

THE BECKONING DEAD: BOOK 1

THE  
HAUNTING  
OF BEACON  
HILL



AMBROSE IBSEN

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# AMBROSE IBSEN

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**T**he dark house sat on the knob of raised earth the area's first settlers had taken to calling "Beacon Hill". Other houses had stood there once, but this mouldering specimen was now the last of its kind, blighting the hillside with its dereliction. The shadows that fell from its awnings and chimney stacks were oily, and cautious onlookers agreed, nine times out of ten, that they were more angular than crumbling features such as these should have been able to cast.

Passersby with an interest in architecture had no shortage of things to discuss where this house was concerned. The ivy-grown exterior of white stone had been discolored by the passage of seasons, and many of the brown shingles along the roof had long ago been worn through, but there persisted in the shabby ruin an almost gothic grandeur.

It was never the architecture that the passersby discussed, however. No, what most drew the eye when one got close to the house was the deposit of shadow in its windows, and the vague but oft-repeated notion that something had only very recently stirred just beyond their shattered panes. Those in close proximity tended to speak of odd noises—chiefly laughs, sobs and echoing footfalls—that emanated from the ruined interior in the hours after dark.

It was likely none had lived in the thing since the Great Crash, and there were some in town who doubted it'd ever been occupied at all—except, that is, by the phantoms populating Montpelier lore. Once every other decade, rumors spread through town of a potential restoration—of an initiative

to preserve it as a local landmark by some moneyed interest. But the money never came, plans of restoration never gelled and the stone sentinel of Beacon Hill was left to decay in perennial solitude.

Though somewhat remote from the bustle of surrounding Montpelier, there were occasions when denizens of the town found themselves treading close to the house on Beacon Hill. The hillside was flanked by a narrow creek where local fishermen sought walleye in the spring and summer, and the open fields to the east were popular sites for picnics in good weather.

And still others ventured there—however rarely—with the intention of exploring. Youngsters seeking to make their own fun in a quiet Indiana suburb, or seeking tests of courage, sometimes found their way to its shattered doorstep.

It was on a summer night when the wind rolling down the hillside was uncommonly cool that three high schoolers strode across the moonlit fields and approached the dark abode.

“I’ve never been this close to it,” admitted Ophelia with a slight tremor in her voice. “It’s a lot bigger than I thought—huge.” Combing a lock of soft black hair behind one ear and batting away a cloud of gnats that swarmed her path, she slowed her pace and glanced sheepishly at her companions. “Maybe this is close enough, yeah?”

Leslie, pausing just long enough to square up the house and snap a picture of it with her phone, shook her head. “Nah, let’s keep going. We should pop in for a minute, have a look around.”

“But, the stories—” began Ophelia.

With a wad of gum between his teeth, Joey interjected. “You mean the stories about Mother Maggot?” He stepped past the girls, hands in his pockets, and marched onto a crumbling brick walkway that led directly to the house. When he’d walked it a few paces, he stopped and waited for the other two to catch up, the bill of his ball cap masking his face in shadow. “They’re true. *All of ‘em.*”

“Shut *up*, Joey.” Trudging up the path to meet him, Leslie tucked her phone away. “There’s nothing in here but a bunch of spiders, maybe some rats.” She looked to Ophelia, who was still hesitantly keeping the rear. “Right?”

Ophelia forced a smile. “O-Obviously.”

“Oh, there’s more than just rats in this house.” Joey kicked a loose brick down the hill, watching it tumble for a few moments. His voice sank and he donned a wolfish smirk. “Years ago, my older brother came here with *his* friends. He and a few guys planned to camp inside the house for the night—even brought sleeping bags.”

“Sounds romantic. Didn’t know your brother was into *that* kinda thing,” was Leslie’s rejoinder.

Joey ignored her. “It was just past midnight when one of his buddies left to take a leak, and when he went back inside, he looked up into one of these windows—” He paused, pointing up at the black panes of the second story. “*Something* was staring back down at him—something *terrible*. After that, they all lost their nerve and packed up.”

Ophelia tried her hardest to ignore the shiver creeping down her spine as she listened to Joey’s yarn. “So, what?” she concluded, shuffling across the discolored bricks and casting a sidelong glance at the house. She cleared her throat and attempted to summon a haughtier tone, but with each step she took she found it harder to banish the quaver in her voice. “One guy *thought* he saw someone in the window. Big deal. That doesn’t prove anything.”

“Sounds like a load of bull if you ask me,” added Leslie. She jogged ahead a few paces and reached into Joey’s pocket for his pack of gum. Helping herself to a piece, she dropped the balled-up wrapper into the grass and took to wiping her glasses with her t-shirt. With clean lenses, she peered up at the house, reappraised the contours of its arched entryway, and tossed her shoulders. “It’s so dark in there that you can’t trust your eyes. You might *think* you see all sorts of things, but when it comes down to it this is just a big, empty house.”



“Yeah? Well, why don’t we find out, then?” Joey tugged on the bill of his hat and finally came to a stop. “It isn’t just my brother—loads of other people have claimed to see things in or around this house. Mother Maggot still walks these halls. You can bet on it.”

Still trailing the other two, Ophelia picked at one of the buttons on her shirt with shaky fingers. “Why do they call her *Mother Maggot*?” she asked. Having arrived within a dozen feet of the entrance, she was struck once again by the place’s enormity. It towered above them like a small mountain, its weathered lines aglow in the gleam of a tired moon. Shadow as deep and rich in color as chocolate syrup seemed to pour out of the place. The centuried air that seeped from the open doorway stung her nostrils.

Joey plucked a small flashlight from his keychain. He clicked it on and thrust the bright LEDs through the threshold in the hopes of taking a look around, but the darkness was vast, unyielding. “Years ago,” he began, his voice unintentionally dropping to a whisper, “a woman lived here with her children. The story goes that she abused them all—did terrible things to them. When one of her sons grew up, he decided to repay her for the years of abuse. He murdered her, *brutally*, and by the time she was found the maggots had feasted on her body. Or so the story goes...”

Leslie, only moments ago a skeptic, now clung to Joey’s arm. Her face appeared pale in the sweeping light. “That’s just gross.” Throwing her free hand behind her, she reached out to Ophelia, seeking to link arms.

Ophelia, though, remained anchored in the entryway, watching with wide eyes as the other two floated off into the gloom. “I don’t want to...” she said, resting a hand on the stone arch.

“C’mon!” urged Leslie, waving frantically. “We’ve gotta stick together!”

Joey’s clumsy footfalls made the floors whine. Though he and Leslie had made it inside, there was no telling if the boards would continue to support their weight further in. It

was possible they'd tread upon a weak spot and plummet straight through. "Come on, Ophelia! We'll just take it slow. I think the floors are holding up."

It wasn't a fear of falling through the floor that kept Ophelia from venturing inside. As she stared into the darkness, she was overcome with a terror that left her paralyzed. Her stomach fluttered and her limbs grew numb. She knew this feeling. This was what it felt like to court a nightmare on the very edge of sleep—this was like the nauseous fear that pooled in the pit of one's stomach before leaping from a diving board.

Leslie back-tracked just enough to snatch up Ophelia's hand. "Come on!"

Ophelia fell into step behind her friends like a dog dragged on a leash. Her heels dug into the creaky floors and her heart took to thumping irregularly in her chest. She thought to protest, to yank her hand from Leslie's, but now that she was in the thick of it the very notion of breaking the chain was unthinkable. A whimper made its way up her throat and was fossilized there, leaving her to suck the dusty air fitfully through her nostrils. Her eyes began to water—and to this, the dust was merely an accomplice.

The trio delved deeper in. Though its exact dimensions were hidden by the darkness, there could be no doubt that this was a very large, high-ceilinged room. Their shuffling steps disturbed masses of windblown detritus and incited the tenants dwelling therein to scurry away from the bobbing light. Interior walls of crumbling plaster were much-festooned with ancient ribbons of mold; where the exterior walls had grown thin, withered stems of ivy crept through the cracks.

There was no furniture to speak of, no indication that anyone had ever lived in the house, only filth. The curious squealing of the floors—coupled with the furtive chitters of the things that lived beneath—made for a ghastly soundscape. Every step, every labored breath the three sent up into the air echoed till the room seemed to resonate with the stirrings of a legion. Dust floated up from the floors and drifted down from the ceiling; motes danced in the feeble light like flakes of snow in a blizzard.

They persisted into yet remoter passages. From the vast room they unwittingly entered a space of narrower dimensions, the walls streaked in brownish stains. Cobwebs as thick as lace doilies were glimpsed hanging in the distant corners, and in them many-legged things remained huddled in wait.

Ophelia crept on behind her friends, knees knocking against one another. Her hands were getting so sweaty now as to prune up, and the immensity of the darkness was proving disorienting. She tracked the thin glow from Joey's flashlight, and its constant swinging from one side to the next left her dizzy. She opened her mouth to speak—to urge the others to turn back—but could barely draw in sufficient breath to prop up her voice. The taste of the house settled on her tongue as she inhaled and her stomach seized up.

Turning a corner, Joey paused to inspect something in the light. "Looks like I found the way upstairs," he said, placing his foot tentatively atop the bottom step of a wide stairwell. Pressing down on it, he nodded firmly. "It seems secure enough. Let's go up there and have a look."

Whatever courage Leslie had possessed prior to that moment was suddenly exhausted. She tugged at Joey's arm, nearly knocking the flashlight from his grasp. "Let's go. We've seen enough. I don't wanna go up there."

"M-Me neither," choked out Ophelia. A draft wormed its way through the house, stirring the hairs on her arms. Matting them down with a shudder, she tried pulling the other two back toward the entrance. "Let's get out of here."

Joey retained his balance and met Ophelia's yank with one of his own. "Aw, don't get all freaked out. It's just a house, right?" His face glowed eerily in the whitish light. "Don't tell me you're actually scared! Don't be such babies. You guys were the ones who wanted to come here, remember?"

His mockery seemed to have the intended effect on Leslie. She drew in a steady breath and ceased her protests.

Ophelia only became more frantic, however. "I mean it. We need to leave. We shouldn't have come here at all!" Under

the circumstances, she didn't mind being labeled a coward. From the moment she'd set eyes on the place, her instincts had been inflamed. The further they'd gone inside, the more conscious she'd become of a great weight in the air—of an impending horror due to materialize around the next corner. Her senses were all in agreement: She needed to leave—before it was too late.

“Let's just look around up there. Then we can go,” insisted Joey, pointing the light up the stairs.

“No, I wanna go now!” Ophelia wrenched on Leslie's arm for all she was worth. She pulled, perhaps, a little *too* hard.

Leslie lost her footing and sailed to the floor with a thud. Joey followed her down.

In the space of an instant, the chain had been broken.

“Shit!” The light slipped from Joey's grasp and went out with a sudden flash. The three were now buried completely in darkness. Only the sounds of his groping for the light, of Leslie's cursing, gave any indication of their respective positions in the pitch blackness.

“Why the hell did you do that?” asked Leslie. She spat out her gum and hissed, cradling a sore elbow.

Even as she hacked in the newly-flown dust, Ophelia threw herself onto the floor and patted around in search of the flashlight. Without any light to see by, the horrors lurking in this sea of darkness were soon to manifest—to close in on them. She scabbled about, gasping and coughing, but her fingers found nothing but splinters.

There entered into the scene a new noise, which halted Ophelia's search and quelled the bickering of the other two instantaneously. From up above—somewhere on the stairwell—there came an unmistakable footfall. One of the steps groaned as someone unseen began a descent.

They all fell silent, unsure of what they'd heard.

A second footfall removed all doubt, however.

Spooked, Joey stammered, “Is... is someone there?”

No one replied, but there *was* a third step, and that was answer enough.

Then a fourth.

The trio did not sit and listen for a fifth. Instead, the blind scene erupted into chaos. There was no time to sit and consider the intentions of this new presence; the occupant of the stairwell was soon to be upon them.

All hope of retrieving the flashlight was abandoned. Joey rose with a groan, slamming into one of the walls. After a moment of hesitation, the sound of his sneakers beating the floors drowned out everything else. He sprinted into the interior darkness, casting off all pretensions of bravery.

Leslie yelped confusedly, calling for the others in turn. “Joey! Wait up! Ophelia, where are you?” Her voice bounced off the walls, waxed deafening as it grew in shrillness. Throwing out her hands and trying to regain her bearings, she choked back a cry and thundered off. In her flight, she caught the edge of an unseen corner with her leg. The remainder of her confused escape was to be carried out with a limp.

“G-guys! Wait for me!” In the commotion, Ophelia felt the boards shaking beneath her. Still on the floor where she’d been searching for the flashlight, she found her sense of direction hopelessly muddled. Which way was she supposed to turn to get back to the entrance? Joey had seemingly gone in one direction and Leslie was fleeing in another. Everywhere she looked there was only darkness.

Rising to her feet, she fast understood the direction of her flight didn’t matter. The only important thing was that she run—that she get away from whatever dwelt close-by, on the stairs. And that someone or something stood very near indeed she was nauseously certain.

“Joey?” she shrieked. “Leslie?”

Her friends didn’t reply, but from the stairs there came yet another footfall. The vibrations coming through the very floor she stood on told her that the descent was finished; Ophelia was standing within arm’s reach of the unseen presence now.

Finally, pulse pounding in her ears, she gathered her wits and fled. Having no sense of direction, she tried to latch onto whatever sensory clue she could grasp, and attempted to follow the sound of Leslie's whimpering.

She raked through the blackness for something, anything, to help her find her way—a helping hand, a wall to lean against—but was lost in the sea of shadow. Trembling and barely able to control her legs, Ophelia staggered on, the sounds of Joey's running and Leslie's voice fading quickly into the distance.

Stifling her sobs, she ran with no clear aim, the floors squealing obnoxiously as if to mock her wandering. *Just stay calm. If you stay calm, you'll get out of here eventually,* she assured herself. *The house isn't that big... you'll find a door or window soon enough...*

The house was gripped by silence. She couldn't hear either of her companions anymore—could scarcely make out the ongoing rabble of the floors over the crash of her heartbeat in her ears. Still, she kept on, reaching out where she could to grope at her surroundings. She brushed up against crusty growths and became entangled in knots of dusty silk. More than once, she felt something crawl past her fingers, or over the tops of her sandals.

Her directionless advance eventually proved fruitful, however.

In the distance, she spied the dull glow of the moon—it was peeking in through a door or window somewhere up ahead. Suddenly reinvigorated, she pursued the light boldly, wiping the tears from her face and running for all she was worth. The closer she got, the more she could make out of the space around her. She'd wandered into some other wing, was traveling down a long hallway, and the light was issuing from one of the open rooms attached to it.

Panting, Ophelia hooked into the doorway and was delighted to find herself in a small room whose window admitted ample moonlight. The pane was broken, but with some care she'd be able to crawl out into the yard without

injuring herself. The tops of overgrown bushes swayed just outside, and the cool breeze toyed with the ivy growing along the sill.

She'd made it. She'd found a way out.

Ophelia crossed the room, trying to figure out how best to hoist herself through the open window without risking a cut on the jagged remainder of the pane, but stopped short. Something had moved in her periphery, startled her, and she halted to take stock of her surroundings, arms tensing against her breast.

The austere chamber was barely the size of her own bedroom, and these four walls—as punished as any hitherto seen—were largely unadorned. Angular stains marred the plaster where pictures might have once been displayed. A pair of holes had been gnawed into the baseboards by persistent rodents. The corners of the room were cluttered with aged leaves and other organic refuse that'd blown in from the outside.

There was only one other thing to account for in the space—a curious holdover the likes of which she hadn't seen elsewhere in the house. On the wall across from her there hung a tarnished mirror. Its borders shined in the dull moonlight.

The mirror was partially blackened, and what unblemished sections did remain hardly offered a clear reflection. The glass had been warped by age, and its corrupted display lent subjects a hint of the cartoonish, like a funhouse mirror. Ophelia spent a moment looking herself over in it. The thing took liberties with the length and proportion of her limbs, made her brown eyes look unnaturally large. Leaning forward just enough to study her black hair in the mirror and to pick the leaves and cobwebs from it, she straightened herself and patted the dust from her clothing.

But before she could turn to the window and climb out, she saw it.

A second figure was reflected in the mirror. It lurked just behind her—its face looming above her right shoulder and its nebulous body wreathed in inky darkness. At first, she wasn't

sure what she was looking at and leaned in closer, confident that it must have been some smudge or defect.

But then she studied it with closeness.

It *was* a face—monstrous, bloated and somehow, despite its distortion, *smiling*. From the cracks in its ragged borders there peeked well-fed parasites; the things pulsed and writhed energetically beneath the surface of paper-thin flesh.

Upon taking in the full measure of its loathsomeness, Ophelia's legs went out on her.

She didn't dare turn to look at the thing with her own eyes. She could feel it behind her, could sense its black gaze on her as she shuddered on the floor, but to turn and glance up at it as it loomed there would have ruined her.

From above—from some deep recess in that worm-eaten countenance—something fell, striking the back of her trembling hand.

A maggot.



The little girl squatted at one of the shelves, her nose nearly pressed to the spines of the books therein. She squinted hard, trying to sound out the titles, and when she did deign to pick one up, she'd give the cover art a careful look before deciding whether or not to check it out. Those volumes that'd passed muster were added to a teetering pile on a nearby table.

The girl carried on this way for several minutes, but having hit a snag in her search, stood up and approached one of the librarians at the front counter. "Excuse me," she said, standing on tiptoe so as to peek over the edge of the high desk. "Can *you* help me?"

The young librarian stood up at once. "Sure! How can I help you?" Stepping out from behind the desk, she dropped to one knee, putting the two of them eye to eye. The librarian had very pretty eyes; they were the color of the grass outside and were housed beneath two dense black brows like caterpillars. She presented a pearly smile and combed a lock of dark hair behind a small, elf-like ear.

"I'm looking for some books," the girl said, pointing back to the children's section from whence she'd just wandered.

"OK, what kinds of books?"

With a finger pressed to her chin, the girl replied, "Books about *kitties*."

The librarian gave a knowing nod and stood. "Kitties, huh? Yes, I think I can help you out. Come with me." Smoothing

out her long, navy skirt, she pointed to the left, at a shelf of books labeled *Animals*. “Some of these may be a bit difficult for your reading level,” she warned, “but most of our books about cats will be in this section here.”

The girl approached the shelf and inspected its contents with arms akimbo. Her wavy pigtails wagged right and left as she perused the titles. “*Actually*,” she replied, “I’m in third grade and I’m the best reader in my class.” Wagging her little brows, she confided, “I won my class’s weekly reading challenge last week and my teacher gave me a coupon for a free pizza.”

The librarian held back a chuckle and feigned amazement, placing a hand to her lips. “Goodness, I had no idea. You’ll be right at home in this section, then.” Watching as the girl inspected a number of books, she turned back toward the front desk—but first, she motioned at the name tag she wore. “My name is Sadie. If you need help with anything else, just let me know!”

“OK, Sadie,” said the girl with a nod. “I will.”

Before Sadie had even returned to the circulation desk however, the girl had come racing back to her. Surprised to see the third-grader again so soon, she asked, “Did you find what you were looking for back there? Need some help checking out your books?”

The girl shook her head, hands in her pockets. “I need more help, Miss Sadie.”

Work at the circulation desk was piling up. The book return echoed with the sound of new deposits and the phone was ringing off the hook. Delores, the part-timer, was currently handling the calls, but if Sadie didn’t get around to re-shelving the returns she’d be stuck in the library till midnight. “What can I help you find this time?”

“I’m still looking for books about kitties,” replied the girl. Pointing to the *Animal* section, she added, “I didn’t really like any of those.”

“I see...” Craning her neck so that she could see across the library, Sadie snapped her fingers. “You know what, I bet you’ll like this. We have a magazine section over there, near the big window, and we get all kinds of animal magazines. There must be some featuring cats, too. Would you like to look with me?”

The girl bobbed her head in agreement and followed the librarian to the magazine displays. “Miss Sadie, do you like being a librarian?” she thought to ask as they walked across the room.

“I do,” was the librarian’s reply. “I love books. This is a perfect job for me, really.”

Lips pursed, the girl considered this a moment. Then, capitalizing on Sadie’s friendliness, she began firing off other questions. “How old are you, Miss Sadie?”

“Me?” Sadie laughed. “I’m twenty-five. How about you?”

“Nine-and-a-half.” Even as they arrived at the magazines, the chatty girl kept on. She was much more interested in asking the librarian prying questions than in looking at magazines. “Are you married?”

With an uncomfortable chuckle, Sadie shook her head and started scanning the shelves for anything with a cat on the cover. “Uh, nope.” Kids were like this sometimes. On a typical shift, she’d meet no fewer than a dozen children, and they often asked her the damndest questions. Sadie considered herself good with kids and always took it in stride, though this child struck her as one of the especially nosy ones.

“Do you have lots of friends?” was the girl’s follow-up.

Flustered now, Sadie leafed through a *National Geographic* and then thrust it back onto the display. “Er... Not really, I guess.” She pointed back to the computer section, where one of the other librarians, August, was helping someone use the printer. “Not unless you include that guy.”

“Oh,” said the girl, a sly smile sneaking across her lips. “So, he’s your *boyfriend*?”

“N-No,” corrected Sadie, her cheeks reddening. “He’s just a friend—a co-worker.”

Unsatisfied, the precocious girl continued her barrage of personal questions. “Well, if you don’t have any friends, then what do you do for fun? Just work all the time?”

The question, though innocently posed, had struck Sadie as brutal. She pretended not to hear it the first time, but when the girl repeated it—and dismissed a number of animal magazines out of hand—Sadie answered begrudgingly. “Well, I like to read...” She searched for something else to say—for some other hobby of hers that would impress the girl—but fell short.

“That sounds boring. And lonely. I hope I’m married by the time I’m *your* age.”

Sadie put on a tight smile. *Gee, thanks*, she thought.

The girl sighed, leaning against one of the shelves. “You don’t have the kind of kitty book I’m looking for, do you?”

Already frustrated with the girl, Sadie did a slow scan of the room and shrugged. “We looked at the animal section, the magazines... I don’t know if there’s anywhere else in the library where we might find books about cats. The science section might have something, but...” She combed a hand through her hair. “What do you want to know about cats anyway, sweetheart? That might help us narrow it down.”

The girl meditated on this earnestly, then replied, “I need a book that will tell me how to fix them.”

“How to... fix them?” Sadie shook her head. “Sorry, I don’t follow. What do you mean?”

“There’s this stray cat in my neighborhood,” began the girl. “It’s really cute. It has white and black fur. I want to let it inside, but my dad said I can’t have a cat unless it’s *fixed*.” She rolled her little eyes. “I told him the cat wasn’t broken but he just laughed at me.”

Sadie pressed a hand to her brow and forced back a grin. “Oh, is *that* it?” She pointed out August who was still idling around the printer. “You should have told me sooner; Mr

August over there knows *all* about that. You should talk to *him*.”

With that, the girl trotted off to bother the other librarian.

Sadie rushed back to the front desk and hid in the staff office—lest the girl think of another rude question to ask.

Delores finished up a phone call and swiveled in her chair to peek into the office. “Sadie, what’re you up to?”

“Me?” Sadie stationed herself before the coffee maker and prepped a fresh cup. “Just getting ready to check the book drop and questioning my life’s choices.”



SADIE YOUNG HAD BECOME a librarian for one reason and one reason only: So that she might be surrounded by books for eight to twelve hours a day.

The smell of books, the heft of good paper between her fingers, the pristine matte finish of a new paperback or the shine of a new dust jacket brought her greater joy than most anything else in the world. The awkward customer service interactions were a small price to pay to walk amidst the shelves all day, submerged in the pleasant business of sorting, selecting and sometimes even reading books.

The desire to become a librarian had been with her since childhood, and the libraries of her fantasies had been grandiose indeed. She’d often pictured herself working in immense buildings filled with spiral staircases and bookshelves that stretched high up into vaulted ceilings. She would have been at home at the Library of Congress, with its millions of books for companions. In quieter moments when her imagination got the better of her, she’d picture herself wandering the shadowed passages of the Great Library of Alexandria, perusing stacks of papyrus scrolls.

By comparison, the Montpelier Public Library was a shoe closet, but the one-story building—boasting a collection of some few thousand books—*did* possess a certain coziness. There was a spacious seating area at the library’s center, replete with a gurgling fountain. Computer workstations sat to

the right of this space, and except for the circulation desk and bathrooms that were positioned near the entrance, shoulder-high shelves of books filled out the remainder of the floor plan, seeming to close in on one. In the daylight hours a pleasant glow issued from the skylights overhead, and in the evening carefully-placed spotlights rendered the stacks in a golden glow.

To the rear of the circulation desk was the staff office. It was a small room, usually packed with carts of reserved books to the point of being unnavigable. Here, the librarians ate their lunches and sorted volumes for re-shelving. It was there, too, that the office coffee maker had been set up—a donation from a wealthy benefactor—and this fixture was one that Sadie had taken to using with frequency. With a fresh tea or coffee in hand and a book tucked under her arm, she felt at peace.

Emerging from just that room with a mug of earl grey, Sadie took a seat behind the circulation desk, chanced a sip—then thought better of it when the steam nipped at her nose—and waited for the clock to wind down. The hour was a stone’s throw from 9pm; closing time.

The few remaining idlers made their way to the book checkouts and scanned their items. A few last-minute deposits into the book drop echoed from the outside and the last manned computer station was abandoned by the glassy-eyed student who’d hunched over it for half the day. When she’d gathered up the handful of items in the book drop and scanned them back into the system, Sadie peeked at her watch. *9:01pm*.

“Oh, damn!” she blurted, shooting up from her seat.

The race was on.

She fished out the small ring of keys from her pocket and then bolted for the front door. Fiddling through them, she struck upon the entrance key—a knobby gold one—and jammed it into the slot. She pressed her tiny frame against the glass and tried to give the key a turn, but it wouldn’t go.

It’d already been locked.

Which meant someone—*he*—had gotten to it first.

From behind her there came the mocking jangle of keys on a ring. She turned and found August seated at the edge of the fountain with a toothy grin. “You’ve lost your edge, Sadie,” he said, giving the keys another jingle. “I got to it first. You know what that means.”

Sadie frowned, stuffing the keys back into her pocket. “I don’t know why I agree to your dumb bets.” She pointedly avoided eye contact with him as she returned to the desk.

August crossed his legs and dipped his finger into the fountain. He’d rolled up the sleeves of his white dress shirt and had taken off his bowtie. He always wore a bowtie to work—insisted it made him look more professional. Today’s had been red with white polka dots, and the ends of the thing dangled from his pocket as he rose from the fountain’s edge with a grunt. “Hey, a deal is a deal!”

Sadie approached the mug of tea, tested it with her tongue. Still too hot. Rolling her eyes, she swiveled in her chair and hoisted up a stack of recent returns. “Lunch is on *me* next time. Got it. But this is the last time. I’m calling off this bet moving forward. You’re going to bankrupt me.”

He leaned over the edge of the desk and sniffed at her tea. Then, patting his non-existent gut, he smirked. “Come on, I’m a growing boy. Don’t cut me off!” August was actually approaching thirty, but except for the carefully-shaped beard and mustache he wore, he did, in fact, look like a growing boy. Very thin—thinner even than the slight Sadie—and barely matching her five feet and seven inches, August appeared something like a perennial high schooler. His voice was smooth and pleasant enough, but it lacked depth, and in very warm or very cold weather—both of which were not unknown in Montpelier—his cheeks always radiated a cherubic warmth.

August’s attitude matched his boyish frame, too. Though a hard worker and favorite of the library patrons, he often grew bored at work, which left him to devise interesting scenarios with the intention of spicing up his shifts. His most recent plot, which he’d managed to rope Sadie into, was a simple betting scheme—the winner of which could demand a free lunch from the loser. The challenge was simple: The first one to lock the

front door on nights where the two of them were assigned to close the library was the winner. After a few weeks of intermittent competition however, Sadie had only managed to win once.

Sadie gathered up a load of books and held them out to him. “Here, get these put away. I just scanned them in.”

“*Yes, ma’am,*” replied August, his arms buckling feebly beneath their weight. Shuffling away from the counter, he dropped them onto a cart with a crash and then cruised into the network of shelves. As he began putting away the books, wandering further through the stacks, only the top of his head was visible. A shock of wispy reddish hair poked out from the uppermost edge of the shelving units like a rooster’s comb.

Finally free of him, Sadie reclined in her chair and took a swig of tea. When working this shift, she liked to take her time at the end. After all the books had been put away and the next day’s requests had been set out for patrons, she often enjoyed a leisurely walk through the place herself. An hour of reading by the fountain with a fresh cup of tea wasn’t uncommon either, and when that was done she’d put out the lights and exit through the side door. Tonight, though, she didn’t have the luxury of lingering. Her car—an old beater—had recently breathed its last and she’d taken to carpooling with August. And unlike her, he much preferred to get out of there as quickly as possible.

Sadie worked her way through the mug of tea and arranged piles of books by section and author name along the front counter. Mounting them onto a cart a few at a time, she returned them to their proper place before going back and repeating the process all over again. Though this work might have seemed monotonous for most people, she found it rather enjoyable. Looking through the different books that locals had checked out sometimes introduced her to new authors or subjects, and it wasn’t uncommon for her to turn around and check them out herself. Her apartment was presently cluttered with some fifty or more books from the library’s collection—and rare was the day that she didn’t bring along a few more in her purse.



August came back to the counter and loaded up his cart with a wavering tower of books, and narrowly avoided toppling it as he sped back to the shelves. Meanwhile, Sadie made the rounds, switching off each of the computer workstations and unplugging the fountain. Dimming the lights, she returned to the staff office and gave the coffee station a quick clean.

It was as she emerged from the back room and started shutting down her own computer that she felt it.

A chill accosted her neck. It was so sudden, so powerful a feeling that she threw her hand up and pawed at her nape. Glancing over her shoulder, she half-expected to find August looking at her—but in fact, he was still across the room, humming to himself, his reddish hair bobbing along the top of the shelves. She looked to the thermostat, wondering if she'd accidentally bumped into it and turned the air down, but the temperature remained steady and the vent above her didn't seem to be blowing any air just then.

When the feeling persisted, she did a slow pan of the room, squinting through the dimness and courting a peculiar tightness in her stomach. The feeling was easy enough to identify; she felt like she was being watched. But from where? And by whom? She looked across the fountain to the tall windows at the building's rear, but saw only the empty field that stretched beyond. Sadie then stepped out from behind the counter and surveyed the entrance, the hairs on her arms standing to attention.

The library was fronted by a large concrete patio. The space was well-lit and largely unadorned, boasting only a pair of benches and a flagpole, but as she looked out onto this scene she noticed a new addition. And a rather unwelcome one, at that.

A person was standing just outside the door—was leaning into it as if to peer through the glass at her. Obscured by the shade thrown from the awning overhead, it was hard to describe the loiterer's appearance with any real thoroughness. They looked to be more than six feet tall, but little else could be glimpsed—

No, that wasn't all.

The *eyes*.

Like white headlights breaking out across a dark stretch of highway, the visitor's eyes were fixed in a wide, blank stare the color of milk. Without the fountain gurgling to her back, the sounds of the outdoors could be faintly heard now, and in her study of those chalk-colored, featureless orbs she heard a swell of nocturnal chittering as though the night insects were pleading with her to look away.

The person outside the door began to beckon. A malformed hand, hitherto limp at the figure's side, rose in a lolling wave.

At this, a scream unexpectedly raced up her throat, and it was only by claspng a hand over her mouth that she forced it back. Sadie promptly turned, steadied herself against the counter, and in so doing accidentally knocked her cup of tea to the ground. The mug gave with a crash and the liquid soaked into the carpet.

Returning to the desk with an empty cart, August eyed the mess on the floor and whistled. "Man, we're just about to clock out and you have to make another mess?" He paused, waiting for Sadie to reply. She didn't, though—not at once. She stood there, pale, her mousy face twisted like she'd just sucked on a lemon. "Hey," he continued, kneeling to pick up a few ceramic shards, "don't worry about it. We can throw a rug over it, no one will know."

With a shudder, Sadie stepped past him, then cast a finger back toward the door. "T-There's someone out there, looking in through the door." She leaned against the counter, feeling suddenly woozy. "Please tell them to leave."

August stood up, brows arched. "Oh, a last-minute visitor?" He started for the door. "I'll handle it."

Latecomers to the library were nothing new. Often when working the closing shift, Sadie had had to turn away patrons after hours. Something was different this time, however. Something about this person made her ill at ease. No, it was

more than that—her reaction to this individual had been visceral. Even though she was standing away from the door, out of the visitor’s view, she could still feel those chalk-colored eyes on her.

“Er, which door, Sadie?” asked August from the front.

“Main one.”

There was a pause. “Uh...” August surveyed the entryway, hands on hips. “You sure?”

Annoyance broke through the icy fear that’d taken root in her stomach. “Of course I’m sure!” She turned, joined him at the front door, moved to point at it—

And then she stopped in her tracks.

There was no one there.

“Huh.” August shrugged. “Maybe they got the message and turned around. We do have the hours printed in the window. Maybe he was just trying to get a look at those, eh?”

Sadie’s mouth was dry. She nodded but didn’t say anything, instead stooping to pick up the remaining pieces of the mug. *It’s been a long day; your eyes are playing tricks on you.* She took repeated glances at the main door and sought to assuage her inflamed nerves. *It was just someone coming by to check the hours, like August said. There’s no way it was—*

She put it out of her mind as best she could and finished cleaning up the mess on the floor. Thankfully, the tea stain wasn’t too noticeable on the dark carpet. She dabbed at it with a handful of napkins and left it to dry. When that was through, she took one last look at all of the staff computers, made sure they were shut down, and grabbed her purse. She joined August at the side door, and while waiting for him to put out the rest of the lights, she looked through the windows at the lonesome parking lot, at the nearby sidewalks. There was no one in view.

“Ready?” August shoved open the door and waved her out. When she’d finally exited—nervously, like a prey animal venturing out of its den—he locked up and led her across the lot to his Honda, whistling a jaunty tune. “Man, it’s good to be

out of there. I'm gonna get something to eat and spend a little quality time with my Xbox. What about you? Any plans?"

Even after she'd climbed into the passenger side and put on her seatbelt, Sadie never stopped scanning the parking lot. She looked from one side to the next, up and down the property, like her head was on a swivel. "Some dinner, I guess," she responded. "Might read something."

August started the engine and wheeled out of the lot. Tinkering with the radio, he settled on the oldies station and bobbed his head in time with some Beach Boys track. "Sounds like a *wild* night," he said with a chuckle. Hanging a left out of the library, he darted down Whitmer Street, only to mash the brake at the next intersection. "Oops," he said, putting on his headlights, "I need to be more careful here. This is where that guy got hit last week—you hear about that?"

Sadie leaned back in her seat. "No, what happened?"

"Some poor guy was trying to cross here. It was dark. I don't know if he lost his balance or didn't see it, but he stepped off the curb and got clipped by a bus. Probably died before he knew what hit him. At least, I hope so."

A shiver coursed through her and her stomach was wrenched into a familiar knot. "Someone died *here*?" She turned and looked out the rear window. The library was still in view.

"Yeah. Pretty nasty. Surprised you didn't hear about it." Not catching her discomfort, August cranked up the volume and sang along with the last bit of "California Girls".

The rest of the car ride was mostly silent, except for August's obnoxious vocals. He belted his way through a David Bowie song and half of "Bohemian Rhapsody" before they finally entered Sadie's apartment complex.

When he'd pulled up to her place, she jumped out at once, thanking him hastily. "Appreciate the ride, August." *Though I could do with less karaoke*, she thought.

"Anytime!" Waving at her, he pulled out of the spot and whipped out of view.

Sadie hurried inside like she was allergic to the night. She burst in through the main door and stomped her way up to the second-floor landing. Rushing into her apartment, she made sure to lock the door and draw the curtains before doing anything else, and even then, she still felt attacked, pursued.

*Who was that outside the library tonight? Could it really have been...* All told, she'd only glimpsed into those blank eyes for a few moments, but something probing in that stare had left her shaken. She kept trying to rationalize it—half-convinced herself that it'd been a homeless person or night jogger.

*Who else could it have been?* she thought. *A ghost?*

The mere asking of the question only soured her mood further.

She wanted to laugh, to put it out of her mind completely. She would have liked to say, “Nonsense, there’s no such thing as ghosts!”

But then, knowing what *she* knew, she would have felt like a liar.

The night wore on. Sadie choked down a quick meal and tried to make progress on any of the dozens of books she was reading, but it was only the next morning, after fitful sleep, that she managed to relax.

The knock came softly at her door. It was her mother again. “Ophelia, sweetie...” A pause. “Can I bring you anything?”

Drawing her knees closer to her breast, Ophelia managed only a strangled, “I’m *fine*.” Clawing up the blankets around her, she sank into the bed and shuddered. It was late in the morning now, though the room was so dim it might as well have been midnight. Upon returning home the night before, she’d drawn the blinds and curtains in her window dazedly, and had even torn apart a few shoeboxes and magazines, pasting the resulting shreds to the glass to further obscure the view. Not that it was the *light* she was aiming to keep out...

Her mother sighed outside the door, placed a palm against it. “Sweetheart, what’s going on? You haven’t been out of your room since you came home. Did something happen last night?”

Ophelia took up handfuls of her black hair and sank deeper into the covers. “Nothing happened, I’m *fine*,” she insisted. Her lips were dry and her tongue felt on the verge of crumbling. She hadn’t been out of her room all night, it was true; not for a glass of water, a snack or even a bathroom break. The four walls of her bedroom seemed about as much as she could reasonably survey at that moment, and the prospect of venturing out into the rest of the house brought with it a fear that something might slip into this dim little sanctum of hers while she wasn’t looking. The only safety she recognized at that moment was in isolation.

“All right.” Her mother turned to walk back down the hall. “Let me know if you need anything.” Softly, her footfalls retreated back downstairs.

She was free now to cower in her bed, to stew in the almost perfect quiet. Silence was a welcome commodity; so long as it reigned without interruption she could be sure of her solitude—could be sure that nothing was slipping past her distracted ears.

Wreathed in blankets, she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, hands locked around her knees. Dark shapes paraded behind her eyelids—empty, transient things—but it took only an instant’s focus on any one of them for her fevered imagination to lend it something of the horrible and familiar. Memories of the night before dropped in suddenly, vividly, and the dread they stirred in her never lessened.

Her mind was haunted by dark doorways, by black halls and staircases and the things that skulked through them unseen in the small hours. Now and then, an innocent itch on her clammy skin would feel almost like the wriggling of a maggot and she’d fly into hysterics anew, scratching at herself and casting the blankets aside in search of a pest that wasn’t there.

The shape and mood of the house on Beacon Hill remained firm in her mind, but the actual events of the night prior felt as ill-defined to her as a nightmare in flight. She remembered entering the house with the others, getting separated from them. She remembered, too, the wax and wane of hope as she’d wandered blindly through its pitch-black halls for an exit. And there had been that last room...

Whatever relief she might have felt at discovering that empty, moonlit room had evaporated the very moment she’d looked into the tarnished mirror that’d hung upon its walls. She should have leapt from the broken window into the field outside at the first opportunity, should not have paused to take in what had, at first glance, seemed to be unthreatening surroundings.

But she had, and the mirror had shown her the true shape of things. That odious resident of the house had been dwelling

behind her all the while—had probably followed her down every shadowed corridor and into that remote chamber from which she eventually made her escape. It'd been her screams at sighting the monstrous thing that'd alerted Joey and Leslie—and with no little effort the alarmed pair had reached in and pulled her outside through the broken window.

Neither Joey nor Leslie had seen the hideous face in the mirror, but if Ophelia closed her eyes and let her thoughts drift, the roiling lines of that devilish countenance would return to her at once. She couldn't forget it—and it was the reemergence of that face in her mind that continually scared off sleep whenever it threatened to overtake her. Even now, in her quiet room, she felt that the specter of Mother Maggot was close; that, no matter how far she'd run from Beacon Hill, the phantom was not far behind. Aside from blacking out the window, the other thing Ophelia had done upon arriving in her room had been to cover the mirror. She'd tossed a blanket over it—had even turned it so that it faced the wall—lest her wandering eye find something glaring at her from within it.

She tensed as her phone buzzed. The screen lit up, casting a bluish glow about the bed. A text from Leslie. It wasn't the first—both she and Joey had tried to reach her a few times since they'd dropped her off.

*Are you sure you're OK?* this one read.

Ophelia saw no reason to respond. All the messages she'd received were variations on same. *How are you holding up? Is everything OK? Feeling better now?*

Joey and Leslie had pulled her from the house and walked her all the way across the moonlit field to the car; Ophelia remembered that part clearly. And she could remember, too, that the pair had tried to calm her down, and to figure out what had her so worked up. Ophelia had exited the house a stammering, white-faced mess—the best she'd been able to do from the back seat of Joey's car between screams and groans had been, *"It was her. Mother Maggot."*

Naturally, the other two hadn't believed her. Despite having run from the dark old house in a panic, they hadn't



actually seen anything and in retrospect were willing to write off their experiences as commonplace. “I *thought* I heard someone on the steps, but it was probably just the floors buckling,” Joey had said on the car ride back. “It’s possible that there was someone squatting there, too. That’s probably what you saw—a homeless person or something.” Earlier, when they’d first approached the house, he’d insisted on the veracity of the Mother Maggot legend; later, with Ophelia gibbering and sobbing in his rearview mirror, he’d sought to distance himself from such tales and to become a voice of reason.

Upon arriving home, Leslie had helped her out of the car and followed her up to the front door. “Are you going to be OK?” she’d asked.

Without a word, Ophelia had slipped inside. She’d thrown all the locks, and in the resulting commotion of her mad dash upstairs, awakened her mother. She hadn’t left her room since.

She stared down at the phone now, the battery icon in the corner reduced to a sliver of red. Her mouth ached for a drink of water. Squeezing the phone in hand, she emerged from the nest of blankets and moved to the edge of the bed. She wanted to leave her room—or, at least, to quench her thirst and retrieve the phone charger she’d left on the kitchen counter—but wasn’t sure she had the nerve.

Ophelia stood and was shocked at her wooziness. Her legs could hardly bear her weight. Steadying herself against a shelf, she made a slow walk to the door, wiping the hair and sweat from her face. Once she’d made it to the door, she listened for awhile, wondering what she’d find in the hall if she dared open it. The silence outside was weighty.

Drawing in a ragged breath, she placed her hand upon the door handle and toyed with the lock. *Just a quick trip to the kitchen... to the bathroom. It won’t hurt anything.* The lock popped and she gave the handle a half-turn. *What you saw in that house was real... and terrible... but this is your house. You’re safe here.* Surveying the dim room to her back, she nodded as if to reassure herself. *You haven’t seen anything all night. It’s safe. And it’s day-time, too. Even if something had*

*followed you back from Beacon Hill, it wouldn't show itself during the day, right?*

Overriding her fear, Ophelia wrenched the door open.

Sunlight turned up in abundance through all of the upper story windows. The air in the hall proved cooler, less stagnant. Her lungs drank it in as she took her first step out of the room. She looked to the right, toward the bathroom. Then, craning her neck, she peered to the left, which led downstairs. Both ways were clear. Bolstered by this, Ophelia crept into the bathroom.

She set about her business and then scrubbed at her face with a damp washcloth. As she did so, her eyes naturally moved across the sink, and, however fearfully, she couldn't help but glance at her reflection in the bathroom mirror as she dried off. The only thing waiting for her was her own face, however—there were no leering phantoms there, no monstrous spectators.

Emboldened further, she made her way to the stairs. Descending them gingerly, she found her mother in the living room, watching the news, and then segued into the kitchen, where she snatched up her phone charger and plucked two water bottles from the fridge. After downing one of them in a single gulp, she turned her attention to the cabinets, raiding them for whatever snacks she could find. With an armful of food and water—and a good deal more courage—she set off for her room again.

These small interventions had made all the difference. She had a clearer head now, was beginning to consider things in a different light. She'd had a terrible fright in that nasty old house, it was true, but whatever had so terrified her was still there, and she was home. The raw fear, the vulnerability, was all a memory; it would fade. In time she might even manage more reasonable explanations for what she'd seen and felt there—maybe, she'd even laugh about it one day.

Hiking up the stairs and careful not to drop her bounty of snacks, she thumbed on her phone and began to reply to

Leslie's latest text. She rapped out a quick message—*I'm fine*—but neglected to hit SEND.

She'd reached the top of the stairs, had started down the hall toward her room, but something in her periphery had incited her to halt. Only moments ago, the hall had been brightly lit, but for the sudden slide of the sun behind a wall of clouds the daylight had much diminished and the corridor was lined now in a temporary veil of shadow.

And in that shadow, something had stirred.

Ophelia flinched, gripped her phone. She didn't look up at once, but intuition told her that something—or someone, more likely—dwelt on the opposite end of the hall, near the bathroom. The air, previously so cool and breathable, became thick with expectation as she hesitated. Prudence dictated a retreat; she would have gone back downstairs if only she could have remembered how to use her wobbly legs. Instead, she stood anchored there, growing more aware of the looming presence with every passing moment. Her throat tightened, her joints became locked and fixed in preparation of a terrible jolt.

*Is... is it...*

She sucked in a deep breath.

*It can't be...*

Her watery eyes were cast upward in surveyance of the hall.

A face turned to meet hers from the black rectangle of doorway—a face that should have been resigned to that hellish, mouldering remnant on Beacon Hill.

The ragged edges of its drooping, worm-eaten visage were drawn up into a miserable facsimile of a smile, and from every pore there wriggled a commotion of insectival salutation. No voice issued from that odious maw; none was necessary to convey the meaning behind its expression. The lurker at the end of the hall meant to communicate one thing and one thing only with its pustulent gaze.

*I'm here.*

Ordinarily, Sadie enjoyed leading the children's story hour on Tuesday nights. From 7:00 to 7:30pm, a librarian would meet children in the kid's section of the library and read them a number of popular picture books. The weekly program was a hit with local parents, who used the half-hour block to peruse the stacks on their own or to wait in their cars, enjoying the brief respite. The children weren't always well-behaved, of course, but Sadie thought herself better than most of the library staff at controlling them. Even when things got out of hand, the parents would always show up at half-past seven to scoop up their kids and she'd take a few minutes to straighten up the books and play tables, no worse for wear.

That was how story hour was *supposed* to go, anyhow.

On this particular evening, the children had complained and frolicked through all three of her picture book choices. One girl, roughly kindergarten-aged, had clocked another child on the head with a block from the building table; another, despite repeated warnings, had loitered around the library fish tank and accosted its resident angelfish, Alphonse, with loud taps. The fish was left darting from corner to corner of the small tank, but no matter where it fled, the boy was always waiting to knock on the glass. Lastly, there'd been a puker in this particular bunch. Sadie's reading of *The House of Long Whiskers* had been interrupted by a fit of gagging and retching. She'd had to break out the wet floor signs and mop, and even after several minutes of intense scrubbing it seemed doubtful

that the paste of gummy worms and cheese crackers would ever be lifted from the carpet fibers.

The kids had largely dispersed by 7:45, and by 8:00 Sadie was getting ready for the final phase of her shift. August was working, too—and his trips to and from the kids section to re-shelve the scattered picture books were punctuated by wry grins and comments like, “What’s that smell over there, near the kids books? It’s kinda making me hungry.”

The day had proven abnormally busy; seemingly everyone in Montpelier had collectively decided to visit their library that day and the steady flow of patron requests—not to mention phone calls, bathroom checks and computer issues—had seen both Sadie and August go without a lunch break.

Hurrying through their duties, the librarians planned to lock up at nine sharp and to head to a local restaurant for a late dinner. August had helpfully reminded her about the previous shift’s bet—she still owed him a meal—and suggested they go to a fried chicken joint called Colonel Cluck’s just down the road when work was done. “It’s a nice place, affordable, and they have this cutesy southern thing going on with the décor. They don’t play anything but Patsy Cline and Hank Williams on the radio, too. Nothing aids my digestion like the comely whine of pedal steel guitar.”

Not having eaten since leaving her apartment that morning, Sadie was hungry enough to dine just about anywhere. “Fine. But it better be cheap.”

Fixing herself a small coffee and dumping several creamer packets into it to blunt her hunger, she stationed herself behind the front desk and tried her best to maintain an agreeable expression whenever patrons walked up with questions or concerns. She guzzled the coffee while troubleshooting the third photocopier jam of the day. An elderly man solicited her help in logging into a computer, only to attempt to access certain lewd sites that the library network blocked by default, and she’d struggled to keep a straight face while explaining to him the reasons why such content was blocked.

August took a few moments to drop a small pinch of fish flakes into Alphonse's tank and fielded his dozenth compliment from an old woman on the print of his bowtie. It was perhaps his tackiest one yet, boasting an explosion of lime green shamrocks. Finally, when the clock was closing in on nine and the library had mostly emptied, he pulled the cord on the fountain and began dimming the lights. The remaining patrons got the hint and filed out shortly thereafter.

They broke protocol, locking the main entrance at 8:55, after the last patron had checked out their materials, and then divided the stacks of remaining returns for re-shelving. Sadie cleared out the book drop and scanned a bunch of DVDs back into the system, then carried them by the armful to the movie section, where she placed them with spacy, hypoglycemic inaccuracy. Banging into desks and chairs with his cart, August sprinted from one corner of the building to the next until his cheeks were red and he'd finally gotten through all of the returns.

Putting out the lights, the duo was all set to leave by 9:30. The director, Marsha, would be in the next morning, and it was possible she'd have some complaints about the state of the place. During a recent staff meeting, she'd urged closers to vacuum the floors, sanitize the desks, computers and children's toys, empty the waste bins and clean the bathrooms and staff offices. August summed it up well as he fished out his keys and led the way to the side door. "Don't worry about it. If Marsha bitches, I'll take the blame. I'll lie and say I did a bad job because I was sick—that *I* was the one who barfed on the floor back there."

Sadie's stomach groaned without surcease as they stepped outside into the humid evening. The sun had fallen out of the sky and clouds were gathering in ashy clumps, promising rain. Clutching at her stomach, she followed August to his car, taking a casual glance up and down the empty lot.

Or, *almost* empty lot.

Across the way, near the flagpole out front, stood a lone individual.

Suddenly, the gnawing hunger in her gut was chased away by pangs of fear. She stumbled and gave August's shirt sleeve a rough tug. "H-Hey, there's someone there." Memories of the eerie visitor at the tail end of her last shift—coupled with August's claims that someone had recently been killed in the vicinity—had largely fallen into the background of her mind. Now, they resurfaced with a vengeance.

August shrugged. "They're probably just putting something in the book drop. Or else they got here too late—didn't know we closed at nine." He unlocked the car and threw open his door.

Sadie hesitated on the blacktop, though. Staring at the figure in the distance, she saw this one didn't look quite the same as the last—in fact, this one didn't strike her as eerie or suspicious in the least. From the sparse light coming down from the nearest streetlight, Sadie thought she could make out long, brownish hair; a pair of jeans and a light-colored T-shirt. Filled with relief at having sighted what appeared to be a normal person, rather than some nebulous phantom, she started back across the lot. "Just a second, August."

The woman out front—yes, she could see that it certainly *was* a woman now—offered a shy wave.

"Sorry," said Sadie, closing the gap, "can I help you with something? We actually just closed up at nine. Sorry for any inconvenience. We open again at nine in the morning, though."

"Oh," said the woman, nodding. She ran a hand through her brown hair—streaked in faint silver—and presented an embarrassed smile. "Guess I didn't make it in time tonight." She cleared her throat, taking another step toward Sadie and then stopping. A curious look came over the woman's face. She was fairly tall and thin, somewhere on the latter edge of middle-age, and her features were pressed just then into something like confusion. "I, uh.. I wasn't actually coming to *use* the library. It's just, I needed to speak to someone."

Sadie had been preparing to head back to the car, but stopped short. "Sorry, you needed to speak to someone about...?"

The woman took another step, her eyes firming up into a penetrating and enigmatic stare. Then, they widened. The beginnings of a smile flashed across her narrow lips but it never fully took root. “It’s... it’s *you*, isn’t it?” When Sadie didn’t reply, the woman took yet another step, nodding firmly. “Yes, it is! Sadie Young?”

Sadie flinched at the mention of her name. “Er... yes?” Smiling confusedly, she glanced back at the car. August hadn’t moved yet, was probably toying with the radio. “Sorry, do I know you?”

With a great sigh of relief, the woman came within arm’s reach and chuckled. “Well, it’s been quite a few years, but I’d say that you *did* know me, once. Must be seven or eight years since we last met?”

Sadie studied the woman’s face awhile in the low light, tried to place it in her memory. There was *something* familiar about it, but try as she might she couldn’t summon a name, and at the risk of staring at the woman awkwardly for an extended period, she finally said, “I don’t recall...”

The woman held out a hand to shake—then, thinking better of it, withdrew it and seemed to prepare for a hug instead. “It’s Rosie. Remember? Your old neighbor? I used to live in the house next to your grandparents?”

“Rosie?” The name clicked, and Sadie was thrust headlong into memories of her youth. Summers long-passed, spent running through her grandparents’ yard with other neighborhood kids. The face before her had been a little younger then, but that it was a part of that same idyllic world there could be no mistake. Donning a huge smile, Sadie leaned in for the offered hug. “Of course! How could I forget. Sorry—it’s been a long day, and... It’s been years!”

Rosie pulled away slightly and made no secret of looking Sadie up and down, shaking her head all the while. “I can’t believe how you’ve grown! When you first moved in with your grandparents you were so young. You’ve become such a beautiful woman.”



Cheeks flushing, Sadie waved off the compliment with a laugh. “It really has been awhile. Those days, in the old neighborhood—they feel like they were so long ago! And yet, if I close my eyes and think about it, it’s like I never really left. Speaking of beautiful women, your daughter must be—what—a high-schooler now? Fifteen? Sixteen? When I left for school she was still just a kid, but I’ll bet she’s shot up like a weed! How is she these days?”

The mirth on Rosie’s face fell away with unexpected swiftness. Beneath the smile she’d only just worn there was haggardness. Her eyes widened, and Sadie saw now that they were the reddish eyes of a woman who’d known neither sleep nor respite from tears in a long while. The lines around her mouth deepened in a sullen frown that was becoming an imprinted habit, and her brow grew knotted.

Noting the change, Sadie realized she may have just touched upon something she shouldn’t have—that she’d struck a raw nerve—but before she could back-peddle, Rosie’s expression softened somewhat as if to dissuade her.

“As it so happens,” began Rosie, “Ophelia isn’t doing all that well.” She looked up into the dark sky—less because she was interested in anything up there and more because she wished to siphon the tears forming in the corners of her eyes back from whence they’d come. “Things have been difficult lately, and uh... Well, it’s hard to explain.” She cleared her throat, her lips quirking in a pained half-smile. “Actually, that’s kind of what this is about. I was...” She stopped again. “I’m very sorry to turn up like this—and especially as you’re getting off work—but I wasn’t sure who else to turn to.”

Sadie nodded slowly, but said, “I’m... not following. You need *my* help with something? Something... that has to do with your daughter?”

“That’s right.” Rosie looked to the idling sedan across the lot, then back to Sadie. “Do you have some time to talk, by chance?”

“Uh... sure, I guess. But what’s this about?”

Rosie's eyes narrowed. "Do you remember back when you first moved in with your grandparents?" She didn't let the question hang in the air—she followed it up right away with another. "Do you remember the things—the *spirits*—you used to see?"

Up to this point, Sadie had been listening closely, and with every intention of assisting this old acquaintance. Now, she visibly bristled. She took a step back as if to distance herself from the very suggestion behind that question. "W-What's *that* have to do with Ophelia?"

Wringing her hands at her waist, Rosie sniffed back a sob. "*You*... you were, uh... a special girl. I remember it well. You could see things—tune into things—that the rest of us couldn't. And, well, the problems that my daughter is having... The medicines, the therapy... they don't seem to be helping. I don't think it's a medical problem, in fact..." She bit her lip, but then blurted out, "I think something has its claws in my daughter. Something like *that*." Head lowering as if in a bow, the woman pleaded through a wail. "I *need* your help, Sadie."

The world began to spin around her and her mouth swelled with saliva as though she might vomit. She hadn't even heard the details yet and already Sadie wanted to run, full-tilt, away from this woman.

**T**he psychologist was a nice man with a lengthy Indian surname, and he'd been seated patiently in the corner of her room for more than twenty minutes now, waiting for her to answer the questions he'd so gently posed. Scratching at his grey, thinning hair, he'd tried breaking the ice a few times with small-talk. "How do you like the food?" he'd asked at one junction. "Is the bed comfortable? I had my gall bladder out last year and could hardly sleep during my stay in the post-surgical ward upstairs!"

Ophelia had mustered weak answers to these queries. *No*, she hadn't much enjoyed the meals served at the Montpelier General Psychiatric Ward. *No*, the bed she was confined to for much of the day was *not* particularly comfortable.

Eventually, the doctor had yanked the pen from the breast pocket of his jacket and put on his reading glasses—a cue that he was moving to more serious topics. Signaling at the inside of his right wrist, he nodded to her. "Tell me about that."

Ophelia's blank gaze drooped down to her lap, where her hands sat in a limp heap. Both wrists had been bandaged—the right one a good deal more than the left. She stroked the mess of tape and gauze with a few fingers and offered a weak shake of the head. The nurse in the emergency room had done a nice job with the dressings; her arms looked like handsomely-prepared parcels, except that the tape and such had been set down to bind the seams of her severed skin rather than those of an envelope.

The doctor, sensing her hesitance, peered across the room with a warm smile and studied the small window near her bed. “If you aren’t ready to talk, I understand. I’m doing my rounds till five tonight; I can come back.”

The moan of an old cart wheeling through the hall outside rang out as a shift nurse buzzed from room to room, distributing afternoon meds. Today’s nurse down this wing was Karen—a butch middle-aged woman, kind and accommodating enough. She’d talked about her dogs—three rescued greyhounds—the last time she’d come in with a little plastic cup of pills that, in her words, would “take the edge off” for Ophelia.

The pills flowed in constantly, and it was true enough that they left her feeling subdued and hazy. She hadn’t gone off the rails since her admission two days previous, and someone had always been by with another foul-tasting tablet whenever her mind got around to recalling just what had sent her into a suicidal fury to begin with.

Karen’s shadow passing by the doorway looked all wrong. It splashed across the polished tile floors like motor oil, then ran up one of the walls as if slapped on by a brush. Ophelia shook her head, raked her fingers through her black tangles. The daylight warmed her bed and cast her blanketed form in brightness; it highlighted, too, her uncommon paleness. She stared detachedly at her hands and gave each finger a little wiggle. They looked like those of a porcelain doll.

The physician crossed his legs and decided to change tack, sliding the reading glasses further up the bridge of his long nose. “I was talking to your mother earlier,” he began. “She mentioned a few things... You weren’t acting like yourself before this happened, were you?”

Ophelia flinched at the mention of her mother. Even through the haze of anti-psychotics, the memory of her suicide attempt—and her mother’s reaction—remained uncomfortably clear. “W-What *about* my mother?”

Clicking his pen a few times, the doctor made some tentative marks on his notepad. “She said she found you in the

kitchen, is that right?”

She winced without meaning to.

“And that you’d tried to hide in the cabinet under the sink?” The doctor glanced up at her—noted her discomfort—and then looked back down. “She told me you used a steak knife.”

She instinctively grabbed up the edges of her blanket. It was imperative at that moment that she have something to hold onto—something to wring in her hands. As she did so, a light pain flared up in both her wrists, only igniting the specter of memory further. “Actually,” she said in a hollow voice, barely her own, “it was a paring knife.”

The old doctor’s brows arched for an instant. “*Paring* knife,” he noted with a tap of his pen. “Anyhow, she mentioned that you’d been acting very... well, her word was ‘standoffish’... prior to your attempt. We don’t have to talk about it *now*, but I’d very much like to hear about the night preceding all of this. Were you planning to harm yourself? Why?” He adjusted his glasses. “Boy troubles, problems with a friend?”

She had to turn and stare out the sunlit window to keep herself from hyperventilating. If she closed her eyes and focused too hard on the darkness behind her lids she was prone to fixate on the shape of that dim, old house on Beacon Hill. She’d recall its yawning entrance, its pitch-black depths. And then... there was the house’s sole tenant...

“I went out with some friends,” she began, licking her lips compulsively.

The doctor nodded. “What friends?”

“Leslie and Joey, from school.”

Jotting these details furiously, the physician invited her to go on with a prolonged, “*Mmhmmm?*”

“We went... we went somewhere we weren’t supposed to go.” Ophelia hesitated, teeth grit. “We went to an abandoned house—the house on Beacon Hill.” Her heart started up violently. Talking about her visit to the house made it more

real. It wasn't simply an abstraction anymore—it had weight behind it. A fresh panic gnawed at her nerves. “It's a very old house... Leslie was the one who brought it up, said we should go. She thought it might be fun to poke around. I thought so, too. That is, until we got there...”

The doctor didn't much react to this. If he knew the place, he said nothing. Instead, he waited for her to go on.

“We went inside, all three of us...” She took to licking her lips again, and she could taste their growing rawness. “I didn't want to, but Joey insisted. And Leslie went with him. They dragged me in and we wandered in the dark.”

“And what happened in this house?”

Ophelia fixed her gaze through the window at the world below. “We heard something—someone. And then we got separated.” She shook her head. “Well, they ran away, the two of them. And I got lost. I tried to follow them, but they left me. I had to walk through the dark to find a way out. I did, eventually, but before I left I saw...”

“Yes?” The doctor waited, pen poised to write.

Her courage ebbed away and she found herself incapable of uttering the name on her tongue. Instead, she leaned against the wall and asked a question of her own. “Do... do you believe in ghosts, doctor?”

“Ghosts?” The physician tapped at his chin. “I don't know. It's a wide, wide world, however. Who's to say? The important thing is whether or not *you* believe in ghosts, Ophelia. Do you? Is that what you saw in the house—a ghost?”

The girl weighed the question carefully, drawing her knees up to her chest. She tugged down the hem of her hospital gown and cradled herself in her arms. “I didn't used to,” she said finally. “But *she* made me believe. And more than believe...”

“Who did?” asked the doctor, referencing his notes. “Leslie? Your mother?”

Ophelia shook her head. Her eyes were drawn to the door, where a powdery black shadow had suddenly sprung up. She watched it pass across the far wall, watched it settle on the

floor just behind the doctor's chair where it lingered like a housefly in wait. The silhouette telegraphed a silent liveliness, grew bolder in color, and finally gave way to its maker.

Nurse Karen rolled her cart into the room with a grating whine. "Howdy, miss Ophelia," she said, staring down at a binder. Before she even looked up to the patient, or to the doctor sitting mere feet from the cart, she counted out a number of pills in a plastic cup and then made a series of tally marks on a printed form.

The doctor stood, made his way to the door. "We'll continue this chat later, all right?" Nodding at the nurse, he removed his glasses, pocketed his pen and stuck the notepad under his arm, sidestepping into the hall.

Karen brought over the afternoon's meds, setting them down alongside a fresh cup of ice water. "How are things today?"

Thankful for the pills—for their dulling effect on both her mood and memory—she reached out and took the cup, giving it a shake and sizing up the contents.

The pills didn't rattle like they usually did, though.

They *squirmed*.

The plastic cup contained a trio of white maggots, plump and energetic, each striving in their own direction to spring out of the vessel. Her grip on the thing loosened; the cup fell out of her grasp and landed on the bed, the contents making a mad dash across the bed linens as she snapped to attention with a yelp.

Karen intervened with a chuckle. "Oops, ya dropped 'em." Gathering up the pills, she siphoned them back into the cup and then held out the ice water. "Just three for now. These should keep you nice and relaxed."

This time, the cup *did* contain only pills; two circular white ones and a bluish gel cap. Snatching them up, she popped them into her mouth and took a swig of ice water. "T-Thanks," she managed, rolling onto her side and pulling the blankets up to her shoulder.

“Sure thing. Let me know if you need anything else.” The noisy cart was wheeled out of the room and continued its ruckus down the hall.

*You just need to sleep. Stay close to the light, close your eyes and try to sleep. She won't be able to get you that way.* Letting a long-held breath out slowly, Ophelia shut her eyes and buried her face in the lumpy, sterile pillow.

It was hard to sleep in the hospital. The meds went some distance in making it easier, but the stiff mattress, the scratchy bedclothes and the constant chatter outside her door made it difficult to relax. Added to the list of discomforts was the itching of her wrists as the wounds she'd inflicted began to heal. She wanted desperately to peel away the bandages and give the mending skin a good scratch—just hard enough to stop the itching. It was all she could do to ignore it, to focus on other things until the sensation faded.

But right then, she couldn't seem to ignore it. For some reason, it persisted, waxed harder than ever before. Ophelia gripped at her right wrist, squeezed the wounded flesh as tightly as she could to try and quiet the itch. Her left hand was locked so tightly around her wrist that the thump of her pulse could be felt through the sleeve of gauze. The pump and toil of her knitting vessels registered clearly against her palm.

The longer she regarded this stirring in her wrist, the less sure she became that it was her pulse, however.

Ophelia sat up in bed and raised her arm out in front of her, looking over the bandaged portion. She stared at it a long while in the brilliant sunlight, counted the furtive shifts of the bandage and wondered if they were truly keeping time with her heart rate.

Here, the bandage creased in a strange way as though something had just moved beneath it; there, the tape seemed to loosen for the wriggling of something barely contained. The whitish gauze began to roil vigorously. The itch intensified into something more maddening—the sensation that something was presently sandwiched between her flesh and the bandage and trying desperately to break free. She



scratched angrily at the gauze, but succeeded only in whipping the things writhing beneath into a frenzy.

*There are no maggots under the bandages. There are no maggots. You're imagining it. She just wants you to hurt yourself again.*

She repeated the mantra again and again, but still she longed to rip the dressings off and expose her slashed wrists. Even if she had, she knew it wouldn't be enough; that was what ultimately stayed her hand. If she removed the bandages, she'd come to feel that same stirring beneath the stitches, would feel compelled to rip her itching wrists open anew to ensure the invaders hadn't taken hold there. Rolling over, she put the blankets over top of her head and focused on her breathing.

For the moment, the pills in her stomach would help keep her from dwelling on Mother Maggot.

But only for the moment.

“DOCTOR, how is she? Did she say anything?” Rosie stood to meet him as he marched past the nurse's station.

The psychiatrist smiled warmly, offered his hand to shake and motioned to a seating area just outside the station. Leafing through his notes, he plopped down into an empty plush chair and toyed with the top button of his jacket. “I did speak to her for awhile today, but I'm afraid she wasn't feeling very talkative.”

“I see...” Rosie sank into the chair opposite his, hands clasped at her waist.

“But she did say something interesting.” The doctor referenced his notes and stirred the air with a single finger. “She went to some house in the area. ‘Beacon Hill’, she said. Do you know it?”

“Beacon Hill?” she echoed. “Yes, I know of it. I mean, I've never been to the house myself, but...” Rosie's eyes narrowed in incredulity. “What does that have to do with this? She *went*

to that house? If so, she didn't say anything to me about it. What was she doing there? Did something happen?"

The doctor crossed his arms, cocked his head to the side. "Well, she wasn't particularly forthcoming in that department, but she did say something I thought strange. She mentioned *ghosts*—asked me if I believed in them. I'm speculating, but I think that your daughter may have seen—or *imagined*—something in that house."

Rosie sat on this information a moment, chuckling confusedly. "Sorry, you think my daughter tried to kill herself because she saw a ghost in an old house?"

"No," the doctor was quick to reply, "I think that she saw or experienced something in that house that affected her negatively and that the suicide attempt was her way of dealing with it. You mentioned to me that she'd been acting strangely prior to the injury—that she'd locked herself in her room. It's clear that something had distressed her greatly, and that her suicidal ideation was a direct reaction to upsetting stimulus. The question is: *What* happened in the house to make her feel this way?"

"I have no idea." The night before her suicide attempt, Ophelia had gone out with Joey and Leslie; that much Rosie had known. This was the first she'd heard of their poking around the old haunt on Beacon Hill, though. Why had they gone to such a place? What had they hoped to find there? Kids their age sometimes did stupid things simply for the thrill of it, but Ophelia and her friends had hardly struck Rosie as the thrill-seeking type. She looked across the bustling nurse's station with a mind toward returning to her daughter's room.

The doctor took his leave and Rosie set off down the hall. A few patients—the stabler ones—ambled around the commons area in their blue psych ward garb, playing checkers or leafing through magazines. Her daughter, though, was kept deeper in, in a wing located behind a sturdy locked door called the Crisis Management unit. Those with suicidal thoughts were confined to the Crisis Management unit for up to seventy-two hours after admission; others, such as those in the

midst of severe psychotic episodes, seldom left it unless cleared by a physician.

The kindly secretary at the desk buzzed Rosie into the locked unit. When the door had closed softly behind her, she marched down the hall and singled out room 334. Arriving outside it, she didn't enter at once, instead taking a moment to peer into the room through the two-by-two window in the door.

The lights were off. The window on the far side of the room, beside the bed, sat aglow for the presence of the sun but all else was consumed by a murky dimness. Rosie found her daughter sitting up in bed, staring across the room with an uncommonly vacant expression. Her black hair—so recently cut—hung in tangled coils about her ashen face. Her brown eyes, usually so active and smiling, were blank now and her chapped lips wriggled as if she were murmuring. A glistening thread of drool coursed down her chin as she sat and mumbled.

Rosie shuddered. The girl on the bed was her daughter, of course, but in some sense she was unfamiliar. She'd carried and raised this child, but now Ophelia's postures, her gaze, seemed unexpectedly foreign. The drugs were at least partially to blame for that, but thinking back to the house—to finding her in the kitchen, attempting to squeeze herself into one of the cabinets—Rosie had to admit that the changes had begun to manifest before the girl had even been dosed.

The moment Rosie set her hand on the door, Ophelia's head whipped around to face her. She startled at the suddenness of it—then nursed a secret shame for having reacted in such a way toward her own daughter. Still, a vague unease persisted as she hesitated at the threshold.

Ophelia's blank eyes were fixed on the door now, and her lips ceased their twitching. With spittle still dampening her chin, her mouth twisted into a strange smile—a smile that contained nothing of the usual warmth. Where the love and liveliness had always dwelt in her expression there lived only vast emptiness now; emptiness and, perhaps, *cruelty*.

Rosie entered the room and leaned into the door to shut it. “Hey, sweetheart.”

The girl’s breathing was loud and ragged. She didn’t respond except to swallow loudly—like she was struggling to choke down the dry, recirculated air. Then, from deep in her gut, there issued a small laugh—a few caustic chuckles.

“The doctor was just in, huh?” Rosie strode into the room, burying her sweaty hands in her pockets because she couldn’t think of anything else to do with them. “How’re you feeling?”

The bone-white stand-in for her daughter rocked with another chuckle, black hair tumbling across her brow till only dark pinpoints for eyes pierced the tangled veil. Ophelia spoke then in a shaky whisper, her tongue rasping against her peeling lips. “It’s too late.”

Rosie sat down carefully at the end of the bed. “W-What do you mean, sweetheart?” She panned about the room, offering the most convincing smile she could. “They’re taking good care of you here. Before you know it, you’ll be able to come home. We just have to... get you through this, first.” Tears stung the corners of her eyes but by this time she’d had no little practice in blinking them back.

The girl only chuckled again, cocking her head to the side. Her pallid face fell to the left and she stared at her mother, curiously owl-like. “It’s too late,” she repeated, more viciously this time. Stirring her arms around in the sheets, she pulled them out from under the covers to reveal a pool of freshly-spilt blood. The bandages on both wrists had been torn off and the stitches pulled out, leaving the wounds puckering as the girl strained to hold out a closed fist.

“O-Ophelia!” Rosie slipped from the edge of the bed, almost to the floor. Scrambling for support she knocked the bedside table over. A plastic pitcher of ice water spilled across the bed. “W-What have you done?”

Ophelia leaned forward, still offering her bloodied fist. She shook it, as if to hint at something in her hand. Grinning wolfishly, her vacant eyes finally found some focus as she

muttered, "I told you, it's too late. She's already in me, mama."

The girl's fingers curled back tremblingly, one at a time, till her blood-soaked palm was exposed to the open air.

And on that palm, amidst the crimson clots, there danced a fat maggot.

Sadie's fork scraped against her plate. She tried to scoop up a bite of mac and cheese but found she'd lost her appetite. "I'm sorry to hear that," was all she could think to say as Rosie dabbed at her eyes with a napkin across the table.

After a miserable shift, Sadie and August had merely wanted a decent meal. For his part, August had gotten precisely that; he'd staked out a little table of his own and was chowing down on fried chicken without a care in the world. Sadie would have done the same had she not opted to invite Rosie along to the restaurant. After the woman—this old family friend—had turned up at the library out of nowhere, desperate to talk, Sadie had tried doing the kind thing and had asked her to follow the two of them to Colonel Cluck's down the road.

Rather than savoring her food though, she'd spent the bulk of the meal with her eyes low, listening to Rosie recount her daughter's recent struggles at the local hospital. Talk of slashed wrists and maggots hardly roused one's appetite, and when the waitress came by mid-way through the meal to ask how everything was, Sadie had sent her plate back and asked for a black coffee instead.

"So, you see why I thought to reach out to you," concluded Rosie, blowing her nose and then chancing a sip of sweet tea.

Sadie nodded, but truthfully she couldn't see what she had to do with *any* of this. "That's awful. I'm very sorry," was all

she thought to say. Every word that'd come out of her mouth since their meeting that evening had been an apology of some sort. What else could be said? She had no advice to offer, wasn't a shrink.

"Anyhow, I decided to look you up, see if you were still in town. That's why I dropped by the library tonight. I was wondering if maybe you'd be able to talk to her." Rosie toyed with the straw in her glass.

"You want *me* to talk to her?" Sadie shrugged. "Why?"

"Because you know what it's like," began Rosie, nodding earnestly. "You—when you first moved in with your grandparents—had an eye for that kind of thing, I remember. You were a remarkable girl."

Sadie took a pull from her mug. The hot coffee hit her empty stomach and despite its warmth she shivered. "Sorry, I don't know what you're talking about," was what she replied, though it was a lie; she knew all too well what Rosie was driving at.

"You had an eye for ghosts, I mean." Rosie leaned forward, patted the back of Sadie's hand. "Unlike most people, you were just... *tuned in*."

"I was a dumb kid," interjected Sadie. "I said a lot of things, but... you know, that was a difficult period in my life." She hadn't focused on this particular bit of her history for quite some time, and revisiting it now, with nothing in her stomach but acidic black coffee, made her feel queasy.

"No, I remember it well. You were the genuine article. You always had this sense about you—you could see and hear things that the rest of us weren't aware of. Even though your grandparents forbid you from speaking about it, you would talk to me, or to kids in the neighborhood, about things you'd seen." Rosie's teary eyes were lost in the clouds for a moment as she reminisced. "Once, you were out with some of the neighborhood kids, catching fireflies after sunset. You were new to the area then, hardly knew anyone. When you all came back to my place for popsicles, you mentioned seeing a tall man standing across the street, remember that?"

Sadie grit her teeth.

“You described him down to what he was wearing, even. You mentioned his long neck, the bluish color of his skin. Now, I doubt you knew about it then, but in one of the houses thereabouts an older man had recently hung himself. I’d known him, had seen him from time to time during walks through the neighborhood. You described him to a T despite never having met him. I was stunned.” Rosie went on, smiling sheepishly. “From that point on, I was convinced that you weren’t just spinning yarns—you were actually seeing the things you described. Once, your grandfather said something to me about it. He mentioned in passing that your mother could see things, too. Is that true?”

Up to this point, Sadie had done a good job of hiding her discomfort, but at that moment, she balled up the thin tablecloth in her fists and replied, shrilly, “I—I don’t really want to talk about that.” Her tugging on the cloth nearly knocked her mug from the edge of the table.

Her reaction had been so visceral that even August had taken notice. He turned to the pair at the other table with an arched brow, a chicken bone half-lodged in his mouth.

“I’m sorry,” said Rosie, smoothing out the table cloth and rescuing the mug from ruin. “I forgot that you didn’t like discussing your parents. I didn’t mean to...” She smiled as if it might smooth out the wrinkles in the conversation, too, and pressed on. “Anyway, I know this is a big ask for someone you haven’t spoken to in years, but I’m desperate. My daughter isn’t herself anymore. I can’t help feeling like something has gotten its claws into her—that she isn’t bluffing when she says she’s being haunted by something.

“Up to this point, Ophelia has been a lovely girl with a good head on her shoulders. She’s never had the slightest inclination toward self-harm, has always been easygoing. But after she went into that house—the one on Beacon Hill—with some friends, she changed. I noticed it the minute she got back home. She locked herself in her room, had this hunted look on her face. And then, in the kitchen, she hid in one of the



cabinets and tried to kill herself, as if dying were somehow preferable to... whatever she was running from.

“I’m not saying that she really did see something in that house, or that she’s possessed, cursed, whatever... But *she* believes it. She believes it so strongly that it’s warped her. I barely recognize her! Her personality, her way of speaking—everything has changed ever since she went into that house. Again, I know that I’m asking a lot, but if anyone can get to the bottom of this—can tell me whether there’s anything to her claims—it’s you.”

Sadie had pulled her chair away from the table. Plucking apart a paper napkin, she forced a tight smile and found she couldn’t meet Rosie’s gaze. “I understand what you’re saying, but I won’t be of any help to her. What she needs is a good doctor that’ll—”

“But the doctors aren’t helping her,” insisted Rosie. She leaned forward, palms on the table. “She’s only gotten worse! They’re drugging her up, spinning all these theories about her psychiatric history, and meanwhile she’s only spiraling.” Teeth grit, she added, “I’m losing my daughter, Sadie! Please! Consider talking to her. She says that something is *in* her. She told me that. She said, ‘*She’s in me, mama*’. What could that mean, if not...”

So pale in the face that August had put down his food and asked, “Are you all right?”, Sadie wiped at her brow. “I... I don’t think I can help her. Even if she thinks...” She gulped. “I’d be of no use, Rosie. I don’t see things like that anymore. I don’t see... ghosts. And I never did.” The words leaving her quivering lips were lies; she winced at their utterance. “The truth is, ghosts aren’t real. There’s just no such thing.”

Rosie sank back into her chair with a thud. She wore a stunned look, and her cheeks were as red as if she’d been slapped across the face. Crunching a napkin in her hand, she gave a little shake of the head and cast a narrow look at Sadie under tear-heavy lids. “You’re lying.” She sniffed loudly, cleared her throat. “You’re lying, Sadie. I don’t believe you. Whatever your reasons for denying that—” She stopped herself and blew out a deep breath. “You know what? It

doesn't matter what you believe. Something is happening to my daughter. I don't know what it is. It was foolish and rude of me to go looking for you at a time like this, but..." She rummaged in her purse and took out a pen. "I don't have a right to ask you this, but do me a favor.

"Come and see her. Just pop in. She might remember you, and a visit from an old neighborhood friend might do her some good. She always looked up to you, you know." Rosie began jotting down a note on her crumpled napkin. "When you've seen her, you can tell me whether or not what's happening to her is normal. I won't ask you for anything else. I promise. Just... come and see her with your own eyes. Then we'll see what you think." She passed the napkin over and then returned to her purse, producing a few twenties. "Here, dinner's on me. And keep the extra."

"Rosie, that's not necessary—" began Sadie.

The woman dropped the money onto the table and stood. Slinging her purse over one shoulder, she pushed in her chair. "I hope you'll come, Sadie. You've grown into a beautiful young woman after all these years. I know I've been nothing but a bother tonight, but I'm still glad to have seen you." Her smile crumpled as she turned to leave the restaurant. "It's just that I want to see *my* daughter grow up like you one day."

"Wait—"

Rosie started across the room for the door.

Sadie peered down at the hasty notes on the napkin. Ophelia's room number and the psych ward's visiting hours had been outlined there, along with Rosie's cell phone number.

August tapped her on the shoulder and brushed a few crumbs from his shirt. "Are you OK? What was *that* about?"

Sadie only looked back down at the napkin.

The car ride back to her place was an awkward one.

“So, you could see ghosts as a kid?” chanced August at one of the red lights, cracking his window. “Like, for *real*?”

Sadie avoided answering the question and merely looked out across the street, tugging at her seatbelt.

“Sorry,” he added, sensing the mood. “I can see it’s not the kind of thing you want to talk about. Don’t pay me any mind.” Then, letting his foot off the brake and coasting a few dozen feet, he turned to her. “But, if you *want* to chat about it, I’m totally game. We’ve worked together almost a year now but it occurs to me I don’t really know much about you. You grew up here in Montpelier, huh?”

Sadie wasn’t about to take the bait and turned up the music a few clicks as a means of drowning him out. Even so, the longer she ignored him—and the subject at hand—the more she felt an urge to talk. It’d been so long since she’d actually sat and talked with someone about herself. She had no close friends to speak of, with the last of her college buddies having flown the coop and moved abroad. She had no family, either. She’d been an only child, her father had died so many years ago now that she struggled to recall his face without the aid of a photo, and her grandparents had gone, one after another, while she’d been in college. And, of course, she’d never really known her mother to begin with...

She pressed her forehead against the passenger side window and smiled ruefully into the side mirror. “In a small way, August, you’re the closest thing I have to a friend. I don’t have buddies like normal people do. I never had much of a family and they’re all dead and gone now. I’m single and I don’t even have a pet. I spend my time at work, playing around with books, and when I get home I dive right into the pages of another. Living this way, I get to feeling sometimes like I can’t separate fiction from reality, you know? I forget about my childhood, my history...”

August pulled into her apartment complex and parked in a spot a few steps from her door. “I’m not so different in that regard. I’ve got a few school buddies floating around, some family living within an hour’s drive, but my existence is hardly what I’d call exciting. If not for the library, I’d probably never leave my house. It’s the hip thing, though, isn’t it? Us modern folk, we’re into our solitude and escapism, aren’t we? It’s easier than ever to live apart from other people, to embrace isolation even in the middle of a bustling city.”

Sadie nodded at this and clouded up the window with a sigh. “I feel like I’ve been more or less alone for my whole life. Usually, I like it that way. Solitude doesn’t bother me. But there are times when I wish I had someone to talk to. They needn’t even listen, necessarily. Just... someone for me to throw words at, someone to vent to.”

“I get ya.” August rested his hands on the wheel. “Sounds like you need a cat.”

“I’m allergic.”

At this, he chuckled. “Well, not to be a pest, but like I said: If you ever wanna chat, I’m all ears.”

“Yeah?” Sadie sat up, picked her purse off the car floor. Looking at the apartment building outside and knowing all too well the silence and loneliness that awaited her therein, her stomach soured at the thought of entering alone. “How about now? Got a free evening?”

August shrugged. “Tonight? Sure, why not?” He killed the ignition and stepped out of the car. “You picked up dinner so

it's the least I can do."

Sadie plucked her keys out of her pocket and left the car. "I'm going to apologize in advance—the apartment's a little messy."

"No worries. Can't be any worse than my place."

She started through the main door and led him up the landing to her second-story apartment. "I've got a bunch of books everywhere. Give me a minute and I'll put them away. I've got tea and coffee, too, if you're into that." Unlocking her door, Sadie stepped into the apartment and flipped on the lights. Tossing her purse down onto a side table, she swept into the room immediately and began gathering scattered books in her arms. She'd left hardcovers stacked on her sofa, paperbacks on the floor and TV stand. Heaping them into piles on the opposite corner of the room, near the kitchenette, she offered August a seat on the newly-cleared couch and shut the door.

"Nice place," he said, plopping down. "You know what would really bring it together, though?" He did a dramatic pan of the bare walls, of the scarce furniture, then grinned. "A *bookcase*."

Sadie dropped into her worn-out papasan chair—and dug still another book from beneath its tattered circular cushion. Bringing someone into her apartment felt strange; come to think of it, except for the maintenance man and the cable guy—and perhaps a delivery person or two—she hadn't *ever* invited anyone into her place. Now that she had August here, she began second-guessing herself. The whole idea of letting him in, of discussing her life's history, struck her as dumb and embarrassing. Hesitating—and wondering if she shouldn't just kick him out and pick up a book to read—she gave a little shrug. "Well, welcome."

August leaned back and crossed his legs, tenting his fingers. "So," he began, affecting a deep, serious tone, "tell me about yourself, Miss Young. Who are you *really*?"

She laughed, looking down at her hands. "I don't know where to start."

“How about the beginning, then?” he suggested.

Her reticence ebbed away just enough for her to get started. “I was born about forty minutes from here,” she said. Then, like she’d just knocked a hole in a dam, the rest of it flowed forth more easily.

“I NEVER KNEW MY MOTHER,” she began, picking at one of her fingernails. “My father told me a little; she had a difficult pregnancy and died in childbirth. So, from the very beginning, it was always just my dad and me. We were pretty close. I mean, we had to be, right? We only had each other. I went to school, made friends like any other kid and except for not having a mom my early childhood was... normal. And for quite a few years there, everything went well.

“When I was sixteen years old, I got sick, though. Like, *really* sick.” Sadie donned a weak smile. “I ate a can of tainted pineapple and ended up with botulism. They put me in the ICU for a month, and at one point I even coded.”

“You coded?” asked August, sitting upright. “You *died*?”

“Technically,” she replied. “For a little while, anyway. They resuscitated me and I made a full recovery afterward, but it was pretty scary.” Rubbing at her upper arms, Sadie paused to clear her throat. “It was after that that things started to...” Another pause, longer than the last. “Something started happening to me after I got out of the hospital.

“You know, I mentioned my mother earlier. Like I said, I never knew her. And from the very beginning, my father didn’t talk about her a whole lot. If I asked about her, he’d say the usual generic stuff; that she’d loved me very much, that she’d be very proud of me—that sort of thing. But he always got this look in his eye when he spoke of her that made me wonder if he wasn’t holding something back. Virtually everything I knew of my mother came from old photos, but even *those* were pretty scarce. My dad was the kind to take pictures of everything—I have enough photos of me and him to wallpaper this room—but there were only two or three of

my mother in all those albums of his. Where the rest had gone—or whether there'd been any to begin with—he never said.

“Anyway, when they let me out of the hospital, I began having these dreams every night. Dreams of my mother.” The air conditioning kicked on at this point, and Sadie nestled deeply into the warm chair cushion. Glancing up at August and feeling her mouth go dry, she blurted, “Sorry, I’m probably boring you. We can talk about something else.”

“No, go on. Tell me about these dreams you had.”

Her pulse hiked up and her scalp began to itch. Truthfully, she hadn’t stopped talking for fear of boring her guest; she’d only stopped because she hadn’t wanted to go on. This particular topic wasn’t one she’d discussed with anyone in many years, and revisiting it—*reliving it*—made old wounds ache.

More than that, it awakened old fears that had long laid dormant.

“Right, so, I started having these dreams,” she continued after a time. “And in them, I’d see my mother. They were short dreams but very vivid, and they always played out the same way. The scene was black and white, and I’d walk into a room—a small, empty room. Think of a closet. Barely enough space to move around, to stretch, right? And my mother would be in there, just standing in the dark, like she’d been waiting for me.

“I’d always wanted to know more about my mother, had always been curious about her, but these dreams were, well, *frightening*. I didn’t find any comfort in them, and when I saw her in my sleep, I was fearful for some reason. Every time, she’d look straight at me with wide eyes and tell me one thing and one thing only. It was always the same. She’d stand real close to me and say, ‘*I’m coming back to see you.*’ The only change from dream to dream was in her delivery. Each time, she’d get more insistent, her eyes would get wider—and *wilder*. It got to the point where I’d fall asleep and the next thing I knew my mother was screaming in my face with her

eyes bulging out of their sockets. Then I'd wake up, crying out for my dad. This went on for awhile."

"Huh," said August, balancing his chin on his palm. He stroked at his beard for a moment. "Sounds like a repeating nightmare. Maybe a night terror or something. A lot of kids have 'em; I did for a little while, too. They tend to go away in time. It's no surprise you'd start having those during such a stressful time in your life."

"Maybe," replied Sadie, "but my dad didn't see it that way. When I told him about it, he got really upset. I'd never seen him react this way to anything; even when I got sick, nearly died, he hadn't been this distraught. The dreams went on for a little while and eventually, without giving me a good explanation why, he told me that he was sending me to live with my grandparents.

"I moved in with my grandparents shortly after I'd recovered, and no sooner did I start staying at their place did the dreams stop. I think the change in scene helped me break the cycle of recurring nightmares." She sighed, offering a tired smile. "But it wasn't long before the nightmares started showing up for me during the day, while I was awake.

"As you can imagine, during my convalescence I didn't hardly leave my room. I was cut off from the world, confined to the same four walls. But when I'd recovered and moved in with my grandparents, I was allowed a modicum of freedom, and would wander the neighborhood with other kids. I started going back to school, went shopping or ran errands with my grandfather. Normal stuff. It was nice to be out in the world again.

"But the world had changed—or, maybe, just my perception of it. What I mean to say is that I began seeing things from time to time. Things—*people*—that others never noticed. Once, while walking through the old neighborhood just after sunset, I saw a figure—it seemed to me a very tall man—standing alone in a cul-de-sac. For whatever reason, he started to wave at me—beckoned to me. I thought it kind of weird, freaky, and pointed him out to the girl I was walking with at the time. To my surprise, she couldn't see him.



“It would be easy to write this sort of thing off if it only happened on occasion, but in my case, it *kept* happening. Once, I got up in the middle of the night for a drink of water and happened to look out my bedroom window. My room was on the second floor of the house, and I had a good view of the road. It must have been three or four in the morning, but I caught sight of someone directly across the street, on the sidewalk. It was a woman that time, and she was laying face-down on the ground. I watched her for a few moments from above, and as if she sensed my gaze she suddenly got up and outstretched a hand to wave. I couldn’t see her face from where I stood—it was dark and my eyes were heavy with sleep—but something about the way she stood there, trying to call me over, left me shaken up. I told my grandfather about it the next morning and it didn’t go over too well.

“My grandparents never came out and used the word ‘ghost’ to describe these figures I was seeing, but every time I’d mention seeing another, they’d tell me the same thing: *Ignore it. Don’t go near it.* It was hard to do, though. When you’re out and about, minding your own business, and you see some stranger in the distance staring at you—waving at you—your first instinct is to investigate further. You’re curious.

“I was out at the park having a picnic with my grandparents and a friend from school one summer afternoon. My friend and I decided to go for a walk on one of the trails before lunch and we’d made it a good distance down the footpath when I noticed someone standing off-trail, amidst the trees. It was an old woman—hunched and feeble. She had a dense tangle of grey hair atop her head and was looking down at the ground. I remember thinking it odd that she was wearing a long, black dress on such a hot day. Her entire body shook as she raised one of her hands and beckoned to me.

“I motioned to her, thinking that she’d gotten lost and needed help, but try as she might my friend couldn’t see her. *‘You’re trying to freak me out, aren’t you?’* she said. All that while, the old fidgeting woman had kept waving me over. I pushed past the weeds and wandered a little off the trail to meet her. I called out, asked if everything was all right. She didn’t respond, but the closer I got the more uneasy I became.

Once I arrived within ten or fifteen feet of her, I stopped in my tracks. I found the woman's face was a strange, dark blur; though it might have been due to the shade of the woods, her skin had looked like slate. With every step I'd taken, her beckoning had gotten more and more frenzied, too.

"I turned and rejoined my friend on the trail and we both jogged back to the picnic site. Needless to say, the picnic was cancelled and my grandparents laid into me for my carelessness. Oh, and that friend of mine stopped talking to me shortly after the incident, too. She thought I was crazy. Growing up is hard enough; the last thing any teenager needs is a reputation for being the 'creepy ghost girl'. My grandparents arranged for me to see a therapist shortly after that—a family friend of theirs. They wanted to train me to ignore these figures I was seeing. Whether they were real or hallucinatory didn't matter; they simply wanted it to stop. And so did I. So, I met with the therapist for close to a year and he tried a number of things. We talked about my family, the nature of mental illness. He put me on some drugs, suggested prayer, and even tried hypnotism. Eventually, something clicked and I no longer saw the things.

"Suddenly, I was a normal girl. Whatever I'd been tuned into before, I could no longer access it. Now and then, I'd see things in the corner of my eye, or in the distance, but I'd fall back on my therapy and simply put it out of my mind, write it off as a daydream. And that's how things have gone for me these last nine years. I've worked very hard at convincing myself that was just a weird traumatic phase I went through—that nothing I saw back then was real. Sometimes, I almost believe it.

"But recently, I've had reason to doubt. The other night as we were leaving work, I saw someone standing outside the library. I thought it was just a latecomer at first—someone who'd dropped by after closing, but..." Sadie shivered. "It wasn't. I *know* it wasn't. And then you told me about that recent accident that occurred just down the street—the pedestrian who got hit. I know it was him. *He* was the one I saw, waving at me from outside. And now... there's *this*."

“Rosie and her daughter used to live next door to my grandparents. She remembers what I was like as a kid—the stuff I used to see and the stories I used to tell. And now that her daughter’s having some kind of breakdown she thinks I can help her. Don’t ask me why. I may have seen things at one point but I wasn’t exactly an exorcist or whatever. I don’t even know what I could do for her! I don’t want to get involved with that situation at all. I feel bad for Rosie and she’s obviously desperate, but whatever abilities she thinks I have don’t exist. I was an impressionable girl back then and it was a rough patch in my childhood; I’m sure it was all mere delusion.”

“Sure,” replied August. Arching a brow, he posed the question that’d been nagging Sadie all the while. “But if it was just a phase you went through as a teen, then how do you explain this recent sighting outside the library?”

“I—I’m not sure,” was all she could say.

August reclined on the sofa and tapped his feet playfully against the carpet. “What you’ve told me is pretty out there, but as it happens, I’m not a *complete* skeptic. I’m a big fan of those ghost hunting shows on TV, and while a lot of ‘em are obviously staged, I think there’s enough evidence out there to prove the existence of the paranormal.” He scratched at his earlobe and backtracked a moment. “Well, maybe not enough to *prove* it, but enough for me to not think you’re crazy. Still, I’m curious about something.”

“What’s that?”

“The ghosts,” he continued, “why do you think they beckon to you? What do they want?”

Sadie massaged her brow with her fingers. “I don’t know. The few times I actually approached one, though, I always got this bad feeling in my stomach. This feeling that I should turn and run—that I’d made some mistake. Whatever they were—and whatever they wanted—it probably wasn’t *good*.”

“Hmm...” August nodded. “So, what happened after that? You didn’t mention your dad; he booted you out to your

grandparents' house and then what? Didn't he have any theories about what you were seeing—and why?"

She gave a soft shake of the head. "My dad sent me off after I started having those dreams, but not a week after I moved in with my grandparents he died."

August's eyes widened. "Oh, I'm sorry. That's terrible. What happened to him?"

Sadie mustered a curious frown. "Honestly? I don't really know. They said—my grandparents did—that it was a heart attack or something. But the suddenness of it... and the *timing*. He was a pretty fit guy, my dad, with no health issues *I* knew of..." She took a deep breath through her nose. "The last time I saw him alive was the day he dropped me off on my grandparents' doorstep. He hugged me, told me he loved me, but... I'd never seen him so scared in my life. I think that's the part that bothered me most; having that be my last memory of him." She paused. "Come to think of it, his funeral was closed casket; my grandparents insisted on that. Why have a closed casket funeral when the cause of death was a heart attack? I never understood that."

"Wow." August sat forward, hands on his knees. "That's... awful. For a teenaged girl to have to go through all that... What about your grandparents?"

"They passed on while I was in college, shortly after I finished my bachelor's. They both died of natural causes a few months apart. My grandmother went first; my grandfather died a few weeks before I began my master's. I got to spend some time with both of them toward the end, and they left me a decent inheritance. After their estate was liquidated I found myself with enough to pay off all my school loans and a decent nest egg besides."

"Well, that's quite the life's story," concluded August, checking the time on his phone. "I have a new appreciation for you; if you wrote an autobiography I'd read it and recommend it to everyone who came into the library."

Sadie rolled her eyes and stood up. "I'm not the writing type." She motioned to the kitchenette. "Hungry, thirsty? I'm

going to make some tea.”

“No, I’m good,” he replied, slowly gaining his feet with a grunt befitting a much older man. “I should probably get going. Early to bed, early to rise and all that.”

“Already?” Sadie blushed, pausing near the sofa. “It’s just... I talked the whole time. I barely let you get a word in edgewise. What about *your* life’s story?”

August shuffled off to the door with a grin. “Actually, mine’s pretty simple. I was a military brat and my parents split when I was in middle school. I settled in Montpelier with my mom and found I liked books better than most people.” He adjusted his glasses and stifled a yawn. “And I’m a Virgo.”

Sadie laughed. “*Compelling*. Well, thanks for listening. I really appreciate it. And, uh... t-thanks for not thinking I’m some weirdo.”

“Ah, but that’s just the thing. I’ve considered you a weirdo since the day we met!” He opened the door, but stopped short. “Hey, do me a favor. If you decide you wanna go see that girl in the psych ward, let me know. I’ll give you a ride.”

“Huh? Thanks for the offer, but... why would I want to do that?”

August stepped half-way out the door and looked back at her from the hall, eyebrows waggling. “Dunno. Just a feeling I have. Popping in to see this girl—a teenager who thinks she’s struggling with something supernatural—might do some good.”

“I’m not following,” replied Sadie. “How’s it going to do her any good? What could I possibly do for her?”

“Nah.” August shook his head. “I meant that it might be good for *you*.” He shrugged and gave a lazy wave as he started out into the hall. “Anyway, it occurs to me that we’re both off tomorrow, so if the mood strikes you, gimme a jingle.” He slunk out of the room and down the stairs.

*What the hell is he thinking?* Sadie shut the door after him and locked it. *What could I possibly gain by visiting that girl?* She trudged into the kitchen and started prepping the

aforementioned cup of tea, only to idle by the sofa as the electric kettle warmed up. Alone now—like she always was—the apartment seemed too quiet somehow. She rearranged her books noisily and changed into some pajamas, slamming the closet door with theatrical force. When she was finished and the kettle had sung, the weight of the resulting silence surprised her.

A few hours ago she would have welcomed this silence, embraced it. Now, with old memories recirculating in her tired mind, it was oppressive.

Sadie didn't have to work, so spending the day in her pajamas, reading, was entirely permissible. Most of the local restaurants delivered, and if the books she had on hand proved boring she could always stream a movie. Alternatively, if she bothered to get dressed in proper clothes she could probably find something fun to do in town.

The day was her oyster. Countless possibilities promising both fun and fulfillment stretched out before her.

So why was it that she could only think of visiting Ophelia in the hospital?

From the moment she'd stepped out of bed her thoughts had been fixed on the girl, and on Rosie's pleas for help. Sadie's initial reaction at the idea of visiting had been purely negative, but after chatting with August the night before—and sleeping on it—she'd somehow warmed to it. Though she wasn't exactly in a position to help the girl, conversations about her past had awakened something like nostalgia in her, and stopping by to visit—to reminisce—with Rosie and her daughter didn't seem all that bad.

Something unexpected had grown up out of the previous night's encounter with Rosie, too; curiosity. Was Ophelia's behavior really so strange—so *terrible*—that ghosts, rather than teenage angst, seemed the culprit? Would the girl—who'd been quite young back then—remember Sadie and the summer nights they'd spent walking through the neighborhood? How had she changed over the years? Had she kept in touch with

the other neighborhood kids after Sadie had moved on to college?

And there was a kernel of guilt at the heart of the urge, too; if there existed *any* possibility that Sadie's presence at her bedside might help the girl out of this self-destructive funk, then she had a responsibility to pop in, didn't she? Rosie had come by in her most desperate hour, had begged Sadie to visit. The more she reflected on Rosie's tears, on the whole sad situation, the more she felt compelled to assist. She still didn't think she could do anything for the girl, but the guilt would consume her before too long if she simply ignored the request.

In the end, confident that it would cost her nothing to stop in and say hello, she decided to get dressed and call August. He'd offered her a lift to the hospital the night before, and she figured she could reimburse him for his kindness with another lunch when they were through visiting. Throwing on a white sundress and putting her shoulder-length hair into a ponytail, she gave him a call.

August answered with a laugh. "I *knew* you'd call," he snorted.

Sadie shouldered the phone and threw together a quick cup of oatmeal. "Yeah, well, I feel guilty. These people are old friends of mine and it won't cost me anything to drop in and show them a little kindness."

"That's mighty big of you," he replied through a yawn. "I can come by in a half-hour. Cool?"

"Sure. And since you're being such a gem, giving me a ride and all, why don't we have some lunch afterward? My treat."

"Free lunch? You know just what to say to a man." He paused. "Say, though, what if this girl does end up to be, like... *The Exorcist*?"

"Huh?" Sadie laughed. "What do you mean?"

"What if she's actually cursed or possessed or whatever? Her mother thinks she's hurting herself because there are



ghosts in the picture, right? That's why she sought *you* out, no?"

Sadie hadn't given that matter much thought, admittedly. "I'm sure it's nothing like that. I know what Rosie claims, but... the truth is that her daughter's probably just going through a really rough time. I doubt ghosts have anything to do with it. People say crazy things when they're under a lot of stress, that's all."

"Right on. Well, I'll be there in thirty, yeah?"

"See you soon." Sadie set down her phone and gave her oatmeal a stir, the question lingering in the back of her mind as she spooned in some sugar and cream. *What if the girl is haunted by something?*

When she finished eating, she opened the blinds and let in the morning sun. Looking out into the parking lot, she waited for August's Honda to roll in and nibbled her thumbnail all the while. It was a bright and beautiful day outside. The birds were singing, the grass was dewy and the skies were gorgeously clear. Could things like what she'd imagined in her youth—dark spirits—really exist in a bright and pleasant world like this one? It didn't seem possible. All the experiences of her youth, all the terrible dreams and sightings, seemed distant now—and implausible.

Right on time, the Honda buzzed into the lot and slid into a spot outside her building with a blast of the horn.

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ROSIE WAS WAITING in the third floor lobby in the same clothes she'd been wearing the night before, just outside the visitor elevators. "Thank you for coming," she said, rising from her seat to greet the two of them. She wrapped Sadie in a hug—an unexpectedly tight one—and shook August's hand, nodding at the metal door that led into the psychiatric ward. "I can come in with you—though, to be honest, she might enjoy just talking with you one-on-one, Sadie. I didn't tell her you were coming. It might be a nice surprise for her."

“Sure, that’s fine. I’ll just pop in for a little while and say hi.” She turned to August. “Will you be all right out here while I go in?”

He planted himself in one of the plush lobby chairs and crossed his legs. “Sitting pretty is one of the few things in life I’m good at.” Rosie sat down in the chair beside his and the pair fell into conversation.

Pushing open the metal door, Sadie found a large desk waiting for her on the other side, manned by a secretary and a uniformed guard. The secretary had been showing the guard something on her phone, but snapped to attention at hearing the door open and looked out at Sadie with a bright smile. “Can I help you?”

“Hello.” Sadie made her way to the desk, peering past it at the bustling station beyond. “I’m here to visit one of the patients. Her mother invited me. Ophelia—”

“Oh, you’re Sadie Young?” The secretary peered down at a clipboard beside her computer. “Rosie told us you might be dropping in. The patient is in the Crisis Management wing—Pete here will have to let you back.”

At this, the security guard stood and gave his weighty belt a tug. “I can escort you,” he said, removing a keyring from his pocket. The far right side of the front counter was built to open like a gate, a similar design to what Sadie had seen in many banks, and when this was opened she was led through a narrow corridor into the unit.

Falling into step behind the quiet guard, she rounded the nurse’s station, passed a glass-panelled section where blue-garbed patients idled in front of televisions or sat at large tables eating lunch, and followed him down a long hall, the terminus of which led to the promised Crisis Management ward. The opening of this door necessitated not only a swipe of the guard’s badge, but another key, which was inserted into a little box on the wall. When both steps had been completed, the door swung open on its own and the two were admitted.

From her very first step onto the polished tile floors of this new ward, Sadie noticed a shift in the air. Things elsewhere on

the third floor had seemed boisterous and almost laid-back; now, stepping into a hall where the doors to patient rooms were made of reinforced metal and the lights were kept dimmer, she felt like she'd entered a prison. Where the outer end of the psych ward had boasted decorations—generic framed art on the walls, a tedious mural near the elevators—there was nothing here but sterility. The air seemed heavier, too—more stagnant, as though weighed down by the anguish of those housed therein.

Ophelia's room was approximately half-way down the hall. The door was shut like all the rest. Before letting Sadie inside, the guard stopped and explained a few things, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. "All right, so, visiting hours back here are limited to one hour unless you're a parent. The rooms in this unit have been stripped of items that patients can use in acts of self-harm, and in this room we've got a ceiling camera set up just in case she decides to pick at her bandages or wander off. You can't get in or out of this ward without a key; when you're done visiting, hit the call-light on the wall next to her bed and I'll come and get you. Otherwise, when the hour's up, I'll come by to escort you out." He stroked at his stubbled chin and then nodded as if to assure himself he'd run through all the details. "I think that's about the length of it. Hit the call light if you need anything else."

"Thank you," replied Sadie, approaching the door. She watched the guard walk off. With the swipe of key and badge, the heavy door at hall's end gave way and he sauntered back out to the front, hands in his pockets.

Alone now in the hall, with only the stirrings from nearby rooms to break up the silence, Sadie put her hand on the knob and prepared to enter the room. The pane of glass in the door, installed at eye-level, gave a limited view of the space beyond. Shadow prevailed in this room; probably the blinds had been drawn and the lights put out.

*Well, this is my good deed for the day. Here goes...* She knocked, then turned the knob. The door fell open with a click and Sadie stepped softly into the room.

Something strange happened as she crossed the threshold, however—something with no overt cause. No sooner did the door fall closed behind her did her pulse begin a steady and forceful climb. Her stomach fluttered, her frame jittered nervously. Outside, in the hall, she hadn't been accosted by these markers of anxiety. Now, having just stepped through the door, it was like she'd entered a different world—a different reality.

No one had dragged her here; she'd come of her own volition. And yet, having only just set foot in this room, she wanted suddenly to flee it.

Sadie found the patient sitting up in bed, studying the window.

The pleasant afternoon she and August had navigated on their way in to the hospital was gone now, and in the ten or twenty minutes since she'd entered the building the outdoors had been transformed by a wall of grey-black clouds and an explosion of pounding rain. The sun wasn't in sight now and the north-facing hospital room was plunged into a gloom more befitting dusk. Summer storms sometimes came on suddenly, but the stark change in the outer scenery unsettled her profoundly just the same.

The visitor was some time in finding her voice. Sadie took a cautious step into the room, toward a wooden folding chair. If Ophelia had noticed her entrance, she'd given no indication whatsoever; the girl's eyes remained fixed on the rain-streaked window and her face was stained with the same stormy palette.

"Hello, Ophelia." Sadie sank quietly into the chair, hands balled between her knees.

With a faint twitch, as though jarred from a daydream, the girl inhaled sharply and turned to meet her guest. Even in the daylight hours shadow can warp the appearance of the commonplace, and in this case, as she looked away from the window into the murky interior of the room, shadow emigrated into every nook and hollow of her vacant expression till the eyes appeared as two sunken chasms and the cheekbones stood out cadaverously. Ophelia swallowed with

evident difficulty, then raked her tongue over peeling lips. “Who are *you*?”

Rocking back and forth in the chair, Sadie proffered a wan smile, the full awkwardness of this little visit hitting her like a bus. “I don’t know if you remember me, but I used to live next door to you and your mother. My name is Sadie—Sadie Young.” She pawed at her knees while staring into that blank, unexpressive face.

“Sadie...” Ophelia’s lips moved very little in echoing the name and her tongue clacked around against her teeth as though she were tasting it—seeking to nudge the fibers of it from between her molars. “I remember you,” she finally said, the bandages on her arms crinkling as she reached up and scratched at her tousled hair. “But why are you here?”

Sadie was asking herself precisely that. *I’m here because your mother thinks I can chase the devil out of you*, would have been the honest reply, but seeking to build a little rapport, she said, “Just recently I was thinking about the old days—back in the neighborhood. I heard you were in the hospital and thought you might enjoy some company, so here I am.” She chuckled. “I know it’s been awhile—years—but... how have you been, Ophelia?”

The girl laughed at this—a churlish laugh that set her whole body into a momentary convulsion. “How have I been?” Ophelia took a moment to scan the four rude walls, then seemed to stare down at her wounded wrists as though that were answer enough. “*I’m chipper*,” she sighed, turning back to the window. Something in the girl’s delivery—her entire manner—was out of step with what one might expect from a sixteen year old girl, though Sadie couldn’t put her finger on precisely what.

The better part of a decade had passed since the two of them had last met. Owing to the difference in years, their prior acquaintance—as neighbors and playmates—had been superficial at best. In her urgings, Rosie had insisted that her daughter had changed, had stopped acting like herself, but what frame of reference did Sadie have to work off of when the girl before her was practically a stranger now? Someone

close to her might well notice such changes in personality, but how could Sadie hope to parse normal adolescent snark or moodiness from the recent, sinister strain of behavior Rosie had noted?

Her initial volley having fallen flat, Sadie switched gears. “This hospital is pretty boring, huh? I don’t know if I ever told you, but when I was about your age I actually spent some time here myself—though, I was in the ICU. I got pretty sick. It was just before I moved in with my grandparents and met you and your mom.”

Whether the girl had actually absorbed this information was impossible to say. Like a mannequin leaned against a wall, she remained stock-still, watching the rainfall with a doll-like intensity.

“Do you and your mom still live in the same house? How is the old neighborhood these days? I haven’t been by there in years—not since my grandparents passed.” Sadie crossed her legs, crossed her arms in her lap, struck whatever pose she could think of to inspire comfort under the circumstances. Each successive attempt struck her as more crude than the last, and the motions she went through served only to usher in the opposite effect. Even without the girl’s eyes on her, Sadie felt watched; studied. She was an insect under glass.

Something, a faint change in the rhythm of the rain, maybe, incited Ophelia to respond. “I remember you,” she said throatily, and shifting away from the window her face was again dressed in shadow. “You were *cool*. All of us kids on the street thought you were *cool*. You were the oldest of us, of course. What do you do now?”

Thankful to have broken the ice, Sadie replied—and with perhaps more cheerfulness than the occasion merited—“I’m a librarian in town, actually! I’ve been there about a year. It’s great.” The response to this latest question prompted only a contemptuous look from beneath hooded lids and Sadie cleared her throat, once more seeking to advance the conversation. “And what about you? What’ve you been up to? You’re almost done with high school; I’ll bet that’s exciting.”

“Exciting?” asked Ophelia. The frown that appeared across her lips as she grappled with this word was at once weary and disdainful. “You know how it is out there, in our old neighborhood. We have to make our own fun. It’s the same; nothing’s changed.” Thunder rumbled in the churning clouds outside. “You, Sadie... you were an odd duck, weren’t you?” The earlier frown was replaced by a long-toothed grin which, either for the lighting of the scene or want of it, was even more unnerving in effect than its predecessor had been. “I remember... you used to tell the *wildest* stories.”

The harsh and unwelcoming tone of this latest statement had caught Sadie by surprise, and she would have asked for clarification then if not for what happened next.

The girl’s beady gaze, hitherto riveted to Sadie, suddenly sprang across the room as if following in the wake of something moving toward the door. And at that same moment—though it may have simply been a gut reaction to Ophelia’s sudden turn of the eye—Sadie felt a swift displacement of the air to her back, as of some unseen occupant suddenly spurred into movement. She turned so quickly she nearly fell out of the chair, fists balled, but nothing awaited her but the girl’s throaty laugh.

The low murmur of thunder made a reprise and a strong wind buffeted the side of the building. A sky in which light was already scarce grew only darker. Seeking to compose herself, Sadie took a deep breath and sought out the call button on the wall. Before letting her into the room, the security guard had advised her to hit the button if she needed anything. She wasn’t going to bail just yet, but knowing where it was brought her a little peace.

The girl coughed and leaned forward in bed. “Sadie... you’re taking me back. *Way* back. Once, when I was little, you and I went out for ice cream. Not a mile from our street there was that soft serve place. Do you remember it?” The barest blush of childish delight played across her face as she reminisced.

“I do,” was Sadie’s reply. She smoothed out her dress. “It was great. Everyone in the neighborhood used to hoof it out



there in the summer.”

“Yes, and that afternoon it was just the two of us. My mother had given us money and we’d gone walking down the street. But I wonder... do you remember what you said to me?” The girl’s features narrowed in anticipation.

Sadie was at a loss. “No, I don’t.”

“You told me about the dreams you’d had. Dreams about... *your mother*.” Ophelia smacked her lips and eased her legs over the side of the bed, leaving them to dangle. “Have you seen your mother lately?”

Thunder crashed and a gust of wind howled past the window. So intense was the discomfort aroused by that question that Sadie couldn’t help but wrap her arms around her stomach. Spying the mischievous widening of the girl’s eyes, it was clear the question had been engineered to garner exactly that sort of reaction. Averting her gaze, Sadie eventually mumbled, “My mother is dead; I never knew her. Those dreams... are a thing of the past. Just nightmares.”

Sadie’s gaze remained glued to the floor. She could feel eyes on her—the weight of the attention heaped on her just then seemed enough to split her in two. When finally she looked up to meet the girl however, she found Ophelia staring elsewhere, *past* her.

If it wasn’t the girl scrutinizing her, then who—

Sadie whipped around, rose to her feet, and found herself standing before a blank wall.

From behind, in a lower, colder voice than before, Ophelia chuckled mockingly. “I think you’ll be seeing her again. *Soon*.”

Certain now that something was amiss in her surroundings, Sadie remained standing. Still alarmed—her face was flushed and her heart had momentarily gone haywire—she shook her head with child-like fervor. “That’s enough about me,” she blurted. “I came to talk about you, Ophelia—about what you’ve been up to.” Without meaning to, her eyes lingered on

the girl's bandaged wrists. "I heard that you went somewhere recently with your friends..."

Ophelia's legs ceased their idle swinging and she looked up at her visitor with a knowing smirk.

"You went out to Beacon Hill. At least, that's what I heard." With a firm grip on the back of the chair, Sadie leaned forward. "I've never been there. What's it like in that dark, old house?"

The girl sighed, blew a tendril of hair out of her face, and seemed to fight back a laugh. "Why don't you go and see for yourself?" she finally replied. In the sparse light, her face looked like a mass of flesh-colored putty; holes had been clawed out for eyes and a crude slash meant to answer for a mouth had been made, but beneath the wiry tangles of hair no other features registered except when she turned to face the window. It was a curious effect, as if the figure on the bed was in fact *two* people, one face bared in the light and the other, singularly warped, only surfacing in shadow.

"They used to tell stories about that house, didn't they?" asked Sadie. She stood to her full—if unimpressive—height in an effort to assert herself. *This is a teenaged girl you're dealing with, remember that. Don't let her under your skin.* "There were all kinds of scary stories, if I remember correctly. Is that why you and your friends went out there? To have a good scare?" Affecting coolness, she took a few paces away from the chair, till she stood on the wall directly opposite the bed. She had a clear view of the window now—and of the torrential scene outside. "What did you see while you were in there?"

For some reason, this question stuck in the girl's craw. She seized up as if about to answer it, then fell silent, merely staring at her guest with furious, bloodshot eyes. Her jaw tensed like she was holding back an answer with every ounce of her strength, like it was on the tip of her tongue, and then, after a moment, her shoulders grew slack and she put on a sedate smile.

Sadie crossed her arms, ignored the girl's combative gaze and looked straight out the window. "Ophelia, I don't expect you to open up to me. It's been a long time since we were neighbors. But the way you've been acting recently is worrisome, and there are people—your friends, your *mother*—who are scared. They think that maybe you saw something in that house that spooked you. Is that what happened? Did you see someone—or something—you couldn't explain?" She leaned against the wall, squared Ophelia in her gaze. "Listen, I don't know what happened in that house, but there are people who can talk you through it. Whatever it was, there's certain to be a rational explanation for it. I'm willing to listen. Your mother, or the doctor, too. We're all here for you. We just want you to get better."

Lightning flashed outside. The burst of brightness took liberties with the contents of the tiny sickroom, casting grotesque shadows across the walls and floor.

"And I want you to know something," Sadie continued. "When we were kids, I said a lot of stuff—made up a lot of stories. I had my own problems when I was your age, and my talk of ghosts gave me a weird reputation, it's true. I'll own up to that. But... none of it was real. Ghosts, things of that kind... they just don't exist, Ophelia." She rummaged up a kind smile.

Ophelia remained stationed on the edge of her bed, face low and completely still. Despite the flow of air from a nearby vent, the disordered hairs on her head hardly shifted. Lightning ripped through the clouds outside like the flash on a camera and once again the room was flooded with an abundance of strange, misshapen shadows.

In that instant, something nagged at Sadie's periphery. There remained between her and the corner of the room some few feet of bare wall, and upon this stretch she sensed a flurry of sudden movement, as of something loosed by the lightning itself. A mass of undulating shadow had been heaped there, to her immediate right, in a quantity befitting a person of rather large proportion—though neither of the room's acknowledged occupants had so much as stirred. This shadow presently scurried up the height of the wall, as if headed for the porous

drop ceiling, the way a many-legged insect might sprint in search for cover. But the size and wild movement of this thing in the corner of her eye was surely too great to be a mere bug.

Before she turned her head to look, Sadie froze. From just above, a little to her right where the shadow had taken root on the wall, there drifted a low growl into her ear. Dry, foul airs as those that circulate in a long-sealed mausoleum washed over her from unseen lips.

A bolt of lightning lasts only for half a second, but even in this fraction of time Sadie saw much. The sky erupted in brightness for an instant, and in the window's dappled reflection, Sadie spied—or *thought* she spied—something clinging to the wall beside her. A black, vaguely membranous shape boasting four stunted limbs clung to the wall like a giant bat, and a lengthy neck was craned in an unnatural downward arc so that a face as white as pus floated at her ear. A black tendril escaped its gaping mouth—a tongue, she fancied—and strained as if to lave her lobe.

Before the breath had caught in her throat—before she'd even managed to startle—the phantasmagoric vision was gone from the reflection and only Sadie's own, white face stared back at her. And in that time, too, Ophelia had looked up at her again, a suggestive smile setting her dark eyes twinkling.

Sadie staggered along the wall a few paces and looked to the right, but the wall was utterly bare and no trace—save for the tremors its appearance had incited in her—remained whatsoever. Even the earthy, rarified air it had brought with it had been chased out, replaced by the stuffier atmosphere expected of such a little room. She had trouble remaining upright and sagged against the wall till she regained her nerve.

“What's the matter?” asked the girl with a faux pout. Then, smirking cruelly, she added, “Why, Sadie, you look as though you've just seen a...” She trailed off into another of her churlish laughs.

With purse in hand, Sadie backed away toward the door. “I-I've gotta go.” Her hand found the handle and gave it a solid turn. “Rest up, Ophelia. I'll see you around.”

Sadie wasted no time in barreling out of the room, and without even meaning to, slammed the door shut behind her. As she'd passed back over the threshold, she'd heard the girl mutter something in reply. Her chapped lips had hardly moved as she'd said, "I expect you *will*."

Rushing down the hall toward the locked door of the Crisis Management ward, Sadie felt almost like a patient there herself; manic and out of breath, she flagged down a passing nurse and begged her to be let out. The nurse unlocked the door and led her as far as the nurse's station, where the guard and secretary still sat. Beyond their post, August and Rosie were chatting over styrofoam cups of coffee.

Sadie left the psych unit; knees weak and face pale, she steadied herself against the wall and wove her way across the lobby to meet the pair. All that while, she licked her lips compulsively and sought to say something. Even a mere "hello" was beyond her power, however.

Rosie stood up and met her. One look was all she needed. "You see now?" She leaned close to Sadie, took hold of her shoulders, which actively trembled. "You understand what's happening. It's true, isn't it?" Her eyes narrowed. "Something is wrong with her—but it isn't mental, is it?"

August stepped in to support her as she swooned. "You OK, Sadie? You don't look so hot." He fanned her ineffectually with his free hand and looked into her face. "You wanna sit or something?"

At this, Sadie shook her head. She didn't want to sit—not here. All she wanted to do was to put as much distance as possible between herself and this accursed hospital. "I wanna go," she squeaked, taking a fistful of August's dress shirt and tugging at it feebly. "*Now*."

Rosie stepped to one side, as if to block Sadie's path to the elevators. "Wait, wait! Don't go yet! What happened in there? I was right, wasn't I?" She pointed at the doors to the psych unit, practically shouting. "That isn't my daughter!"

Feeling as though she might be sick, Sadie brought a hand to her mouth and staggered to the elevator bank under

August's guidance. "I can't help you, Rosie." Shuffling on, she mashed the call button and added, "I can't help *her*."

The elevator door opened and Sadie pulled August in after her. Rosie remained outside, pleading. "Why not? Please, you've got to talk to me, Sadie! I don't know what else to do. How can I help her? How can I get my daughter back?"

Sadie held down the CLOSE DOOR button and shook her head dazedly. "I'm sorry. I'm *really* sorry, but—I can't help. I don't want anything more to do with this. P-Please, don't call me anymore, Rosie. I wish you the best." The door began to slide shut. "Goodbye. I'm sorry."

The door closed and the elevator began its smooth descent. On the silent ride down, still standing near so as to keep her from falling, August exhaled loudly. "What, uh... what happened? You OK?"

Sadie shut her eyes and waited for the door to open onto the first floor. "Just take me home," she said, balling her fists. "I don't want to talk about it. Please, just take me home."

She said nothing at all when August probed for details on the ride home, and when she returned to her place she scrambled out of the car, barely uttering a word of thanks. She absconded to her apartment, spent the remainder of the day in bed, listening to the rain and thunder and attempting to scrub all memory of the afternoon's visit from her mind. That which she could not scrub she endeavored to massage into something she could live with—into something she could recall without flinching.

The girl had been very disturbed and upset, yes—and her offensive, standoffish manner had been a defense mechanism. But had there been anything supernatural about the girl—devilish? *No, of course not.* She was a sick girl, much in need of therapy and medication. And it was unwise, no doubt, to trust implicitly things glimpsed in the corner of one's eye—and reflected on rain-soaked glass, no less. Questions about old dreams, about Sadie's mother, had been posed merely to wound her; the girl had just been lashing out. This was all that was behind Ophelia's recent, sinister bent—teenaged angst and rebellion.

Sadie rolled over in bed and buried her face in her pillow. She wanted to wash her hands of it—*all* of it. Rosie and her daughter; the memories so recently stirred up in conversations with them and August; the blank-eyed lurker outside the library entrance. The more she numbered her grievances the keener the desire to relinquish her entire life, to burn it all down and rebuild. Her history, her career, the very apartment

she presently cowered in—none of it meant anything to her. She would have liked to fall asleep and to subsequently awaken just about anywhere else on the planet—and as anyone but Sadie Young.

She did, after a time, manage to drift off—and to an unexpected place, at that.

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THE ROOM WAS VERY SMALL; in fact, its dimensions bordered on coffin-like. From someplace unseen—or maybe from no place at all—a faint light brought Sadie’s narrow surroundings into focus. Everything was powdery, shades of grey and black and white, as if she’d stepped into a charcoal drawing.

Behind her, there seemed to be nothing. Turning around, backing up, never crossed her mind. Her attention was fixed solely upon the outline of a narrow door just ahead, its round knob shining expectantly. The urge to open it was innate; her pale arm drifted out loosely before her and she pulled it ajar without a sound.

Swinging open on muted hinges, the door revealed a still narrower space—a space, it seemed, built solely to accommodate one. And this nook, she discovered, was already occupied.

A woman was inside. Her skin was white as bone and she wore a black dress that stretched nearly to her small, bare feet. These feet did not touch the ground—they hovered some inches above it. But of all the woman’s characteristics, this ranked among the *least* impressive. Surely, her most captivating quality was the expression she wore—one of perfect, sublime tranquility. Her face—eyes closed and lips fixed in a serene smile—could not have been more placid had it been a death mask. She was suspended in the air as though dipped in resin; stationary, sleeping her halcyon sleep, incorruptible.

Sadie’s surroundings began to contract. The passage in which she stood did not widen, but it *did* grow in length, leaving her at one end of what was now a long hall, and the pristine, slumbering idol on the other.



The sound of her heartbeat registered suddenly. It sounded like a run on the timpani—quick, sonorous, and growing quicker still.

Far ahead of her, the slumbering woman awoke.

And more than awoke.

Eyes only moments ago shut and serene were suddenly thrust open to their limits, their strained, weepy lids quivering and the orbs themselves a perfect, polished black. The lips, too—once relaxed in a perpetual smile—parted in a scream. The woman in black garb did not have to draw breath to coax out this deafening scream; it burst from deep within her as though it had always been there, clawing at the reverse of those once-placid lips to be released. Livid, wriggling veins sprang up across the alabaster face and neck, and the whole form took on that rare breed of loathsomeness unique to the destruction of the wholesome.

Sadie watched from across the narrow corridor as the woman in black ceased her floating and began to shamble toward her. The woman's jerking, staggering stride was that of the injured or malformed; she stumbled across the floor as though the hinges of her joints had been reversed without her knowing it. Loping and swaying—screaming from that ebon, spittle-stained maw—the woman drew nearer. The black eyes spun in their sockets till they threatened to spiral out of the shrieking face altogether.

The woman closed the gap, arriving within feet of her, and had Sadie not spun out of her bed onto the floor and awakened for the sudden jolt, the nightmare might have progressed even further—and to still greater peaks of demonic hallucination.

Coming to on the floor of her room, panting, sweat-drenched and shuddering as if febrile, she tucked herself into a fetal heap and wept into the carpet. Darkness pervaded; there was no guessing the hour. With hair matted to her face and a heart that felt on the verge of giving out, she worked herself into an upright position by degrees and after no small effort regained her feet. When she was sure she was in her room—

that she hadn't merely slipped into some new nightmare—she shuffled to the window and threw back the blinds.

It was night—and going by the stillness of the courtyard outside her building and the immense blackness of the sky, the hour was quite advanced. The winding sidewalks that stretched from building to building in her complex were empty. The building across from hers, some fifty or sixty yards on, was fully dark except for the constant yellow glow that issued from the stairway fixtures. Lamp posts were scattered throughout the property, but not in such number or sequence as to put a dent in the formidable gloom.

Sadie drew away from the window, but not before she glimpsed something else in the twilight courtyard. Huddled so closely beside a shady oak beside the opposite building that she nearly missed it, was a lone individual, well-obscured by the shadow cast by the stirring boughs. Despite the distance between them—she was on the second story of her building and at least half a football field away—she was certain as she was of anything that the figure was watching her.

This was confirmed moments later when the oily human silhouette took a step forward and began beckoning to her.

Sadie pushed away from the window. The blinds crashed back into place and she fell onto her bed. Even then she didn't stay put, clawing her way across the knotted covers and staggering into her nightstand. She put on a lamp, and when it flashed on she did a wild, minutes-long search of her room to ensure her solitude.

She wanted to scream. Her limbs shook and her pulse thumped deafeningly in her ears. Terrified and alone, she felt the full weight of her lonely existence for the first time in ages. She would have liked to reach out to someone for comfort—her father, her grandparents—but there was no one left in her life to save her.

Picking up her phone, she did the only thing she could think of.

August picked up on the third ring with a yawn. “S-Sadie?” he answered groggily.

“It’s... It’s all starting up again,” she hissed into the phone. Her teeth chattered and she sank to the floor with a sob. There she stayed until, a half hour later, August arrived at her door.

**A**ugust went from window to window. “I didn’t see anyone on the way in, either,” he noted, scratching at his wild red mane and stifling a yawn. “Not that I don’t believe you,” he quickly added. Slouching in his T-shirt and sweatpants, looking like he’d been jostled out of a sound sleep, he made his way back to the living room and plopped down onto the sofa.

Sadie locked her hands around a mug of hot tea she’d thrown together but had no intention of actually drinking. Upon his arrival, she’d taken refuge in her papasan chair while August had made the rounds, though his report of “all-clear” had done little to soothe her startled soul. “It’s all starting up again,” she said, shoulders stooped and legs tucked beneath her. She was still in the same outfit she’d worn to the hospital—the white sundress—and the wrinkles running through it, coupled with her disheveled hair, made her look grungy and unstable. Abandoning the tea to a side table, she smoothed out her hair and threw it into a messy ponytail. “I had the dream again.”

“The dream about your mother?” he asked. His flip-flops clopped as he crossed his legs and threw his arms across the backrest of the sofa.

She nodded. “It’s the first time in *years*,” she confided, wedging a thumbnail between her teeth. “I haven’t had that dream since I moved in with my grandparents. But it was different this time.”

“Different *how*?”

Not wishing to ruminate on the monstrous imagery of the dream too closely, she cleared her throat and summarized it as, “More frightening. It wasn’t like the other dreams. It was longer—more intense. And my mother...” Wakefulness had mercifully dulled her memory of the most egregious bits, but the stagger of that screaming, infernal figure held fast in her mind. “She was different—a *monster*. Barely my mother at all.”

August stroked at his bearded chin, pinching the coarse hairs between his fingertips. “I see. That’s pretty strange, having that kind of dream again after all these years. Do you think that meeting with that girl today is what prompted it?”

That her encounter with Ophelia had been the trigger Sadie hadn’t the least doubt... and yet the meandering path of her daily life had lately featured no shortage of potential harbingers. The figure glimpsed outside the library entrance the other night, her recent conversations with August—conversations that brought long-dormant memories back into focus—and her tense meeting with Rosie at the restaurant, too, seemed contributing factors.

“I think that Ophelia was the straw that broke the camel’s back,” she managed, lowering her head into her hands. “But it feels like this has been building up in the background for quite awhile now.”

“So, if you don’t mind me asking, what happened today?” August polished his glasses with his T-shirt and wiped at his droopy eyes. “At the hospital, I mean. When I dropped you off, you weren’t acting right at all. I was pretty worried, to be honest.”

The drip of the kitchen tap called to mind the storm of the prior afternoon, and with it came visions of that cramped, sterile room in the psych ward. Even at that moment, in the small hours of the night, the haunted girl in room 334 was probably still staring out the window, the shadows cast throughout her room fidgeting odiously across the walls like the roots of a foul sapling. “She scared me,” she put it simply.

“She wasn’t normal—wasn’t what I expected. I saw things while I was in that room. It felt like there were more than just the two of us in there.”

August nodded. “So you think she really got tied up with something... *supernatural*, then?”

Nestling deeper into the chair, she shrugged. “I didn’t *want* to believe that was the case, but... yeah, I think she did. There was more than just a teenager behind those eyes of hers. From the minute I walked in there to the minute I left the hospital I felt threatened. Teens can be jerks, real moody and rude. But this was different.” Sadie frowned and balanced her brow against the heel of her palm. “Something is definitely wrong with her, and the doctors won’t be able to fix it. I can guarantee it.”

“OK,” he replied, sitting up. “So, we need to do some digging, then. What would be the best way to get to the bottom of this, I wonder?”

“*No*,” she snapped, loosing a nervous laugh. “I told Rosie I didn’t want any part of this and I meant it. I poked around enough, August. Whatever has the girl acting this way, I want nothing to do with it. I just paid her a visit and now look what’s become of me!”

He toyed with one of his earlobes and groaned inwardly. “Yeah, and I get that. But it’s time to face the facts, Sadie. Things are in motion now. You’ve either got to get proactive about it or let it trample you.” August studied the ceiling for a beat. “After years of living a normal life, this old weirdness, this ghost stuff, has started up again. If you want it to stop—and to stop for good—then you’ve got to start asking questions. That’s what I’d do if I were in your shoes.”

“Easy for you to say,” she shot back.

“Maybe so, but the point stands.” He wagged a finger at her like a scold. “You had a difficult upbringing, had some scary experiences. But rather than help you work through them, make peace with your unique gift, everyone in your life tried to separate you from it. They acted like it wasn’t real, told you not to discuss it. Am I wrong?”

Sadie studied her toes and offered a weak shake of the head.

“You start having terrifying dreams and your dad’s solution is to move you in with your grandparents? I dunno, but that doesn’t seem too sensible to me. He should have talked to you about it, tried to offer some insight rather than just send you away like you were defective. And your grandparents, too—they knew you could see strange things, things that the rest of us can’t detect, but they forbid you from making sense of that ability. They stuck you with a therapist and hoped you’d forget all about it—that it would simply go away. That isn’t a healthy way to address a problem, though.

“Since you were Ophelia’s age, you’ve been working to close yourself off from the supernatural, Sadie. You followed the advice of your elders and ran from it as long as you could. But now it’s all starting up again. It turns out that the problem never went away at all, it’s just been waiting for you.” August tossed his shoulders. “So, what will you do now? Keep running? You already know that won’t work—not in the long-term. No, what you should consider doing is to meet it head-on. You’re seeing things, awful things, but you’re seeing them for a reason. What would happen if you acknowledged this and sought to control it—went looking for answers instead of fleeing from it like you’ve always done?”

“My family only wanted what was best for me,” was her reply. Sadie tugged on the edge of the chair cushion, red in the face. “They wanted to protect me. That’s all. They weren’t bad people.”

“Sure, but did their approach get results?” He did a slow pan of the room. “In the end, all this running just pushed off the problem to another day.” Rubbing at his neck, he continued. “Seems to me like the bill’s come due.”

“Maybe it has.” Sadie fell into silence for a long while then, staring down into her cup of cooling tea. Looking to the window, she discovered the faint light of dawn peeking in around the edge of her blinds. “But what can I do?” she finally asked. “Sometimes running is the smart thing to do, the only reasonable option. I could embrace this ‘*gift*’ of mine, like you

say, but where will that lead?" She chuckled darkly and turned away from him. "Pursuing this might just make a ghost out of *me*."

"Maybe, but a life spent running in terror is no life at all, is it?" August sighed. "Find out what you're really seeing and why you're seeing it. If you feel like this girl, Ophelia, is the tipping point, then look into what happened to her. Maybe the key to freeing her of this dark influence is what you need, too."

"Sure, but... Where do I start? And how the hell am I supposed to do this alone?" she asked.

August clicked his tongue. "Now, no one ever said you had to do this *alone*. You've got me in your corner and I'm *at least* as valuable as a dozen men." He snickered. "I'll help out, however I can. I may not be able to see ghosts like you, but there's no reason for you to dig into this solo."

She arched a brow and let slip an incredulous smile. "Oh? That's real chivalrous, but what dog do *you* have in this fight, exactly?"

August raised one of his fists and placed it over his heart. "Us loners have gotta stick together. But more importantly, we're both part of the Montpelier Public Library family and that's thicker than blood as far as I'm concerned. Don't you remember swearing the librarian's oath?"

Sadie rolled her eyes. "If there *were* such a thing, I don't imagine it would mention helping your co-workers with ghosts... but thanks. I appreciate it."

"No problem." August stood up, stretched. "So, it's been a long night. If it's all the same to you, I'm going to head back to my place for a little beauty sleep. You gonna be OK?"

"Yeah," she replied, easing herself out of the chair. "I think so. Thanks again for coming. I really owe you one."

He snapped his fingers. "Well, not to be a total asshole, but I *do* remember you promising me a meal for taking you by the hospital. Ya flaked on that one, so how about we meet up later today for a bite?"



“OK,” she said. “That sounds fine.” Then, hesitating, she added, “I’ll call Rosie in a little while and apologize. Maybe we can meet with Ophelia’s friends and find out more about what happened that night they visited Beacon Hill.”

“As good a place as any to start,” he said, striding to the door. “Let me know if you need a ride.” Slipping out into the hall with a wave, he jogged down the stairs and back to his Honda.

After the night she’d had, comfort was awfully scarce. Still, having talked things through with August—having devised a plan, however vague—riled her confidence. Downing her cold tea, she picked up her phone and decided to give Rosie a call. She fished the slip of paper with her cell number on it from her purse and dialed while opening the blinds in the apartment. As she did so, she looked out each window and surveyed the scene outside. It was thankfully phantom-free.

The phone rang three, four times. Just before it was set to go to voicemail, there came a clipped answer. “Hello?”

Sadie cleared her throat. “Hey, Rosie. It’s me, Sadie. I, uh... I’m sorry to call so early.” She paused. “And I’m so sorry about yesterday. Uh, I was hoping you had a minute to talk.”

Rosie’s voice had a gravelly edge to it, like she’d come down with a terrible cold overnight. “Thanks for calling, Sadie, but...” She wiped loudly at her nose. “I don’t have time to talk with you right now.”

Nursing immense guilt for having rushed out of the hospital the day before, Sadie apologized profusely. “I’m really, really sorry, Rosie. I shouldn’t have stormed out like that yesterday. The truth is that I was scared. But I’m calling because I want to help, however I can.”

“It’s not that,” Rosie interjected. There was a pause on the line as the woman gulped and steadied her voice. “I don’t have time to talk right now because there’s been an... incident.”

“An incident? With Ophelia?” Sadie shouldered her phone and walked to the living room window, looking down upon the parking lot where August was still situating himself in the driver’s seat. “What happened?”

Rosie spared a shuddering sigh. “Ophelia went missing last night,” was all she said.

“Missing?” asked Sadie, brow furrowed. “From the hospital?”

“That’s right. Look, I’ll call you later. The police are here, and…” Rosie trailed off.

“Can I come by?” She struggled to open the window and waved frantically down to August, who was preparing to pull out. “Can I meet you there, at the hospital?”

Rosie hesitated. “OK, sure. Give me a call when you get here.”

Cutting the line, Sadie shouted out the window. “August! August!”

The reversing Honda suddenly halted as its driver caught sight of her. August rolled down the window and stuck his head out, easing back into the parking spot. “What’s up?”

“Hey, uh, how about we do breakfast instead?” she asked.

He peered at the clock on his dash and scratched his head. “Uh… Now? Sure, I guess. What do you have in mind?” he called up to her.

Nabbing her purse and keys, Sadie locked up and rushed out to the parking lot to meet him. Plunging into the passenger seat, she finally replied, “I was thinking the hospital cafeteria.”

The psych unit appeared to run in its usual sedate mode, except that a handful of police officers stood in one of the consultation rooms near the nurse's station, speaking in hushed tones to a frazzled supervisor.

Rosie met both Sadie and August near the unit entrance as the elevator spit them out, and she wrapped the former in a tight embrace as though she were hugging her own daughter. "I'm glad you're here," she said. That morning, or the evening previous, the harried mother had attempted some self-care; she'd done her hair and makeup. Receiving the unexpected news that her troubled daughter had vanished from her hospital room overnight, the makeup had been mostly wiped away by tear-stained tissues now, and what little did remain had been smeared into a messy, clownish haze. She led the young pair past the elevators to the little alcove where they'd met the previous day.

"So," began Sadie as they all took seats in the stiff chairs on offer, "what happened?" She looked down the hall at the sturdy metal door fronting the unit; that a patient could slip through it undetected seemed impossible. "You say she disappeared from her room, but... how can that be?"

August divided his gaze between the two of them, then stood to help himself to a cup of coffee from the machine set out for visitors.

"They only just told me about an hour or two ago," said Rosie, dabbing at her eyes. "Except for the shift checks, they

hadn't entered Ophelia's room all night, figured she was sleeping, I guess. The last check was at 3AM. The morning nurse came by four hours later, and..." She grappled with the lump in her throat. "She was just *gone*."

Sadie nodded, though she still failed to understand how that was possible on such a closely-guarded unit. "She... walked out? Escaped?"

Rosie could only shrug. "They're... not sure. You know, they put a camera in her room to keep an eye on her, but they haven't let me see the footage yet. Maybe the recording will contain some clue, but... They've been combing the hospital ever since—called a 'Code Adam'—and they're thinking about contacting media outlets to start a local search in case she actually made it off the premises." She was wearing a flannel shirt, and she ran the sleeve past her nose with a loud *sniff*. "I just don't know how this could happen, or where she's gone."

August sat back down with his cup of coffee and blew on it. "Does anyone know *how* she got off the unit? There have to be a million security cameras in this place, right? I'm sure that if the security guards run through all of the night's footage they'll find her passing through a door someone forgot to lock." He sported a polite smile. "Anyway, I'm sure they'll find her. The police are involved, so you know they're taking this seriously."

Rosie was little comforted however. "I went home last night and felt like something was wrong. It was just a feeling I had in my gut; a feeling that things were getting worse, rather than better. And then, as I'm driving in this morning, I get the call..." Her teeth creaked against each other as she held the tears back. "I just want this to stop. Whatever it is. Is that too much to ask?"

Sadie wasn't of much help in these situations and maintained an awkward silence as Rosie collected herself for the umpteenth time. Finally, she said, "Listen, Rosie, about yesterday..." She scooted forward in her chair till she occupied only the edge of the seat. "After meeting with Ophelia, I think you might be onto something. I don't know

what's gotten into your daughter and I have no idea how to stop it, but... it struck me as unnatural. Something dark is behind this recent change in her. I wanted to deny it, but there's just no other way for me to explain what I felt in that room yesterday."

Here, August chimed in. "Sadie and I both are interested in helping. This morning we were actually trying to think of some way to move forward—stage a kind of investigation, I guess. Um... She went to an old house, right?"

Rosie nodded. "The one on Beacon Hill."

"And she went with friends of hers, right?" added Sadie.

"That's right. Her friends Joey and Leslie, from school. They're pretty good kids—close to my daughter." Rosie sighed and looked at the two of them in turn. "What are you planning? How can I help?"

Sadie chuckled, throwing her hands out in a preemptive gesture. "I don't want to get your hopes up. We're winging this completely. But we were wondering about these friends of hers. You mentioned that she started acting weird after returning from Beacon Hill. Have you spoken to her friends about it? Maybe they saw something, noticed something, while they were there?"

"I spoke to them a little," said Rosie, "but they didn't have much to say. I think they were worried about getting into bigger trouble and they didn't even want to admit they'd gone there. If you think it would help to speak to them, I can arrange that."

"That'd be great," replied Sadie. "The sooner the better, I think. Can you arrange for us to meet them this afternoon, maybe?"

"I'll try. I imagine they'll be more open to talking to you, seeing as how you're younger." Rosie shrugged. "Is there anything else I can do?"

August took a gulp of coffee. "I think we're going to need to look into the history of that house. If the house has anything to do with what's happened to your daughter then we need to

cover our bases. It sounds like it's ground zero for this entire thing. But Sadie and I will manage that easily enough. We're librarians, after all; all we do is research."

"OK," said Rosie. "I'll get ahold of Ophelia's friends so that you can meet them today. And—" At that moment, the door to the psych ward swung open noisily.

A woman in a white lab coat, flanked by a pair of departing police officers, started into the visitor's lobby. The cops set off for the elevator, but the woman hooked a right and made a beeline for the seated trio. "Hello," she said, flashing a gummy smile that lasted only an instant. "I'm Heather, the hospital supervisor." Her bespectacled gaze settled on Rosie and she offered a hand to shake. "I want to let you know we're doing everything we can to find your daughter. This is a very strange case, and it isn't consistent at all with our core values. I'm very sorry for what's happened and I want you to know we have everyone at our disposal working to rectify it. Patient safety is our top priority."

Rosie forced a smile, uttered a pained, "Thanks."

Heather motioned back to the metal door. "If you could come this way, I'd like to show you the security footage taken within your daughter's room last night. As I'm sure you're aware, we put a ceiling camera in her room—standard procedure for patients with suicidal ideation—and we did pick up some movement around 4am. However..." She held her tongue in the interest of picking *le mot juste*. "The footage is a bit of a mess."

"How do you mean?" demanded Rosie, taking a step toward the unit.

"Well," Heather began, running a hand through her short, blonde curls, "our supervisors in both the IT department and in security haven't seen anything quite like this. The recording is somewhat scrambled as if the camera had been subjected to interference. What's more, it cuts out before revealing Ophelia's precise movements out of the room." She pointed once again at the door. "If you head to the station, the secretary there can show you the footage on her computer."

Rosie nodded and charged for the unit entrance—but first asked, “These two are friends of mine and Ophelia’s. Can they watch, too?”

Sadie and August looked to one another.

“Oh, certainly,” said Heather. “That’s no problem.” Pulling a business card out of her pocket, she handed it to Rosie and added, “I’ll be working around the clock to find your daughter, and the minute I have news to share I’ll let you know. Meanwhile, if there’s anything I can do, any question I can answer, call me at my office number or have the hospital operator page me overhead.” With that, she joined the police officers in the elevator bank.

Without missing a beat, Rosie pocketed the card and rushed at once into the psych ward. Sadie and August followed at her heels, slipping into the unit as the door *clunked* open.

The young secretary at the desk—the same one from the previous day—gave Rosie a weary smile and said, “Did you come to watch the footage?” Having already queued it up on her screen, she picked up the bulky computer monitor and turned it so that the three visitors could see. Playback began when she tapped the space bar on her keyboard, and the girl adopted a curiously wary mien. Stealing a glance at Sadie, the secretary’s feigned smile told all. *This footage gives me the creeps* was what she was thinking.

The three of them stood before the nurse’s station and watched.

The camera installed in the ceiling of Ophelia’s room—a cheap, portable thing—recorded in grainy black and white—and from the first frame, Sadie couldn’t help but shudder for the resemblance between the recorded imagery and the charcoal trappings of her recent nightmare. Still, she watched on, and the time ticked by in the lower-right quadrant by the second. The secretary had advanced the footage nearly to the point of the alleged disturbance, when the recording had apparently ceased. Ophelia was seen to toss and turn in her bed for a short while.

Suddenly, the picture went wobbly. Despite its being a digital recording, the footage adopted all the fuzziness of a tracking VHS tape. Visual snow crowded in around the edges where only moments ago the picture had been perfectly clear.

The subject of the video behaved in a strange way during this period of graphical flux. She had gotten out of bed, though the intermittent clarity of the picture had lent even this simple act an impression of malignity, for the jittery distortion of the recording had seen her lying in bed one moment and then suddenly standing at room's center the next with no perceptible movement between. All three of the viewers startled somewhat at this seeming display of teleportation.

Once squared at room's center, Ophelia could be seen to look upward, in the direction of the camera, though she did so in a most peculiar fashion—and once again, the choppiness of the video superadded a hint of the sinister. The cut in the video had occurred at the very moment she'd turned upward to look at the ceiling, with the result being that her head appeared to snap back at great speed, and at an unusual angle—the back of her head seeming flush with her shoulder blades. Coupled with the onset of a dark, whirring blur, only her eyes and mouth were discernible—and scarcely, at that. For the interference, her eyes had looked oversized and white; her mouth a yawning black blur.

Perhaps most disquieting was what occurred next, as the visual interference ceased and the recording played on normally.

The trio found themselves watching a recording of an empty hospital room.

One moment, the patient had been featured front-and-center, albeit through a fog of distortion.

The next, she'd simply vanished, like she'd been a speck of dust wiped from the camera's lens.

For close to a minute, the three of them kept watching the video, waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. “The rest of it is just like that,” said the secretary, standing up and pausing the footage. “The rest of the recording is crystal-clear,



but she's not in it. It's like she just..." She shrugged. "Vanished into thin air, I guess." She wrangled the computer monitor back into place, but not without losing a full-body shudder.

Rosie had lost her complexion and strayed a few paces from the station, looking like she was about to be sick. Without a word, she passed back through the metal door and steadied herself against one of the walls.

Sadie followed close behind. "You OK, Rosie?"

"It's like..." Rosie ran a palm across her stony face. "It's like she was carried off on the Devil's own wings."

August rubbed at the back of his arm and parked himself to Rosie's right, ready to catch her if her woozy legs gave way. "The thing that weirds me out is that the camera only malfunctioned during the most inconvenient time. Except for that minute or two when Ophelia got out of bed, the thing has been recording like a dream. What's up with that?"

"Whatever is *in* her... I guess when it shows itself, electronics don't play too nicely." Sadie massaged the back of her neck and was surprised to find the flesh still standing up. "Anyway, a video like that isn't going to help us find her. It raises more questions than it answers."

"Where do you think she could be?" asked Rosie, crossing her arms tightly and sagging against the wall.

"Maybe she went home?" suggested August.

"It's possible." Sadie nibbled on her lower lip and took a few paces toward the bank of elevators. There was a window there, brightly-lit, and from it she could see three stories down and a fair bit into the distance. "If not home, maybe she went to a friend's house, or some place of similar significance." Staring through the window, another thought occurred to her. "Or... maybe she returned to *the* house."

"The house?" Rosie shook her head. "Wait, you mean..."

"Beacon Hill?" August arched a brow. "Maybe..."

“We have to look for her,” insisted Rosie. “I can run home and see if she’s there, but the two of you—would you mind? Can you go to that house? It’s a few miles from here, but if that’s really where she went it’s possible she’s still there. If we split up, we’ll have a better chance of finding her quickly. It’s been more than four hours since she disappeared—we don’t have much time.”

Most everyone in town was familiar to some degree with the abandoned house on Beacon Hill. It was something of an institution—a place that the locals referenced even if they’d never dare set foot there themselves, and which was implicitly understood as “haunted”. Stories of all shapes and kinds circulated about the place, from the grisly to the downright bizarre, but this was the extent of Sadie’s acquaintance with it. She’d never dreamed that she’d one day have cause to become more familiar with it—much less enter it in search of a missing girl.

“Absolutely,” replied August. He nudged Sadie’s arm. “We can swing by and scope out the place, right?”

“Maybe,” began Sadie, frowning with hesitance, “we should let the police know. *They* can scope out Beacon Hill and—”

Before she’d even finished, Rosie was already stepping into the elevator. “Come on, let’s hurry.”

It seemed the decision had already been made for her.

“I still think we should get the cops involved. There’s no reason for *us* to go into that house to find her,” insisted Sadie.

“Well, there’s *one* reason, at the very least.” August hung a sharp left and started past the local mall. A few miles beyond they’d find the empty fields at the foot of Beacon Hill. “The cops can’t see ghosts. As far as they’re concerned, they’re looking for a troubled girl. We know better, though—we know what she really is.”

“Yeah, which is all the more reason to—”

“We’re in this to help her, right? Authority figures like doctors and cops haven’t exactly been pulling their weight thus far; Ophelia needs something they can’t provide. She needs *you*, your gift, to see... *whatever* it is that’s inside her.” He let off the accelerator and rolled his window down a few inches. “It’s just one teenaged girl. I think we can handle this.”

Despite these reassurances, Sadie was more than a little skeptical. Referring to Ophelia as a mere teenager was in itself unwise; she’d proven much more than that, which was the whole reason Sadie had gotten involved in this mess at all. Further, to hear the girl tell it, the whole trouble had begun in this remote, abandoned house. This little rescue mission of theirs was tantamount to following a diseased person to the very place they’d picked up their infection. It felt reckless.

Leaving the mall in the rearview, passing a car lot, a fast food joint, the fields at the foot of the hill soon entered into

view. There were no indicators in place to christen this particular spot “Beacon Hill”; to the best of Sadie’s knowledge it was an unofficial designation, perhaps the name of the street that had once run thereabouts, in the days when multiple houses had populated the rolling hilltop. In the way of parking, the closest solution was a sprawling stretch of weed-heavy gravel where a gas station had once stood, a quarter of a mile from the base of the hill. August wheeled the car into this stretch and cut the engine.

Sadie stepped out into the warm sunlight, stretched, and looked across the field to the gradual uphill slope whose crown was the large, stony abode. At this distance, it looked nondescript and harmless enough; she’d probably driven past this spot a few times over the years and glimpsed the shadowed hulk on the knoll in her periphery, thinking nothing of it. As it had become a destination now, her present appraisal of the far-off building was much changed, however. Standing beside the hood of August’s Honda, she stared at the pale accumulation of stonework and got the impression that—even in the bright light of late morning—the shadows of the property had about them an air of permanence. Some houses were built in such a way as to make use of the natural light; to admit it, to harness it for the comfort of its occupants. Not so this house. By all appearances, even at this range, the construction of this lofty abode had sought first and foremost what one might deem the preservation of darkness, or the renunciation of light. However one might choose to put it, the effect was the same.

August locked up and started for the hill, hands in his pockets. “So, I take it you’ve never been here before, huh?”

“No.” Sadie followed behind, trampling a number of dandelions.

“That makes two of us. Wonder if it’ll live up to the rumors.”

Sadie might’ve taken the bait, might’ve asked, “*Which rumors?*” and together they might’ve cobbled together a working mythology for the house based on the tidbits they’d both picked up over the course of their residency in

Montpelier. Instead, she divided her gaze between the house and the grass beneath her feet, thankful that the house remained—for the moment—some ways off.

Even from this distance, the house rather attracted the eye. It may have been Sadie's own tastes—she found herself drawn to the grandiosity of its architecture—that kept her glancing up at it as they wandered near. Houses of this age and kind were a rare thing indeed in staid Montpelier; even the oldest remaining city buildings were unadorned and vaguely brutalist in effect. Had the circumstances been different; had the two of them been coming here solely to reflect on the building's style, rather than to stage a reckless search, then perhaps her guts would not have been churning as they began their ascent of the shaggy hill.

Beacon Hill grew messier, more unkempt the further they climbed. Lush grasses—of heights and varieties not known elsewhere in town—sprang up in wild masses, and at their tallest appeared almost knee-high. Mixed in with the knotted turf was at least of a generation's worth of windblown druff; garbage discarded by picnickers, toppled fencing and the occasional brick. The nearest boundary of the property was in clearer view now. The stones of what had once been a retaining wall, sapped of color and left porous—nigh scoriac—by decades of exposure, jutted out of the ground like decayed molars.

August quit his yapping as they drew nearer. His usual loquaciousness had been stunted by the sight of the thing and he looked up at it with barely-veiled terror now, despite his earlier bravado. Its alienage and extent were profoundly humbling from up-close. "I've never seen anything like it," was how he summed it up while trudging through the grass. "Except in movies, maybe."

They stood almost toe-to-toe now with the titan of Beacon Hill. Its numerous windows, ringed in weathered stonework, possessed all the darkness of caverns cut into a slab of mountain and at a glance there could be no telling what dwelt within. Some forty yards ahead there yawned a wide door through which they could enter, but for the moment neither

party showed much interest in doing so. They lingered near the tottering retaining wall, eyed the remnants of a crumbling terrace, but presently went no further.

Breaking the silence before it got the better of him, August looked up at the house and whistled. “They don’t make ‘em like this anymore. How old do you think it is? I’ll bet it was built in the early 1900’s. Hell, maybe the late 1800’s, even.” He raked at his beard as he spoke, compulsively, and then took his keys out of his pocket. On the same ring was a chunky black flashlight roughly the dimensions of a D battery, and he tested the cluster of LEDs within by a click of the button on the rear. It flashed to life, but even this didn’t seem to inspire much confidence in him. “Always come prepared,” he chuckled, waving the thing in his hand. And then, seeming to look anywhere but at the house itself, he fell silent once again.

In the ensuing quiet Sadie strived to listen for sounds of life; voices, footsteps, any audible noise issuing from within those darkened halls. But none came. A fine summer wind rolled past the hill and brought with it—beyond a frisson of unease—a vegetal rustling that spanned the entirety of the grassy acreage. Said wind seemed briefly to probe the house’s many open doors and windows, only to withdraw apace and in so doing produce a low, hollow piping, as if in warning of what lay within.

Sadie cleared her throat, and the moment the wind died down she raised her voice in a shout. “Ophelia! Ophelia! Are you here?” She took a step forward and called out once more, hands coned round her mouth. “Ophelia! Ophelia!”

August joined in too. “Ophelia? Ophelia? Are you inside?”

Another gale swept past, and still no answer came.

“Maybe she’s not inside after all,” muttered August, unable to mask the hopefulness of his tone. “We might have come here for nothing. I mean, it was worth a shot, right?”

“It’s possible she can’t hear us,” answered Sadie, her lips sagging grimly. “Or she could be hurt.” She studied the upper story windows, took in their unbelievable blackness one at a time to see whether their calls had summoned anyone thence.

Another statement to the effect of “*We have no choice but to go in and search*” had been poised to leave her lips when something entered into view. Her attentions highjacked, the words were left unvoiced.

An upper story window to the left of the yawning entry door was the one that’d caught her eye, for in it there were now framed the unmistakable contours of a human face. A countenance of singular paleness—and seeming wholly detached from any discernible bulk—surfaced from the abounding gloom like that of some deep-dwelling marine creature drawn to the surface for a breath of air. At such a distance as Sadie now stood from the window, some twenty feet or more high, she could make out only that this oval-faced occupant was looking out across the field, likely lured by their cries.

Sadie raised a finger to point out the porcelain face, but found she couldn’t speak.

“What is it?” August followed the trajectory set forth by her trembling finger, but even as he studied the window she intended—as well as those adjacent—he saw nothing in them. Wiping at his eyes, he took a few steps forward and asked, “Do you see something?”

Anyone with a pair of working eyes should have been able to see *this*. “T-There,” she stammered vacantly. “The window...” Sadie watched as the face seemed to strain a little outward, as if in concerted study—and then, just as suddenly, to retreat into the depths. But before it disappeared completely from view, the motion of a wan little hand could be seen, and before it, too, had been consumed by the darkness, the meaning of the gesture had become clear. The person in the window had been beckoning to her.

“Huh,” said August, pacing this way and that. He stared on tiptoe, blocked the sun from his eyes, but no matter what he did he missed seeing the figure in the window. “I don’t see anything.”

It was little wonder he couldn’t see it. “I... I don’t think it’s the kind of thing that you’re going to be able to see,” she

admitted, shoulders tense.

He gave her a curious look, like he wasn't sure what she meant, but while polishing the lenses of his glasses on his shirt, he clicked his tongue. "Oh. You mean it's a ghost thing, huh?"

"It was waving," continued Sadie.

"What did they look like?"

Sadie did her best to describe it, watching the window for any return of the beckoning figure, but the more she tried to put words to what she'd seen, the more inadequate her descriptions seemed. "Imagine a human face cut out of paper, a mask, but with nothing behind it," was how she finally decided to put it.

"Could it have been Ophelia?" asked August, running his hand against a weathered brick.

"I don't know."

He clicked his tiny flashlight on and off a few times. "Well, there's one way to find out, eh?" He nodded at the entrance. "You ready?" The way he had wrapped his quivering fist around the little flashlight, the way his gaze couldn't help but jump around at the slightest breeze, made it clear he wasn't looking forward to exploring the house in the least, but he pressed his face into the bravest possible expression under the circumstances and cleared his throat repeatedly to maintain a certain vocal depth. "Let's just run in there real quick. No need to linger. Just have to make sure she's not here, right?"

Sadie was more than a little reticent. Sure, it was possible that the figure in the window had been Ophelia; darkness and distance both could obscure the features of even a familiar face. But what if it hadn't been the girl? What if it had been something more sinister, waving her in to her doom? It was this possibility that kept her moored to the crumbling retaining wall.

And there was, if she was being honest, still another reason she couldn't find it in herself to go in—something that had dawned on her only gradually, but which was at that very



moment too stark a thing to ignore. The house possessed a kind of combativeness, a hostility that would surely act upon anyone foolish enough to wander inside. To what facet of the house this impression was owed was not immediately apparent—it might have lain in the ruined stonework, in the sagging chimney stacks or in the heaps of weatherbeaten shingles cast pell-mell across the knotted lawn—but that it was oppressive and repellant could not be denied.

Even taking all of this into account, Sadie found herself making a shaky advance toward the house. *This is exactly the kind of thing you came to face, right? Remember what August said: You can't keep running away from this. You have to face it. Especially this time, when a girl's safety is at risk. If you turn back now, you're turning back on Ophelia, on Rosie and on yourself.* She kept close to August, who began his own jittery stride for the house, and together they began wordlessly for the wide, black entryway.

**T**here existed in this house a darkness so dense and perfect that in entering it one couldn't help but fear becoming coated in it. August crossed the threshold first, nose twitching as he breathed in the scent of accumulated antiquities, and Sadie was close behind, one hand pressed to the weathered stone arch of the entryway. The LEDs in the flashlight, however bright in other circumstances, could only rasp at the darkness found here—could only punch minute holes in the black fabric, thus adding to the impression of a tar-like and tangible air. It was clear that if they meant to advance at all with such a weak light, they would be forced to do so very slowly.

The whine of centuried wood sounded at their heels—the only noise to be heard from inside the tremendous building, and a very jarring one at that. In its years of abandonment the reign of silence had been well-cemented here, and as the creak of the floors subsided and the duo fell still, the rule of quiet was imposed with still greater harshness. It is said that silence can deafen; till she'd entered the ruin on Beacon Hill and sampled its sepulchral quiet for herself, Sadie had never grasped the meaning of the idiom.

The air was still—chokingly so—yet seemed pregnant with an animate portentousness. Only moments ago, she recalled with a shudder, she had glimpsed a face in an upper story window. Where was that face now and to what ends was its owner scheming in this miserable place? For all Sadie knew, the glimpsed figure stood three paces ahead, or

presently leered from some yet-undiscovered corner. The very notion that something should *choose* to exist in a setting such as this troubled her profoundly. A cold fear, as of being well out of one's depth, began to rack her; the fear, perhaps, of the minnow leaving the shallows for darker, uncharted waters. She watched August soundlessly wave the light, cognizant that he might just reveal the Kraken with the next flip of his wrist.

They ventured deeper in; not, perhaps, of their own volition, but drawn thence by the gravity of some unseen force lurking somewhere in the blackness. Some paces into this first room—a foyer? A large hall? The weakness of their flashlight made it difficult to scope out its exact dimensions with any certainty—and already the daylight ringing the entryway struck her as powdery and distant. Their shoes clopped against the timeworn boards, and the air they encountered further in was over-seasoned with notes of grime and decay. They paused at hearing something scamper in the distance, perhaps a large rat or other animal, but no chasing of the noise with the light could reveal its source.

August sniffed loudly, placed his forearm up against his nose. “This place has been empty a long, long time,” he whispered. “I’ll bet it’s been like a hundred years since anyone last lived here.” He cast the light upward in a survey of the ceiling and found—either for its great height or the weakness of the LEDs—that he couldn’t see it. “It’s like a castle.”

Sadie shuffled on without a word, keeping close to his side. Traipsing through this fibrous darkness into the unknown set her heart aflutter; at turns her own clumsy footfalls were drowned out by the toil of her pulse. When August arrived at the edge of a web-encrusted wall and pivoted slightly to his right, she dared a look around a new corner and spied what appeared to be a long hallway, the ceiling punctured at sporadic intervals and threads of intrusive sunlight worming their way through the openings, shining like diamond dust. The sight of the daylight brought her comfort enough to use her voice. “Should we go down there and shout for her? Do you think she’ll answer us if we call out?”

August chewed on his lower lip for a time. “You saw someone in the upstairs window, right? I reckon *someone’s* going to respond, but... it may not be the girl.”

Raw fear set her guts churning. She returned to the memory of that vague, porcelain-like face, glimpsed only minutes ago. “Well,” she continued with a shiver, “let’s hurry up, then.” She waited for August to start down the shadow-clotted hall and then followed, her itchy eyes tracking the bob of the flashlight beam.

Thus channelled into the house’s deeper reaches, the pair descended into vigilant silence. Coupled with the weak glow of the sun that sometimes leaked into the passage through breaks in the roof, they found they could make out its dimensions with more thoroughness than hitherto possible; a thing that might have lent them no small comfort had conditions been different. But the state of the passage they presently occupied was monstrous in its decay, and the recklessness of their errand was brought into sharp relief.

The ancient plaster walls puckered where the elements had been unkind, and the measured step of both inhabitants incited them to quiver in places not unlike wrinkled skin. Crevasses long-packed with spider’s silk and mold shimmered in the whitish light as they passed, as did the clicking black legs of the things that made their home there. Baseboards were in many places lifted completely from the walls; sure-footed pests dashed through the narrow channels behind with an ominous rustling. The ceiling, in its more heavily damaged sections, buckled beneath the weight of the upper story; a survey of the second floor seemed unlikely, then.

August paused to look into one of the cracks, massaging the back of his neck. “That light is coming from the upstairs windows, it looks like. But the damage in some spots is heavy. I don’t think we’ll be able to get up there.”

That suited Sadie just fine. They’d barely begun their tour of the house but she was good and ready to call it quits. “If we really think she’s up there, we’ll call for help. The fire department or something can get her down.” She frowned, giving a weak shake of the head. “But, you know, I’m not sure

I actually saw anyone. It could have been my eyes playing tricks on me.”

He let out a long sigh and held the light out a little further, pointing out a fork in the hall. “Or, you know, it’s possible you saw a ghost. Either way, no big deal, right?” He tried chuckling, as if to lighten the mood, but the echo of his laughter clashed violently against the atmosphere of the place and he fell once more into silence.

The hallway continued straight ahead, leading to a more sunlit portion of the house, and also branched to their immediate right, down another lengthy hall—this one also featuring some few slivers of daylight fed into the house by the windows and defects of the rooms down its length. Without deliberation, both frightened creatures naturally chose the best-lit path and continued in their set direction, covering some tens of feet before arriving at a stairwell. The warped wooden steps led into the upper story, and from some ruptured window or roof defect there came traces of the warm sunlight.

Sadie wasn’t willing to risk her safety attempting an ascent, but she reached out and touched the dust-heavy bannister and even leaned on the bottom-most step while trying to look into the level above. She craned her slight neck, looked up into the sunlit craters in the roof and watched as dust motes circulated in the feeble golden glow. The steps were many, and half-way up there seemed to be a landing, but it was difficult to make out much more from her present position. After a brief hesitation, she climbed another step, clinging to the grime-slick bannister and straining her gaze upward.

“Sadie, I wouldn’t keep going if I were you,” warned August. “Those steps might not be safe. And the floor up there —”

She shushed him with an outstretched hand and climbed the third step, bracing herself against a solid bit of wall. She was, she *hoped*, the lighter of the two of them, and some degree of exploration was necessary to ensure Ophelia hadn’t gone up there. Perched carefully on this third step, scanning the upper level as best she could, she called out for the girl in a

weak, wavering voice. “Ophelia? Y-You up there?” By the frail daylight issuing from above, Sadie studied the next few steps. If the girl *had* gone up to the second story then surely she’d have left some trace—footprints, breaks in the dust—behind. As best she could tell, no such signs existed. She looked back up again, standing nearly on tip-toe, and prepared to call out one last time.

She stopped short, however. From the upper level, she found her gaze reciprocated.

From a bleak recess several feet above, something leered back down at her from within the shadows. A pale, ovoid countenance descended from a muddled, inky physique that blended in effortlessly with the shadows of this upper story nook. As though it were a living mold using the house for a substrate, thick, ropey tendrils of blackness had taken root throughout the crumbling walls and from this quivering heap the face drooped—waggled—downward in a slug-like inspection of the newcomer. Thin, black slits for eyes were thrust open; lips were parted to reveal an open, circular mouth. Nothing filled these open spaces in the milk-white face that could answer for organs of sight or taste, though. Only a swarming, jittering and buzzing lived there, as of ten thousand black flies crammed into the dimensions of a human skull.

Sadie lost her footing and slipped, landing on her knees. The stairwell seized and squealed beneath her. She lurched back to her feet, holding onto the bannister with such tightness that it shifted slightly out of place, and looked once more to the dim upper story.

Thin bands of sunlight wormed their way through the cracks in the walls and ceiling. Circular water stains marred large portions of the remaining plaster and a lonesome spider idled on its thread, legs twitching. The thing—if it had been there at all—was gone.

“You OK?” asked August, taking hold of her arm and leading her down the stairs.

She pulled away from him, smoothed her hair back a few times. “I’m fine,” she choked out, though there was no hiding

the terror in her eyes, nor the paleness of her face. She stood at the foot of the stairs, pawing at her forearms.

“Did... did something happen?” August stepped gingerly onto the bottom step and waved the light around.

“I don’t think it was Ophelia that I saw in the window,” was all she managed before retreating a few paces from the stairwell.

“You saw... something else, then?” He stepped back down, canvassing the steps for a moment. “There’s no sign that anyone’s used these steps in awhile, so I doubt she’s up there. Let’s hurry through the rest of the ground floor and then get the hell out of here, yeah?” He signaled the way forward with a nudge of the flashlight. “Let’s keep down this hall and then we can back-track, search the rooms down the other side of the fork. Sound good?”

Nothing about this visit struck her as particularly *good*. There was something in this house—something malevolent. From afar it had stirred in one of the windows innocently enough, beckoning from within the darkness at her. A lure had thus been cast and she and August had been stupid enough to take the bait. The thing in this house—whatever name it might go by—wasn’t like the others she’d seen throughout her life. It was more repellant somehow, more viscerally frightening and plainly malefic. And like a fool, she’d stepped onto its turf.

The terminus of the long hall delivered the pair into another massive room, and like the first the dimensions were a tricky thing to pin down in the thick darkness. The scent of decay was more profound here than in previous sections of the house, and an unsettling rustle, as of vermin in flight, broke out the moment they set foot in it. Here and there the floors sagged beneath their feet precariously, the planks bowing and springing in their timeworn placements. Their steps became slower, more cautious.

August groped about the new room for a time and then halted. “Damn it, this was a bad idea. We should have brought a brighter light. It’s so dark—and this place is so huge—we might be overlooking all kinds of rooms or hiding places. We

need a lot more light and a friggin' map in order to search this place properly.”

A low, slow creak sounded in the room and a barely-perceptible vibration traveled through the floor as someone took a measured step.

Someone yet buried in this endless mire of shadow.

August stood fully upright, whipping the flashlight all around him. “D-Did you hear that?” he asked Sadie under his breath.

Indeed she *had* heard; the disembodied step had registered from somewhere close-by. She had felt the board beneath her very foot swell with added tension at the sound of it. Sadie leaned closer to him, her green eyes shaking in their sockets as they fought to analyze the darkness. *Maybe it's her. Maybe it's Ophelia*, she thought. “Ophelia?” She paused and sucked in a hasty breath. “Is... is that you?”

What came next, August was fortunate enough not to hear. The reply that floated in from the surrounding darkness—from very near indeed—was Sadie's burden alone to bear, and the fact that August remained oblivious told her at once who that voice was coming from.

A throaty groan was its opening syllable—a pained noise whose tortured transit from the gut was felt almost as much as it was heard. Still another sound of this kind followed it, and another, like links in a chain, punctuated only by the crackling wheeze of rickety lungs. Sadie was hearing a species of low, infernal laughter, and it grew more delirious and forceful with every mocking peal. *Ah-ah-ah-AH-AH-AH!* From nearby there came the scent and weight of gangrenous breath, puffing out from unseen lips with each glottal guffaw.

“It's not her,” spat Sadie, taking up a fistful of August's shirt. She shook him and took a step back. Like a noxious gas, the laughter rose up and filled the empty space with a cacophony of jagged echoes. “It's not her!” she repeated, tugging him in the direction of the hall.



“Huh?” August nearly tripped over his own feet in trying to balance himself. “W-What’s the matter?”

She gave him a shove and began searching desperately for the hall. The wild, sucking laughter didn’t cease, didn’t slow. It filled Sadie’s ears till she felt its every note ricocheting through the hollows of her skull. Half-blind, she ran over the rumbling floors, hands out in front of her, and tried to find the entrance to the hallway. She succeeded only when the far-off sun-dappled shape of the stairwell flickered into view in the distance. August was trailing some steps behind her, flashing the light in hysterical ellipses and attempting to figure out what had sent her running.

No sooner had the duo burst back into the hall did the vast room to their back return to silence. The racket dropped off instantaneously, and however frightening the laughter had been, its sudden cessation proved somehow *more* unnatural and terrifying. Sadie gasped and coughed in the dusty corridor, galloped across the quivering boards and reached the foot of the stairs with a loud *thump*. August crashed into her and the two of them flopped across the lower steps, twitching like animals caught in a snare.

“Sadie, what the hell is going on?” August regained his feet, canvassing both ends of the hall with the flashlight and then glaring down at her expectantly. “Did you see something in there? Come on, talk to me!”

She proffered her mealy-mouthed explanation when she’d finally drawn in sufficient breath. “There’s something in this house,” she panted, red in the face.

“Yeah?” replied August. “What is it?” He did another sweep of the hall and tossed his shoulders. “I can’t see it, help me out here.”

Sadie slowly rose to her haunches, then, shuddering violently, stood to her full height. “It isn’t Ophelia. It’s... It’s...” She inhaled through her nose, rubbing at her face and leaving streaks of dust behind on her ruddy cheeks. “We need to leave. Whatever it is, it’s...” Rather than stand and lecture on the nature of the thing, she took off from the stairwell and

hooked a tight right, starting back the way they'd initially entered.

August couldn't help looking over his shoulder as they back-tracked, but the frown he wore telegraphed no little annoyance. "But, I... I haven't seen anything! Are you sure it's—"

"Yes, I'm sure," she spat out, breaking into a jog. August was scarcely able to keep the path lit as she raced down the hall. When they reached the fork, she turned, giving the other branch of the lower level a momentary glance—and in that moment she glimpsed something that made her dig in her heels and stop.

"Damn it, Sadie!" August only narrowly avoided bowling her over.

This new hallway was somewhat brighter than the rest of the house; numerous rooms lined the stretch, and the windows within each chamber admitted light enough to spill out through the doorways. Though dreary, the bulk of this passage could be traveled without a flashlight.

Something in this lit section of the house had stirred the moment she'd glanced down it—seemingly darted just out of sight into one of the many open doorways. It had seemed like a lone figure, moving with a normal stride, though she'd experienced so much in this house that she didn't feel she could trust herself. It wasn't until she heard a voice cry out from that same distant doorway that she came to believe in what she'd seen.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" called a voice from down the hall. It was high and youthful; feminine. "Can anyone hear me?"

Sadie's pause at the end of this unexplored hall lengthened as she dissected the voice. It sounded to her like Ophelia's, but she couldn't be certain. "August," she whispered, "does that sound like Ophelia to you?"

From deep in the house, the girlish voice came again—this time, tinged with panicked sobs. "Is anyone there? Please,

answer me!”

She ventured a step down the hall, looking to August. “Well? What do you think?”

August, though, fixed her with an incredulous gaze. He frowned, eyes narrow. “Does *what* sound like Ophelia? What’re you talking about?”

Terror gripped her heart. Sadie surrendered her ingress down the hall and turned once more to the familiar path leading to the front entrance of the house. “Y-You can’t hear it?” she asked. When August shook his head, she knew that could mean only one thing. “It’s trying to lure us down there,” she muttered, resuming her trek toward the exit. August joined her, thrusting the light an arm’s length ahead of him to ensure the path was clear. Finally, they entered into the great foyer and the glowing arch of the door came into view.

The two of them wasted no time in making a mad dash for it.

And then, within seconds, they were out in the sunshine again, back to the untamed greenery of forlorn Beacon Hill.

Sadie started out quickly for the edge of the hill, cradling herself in her arms and grappling with the urge to look over her shoulder, to reappraise the shadow-bound house. She said nothing, but whimpers gathered in her throat as she went, fidgeting and wincing.

August, too, was silent—except for one request as they began their descent of the hill. “Do me a favor. Pretend you’re Lot’s wife. Don’t look back, OK?”

She succeeded until they’d made it all the way to the foot of the hill and some yards beyond. When she finally turned to look at the house once more, it had been reduced to a curious gray smear on the horizon.

“**S**he isn’t here.” Rosie paused as if she meant to have another look around the house. “And you two didn’t have any luck?”

“No,” replied Sadie, forehead pressed to the passenger side window of August’s Honda. The engine was running and outside, well into the distance, stood the dark hulk they’d escaped from a mere ten minutes before. “There was no sign of her.”

“I see... Well, you two wanted to talk to Ophelia’s friends, right? I can have Joey and Leslie come by if you’re game.” She chuckled sheepishly. “I’m sorry, I know I’ve asked so much of you already.”

“It’s fine,” said Sadie. “We can come by. We’re both off today. Talking to Ophelia’s friends might clear some things up.”

“OK, great. Do you still remember how to get here?”

Sadie laughed. Rosie’s place sat next-door to the house where she and her grandparents had lived. Though she hadn’t gone for a drive through the old neighborhood in the years since they’d passed, Sadie couldn’t have forgotten the way there if she’d tried. “Of course. We’ll be there soon.”

When Sadie had cut the line, August—having gotten the gist of their destination while listening in on the call—threw the car into drive and coasted off the gravel lot. “So, back to the old house, eh?” He scratched at his wild hair and picked a small nub of plaster from his scalp. “Before we get there, I

want to apologize. We didn't plan this whole thing too well. I shouldn't have just volunteered us when Rosie asked. And you were right; it would have been safer to have the cops scope out the house instead. I don't know why I thought we could handle it with *this*." He gave the little flashlight a shake and then dropped it into a cup holder. "Next time we go in there, we're going to have to be better prepared."

Sadie shot him a foul look. "*Next* time? Are you on drugs? There isn't going to be a next time, August. That place is..." She shook her head and stared up at the car ceiling. "We're out of our depth. There's nothing we can do to help the girl after all. Having gone into the house and seen what's in there..." She closed her eyes and trailed off.

"Right, but you *could* see something in there. Something that I *couldn't*. And you heard stuff, too. It would appear you're more useful to a case like this one than the average bear, even if we don't know how to play into your strengths." He rolled his window down all the way, patting the dust from his shirt as he approached a stop sign. "Speaking of which... what did you see? What's going on in that house that us normal folk aren't privy to?"

She declined to answer at first, instead pretending like she hadn't heard the question. Then, looking herself over in the passenger side mirror—and palming away some of the dust she'd carried away on her sweaty brow—she summarized the horrors of Beacon Hill thusly: "Something terrible lives in that house, and it was trying to lure us."

"It wanted to *lure* us, huh?" August whistled. "What for?"

"I don't know," she replied. "In case you didn't notice, I wasn't exactly chatting with the thing." She pursed her lips and tried chasing out the images parading through her mind. For a minute or two she watched the unkempt fields roll by, focused on the blue, nigh-cloudless sky. "It wasn't a ghost," was what she eventually mustered when her thoughts had gelled. "At least, not the usual kind. And it's not the first time I've seen it."

He arched a brow and waited for her to continue.

“I saw it in the hospital, while visiting Ophelia,” she said. “I don’t know what it is, but it isn’t like most of the other ghosts I’ve seen. Usually, when I see a spirit, it looks more or less like a normal person. The face might be all wrong, or the spirit might behave strangely, but... The thing in that house struck me as something altogether different. It had a face, but it wasn’t just some shadowy figure standing there in the dark, waving to me. It was... distorted, seemed to be one with the darkness. Does that make sense?” She went to chew her nails but found the taste of the house still dwelt on her fingertips and she heaped her hands in her lap instead. “It was darker, more frightening than what I’m used to. Twisted.”

“And you think this is what’s gotten into Ophelia?” concluded August.

She nodded. “It seems likely.”

“Is that possible, though? Could it be inside the girl *and* remain in the house?”

“You’re asking questions I don’t have the answers to,” replied Sadie. “Who’s to say what’s possible? This is uncharted territory for me.” The landscape outside her window was becoming familiar now. She recognized the bright red sign of a particular gas station, the blue and yellow roof of a video rental store she’d once patronized, the bank where she’d opened her first checking account...

It was hard to believe that only a few years ago this stretch of road had been an almost daily sight for her. She picked out other familiar tidbits in the scenery: The rusted mailbox still sat outside the convenience store; a cluster of shabby condos still jutted out into the rear of a laundromat; another hundred feet ahead she spied the Chinese buffet where she’d first attempted to use chopsticks. She was on her way *home*.

The thought made her wince. No, this wasn’t home for her anymore. Everyone that had made it home was dead and gone now. Home was a stuffy one-bedroom apartment. Home was her ragged papasan chair, her stacks of half-finished books. This was just a literal stroll down memory lane.

Sadie hadn't been prepared to turn onto South Street. August hooked a gentle right and then slowed further as he began through the quiet succession of well-kept lawns and fuel-efficient family cars. She noted the house numbers as they went; did Mr. and Mrs. Wesley still live at 844, and if so, how was their cat, Dean, doing? And what about the Robertsons at 850; had they managed to work things out or had the Chrysler in the driveway been paid for with alimony money? Children she didn't recognize ran through a sprinkler at 853; she supposed that meant old Mr. Halstead had moved on.

Rosie's house, 863, came into view ahead, but Sadie didn't notice it till August had pulled into the driveway. Even then, as she clambered out of the Honda, her attentions had been focused on the house next door. 862 South Street.

She was a yard's length away from the two-story house she'd spent her teenaged years in. The place had changed since then, of course; the new owners, whoever they were, hadn't been fond of her grandmother's small garden near the front patio and had subsequently mulched it over. The large oak beneath whose shade she'd read many books in her day had been trimmed way back, and the driveway had recently been repaved. She stared up at it a long while, her mind retreating from recent events to the small comforts of yesteryear.

August had already approached the door to Rosie's, and she'd opened it before he could ring the bell. "C'mon, Sadie!" he shouted.

She startled to life and turned away from her grandparents' house. *No, it isn't your grandparents' house anymore*, she reminded herself with a little frown. Marching up Rosie's lawn, she joined August on the porch and was invited enthusiastically inside.

"Come on in, make yourselves at home," said Rosie, looking the two of them over. She'd evidently picked up on their filthiness, but was too focused on being the accommodating hostess to much remark on it. "Any trouble on Beacon Hill?"

*There was plenty of trouble*, Sadie thought to say, though she didn't feel at all like revisiting it yet again and offered instead a lukewarm smile. "It's been awhile since I've been back here," she said. "It's kind of strange, returning to the old neighborhood after all this time. Seeing our old house next door..."

Rosie eased the door shut behind them and nodded. "Yes, that old house of yours returned to market just recently; a young couple moved in a week or two ago. Second owners to move in since your grandparents passed." She led them through the living room and into the kitchen. "What can I get you to drink? Oh, and I'll order some pizza, too. What would you two like?"

Though she appreciated the hospitality—and had been running on empty for awhile now—Sadie hadn't exactly dropped by to have a pizza party. She sank into one of the kitchen chairs and brushed the hair from her face. "So, these friends of Ophelia's... are they free today?"

"Yes," said Rosie. "I actually texted them, told them it was about Ophelia. They don't live far from here and will be by shortly."

When they'd availed themselves of some water, the pair took turns cleaning up in the bathroom, reconvening just in time to watch Rosie answer her door and admit a pair of sulky teens. Joey, a stick-thin kid wearing a ball cap and varsity jacket strode into the living room and appraised Sadie and August with a furrowed brow. Leslie, bespectacled with dirty blonde hair, made pleasant talk with Rosie till she spotted the older pair seated at the kitchen table.

It was Rosie who broke the ice, ushering the teens into the kitchen. "This is Sadie and August, they're friends of mine." She put on a tight smile and welcomed the new visitors to raid the fridge for drinks. "Anyway," she continued, leaning against the counter with arms crossed, "I was hoping that we could all talk about what happened that night—the night you two and Ophelia went by the old haunt on Beacon Hill. You see, Ophelia has gone missing. She disappeared last night."



Joey took off his cap and set it on the table. The mid-length black hair beneath was stick-straight. “She disappeared?” He panned across the room at the others with wide eyes. “*How?*”

Here, Sadie interjected. “We don’t know how. And we don’t know where she went, either. Based on what little we know of her recent behavior, we kind of suspected it had something to do with her visit to the place on Beacon Hill. August and I were just there.” She donned her pearly librarian’s smile and looked to the teens in turn. “Why did you guys decide to visit the house at all?”

Leslie shifted uncomfortably in her seat. The jeans she wore had small holes along the right thigh, and she spent more time in picking at them than she did in answering. “It was my idea, kind of.”

“You and Ophelia both had talked about it,” Joey added.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“We just thought it might be fun,” continued Joey. “My older brother told me stories about the house when I was younger and I’d always thought about visiting myself. We were bored that night and got to talking about it.” He shrugged. “I didn’t mean for Ophelia to get that scared, though.”

Leslie rolled her eyes before anyone else could get a word in edgewise. “I dunno about that. You were doing your best to freak us out before we even set foot in there. You kept telling us stories about Mother Maggot—and Ophelia really took them to heart.”

August leaned forward. “What’s this, now?” He chanced a quick pull from his water bottle. “Who’s Mother Maggot?”

Leslie turned to Joey expectantly, chin propped on her palm.

“Well, there are stories,” began Joey, hesitantly. His eyes studied the checkerboard print of the tablecloth as he went on. “My brother told me stories about her—about this ghost who lives in the house. They call her Mother Maggot.” He didn’t

seem to want to go on and, withering beneath the stares of his listeners, threw his hands up. “They were just stories, OK? Like, I don’t know where they came from. My brother probably just fed them to me so that I’d have nightmares. I didn’t know they’d scare her that badly—that they would lead to *this*.”

Leslie slapped Joey’s upper arm. “If you’d just kept your mouth shut, maybe things would have gone differently.” She turned to Sadie. “The stories spooked me, too, but not *nearly* as bad as they did Ophelia. We got lost in the house, and separated, but the first—and pretty much *only* thing—she said when we all got out of there was that she’d seen Mother Maggot. Like, she was *convinced*. And she looked so scared when she said it that I almost believed her.”

Sadie peered across the table at August pensively. “What kinds of stories were they? Can you give us more details? Tell me more about this Mother Maggot character. I’ve lived around here for quite awhile but I don’t think I’ve ever heard those stories.”

“Neither have I,” chimed in Rosie. “Even when we were kids, people used to say that house was haunted. They’d talk about weird noises or things moving in the windows, but most people knew better than to go near it.”

Joey stuck his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “Uh, well, the way I heard it, there used to be a woman who lived there a long, long time ago. She had a bunch of kids, but supposedly she abused them—did terrible stuff. Somewhere along the line, I guess one of them got tired of the abuse. It’s said she was murdered by one of them, and by the time someone found her body in the house...” He swallowed hard. “They call her Mother *Maggot* cuz by the time they found her in there the flies had gotten to her body and she was, you know... full of ‘em.”

Where usually a gruesome tale of that kind would elicit a frown and a roll of the eyes in her, the description of this dead woman—this *Mother Maggot*—sent a chill racing down Sadie’s spine for its unexpected familiarity. She cleared her throat and tried sitting up in her chair, palms against the

tablecloth. “And Ophelia claims she *saw* this thing—she claimed to have seen Mother Maggot?”

Leslie nodded, glancing at Joey as if for support. “That’s what she said,” replied the girl. “We all split up in the house. It was an accident—Joey tripped and we lost our light.” Her cheeks flushed. “We thought we heard something—someone walking—and we all ran off in different directions. Joey and I made it out first, but after we’d met up outside, we couldn’t find Ophelia. We started walking around the outside of the house, waiting for her to come out, but instead we heard her screaming.

“We both followed the sound of her voice and found she’d made it to this little room with a window in it. We helped her out through it, but she was beside herself, just crying and screaming. I thought she’d gotten hurt at first, but... all she said was that she’d seen something in the house—that she’d seen Mother Maggot. We hurried back to the car but on the way back here Ophelia didn’t want to talk much. She’d barely calmed down by the time we arrived, and when I sent her texts later that night and into the next day, she didn’t respond. It wasn’t like her.”

Joey piped up. “I thought she wasn’t replying because she was angry at me—at both of us—for running out of the house and leaving her there.” He rubbed the back of his neck shamefacedly. “And I know that wasn’t cool. But I think she really believed the stories—and that she’d seen Mother Maggot inside the house.”

Throughout this interrogation, August had taken out his phone and begun tapping out notes. He looked up from the screen. “So, you three thought it would be fun to visit the old house and see if ol’ Mother Maggot was home—and, according to Ophelia, she *was*, eh? That about the length of it?” He peered back down at his phone. “Where did these stories come from? I’ve lived hereabouts my whole life and this is the first I’ve heard of such a thing.”

Unsettled, Sadie let her thoughts simmer for a time. The description of Mother Maggot dovetailed surprisingly well with what she’d seen on Beacon Hill. The spirit of a cruel

woman—murdered and unable to move on—insistent on spreading misery even from beyond the grave; if ghosts could be said to exist at all, then this was precisely the kind of drama they were made of. Though, while this talk had proven illuminating, there was only so much they could hope to glean by discussing urban myths with a pair of teenagers. “Just out of curiosity,” she said, “when was the last time you two spoke to Ophelia?”

The teens considered this for a moment. “I haven’t spoken to her since we dropped her off at home that night,” replied Leslie. “She didn’t respond to my texts. And when she got put in the hospital, well, they didn’t let her have a phone, so…” She turned sheepishly to Rosie, offering a weak smile. “Maybe I should have come to visit her.”

“I haven’t talked to her since that night either,” added Joey.

Having extracted all the useful information they could hope for from the teenagers, Sadie and August stood up. “I don’t know if these stories will help us find Ophelia,” began Sadie, “or if they’ll get us any closer to explaining what she saw in that house, but we’ll do some digging and get back to you. August and I both have to work tomorrow, but we’ll be in touch.”

Rosie followed them to the door, leaving her daughter’s friends behind in the kitchen. “So, what now? Provided the police don’t make any headway, then…?” She’d done a great job holding herself together during their visit, but now that Sadie and August were departing, her strength looked set to leave alongside them. “Do you think there’s anything to those stories?” she asked, holding the door open for the two of them.

August let Sadie answer that one, stepping outside with a wave. “There might be,” she confided, “but we’ll need more time. Let us know if there are any developments in the search; we’ll let you know what we find.” They shared a hug and then Sadie marched out to the driveway where the engine was already running.

Rosie stood in the doorway and watched them till they vanished around the gentle bend of South Street.

Once again, as during their arrival, Sadie found herself disarmed by the sight of her old home sitting just next door. Though she climbed in and buckled up, it was all she could do not to stall—not to walk over to the old house and take a look around. Only when it had faded out of view completely did Sadie let it go with a sigh.

“So, that was something,” said August, letting his arm dangle from the window. “What do you think of all this Mother Maggot talk?”

“I think,” she replied after a beat, “there might be something to it.”

“Yeah?” He arched a brow. “How so?”

From somewhere outside, the voices of children playing and laughing reached her ears. The high-pitched laughter awakened a memory in her, bumped the crust from a wound that hadn't fully healed yet; that of the devilish laughter she'd heard ringing through the darkness. “I saw something in the house and the description was...” She wrung out her seatbelt. “It may not be just a myth.”

At a red light, August looked himself over in the rearview. “OK, so this might be a lead. It may be an old, hokey story, but you never know what grains of truth you'll pick up if you take a closer look. We'll research it.”

“How?” asked Sadie, chortling. “You got a book on Montpelier ghost stories?”

He slapped the wheel and wagged a dismissive finger at her. “Are we not librarians? Research is what we do, Sadie! We'll get to the bottom of it. Tomorrow, when things are slow at work, we'll do some digging. We've got access to the local history section, a digital catalog of old newspapers, and plenty of connections throughout the library system. If Mother Maggot exists, she'll turn up.” At a red light, he eased down on the brake and stifled a yawn. “But, first things first, we need to eat. I'm thinkin' something quick. McDonald's? KFC? What're you in the mood for?”

She picked a knot of spider's silk—a souvenir from Beacon Hill—from her sleeve and flung it out her open window. “A shower.”

The light was smalling by the time she returned home. August let her out at the usual spot with the promise to pick her up in the morning for work, where they'd spend their free time doing research into the house on Beacon Hill and its resident terror. She thanked him for his time, his effort, and then started slowly into her building. No sooner had she begun shuffling up to her unit did the silence and solitude leave her unnerved, though.

From adjacent apartments there trickled muffled sounds of life; chattering televisions, hushed phone conversations, the *whoosh* of a dishwasher. Despite being surrounded by other tenanted apartments however, Sadie still felt cut-off, isolated, as she moved to unlock the door to her own. She stepped inside, shuffling out of her shoes at once and putting on the lights. It'd been quite the day, a most stressful one, but even though she was home now, free to do what she wished with the remainder of her evening, she couldn't find it in her to relax.

Rather, standing awkwardly in the living room, she felt as though she'd brought the day's work with her. The things she'd seen and heard were like bags she couldn't unpack and their continued presence proved a constant reminder of a trip she only wanted to forget. Sadie dropped her keys on the counter, plugged her phone in to charge and wandered down the hall to her room. When she'd secured a change of clothes—her favorite cotton pajamas—she dropped them on the edge of the bathroom sink and waited for the shower to heat up.

All told, she spent twenty minutes in the hot spray; only then did she feel confident that she'd washed off every last speck of the filthy old house. But in that twenty minutes, between the rounds of shampoo, the scrubbing and rinsing, she found there were things she'd brought with her from Beacon Hill—fancies, fears—that her loofah couldn't reach, and her mind went to work on them.

Now and then, while standing under the water, she wondered what she might see if she peered around the edge of the dark blue shower curtain. It was madness, of course—each time the thought occurred to her, she tried chasing it off with a laugh. And each time, too, the laugh would fade and she'd hesitate to take that hypothetical look beyond the curtain, lest she find someone standing just outside its damp folds. When the shower was done—when her skin was pruning up and she couldn't afford to stand in it any longer—it took no little courage for her to peel back the curtain and step out onto the mat.

Upon doing so she met only the wall of steam that'd accrued. Sadie toweled off quickly and threw on her pajamas. The face in the mirror was rough. Her eyes were holding onto dark circles for her recent, miserable sleep and her skin looked a bit dry. She dabbed on some moisturizer and stepped out into the hall, the tendrils of white steam rolling out beside her, but that was as far as she went. The sole of her foot had no sooner met the carpet than her leg seized up and a dread fear trotted down her freshly-washed spine.

The air in the hall was wrong; that is, it felt recently disturbed, and by someone other than herself. Her eyes jumped up and down the length of the short corridor, from the door of her bedroom to the edge of the living room, and they brought up nothing out of place. Even so, the feeling that someone had crept past the bathroom door in the instant before she'd opened it remained.

Hers was a very small place. There was a closet in the hallway, cluttered with odds and ends. Both the kitchen and living room were cramped, could be canvassed in their entirety with a single glance. The bathroom was empty; she knew



because she still had one foot in it, and as for the bedroom, it was so sparsely adorned—featuring only bed, dresser and densely-packed closet—that it afforded no shelter for a prospective prowler.

Still, the mind knows when the eyes are being lied to, and Sadie walked a few circuits around the entire unit before she was finally convinced of her solitude—and even then, only tenuously. She took her place in the papasan chair and, phone in hand, scrolled through a metric ton of spam emails, keeping one eye always on the rest of the room. She considered digging into one of her many books, but before she'd even reached for the nearest one she knew she lacked the attention to become fully absorbed and abandoned the idea. Instead, she returned to her phone, pulling up a search engine. Her time would be better spent confronting the the subject that was *really* on her mind.

With shaky thumbs, she tapped “Mother Maggot” into the search bar and hit ENTER.

Ten minutes of scrolling, of parsing bug-infested image results that made her dinner trek back up her throat, she realized she wasn't going to get anywhere and tried a number of other terms. “Beacon Hill”, “Montpelier Haunted House”, “Montpelier Urban Legends” and other searches filled out the next hour and pummeled her tired mind with unrelated results. Blink by blink, she lost her grasp on wakefulness and the text on the screen grew fuzzy. No matter how she wiped at her eyes there was no getting around the fact that the long day had finally caught up with her. Her scrolling became listless until, finally, she began nodding off in her chair. The phone slipped out of her grasp and she curled up in the large, circular cushion, ready to drift off.

At the moment when her eyes were at their heaviest, she peered narrowly across the living room from the comfort of the papasan and noticed something—an aberration in the otherwise predictable scene. It took her sleepy head a while to process it, but when she had, all fatigue was driven off and she sat bolt upright. Dread had granted her a second wind.

She'd heard her name called.

Half-sure that she'd dreamt it, Sadie climbed out of the chair and scanned the room. She sent a stack of hardcovers tumbling over as she stepped toward the kitchen, trying to figure out where the voice had come from—if she'd heard it at all. Nodding off like she'd been, straddling the line between sleep and alertness, it was entirely possible she'd dreamt it.

She wasn't satisfied to leave it there, though. The two syllables of her name, muffled and far-off, kept ringing in her ears like an echo, and she drew back the blinds in the living room window to survey the parking lot below, expecting to see someone outside. Except for a smattering of silent parked cars, the lot was empty, however.

While she stood by the window, gaze thrown over her shoulder in watch of the living room and kitchenette, she heard it again. "*Sadie!*"—it was unmistakable. Notes of fear or hysteria had been attached to it, lifting it to a register so shrill it was nearly a scream... and yet, it barely registered as a whisper where raw volume was concerned. She stuck fingers into her ears, wondering if they weren't plugged, and then approached the door. Sadie drew very close to the peephole and looked out onto the landing, but she had no visitors and none of the neighbors seemed astir.

The search continued through the rest of the apartment—an exercise she'd repeated so often this evening she was beginning to feel insane—and as she went she flipped on every light in reach. All the while, the silence was occasionally broken up by that distant shriek of her name by someone whose voice she couldn't altogether pin down. It was feminine, quite high, and seemed to come from afar; that was all she could say for certain.

She stepped into the bedroom and put on the lights. Then, turning up the blinds, she looked out into the courtyard beside her building, combing the dark grass for signs of this mysterious screamer. For two, maybe three minutes she stood there, and in that time the voice was heard once, though the scene outside brought her no closer to the culprit.

Sadie continued looking out the window—had been about to open it to take a closer listen, in fact—when her attentions

were hijacked. From elsewhere in the apartment there came a new noise, this one readily identifiable. It was the hiss of the shower.

Baffled, Sadie turned out of the room and ventured a few paces into the hall. The bathroom came into reach, and she saw that the lights were off and the door was open. From within came the ordinarily calming sound of the shower head. For a time she forgot all about the voice she'd been chasing and focused on this new, strange development. *I know I turned off the water. Could it have started on its own, or...?* She reached into the bathroom and felt out the light switch. With a flick, the bulbs over the sink flashed on.

Nothing, save the gurgle of the tap, seemed out of place as she stared in from the hall. It wasn't until she dared a step inside that she noticed the barest edge of a shadow concealed by the dark blue material of the curtain. The shadow, perhaps, of someone standing inside.

The voice returned to her ears. "*Sadie!*" Sure now that it must be issuing from this room—from behind this very curtain—she held her breath and took a step onto the tiled floor. Plucking her curling iron from the basket near the sink, she held it out in front of her like a sword and jabbed at the curtain forcefully. The blue plastic gave without incident and Sadie whipped the curling iron violently about the inside of the shower. When finally she'd batted the curtain to one side, she found nothing awaiting her there but a puff of warm steam.

"What the hell?" She set the curling iron down on the lid of the toilet and stared at the empty shower in disbelief. Eventually, she reached inside and shut off the tap, but even then she stood and stared awhile longer, unable to shake the creeping fear that had descended upon her.

In the newly-formed silence, she listened to the dripping of the shower head. She watched the beads of warm water roll out of the silver apparatus and crash down into the drain, counted them—and in doing so became cognizant of a noisy dripping that was out of step with the water draining out of the bath. She thought it might be a sudden rain and looked upward to the ceiling, but it didn't seem to come from there. It wasn't

until she turned to leave that she felt a drop of warm water strike the top of her foot and realized where this other dripping noise was coming from.

Someone was standing behind her.

A sopping mane of black hair had delivered that unexpected drop, and from behind its tangles there stared out two glazed eyes, their pupils reduced to pinpoints. A wide, almost wacky smile had broken out beneath the maniac stare and the pale lips were damp with spittle. A blue hospital gown, completely soaked through, clung to a thin feminine physique.

It took her a few seconds—and a tumble backward, into the shower—to realize it was Ophelia.

The girl was still as a sculpture, features stretched to the breaking point. She dripped water all over the floor, proof enough she'd been in the shower only moments ago, but there existed not a single clue as to how she'd gotten in there—how she'd found her way into the apartment at all. They were in a second-story unit with no fire escape and the door remained locked. Repeated searches of the premises had yielded no physical trace of Ophelia, even if the sensory evidences of an unseen presence had harangued Sadie from the moment she'd returned home.

Unless she'd been transmitted into the locked apartment, molecule by molecule, Sadie could furnish no explanation for the girl's presence in her bathroom, and instead of dwelling on that terrifying fact, she stood and took her by the soggy shoulders. "Ophelia! Are you all right? Can you hear me?"

There was a shift in the frenzied mask—a sudden focusing of the eyes—and Ophelia's entire expression was subsequently wrenched in the delivery of a howling, "Sadie!" Only moments ago completely rigid, the girl wobbled and fell to the floor with a *splat*, her blue garb sticking to the wet tiles below. She clawed at Sadie's pajamas, whimpering and shuddering, and buried her face against the bath mat.

"Ophelia!" Sadie knelt down beside the girl, combed the hair from her pale face. "What are you doing here? Where have you been—how did you...?" She took Ophelia in her

arms and rocked her slowly from side to side till her breathing grew more regular. “Calm down for me. Take a deep breath. In and out, that’s it. Relax. You’re safe with me.”

A sliver of composure returned to the teen in time, but the longer Sadie studied her—wondered at the horror in her eyes—the clearer it became that calm nights were a thing of the past for her. There was something else, too. These eyes, these expressions, were fully the girl’s. Whatever sinister thing had lain behind them during their meeting in the hospital seemed to have gone completely, and except for this stammering terror, left no trace behind. She sobbed into Sadie’s shoulder, muttering incoherently and pawing at her runny nose.

Sadie nabbed the closest towel and draped it over Ophelia’s shoulders. “Hey, it’s all right. It’s me. Are you OK? Where have you been?”

Minutes passed before the girl could wrangle her tongue into speech. “It... It let me g-go,” she stuttered. “She let me g-go.”

“Who did?” asked Sadie, gaze narrowing. “Do you mean... Mother Maggot?”

The utterance of that name inspired a visceral wince in the girl, but she nodded fervently all the same.

“*Oh*,” said Sadie, wrapping the girl in a tight embrace, “that’s wonderful.” She ran a hand through Ophelia’s hair, held her close and rubbed her back. “I’m so happy to hear it. You’ll be safe now.”

Here, the girl slowly wormed her way out of Sadie’s grasp, turning her small, reddened eyes upward. “But *you* won’t be,” she replied through chattering teeth.

Sadie watched from the floor as the bulbs above the bathroom sink dimmed in unison. The stuffy bathroom, hitherto packed with steam, grew suddenly and unaccountably chill. Ophelia’s trembling fingers dug into her upper arms and the girl’s stale breath washed over her face in increasingly wheezy huffs. “W-What do you mean?” she asked, eyes darting about the room.

Fresh tears queued in Ophelia's eyes. "She gave me up because she wants you *instead*," she whispered.

In the mirror over the sink, its corners still adorned with fog, something shifted. Sadie couldn't help looking—her eyes were drawn to it. The reflection showcased something clinging to the wall opposite; a figure. Black hands with withered, smear-like digits spread out across the beige paint, and from the bundle of membranous black tangles that answered for a body there grew a white, egg-like face. Every fold of that countenance surged with activity and the air was filled with an almost deafening buzz, as of a hundred angry flies.

No sooner had Sadie glimpsed this figure did every light in the apartment suddenly blink out. The unit would have been plunged into silence then, too, had not the girl begun to shriek at the top of her lungs. Ophelia raged in Sadie's arms, screamed at the fading of the light.

With Ophelia's arm in her grasp, Sadie lunged out of the bathroom and led the girl into the hall. "Come on!" she barked over the piteous screams. "We've got to get out of here." Yanking the girl behind her like a rag doll, Sadie felt her way into the living room and then charged the front door. She threw it open with a crash and stumbled out onto the landing, the girl tripping on her own feet and loosing still another scream.

The lights elsewhere in the building were still on by the looks of it. The yellowish lights of the lower lobby, the stairwell, burned like they always did, and as Sadie's neighbor across the hall burst out of his unit in his boxers to inspect the commotion, it was clear his lights were still on, too. "The hell's going on out here?" he asked, palming the sleepiness from his stubbled face. "You two all right?"

Sadie hooked her arms around the girl and hauled her to her feet. She didn't reply.

The neighbor peered narrowly across the hall at her place, noticing the darkness throughout. "Oh, power outage? Is that it?" His gaze wandered to Ophelia, and as he took stock of her garb—a soggy hospital gown—he furrowed his brow. "Just,

uh... keep it down, OK?" He slammed his door shut and retreated with a grimace.

Sadie led Ophelia down the stairs and had her sit near the building entrance. She crept back up to the landing and, finding the lights now on in her place, took stock of the living room from afar. It was only necessity that compelled her to run in and retrieve her phone. With that in hand, she scooped her keys off the kitchen counter and dashed back out. By the time she'd locked her door and rejoined Ophelia on the lower level, she'd already dialed Rosie.

"H-Hello?" answered Rosie after several rings.

"It's me," began Sadie. "I found Ophelia."

There was a gasp on the other end. "You found her?"

"She's at my place."

Rather than wait for an explanation, Rosie hopped out of bed and took down Sadie's address. She arrived within twenty minutes. Sadie and Ophelia passed the wait at the bottom of the stairs, the girl sobbing quietly and Sadie muttering assurances, while the devil—out of sight but not out of mind—breathed the same air.

“**I**’ll tell them that she came by the house—that she knocked on my door.” That was the story Rosie planned to feed the police and hospital staff. “But you really don’t know how she got inside?”

The night was warm. Moths bobbed around the light fixtures on the exterior of her building and the engines of nearby cars clicked and settled. Sadie shook her head. “I was feeling paranoid when I got home, but I was sure no one was inside the apartment with me. The doors were locked and she couldn’t have climbed in through the window...”

However bizarre the circumstances may have been, Rosie didn’t give the matter another thought. She was just pleased to have her daughter back. Like she couldn’t believe it was really Ophelia, she looked closely at the girl for the dozenth time, studied her face, her reactions. “It’s really gone, isn’t it?” she’d say each time. With profuse thanks and a tight hug, she led her daughter to the car. “Thanks, Sadie. If not for you, none of this would have been possible.”

*You have no idea how right you are...* It was a nice sentiment, and at any other time Sadie would have accepted such heartfelt thanks with a smile. As Rosie and her daughter filed off to the car however, Sadie exchanged a look with the girl. They hadn’t told Rosie *why* the spirit of Mother Maggot had decided to move on.

Ophelia’s voice sounded through Sadie’s mind as the car pulled away and she was left alone—though not as alone as



she would have liked—outside her building. “*She gave me up because she wants you instead.*”

She had entered into this mess with only a single goal in mind; to figure out what had been hounding the girl and to free her from it. Becoming enmeshed in the trouble herself—taking the fancy of the dark spirit—had never been a part of her plan. It was possible that Ophelia had been confused, mistaken; it was possible, too, that a certain something about Sadie had proven more alluring to the hideous specter and that the teen had been freed so that Mother Maggot might exploit it instead.

She didn’t go back into the building, not at once. She paced around in front of the entrance and chanced a call to August. She needed to inform him of this latest development and she hoped, too, that he might drop by and keep her company. Returning to her apartment alone after what she’d glimpsed in the bathroom didn’t sit too well, to put it lightly. Her call went unanswered, however, and she declined to leave a voicemail.

There was nowhere else for her to go. She considered looking for a hotel in the area but couldn’t be sure that the trouble wouldn’t follow her there. What’s more, now that the excitement had once again ceased, she found herself bone tired, on the verge of collapse. Perhaps it was this immense fatigue that blunted her reason sufficiently to climb those stairs and return to her apartment.

The power was back on, and her initial hasty walk-through brought nothing sinister to light. If Mother Maggot was there—hell, if *any* spirit was there—she should have been able to see it, no? Unless she’d suddenly lost her ability to see the dead—which would have been a pleasing development, no doubt—nothing of that kind should have been able to hide from her. Room to room, corner to corner, she sought out that hideous louse with the pale, maggot-filled face, but found nothing. The living room and kitchen were still, in the hall and bedroom she found herself alone, and the bathroom mirror showcased only her own sleep-starved face when she dared stare into it.

What was she to make of this? *Is the spirit still in here with me or did it leave with Ophelia? And if it is here, then why can't I find it?* She idled in the hall for a silent moment, daring something, anything, to reach out to her. Nothing did, and though it was possible she was jumping the gun, this fact was sufficient to make up her mind. She would tough it out in the apartment, try to get some sleep.

She decided to keep the lights on—all of them—and shuffled into her bed. The fear never fully left her, the terrifying possibility that something *did* lurk in her surroundings just out of her view never faded, though neither was it consummated as she drifted quickly into a coma-like slumber. She left the phone in the breast pocket of her pajamas; first thing in the morning, before he even dropped by to pick her up for work, she'd try calling August again. She simply needed to close her eyes, take a load off...



SHE WAS STARING at the black door, and the charcoal-colored passage around her pulsed like a slashed vein. She recalled nothing of the walk that'd brought her to it, couldn't grasp at anything like a history. There was only *this*, only *now*.

Numb hands felt out the knob. Opening the door just struck her as the right thing to do; instinct drove her to pull at it. The door flapped open without a sound and for a long moment Sadie stood there and fixed her anesthetized stare at the darkness beyond the threshold. A strange feeling pierced her heart, made it flutter in her chest. Regret? Impatience? Fear? More likely it was a fusion of all three.

She soon realized there was more than darkness in this space. She spied a human silhouette stationed within, a whitish smear as of something rendered in chalk. The shadows receded, drained away, giving the figure more definite shape. Inch by inch its details came into sharper focus till she was looking upon an individual with an almost microscopic scrutiny.

And what a lovely figure it was. A very pale woman in a black dress, sleeping the most peaceful sleep imaginable,

floated before her. As though suspended by some unseen wire, the motionless woman didn't even touch the ground, her small feet hovering several inches from the floor. There was something vaguely familiar about the figure—about the entire setting—though she couldn't put her finger on what.

The perfect alabaster face, features smooth and serene, stirred with the first twinges of wakefulness. The face was beautiful, almost comforting, but movement introduced an unexpected chaos into its features. One by one the eyes shot open, then the mouth. The nostrils flared.

The straining eyes were wholly black and glossy as though coated in shellac, and the formerly pretty lips were thrown wide in the utterance of an infernal scream. Whatever color the face might have possessed was forfeit till the whole of the shrieking countenance took on something of the transparent. The lines of the woman's skull were starkly visible; veins in her brow, her neck, trembled furiously.

Before the woman could reach out and touch her, Sadie suddenly plummeted into the blackness.



HER HEART WAS THUMPING SO hard that she clutched a pillow to her chest in the hope of quietening it. She'd been deep in a nightmare—*that* nightmare—when wakefulness had made a merciful reprise. She was thankful to have been spared the worst of the dream, to have been booted from it just as it had reached its frightful crescendo. And yet, even as cognizance made a swift return, she found her terror was not lessened for having returned to the waking world. Rather, she felt certain her awakening was owed not to good fortune, but to an unseen agency—still present—in this very room.

*It was just a nightmare, she told herself. You're awake now. You're safe.*

Sadie gulped the air in labored breaths, her hold on the pillow growing vice-like, and grappled with a terror that simply wouldn't retreat. The room felt unnaturally cool and the air she sucked in had about it a terrible staleness. Up to this point, she hadn't opened her eyes; sleep had left them glued

together and the suspicion that something sinister dwelt nearby only kept them so. But as she got a handle on her breathing, eased her grip on the pillow, her eyelids ceased their squeezing and she chanced a narrow glance at the ceiling.

The first thing she noticed was that the lights were off. All of them. Hadn't she left them on before climbing into bed?

Bands of pale moonlight stole in through the edges of her blinds, creeping across the popcorn ceiling. The tiny button on the smoke detector mounted there gave off its usual dull red glow, and the sight of it was somehow reassuring to her. She turned very slightly to her right, looking to the clock on the nightstand, and found it was nearing four in the morning. There was time enough yet to get a little more sleep before work. It was going to be a rough shift, but—

There was a long, low creak as of someone shifting their weight upon the carpeted floor.

Sadie's heart lurched to a stop; two, maybe three beats were skipped before it staggered back to harried life. Her mind abandoned every thought and was plunged into silent, fearful anticipation. She pressed herself into the cushioning of her mattress as though gravity had increased ten-fold and shut her eyes so hard that she saw stars behind her lids.

The floor squealed once more and the air about her courted a sudden shift. Something was looming very close; she didn't need eyes to sense someone actively intruding into her space, weighing down the atmosphere with their presence.

When the floor settled for a third time beneath unseen feet, Sadie opened her eyes. It had only been reflex that'd eased them open, and she took in her surroundings with teary glances upward, then to the left—where she found the ceiling and nightstand intact, unchanged. It was when she turned her gaze to the right that she spied the culprit poised just paces away.

Someone was standing between the window and the edge of her bed. It took her several breathless moments of study to make sense of what she was looking at. The lurker stationed at her bedside was of an unimaginably dark cast, and so rigid in

posture that it might have been a gnarled sapling rooted in the carpet. Thin, black arms were held awkwardly at its sides, seeming almost fossilized for their stillness and fixedness. Its face was not in view; instead, it faced the window, giving the impression that it had been approaching her bed in reverse.

Sadie couldn't breathe except in fits and starts, and with what little oxygen she managed to take in she dared whisper, "W-What do you want from me?"

The ghoulish figure stirred at the sound of her voice and took a backward step, standing now within spitting distance of her. Movement throughout the gnarled body did not end there; it continued up into the trunk, the shoulders and neck, as each inch thereof began to shudder and bend in reverse. Like the jointed segments of an immense millipede, the twisted black body slowly lolled astern until a white ovoid face dawned into view and the rigid, hook-like arms wheeled feebly in the air. The figure, thus positioned, began loosing a soupy, ghoulish laugh. The mouth from whence it came teemed with the rabble of flies and the from every pock in its paper-thin skin there peeked maggots like so many squirming grains of rice. "*AH-AH-AH-AH-AH—*"

Screams piled up in her throat and then tumbled back into her stomach in such volume that she felt she might vomit. Sadie rolled to her left, hitting the floor with a thud, and made a mad dash for the hall, the vile laugh growing in volume all the while. As she burst out of the room and groped her way through the dark apartment, a flurry of movement sounded to her back. She tried steadying herself against the wall to gain her feet, but they gave out on her within a few steps and she was left to crawl into the living room.

Sadie threw up a hand and raked wildly at the counter while backing toward the front door. She felt out the strap of her purse and yanked it down from its perch while grasping at the doorknob, and had the wherewithal to snatch her shoes from the door-side mat she'd clambered over in her retreat. Hauling herself up with the knob for a crutch, she threw the door open and took a shaky step out into the hall, casting some of the yellowish light from the passage back into her pitch-

black apartment. The laughter erupted from deeper in with renewed gusto as she fled. “*AH-AH-AH-AH-AH-AH—*”

Before she slammed the door shut and all but tripped down the stairs, Sadie turned and looked into her place, her eyes locking onto movement in the hallway she’d blindly navigated only moments ago. In that dark passage, brought to light by the glow in the hall, the laughing figure of Mother Maggot was seen giving chase. The body remained bent backward, and the stiff limbs shot up and down in shaky sequence, propelling it in a sort of spider-walk through the corridor. Where its withered hands met the carpet, black smears like oil stains were left behind, and with every jerking pace, pests came tumbling out of its pores.

Drunk with fear, Sadie slid down the stairs, exited the building and crawled across several feet of sidewalk until she could negotiate her legs into a run. She clutched her purse and shoes in one arm, the soles of her bare feet aching as she sped over rocks and debris in the parking lot. Eventually, when she’d put some distance between herself and the apartment building, she stopped long enough to step into the shoes. Once they were on, she resumed her run, and she didn’t stop again until she arrived, breathless and shaking, at the edge of a dim strip mall.

Dropping to the curb, she fumbled with her phone for the better part of an hour, assailing August’s voicemail box with hysterical messages. A light rain began to fall, which led her to take shelter beneath the awning of a closed business. Better still, at half-past five, the coffee shop on the opposite end of the strip mall opened and she took refuge inside, paying the concerned-looking cashier for a coffee she didn’t touch and then claiming one of the booths near the window, where she both nodded off and kept vigilant, terrified watch outside at turns.

By eight in the morning, an hour before her shift was set to start, she’d managed to regain her composure. Begging a phone charger off one of the baristas, she plugged in her phone and did something she’d never done before. She dialed her

manager and called in sick. In her year as a librarian she'd never once considered taking a sick day.

Shortly thereafter, August returned her calls, sounding almost annoyed. "Sorry I didn't answer," he replied groggily. "I accidentally left my phone on silent. I didn't listen to all the messages, figured I should just call you back. What's going on?" He paused. "Oh, and I just got a call from Marsha, too—she says you called off today?"

The sun had long risen in the hazy sky. Raindrops beat the window as she tried to sum up the night's events succinctly. "I found Ophelia," she began. "She's safe, and she's free of this thing. Now it's after me, though."

August chuckled at first, as though she were setting up for some joke, but when she didn't continue he tensed up. "Wait... you serious?"

"As a heart attack," she replied, pressing a fist against her pounding brow.

"You found the girl?" he asked.

"She showed up at my place. No explanation for it. The doors were locked and she just appeared. And she was herself—not possessed anymore."

"And..." August sighed, shouldering the phone. "And the thing is after *you* now? How do you know?"

The whole terrifying scene—the nightmare, awakening to something in her room, being chased out of her home—flashed through her mind once again. She wanted to curse at him, to berate him for not answering sooner, but instead let out a long sigh. "I thought you knew: I'm popular with ghosts."

"All right," said August. "Try and stay safe, and get ahold of me if you need anything. I can talk to you during lunch today, and I'll use any spare moment I have to look into this mess. The house, this *Mother Maggot*—hell, I'll see if I can't get some credible info on ghost hunting. You... just try and relax, yeah?"

"Try to relax?" Sadie echoed with a frown. "You know, I hadn't thought of that."

“I’ll get back to you, promise.” August cut the line.

She took a swig of her cold coffee and rested her forehead against the table. *What does this thing want with me? Hell, what did it want with Ophelia?*

This twisted thing had been inside the girl; presumably it wanted inside Sadie now. What havoc it would wreak if it got its way remained to be seen, but that it would try again—that it would prove relentless—was assured. And the next time it reared its head, it was possible she wouldn’t escape it.

She sat in the booth a long while, just watching the rain fall.



**I**f she was going to get through this situation unscathed, Sadie would have to come up with a plan. Before leaving the cafe in the late morning, she'd done her fair share of thinking and had devised a basic course of action. Whether it would keep her from becoming possessed by the parasitic Mother Maggot remained to be seen, but feeling as though she had some handle on the matter, some concrete steps she could take to at least temporarily assure her safety, made her feel better.

Daylight seemed a crude defense against so horrific an antagonist as this, but it occurred to her that the thing had never manifested before her in full daylight. It had appeared in the gloomy hospital room during a black and rainy day, and she had come face-to-face with it in the shadow-packed rooms of the house on Beacon Hill. It had turned up in her apartment after dark, as well, but it occurred to her that her daylight hours had been relatively peaceful.

It was a grey and misty day, though the sun had made frequent rallies and asserted itself over the prevailing shade. She'd spent all morning in the cafe, surrounded by other people, and had seen nothing of the specter since being chased out of her home. What this meant precisely Sadie couldn't be sure, but that Mother Maggot operated under some kind of limitations seemed clear enough. Otherwise, she'd have been assailed at every turn, would have been possessed in broad daylight. Ophelia's initial encounter with the thing, which had seen her dominated by its will, had taken place in the old

house, and in the night. Taking all this into stock, the idea that Mother Maggot should have less freedom in the daylight than in the hours of darkness was as reasonable an inference as any.

Even if true, this alone was not a solution to all her ills. Day would invariably give way to night, brightness to gloom, and Sadie would find herself eventually isolated. It was at such a time that the spirit was likeliest to strike. What's more, she had to sleep *sometime*. Had she not awakened that very night to find the spirit at her bedside, what might've happened? She shuddered to think...

And so, time was clearly of the essence. For some reason, Sadie had been marked by the spirit. It had happily forfeit its iron grip on Ophelia and was now actively pursuing *her*. To what end? What made Sadie a more attractive target? Ever since she'd begun seeing the dead, encountering those beckoning apparitions, it was clear that spirits had a particular interest in her, though she'd never struck upon the root cause for their solicitations.

What's more, looking back on her many experiences, she realized she'd encountered many such spirits even in the daylight—and this realization only refreshed her dread. Usually they'd been found in shaded spaces, lurking in spots where shadow prevailed, but that they'd sometimes turned up and beckoned to her in the daytime was a fact. Perhaps there were limits to her hypothesis, limits to the protective nature of sunlight...

Unless Mother Maggot was presently close-by, bidding her time, unseen, then where was she lurking at that moment? Was her spirit still in the apartment? Had it returned to the house on Beacon Hill? Was she across the street, staring at the cafe from the shade of a tangled copse of trees, ready to pounce? These were questions Sadie couldn't hope to answer with any thoroughness; it was all she could do to wish that the sunlight would keep her away until she could stumble onto a workable solution.

She spiraled further into thought, and with every question that reared its head her despair grew manifold. What if there was no "solution"? What if her lot was to be hounded by this

and other monstrosities until her dying day? What kept such spirits rooted in the physical world, and how might they be dismissed? Was there any true antidote to what people referred to as “haunting”? Had she not spent the past several years running from the supernatural, perhaps she would have stumbled upon some answers to these questions by now. And how she longed to return to that feigned ignorance, to that time of active forgetting! But there could be no running from it any longer, not in any meaningful way. Now she was being hunted by something, actively. There was nothing to do but learn, to experiment, in the hopes that something would stick.

Despondent, she eventually left the cafe. The rain had quit and the sun was trying its damndest to push through the grey haze overhead. Keeping to the sidewalk, she made a slow walk back to her apartment, though no sooner did her building enter into focus did she dither by the road, too fearful to even step into the lot.

Her arrival happened to coincide with the mailman’s daily visit. He was a kindly older gentleman she’d spoken to a number of times in the past. Watching as he left his truck and entered the building, she found courage enough to follow his lead, and she started between the parked cars in the lot for the entrance.

He spared her a warm smile as she stepped inside—and then, noting her haggard appearance, her damp pajamas, his eyes narrowed in concern. “Good afternoon,” he said, unlocking the wall-mounted mailboxes and pulling a stack of pre-portioned letters from his satchel. “Long night?”

Sadie’s face reddened, and she looked away from him as she started for the stairs. “Yeah, you could say that,” she replied.

The postman thumbed through the mail and handed over her things—a few circulars and a utility bill—as she climbed upstairs. “Well, have a good one!” He returned to his work, whistling and tucking letters into the appropriate boxes.

Sadie hadn’t even bothered to lock the door in her flight. Pushing it open and immediately reaching for the light switch,

she took a very hard look inside before setting foot in the living room, and even when she did enter after an awkward thirty seconds—and another weird glance from the mailman—she left the door open behind her.

The apartment was still, home only to a punishing and provocative quiet. She took a few paces into the living room, leered over the kitchen counter and then continued deeper in, to the bathroom and bedroom. As far as her eyes were concerned, all were empty, though her spine still tingled with the memory of what'd occurred only hours before and some deep-seated instinct seemed to warn her against lingering.

Jamming the bedroom door so that it couldn't be closed behind her, Sadie quickly threw off her pajamas and changed into fresh clothes. Then, marching through the apartment, she gathered a few essentials—her phone charger, her keys, a bit of food and water. When this was through, she rushed back out into the hall, locked her door, and promptly left the building.

After some waffling on the sidewalk, where she considered her next move, she ultimately decided to give Rosie a call. She wanted to make sure Ophelia was still doing well, that she hadn't reverted to her suicidal state.

Rosie answered after a few rings, and with more cheer in her tone than Sadie had heard since their recent reunion. “Hey, Sadie!” she answered.

“Hello, Rosie. I was just calling to check up on things. How are you and Ophelia doing?”

“Oh, we're good,” replied Rosie. She sighed into the phone with no little relief, chuckling. “Not that things could have gotten much worse! How are you, sweetheart? You get some sleep?”

Sadie laughed a little caustically. “Just a bit.”

Rosie continued unprompted. “We got back here last night. I told the staff that Ophelia turned up at *my* door and she was re-admitted. Of course, since she wandered off like that, they've decided to take a lot more precautions. She isn't allowed to have any visitors—except for me—and they've got

a patient sitter in with her. Still, she's doing really well and even the doctor noticed how she's brightened up. I expect they'll let her out soon."

"That's wonderful to hear," said Sadie—and she meant it, too, but the dread welling in her gut robbed her tone of conviction.

"It's been a wild ride. If not for you, I don't know what would have happened," said Rosie. "To think that this all started in that dank old house. I hope she's learned her lesson. I can't imagine she'll ever do something as foolish as this again. I don't know what you did, Sadie, but it worked. I have my daughter back." She was tearing up, her voice dripping with gratitude.

Something Rosie said struck her as she listened—warranted a second look. "*To think that this all started in that dank old house.*" This nightmare *had* begun in the house on Beacon Hill, it was true, but up to this point Ophelia hadn't been in the right mind to discuss her actual encounter with Mother Maggot. The spirit had wormed its way into her, had driven her to self-harm and warped her personality, but where, exactly, had this change taken place? Did the girl have any memory of the initial encounter—and, if so, might such testimony shed some light on the nature of the spirit?

"Say, Rosie," began Sadie, "I know that they aren't letting her have any visitors, but... Do you think I might be able to come and see her somehow? Is there any way that the staff might be willing to clear me for a visit? Just... for a little while? There's something I want to ask Ophelia about—something I need her help with."

Rosie hesitated. "Er... maybe. But what do you need to talk to her about?" Perhaps she'd picked up the tremor in Sadie's voice, because her own firmed up warily. "What is this about?"

"It's about the spirit—Mother Maggot," admitted Sadie. "Now that Ophelia's in her right mind, I need to ask her more about that night—the night she went into the house."

There was silence on the line. “I... I don’t understand.” Rosie swallowed loudly, could be heard to take a few paces. “What do you need to know? It’s all over now, so why talk about it?” Another pause. “It *is* over with, right?”

Sadie couldn’t bring herself to lie, but didn’t want to tell the whole truth, either. “It’s complicated,” was what she settled on. “But it’s important.”

“I... I don’t know. She’s only been back for a few hours. I... thought this was all over, Sadie. I don’t want to stir things up, risk having her get worse again,” was the grave eventual response. “Maybe some other time, when she’s had awhile to recover?”

“Rosie, listen,” pleaded Sadie. “This *isn’t* over. I need to speak to her. Please, just give me ten minutes with her. You can tell the doctors I’m her sister or something—whatever it takes. But this is important. It’s life or death.”

“Life or death?” Rosie chuckled, unconvinced. “For *who*?”

Sadie’s silence was reply enough.

“It’s... it’s after *you*?”

“Yes.” Sadie squeezed the phone, wandered up and down the sidewalk.

The resulting pause was so long Sadie thought she’d been disconnected. Finally, Rosie stammered, “I-I’m sorry, Sadie. I really am, but... if it’s after y-you I don’t think you can come by. I don’t want that thing near my daughter again, and I’m very sorry to hear about this, but... You understand, don’t you? You understand why I can’t allow you to come and—”

“Ten minutes!” Sadie was all but shouting. “Please! That’s all I’m asking! Get me in there for ten minutes and I’ll ask her a few questions. That’s it. If she can tell me anything useful I may be able to get rid of this thing—for good.”

Rosie waffled. “I don’t... Today? I could speak to the doctor, but... Sadie, are you serious? And, I mean... today? She’s only been back for half the night! Can’t this wait?”

“Please, speak to the doctor. I’m calling a cab. I’ll be at the hospital in a half hour. Will you meet me outside the unit then?” She didn’t wait long enough to hear the reply. Even if Rosie refused, Sadie was determined to visit anyway. She cut the line and immediately called a taxi.

Waiting on the sidewalk in front of her place, the air scented with rain, she felt more than once that there were eyes on her. Cars would pass through the lot and other tenants would go in or out of the surrounding buildings, but none of them would spare her more than a quick glance. No, the weighty gaze on her was coming from elsewhere—from her own living room window, she wagered—and she repeatedly restrained herself from looking up at it.

Sadie stepped out of the elevator onto the third floor and began immediately for the pair of metal doors leading to the psychiatric ward. Rosie was waiting for her in the adjacent visitor area and intercepted her before she reached them, however.

“Sadie, I spoke to the doctor,” began Rosie, joining her near the ward entrance. “I explained that you were a close family friend who’d been instrumental in the search, and considering Ophelia’s recent improvement he was willing to allow you inside for a brief visit.” Here, her expression darkened. “But I need you to promise me something. Ophelia is doing better now, and I... I don’t want whatever it was that preyed on her to return.” She leaned close, eyes narrow. “Can you promise me that it won’t come back? If you go in there and spend time with her, can you promise me that my daughter will still be herself when you come back out?”

Sadie placed a hand against the door. “Last night, when I found her, Ophelia told me that the spirit wasn’t interested in her anymore—that it was after *me* now. After the night I had, I’m inclined to believe her.” She pushed her way into the ward. “I won’t be long. I promise.”

Leaving Rosie behind, Sadie started toward the nurse’s station where a young secretary was furiously typing. She looked up at the visitor with a tired smile, gave the neckline of her teal scrubs a little tug and then peered back at her screen, asking, “How can I help you?”



Sadie looked past the station, into the depths of the unit. “I’m, uh... I’m here to visit someone. She’s in the Crisis Management section—room 334.” She put on the rosiest expression she could manage and added, “The doctor gave the green light, as I understand it.”

The secretary’s dull eyes brightened somewhat. “Oh...” Her finger went to work on the mouse, clicking and scrolling through a mess of open windows. “You’re here to visit Ophelia?” She looked up from the screen. “I don’t see any order for visitations—only blood relatives right now, it looks like. If the doctor OK’d it, he probably hasn’t put the order in, and I’m afraid I can’t let you back until—”

From the rear of the station, a middle-aged nurse with short hair—her name tag read Karen—approached, grasping the back rest of the secretary’s chair. “You’re the family friend, right?”

Sadie stood to attention. “Yes, that’s right.”

The RN hiked a thumb in the direction of the Crisis Management ward and told the secretary, “She’s all good. I heard the doc.” Then, turning to Sadie, she waved her through. “I’ll let you back there.”

They stepped past the station and entered the narrow walkway which led to the imposing locked door of the crisis unit, and on the way they passed the glass-panelled activity area where other patients thumbed through books or watched the news on wall-mounted TVs. The atmosphere there was sedate—almost eerily calm.

“She’s doing much better today,” the nurse confided as they approached the locked ward. She fussed with her keys, sliding one into the socket on the wall, and then swiped her badge in the card reader. As the door unlocked, she led Sadie into the stuffy unit and paused outside of Ophelia’s room. “You’ve been up here before, right?”

“I have.”

“Excellent.” The nurse opened Ophelia’s door just a touch and then stepped aside. “If you need anything, hit the call

button on the wall. Otherwise, I'll be back in, oh, say..." She looked to the large clock on the opposite side of the hall. "Half an hour?"

"Thank you, I appreciate it." Sadie ducked into the room quietly.

Just inside the door there sat a drowsy-looking nurse's aid—college-aged and scruffy. He'd been tasked with keeping an eye on the patient, but he'd proven more interested in snoozing. The young man in teal scrubs sat up with a start as Sadie entered.

"Oh, you here for a visit?" said the young man, blinking hard so as to appear more awake. "I'll step out for just a second, then. Give you both some privacy. I'll be in the hall if you need me." He stood, straightened his wrinkled uniform, and made a silent exit, his eyes narrowing in a silent plea along the lines of, "*Please don't tell the nurse I was nodding off...*"

Sadie looked to the other end of the room, to the bed, the little nightstand, the rain-flecked window and, of course, the patient sitting up in the plasticky recliner. The last time Sadie had entered this room, she'd encountered something sinister and otherworldly; from the very first Ophelia had come across as eerie and combative.

What a difference a day made. The girl she'd found shivering and soaked in her bathroom the night prior was now paging leisurely through a nature magazine. The disheveled bandages on her wrists had been replaced and the new dressings appeared completely undisturbed. Ophelia had bathed, brushed her hair and was even wearing casual clothes of her own—a baggy T-shirt and leggings. She turned to meet her visitor with a bright smile. "Hi, Sadie."

"Hello, Ophelia." Sadie crossed the room and plopped down into a folding chair, crossing her legs. "You look great." Truthfully, this was an understatement—the girl looked like a new person altogether. Except for the bandages on her arms, no trace in her existed of her previous troubles. Had Sadie not

known better, she might've mistaken Ophelia as a hospital visitor herself.

"Thanks," replied the girl, setting down her magazine. "What're you doing here? I thought they weren't gonna let me have visitors for another day or so."

"So I heard," replied Sadie. "I bugged your mother, though, and they made an exception for me. You see," she continued sheepishly, "I have a few questions for you."

"Questions?" Ophelia cocked her head to the side. The smile gradually fell from her lips and her eyes widened. "Oh. You're here to talk about..." She nodded, looked away. "Of course, yeah."

It was hardly surprising that the prospect of discussing Mother Maggot was upsetting to the girl; even so, Sadie had no choice but to press on. There were questions about the whole frightful episode that only she could answer, and Sadie was keen to gather whatever information she could on the specter. Her own hide was on the line now. "I don't want to upset you, Ophelia, but last night..."

"You saw her," stated the girl matter-of-factly.

"That's right." Sadie nibbled on her lower lip. "I saw her when I found you in the bathroom—in the mirror. And then I saw her again, next to my bed."

The girl's body language had completely changed. Now, as if anticipating some tremendous physical blow, she cowered in the chair, arms tucked around her abdomen and head low. She didn't say anything, just sat there, eyes scanning the floor.

"I was wondering about that night you went to the house with your friends. I met Joey and Leslie. They told me about your visit to Beacon Hill, but I want to hear your side of the story—I want to hear about the moment you encountered..."

"Mother Maggot." The girl finished the sentence—spat the name out as though it tasted too bitter.

"Yes." Sadie crossed her legs. "You all got separated while exploring the house. And eventually, your friends heard you screaming. They found you in some little room, pulled you out

through the window. But what happened between those two points? How did you meet... *her?*”

The color drained from Ophelia’s face as she pondered the question. Her eyes went glassy as her mind retread that old ground. At first she uttered, “I don’t want to talk about it...” but as the moments passed, something impelled her to speak. “I was alone. That is, I *thought* I was alone.

“I just wanted to find a way out of the house. But all the while, she was there. I could feel her, you know? Like she was floating in the air all around me. I could hear her footsteps, too, but I never saw her—not until...” She took a deep breath and clutched at the armrests. “I ran through the dark after my friends left me. I didn’t know where I was going. There came a point, though, where I could follow the moonlight, and so I did. I...” She shook her head as if in a violent struggle with the memories coming to the surface. “There was a hallway, and a moonlit room—I went into it. The room with the window. I should have just climbed out then and there, but I stopped to look around. That was when I saw... that mirror.”

Suddenly, the girl stopped. She rose nearly to her feet, then slumped against the back of the chair, her slipped heels digging into the floor.

“A mirror?” asked Sadie. “What mirror?”

“In the room,” blurted Ophelia. “In this room, there was a mirror. I didn’t see her, not with my own eyes, but she was in the reflection, right behind me. And then she looked at me... with those eyes that *aren’t* eyes. I screamed until the others found me and pulled me out. But by then it was too late. She’d already climbed into me.”

Sadie listened intently, making a mental note of this alleged mirror. She’d encountered no such thing in her frenzied tour of the house, but having glimpsed the apparition in reflective surfaces herself, she couldn’t help assigning potential significance to this detail. “So, you *knew* she was in you, then?”

Ophelia nodded furiously. “I had that feeling from the very beginning—that she was still there, that she had followed me

out of the house. The next morning, I saw her again. And then I heard her voice in my head. She wanted me to hurt myself—told me to slash my wrists.” Tears were forming in the corners of her eyes and she wiped them away with a loud sniff. “She started following me around the house, showing me horrible things. But she promised that if I did what she asked—if I hurt myself when she told me to—that she’d leave me alone. It didn’t work, though. Every time I hurt myself, she just dug in deeper.”

“Why do you think she wanted you to hurt yourself?” asked Sadie.

“I don’t remember,” admitted the girl. “But it made her stronger. Every time I did it, she’d get closer to me. Her voice would get louder, and...” She held her wrists out in a brief display. “She told me there were maggots in my wounds, ordered me to dig into the bandages. I lost a lot of blood, could have died. After that, I stopped feeling like myself. I was more *her* than I was *me*. I don’t remember much of what happened after that. I barely remember you coming to visit that last time. Everyone said I disappeared... but that’s a total blur. The only thing I clearly recall is waking up in your bathroom last night.”

It was painful to watch the girl recount this trauma. Sadie nodded slowly, reached out to hold one of her hands. “Last night, you said that she’d let you go because... she wants *me* instead. Do you know why?”

Ophelia gave a weak shrug. She raked at her hair, tangling her freshly-brushed locks. “I don’t know. It’s all hard to remember. It’s like a bad dream... Sometimes you can remember it when you first wake up, but then it starts to fade away. She was done with me, I suppose—she’d only been interested in hurting me. But you...” She cast a teary glance at Sadie. “She was *very* interested in *you*, Sadie.”

Sadie glanced down at herself, peered at her hands. “What does that mean, exactly? Why me?”

“I don’t remember,” was all Ophelia managed to say before the nurse knocked on the door and stepped inside.

“All righty,” said Karen from the doorway, waving Sadie over. “All set, I hope? Your half-hour’s up.” Her smile dropped promptly off her face when she noticed the tears running from Ophelia’s eyes, and her next look at Sadie was a vicious one. “Please, this way.”

Sadie offered the girl a polite smile, thanked her, then made her way to the door. She joined Karen in the hall and was escorted in pointed silence to the exit. Upon leaving the psych unit, Sadie made a beeline for the elevators, doing her best to bypass Rosie, who was still lingering in the visitor’s area.

“Sadie, how did it go?” she called, rushing over.

Without bothering to look if it was going up or down, Sadie hopped into an open elevator and began mashing the button for the first floor. “Uh... fine,” she lied, praying the door would close.

Rosie arrived within the elevator bank. “Is everything OK? Did she answer your questions? What’ll happen now that—”

“I’ll call you later, Rosie.” The door began to slide closed, cutting their line of sight. Sadie backed into the far end of the elevator and waited for the cabin to rise or fall. With a *ding*, it began a slow descent to the first floor.

Leaving the elevators behind and wandering aimlessly through a crowded lobby, she made her way past a gift shop before turning into the hospital cafeteria. The place was crawling with visitors and staff carrying trays of questionable-looking food. Rushing through this crowd with her head low, she staked out a little table for two in a remote corner of the dining area and dug her phone out of her purse. She tapped out a quick text to August and then chewed her nails down to stubs while waiting for a reply.

He called not five minutes later. “I was just about to call you anyway,” he began. “What’re you up to?”

“I’m at the hospital.”

August paused. “Er... is everything OK?”

“I was visiting Ophelia again,” she explained. “Things are... strange. We need to talk.”

“Right. Like I said, I was about to call you soon anyhow. I’ve been doing some digging and, uh...” He exhaled loudly. The sound of several thick hardbacks being shuffled around filled his end of the line for a beat. “This Beacon-Hill-slash-Mother-Maggot thing is looking downright bizarre. Like... it’s a hell of a rabbit hole. I’m still reading, but we’re going to have a lot to discuss. What’re you doing tonight? Want to meet up when I’m done with work?”

“Sure. Meet me here, at the hospital,” she replied.

“At the hospital?” He chuckled. “I mean, if you want. But why not go home, relax for a little while? I’ll bet you could use some sleep.”

“No, thanks. It’s bright in here. There are lots of people around. I’d rather... not be alone.” She turned to the large picture window across the dining room and admired the bright sunlight that drifted through it. By the time August was done at work, that light wouldn’t be around to protect her any longer.

“OK. I’ll talk to you later, then. Text me if anything changes.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, “Mirrors. Look into mirrors.”

“Huh?”

“Ophelia told me that she first saw Mother Maggot in a mirror,” she explained. “It struck me as odd—maybe it’s an important detail. You’re reading about ghosts, too, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, see if there’s anything you can dig up about ghosts and mirrors, then.”

“You’re a real slave-driver, you know that? And to think I’m doing all of this next-level research *gratis!*” He clicked his tongue and jotted down a note. “All right. Ghosts and mirrors. I’ll add that to the pile. Talk to you later.”

Sitting in the dining room, the tables around her full of doctors and nurses engaged in boisterous conversation, she almost felt secure. The light coming through the windows made her feel safe as well. But eventually the light would fade and the crowd would thin and she'd be vulnerable again. And when that happened, she wasn't sure what she'd do. *Mother Maggot is after you*, she thought with a visceral scowl. *What the hell does that mean? What could she want with you?*

She toyed with her phone awhile, attempted to do some research, but was demoralized at the lack of resources at her disposal. Her toolkit as a librarian was vast—but presently, all she could do away from her desk was to punch search terms into her phone and pray for something substantive to pop up. By the sounds of it, August was hitting pay dirt; perhaps he'd stumble upon something that would explain this sordid business—a solution that would help them put a stop to this haunting for good.

Sadie watched the seconds tick by on the big clock on the wall.

The long wait began.



She'd been tortured by dreams of her dead mother, was being actively pursued by a nightmarish ghoul and hadn't known a good night's sleep in days, but the macaroni and cheese served in the hospital cafeteria was pretty good, and at this point Sadie was willing to take a win wherever she could get one.

Eating her modest lunch out of a styrofoam clamshell, she walked a circuit around the first floor, taking in the landmarks. There were something like three different gift shops, all told, and their wares were all slightly different. One dealt in snacks, gum and flowers; the next in gifts for infants. The last peddled higher-quality fare like hospital-branded clothing, tacky home décor and locally-made kitsch. Across from this last there sat a non-denominational chapel where guests or patients could spend some quiet time in prayer, and Sadie enjoyed a solid twenty minutes of solace there before moseying on.

Eventually, though, she found her way back to the cafeteria and decided to settle there. She dumped her empty container in the trash and parked it at a corner table near the window where she could gauge the smalling of the light minute by minute. She'd nodded off in the cafeteria for close to two hours and had then wandered the halls, poked around in shops, for nearly two more. Hours remained before August was set to show, however, and it occurred to her that she ought to try and do something constructive while she waited. So what if she didn't have access to the entire library system—to its collection of local materials and newspaper archives? With her phone,

almost fully-charged thanks to a conveniently-placed outlet, she could at least do some digging into the nature of ghosts, right?

She spent the next few hours searching, taking occasional breaks to use the bathroom, or to grab caffeinated drinks from the cafeteria. Her journey started on video sites, where she sought out footage of alleged hauntings. She was curious if anyone had ever captured something on camera that aligned with her own supernatural experiences. Burning through a hundred different videos, though, she came away with only bitter disappointment. There were loads of “screamer” videos—pranks; there were pointless recordings of “orbs”, which were clearly lens flares or dust motes. There were also plenty of vague shots depicting misty “spirits” that looked like nothing at all. At best, the videos were dull and uneventful; at worst, they were obvious frauds.

She turned next to sites where users discussed their own dealings with the supernatural. Stories of possession, of poltergeists and bumps in the night were common, but in her experience none of them carried any weight. No one on any of the sites she checked quite described the spirits of the dead the way she’d encountered them, and so their testimonies could only be met with skepticism. Novice magicians, dabblers in the so-called “black arts”, talked about their involved rituals for conjuring or dismissing such things, but came off as lame role-players. Experiments with tape recorders regularly yielded unimpressive results—the EVPs, in general, were so muddled and quiet that they sounded nothing like what the claimants said they were.

She took intermittent looks out the window. In the vast lot outside, cars wheeled in and out in a steady stream. Hospital employees clad in scrubs of every imaginable color drifted up the steps and entered the building through some unseen side door at a regular clip. The rain would turn up again for a brief burst, then the sun would come to the fore, only to retreat a little into the grey and give way to a minutes-long shower. A tall fence lined the borders of this parking lot, and beyond it were rows of handsome little houses. Now and then, when the

rain was put on pause, the tenants of said houses would wander out to check their mail, or to haul garbage to the curb.

But the sunlight was fading. What could she expect to see out in that rainswept lot when all the world was dark? She ignored the first signs of dusk and stuck closely to her phone, wading through page after page of crap in the hopes of finding a gem.

The sky was darkening when she was distracted from her reading by a call from August. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Phew,” he said with an exaggerated sigh. “You’re still alive, eh? Here I was afraid Mother Maggot had gotten to you—that all this research I’ve been doing has been for naught.” He cleared his throat. “OK, here’s how it’s going to go. I’m supposed to close alone tonight since you’re not here, but I’m going to bounce at nine, sharp. I’m already shutting off computers and stuff, and I’ve been handling returns during every free moment, so at nine, when the last person walks out the door, I’m flipping off the lights and locking up.”

“Tomorrow’s opener might have some choice words for you if you don’t get everything squared away,” she warned.

“Maybe, but I’m off tomorrow, so someone else will get it in the ear!”

“So, you’ll be heading over at nine? Did you find anything?”

“I sure did,” he said with evident pride. “I’ve got a sack full of books—stuff from the local history section, some newspaper scans... I hope you’re ready for a lecture.” His tone hardened a little as he continued. “To be honest with you, this stuff is... kinda dark. When I went looking into the house, into Mother Maggot, I didn’t expect to find...” He trailed off. “Anyway, I’ll explain when I get there. Sit tight.”

The passage of the next hour felt immeasurably longer than its sixty minutes. The clock on the wall—the one she’d been referencing for the better part of her day—counted down the time with a kind of stubbornness. She watched the second hand click round the face, and though it may have only been

her tired eyes playing tricks on her, she thought she saw it double back a few times. It was when she couldn't bear to stare up at it any longer that she decided to get up and stretch her legs again.

There was a second reason Sadie got up and left the dining area. She set out because it was almost empty and she'd found herself well-isolated in the corner near the dimming window. How strange it was for her to take flight from solitude. Once, she'd been the kind of creature to thrive on it. Now, aloneness seemed to bring with it the sure promise of danger. In the hope of enjoying the company—and protection—of other human beings, she migrated to those sections where others might congregate in higher numbers.

As the hours had passed, the bustle had lessened, though. Visitors to the hospital were fewer now that the evening was pressing on, and though she encountered a few near the entrances their scarcity and manner—for many of them were distraught after visiting loved ones or discussing care plans and diagnoses—brought little security. The ebb and flow of staff had slowed, too. At around seven that evening there'd been a noisy rush out the doors and a simultaneous influx owed to the changing of shifts, but now, an hour later, lab-coat-wearing passersby were harder to find.

Sadie walked laps around the first floor in a daze, and every time she passed a window she found the sky dimmer. She wasn't sure what awaited her at sundown. It was entirely possible she was jumping the gun; that nightfall would bring no horrors and that her dwelling in this very public space would be sufficient to drive off any that might otherwise materialize. But then, Mother Maggot had already appeared within these walls, hadn't she? Sadie looked up at the ceiling, as though she could see through it to the third floor, and recalled her initial meeting with Ophelia in the psych ward.

The gift shops were all closed and the *clack* of her lonely footfalls broke up the mounting silence as she continued out of the lobby and down a narrow hall lined in offices. As she walked she kept a hand pressed against her pocket, her fingers tracing the outline of her phone. She wished it would ring, that

August would call her with some kind of good news—answers to her questions, a promise that he was on his way—but it was silent.

What had he found in his research? Would it be enough to put a stop to this haunting—to throw Mother Maggot off her trail? She thought to call him then, to grill him on it, but simply shuffled on in contemplative silence.

She was quite deep in her thoughts when, at one junction, she looked around and realized she didn't much recognize her surroundings anymore. She came to a stop and had a good look around, sure that she must be mistaken, but her survey of this hall convinced her that she had, in fact, distractedly taken a wrong turn during her last circuit. How long she'd wandered this way—and where she was in particular—was uncertain. She was little bothered by this; there were signs hanging on virtually every wall in this place, and soon enough she'd happen upon one that would direct her back into familiar territory. Rather than turning around, she charged on ahead, sure that she hadn't wandered too far from the right track and planning to follow signs back to the lobby—or, if necessary, to flag down the next staff member she encountered for directions.

She was navigating a narrow hall with walls of brick, and the dim, boxy light fixtures cast a very mild light overhead. Compared to much of the hospital, which had been recently renovated as she understood it, this passage appeared cramped and dated. What's more, it seemed virtually empty. She thought little of it initially, and turned a corner expecting to find an information desk or sign that would orient her.

Instead, she stepped into an unfamiliar lobby. There was a desk—unmanned at that moment—and a bank of elevators. These elevators, she discovered at studying the listings on the wall, led to doctor's offices, and beyond them, at the end of another hall, stood an automatic glass door that brought one into a parking garage. This part of the hospital obviously didn't get much use this late in the day, for the lights had been dimmed and the only sound to be heard came from the noisy ventilation system.

Sadie idled in the lobby for a few moments, trying to make sense of the signs and find her way back to the other side of the hospital. She would have gladly returned to the cafeteria then, to the chapel, but the signage was hard to make sense of. The section she now stood in was called ENTRANCE R if the massive sign over the automatic door was to be trusted, but it seemed an arbitrary designation just then, and a careful study of a wall-mounted map only complicated things further. Locations were outlined with obtuse names; she understood words like “lobby”, but the map dealt in confusing titles such as “DIAGNOSTICS” and “ENTRANCES C-F”.

The quiet, her unfamiliarity with this space and its unpleasant dimness gave rise to a creeping dread as she worked over the map. She was thankful, then, when the automatic door at the end of the hall slid open to admit someone coming from the parking garage. Sadie turned, hoping to catch a staff member she could ask for directions.

The door opened with a hiss, admitting the summer warmth into the passage for four, maybe five seconds, and then it slid closed. For that same duration, she stood and stared at it from the opposite end of the hall, waiting.

No one came through the door.

*Huh? That's strange...* Sadie was hardly an expert on such things; she knew that doors like these worked with motion sensors, and it was entirely possible that the mechanism had merely malfunctioned. The timing, though, sent a shudder coursing through her all the same, and even as she looked back to the map, she couldn't help wondering if that was what had really happened.

Her attention was once again yanked from the map when she heard a single footfall issuing from the direction of that misfiring door. Her shoulders tensed so hard that they nearly bumped her ears. The sound had been soft, as if issued by a bare foot against the tile floor, but had undoubtably come from the same direction. She fixed a hard stare down the hall, seeking the source, and even squeaked out, “Is anyone there?”

Still, the hall remained empty.

Sadie's interest in the map had evaporated. Her interest was now in leaving this dark stretch behind and returning, through whatever means necessary, to familiar ground. She passed the unmanned desk, noting a number of divergent hallways that might lead back to her intended track, and nursed her inflamed imagination while picking one at random. *The door was probably just acting up*, she assured herself, chin up. *And there's no one down that hall—you'd have seen them through the door before they even came inside.* The hairs on the back of her neck stood up as she considered the possibility it was a supernatural visitor, but even for this potentiality she furnished a sensible explanation. *It can't be a ghost—it can't possibly be her—because if it was, you'd be able to see her coming.*

Sadie marched solemnly down this new hall, passing closed doors, dark stairwells and still another bank of elevators. None of it was familiar, but she told herself she'd happen upon the right way soon enough. Black, circular security cameras were common features in the ceilings, and the corners all boasted large quarter dome mirrors that allowed wanderers to look around bends and avoid collisions with others who might turn onto their same track from the opposite direction. All this acted like a pleasant balm on her aching nerves—all of it made her feel “safe”, at least, in a superficial way.

But then she heard it again—a footstep. Distant, to be sure, but of the same strange, soft-soled variety as the last, and not nearly so distant as she would have liked. She startled at the sound of it—and froze as it was followed up with yet another. Sadie caught her own terrified face in the bulbous dome mirror as she hooked a sharp right and pressed her back to the brick wall.

From around the way she'd just come, there issued now a slow but steady progression of steps. Faint and fleshy, the gait responsible for them seemed closer to a stagger than a calm and easy walk. The steps had grown damnably close by the time she summoned the courage to peel herself from the wall and look around the corner, but when she finally did she found no one standing there.

*Where the hell are these footsteps coming from, then?* she wondered. *And if it is a ghost, then why can't I see it?*

She told herself she was mishearing—going deaf, possibly—and prepared to continue briskly on her way, but for an ill-advised, second-long glance into the corner mirror, she fell back against the wall.

They hadn't been steps; what Sadie had been hearing had been the *clop* of malformed black hands up and down the brick walls. A face was reflected in that mirror—the face of something that clung to that wall, crawled across it, perpendicular to the floor—and it presently strained on its dark spindle of a neck to peer around the corner at her. The midnight-colored bulk of the body shook furtively as it turned its bone-white face to meet her.

Sadie jerked backward, flopped against the wall as the lights above her began to flicker. The porcelain brow, its every infested crease a-writhing, was the first thing to round the corner; then came the wide, circular sockets, gleaming chaotically with the stare of a million compound eyes and the membranous flutter of wings. The lily-white lips were curled back to accommodate the stirring of so many twitching black legs, and the mouth burgeoned all the way to the rear of the throat for the legion of chittering bodies packed therein. Beyond the almost deafening buzzing there rose the nauseous notes of a deep, mocking vocalization that was as much a retch as it was a laugh. “*AH-AH-AH-AH-AH-AH...*”

The hideous thing dropped suddenly to the floor, landing with a rustle like a plastic bag, and then leapt onto its two jagged legs. Its body, like a wad of chewed, black gum, took on something of the humanoid as it hobbled at her. Thin, disproportionate arms reached out and at their ends waggled greedy, hazy digits.

Sadie pushed off the wall and launched herself down the hallway at full-tilt. She still had no idea where it would lead, but so long as she could evade those groping hands, escape that vomitous laughter, it didn't matter where she ended up. She stomped to the very end of the hall, turned to her right, then slammed through a pair of metal double doors. The



impact nearly toppled her, but she regained her balance and raced on, finding herself in a new passage whose walls were the painted plaster she was accustomed to. Bumping into a handrail and descending a gentle ramp, she fell into another door and, passing through it with a gasp, found herself in a familiar atrium.

The glass skylight overhead was dark at this late hour, but the room she now stood in was flooded with fluorescent lights. The walkway to the right would lead her back to one of the gift shops, to the chapel and cafeteria. A few passersby gave her strange looks as they lounged in the plush chairs near the exit doors. An announcement—a page to one of the in-house doctors—sounded cheerfully overhead.

Despite the weird looks, she jogged all the way to the cafeteria before collapsing into a chair at the center of the dining room. It was there that August found her a half-hour later, still shaking.

“**S**he isn’t like the others,” pleaded Sadie as he began unpacking his materials and setting them out on the table. “I don’t know what she is. I... I just saw her, before you arrived, but somehow she hid from me until she got real close.” She tugged at his sleeve and gave his arm a hard shake. “I’ve never encountered something like this before.”

August finished unloading his bag, then motioned to the stack of books and papers, at least two feet high. “I’ve been working on this all day, and I think I’ve found some good information.” He looked over his shoulder and scanned the quiet dining area. “Is she here with us now?”

Sadie joined him in panning across the room. Except for a custodian pushing a mop near the cafeteria entrance, the two of them *appeared* completely alone. Lately, though, mere appearances had been a tricky thing. “I don’t think so,” she replied tentatively.

“OK, then let’s dive in,” he said. “The sooner we discuss this, the better.” He pulled out a chair and sat down. When Sadie proved too tense to follow suit, her eyes still traveling up and down the rows of tables, he snapped his fingers and pointed to the chair across from him. “Come on, sit. We have a lot to talk about.”

She obeyed, but even as August began rifling through the stack of materials she could barely focus.

“Where to begin?” he said, shuffling a stack of paper-clipped print-offs and then slipping his finger into an aged hardcover. Sadie recognized this particular book—it was a book on Montpelier history taken from the “Local” section of the library. These particular reference materials weren’t technically supposed to leave the premises; patrons could use them in the library but weren’t allowed to check them out. Regardless, August had apparently snatched up several, and there were brightly-colored bookmarks sticking out of each. “Let’s start with the house, shall we?” He straightened his Hawaiian print bowtie and cleared his throat. “It was built in 1883.

“Take a look at what we had on file!” He tapped a blurry photocopy of what at first glance appeared to be a faded sketch. “This is an old architectural draft—a blueprint—giving the layout of the entire house as it was designed. Turns out we’ve got loads of this stuff stashed away in dusty old archives. It was designed by its first owner, a fellow by the name of Hudson S. Purefoy. You know that it’s got ten bedrooms in it?

“Never mind, that’s not the interesting part. When the original owner passed on in 1927, the house changed hands. A woman by the name of Margot Blake moved in.” He tapped at the pertinent passage of the book and shoved it towards her so that she might read it for herself. Then, he picked up the stack of papers and flipped through them. “Margot Blake was an interesting character. I was able to dig some stuff up—birth certificate, death certificate, some other things—but most of it didn’t amount to much. I learned that she was a nurse, and that she’d never married. Despite this, when she moved in to the house on Beacon Hill in the spring of 1928, she brought with her *five* children.

“You see, I learned about these children in a photograph of the house.” He held out a rough printout whose background was the hulking house on Beacon Hill. In the foreground stood a middle-aged woman and five children that varied in age from five or six to mid-teens, though little else could be said of any of them for the grainy quality of the photo. “I wondered who these kids were; if she never married, had she adopted

them?” He set the photo down and next handed over another sheet. “She worked as a nurse, right? This is a copy of her nursing license here. I looked into her work history, and it turns out she worked at a place called Rainier Asylum in nearby Tiffin, Indiana.”

August let Sadie glance over the glut of offered materials and dug into another of the hardbacks, navigating to one of the bookmarked sections. “Rainier Asylum wasn’t a real nice place by the sounds of it. I mean, psychiatric care in those days verged, well, on the barbaric, you know? But that’s where Margot worked up until 1927. I didn’t think too much of that until I looked into the asylum itself, and when I did...” He singled out a few passages with an outstretched finger. “Rainier Asylum was out in the boonies—the people who built it thought that the fresh air and wide open space was good for the patients.

“But its distance from the city also made it easier to hide various abuses, and it looks like the staff there were up to something—something *dark*—because the whole place got shut down in 1927. The Governor of Indiana actually stepped in and forced the place to close after certain activities came to light, and I understand it led to quite a stir, locally.” August went back to his stack of print-outs. “There are some old news articles floating around from that time, discussing a number of staff members and their participation in...” Here, he licked his lips, seemed to struggle to find the right words. “The best way I can put it is that they were members of a cult. Some kind of Satanic thing, I guess. There were a few doctors, some nurses and others, who were abusing the patients and carrying on weird rituals with some of them. Two of the doctors—Roger S. Burns, M.D. and Leonard A. Small, M.D. were both *hanged* for their involvement in this thing! I don’t know what they did in particular, but it must have been pretty brutal stuff to warrant the noose.

“So, the place gets shut down in 1927 when all of this comes to light, right? Another news article details the children who’d been living in the institution, most of them orphans, and how they were left without a home due to the closure. Instead of shipping them off to another facility, though, five of those

kids were taken in by a kindly nurse who'd worked at Rainier for several years. Any guesses as to who that was?"

Sadie glanced up from the paper. "Margot?"

"Bingo," replied August. "Margot Blake wasn't implicated in the occult stuff that went on in the asylum. She was considered a good nurse, an upstanding woman, and she petitioned the governor for custody of those five young patients. She insisted that she had the experience to care for them, that they needed the stability of a familiar caretaker, and apparently the local government agreed because they awarded her custody. Around this time, a wealthy benefactor in town, so disgusted by the events at the asylum but moved by Margot's service to the children, bought the house on Beacon Hill and gifted it to her. That was how she and the five kids came to live in it."

"And then what happened?" asked Sadie.

August grinned, wagging a finger at her. "Ah, you understand that the story doesn't end there. Very perceptive of you!" He scratched at his fiery hair and then slipped another sheet from the stack of papers. "Long story short, this wasn't a big, happy family. There were... problems in that household almost from the get-go. In 1929, 1930, 1931, we've got multiple police reports filed. Nothing was ever done in any of these cases, but documentation still exists.

"Once, one of the kids—cited in the report merely as "Robert"—ran away from the house. He went to the police and said that Margot was subjecting him and the other children to nightly tortures of some kind. He was returned to the house and the complaint was dismissed, by the looks of it. Other reports later on elaborate on the kinds of things that went on in that house, though. One report, from midway through 1930, deals with one of the girls, Sophia, a teenager. Someone living nearby saw her outside and noticed that her wrists were both bandaged up. When asked about the bandages, Sophia confided in this neighbor that Margot had forced her to cut herself—and that she'd even tasted the girl's blood. A report was made and, again, it was dismissed as the talk of a troubled kid.

“Anyway, I could bore you with more, but the point is that *something* seemed to be going on in that house. Margot wasn’t just keeping an eye on those children, and she’d probably been more involved in the asylum’s sordid business than she’d let on. Now...” He grit his teeth, actually winced as he picked up the next page. “This went on for years, but in 1936, something changed. There was a *murder*.

“Margot was murdered in the summer of that year. The culprit was never caught, but I can tell you right now it was likely one of the kids living in that house. If even half of these police reports have a kernel of truth to them, then I’d bet top coin one of the older kids tired of her abuse, snapped and did her in.” He thumbed at the edge of the page in his grasp. “I *really* had to do some digging to find this, but it turns out that the crime scene was photographed.” He handed the paper over and leaned back in his seat. “That’s how they found her.”

The picture quality was very poor, but the broad strokes were plain enough. The setting was a room of narrow dimensions and the edge of a window was visible in the background. The walls were adorned with some small pictures—blurry decorations—and a small mirror hung to the right. It had not been these paltry details that the photographer had chosen to focus on, however. The true subject of the photo was the rigid body on the floor of said room, fallen a few paces in front of the aforementioned mirror, face-down. Dark splotches marred the already dark wooden floors—presumably blood. Though the graininess made it difficult to know for sure, the corpse’s attire seemed casual—evening wear, perhaps. Sadie dropped the picture onto the table and promptly slid a book over it so that she wouldn’t have to look at it anymore.

“It’s hard to say what happened—even the police didn’t have all the answers. If you ask me, she was probably getting ready for bed one night, brushing her hair in that mirror, when someone came up behind her and let her have it. The autopsy report cites something like twenty stab wounds—if that isn’t proof of a grudge then I don’t know what is. She died on the floor, bled out, and according to the report she wasn’t found until a few days later. By that time...” He shrugged weakly. “Let’s just say the urban myth may have a little truth to it after

all. The flies may have gotten to her, thus the moniker ‘Mother Maggot’.” He threw his hands up. “I never found out what happened to the kids still living in the house; I imagine they were sent elsewhere. Since that day the place has been unoccupied—Margot was the last to live in it. *There*. A crash course on your ghost. Any questions?”

She scanned the materials before her, chin propped on her palm. “So... she took in those kids and hurt them? *Made* them hurt themselves?”

“Looks that way. It probably had an occult angle to it, though it doesn’t seem like anyone ever got to the bottom of it.”

Sadie nodded. “Well, Ophelia told me that she was driven to hurt herself by Mother Maggot. It makes a little more sense now. Maybe her spirit is trying to continue this work—harming children—from beyond the grave. But... why? And what keeps her from moving on?” She chanced another glance at the gruesome crime scene photo and asked, “What about the mirror thing? Ophelia mentioned first seeing Mother Maggot in a mirror. For all I know, it was the same mirror that Margot died in front of. I don’t know if that has any significance, but what did you find about mirrors?”

August took a few moments to stir up the papers on the table. When he’d finally pinpointed the one he sought, he adjusted his glasses and continued. “Right, mirrors and ghosts. It turns out there’s a connection. Er...” He smiled weakly. “Some people *believe* there’s a connection, right? See, in some cultures, when someone dies in a house, it’s a tradition to cover up the mirrors. It’s believed that leaving them uncovered can trip up a spirit that’s supposed to be on its way to the next life. People cover the mirrors to keep ghosts from ‘finding their way back’ here, so to speak. Mirrors have always been thought to have magical properties. This notion that a ghost will live on in a mirror or get trapped in one is an extension of that.”

“It looks to me like Margot died in front of a mirror,” said Sadie, tapping at the crime scene photo. “If that’s the case—and if there’s *anything* to this old superstition—then is it

possible the mirror in that house, the one that Ophelia looked into, contains Margot's spirit? I mean, if she died while staring into it, who's to say, right?"

"In light of everything that's been happening recently, I'm inclined to think it possible," he replied. "And, look here. I even went through the trouble of digging deeper on the matter. Traditions vary, but if you've neglected to cover the mirrors in a house where someone has died, don't fret. All you have to do is sprinkle salt all over the mirror and bury it at least two feet in the ground. Oh, and it has to be buried at night-time. I don't know why that matters, but the ghost-hunting types I got this from insist it's important."

Sadie sat upright, knocking the mess of materials aside. "I don't know if it'll work, but... do you think we can stop Mother Maggot if we find the mirror in that house—the one featured in this photo—and bury it with salt? Could that do the trick?"

"I mean, maybe..." August carefully closed the books and gathered up all the loose sheets. "We'd have to go back to the house, though. And if you want to try this as soon as possible..." He peered at his phone. "We're burning moonlight."

There was no telling whether or not this course of action would prove effective. It was a gamble. Sadie turned and looked out the window of the dining room, its square borders black with night. Their initial visit to the house had been intensely frightful; the mere idea of making that same trip after dark turned her blood to ice. Still, if she and August didn't act immediately, Mother Maggot would still come for her. Either they could bring the fight to Beacon Hill or she could return to her apartment and wait for the specter to show up at her bedside again.

"Let's do it," she said, standing up. "Please, let's try this. I don't know if it'll work, but... I don't have any other ideas. If this fails at least I'll know we tried. At least I won't have sat at home all night just waiting for her to walk in."



August began tucking the materials back into his bag. “All right, we can give it a whirl,” he said. “One problem, though.”

“What’s that?”

“You know where the mirror is in this house?”

Sadie hesitated. “No, not *exactly*. But Ophelia told me enough. I know it’s on the first floor, and I think I know where to look. She found her way there by following the moonlight. We’ll be able to do the same.”

“Moonlight is nice and all, but if we’re going to do this, we’re going to be better-prepared than last time,” he insisted. “We’ll pick up some lights, things like that. I’m not going in blind again.” He slung his bag over his shoulder with a grunt. “Oh, and another thing. I can’t see these spirits like you can, but something occurred to me earlier that might help me be a second pair of eyes in a situation like this. Remember that video we watched of Ophelia in her hospital room? When the camera malfunctioned and she disappeared?”

“Sure, what about it?”

August started from the table. “I’m going to bring a camera with me—I’ve got a good handcam at home. I’ll start recording the minute we walk in there, and if the video goes wonky it may be a sign that the spirit is close-by. What do you think? Mother Maggot’s presence messed with the hospital cam; maybe if I bring a camera to the house it’ll give her away, yeah?”

“It might work,” she said, joining him as he strode out of the dining room.

They passed the cafeteria and started into the main hall. August fished his keys out of his pocket and led her through a side entrance into the young, warm night. His Honda sat across the way, in the visitor’s lot. When he’d dropped his bag into the trunk and started the engine, he turned to her and asked with a forced joviality, “Are you ready to rock?”

She could only offer a lukewarm smile. Buckling up and taking repeated glances through the windows in search of dark

figures outside, she didn't feel ready in the least. She was only going because she no longer had a choice.

**A**ugust lived in a two-bedroom bungalow located in a new subdivision. Half the houses on his street—all of them close together and practically clones of one another—were still up for sale, and those that lacked for-sale signs in their spotty lawns sat dark and silent.

He led the way in, putting on the foyer light and then dropping his keys onto a rickety little stand he'd left sitting in the doorway. From there, he made a beeline into the kitchen where he immediately grabbed a can of soda from the fridge. He tossed a second one to Sadie, who failed to catch it, and the can struck the linoleum with a nasty *clang*. Thankfully, it didn't explode as she picked it up and set it on his cluttered table.

“Gonna need some good flashlights, the handicam...” He said after downing half his soda in a single gulp. Dirty dishes and unsorted junk mail were scattered pell-mell across the counter. He set his soda down into this mess, amidst a handful of long-empty cans, and nodded at the doorway. “I’m gonna see what I have. One second. Make yourself at home.”

Sadie ended up doing the exact opposite, instead lingering near the sink with her arms crossed. The sounds of August's rummaging issued from down the hall and he took to whistling a pleasant tune as he went looking for supplies. She peeked around the corner and asked, “So, you read a lot about ghosts today, right?”

“Uh-huh?” came the muted reply. He was on his knees, pawing at things in his bedroom closet.

“Did you learn anything else about them?” she continued. “Why they exist? Why they haunt people at all instead of just moving on after death?” These questions had been nagging at her all day, but her own searches had brought only facile answers to them. It was a lot to hope for, but she wanted to know if August, in all his reading, had happened upon more substantial theories.

“Oh, cause, you know, I’ve got a PhD in busting ghosts now,” he said mockingly, unzipping a duffel bag and digging through its contents. When he’d exhausted the closet he moved to his dresser, searching the drawers. “There’s no one answer to questions like those,” he eventually replied. “The common theories are that ghosts are just the spirits of people who died with unfinished business. They can’t move on because they kicked the bucket with something important on their conscience. Till it’s dealt with, they won’t know peace.

“There are *other* opinions, though. One writer who’d studied the paranormal claimed not to believe in ‘ghosts’, per se, but that apparitions were actually demonic manifestations—nothing human about them. Then there’s the metaphysical new-agey theory that we never really die, and that there are multiple universes; some theories about how ‘ghosts’ are just memories that play on in the fabric of reality, a sort of time loop. One dude wrote about how reality is just a computer simulation and that spirits and other anomalies were akin to bugs in the code—glitches. So, a dozen different theories, all told. Can’t say which is right, but if I were a betting man I’d say the answer is somewhere in the middle of ‘em all.” He returned to the kitchen with an armful of materials and dropped them on the table.

She thought back to August’s earlier lecture about Margot Blake’s past, and about her ties to Rainier Asylum where, allegedly, patients had been abused in the performance of dark rites. “Margot worked in that asylum, probably closely, with the people who ended up getting in trouble for the abuses that shuttered the place, right? At the time the asylum closed she

wasn't suspected of taking part, but no sooner did she move into the house on Beacon Hill with those kids did stories of similar abuses start to circulate. Do you think she *was* involved back at the asylum, with the others? Do you think that she got away with it and then continued whatever work they'd been doing on her own, in the privacy of that house?"

August huffed on the lens of his handycam and switched it on, shrugging. "Sure, why not? Maybe she moved into that big, dark house with those children and decided to take up Satanic ritual abuse to pass the time. Everyone needs a hobby, you know?"

Sadie ignored him and continued. "It's just that... in life, there were reports of her hurting the children under her care, right? What for? Was she just crazy and abusive or did she have another reason for doing it? For that matter, why did the staff at the asylum get involved with... whatever it was they got up to?" She frowned. "However it is that Margot has managed to remain in this world, the one thing that hasn't changed is her interest in hurting people. Margot possessed Ophelia, and she was the one who made her slash her wrists and later reopen the wounds. I could be missing something, but I think Margot is stuck in this world because of unfinished business. The business, though, is the continued abuse of innocents—she's still trying to finish her dark work, the work that began in the asylum." She sighed. "I'm just spitballing, but that makes sense, doesn't it? Did you ever find out what exactly happened in the asylum? Why the staff had taken to abusing the patients—what their goal had been?"

"I couldn't tell you," he replied, scanning the kitchen through the handycam's viewfinder. "I'm afraid I didn't have time to look into that. Whatever it was they were hurting patients for, it was serious enough to get two of the guys—doctors—hanged, though." He gave the camera a shake and then shut it down. "It's got a half-charge. Should be enough."

"The asylum was shut down in 1927, right?" Sadie eased herself into one of the kitchen chairs. "That means her spirit has been walking those halls for almost a century. If there's a link between Margot and the scandal at Rainier, then it's just

possible that her spirit has been trying to fulfill some dark goal all this time. We have to stop her tonight, no matter what. We need to find that mirror, bury it, and if that doesn't work we need to try something else. Whatever happened at the asylum, she's the last remaining link—the last root of the tree. We need to dig it up for good, lest it keep growing for another hundred years.”

“To that end,” interrupted August, pulling up his chinos, “this is what we've got.” He singled out two flashlights of hardy steel construction. “Lights. These will fare much better in the house. We'll each carry one.” He pointed to a small plastic camping lantern. “We can set this down in a room as a beacon—something that'll help us get back to, say, the main entrance.” One by one he dropped the lights into a backpack.

“What're these for?” asked Sadie, picking up a crumpled plastic bag filled with what looked like glow sticks.

August reached into the bag and grabbed a handful, activating them with a snap. When he'd shaken them furiously and put out the lights to test their brightness, he handed her a fistful and dropped the remainder into the backpack. “Unlike a flashlight, these don't run out of batteries and no electrical interference will hamper them. We drop 'em like breadcrumbs throughout the house so that we can establish a trail, get it?” He paused, grinning, and singled out one in the shape of a fairy wand. “I'm calling dibs on *this* one, by the way.”

They were better prepared this time, but the prospect of visiting the house at night still irked her. “Do you think this will be enough?” she asked. “She might be stronger right now that it's nighttime; she's more at home in the dark than we are. We may not even see her coming. I can usually see ghosts just fine but she managed to sneak up on me nonetheless.”

August held up the camera and then gingerly set it in his bag. “That's what this baby is for. If she shows up, the recording is going to wig out. Remember the hospital footage? Same deal. She can't help but give herself away.”

She had to give him credit; he'd put a lot of thought into covering the bases. Still, there was one potentially time-

consuming problem he hadn't addressed yet. "I'm still not sure how we're going to find the mirror, though. The longer we wander through that house, the more time we're going to give Margot to prey on us. It could take us hours to find a mirror in that giant place..."

"Nah," countered August. "I've been thinking about it. It's like this. Remember that blueprint of the house I showed you?" He extended a finger and traced lines in the air as he explained. "Margot's corpse was found on the first floor; that limits our search to the ground level. Also, if you look at the layout, you'll notice that there are two long halls that cut through the lower story. The first one, which goes straight ahead from the entry hall, leads past the stairwell and into a bunch of larger rooms. That was the hall we explored during our previous visit. The downstairs bedrooms however—there are five on the first floor and five on the second—are located down the right-hand hallway, which we passed but didn't explore. Based on the facts, we know that Margot must have died in one of those five ground-floor bedrooms, and it follows that one of them is bound to contain the mirror. In reality, we only have to search five small rooms in that house to find our target."

"Damn," she replied, "I'm impressed."

"There's one last thing," he added, standing up and throwing open one of his cupboards. From it he drew out a large box of kosher salt. "We'll be needing this and a shovel. I've got one in the garage. So, this is the battle plan: We find the mirror, drop it into a hole two feet deep and coat it in salt and—*voilà*—no more Mother Maggot."

"*Hopefully,*" she was quick to insert.

He retrieved his keys and slung the backpack over one shoulder. "You ready to roll?"

She wasn't, but if she hesitated any longer it was possible she'd lose her faith in the plan and all her nerve besides, so she nodded and made her way to the door. August locked up and tossed the supplies into the backseat. When he'd jogged round

to the garage and found his shovel, he set it in the trunk and then fired up the engine.

The night had deepened substantially by the time they began rolling out toward Beacon Hill.



The entire car ride was tense. Sadie braced herself the whole way, as if in preparation of a sucker punch that never came. Though, in a sense, the blow *did* land, for at seeing the stony titan atop Beacon Hill from the roadside she felt the breath knocked out of her.

The Honda slowed and August coasted into the gravel lot across the road. He wasted no time in parking, in stepping out and gathering the supplies. He tasked Sadie with the shovel and box of salt and took the backpack for himself. A curious change had come over him in the previous twenty minutes since they'd left his place. He wasn't making his usual wisecracks; his ordinarily bubbly nature had been replaced by something more subdued, almost melancholic. She was glad to see him take this seriously, and yet the change in his demeanor—and the knowledge that, like her, he was almost certainly terrified—only fed her apprehensions.

She clutched at the wooden handle of the shovel and started across the quiet road behind him. The moon was bright tonight; brighter than in recent memory, and in the hopes of softening the mood she pointed it out to him. “Moon's nice and bright tonight. I wonder what phase it's in.”

He looked up into the sky for an instant before leveling his gaze back on the house in the distance, and replied, “It's a waxing gibbous.”

She chuckled, unsure of what to do with that information, and then slid back into silence.

Aside from its brightness, this night was also singularly quiet. There was almost no breeze to speak of, leaving the tall, usually rustling grasses ahead of them to stand like spikes of green glass. Some smallish mammal—a squirrel, raccoon or rabbit—descended the hill some thirty feet off, chittering as it went, and for awhile that was the only noise to be heard. Small sections of the field were home to clouds of gnats; they clustered above muddier pockets in the grass that the earlier showers had left behind, and from elsewhere their shriller relatives made occasional bleats.

She used the shovel as a support when the gradient increased, and when she dared look up at the house again she was stunned at its closeness. The pair was ascending at a reasonable clip, but the structure now loomed inordinately near, as if it were itself sliding down the muddy hillside to meet them. Sweat dotted her brow, made her blouse stick uncomfortably to her skin. August paused just long enough to roll up his sleeves and undo a few of the buttons on his dress shirt. The bowtie he'd worn up to that point was stuffed almost hatefully into his pocket and the collar of his shirt was left damp with perspiration where it had sat.

The house on Beacon Hill greeted them with its usual stony silence, and the shadows cast by its impressive footprint were as distinct as lines on a map demarcating the borders of hostile territories. They were a few dozen yards from the busted retaining wall now, and as they advanced Sadie thought better of scanning the black windows as she'd done during their first visit. She kept her eyes locked onto the tangled path ahead, on her companion—on anything but the weathered grey facade.

“All right,” said August, adjusting the shoulder strap of his bag. “Here we are.” He picked up his pace for a few moments and then drew to a halt at the borders of that crumbling wall. “Here, take this,” he said, handing over one of the flashlights. He claimed the other for himself and also juggled the handcam. The device whirred and clicked as it powered up. The viewfinder flashed several times before it was ready to record, and he spent awhile adjusting the zoom and taking in their surroundings. “It’s working,” he said.

This, she took it, was his way of saying it was time to go inside.

He tucked his flashlight under one arm and dug out a claw-full of glow sticks, some of them giving off warm neon colors. “Leave the shovel and salt out here and stick these in your pockets so that you can drop them as we go. You might want to activate a few more so that you don’t have to do it inside.”

Sadie wedged her flashlight into the back pocket of her capris and then took to snapping the chunky things until they glowed. With a dozen or so successfully activated now and their combined brightness showing dimly through the fabric of her pockets, she sized up that wide entry arch and took a deep breath. “I can’t believe we’re going in again,” she muttered.

“Stick to the plan,” he advised. “It’s going to be quick—painless, remember? We know just where we need to go and we’ve come prepared.” This paternal tone of his was quite different from his usual manner; she found she rather appreciated the change. Listening to him talk that way, she could almost bring herself to believe that everything would be OK.

*Almost.*

They began toward the entrance, and when both had hesitated sufficiently at the threshold, they stepped wordlessly inside. The now-familiar squeal of the tired floors was there to greet them as they entered, as if it were the house’s way of saying, “*Welcome back!*”

Flashlights activated, the pair cut through the velvety darkness with wild swings, the whitish beams serving to break fist-sized holes in what was otherwise a wall of perfect black. These flashlights were certainly an upgrade compared to the tiny thing August had used the last time, but even with two of them in action, Sadie was dismayed at how little a difference they made.

August interrupted her thoughts before she lost ground to despair. “Let’s set the lantern up in here,” he suggested, lowering the bag and handing her the camera. “Hold onto that for me.” Unearthing the lantern, he clicked it on and then

walked it several paces into the room. Once set, it cast a feeble glow across the floor. “Hopefully we’ll be able to see that from a distance.” He reclaimed the camera, giving the room a quick study through the viewfinder. “It’s early yet, but I don’t see anything happening here. No glitches, no static. What about you, Sadie. See anything? Hear anything?”

Her grip tightened instinctively around the barrel of the flashlight and she thrust it out before her in a joust. “N-No,” she stuttered. She stood in place awhile, the light peeling back only the most superficial layers of darkness, and combed the space for that white face. It didn’t emerge, but that was no guarantee that it didn’t lurk deeper in.

August turned, outstretched his light to the left. “This is the way we went last time. The hallways are down here, remember? If memory serves, there’s nothing to the right. This is just a big entry hall.”

Sadie stuffed a hand into her pocket and withdrew a neon blue glow stick. She followed closely behind August who now sought out the entrance to the hall, flashlight and camera held out tautly before him. When her own eyes turned up no phantoms in the dark, she would look to the viewfinder as if to reassure herself there was really nothing there.

The hallway appeared before them, its gloom completely untouched by the sickly shine of the lantern to their backs. With a wind-up, Sadie tossed the blue glow stick into the passage and watched it roll awhile across the dusty floors. When it came to a stop, the pair proceeded and she yanked another one—neon orange this time—from her collection.

They pushed into the hallway, the narrowness of the passage giving the beams of their flashlights a bit more currency. Something skittered past their feet as they started in, but after a shared gasp they shook off the scare and kept on. Tainted wrinkles in the plaster seemed to writhe like diseased veins as they swept past, almost fooling one into the belief that the house was a living thing. Streaks of mold, of spider’s silk, traced the slumping walls like vessels leading to some black organ that stirred within the uncharted depths.

Sadie cast another glow stick down the hall. It rolled over the uneven floors, and she tensed as it stopped, half-expecting it to cease its rolling against the specter's waiting foot. So far, the way was clear of phantoms, however. They continued with a threadbare confidence, marking their way and keeping a lookout for the fork in the hall that would transfer them to the wing they sought. Their previous trip down this very passage, coupled with their earlier study of the blueprint, told them they were getting close.

"It can't be too far now," whispered Sadie, dropping a red glow stick at her feet.

"Wait—" blurted August.

Both of them halted when the viewfinder screen gave an unexpected blink, as if the visuals had cut out for a fraction of a second. "Hold up," whispered August. "It might just be the battery or something. I haven't used this thing in awhile."

While he adjusted the angle of the viewfinder and waited to see whether the display would flicker again, Sadie looked back the way they'd come and was alarmed to find that she couldn't see the lantern anymore. A feeble glow radiated in that nest of dense shadow to their backs, but it had been beaten down by the effusive darkness till only traces of it polluted the space.

Another possibility occurred to her as she stared back, however—one that was quickly borne out by a shift in said glow.

The light hadn't been subdued by the shadows; rather, it had been obscured by something standing in her line of sight. Her heart jumped in her chest and she nudged August in the side with her flashlight. "It's... It's..."

The handcam display gave a violent flicker, which led him to finish her sentence. "It's coming, isn't it?"

From the tired floors they'd walked only moments prior, there sounded a slow, noxious squeal.

At this noise, August whipped around, thrusting both light and camera toward the hall entrance, and in doing so

witnessed a sudden jumbling of the display. The screen of the viewfinder pulsed on and off, and when it powered back up after a seconds-long lapse, clusters of pixels jittered in the center as though unable to process what the lens was taking in. “Oh, shit.” He fell a few steps back and only kept from tripping thanks to Sadie’s grip on his arm.

She didn’t need the camera to know what was standing behind them. Through the cone-shaped divot her light managed to carve into the darkness, she could see the vague, slumping outline of that night-bodied thing, could catch the barest edge of its eggshell of a face.

And it was getting *closer*.

Stumpy black legs pistoned disjointedly against the floors, and the fearsome whole lurched forward, head rolling to one side. The tar-colored membranous body quaked for the effort, and it shook harder still as that grating, bone-dry laugh began to dribble from its insect-encrusted lips. “*AH-AH-AH-AH...*” The vile laugh built into a hacking shriek as the figure groped through the darkness. Its quickness was spent in the smaller movements—the wiggling of its gnarled digits, the frenzied turns of its head—but as a whole it moved with an almost impossible slowness, as though stumbling through waist-high water. This gradual gain down the hall, made in fits and starts through profoundly unnatural movements, was in some sense more disturbing than a full-on run. There was an otherworldliness, a strange menace superadded to its pursuit.

The duo bumped into each other and then charged deeper into the hall. Sadie managed to continue dropping glow sticks, though her shaking hands grabbed up too many at a time and cast them about at random. Clusters of red and blue and green lights littered the hall, making for a zigzagging trail.

“Here!” shouted August, suddenly bracing himself against the wall and hitching to the right. “It’s the other hall!” With nary a pause, he switched tracks, breaking into a jog down this new passage. He lowered the light, the camera, and pointed out shafts of the bright moonlight penetrating into the passage from the open doorways down the way. “It’s in one of these rooms,” he said. “It’s gotta be.”

From the rear, the sounds of Mother Maggot's advance waxed dominant. Whenever there was a pause in the uneven footfalls, a brief break in the noise, peals of sputtering laughter would ring out. August couldn't hear the laughter, but his continued study of the scrambled viewfinder told him that the specter was on their heels.

Sadie, though, could hear nothing *but* that perverse laugh, and as she barreled after him, she couldn't help screaming back, "Shut up!"

They arrived at the first of six or seven doors. Each was set several feet from the last, and which contained the sought-after mirror was an utter mystery. August dove into the first room on the right. "Hurry! Start looking!" Whether he intended for them to go room by room together was unclear, but he disappeared into the open doorway and fell completely out of sight.

Sadie's dithering was cut short by the trudging at her own heels. She cast her light up and down the hallway, and though she failed to secure a visual, the thump and gaiety of the monstrous thing still filled the air. In a panic, she hooked into the first room on the left, opposite the one August had entered.

This interior room had no windows. Though it may once have been a bedroom, it had been stripped of every defining characteristic since antiquity, leaving only peeling plaster and an abundance of grime. This wasn't the room she was seeking. When Ophelia had spoken of the mirror, she'd described the room that housed it as boasting a window—one that admitted ample moonlight. It'd been the girl's journey toward this natural light that had led her into that room to begin with. What's more, Sadie had seen the room herself, in the crime scene photo. She realized the room she was looking for *had* to be on the right side of the corridor.

Sadie darted back into the hall, and at that moment August, too, had rushed out of his chosen room so that the two barely avoided colliding. He chose the next doorway on the right, seemed keen on taking them in order. His light flashed across the walls of the next room and he stomped about the floors in search of the mirror.

Sure now that she must follow the moonlight to her target, Sadie lowered her flashlight just long enough to see where the natural light shined brightest along the passage. The last room on the right, twenty or thirty feet ahead, appeared positively brilliant in comparison to everything around it. *That one. The mirror has to be in that one!* She set off for its twilight borders immediately.

But the hall had grown quiet. The sounds of August's investigation were plain enough, as were her own noisy wanderings, but all evidences of Mother Maggot's chase had seemingly petered out. Even the laughter had stopped. She paused, blasted the walls with her light and listened for any sign of the thing.

The sign came from above in the form of a sudden rustling.

Her flashlight may not have been strong enough to probe the high ceilings with perfect thoroughness, but a toss of the light upward was sufficient to expose a body huddled there. The blasphemous thing inched across the ceiling like its namesake, its face left dangling low by a tarry thread of a neck. The teeming sockets were fixed on her and the specter peeled a black hand from the crumbling ceiling to swipe at her. The tainted digits missed the mark, but the air in their wake was scented with the sourness of decay.

Sadie threw herself forward to avoid being grabbed, and the resulting force of her knee striking the floor made one of the boards crack. She ignored the pain, clawing her way back to her feet and aiming now for that room whose borders were thickest with moon glow. As she went, cognizant of August's efforts, she shouted a warning to him. "She's in the hall! Be careful!"

He paused his search, panning the hallway with the handycam and seeming to confirm the apparition's presence with a muttered curse. August backed up into the room he'd been exploring, unsure whether it was safe to proceed to the next.



Sadie closed the distance, her legs aching, and not bothering to look back she dove at once into the doorway of the moonlit room. The abundance of natural light here was almost disorienting, what with her having just wandered out of almost complete darkness, and as she began searching the walls she realized she didn't even need her flashlight to find the promised mirror.

It was, frankly, an unassuming thing, roughly three feet by three feet with a thin iron trim. The glass itself had been discolored by age so that one could not be assured a precise view of anything reflected in it. Where mirrors were usually intended to aid their owners in pursuing beauty, this blotchy timeworn thing had very much the opposite function; everything glimpsed in it was degraded. The mirror was propped against the wall by a number of small, rusted nails, and a test of them found it also bound there by an nigh-disintegrated length of wire. When she'd gotten her fingers around its borders, pulling it from its resting place proved simple enough.

Her heart was still thumping with terror, but having met her objective, the quickness of her pulse was increasingly owed to excitement. "I found it!" she yelled, the ancient walls trembling at the force of her voice. "August, I found it!" She peered at the window to her right, the tottering sill shining with the powdery light of the moon. There was a bit of broken glass there, but if she moved carefully she'd be able to make it out without cutting herself—and this method of escape suited her much better than running back through the house and chancing an encounter with the apparition. She tucked her flashlight into her back pocket and prepared to climb over the sill.

There was a step at the door—August, she presumed—and she looked back to the hall with a wide smile, holding up the mirror and showing it off. "See? I found it—"

But it *wasn't* August who stood there, head low and ropey arms drooping nearly to the floor.

A white socket bulged with an effusion of legs and wings as the thing peered at her from across the room. Mother Maggot staggered in, limbs jittering and ovoid head bobbing.

Sadie froze. Her petrified mind tried to run the numbers as she pressed the mirror to her body. If she climbed out the window at that instant, she could almost certainly outpace the thing. It didn't move quickly enough to beat her in a full-on race. Still, she wouldn't be able to dig a hole on her own quickly enough to escape the specter; she needed August. She wanted to call out to him again, but her throat locked up on her.

In this breathless moment however, Sadie noticed something strange.

The apparition had stepped into the room, but at sighting the mirror in her grasp, had come no further. Mother Maggot remained just inside the threshold, still as a statue.

It was hard to assign intention to many of the horror's movements. Perhaps it was merely taking a break, gathering its strength before rushing her. But as it stood some paces into the room, seemingly transfixed, and then leaned down far enough to study itself in the spoiled glass, one would have almost thought it on the verge of preening.

Sadie struggled to hold onto the mirror for the shaking of her arms. She held its odious frame closer to keep from dropping it and then took a measured step backward, to the

window. Mother Maggot, though, remained in place, seemingly engaged in deep appreciation of her own botched reflection. The infested features narrowed in study, perhaps even familiarity, like those of an animal looking into a mirror.

Had the specter halted because Sadie held in her hands the very seat of its power, or merely because its own reflection proved distracting? So that she might come nearer to the truth, Sadie took another step toward the window and then allowed herself a quick glance at the glass. Nothing could have prepared her for what she found there, however.

The figure standing across the room was an incarnate nightmare—a thing so foul that it should not have been allowed to exist in a sane world. That which was reflected in the mirror at that moment was shocking primarily for its normalcy, though. It was, put plainly, the reflection of a middle-aged woman. In fact, the only off-putting notes in this woman's appearance were those which the time-spoilt mirror added by its warped nature.

To believe the mirror was to entertain the idea that the thing standing before her was not the black-bodied, insect-ridden monster known as Mother Maggot, but a trim and sallow woman of fifty-odd years with whitening hair—a figure garbed not in darkness and filth, but in a severe, semi-clerical grey dress of ankle-length. The stained mirror-face made it difficult to know for certain, but from fragments showcased in those few unobscured sections it was possible to surmise a tight smile plastered to that face, and a cutting stare as well.

This woman, Sadie could only presume, was Margot Blake, and when the standoff had worn on for several moments, it was by this name that she addressed the figure. “Margot? Is *that* your name? Margot Blake?”

There was no perceptible shift in the apparition, but the woman in the mirror moved all the same. Her dark eyes were cast upward as if in answer to Sadie's voice, and from somewhere in the room there drifted a quiet reply. “*I've been waiting for you.*”

She glanced about the moonlit room after the source of that disembodied whisper, but came up short. “Why?” she squeaked out, taking another step toward the window. Her backside met the sill—if she threw one of her legs over it, she’d be able to climb into the bushes outside. “What do you want from me, Margot?”

The specter’s voice drifted through once again; low and quiet like a radio transmission heard from afar. “*I’ve been waiting so long for you. I thought you’d never come. All these years I’ve waited and now you’re here.*” The woman in the mirror looked upward, giving the impression that she could see over its edge into the room—into Sadie’s own face.

“I don’t understand,” began Sadie. “I don’t know you, Margot. You’re mistaken. I’ve only been in this house twice. What do you want?”

“*No,*” replied the mirror-borne apparition with a hint of a laugh. “*No. I’ve waited for you many, many years. We all have. Finally, you have come to us.*”

The familiarity with which she was being addressed struck a nerve. She clutched the edges of the mirror tightly and weighed the possibility of a hasty exit, but something made her hesitate. “You’re mistaken, Margot. You don’t know who I am—you know nothing about me. And... what do you mean, ‘us’? Is there someone else here, too?”

The spirit laughed smugly. “*You’ve forgotten, haven’t you? It’s all right. Come closer. I’ll remind you. We’ve been waiting so long for you to return to us. I’ve longed for you. This is the day we all prepared for.*”

In time with the woman reflected in the mirror, Mother Maggot outstretched one of her withered, inky hands and beckoned.

“Sadie?” shouted August from deeper in. “Where are you? Is... is it still in the hallway? You OK?”

The sound of his voice made her startle—she nearly lost her grip on the mirror and it was only a lucky nudge of her knee that kept it from sliding to the floor. Glancing over her

shoulder, she eased herself onto the sill and shouted back, “Get out of the house! Now! I’ve got it, meet me outside!”

“Huh?” There was a confusion of steps from the hallway. “You found the mirror?”

“Yes!” Sadie stuck one leg out, grazing the bushes, and then quickly retracted the other. Clutching the mirror to her breast, she leaned forward and dropped over the other side, landing awkwardly in the tangled growth.

From inside the house, August’s heavy footfalls could be heard as he clumsily traced his way back to the entrance. And there was something else, too.

Mother Maggot was on the move again. The specter slunk toward the window, gnarled hands groping the sill and wandering eyes peppering the bushes with wriggling pests. The sound of the monstrosity sliding down into the bushes and giving sluggish chase shattered the quiet night as Sadie began running across the overgrown yard. At the same time, the woman in the mirror still beckoned. “*We’ve been waiting so long for your return.*”

She broke into as fast a run as she could with the bulky mirror in her grasp and tried to ignore the sounds of pursuit, the sinister voice that kept coming through the air despite her increasing distance from the house. Upon reaching one of the corners, she burst around it and caught sight of the broken retaining wall, where August had just arrived and was presently searching for her. “August!” she yelled. “Dig! Dig!”

He turned to her, studied the rectangular mirror she held and then scrambled for the shovel. “OK, got it!” He glanced about his feet and, selecting a patch of damp ground, plunged the tip of the shovel in. His thin arms shook and when he stamped down on the head of the shovel to dig deeper, his entire frame quivered. With an audible groan, he began hoisting the soil over his shoulder.

Sadie arrived at the retaining wall within the next few seconds, panting and fatigued. With great care so as not to smash it, she set the mirror down on the remnants of the wall

so that its surface looked up into the moon-bright sky, and was terrified to find Margot still reflected there.

The reflection wobbled slightly as the figure showcased therein adjusted itself. Margot peered out at her as through a dust-streaked window, still smiling, eyes wild and black. “*We knew you’d come. We prayed for it all these years...*”

Meanwhile, from around the very corner she’d just turned, there came a rustling. Even August heard the commotion and paused in his digging.

“Don’t stop!” she ordered him, grabbing the box of salt and ripping the top off it.

Mother Maggot clawed her way through the grass, slithering across the lawn like a great, black serpent. From within the knotted growth the white face leered, polluting its wake with mounds of shuddering flies. The entire property seemed to buzz for the things that inched throughout that egg-like skull.

“Damn it.” August reared back, batting away a cloud of flies. “Where the hell are these coming from all of a sudden?” He buried the shovel again and lifted another clump of dirt. The soil was fairly loose and the hole was getting deep—but was it deep enough?

Dropping to her knees beside him, Sadie began scratching at the earth with her own hands, lifting out fistfuls of soil and increasing the opening’s footprint. Very soon, the apparition would be upon them. She moved aside as August cleared a few more inches and then stood, grasping the mirror with her muddy fingers. “Is it deep enough?” she asked.

“I... I think so,” he replied, standing aside. “Drop it in, see if it fits.”

Lowering the mirror into the ground, she was reacquainted with Margot, who continued to beckon. “*We’ve been waiting so long for your return. Come closer...*” Having placed the accursed artifact in its grave, she grasped the box of salt and began pouring it liberally over the top. All the while, the rustling in the grass continued and the woman’s beckoning

grew more frenzied. She caught a shadow in her periphery, as of something looming within arm's reach.

Having emptied the entire container of salt into the hole, Sadie rolled aside. "Cover it!"

August began tossing shovelfuls of dirt back into the opening, and Sadie, too, threw whatever clumps her shaking hands could gather. The air buzzed with a frenzy of flies, but they worked through them, covering the mirror completely with soil and then madly packing it down with their hands and feet.

It wasn't until the last bit of dirt had been added that the flies dispersed and Margot's voice finally faded out of hearing. When, after more than a minute, Sadie rose to her feet and surveyed the vast property, she found the two of them were alone—or, very nearly. In the grass some feet away there writhed a knot of white maggots, the last-remaining trace of the apparition that had been racing toward them only moments ago.

"She's gone." Sadie turned to him, had another look around. "We did it. She's gone!"

August leaned on the handle of the shovel, sweat dripping down his nose. "It's over?"

Sadie gave the burial mound one last stomp for good measure, then took a moment to peer into the house's black windows. No pale faces leered at her from their heights—nothing, save for mice, perhaps, stirred within. Any such declaration was admittedly premature, but sensing a shift in the mood of the place, a lightening of the atmosphere, she felt confident enough to nod. "Yes, it's done."

For the first time all day, the two of them were able to relax, and they plopped down on the sturdiest section of the retaining wall to catch their breath.

"So, what happened? You found the mirror and then jumped out a window?" asked August, scratching at his ruby red cheek.

Sadie pawed at her capris, wiped the grime from her fingers. “She followed me into the room where I found the mirror,” she began. “But... when I took it off the wall and pointed it at the spirit, it stopped following me, like it was too busy staring at its own reflection. I looked into it, too—I could see someone else there, a woman. I think it was Margot Blake, the way she looked in life. And she spoke to me. Could you hear her?”

August shook his head. “Nah. I thought I heard something in the grass there, but I didn’t hear anyone speaking. What did she say?”

“She said... she’d been waiting for me a long time. She and... *others*.” Sadie chuckled, but a shiver raced through her tired form all the same. “She wanted me to come closer, to stay here, I guess. I don’t understand what she meant, though—she must have been mistaking me for someone else. She didn’t stop talking till we finished burying the mirror.”

He didn’t have much to say about that. Wiping at his brow, August kicked a few dirt clods from the shovel and then stood. “This has all been quite the adventure, Sadie. But there’s one thing I still don’t understand.” He picked up the handcam and dropped it into his pack.

“What’s that?”

“After all we’ve been through, I don’t understand how anyone could possibly enjoy gardening. Imagine, spending your day digging a bunch of holes to plant stuff in,” he said, shaking both of his noodly arms. “Digging sucks. I’m gonna be sore for days after this. We librarians are delicate creatures!”

She couldn’t help but laugh. “A little soreness? I think we got off easy.” She cast one last look at the house and then grabbed the shovel. “Ready to go?”

“Hell yeah.” Slinging his bag over one shoulder, he led the way down the hill.



**A**ugust pulled into one of the open spots outside her building and rested his head on the wheel. They hadn't spoken much on the way back from Beacon Hill, hadn't seen the need. "Well," he said, puncturing the lengthy silence, "If it's all right with you, I'm gonna drive home and collapse face-down in my bed now. You gonna be OK?"

Sadie looked up at the apartment building and nodded. "I think so." She frowned a little. "I mean, I *hope* so." She turned to him. "Do you think it's over? Like *really* over?"

He chuckled darkly and ran a filthy hand through his hair. "I guess we'll find out tonight, eh?" He nodded. "Yeah, I think it's over. We found the mirror, buried it, the whole shebang. I think that mirror was her connection to the world and we just severed the roots."

"Sure, but..." Sadie turned and looked into the backseat, where August had left the bag of supplies. In it, she recalled, was the camera. "If her spirit lived on in the mirror we buried, is it possible that it could have moved to a different mirror—or into something else? What about your camera? Do you think footage of her might give her a kind of refuge?"

August reached back and grabbed the bag. Unearthing the camera, he powered it on and tapped a few buttons in the menu. Then, turning it so that she could see, he promptly wiped the memory. "There we go," he said. "If I *did* get

anything really spooky on tape, it's gone now. So much for my planned ghost-hunting YouTube channel..."

"Thanks," replied Sadie. "Hopefully that'll do it."

August lifted his glasses and pawed at his tired eyes. "You asked if it was 'over' just now. I don't think we'll have to worry about Mother Maggot anymore. But that doesn't mean this *ghost* thing is over. We still don't know much about how these things work, why you see them and all that. Maybe next time you'll get closer to the truth."

Sadie laughed and opened the door. "Next time, huh?"

August's expression was less jovial than she expected when he replied, "Sure, next time. There's no avoiding it, is there?"

Her own mood, only recently mended, crumbled a little for this reminder. "Well, thanks, August. Get home safe."

He waved and pulled out of the space.

Sadie took her time in climbing the stairs, and when she got up to her place she lingered awkwardly in the hall for a few minutes. She ultimately found the nerve to enter, to put on all the lights and do a walk-through, and she didn't find anything out of sorts. The place seemed empty by all appearances, though by this time she'd come to distrust her eyes. There was always more to the story than what one could see.

Tired and achy, she took a quick rinse in the shower, keeping the curtain slightly open so that she might survey the bathroom and hall, and then threw on a fresh pair of pajamas. There wasn't much in the fridge, but she cobbled together an underwhelming meal from its contents and scarfed it down alongside a hot chamomile tea. Rather than sleep in bed, she made herself comfortable in the living room, on her papasan chair, so that she might be closer to the door in the event of a late-night scare.

She plucked a paperback from one of her many stacks, but didn't even manage to lift the cover before sleep came full bore for her.

IT WASN'T a hideous dream that woke her, nor a watchful monstrosity, but a shaft of morning sun peeking in around the edge of her blinds.

Sadie awoke with a start, but the fright that came over her was gone in an instant when she realized she'd passed the entire night peacefully.

It really was over.

“OK, how about this?” asked August, glancing at his watch. “At nine, sharp, whoever puts out more of the lights has to pay for morning coffee the next shift?” He smoothed out his bowtie—white with blue stars—and leaned over the circulation desk toward her. “It’s only five minutes till, so you’d better get ready.”

“No way.” Sadie hoisted up a stack of returns from the counter and carried them to the children’s section. “I’m not getting wrapped up in another one of your dumb bets. Buy your own Starbucks.”

He slumped, kicked his feet in a silent fit. “But it tastes *better* when *you* pay for it!”

The library had emptied out in the minutes prior to close. The last visitor had plucked her items from the reserve shelf and hastily checked them out. Now, it was time to hurry through the usual busywork so that they could clock out at a reasonable hour.

A few days had passed since their last trip to Beacon Hill, and what stunned her most was how easy it had been to slip back into a normal life. She’d been sleeping well, eating well, and had even gotten back to her reading. The first night had been difficult, but subsequent ones proved easier.

The morning after she and August had buried the tarnished mirror, she’d gotten a call from Rosie. Things with Ophelia were going well; she was set to be released within the week. Without getting into the finer details, Sadie had also assured

her that everything was back to normal—that the thing that had threatened her daughter was now gone from the world.

Still, every time Sadie woke up, or found herself in a darkened room, she couldn't help wondering if that was truly the case. Mother Maggot never turned up; what's more, their success at Beacon Hill had coincided with a sudden stop of those horrific dreams she'd been having of her mother. But that one or both might suddenly return never seemed completely out of bounds. Her recent days had been suspiciously peaceful. She wasn't used to it, and sure that it wouldn't last forever, her enjoyment of the calm proved hollow. Someone with a gift like hers couldn't live a normal life for very long. That's all there was to it.

And that evening, as she started for the main door to lock up some minutes past nine, her truce with the universe was broken.

Sadie had been toying with the small golden key, but at a glance through the door—and at the thing that lurked without—she came to squeeze it so hard that it left an impression in her palm.

Outside, standing very close to one of the front windows, was a dark figure. Outlined vaguely for the whitish glow of the streetlight in the courtyard, the individual stood perfectly still, leering into the dim library with feverish intensity. Any hope that it was merely a passerby, a latecomer, vanished when she met those familiar chalk-colored eyes staring in at her through the glass.

Whatever or whomever was looking at her through that window was no longer part of the world of the living. August had mentioned a recent traffic accident just down the road; she took this to be its victim, come to look into the windows and beckon to her. The figure did just that, offering a limp hand in salutation.

Panic set her heart knocking around her chest, but she didn't give into it. Instead, she took a few steps back and stood out of view of that window. Fear would only make it worse; things of this kind thrived on terror, on discomfort. If she

collected herself and then returned to the window after a count of ten, odds were good it wouldn't be there anymore.

Recent events had taught her to look at these beckoning phantoms in a new light. They were like stains on this world—things that could not be lifted to their rightful plane till their connections to the physical sphere were severed. What kept this milk-eyed loiterer bound to these dark streets? If she approached, investigated, could Sadie free this one, too—banish it like she'd done to Mother Maggot? She felt reasonably sure she *could*, and this feeling emboldened her, sapped some fearfulness from the thing.

With a deep breath, she stepped back around the corner and took in the main entrance.

As expected, there was no one there. The figure had moved on just as she'd predicted.

“What's the hold up?” shouted August from behind as he trudged toward the main entrance.

She nearly jumped out of her skin at the boom of his voice.

He quickly slid his key into the lock of the main door and then turned to grin at her. “I got to the door first. Guess that means you're buying me dinner again, huh?”

Red in the cheeks, Sadie stormed off to the main desk. “I told you, I'm not playing those games with you anymore!”



SLEEP CAME EASY THAT NIGHT. Thoughts of her day were quietened and that sooting internal darkness prevailed. From it, though, there came a familiar scene.

A long, dark hallway. At the end of it was a black door.

Sadie couldn't remember how she'd gotten there, and the walls around her seemed so narrow that she could hardly take a step forward without getting stuck between them. Still, the door seemed to call out—to attract her—and she floated toward it, feeling like she'd seen it before. A dim memory echoed through her mind like a scream—a memory that she hadn't merely *seen* the door before, but that she'd opened it—

however, she cast all this away as she approached and threw a hand out for the knob.

Her entire body seized up as it swung open. Anticipation gripped her, turned her stomach into a pit of cold. Something in her psyche told her she'd made a mistake—that the door should have been left closed. But it was too late now. By slow degrees it fell open on its silent hinge to reveal what was inside.

And when it had opened completely, Sadie stood before the doorway and found herself looking at nothing but an empty closet.

The initial reaction was relief—the kind of relief one feels when cresting what turns out to be a fake hill on a roller coaster. But as with that precise brand of relief, it was altogether too premature. The ride was only getting started, after all.

The dread that followed shortly thereafter left her feeling ill and heavy. Fear issued from the realization that this discovery could be viewed through two distinct lenses. The first, an optimistic one, viewed the matter as settled; she was no longer to be haunted by the thing she'd expected to find within the closet. It was gone, never to ruin her nights again. She'd outgrown it.

The other view, though, was that she wasn't merely looking into an empty closet. She was looking into a space where something, previously contained, incarcerated, controlled, was no longer confined. That something, perhaps, was now walking *free*.

Her fear never reached such highs as to break her out of sleep. The scene was reabsorbed into the folds of her mind and she drifted deeper. She didn't awaken till well past sunrise.



THE CALL CAME AROUND ten in the morning. Sadie had only been out of bed for an hour, and was poking at her oatmeal, when she'd answered her phone. It was Rosie. "Hello?"

“Hey, Sadie,” started Rosie, “I’m sorry to bother you. I just wanted to tell you that they’re letting Ophelia out of the hospital today. She’s been doing so well that the doctors are allowing her to discharge. I wanted to say thank you again. If not for you, it’s possible I would have lost her forever.”

“Oh, it’s no problem,” came Sadie’s reply. “I’m happy to hear she’s recovering well. She’s been through a lot. Tell her I said hi.”

“Actually, I was wondering if you and your friend had time today to drop by. I know it’s short notice, but I was thinking of having a little barbecue to celebrate. If you’re both free, I’d love to have you over.”

Sadie sat upright, set her bowl aside. “Uh, yeah, I know I’m free today. I’ll let August know and see what he’s up to. What time are you thinking?”

“How about four this afternoon? Right around dinner time.” Rosie paused. “Erm, there was something else, too. Remember how I told you your grandparents’ old house was recently bought by a young couple? Well, they were doing some renovations in the attic and I guess they found something that might have been theirs—a box, mostly paperwork inside. I had been talking with them, and mentioned how I was still in contact with you, so they brought it over and gave it to me. I was wondering if you’d like to take it. I can throw it out otherwise—and I haven’t snooped around in it—but I thought I should mention it.”

This took Sadie completely off guard. She herself had spent a few days clearing things out of that house, preparing her grandparents’ estate for liquidation. What could be in this box—kept in the dark, unfinished attic, of all places? It was almost certainly junk; old financial records, perhaps receipts or tax documents. On the off-chance that there was something worthwhile in it, she agreed to take it, though. “Sure. When I come by today for the cookout I’ll take it off your hands. Thank you for holding onto it.”

When the plans had been set, Sadie shot August a quick text. *Hey, Rosie just let me know that they’re letting Ophelia*



*out of the hospital today. She wants to have a barbecue at her place around 4 and she's invited us both. You in?*

A minute went by and then her phone chirped with his reply. *FREE FOOD?!?*

He was, apparently, rather excited at the prospect.

The morning wore into afternoon, and as she tidied up her apartment and got ready for the cookout, Sadie kept thinking back to this box that'd turned up in her old home. She tried not to get her hopes up, reminded herself it was bound to be junk, but there was no helping the little twinges of excitement she felt whenever she remembered it.

At half-past three, August rolled up and laid on the horn. She set out to join him and they sped off for Rosie's.

**I**t was a warm but breezy day; perfect for a barbecue. August navigated the old neighborhood, passed all the familiar sights, and pulled into Rosie's driveway. As before, when they stepped out, Sadie couldn't help looking over at the house she'd spent her teenage years in.

Rosie met them in the drive with a hug, and had brought the box out with her—a thick cardboard number about a foot across and a foot deep—and handed it to Sadie. “Just so I don't forget,” she said with a laugh. “Anyway, Ophelia's out back. We're waiting on her friends to come by, but you two make yourselves at home. I've got the grill heating up and there are drinks in the fridge.”

Sadie returned to the car just long enough to set the box in the backseat, and it took all her willpower not to pry off the lid and start rummaging through it. It wasn't particularly heavy—ten pounds, at most—but its contents crinkled and rattled. After setting down the box, she followed August and Rosie inside, and accepted a cold bottle of water.

While August and Rosie made small talk in the kitchen, Sadie found her way out to the back yard, where Ophelia was standing. The girl looked worlds better. Her wrists were still bandaged, but she'd put on a longer shirt that obscured most of the gauze. Her hair had been styled in a braid and she'd applied a generous dose of fruity body spray. The sight of the girl, home and healthy, brought Sadie great joy. If only their initial reunion had taken place under circumstances like these, rather than in a gloomy hospital room. “Hey, Ophelia.

Welcome home!” she said, stepping across the porch and setting her water down on the cobblestones.

The girl seemed in her own head. She was standing next to the grill, looking across the fence into the distance. She gave a little nod as if in acknowledgement, but didn’t say anything.

The air was rich with the season’s greatest hits; freshly-cut grass, wildflowers from the nearby garden, burning charcoal and tangy earth. “It’s such a nice day out today,” continued Sadie, unprompted. “They couldn’t have picked a lovelier day to discharge you, huh?”

Ophelia’s shoulder-length braid swayed in the breeze. She still didn’t turn to meet her visitor, but kept looking over the fence, back and forth, back and forth, like she was waiting for someone to climb over it. “You told my mother it was over, didn’t you?” The words sounded vacant, almost slurred.

“Y-Yes,” replied Sadie, cracking an uneasy smile. “It’s all behind us now, that. She’s gone—she’s gone for *good*,” and in her inflection, Sadie made it clear exactly which *she* was being referenced. “August and I took care of that.”

Birds twittered overhead and the trees rustled in the wind. Ophelia gave a very slow shake of the head and whispered an emphatic, “*No*.”

“No?” asked Sadie, taking a step toward the girl. “What do you mean?”

“It’s *not* over. It’s *worse*,” muttered Ophelia, her voice very nearly taken by the wind. “Last night, I saw her in my hospital room, next to my bed. She *spoke* to me, and then I started to remember... I remembered the dreams I’d been having, I remembered... *why*.”

Sadie’s guts clenched involuntarily. “W-Wait, you saw Mother Maggot? L-Last night?”

Ophelia gave a slight turn of the head, taking in Sadie with one wide eye. There stood out a queasy smile on her pale lips and she shook her head for ten, fifteen seconds as if in extra emphasis. “No,” said the girl, “not *her*.”

“Then who did you see last night in—” Sadie stopped abruptly. Without any further insight, she found she already knew who the girl was referring to, and the knowledge of that made her heart skip a beat. But no, the very suggestion of such a thing was beyond imagining—she refused to believe it. “Ophelia, what do you mean?”

Ophelia was shaking now—every hair on her head trembled like a live wire. “I... I don’t know what she is... I don’t know where she came from...” She looked on the verge of falling, her body swaying from side to side. “I’ve had dreams of a tree—a black tree—that seeks to grow into Heaven. It has a thousand black roots. People chop it down—it would be a *good* thing to chop it down!—but it always grows back because no one ever severs the roots. There are too many of them. So it lives on and on...” She trailed off into a fit of shivers, clutching at her arms.

Sadie took a cautious step forward, her voice as unsteady as the girl’s frame. “Ophelia, who did you see last night next to your bed? Who was in your room?”

Ophelia wobbled as she produced a mirthless laugh. “It wasn’t a *who*, Sadie. It was a *what*.” The wild, bloodshot eye shook in her pale face. “Your mother... isn’t human.”

She was thunderstruck by this, at a complete loss for words. Sadie tried to ask, “You saw my mother?” but the sounds pouring from her lips were nothing but stunned gibberish.

And it was this bafflement that rendered her too slow to stop what came next.

Ophelia turned and reached past the grate of the hot grill, pulling out one of the grayish glowing coals. The skin of her hand, of her fingers, sizzled audibly as she clutched it, and with those same ferocious eyes, she lifted the coal to her lips and ushered it into her mouth. The smoldering briquette met her tongue, her soft palate, with an angry hiss, and as it left her right hand it took a layer of skin from her palm with it. Like a seabird trying to accommodate a flopping fish in its gullet,

Ophelia hitched her head back and gyrated from the neck down to ease the burning load down her esophagus.

“Ophelia!” Sadie took the girl by the shoulders, pulled her around so that they were face to face. “Don’t swallow it! What are you—!” She looked back to the house and screamed for help. “Call an ambulance!”

The girl jerked and coughed, embers spilling out of her mouth as the coal ate up the soft lining of her throat. Then, the coughs brought forth bright red blood, which dribbled from the corners of her lips and burst forth in an ash-flecked mist across Sadie’s face. The girl sank to the ground in Sadie’s arms, and tugged up handfuls of grass as the charcoal burned its way through her innards. Her red, bulging eyes swelled with tears and tortured noises welled up in her heaving breast.

Sadie wiped the girl’s blood from her face, tried opening Ophelia’s mouth to look for the coal, but realized it had gone too far to be reached. She brought her water bottle to the girl’s lips and tried to empty it down her throat, but with a savage grunt, Ophelia knocked it into the grass. So horrified that she could hardly meet the girl’s glassy gaze, Sadie turned back to the house and screamed once again. “Please! Hurry!” At that moment, both August and Rosie could be heard running through the house for the back door.

The girl lurched and groaned in her death throes, blood trickling across her cheeks, drops of it clinging to her earlobes. She clutched at her chest, stirring violently at the briquette’s constant progress. The smell of smoldering flesh escaped her bloodied lips like a foul burp.

“Why?” asked Sadie, lowering Ophelia fully into the grass and holding up her head in her hands. “Why did you do this? Did... did my mother make you do this?”

August and Rosie burst through the back door. “What’s happened?” shouted Rosie, diving into the grass after her daughter. “What’s... what’s all this?” She took up the girl’s head, her fingers growing damp with blood. “Ophelia?”

The light went from the girl’s eyes at that moment, but they’d remained fixed on Sadie to the very last. What’s more,

she died with the widest of smiles on her face.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Once upon a time, a young Ambrose Ibsen discovered a collection of ghost stories on his father's bookshelf. He was never the same again.

Apart from horror fiction, he enjoys good coffee, brewed strong.

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