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## White

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WHITE

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HNR 499

Advisor: Professor Chris Haven

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## Present Day

The real estate agent hands you a list of eight houses in your budget. Of course, one of them is that house on Rathcool. You shake your head. Grandpa Clement is in a mental hospital somewhere that nobody visits anymore; even dad doesn't know whether his mental illness caused his actions, or whether the mental illness came from the guilt afterwards. Mom and dad haven't spoken about the murder in years. Dad always used to beg him to confess, because he didn't have the heart to turn his father in. But grandpa never did and now it wouldn't matter: he could plead insanity. You've heard that her ghost still haunts a house on Ratchool, the house that's been empty for years now. Your family might have forgotten about the tragedy, but you never did. It's been in the newspaper as abandoned and for sale for the longest time. You had hoped they would just demolish it. You decide that if it's going to pursue you like a malicious shadow, you might as well turn and face it head on.

Accept it. Buy the house. Move in. Face the un-faceable.

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You look at the decrepit stone step with repugnance. You think that surely if anyone meant to sell this place, they would have touched it up a bit, maybe planted some flowers or painted over the exterior's cracking white paint. Perhaps it was the old house itself that kept people away, rather than anything that may or not be hanging around unseen. The only visible maintenance done on this sad excuse for a house was a shiny red door. It's the only part of the house that didn't look as ancient as Ireland itself.

You step carefully, as to not disturb any fragments of the decaying stone step. The step is surprisingly solid and sturdy despite the rough appearance. Bonnie the realtor has left the door unlocked for you, as promised, so you push open the red door and step inside. Wood floors, a

faded pink armchair, and kitchen with beautiful wood counters. You walk in cautiously, feeling like you're walking into someone's home, rather than an abandoned, for sale house, which is crazy, because from the layer of dust it's apparent to you that nobody has been here in quite a while. Unless if there was something that wouldn't disturb the dust. Perhaps the rumors are true.

The living room is sparse: the chair and an old cracked picture frame, the glass yellowed, obscuring the writing beneath it. You have two options, the staircase to the right, which leads upwards to who-knows-what, or the kitchen that you observed briefly upon walking in. You head for the kitchen and clench your arms to your body in a protective self-embrace when the floor creaks so loud you're sure it is going to drop you through to the cellar bellow and you feel the need to prepare yourself for the inevitable fall. But again, the strength of the house impresses you and after a few steps, you arrive safely in the kitchen.

There's an old phone on the wall that's off the hook and you can hear the faint hum of the dial tone. You shudder involuntarily, wondering how long it has been like that, waiting for someone to click the receiver back in. You can't help but wonder now, if it was a haunted spirit that knocked the phone off the receiver in the first place. The long cord leaves the phone hanging mid-way down the wall. You bend slightly to reach the phone and the black plastic is so cold it slips out of your hand in your surprise, causing the phone to thunk up against the wall. The phone leaves a small divot where it impacts. Your palm turns up and you notice your hand is turning red, just like when you were young and threw snow balls with no gloves on, even though your parents always warned you about how the frost would gnaw your little finger off. You think about how your parents will warn you when you tell them you're going to buy the Rathcool house, with all of its infamy, especially in your family.

The kitchen is average and outdated, but it doesn't matter. A small black table made of cheap pressed wood is pushed up next to the wall. You would live here even if it didn't have a kitchen. Living here, taking the dilapidated house off the market, clearing your family's name in the only way possible... You make your way back into the living room and this time you are prepared for the creak in the floor boards. It's almost musical, endearing, the way you wait for the sound.

About to head upstairs, you catch a gleam out of the corner of your eye. You turn and stare back towards the door, the frame, the window, hoping to catch the haunted spirit stalking you through its house. Her house, if she's still here to claim it. There's nothing to see, but before you even move your feet you hear the creak of the floorboards. Your heart rate increases from excitement. After sweeping the living room with your eyes a final time to ensure that there's nothing to see, you ascend the stairs. Your mind is playing tricks. You expected to see a ghost, so now your eye is catching what must've just been light from the window, your ear reacting to the normal creaking of an old house. Shake it off.

The upstairs is small and overcrowded. A master bedroom with a tiny bathroom. There's not even a shower, because that's in the slightly larger, but still cramped bathroom in the hallway, next to the other small bedroom. But that's all fine. Nothing will change your mind. This house has to be taken off the market, and it has to be you. That should give the neighbors something to talk about besides the bloody events from decades ago. They need new material, some good small-town gossip.

You walk back down the stairs, scrolling through your phone. The front door slams shut as you reach the bottom of the stairs. You look up startled, but it quickly changes to contentedness. It isn't even a little bit windy outside and even your mind couldn't have conjured

that noise. You consider briefly that the real estate agent has returned to check in on you. A quick look out the window confirms that there is no car. So regardless of whether that door slam is a ghost's way of locking you in or trying to scare you away, it doesn't matter. Either way, you're not giving up.

"Hello?" You ask tentatively. There's no answer. But then the floor boards creak and you scan the room wildly for anything unusual. Near the chair, not more than two meters away, the wall goes fuzzy with heat wave-like vapor streams and as you focus on it, the waves morph into hair, wavy hair. Squinting, you can see the figure of a foggy woman shrouded in gray. You jump back a little, your back pressed against the red door, trying to put as much space between you and the misty apparition as you can. Her eyes are wide, intent, with brows crinkled together, jaw tight. She's a little shorter than you, but that doesn't diminish her intimidation prowess.

"How...dare...you..." her voice is low and husky. She glides towards you. "How dare you come into my house, you murdering rogue!" She stands on her toes right in your face and spits the last three words. You flinch, expecting impact, but you feel nothing.

"I-I didn't murder you! I'm only here to help rectify the situation." Your confidence waivers.

"Why would you come here, you with murderer's blood in your veins?"

"I want this to end: to make amends. What my family has forgotten and ignored is unforgiveable, and I put all of my effort into working towards resolve." The short figure that is up in your face disappears and your knees buckle, as though another unseen force had been holding you up in her direct line of eyesight.

She shimmers into sight sitting in the arm chair, or at least trying to. It doesn't look like her translucent body actually contacts the faded fabric.

“Why?” She asks again.

“You didn’t deserve this.”

“Look how much that helped me,” she snorts.

“Why did they kill you?”

“Ask the one who did this.” You feel the knot in your stomach. Grandpa ...he did this to her.

“I can’t,” you say shaking your head. You step forward, away from the stairs and sit cross-legged in front of the chair, aware that you’ve given her the position of power sitting above you. “He’s delusional. He’s in a mental hospital - he needs help. On his behalf: I’m sorry.”

“Sorry isn’t enough. You need to leave. Now.” She snaps, standing. She’s towering over you as you stare up at her. Her eyes flare and her hands twist into tiny fists when you don’t immediately move.

You scramble to your feet and exit the house, not willing to be in there continuing to provoke a ghost you know so little about. What you need is a bold move: while still on the doorstep, you select Bonnie, REA, from your contacts and hold your phone to your ear.

“Hello, Bonnie! You were right. There’s *something* about the Rathcool house...” Mimicking her words from an earlier conversation makes you grimace. You wonder if she made the connection between your last name and the history of the house. Maybe she was just having herself a laugh at your expense by suggesting the house in the first place. “I want to make an offer. Can you arrange that for me? Cheers.”

A quick glance back at the house on your way to the car is all it takes to let you know you made the right choice. She’s standing in the window, glowering, but resigned. She knows you’ll be back. And next time, you’ll be ready.

When you get back to your apartment, you call your parents and tell them that you made an offer on a house. *That* house. Thankfully mom answers, so you don't have to face your father. Understandably, he's much sensitive about the subject than your mother. She keeps alternating between asking why, asking if you're crazy, and telling you it's too dangerous. Despite your reasoning, she is not convinced and is close to tears on her end of the phone. You do the whole "I promise to be careful" deal that you perfected during your teenage years. She doesn't buy it, but chokes out a "goodbye, love you."

Ending the call, you get on your computer and open Google, the source of all answers. Then you stare at the screen for a moment not sure what to type in. *Murder at 21 Rathcool in Belfast*. Before you were born, another family had moved in to the Rathcool house, a few years after the murder. You'd heard that the family was arrested and never heard from again. It sent shivers down your spine. Why couldn't this town be *normal*? The results come back and there she is right in front of you: *Olive Farrell*. Apparently, her husband Ronan was killed the same day. You hadn't heard that before. *Was Grandpa responsible for that too?* There wasn't a lot of coverage just because of how much was going on at the time, but after scrolling through the first few links you find an article from a small Belfast newspaper dated 1966. It listed several unexplained and uninvestigated deaths or injuries as well as speculating on who was responsible. Grandpa's name was nowhere to be seen, but the Ulster Volunteer Force got the "credit." Next you search for Ronan. Irish Republican Army hits fill the page.

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Before you even get out of bed, Bonnie the real estate agent calls your cell phone. "Hello?" You say groggily.

“You got the house,” she says. “You can move in after you make the first payment.”

“I’ll stop in today with the first payment to pick up the keys.”

You dress quickly in a simple jeans and t-shirt, because today, you will be packing and moving boxes into your new house. As you’re tying the laces of your tennis shoes, your phone goes off again. This time, it’s a text from mom. *News on the house?* You type back, *it’s mine*. She doesn’t respond, but you didn’t expect her to, either. You wonder if she has told dad. They don’t have to like it. Pretending the past didn’t happen has worked for them for decades.

That afternoon, you drive to your new house with a carload full of the first boxes from your apartment. You walk up to the house first with just one box, so you can get the door without too much trouble. Stepping over the newspaper left on the step, you open the door and step inside.

“Olive?” you call.

“Why? Why are you back?” Your ghostly adversary becomes more visible as she speaks, sitting in the chair again, legs crossed. Her eyes are wild: perhaps she is as delusional as Grandpa. There’s no telling what she might do when she’s got nothing else to lose, but still somehow, she doesn’t seem as angry as she does hurt. You could provide her with closure worth ten times what vengeance could accomplish.

“I’m going to live here,” you say with assurance. You’re prepared this time. After your research, you feel better equipped for what you’re dealing with.

She nods. She had heard you on the phone. Despite her question, she knew why you were there. “It’s not safe here, haven’t you heard? No one who lives here leaves by choice...” Her tone softens.

“Are you going to make me leave?” you challenge.

“No, I’m saying you should leave here before something awful happens. To you.” It’s unfathomable to you that she would actually want to help you.

You’re instantly suspicious of her motives. “What about you?” you ask.

“No one who lives here leaves by choice...” Her words chill you. The words she used to warn you are now used to define her sentence. She’s captive here. Captive in the house where she and her husband were murdered. Feelings of sympathy threaten to take over your resolve: she’s been stuck here since 1966. “I miss him,” she says looking up at you with iridescent tears streaming down her face. How many families had lived here? What kind of torture would that be for her to experience happy families while she was separated from the one she loved? Or worse, unhappy families that didn’t appreciate what they had. You nod numbly. You want to help her.

You remember the newspaper on the step and run outside to get it. Returning to the living room, you hold it up to show Olive as you pull a lighter out of your pocket. Her eyes widen. “Will it work?” you ask. She looks uncertain, but she shrugs: *worth a try*.

Examining the room, you step on the creaky spot in the hardwood floor. *Wood*. You kneel down and pry the board up from the aged floor. The newspaper and lighter wait next to you on the floor as you examine the hole. There’s something tucked underneath the board and you reach in cautiously and grasp a tight roll of faded papers.

“What’s this, Olive?” You say holding it up. It looks like it would’ve come from her generation, just guessing by the age. She comes over next to you and watches as you unroll the stack. A large building is shown with blue outlines of rooms. When you notice the red classified stamp at the top of the page, you look questioningly at Olive.

“I think I’ve seen something like that before,” she leans in a little closer, then tenses up.

“What are they?” you ask excitement rising.

“Burn them,” she says sternly. Obliging, though a little disappointed, you drop them back in the hole and quickly set the newspaper on top of them. You light the edge and throw the old floorboard back on top. You walk over to the door, grab your box and turn the handle, opening the door. Looking back briefly, she’s sitting right next to the growing fire, which has caught on the wood floor boards. She’s rocking back and forth.

“Olive...”

“Go now, quickly. We are both free,” she says meeting your eyes.

You yank open your car door and throw the box roughly inside. It was the right thing, but you can’t help but feel like you’re killing her again. *This is what she wanted*, you remind yourself. From the safety of your car, you watch the rest of the house go up in flames.

## July, 1971

Eoin sat at the small oval kitchen table staring down his plate of peas. He was sure the pile was growing. It definitely wasn't shrinking. He picked up his fork and carefully speared one pea on to each prong. His seven year old brain couldn't comprehend the necessity of such pointless green spheres. Most days, he wasn't left to think of such things. He was usually pleasantly distracted by his father's laughing, teaching, and storytelling. The table felt lonely and quiet without him and Eoin yearned for the typical light cheery atmosphere. The whole room seemed darker, colder, in his absence.

"Eat up, Eoin, so you can have dessert." His mother said as he pouted at his plate.

Eoin had been silent through most of the dinner. "Where's daddy?" He asked, still holding his fork with the four peas. He hadn't seen his father in several days, which was very unusual. His mother's expression darkened, but his eyes were on his plate, so he didn't notice.

"He's just...visiting your uncle for a while."

"When will he be back?" All he wanted was to go outside and play football before it got too dark. His mother looked at her hands.

"I don't know." She stood to clear the plates and Eoin's fork still laden with peas clattered to the cheap ceramic plate.

He didn't care; he didn't want dessert anyway.

It was midnight. Eoin stood in the kitchen, the phone dangling from his arm, the line dead. His mother rushed in and took the phone and held it briefly to her ear. "Who was it Eoin? What did they want?" Eoin could tell she was frantic, but he was in shock, he couldn't reply.

Instead he slid to the floor in a failed attempt to make his numb body sit. He huddled his knees up to his body and wrapped his arms, protecting against the sudden chill he felt.

After a few moments, he looked up at her with a teary glare. “Mom, I-I called Uncle Willie. He said daddy’s not with him. He said daddy’s in prison.” His gaze was quickly drawn away from his mother as he stared intently into the living room.

“Oh.” She hung up the phone and joined Eoin on the linoleum floor. “He’s not a bad man, Eoin: he didn’t do anything wrong.” She said as she put her arm around him. “They’ve been arresting people that they think are starting trouble, but they were wrong this time. Your daddy never started anything. He is just a good family man who they had better let out real soon.” She shuddered, a small quick spasm. Eoin knew why they had taken his father away. He was part of the IRA and so was his mother. This was *their* fault. *If they could’ve just been satisfied with being a family, instead of worrying about all the fighting*, Eoin thought bitterly. *I will never, ever pick a side. Then they can never come for me...* Eoin was still facing away from her, his gaze fixed. “What are you looking at?” she asked craning her neck to try to see.

“I thought I saw something near the door. And the poem on the wall by the door moved, too...see how it is hanging crooked now?” He tilted his head so that his eyes were at the same angle as the framed poem.

“It must’ve just shifted on its old nail. That old thing has been up there since the beginning of time. Your father insisted we keep it hung up. Maybe that’s why they took him away...They wouldn’t understand. Just because we wanted religious equality doesn’t mean we wrong...” she trailed off, probably worried about over-burdening the mind of her seven year old son.

Eoin turned his attention back to his mother. “They have to let him go, they have to!” he said, curling his fingers into his palms, a protesting fist. She stood and offered him her hand. Her hand felt like fire to his. He hadn’t realized how cold it had become until she touched him. She held him for a moment in a tight embrace and then headed back upstairs to her bedroom.

He stood for a moment, in between the kitchen and the living room looking again at the poem, wondering what the strange shadow he had seen was. Then, without warning the frame fell from the wall, making a dull chink against the wooden floor. He stepped over the boards he knew would creak in making his way over to the fallen frame, hoping the noise wouldn’t cause his mother to return.

He lifted it off the floor carefully. He knew if he wasn’t careful the glass would cut him, but to his surprise there weren’t any loose glass pieces. A fine, spider web crack covered the part of the beginning and all of the end of the poem. He couldn’t read it anyways. He looked up at the nail, just out of reach to his young arms. It didn’t seem all that old. He wondered what had made the frame fall, after all those years. He looked around him for something to raise him up a few inches, but the only thing sturdy enough around was the old armchair. He slid it carefully across the floor towards the wall with the nail. His mother would kill him if she saw him standing on it, but he didn’t care. The poem was important to his dad. He didn’t know why, but if his dad did come home, he wanted the poem to be back on the wall where it belonged. Easily reaching the nail now, he placed the cord on the back of the frame over the nail. He took a step back on the chair to examine his handiwork. It was crooked still, as it had been before. He shifted the frame on its cord, trying to get it to re-center, but the frame insisted on leaning down on the left side. Eoin crawled down from the armchair and scootched it back to its resting place against the opposite wall. He hoped his mother wouldn’t notice anything.

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Early the next morning, Eoin was woken by an incessant hammering on the door. He sat bolt upright in his bed, a flood of memories and traces of strong emotions from the night before coming back to him all at once. *Daddy's back!* was his first thought, followed by: *But he wouldn't have to knock...*

The knocking ceased as the front door clicked open on its shiny hinges. Eoin kicked off his sheets and bolted to the top of the stairs so he could see who had arrived on their doorstep. Almost immediately, he wished he hadn't. The man in the door wore a light blue shirt and a black tie. Eoin knew he was a police officer and, though he couldn't make out the words, he understood from the strain in his mother's voice that things were not going well. He hurried back to his room and buried his face in his pillow. He felt the tears starting to well in the corner of his eyes, but he refused to give in. His father always told him not to cry and would tease him gently if he did, which would make him laugh and no longer feel the need to cry at all. He felt a small giggle inside him at the thought. Even the thought of his father was enough to cheer him up.

His repose from worry didn't last long though as he heard the footsteps on the wooden stairs. Soon he would have to face his mother, face the news. He prayed that everything would be okay. He turned over to watch the doorway, gripping his sheets tightly in his small hands.

But to his dismay, it wasn't his mother that came up the stairs. It was the police officer he had seen when he peeked downstairs. There was no sound downstairs. The large man filled the doorway to his room and all Eoin wanted to do was pull the sheets up over his head and disappear. He was suddenly chilled.

"Don't be scared, son. We had to take your mother away; she was a traitor, plotting against our country." Eoin saw something move behind the man, but the man didn't notice. He

continued his speech, Eoin barely listening as his eyes focused in on a strangely pale woman squatting in the corner of the hallway, still unnoticed by the man. She had a small build, or perhaps it was the way she was hunkered down, guarded on one side by the rail of the balcony and by the wall of the bedroom on the other side, just watching the man and the boy. Her hair was shoulder length and wavy, but it didn't seem to move naturally. It was almost like it was frozen, like a photograph.

"Now, we don't blame you, we know it's not your fault." The man began, Eoin squinting up at him. Eoin knew it wasn't his fault. It was his parents'. They're the ones who picked a side, a side the government didn't approve of. We just need to get you to someone who can take care of you better while your parents are put to trial." The woman was beckoning to Eoin, calling him into her arms and somehow he knew he didn't have to fear her, that her arms offered only safety. It was the man, not her that was the enemy.

"We are just going to take you over to your Uncle Willie's until we figure out a more permanent arrangement." The woman nodded, so Eoin followed suit. He realized all he had to do was get past the man and he would be with her. She would be able to help him, his mom, his dad...he was sure of it. The man stepped out of his doorway and Eoin stood up, keeping his eyes on the woman. She stood, too, her arms open, waiting for him. When he got to the doorway, the man said, "Ready?", startling Eoin. He wondered if going with this man would be giving in, choosing an allegiance. He wasn't willing to do that. The man just didn't seem right: intimidating, angry, terrifying...But the woman...She reminded him of his mother, but younger and somehow less *real*.

The woman beckoned him, and he nodded numbly, recognizing that she was offering to protect him. Perhaps it was just the way she smiled at him like she really cared. He had no idea

who the woman was, but all the same when she gave him a quick nod, he rushed past the man in the hallway to her, crouching down next to where she was. The woman tried to put her arms around Eoin, but her arms only passed through him, sending a shiver down his spine.

“Ready?” the man repeated. Eoin didn’t want to follow. He didn’t want to leave the house. Who knew if he would ever see it again if he left it now. He would not let the officials take him.

“Where’s my mother?” He demanded. Something didn’t feel right about this man. If the woman that he had seen calmed him and felt safe, this man was the complete opposite.

“We had to take her into custody.” The man said, then grabbed Eoin’s arm, pulling him to his feet.

“She was just here. I want to see her. I want to talk to her.” He pulled his arm back. He would not budge. He looked around back at the woman crouched behind him, but she was gone. He could still feel her presence though; she wasn’t far away.

“Look kid, she already left in another officer’s car. You’ve got to come with us.” Angry tears began to form in Eoin’s eyes, despite his best efforts to keep them away, to keep from looking weak. He felt betrayed. First his dad left him, then his mother. Now, this mysterious woman who had looked at him so caringly had left him, too.

“I’m not going. Anywhere.” This was *his* house and he would not leave it voluntarily. A low wail sounded through the house, coming from all directions at once. The man took a menacing step towards Eoin and the wailing grew louder. In a swift motion, the man picked up him effortlessly and draped him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He knew now there was nothing he could do. The woman couldn’t help him. He couldn’t even help himself. Still, in a last desperate attempt, Eoin began to kick and scream as the man carried him down the

stairs, across the living room and out the front door. Eoin grabbed furiously at the door frame as they stepped over the threshold and into the darkness. Neighbors were gathered at their windows, some standing outside their houses, watching the struggle. No one stepped in to help. Looking back, he could see the woman standing in the doorway, shaking.

## June, 1966

No matter what goes on around a house, it's what's inside that makes it a home. I've always thought that a home was somewhere a family could reside peacefully and safely for as long as they so desired. Recently, I began to call that definition into question as the religious turmoil increased around here. The neighborhood isn't what it used to be. I mean, sure there have been some problems over the years, but nothing like what we've seen recently. From my morning perch in my arm chair, coffee in hand, I could see a black car out the front window parked across the street. It had been there on and off for the past week. No one ever got in or out. I felt like it was watching us, though I couldn't fathom why.

Before Ronan and I even got engaged, we had to have that talk: our faith is important, but not to the extent of exerting violence over those who oppose us. No, we decided that it was better for us to stay out of the politics and focus on living our lives, reaching out to those in our community when we could, but not getting into trouble. There was enough trouble to go around without us adding to the mix. I was content with our decision, because it was one less thing I had to worry about. Ronan...well he had given in. He knew I was right. Besides, Pope Paul VI always preached acceptance, telling Catholics to love everyone, even Protestants or atheists.

"Are you ready to go?" Looking up at Ronan, I realized I had been holding my face in my hands, fingers pressed against my temples as though they were trying to pressure all of the negative thoughts into leaving my head. I was exhausted and it wasn't even 10 a.m. yet.

Ronan said he won't start our family here. What am I supposed to do? I grew up just down the street and I've been living in this very house for four years now. I'm not about to just pick up and move. My mother warned me that I found the one person more stubborn than me, but, of course, I was too stubborn to listen. I used to think that didn't matter. Now, I wanted

nothing more than a little boy or girl to play with in the yard after work and to take to the park on the weekends. Was that too much to ask?

“Olive? Mass starts in fifteen minutes.” Ronan came into the kitchen and leaned on the opposite side of the counter, facing me.

For thinking it’s not safe enough to start a family here, he seems to have a lot of confidence in displaying his faith publically. Since the Ulster Volunteer Force declared war, mass is the last place I want to go. I shouldn’t worry. Neither Ronan nor I are involved in the Irish Republican Army. Some of our neighbors are though, as are some of Ronan’s friends. I suspect that his friend from work, Michael Clement, might be involved. He seemed so reserved and secretive that I thought there just had to be something else going on. And around here, secretive usually ends up leading back to some rebellious organization. I didn’t trust him and I couldn’t understand why Ronan was even friends with him.

“That car is back.” I said looking past him and out the window. For the first time in my life, I’d rather stay home than go to mass. I love the service, I love dedicating that time on Sunday mornings to Christ, and I love the fellowship our church provides. But today, I’m ashamed that I’m afraid to identify as a Catholic. It’s not safe to be a Protestant either, but I can’t help but worry about myself, about my husband.

“Honey, you’re being paranoid. I’m telling you, it’s nothing. Come on, let’s go.”

“I’m not feeling well,” I murmur looking down to avoid his gaze, but not before I saw the troubled look in his light brown eyes. I’ve been sick before, but in all the time we’d known each other, neither of us had missed a mass. Which is actually something considering that would be around eight years...times 52 Sundays a year...plus Holy Days of Obligation... Ronan tilted his head, reminding me of Finnegan, the Wheaten Terrier puppy that Mum and Dad gave me for my

twelfth birthday, who would always tilt his head when we called his name. We think it confused him: he wasn't a very bright pup, but I loved him all the same. I knew Ronan didn't believe me, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him the reason for my fears. "Paranoid" is not a word I want my husband to think of in describing me.

"Okay," he said slowly. "Well, I'll see you for lunch." I felt my pulse quicken.

"You're still going?" I was overreacting and I knew it, but I couldn't help myself. I'd lost so much: my Finnegan to old age, my parents to a car crash...I felt faint, nauseous even, at the thought: What if he didn't come back?

"Why wouldn't I?" His voice wasn't accusatory, but his question bit. I had no answer. No good answer, anyway. There had been violence in Northern Ireland since before I was born. He walked over to my side of the counter, slipped his arms around me, and after a quick squeeze, he turned and left the kitchen. I heard the front door creak open on its ancient hinges, and I wondered briefly if one day it would just fall off the frame. Instead, I heard it clang shut behind Ronan, and I felt a sob rise in my throat.

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Ronan was late coming home from work, which wasn't terribly unusual. I had apple chicken on a bed of mashed potatoes ready at the oval table my mom picked out for us when we moved in. My watch clicked into the 7 o'clock position and I began to pace.

The oak flooring creaked its characteristic whine as I crossed into the living room. I slid into the armchair facing the door and let my head lean against the side of the cushion. For the first time in a long time, I noticed the poem I hung between the window and the door on the day we moved in:

*What matters that at different shrines*

*We pray unto one God?*

*What matters that at different times*

*Our fathers won this sod?*

*In fortune and in name we're bound*

*By stronger links than steel;*

*And neither can be safe nor sound*

*But in each other's weal.*

Oh what a world it would be, Davis, if we had religious harmony, I thought, squinting at his poem. Nothing would make me happier than the violence ending. It was so pointless, so interfering. If the violence ended, we could have a family. It would be safe to let children play outside on the lawn. It would be safe to walk to mass, as a family... I could almost picture a little boy holding Ronan's hand, the same dark hair, long, hanging in his eyes, a little girl, bows holding up her dirty blond hair in tiny high pigtails. The sound of the door being forced open, shaking the entire house, brought me abruptly back from my musings.

"Ronan!" I couldn't keep the smile from my face. There was no use trying to be mad at this man.

"Darn door stuck again. Sorry I'm late," he looked up, turning his head slightly. Perhaps he re-noticed the poem, as I had just moments before he arrived. That or he was avoiding my eyes. "I-uh had to finish up working with Michael on the blueprints for the remodel of the old primary school." He brought his eyes back to mine and smiled weakly. The kitchen phone began to ring and I stood up to go answer it, but Ronan rushed past me.

I heard him snap the receiver off the wall, "Hello?" He then began speaking in a hushed voice and I could no longer decipher what he was saying. I figured I would just go check if our

food was still warm enough and wait at the table for him to finish. When I walked in the kitchen though, his eyes widened and he turned to the refrigerator, away from me. “No, I- I was just... Please. Listen, wait. I can explain...Oh, we’ll talk about it tomorrow...yeah.” He clicked the black plastic phone back onto the wall, hesitating for a moment. With a deep breath he turned to look at me. “Michael again,” he said in answer to my questioning stare. His voice shook a little as he spoke, lacking its normal vigor and fervor. I nodded blankly, desperately wanting to know what Michael would say that would upset Ronan so much. *If he wanted to tell me...* I thought, but then shook my head. I quickly took my seat at the table. When did I begin thinking like this? I shouldn’t be afraid to talk to my own husband.

“How were the kids today?” He asked, joining me. I could tell he was making an effort to act like things were normal. But they weren’t. He had never been so secretive and nervous around me before.

“Good. Well, as good as you would expect. Nobody wants to be sitting in school during the summer. I am definitely seeing improvement though, which gives me hope that they’ll be ready for this fall...” I sighed. They truly had come a long way, but there were a few that just would never be ready to move on to the next class. “I just wish I could do more to help my students.”

“Yeah.” He poked at the pile of mashed potatoes under his chicken, but didn’t eat it.

“So, how was your day?” I asked warily. His disinterested behavior was uncharacteristic. I had never felt such a distance between us.

“Alright, I guess.” He still hadn’t begun to eat.

“Did you get the blueprints all finished? When do you start the remodel?” I continued eating, watching Ronan and waiting for him to join in. He didn’t.

“Just about finished...haven’t set a date.”

“Oh,” I said. “Are you going to eat? I thought this was your favorite.”

“I guess I’m not very hungry. I think I’ll just turn in early tonight, sorry Olive.”

Excusing himself from the table, he left his plate and walked out of the kitchen. I followed the creaks in the living room to the stairs. When they ceased, I knew he had reached the bedroom. I suddenly wasn’t hungry, either.

When I got up to the bedroom, he was already asleep or at least pretending to be. I tried not to think.

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I didn’t bother to get dinner ready, because as I suspected, Ronan was late again. Instead, I settled into my favorite chair and grabbed the book I had been reading.

After a few pages of reading about some school this missionary started in the Himalayas, the phone rang. I hopped up and set the book down on the kitchen table and picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Olive, is Ronan there?” Michael’s voice is gruff over the line. I’ve only actually met him once and I got a similar impression of his personality. I never understood how Ronan could be friends with him. For Ronan’s sake, I put up with him.

“No, he’s not home yet, but he should be home soon. He’s never this late ...was he still at work when you left?” I tried to keep the worry out of my voice. So much violence had been happening in the area that the news didn’t even try to cover it anymore.

“Ronan wasn’t at work today.” I hear the dial tone. Michael didn’t even give me the chance to respond! His rudeness was shadowed by the news he gave though. Where was Ronan if he didn’t go to work? My heart tightens into a fist of hurt and fear. I slammed the receiver back onto the wall. How long had I been trying to deny Ronan’s involvement? Around Belfast, “secretive” almost always leads back to one rebellious organization or another.

I picked up the book and settled back into the arm chair. I could be a thousand kilometers away building mountain schools somewhere I could feel safe, away from all of intolerance and violence. I pulled out my bookmark and was instantly teleported one thousand kilometers away to the Himalayas. If anything could get my mind of my husband’s unusual behavior, it would be floating away into someone else’s struggles where the conflicts and trials of my life don’t exist.

Catching motion out of the corner of my eye, I looked up from my reading: Ronan’s car skided crookedly against the curb and he flies out of the car and towards the house. My heart suddenly racing, I noticed the men outside, getting out of the black car, the one I had been watching. My worst fear. The Ulster Volunteer Force. Though there was no standard “uniform” of those in the organization, I had heard that these men, often dressed in black from head to toe including a black forage cap and belt, were the ones that would go around looking for IRA members, or any Catholics to kill. And they were following my husband. Even with the uniform, I couldn’t help but recognize one of the dark soldiers: Michael, the man I had just told over the phone that Ronan would be home soon. I was paralyzed, unable to move from the chair.

The door burst open as Ronan shouldered his way inside, slamming the door behind him. I couldn’t move, only stare at him wide-eyed. He stood panting, hands pressed against the door

behind him. “He...found...out...” He said between gasps for air. *He found out what? Were you part of the IRA?* I yearned for answers, but there wasn’t time, not with the commotion going on outside. “They have AK 47s...my fault ...I-” I heard yells from outside the house as the four men gestured with wide arms, hauling a large dark bag out of the car and setting on the ground. Michael zipped open the bag and pulled out a large rifle, raising it towards our house.

*Pewuuuhhh-* the loud gunshot carried through the air, followed by the splintering crackle of glass shattering. I felt like I was going to pass out, like I had just been punched in the chest. Shards of glass littered the previously spotless wooden floor of my living room. My breath was trapped inside my lungs, barely able to escape.

Through the hole in our window, I watched the gunman retreat a few steps, back to the safety of the car, but he didn’t leave. My hands reflexively snapped to the pain of my right shoulder/chest area, contacting with sticky warmth. When I moved my hands away, they were covered in blood. *Ronan*, I wanted to scream, but I was gasping for air and couldn’t find my voice. Ronan’s wide terrified eyes met mine and instantly changed to horror and anger as he let out a deep anguished groan. “No,” he cried, “no, no, no.” I wanted to ask him to stay with me, to hold me. Instead, he thrust the door open and rushed outside, knocking the door off its hinges as it slammed back against its old wooden frame. I knew I would never see him again. I was so cold, but my shoulder and chest were burning. My mind went hazy: ears ringing, I slid off the chair and onto the ground in front of the open door.

*This wasn’t how it was supposed to end...* I heard another abhorrent *pewuuuhhh* sound and through the door-less frame, I saw Ronan fall to the pavement just outside our house. My labored breathing made it hard to focus, but my mind was crawling into overdrive, trying desperately to understand the scene around me. Michael ran over to him and for a second, I

thought it was to see if he was okay. That thought didn't last long as Michael kicked Ronan over so that he was face up and pulled a set of rolled documents out of Ronan's coat. As Michael and the other men got in the car and sped away, I finally realized it was over. Ronan was probably gone, I was going... *Keep breathing!* I ordered my foggy brain, but the pain was getting to be too much. I fumbled to put my two clammy hands together, as the pain increased in my chest. Laying on the floor gasping for breath, I tried to cough out a prayer for Ronan, but it was hard to tell if any sound actually escaped my cracked lips as I mouthed the words:

O God, whose property is always to have mercy and to spare, we humbly beseech Thee for the soul of thy servant Ronan, which Thou hast this day called out of the world, that Thou wouldst not deliver it up into the hands of the enemy, nor forget it unto the end; but command it to be received by Thy holy angels, and to be carried to paradise, its true country; that as in Thee it had faith and hope, it may not suffer the pains of hell, but may take possession of everlasting joys: through our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son, who liveth and reigneth with Thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

I finished the prayer and immediately started it again. There was nothing else I could do for Ronan, for myself. My hands still clasped tight, I noticed how incredibly pale they had become. *We were supposed to have a family.*

## Notes and Influences

1. For the historical context of this piece, I first consulted Wikipedia to get a general understanding of the whole religious war and partition between the North and the South. Once I had a foundation of knowledge, I got specific information used to determine time periods and organization affiliations from *The Irish Experience Since 1800: A Concise History* by Thomas E. Hachey and Lawrence J. McCaffrey.
2. I used Google Earth to locate and look at the area that I set the house in. Using a suggestion of the area that was controversially neither exactly Catholic nor Protestant, but always an area of contestation, I looked at what was currently on those streets in that area and choose Rathcool from that. I used the details of the outside of house for the Present Day section, while the past details were chosen to contrast that current image.
3. The inside of the house is a layout that I am familiar with, as it is based off of a house that I stayed at in Dublin for a couple months. I did change some details, such as making the floor plan on the ground floor more open and making the upstairs smaller. The wooden counters of the house were specifically influenced by the counters at the house in Dublin, as it is not something I have seen in the U.S. before.
4. The character from the first section has the last name Clement (and the grandfather, Michael, as well), as in Clementine to represent the orange of the Irish flag, which stands for Protestantism. Olive, naturally then is the green Catholic side. White, from the title, is the center of the flag, which represents unity and peace between the two sides.
  - a. Most of the other characters' names came from either Irish history, or web searches for "Irish names" or "Irish surnames."

5. The poem that hangs on the wall of the house is written by Thomas Davis, cofounder of the Young Ireland movement. He supported Irish cultural nationalism, as shown by the poem. I used the poem because it inspired one of the main themes of this piece: cultural nationalism through unity.
6. The unusual narration and layout of this story is a result of my desire to play with the “rules” of fiction and write something very different from anything I had ever written before.
  - a. I chose first to do reverse chronology, because I wanted to see how that would affect the telling of a ghost story. I wanted the ending to be the reader recognizing this ghost as a real person, though of course she always was. In books where the ghost is introduced as a living person first, I believe it biases the reader into being more sympathetic and having a greater understanding of the ghost’s motivation. By having it come at the end, I hope that the reader will have gotten to know the ghost through how she interacts with others and can maybe guess at her motivations, but really know after reading Olive’s section.
    - i. The reverse chronology was inspired by Hannah Voskuil’s short story, “Currents,” which is set in reverse chronology. The way that each new piece of information revealed something about the big picture was really inspiring and something that I aimed for in my own writing.
  - b. The narration style came from me wanting the reader to experience this story as though it was happening to the reader, right now (second person). Olive is in first person so that we can really see her thoughts and get inside her head. I think it

gives it more emotion. For the middle section, the decision mostly came from what was left: third person.

7. I researched symptoms of shock, types of weapons, and the sounds of those weapons to make the last scene authentic and detailed.