism on *Pet Sematary* explores, the novel's Micmac tribe shares many similarities with the real life Mi'kmaq, and King's use of the Wendigo, a fairly recent

⁴²¹ Philip Freneau, 'The Indian Burying Ground', in *Early American Poetry: Selections from Bradstreet, Taylor, Dwight, Freneau, and Bryant*, ed. by Jane Donahue Eberwein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), pp. 232-3 (pp. 232-3), ll. 4-12.

⁴²² Ringel, *The Gothic Literature and History of New England*, p. 24.

⁴²³ Kevin Corstorphine, "'Sour Ground': Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* and the Politics of Territory", *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 1.1 (2006), 84-98 (p. 93).

⁴²⁴ Corstorphine, 'Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* and the Politics of Territory', *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 1.1, 84-98 (p. 94).

⁴²⁵ Michelle Burnham, 'Is There an Indigenous Gothic?', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. By Charles L. Crow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 225-37 (p. 226).

⁴²⁶ Bruhm, 'The Ghost of the Counterfeit Child', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, pp. 371-2.

⁴²⁷ Erin Mercer, "'The Flaw Is Only the Inability to Accept': Roads, Rationality and the Horror of Modernity in Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*", *Journal of Popular Culture*, 54.1 (2021), 131-45 (p. 132) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12990>>.

addition to New England folklore, demonstrates that he was at least aware of Native histories and superstitions.⁴²⁸

Interestingly, Anne-Christine Hornborg writes that the English spelling of 'Micmac' may appear as 'further example of the European annexation of Mi'kmaq land and culture' to some members of the tribe, having fought to get their traditional spelling legally recognised.⁴²⁹ While King uses the English spelling of 'Micmac' throughout *Pet Sematary*, he *does* acknowledge the displacement of the Mi'kmaq people, and the United States' fraught relationship with indigenous land. In the novel, Jud tells Louis that 'the Micmacs, the State of Maine, and the government of the United States are arguing in court about who owns [the Micmac] land', before adding that he thinks 'the Indians will get it back in the end... that's the way it should be'.⁴³⁰ While it was the Wendigo that forced the Micmac peoples from their land, it is not difficult to see this as a metaphor for colonialism. Another of King's novels which deals with the idea of past crimes returning to the present to be avenged through supernatural means is *Thinner* (originally published under King's pseudonym Richard Bachman in 1984). When the book's protagonist, pompous lawyer Billy Halleck, runs over an old woman because he is engaging in a sexual tryst with his wife, he neither feels much guilt nor is punished for her death. It is the woman's father, however, who brings Halleck to justice by cursing him: he will lose weight, rapidly, until he dies (unless he can find a way to reverse the curse). There are similarities to be made between the Romani 'Gypsies' of *Thinner* and the Indigenous Micmacs in *Pet Sematary*: both are racialized 'Others' whose *foreign* and *otherworldly* ways puts the white man at risk, yet both are also victims of that same white man (while Louis is not directly responsible for the Micmac's displacement, it is a guilt inherited from his forefathers). This supposedly uncivilised 'Other' holds up a metaphorical mirror to show the American the monstrous side of his own past or history. For in *Pet Sematary*, as in *Thinner*, the sins of the past always come back to haunt the present.

3.3 *Beloved*

Each of the three parts that make up Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* begin with a description of the house at the centre of the story. The time that it takes 124 Bluestone Road to, finally, become 'quiet' is, in terms of the novel's main narrative timeframe, not that long, happening just over the course of a year.⁴³¹ However, what is interspersed with the events of the house's haunting is several years worth of 'rememory': Morrison's term for the process of actively remembering one's past, and something that the protagonist Sethe spends a majority of the novel trying to avoid doing. While in *Pet Sematary*, the Wendigo hidden in the secret cemetery behind the Creed's new home long precedes the arrival of the family in Ludlow, just as it will still be there once they are gone, what Morrison does in *Beloved* is chronicle a haunting from the very arrival of the ghost all the way through to its dismissal: a haunting conjured not only from personal familial trauma but also from a shared, national trauma. As

⁴²⁸ Ringel, *The Gothic Literature and History of New England*, p. 24.

⁴²⁹ Hornborg, *Mi'kmaq Landscapes*, p. 3.

⁴³⁰ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 289-90.

⁴³¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Picador, 1988), p. 239.

Liliane Weissberg writes, comparing King and Morrison's said novels, 'the dead come to life in both, and haunt the living.'⁴³² At the start of *Beloved*, Sethe and her daughter Denver are 124's 'only victims' left; Sethe's two sons, unnerved by its antics, fled the house, shortly before the death of Baby Suggs (Sethe's mother-in-law and the house's owner).⁴³³ 124's only other inhabitant, then, is the spirit of Sethe's two year old daughter, Beloved, who died after having her throat cut. Her killer, Morrison comes to reveal, was Sethe herself, tragically believing that murdering her child was the only way of sparing her from the life of slavery she herself had endured. Here, Morrison was inspired by the real life story of Margaret Garner, which she states she first read about in a newspaper article.⁴³⁴ As recounted by Mark Reinhardt, Garner was one of ten slaves who managed to escape enslavement in Boone County, Kentucky on January 27, 1856. While the party were able to reach their destination of a nearby home belonging to a freed relative, they were soon tracked down. As the Slave catchers attempted to enter the house, Garner formulated the plan to kill her children before they could be taken, succeeding only in slitting the throat of her two-and-a-half year-old daughter.⁴³⁵ Garner's story is almost identical to Sethe's, revealed throughout the novel in fragmented recollections that plague the rest of her narrative. What differs, however, is what happens to the two women *after* this incident. While Garner was, sadly, returned to a life of slavery, Sethe, although freed, is still bound by the guilt of what she did.⁴³⁶ For 124 is not only 'palsied by the baby's fury' at her for having killed it, but also by Sethe's memory of being forced to offer her own body as payment for the engraving of her child's gravestone; Beloved, unnamed in life, was so named after the preacher began his sermon with 'Dearly Beloved' at her funeral. When Sethe suggests that they could move from 124 to escape the ghost of her trauma, Baby Suggs, who herself has lost all eight of her children as they were either 'taken... [or] chased', tells her that it would be pointless as there is '[n]ot a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief.'⁴³⁷ Morrison's linking of Sethe's personal trauma in *Beloved* to the horrific legacy of slavery on the African American population at large becomes a key, recurrent theme throughout the rest of the novel. Roger Luckhurst comments on this, writing that while '124 is a site of a specific tragic event... it also invokes a whirlwind of multiple voices.'⁴³⁸

Morrison herself wrote that she so named 124 in order to 'give the house an identity separate from the street or even the city' that it stands in and that, by using numbers only, there would be 'no posture of cosiness or grandeur' about it. Using different adjectives to describe 124 at the start of each section of the novel, such as 'spiteful', she goes on to say, allowed the house to be 'personalised by its own activity, not the pasted on desire for personality'. She elaborates on this even further, stating that she wanted the novel's opening to give the reader the sense of being 'snatched' and thrown into an unknown environment,

⁴³² Weissberg, 'Gothic spaces', in *Modern Gothic : A Reader*, ed. by Sage and Lloyd-Smith, p. 115.

⁴³³ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 4.

⁴³⁴ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 282.

⁴³⁵ Mark Reinhardt, *Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. 4-5.

⁴³⁶ Reinhardt, p. 8.

⁴³⁷ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 5.

⁴³⁸ Roger Luckhurst, "'Impossible Mourning'" in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Michèle Roberts's *Daughters of the House*, *Critique*, 37.4 (1996), 243-60 (p. 248).

such as was the experience of slaves: ‘the house into which this snatching... propels one, changed from spiteful to loud to quiet, as the sounds in the body of the ship itself may have changed.’⁴³⁹ Andrew Hock Soon Ng notes that it is interesting that the number three is missing from the house’s number just as Beloved, the third child, is also missing from her mother’s life. The number three then, he writes, comes to represent ‘an empty space that nevertheless resounds as an undeniable trace.’⁴⁴⁰ Ng goes on to explore the ‘dread’ occupying 124, which is, he writes, ‘fundamentally Sethe’s projection of trauma onto the interior of her home’, her memory of killing Beloved now ‘an independent existence whose source is the architecture itself.’⁴⁴¹ Ironically, he notes, while Sethe acknowledges that the house is haunted, she ‘fails to recognise that she is the source.’⁴⁴² Valeria Smith comments on Beloved’s name and its relation to mourning, as it signifies both ‘that which is past and present, [and] she who is absent and those who are present.’ This, she elaborates further, helps to demonstrate that Beloved is the embodiment of Sethe’s term ‘rememory’, being ‘something that is past, yet remains as a physical presence.’⁴⁴³ In *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992), Anthony Vidler states that the source of a space’s uncanniness is not actually a property of the space itself, but in fact ‘a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal’. Buildings that appear uncanny, then, do so ‘because they act, historically or culturally, as representations of estrangement.’⁴⁴⁴ Ng uses Vidler’s theory here to explore Sethe’s relationship with 124 in *Beloved*. Putting this process into his own words, the former states that: ‘The inhabitant projects her own uncanny onto lived space, which in turn, harbours it as a constant property that discomits her.’⁴⁴⁵ Weissberg echoes Ng’s thoughts here, as she writes that Beloved’s haunting of 124 makes it a space that is ‘both familiar and defamiliarized’ to its inhabitants.⁴⁴⁶ Sethe, then, is caught in this seemingly never-ending cycle: unable to rest as ‘the house itself is constantly compelling her to confront her past’, yet it is this unacknowledged story itself that has taken the form of the ‘energy that permeates the house and subsequently threatens her life.’⁴⁴⁷ After it is suggested out loud that Sethe and Denver could move from 124, Morrison writes that ‘[s]omething in the house braced’ (with it coming alive in a particularly violent haunting shortly after), thus demonstrating Beloved’s fear that her mother may one day escape her grip.⁴⁴⁸

The concept of home and its function for African Americans in a post-slavery America is explored in much of Morrison’s writing — indeed, she would go on to name her tenth novel simply that. *Home*, published in 2010, explores the life of the young African

⁴³⁹ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 194.

⁴⁴⁰ Andrew Hock Soon Ng, *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives : the House as Subject*, 1st edn. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 89.

⁴⁴¹ Ng, p. 68.

⁴⁴² Ng, p. 90.

⁴⁴³ Valerie Smith, ‘The Flesh and the Word: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*’, in *A Companion to the American Novel*, 1st edn., ed by Alfred Bendixen (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 570-81 (p. 578).

⁴⁴⁴ Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, pp. 11-2.

⁴⁴⁵ Ng, p. 91.

⁴⁴⁶ Weissberg, ‘Gothic spaces’, in *Modern Gothic : A Reader*, ed. by Sage and Lloyd-Smith, p. 110.

⁴⁴⁷ Ng, p. 93.

⁴⁴⁸ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 15.

American veteran Frank Money as he returns ‘home’ to a segregated America which continues to exclude him despite having fought overseas for it. Morrison’s debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is (behind only perhaps *Beloved*) her most discussed example of this. The novel begins with an extract from the *Dick and Jane* stories as a ‘pretty’ house and its inhabitants, consisting of a white nuclear family and their pets, are described. Contrasted with this is the old storefront that the black family at the heart of the story, the Breedloves, live in. Consisting of only two rooms (created by partitioning off the shopfloor) and a small kitchen, it lacks proper bathing facilities and is furnished with items ‘manufactured... in various states of thoughtlessness, greed and indifference.’⁴⁴⁹ Yet Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, along with their two children, found themselves living there ‘because they were poor and black, and stayed there because they believed they were ugly.’⁴⁵⁰ Ironically, Morrison names the plantation Sethe manages to escape from in *Beloved* ‘Sweet Home’. Despite its name, however, we learn that it ‘wasn’t sweet and sure wasn’t home.’⁴⁵¹ As Maisha L. Wester writes, ‘the name of the plantation, “Sweet Home,” presents the location as an idyllic space for all of its residents, yet the supposedly domestic utopia masks a horrific reality.’⁴⁵² As Morrison comes to reveal, Sweet Home was the site of unimaginable traumas for Sethe and the other slaves kept there despite its initial appearance, under the ownership of the Garners, as ‘a harmonious family setting’.⁴⁵³ Although Sethe and Halle married there ‘as though Sweet Home really was one,’ the only way that she ‘could feel at home [there] was if she picked some pretty growing thing and took it with her’, thus reminding her that there was still a life outside of, and beyond, Sweet Home.⁴⁵⁴ Weissberg argues that sites such as Sweet Home are transformed into Gothic settings as they treat slaves as like both ‘invisible spirits’ and ‘invisible Blacks’. In *Beloved*, though, Morrison renders these slaves visible for the reader: no longer voiceless, they are able to articulate and reclaim their own stories. This is a common theme in the novel, she goes on to say, as Morrison’s writing works in ‘restoring Black history via Black folklore, but also reworking the white tradition of Gothic literature in writing the history of its ghosts.’⁴⁵⁵

Interestingly, it takes the arrival of an outsider to prompt the corporeal manifestation of the baby’s spirit haunting 124 in *Beloved*. Sethe returns from collecting chamomile one day to find Paul D sitting on her porch, a man she has not seen for eighteen years since they were slaves together at Sweet Home. While Paul D senses some ‘kind of evil’ as he enters the house for the first time, this soon transforms into an overwhelming sense of grief.⁴⁵⁶ Soon after, Sethe is able to express some of her own grief to Paul D. As he caresses her in the kitchen, she tells him about some of her darkest memories from her life as a slave, such as the time a group of boys stole her breast milk; and the cowhide whipping she received which left a large, tree-shaped scar on her back. As Anya Heise-Von der Lippe comments, scars,

⁴⁴⁹ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 33.

⁴⁵⁰ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, p. 36.

⁴⁵¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 14.

⁴⁵² Maisha L. Wester, ‘Toni Morrison’s Gothic: Headless Brides and Haunted Commutes’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 378-91 (p. 381).

⁴⁵³ Weissberg, ‘Gothic spaces’, in *Modern Gothic : A Reader*, ed. by Sage and Lloyd-Smith, p. 109.

⁴⁵⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, pp. 22-3.

⁴⁵⁵ Weissberg, ‘Gothic spaces’, in *Modern Gothic : A Reader*, ed. by Sage and Lloyd-Smith, p. 116.

⁴⁵⁶ Morrison, *Beloved*, pp. 8-9.

particularly for former slaves, ‘are bodily reminders of past trauma which can be neither told nor forgotten.’⁴⁵⁷ By allowing Paul D to see and even touch her scar, she is allowing him, without words, to understand some of her trauma. As she reflects on the writing of *Beloved* in an essay collected in *The Source of Self-Regard* (2019), Morrison writes that the characters’ ‘shared effort to avoid imagining slave life as lived from their own point of view’ became a major theme of the novel, with forgetting the past being the book’s ‘engine’.⁴⁵⁸ Sethe, though, soon realises that time has made Paul D the type of man who could, finally, help her to ‘remember things’.⁴⁵⁹ This feeling is mutual as, on seeing Sethe again, Paul D feels as if ‘[t]he closed portion of his head’ had opened again.⁴⁶⁰ Sensing the growing affinity between the two, and the risk that, with Paul D, Sethe might finally be able to find peace, the house suddenly comes alive in a violent outburst. Paul D responds in anger, telling the spirit to leave the house alone which, at least temporarily, she does. In *Beloved*’s absence, Sethe wonders if it may finally be time to allow herself to start to feel again and to make plans, now that Paul D has made room for such things. While, in the past, ‘the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay’ for Sethe, she cannot help but start to envision one with Paul D.⁴⁶¹ Denver, however, already jealous of the attention her mother is now giving him, resents Paul D for banishing ‘the only other company she had’.⁴⁶² It is not long, though, until *Beloved*, ‘desperate for being not just remembered, but dealt with’ too, returns to 124.⁴⁶³

It is on their return home from the carnival Paul D has persuaded them to attend that Sethe and Denver spot an unusual sight just outside of 124: what appears to be ‘a black dress, [with] two unlaced shoes below it’, sitting on a tree stump.⁴⁶⁴ This is reminiscent of one of Denver’s earlier memories when, some time ago, she saw her mother through the window of Baby Suggs’ room, kneeling in prayer with ‘a white dress knelt down next to her’.⁴⁶⁵ This time, however, the dress is not disembodied. As they get closer, they realise that it is a young woman; a woman with ‘new skin, lineless and smooth’ and who, once they invite her in, introduces herself as ‘Beloved’.⁴⁶⁶ The two women of 124 are taken by their newest houseguest, tending to her in an almost motherly way as she sleeps in Baby Suggs’ bed, changing her bedsheets and preparing sweet food for her consumption. Paul D, however, is not yet so enamoured: feeling confused by the way *Beloved* acts sick but does not appear to be. Even after her recovery, *Beloved* stays at the house where she repays Sethe’s care with an almost obsessive devotion, mirroring her movements in the kitchen and walking her home from work. Soon, *Beloved* begins to ‘feed’ on the stories of Sethe’s life instead of the sugary foods she craved during her recovery. One afternoon, *Beloved* asks Sethe to tell her the story of her earrings: the earrings she received as a wedding present from the owner of Sweet

⁴⁵⁷ Heise-von der Lippe, ‘Representations of the Female Gothic Body’, in *The Female Gothic : New Directions*, ed. by Wallace and Smith, p. 170.

⁴⁵⁸ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 283.

⁴⁵⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, pp. 17-8.

⁴⁶⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 41.

⁴⁶¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 42.

⁴⁶² Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 19.

⁴⁶³ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 283.

⁴⁶⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 51.

⁴⁶⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 29.

⁴⁶⁶ Morrison, *Beloved*, pp. 51-2.

Home, but which have been '[l]ong gone' for years, prompting Denver to wonder how she could have known about them.⁴⁶⁷ This, along with Beloved's admission that she came back to see Sethe's face, makes Denver realise who she actually is, something she asks Beloved to promise not to tell her mother. Sethe, however, comes to this realisation herself after hearing Beloved hum the song she made up for her children as infants. She is instantly overjoyed, thankful for the fact that, now that she has her daughter back, she does not have to 'rememory' all of the traumas of her past as Beloved already knows them all.⁴⁶⁸ Sethe, finally, feels as if she no longer has to blame herself for what she did. It is not long, though, until 124 returns to a distressing state not dissimilar to the novel's opening.

Denver, although happy that her sister is back, has convinced herself that her mother will try to kill Beloved again, influenced by a power 'from outside this house', and that it is her job to stay by her side at all times to protect her.⁴⁶⁹ Paul D, feeling as if Beloved is somehow pushing him out of the house, takes to sleeping in the storeroom outside. Eventually, after Sethe finally admits to him that she killed Beloved as an infant, he leaves 124 for good. Sethe feels that her confession has pushed him away like it did the rest of the townsfolk. As we learn, before Sethe killed Beloved there, '124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house' full of life and love at the heart of the community, where even strangers were welcome to drop in and leave messages for other people.⁴⁷⁰ Sethe herself acknowledges that her arrival was what marked the start of 'the grief at 124'.⁴⁷¹ In the aftermath of the incident, Baby Suggs lost her faith and stopped preaching (her sermons previously a communal event in the clearing behind 124), as the rest of the townsfolk turned on the family. Once again, in the absence of Paul D, Sethe feels alone as, simultaneously, the atmosphere at 124 begins to deteriorate. Although originally happy about her daughter's return, feeling that it could bring her peace, Beloved has now grown demanding, playing on her mother's guilt. Physically growing larger and larger too, she is feeding both on 124's food supply (leaving none for Sethe and Denver) as well as her mother's attention: we learn that Sethe was fired from her job for arriving late too many times due to caring for Beloved. Kathleen Brogan comments on this new dynamic, writing that, in stories centred around hauntings, '[c]haracters run the danger of being swallowed up by the very past they attempt to recover'.⁴⁷² As her newly returned daughter is growing fat, Sethe is becoming thinner: almost as if she, herself, is now becoming a ghost. As she came to understand it while writing *Beloved*, Morrison herself defines a haunting as embodying 'both what we yearn for and what we fear'.⁴⁷³ Although Sethe is reunited with her lost daughter, this is not the same Beloved she once held as a baby. Soon her actions turn violent again, mirroring the way she haunted the house in spirit form as things are slammed and broken. Here, Denver realises that she should no longer be protecting Beloved from her mother, but, actually, 'her mother from Beloved'.⁴⁷⁴ And so, finally,

⁴⁶⁷ Morrison, *Beloved*, pp. 58-60.

⁴⁶⁸ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 191.

⁴⁶⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 205.

⁴⁷⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, pp. 86-7.

⁴⁷¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 90.

⁴⁷² Kathleen Brogan, 'American Stories of Cultural Haunting: Tales of Heirs and Ethnographers', *College English*, 57.2 (1995), 149-65 (p. 153) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/378807>>.

⁴⁷³ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 284.

⁴⁷⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 243.

Denver ventures out of 124 into the outside world she fears so much to try to find help. There, she finds the support of the other women in town as they leave food outside of 124 and tell Denver stories of when the house was the hub of their community. Eventually, as tales of Beloved's mistreatment of Sethe spread throughout town, the women form a group and descend upon 124 to rescue her. Despite their disgust with what Sethe did, 'the idea of past errors taking possession of the present' is, ultimately, more unnerving to them.⁴⁷⁵ Denver witnesses as the women kneel outside of the house, as if in prayer, and begin to sing. As Ng notes, by asking the community for help Denver has transferred her family's personal trauma 'to something communal and historical.'⁴⁷⁶ Their song reaches Sethe and Beloved inside, who emerge onto the front porch, Beloved now resembling a 'pregnant woman, naked and smiling'.⁴⁷⁷ Sethe, however, has spotted the white Edward Bodwin descending on 124. Although he is only there for Denver, as she now works for him, Sethe believes that he is there to take 'her best thing' again: her Beloved. Mirroring the scene which is the root of her trauma, Sethe picks up an ice pick and runs into the street; however, inverting that original incident, instead of attempting to use it on Beloved, her target is Bodwin (although the group of women manage to stop her in time). Brogan comments on the significance of this inversion as, by pointing the pick at Bodwin, Sethe is finally 'naming white guilt for the evil consequences of slavery' and thus, in the process, freeing herself from the grip of guilt that has always plagued her.⁴⁷⁸ And so, just like before, Beloved is gone, leaving 124, finally, quiet.

While Beloved was undoubtedly the source of troubling disquiet at 124, she is not the novel's only ghost. Earlier in *Beloved* when one of Sethe's old friends, Stamp Paid, goes to check on her after Paul D's leaving he hears 'a conflagration of hasty voices—loud, urgent, all speaking at once' coming from the house.⁴⁷⁹ It is later, as he returns and hears the voices again, that he finally understands who these voices belong to: 'The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked bloods and black girls who had lost their ribbons.'⁴⁸⁰ Or, in other words, 'the mumbling of the black and angry dead.'⁴⁸¹ Perhaps one of these 'angry dead' could be the headless bride that we learn used to haunt the woods behind Sweet Home. Luckhurst comments on this bride, stating that, like Beloved herself, this ghost signifies 'the traces of individual histories, stories of the unnamed that remain untold and therefore hauntingly unresolved between two deaths'.⁴⁸² Later, after her physical dismissal from 124 by the towns' women, Beloved's voice once again merges with those of dead slaves. In a monologue written in broken sentences and lacking any punctuation, Beloved describes her journey between life and death in terms similar to the Middle Passage. Smith writes that, here, Beloved 'seems to have become one, in death, with those who suffered and even died during the Middle Passage', their voices and memories now indistinguishable from one

⁴⁷⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 256.

⁴⁷⁶ Ng, p. 97.

⁴⁷⁷ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 261.

⁴⁷⁸ Brogan, 'American Stories of Cultural Haunting', *College English*, 57.2, 149–65 (p. 154).

⁴⁷⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 172.

⁴⁸⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 181.

⁴⁸¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 198.

⁴⁸² Luckhurst, "Impossible Mourning", *Critique*, 37.4, 243–60 (pp. 247–8).

another.⁴⁸³ Heise-Von der Lippe echoes this, positing that this merging of their voices works in ‘overcoming the boundaries between life and death.’ On Morrison’s decision to present this monologue in such an unconventional way, she states that ‘the horrors of the Middle Passage are nevertheless clearly placed in the context of the American Gothic tradition’, creating, what she defines as ‘a specific Postcolonial Gothic narrative style’.⁴⁸⁴ Similarly, Wester argues that Morrison’s novels (particularly *Beloved*) demonstrate the ways ‘the Gothic may be deployed as a historical mode’ as, instead of ‘imagined terrors’, the legacy of slavery and race-based hatred becomes the source of horror.⁴⁸⁵ As she looks at the role of ghosts in African American literature, Brogan states that while they continue to serve some of the same purposes as the ghosts of traditional Gothic tales — such as ‘setting in motion the machinery of revenge or atonement’ — they also serve another crucial role here: ‘they signal an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history.’⁴⁸⁶ These types of stories, she elaborates, are not merely ghost stories but ‘stories of cultural haunting’ as they focus not simply on the experiences of the individual but on a shared, collective history. *Beloved* is one such example she gives of this, the scene in which the titular character ‘speaks of her life in the grave in terms appropriate to the slave ships’ demonstrating that her return to 124 was not merely representative of a personal family trauma, but also of ‘the return of all dead enslaved Africans.’⁴⁸⁷ Morrison, then, ‘defines historical consciousness as a good form of haunting, in which the denied ghosts of the American past are integrated into our national identity.’⁴⁸⁸ Luckhurst echoes Brogan’s sentiments here, writing that, in *Beloved*, Morrison ‘resorts to the trope of the ghost to *unspeak* the historiography that has repressed its unmemorialized participants’ (italics in original).⁴⁸⁹

While the writings of Morrison and other African American authors may have helped to confront America with a past it would rather forget, in *Beloved* any memory of its titular character soon fades from all those who encountered her. The impact of her visitation, however, remains with them, allowing Sethe, Denver and Paul D to, gradually, confront their own histories in an attempt to move forwards. Before *Beloved*’s physical arrival, Denver was unable to venture beyond the field just behind 124. The reason for this, we learn, is that during one of the classes she attended at a neighbour’s house as a child she was asked if she had been with her mother during Sethe’s imprisonment (after murdering *Beloved*). Denver, who had only been a baby at the time, is unable to remember anything about prison except ‘a darkness’, and so avoids asking her mother about it so as not to make these memories more vivid.⁴⁹⁰ From then on Denver stopped attending her classes, associating the outside world with questions about her mother’s past (and, by extension, her own) that she would rather not

⁴⁸³ Smith, ‘The Flesh and the Word’, in *A Companion to the American Novel*, ed by Bendixen, p. 579.

⁴⁸⁴ Heise-von der Lippe, ‘Representations of the Female Gothic Body’, in *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, ed. by Wallace and Smith, pp. 172-3.

⁴⁸⁵ Wester, ‘Toni Morrison’s Gothic’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 378.

⁴⁸⁶ Brogan, ‘American Stories of Cultural Haunting’, *College English*, 57.2, 149–65 (pp. 149-50).

⁴⁸⁷ Brogan, ‘American Stories of Cultural Haunting’, *College English*, 57.2, 149–65 (p. 152).

⁴⁸⁸ Brogan, ‘American Stories of Cultural Haunting’, *College English*, 57.2, 149–65 (p. 154).

⁴⁸⁹ Luckhurst, “‘Impossible Mourning’”, *Critique*, 37.4, 243-60 (pp. 248).

⁴⁹⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 104.

know the answer to; as '124 and the field behind it were all the world she knew or wanted.'⁴⁹¹ To counter her mother's dark secrets she also created 'sweet' secrets of her own, such as the secret 'room', made out of a ring of trees, she would often sit inside behind the house.⁴⁹² When, some time later, Denver is finally forced to step outside of 124 to find help for her mother, she realises that the outside world is neither as scary nor as large as she used to think it was — particularly when compared to the growing, and increasingly violent, Beloved. Here, Denver is able to find opportunity: beginning her schooling again, with the same neighbour who taught her as a child and, eventually, finding a job. Reversing all of her previous anxieties, Denver finds that as '[her] outside life improved, her home life deteriorated.'⁴⁹³ For Denver, Beloved exposed that the safety of home was only ever a façade, allowing her to step outside of it and find both a life and happiness for herself away from the ghost of her mother's past.

Just like Sethe's, her fellow slave Paul D's life was one full of trauma and suffering. While he does tell her some of these stories of his past, such as the time he was forced to wear the iron bit, or when he saw her husband, Halle, smothering his face in butter (left horrified after witnessing the incident where Sethe had her breast milk stolen), he stops himself from retelling his worst memory, thinking that Sethe has enough of her own. After being accused of threatening to kill the man who bought him, Paul D is chained up with other slaves, making a line of forty-six men. They are forced to spend weeks like that together, surrounded by armed men and vicious dogs and, during a mudslide, almost drown, relying on the actions of one another to survive. Paul D thinks of these memories as contained within the tobacco tin he hangs around his neck, 'buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut.'⁴⁹⁴ This, as Ng writes, 'protects [Paul D] from being overwhelmed by the perpetual loss... he has experienced' in his life.⁴⁹⁵ Symbolically this tin comes apart, unbeknownst to him, as he and Beloved are making love in the outside storeroom of 124 after she has offered herself to him. As Sethe visualises the horrific stories he has told her, particularly the face of her husband covered in butter, she feels that Paul D had 'beat the spirit away the very day he entered her house... but in its place he brought another kind of haunting'.⁴⁹⁶ Later, when Sethe does finally retell the story of *her* own worst memory, it is to Paul D. After being shown a newspaper clipping of the story, Paul D refuses to believe that Sethe killed Beloved, and so asks Sethe herself. As she begins her tale, she intersperses it with other memories and stories, putting it off until she is physically spinning around the room, knowing that 'the circle she was making around the room, [Paul D], the subject, would remain one.' The truth, though, as only Sethe knows, 'was simple': she had '[c]ollected every bit of life she had made... [and] dragged them through the veil, out, away, where no one could hurt them.'⁴⁹⁷ Hearing this confession makes Paul D see Sethe differently and so he leaves her and 124, Beloved watching him. When he does eventually return at the end of the

⁴⁹¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 101.

⁴⁹² Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 38.

⁴⁹³ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 250.

⁴⁹⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, pp. 72-3.

⁴⁹⁵ Ng, p. 88.

⁴⁹⁶ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 96.

⁴⁹⁷ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 163.

novel, now that Beloved has been exorcised by the other women of the town, 124 is ‘just another weathered house needing repair.’⁴⁹⁸ Inside, though, he finds a scene more disturbing to him than any of Beloved’s antics: Sethe, asleep in Baby Suggs’ room, has become bed-bound and reliant on Denver for support, mirroring the old woman’s last days at 124. She is even wrapped in Suggs’ old patchwork quilt.

Originally consisting only of ‘the full range of the dark and the muted’, the only bright spot on the patchwork quilt (two orange squares) had been a source of attraction for Beloved when she had returned to 124.⁴⁹⁹ For 124 was a house devoid of colour, with Baby Suggs, in her last days, asking Sethe to bring brightly coloured items into her room. It is only much later that Sethe realises why Suggs did this, as she ‘never had time to see, let alone enjoy [colour] before.’⁵⁰⁰ Sethe, herself, avoided seeing colour because of the guilt she felt that her daughter Beloved would never be able to see it, either. As she recalls, the last colours she vividly remembers are ‘red baby blood... [and] pink gratestone chips’.⁵⁰¹ It is only once Beloved has returned that Sethe begins to see colour again, and the two begin adding scraps to Suggs’ quilt. As Paula T. Connolly explores, patchwork quilts are a frequent motif in children’s picture books about slavery, their presence symbolising a variety of different discussions, sometimes ‘serving as a message between mother and daughter; a link between Africa and one’s enslaved life in the Americas... [or] a promise of hope, protection, and home’.⁵⁰² Patchwork quilts are traditionally worked on and passed down generationally, acting as a physical reminder of familial ties and memories, each new patch representing something else worth remembering. For the slave, whether former or current, however, all that can be handed down is trauma — this is also explored in Alice Walker’s 1973 short story ‘Everyday Use’, although in a more optimistic way: here, the quilts signify the passing down of a shared and remembered heritage — as Morrison herself writes, ‘[i]t was not a story to pass on.’⁵⁰³ Just as Sethe had hoped to make a new dress for her daughter with the beautiful, colourful fabrics at Sweet Home, but had been forced to leave them behind and make do with some of Baby Suggs’ old cloth, this suffering and deprivation is always hereditary. By the time Paul D has returned to 124, however, the once drab blanket is now a ‘quilt of many colours’. Beloved has helped her mother to see colour, just as she has helped her to reconcile with her past, through adding squares onto the blanket. Its transformation demonstrates that, while Sethe resembles Baby Suggs, lying in her bed and covered by her blanket, the fact that she can *see* colour means that there is a chance that she may, one day, be able to *enjoy* it, too. The generational suffering that had previously plagued the family has finally come to an end, with Denver, pursuing a life of her own, being the one to have broken the link. Sethe’s chance of happiness, too, has returned to her. As Paul D looks down at the now colourful quilt covering Sethe, he is reminded of the parts of her that he loves, and the way that he does not have to feel shame about his own scars when he is with her, due to the fact that Sethe has

⁴⁹⁸ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 264.

⁴⁹⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 38.

⁵⁰⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 201.

⁵⁰¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 39.

⁵⁰² Paula T. Connolly, “‘Texts Like a Patchwork Quilt’: Reading Picturebooks About Slavery”, *Children’s Literature in Education*, 44.1 (2013), 29–43 (p. 41) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10583-012-9175-2>>.

⁵⁰³ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 275.

many of her own. While, previously, the two former slaves hid the worst parts of their pasts from one another, it is actually this shared trauma which binds them together. They come to understand, then, as Ng writes, that ‘suffering will not be surmounted unless it is communicated and confronted.’⁵⁰⁴ Only the type of woman who had endured the same horrors as he had could make Paul D leave ‘his manhood like that’, just as it was Paul D’s experiences which made him ‘the kind of man who [could] walk in a house and make the women cry.’ Paul D’s realisation of this makes him want ‘to put his story next to [Sethe’s]’, hoping that, together, they can create ‘some kind of tomorrow’ despite all of the yesterdays they have both experienced.⁵⁰⁵

In many ways *Beloved* came to symbolise a patchwork quilt herself: pieced together by scraps of trauma from both her own story and the stories of millions of others, it was her reappearance which, ultimately, helped Sethe, Paul D and Denver acknowledge the past in order to envision a future. Although they will come to forget her ‘[l]ike an unpleasant dream’, *Beloved* will never truly be gone from their lives, however. As Morrison writes in the novel’s closing, whether it is ‘the rustle of a skirt... [or] the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep’ there will always be some reminder left, like the footprints by the stream that ‘come and go’.⁵⁰⁶ Luckhurst comments that this ending serves as a ‘recognition that the work of mourning, for genocide, cannot be allowed to end.’⁵⁰⁷ For *Beloved*, as for the sixty million or more slaves that preceded her (as Morrison dedicates the novel to), no singular act of lamentation can ever — nor *should* ever — suffice. Remembering them, however, is a place to start.

3.4 Conclusion

Simultaneously running parallel to King’s and Morrison’s exploration of past sins or mistreatments on a national level, tales of personal familial horrors are also interwoven into *Pet Sematary* and *Beloved* respectively. As these threads of traumatic memory are pulled together like squares of fabric in a patchwork quilt, passed down or inherited, they demonstrate that engaging with the past can be dangerous: both of the novels’ protagonists end up, in some way, losing their minds. Whether it is Louis Creed, left sucking his thumb after witnessing his newly resurrected toddler feeding on his own mother like a vampire; or Sethe Suggs, the former slave who no longer wants to leave her dead mother-in-law’s bed in the aftermath of an extended house visit from the adult daughter she herself murdered as a toddler, both are haunted by ghosts from the past. For it took the return of a lost child to help both characters understand that ‘sometimes death is better’.⁵⁰⁸ The American Gothic, however, creates a space for the repressed or the voiceless to break through the thin layer of soil covering them, regardless of the consequences. America’s story is one known the world over, yet it is also one that is only ever half-told. The writing of Morrison and — at times, at least — King helps to offer an alternative view to the idealistic, and equally fictional, American Dream. If King manages to offer a brief glimpse behind the door of the closet

⁵⁰⁴ Ng, p. 96.

⁵⁰⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, pp. 272-3.

⁵⁰⁶ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 275.

⁵⁰⁷ Luckhurst, “Impossible Mourning”, *Critique*, 37.4, 243-60 (p. 244).

⁵⁰⁸ King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 180.

housing America's darkest skeletons in *Pet Sematary*, then what Morrison does in *Beloved* is tear down the entire door. While both of their novels illustrate that remembering can be a deadly thing, it is, however, also a necessary one.

Conclusion

According to Faye Ringel, America ‘can be figured as a haunted house, with madwomen screaming in the attic, the bones of Indians under the foundation, and African enslaved people in the basement, their skeletons in the closets.’⁵⁰⁹ Whether it is Shirley Jackson in *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), Stephen King in *Pet Sematary* (1983) or Toni Morrison in *Beloved* (1987) — all texts explored within this thesis — it is each of those groups which, in recent decades, the American Gothic has finally attempted to set free or, at least, to bring attention to their entrapment in the first place. The American Gothic, then, offers a medium for its writers in which to atone for America’s forgotten crimes and sins. On this, Charles L. Crow writes:

In the United States, a belief in progress is almost an article of faith. The Gothic, however, is deeply sceptical that either individuals or societies can be perfected. The Gothic insists that humans are flawed and capable of evil, and that the stories we tell ourselves in our history books may leave out what is most important for us to understand. The Gothic patrols the line between waking and dreams, human and machine, the normal and the freakish, and living and dead. As a literature of borderlands, the Gothic is naturally suited to a country that has seen the frontier (a shifting geographical, cultural, linguistic and racial boundary) as its defining characteristic.⁵¹⁰

Eric Savoy echoes Crow’s sentiments here, stating that the American Gothic is ‘a strain of literature that is haunted by an insistent, undead past’ which, as such, ‘gives voice to the dark nightmare that is the underside of “the American Dream.”’⁵¹¹ He continues, writing that ‘the entire tradition of American gothic can be conceptualised as the attempt to invoke... the spectre of Otherness that haunts the house of national narrative’. The process through which the genre achieves this, Savoy elaborates, is when ‘an unspeakable, irrecoverable historical preterite is marked, and its consequences brought forward to the present’.⁵¹² This ‘house of national narrative’, we can safely assume, accommodates the same sort of *historical preterites* as Ringel’s aforementioned metaphorical house. Just as these images put forwards by Ringel and Savoy of America’s figurative house containing entrapped women, Indigenous peoples and African Americans are crucial to this idea of the “American Nightmare” that the American Gothic exposes, then, so too has the haunted or sinister house been a central motif in the genre since its beginnings. As Savoy writes, ‘the house is the most persistent site, object, structural analogue, and trope of American gothic’s allegorical turn.’⁵¹³

⁵⁰⁹ Ringel, *The Gothic Literature and History of New England*, p. 3.

⁵¹⁰ Crow, *American Gothic*, p. 2.

⁵¹¹ Savoy, ‘The rise of the American Gothic’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Hogle, p. 167.

⁵¹² Savoy, ‘The Face of the Tenant’, in *American Gothic : New Interventions in a National Narrative*, ed by Martin and Savoy, pp. 13-4.

⁵¹³ Hogle, ‘The Progress of Theory’, in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 9.

Some of the earliest and most famous examples of Gothic tales centred on the house by American writers include Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). Indeed, what is considered to be the first Gothic novel ever published, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) tells the story of the seemingly cursed titular castle. As noted by Andrew Hock Soon Ng, 'the Gothic has consistently depicted the house not only as a setting for the unspeakable, but... as a site that actually invigorates it.'⁵¹⁴ Maria M. Tatar posits that it is the conflict between the familiar and the strange within a house (leading back to Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny or the 'unhomely', a theory the first chapter of this thesis engaged with) which makes it a perfect site for this 'invigoration', as she observes: 'A house contains the familiar and congenial, but at the same time it screens what is familiar and congenial from view, making a mystery of it.'⁵¹⁵ For the female inhabitant, though, the Gothic house has but another source of terror, deriving from the realisation that her staying there is not 'in order to protect her innocence but is, in truth, fundamentally meant to subordinate her to male dominance and control.' This inversion of safety and comfort within the home is a common theme in the Female Gothic, whether at the hands of supernatural entities or a domineering husband (or both), transforming a place of refuge into one of fear, as the first half of chapter one of this thesis explored. On this, Ng writes that 'the Gothic invariably testifies to a link between the female subject and the house'.⁵¹⁶ In Leonard Lutwack's *The Role of Place in Literature* (1984) he explores the relationship between the female body and setting in literature as he writes that 'woman is more intimately tied to fixed places than man'. He observes that one reason for this is likely due to the 'repose rather than motion' required in bearing and raising a child, with the unborn child viewing its mother herself as 'a place' while inside her womb.⁵¹⁷ The Female Gothic has consistently allowed women to express anxieties surrounding motherhood and society's expectations of, and limitations on, them and their bodies. Claire Kahane comments on this, writing that 'images of the womb as the mummy's tomb, of penetration, impregnation and childbirth as female Gothic terrors, committing women to an imprisoning biological destiny which denies the autonomy of the self' are frequent in the female Gothic, particularly in the Southern Gothic works of Flannery O'Connor.⁵¹⁸ Tricia Lootens makes a similar analogy between the womb and the tomb as she discusses the titular house in Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, writing that it evokes 'the original womb/tomb, with all the comforts of home.'⁵¹⁹ As noted by Liliane Weissberg, in the Female Gothic the home has been a place of danger and suffering for its female characters since the eighteenth century. This, she posits, offers 'a more precise account of the female social position and struggle for rights at that time' than the alternative, idealised view of the home as a source of comfort for women.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁴ Ng, p. 1.

⁵¹⁵ Maria M. Tatar, 'The Houses of Fiction: Toward a Definition of the Uncanny', *Comparative Literature*, 33 (1981), 167-82 (p. 169) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1770438>>.

⁵¹⁶ Ng, p. 4.

⁵¹⁷ Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1984), p. 82.

⁵¹⁸ Claire Kahane, 'Gothic Mirrors and Feminine Identity', *The Centennial Review*, 24.1 (1980), 43-64 (p. 59).

⁵¹⁹ Lootens, 'Familial and Sexual Politics', in *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Murphy, p. 158.

⁵²⁰ Weissberg, 'Gothic spaces', in *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, ed. by Sage and Lloyd-Smith, p. 105.

Just as for women, the relationship between African Americans and the idea of 'home' is fraught. As Valerie Sweeney Prince writes: 'The search for justice, opportunity, and liberty that characterised the twentieth century for African Americans can be described as a quest for home.' This is also depicted in African American literature, particularly in the works of Morrison, as, in such novels 'home is ubiquitous and nowhere at the same time', she continues.⁵²¹ As well as in *Beloved* (as explored in the second half of chapter three of this thesis), another such example of this is found in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). As Prince observes, 'Mrs. Breedlove's storefront home is also, simultaneously, not home', lacking the domesticity and amenities of the home belonging to the white Fisher family whom she works for.⁵²² Instead, the Breedlove's home is the site of trauma, as Pecola is raped by her own father on the kitchen floor. Prince comments on this, writing that:

The tragedy of home for Pecola is described best in this scene. The space of home has become so compressed that she is left to manoeuvre psychologically within the confined space of the kitchen floor... In 1941 the unyielding black ground signified the terrible cost at which home might be established for the black community of Lorain, Ohio. The barriers that delineate the place of home are erected upon this foundation: the unyielding black ground and the Breedloves' kitchen floor. The storefront is what remains for cultural outcasts like the Breedlove family. Their internalisation of white normative values and their inability to find any productive coping mechanisms ultimately pin Pecola tragically to the ground under the weight of her father's "embrace".⁵²³

Whether it is 124 Bluestone Road or the Sweet Home plantation in *Beloved*; or the Breedlove's storefront home in *The Bluest Eye*, home, for Morrison's characters, is not a place of comfort and safety but one of pain and uncertainty. Mirroring the African American community's 'quest for home' is a similar one for the country's Indigenous population. On this, Anne-Christine Hornborg writes:

The wilderness that cartographers tried to transform into a land to their liking was the Mi'kmaq's home, and it was only through hard pressure from the colonisers that the Mi'kmaq were finally forced to leave the 'wilderness' and be settled on reserves... To leave the forest, for them, was the same as abandoning their home.⁵²⁴

Unlike for the Puritan settlers, then, she states, 'the forest [was] not a temporary surrounding, but a home' for the Mi'kmaq tribe.⁵²⁵ While the wilderness remains a place of terror in much of the American Gothic, with the 'figure of the American Indian... providing a source of

⁵²¹ Valerie Sweeney Prince, *Burnin' Down the House : Home in African American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 1-2.

⁵²² Prince, p. 85.

⁵²³ Prince, p. 90.

⁵²⁴ Hornborg, *Mi'kmaq Landscapes*, p. 57.

⁵²⁵ Hornborg, *Mi'kmaq Landscapes*, p. 16.

horror, guilt, and trauma', in recent decades some texts have begun to invert this.⁵²⁶ As Michelle Burnham writes, Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* (1996) and Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* (2005) are among the novels which employ 'standard Gothic conventions while also turning them inside out', as they 'feature Native American protagonists who more often experience than cause fear and terror'.⁵²⁷ King, too, acknowledges the horrors of colonialism and the displacement of America's Indigenous communities in *Pet Sematary*, as explored in the first half of chapter three of this thesis.

While space, according to Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu, 'has traditionally been viewed as a backdrop to plot', they go on to explore how it can serve other purposes within a narrative, ranging from acting as a 'bearer of symbolic meaning'; to becoming a 'supporting medium' of the story being told. Central to their argument is the understanding that there are two principal ways in which space can intersect with narrative:

On one hand, it can be an object of representation, on the other, it can function as the environment in which narrative is physically deployed, or, to put it differently, as the medium in which narrative is realised.⁵²⁸

In each of the novels explored in this thesis, space and setting, certainly, has acted as a medium for the realisation of their highly traumatic, Gothic narratives. In *Danse Macabre*, King himself comments on the way the 'Bad Place' in the American Gothic has transformed from 'a symbolic womb' into 'a symbolic mirror', representing a 'fear of the self'.⁵²⁹ His own texts are a testament to this, exploring the shadow cast by 'the sunny American republic' and its hidden past (just as, mirroring this, so many of his own characters possess their own repressed histories), and thus demonstrating that King is, indeed, deserving of his place within the figurative haunted house of the American Gothic.⁵³⁰ Examining King's novels together with works from the wider American Gothic genre that they have not previously been considered alongside with before has allowed me to offer new readings of these texts as I explore how space and narrative interacts within them, such as how place and setting functions as a site of the Gothic, as well as enabling me to draw parallels between the commentary these novels offer on various aspects of American society. Whether it is Hill House and the Overlook hotel, possessing and ultimately claiming the lives of Eleanor Vance and Jack Torrance respectively; or the small town of Jerusalem's Lot and the sinisterly modern Jefferson Institute, transforming the living into undead commodities for a vampiric capitalist figure; or the secret Micmac burial ground and 124 Bluestone Road, whose supernatural inhabitants feed on grief while representing the intersection of personal mourning and national mourning over some of America's most heinous crimes. It is these ideas, too, which I have explored and developed in my own short story collection as past sins,

⁵²⁶ Burnham, 'Is There an Indigenous Gothic?', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 226.

⁵²⁷ Burnham, 'Is There an Indigenous Gothic?', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Crow, p. 228.

⁵²⁸ Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth E. Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu, *Narrating Space/spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2016), p. 1.

⁵²⁹ King, *Danse Macabre*, p. 316.

⁵³⁰ Savoy, 'The rise of the American Gothic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Hogle, p. 168.

buried but not forgotten, rise to the surface again against the backdrop of Gothic spaces. From Minnie Stewart, uncovering the true story of the titular home in ‘The House on Montrose Avenue’, and in the process losing both her sanity and her family; or the title character in ‘The Legend of Robert Jacobson’, claiming the lives of innocents to misguidedly avenge his own violent and hate-fuelled murder upon a bridge that comes to represent the liminality of life and death, each exposes an alternative view of the “American Dream” — one that is more akin to a nightmare.

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