
THE HOUSE AT THE END OF [CHERRY GLEN]

A Novel By
Robert Hedges

Open Me Publications

OPEN ME PUBLICATIONS.

With cooperation from Lulu.com.

THE HOUSE AT THE END OF [CHERRY GLEN]. Copyright © 2015
by Robert Hedges. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of
America. For information, bobby.hedges@hotmail.com.

ISBN <TBD> (trade paperback)

Robert Hedges'

The House at the End of [Cherry Glen]

A History of the [Donnelly] Family as Compiled by
Chester B. Arden

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of [Publication Omitted].

This is a work of fiction.

All characters, organizations and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

...*Seriously.*

“What do you know about the house at the end of [Cherry Glen]?”

These were the first words [Reese Donnelly] ever spoke to me, and because I answered him I will never sleep peacefully again.

Early March, 1996...

-ONG!

I woke with a jolt; unaware of where I was or how long I had been asleep. Using the back of my hand, I wiped the thin stream of spittle that had trickled from my mouth off of my face as my senses rebooted.

I found myself in a padded office chair, slouched over with my head buried in my chest. In front of me was a computer desk littered with comic books, multiple Mountain Dew cans and the crumbly remains of an exhausted bag of Combos. Light flickered from the computer screen atop the cluttered desk. On it, a brown mass consisting of not much more than a pair of eyes and disjointed arms and legs screeched and slashed through the air as it neared a pixelated hand that clutched a boxy looking shotgun. A synthesizer provided the monophonic soundtrack as the brown mass flailed its angular appendages until it had laid to waste its 16-bit foe.

I had fallen asleep playing Quake.

It had been one of those late winter/early spring days that teased that the cold, wet season would soon come to an end. I could hear neighborhood kids playing football a few houses down, each of them determined to take in as much of the diminishing sun as they could before being thrust back into the certain chill of the approaching evening. I detected a faint smell that made my bulbous stomach rumble with jealousy. Someone somewhere was barbecuing. Suddenly, I was startled by the same sound that had woken me from my nap:

KNOCKKNOCKKNOCKKNOCKKNOCK!

I typed the word “knock,” here, but in reality, the sound was more like a wooden club being repeatedly hammered against a dense slab of meat. There was an unmistakable urgency in the forceful rapping against the heavy oak door, each session of knocks louder and more frantic than the last.

At first, I thought to ignore the noise; assuming that it was either a solicitor or one of the neighborhood kids selling candy or more likely playing some juvenile prank like knocking and running away. I yawned and stared at the many glow-in-the-dark stars tacked to the ceiling (a geeky substitute for a nightlight to compensate my nycto-claustrophobia).

KNOCKKNOCKKNOCK!!!

Then the doorbell began to chime as well.

KNOCKKNOCK-DINGDING-KNOCKKNOCK-DONGDONG!!!

KNOCKKNOCK-BINGBING-KNOCKKNOCK-BONGBONG!!!

I relented and struggled to raise my lazy, hefty frame from the chair’s comfortable recline and schlepped myself downstairs to the front door. Often I wonder what my life would be like now if I hadn’t.

“What do you know about the house at the end of [Cherry Glen]?”

[Reese Donnelly] stood in the open doorway, slim and pale; his arms decorated with several thoughtlessly placed tattoos. He wore black Doc Martin boots, tattered jeans that frayed at the bottoms and a black T-shirt with the image of a little girl clutching a

crayon while scrawling on a sheet of construction paper. Beside the child's box of crayons lay a .45 caliber handgun. A crudely scrawled caption below the screen-printed photo read:

CHOICES

There was hardly a cloud in the sky and I saw no sprinklers running in any of the nearby yards, yet water spilled from [Reese] into a large puddle that had formed around him.

After he brushed his sopping, shoulder-length hair from his face, I finally saw the mix of confusion, hopelessness and terror in his slight and sunken eyes. He skittishly glanced around and then back to me. Trembling, he seemed to stare straight through me as though he didn't see me at all.

Neither of us spoke at first. [Reese] was likely expecting me to say, "hello" or "can I help you?" or even "do you need a towel?" as any normal, descent person would. Instead, I wiped the crumbs from my shirt. Bewildered and slack-jawed, I stared blankly back at him.

What probably were only a few seconds felt so much longer to me as we faced each other; neither of us speaking a word. Finally, I found the will to part my lips and force breath through them.

"Are you-?" I began.

As soon as I spoke, [Reese] blinked with frightening astonishment. It appeared to me as though only by hearing the sound of my voice was I able to materialize in front of him. He quickly gathered his thoughts and in between broken breaths blurted over me, "What do you know about the house at the end of [Cherry Glen]?"

"-okay?"

I knew that shortly after the school year started [Reese]'s family had moved into the house in the cul-de-sac at the end of the street that was a few doors down and caddy-cornered from mine. I could have told him that. I could have told him I knew that for years the front door had been stained blonde, until his mother painted it and the shutters red. I could have told him that the neighborhood kids favored its mailbox for exploding with cherry

bombs and smashing to bits. I could have said that it had remained vacant for over a year before his family moved in. I could have told him I knew that three families had moved in and out of the house in the last seven years, or that the last family moved out without notice after only eight months.

Instead, I replied with a spacey, “Uhh... why?”

[Reese] turned his head back towards the house and studied it intently. Visibly paranoid, he seemed as if he were checking to make sure no one could hear him or that no one was watching from the windows. He turned back to me, apparently satisfied that it was safe to continue, grabbed my arm and pulled me closer. My first reaction was to pull away. I had only known him from very conflicting stories and rumors that funneled through the halls of our school, but I suddenly felt the need to look around to see if there was anyone nearby that might come to my rescue in the event that some of the less pleasant rumors were true.

His eyes locked inches from mine and with a quiver in his voice, [Reese] leaned in and all but whispered,

“It killed my father and I think it wants to kill me next.”

Prologue...

My name is Chester Byron Arden and I am going to lie to you.

To be fair, it's not out of malice or because I'm a shitty narrator. In fact, large portions of what I am about to tell you are absolutely true and can be verified by the friends and family of the [Donnellys], as well as local police reports and a handful of archived local news articles. However, because these people and pages can't fully explain what occurred and what was said within the walls of that house almost two decades ago, it was necessary to use a certain level of creative liberty to properly convey the personalities of this family and their relationships in the days leading up to the strange and terrible events that quickly unfolded around them.

I personally only spent a handful of weeks with the [Donnelly] family; but I have taken all that I recall about them and have coupled these memories with the recounted recollections of others who were close to the family in an effort to paint the most accurate portrait of the [Donnellys] possible.

Which brings me to the parentheses. As you may have guessed, I have omitted the actual names of people and places to allow a degree of anonymity for parties who wish to be unidentified... and yes, I realize that in this web-centric era, any idiot with a smartphone can quickly research my name and within a few minutes will be able to discover that the old neighborhood was not actually named Cherry Glen. I am also aware that with enough digging through archives or microfiche, anyone can find that the Donnelly's family name is actually Hedges. The decision to change the names of the members of the Hedges family was made for consistency following a legal injunction.

One last thing on the subject of research- I've done it all for you. Out of respect for the living, the departed and for the sake of your own sanity, I strongly advise against looking into the family or these events outside of the confines of these pages.

R. HEDGES 2015

...Trust me.

Post-Prologue: June 12, 2008...

Shortly after college I took a job in New York as a writer for a well-known music magazine's online department. I started as a free-lance writer, struggling to find stories that were intriguing enough for the magazine to want to buy off of me, which would ensure I could make the each month's rent. But as geek culture gained popularity, so did my work and before long I had a reserved column, my own office and a spot at the big table along with the other staff writers and editors who planned the editions and decided which articles were worth print and payment.

People don't really think about how much is involved in publishing a magazine- print or otherwise. Ideas have to be gathered, stories have to be assigned, then written, re-written, thrown away, written again, edited and approved. Photographs need to be taken and sized, advertisements need to be sold and placed and hundreds of T's and I's must be crossed. A lot of time, thought and effort have to happen before the consumer can overlook all of those words in preference of the pictures while waiting in line, or riding on the subway or what-have-you. Because the process takes a while, issues are planned months in advance; which is why I found myself planning a Halloween edition in the middle of the afternoon during one of the hottest days of the summer.

The room of twenty of the publication's best and brightest were working on a concept to send ten prominent writers and ten musicians to ten of the country's most notorious haunted houses for an overnight stay, an interview and a two-song acoustic performance (the latter we would record for bonus content that we would provide for online subscribers). After a morning of frantic, key-banging research to locate the most interesting haunted houses, Bradley Morris- Senior Editor and personal mentor projected the list of his preferred selections from his laptop onto the vinyl screen at the far end of the table. For each selection, he attached a quick blurb about each of the locations. Next to that, he had typed the names of his ideal writer and artist parings:

-
- **Myrtle Plantation;** St. Francisville, Louisiana- *Reported hauntings by the "Lavender Lady" since the 1800s (D. Hill, Rob Zombie).*
 - **The Winchester;** San Jose, California- *Eclectic compound allegedly haunted by many spirits (J. O'Brian, Marylyn Manson).*
 - **Lizzy Borden House;** Fall River, Massachusetts- *Home of the legendary axe murderer (J. Michaels, Hailey Williams).*
 - **Hull House;** Chicago, Illinois- *Home of the "Devil Baby" (B. Stokes, Jared Leto).*
 - **Stranahan Mansion;** Fort Lauderdale, Florida- *Haunted by the original owner and at least seven other ghosts (E.J. Holiday, Lil' Wayne).*
 - **5 ½ Minute Hallway House;** Virginia- *Home featured in the Navidson Record (Zampano, Poe).*
 - **LaLaurie Mansion;** New Orleans, Louisiana- *Haunted by souls of tormented slaves (P. Garcia, Blake Shelton and Miranda Lambert).*
 - **Smith Cottage-** Portland, Oregon- *Home of the Smith Family Murders. Location is now a 7-11, though hauntings are still reported (F. Smith-Price, Taylor Swift).*
 - **112 (currently 108) Ocean Avenue;** Amityville, New York- *Original home of the Amityville hauntings (T.Englund, Lou Reed).*

As the staff brainstormed the possible locations that would round-out the top ten, my waning attention was pulled back into the conversation when I heard someone say;

“What about the [Donnelly] house?”

All of the blood in my body rushed to my feet, vanished and suddenly was replaced by antifreeze; paralyzing me. My throat seized shut. Dozens of keys clicked away as the staff members who were ignorant of the house’s history quickly tapped at their laptops. I swallowed down the golf-ball sized knot that had blocked my larynx and forced myself to speak.

“It’s *not* haunted.” I replied.

I hoped that this simple fact would be enough to keep the house off of Bradley’s list. The room debated what the qualifications were for something to be considered haunted; and after a lengthy discussion that covered everything from horror movies, grandmothers’ homes, grandmother’s ghosts, the Bible and UFOs it seemed as though the idea would be scrapped. I felt myself relax back into my seat as the topics moved further and further away from [Cherry Glen].

“Isn’t the Chelsea supposed to be haunted?”

“What about the White House?”

“Oh sure, they’ll just be like, ‘Toss the sleeping bags anywhere guys.’”

“How about we give the Stanley Hotel a spot? It was Stephen Kings’ inspiration for the *Shining*.”

“I’m pretty sure I can pull some strings and get Jack Nicholson’s publicists to convince him to stay the night there if we agree to let him guest contribute to the article. Rumor has it he’s taken to writing.”

Bradley started typing and thinking aloud said, “...and we pair him up with Leonard Cohen.”

Just then one of the younger Junior Editors gasped, which brought all other conversations to a sudden halt.

“Oh. My. God.”

She turned her laptop around so that the rest of the room could see what had caught her attention. There on the screen was a detailed color pencil drawing of an overweight teenager wearing an ill-fitting navy blue suit sitting behind a wooden railing and an illustrated bank of microphones. The boy appeared to be speaking to a less-detailed sketching of an older gentleman. Even though they were both made of pencil pigments, the older gentleman’s suit appeared to fit his frame more so than the teen’s. Behind them both were twelve hastily scrawled seated figures washed in the background. At the bottom of the image was the caption:

Chester Arden Testifies at [Maurice "Reese"
Donnelly] Trial.

Court Illustration, 1998.

"Holy shit, Arden; is that you?" Someone asked and every head in the room snapped to my direction.

...Any idiot with a smartphone.

The sensation I felt next can only be compared to what I imagine a frail gazelle feels once it realizes that the paired, glistening sparkles it sees in the dark are the eyes of a pack of hungry wild dogs- and they are all locked right on their next meal. It was that heavy, ridged, I-am-so-screwed feeling that makes your guts feel like they are filled with concrete.

I tried to act aloof as I acknowledged that it was me in the picture, "Yeah, but that was sixty or seventy pounds ago."

This garnered a couple awkward chuckles, which I appreciated. I tried to convince myself that no one could tell how uncomfortable I had become.

"You were there." Someone said. This wasn't a question as much as it was a statement of astonishment.

I nodded, "But there's no new story in that. You want to read my take on what happened? All you have to do is Google it."

There were side conversations as writers tried to find a way to exploit this new information. I noted that Bradley Morris had not said anything. Since Bradley was the only person in the room that owned a cabinet in his house with three Mirror Awards, a Lovejoy Award, and a Pulitzer nomination placard in it- and since he signed the paychecks, the tendency was to listen to him.

"...And the house *is not haunted*." I reiterated. In my head I prayed that he would agree with me. I did not want to revisit this past.

I had avoided my home town for years. In fact, the closest I had been was when my mother passed away. I stayed in a hotel

right by Hartsfield-Jackson Airport. During that three-day trip I managed to only venture to the lobby bar, the church and the cemetery. I used grief as an excuse for not returning to my childhood home after the funeral. My lawyer was instructed to sell off the estate, with the exception of a couple of boxes worth of my mother's personal effects, which were shipped to my East Village apartment. In the end, I never got closer than twenty miles to the house at the end of [Cherry Glen].

Bradley Morris did not know this, and even if he did I am fairly certain I would have found myself contending with the same end-result. Bradley thought for a couple of seconds, and then assuredly declared, "There's still a story in there somewhere and you are going to find it."

He began typing and "[C-H-E-R-R-Y]" appeared on the projected list, "...and then you are going to stay there."

Where it was once so easy to throw excuses left and right to keep from returning to the southern town I had tried so hard to leave behind, I could not come up with anything to say to stop Bradley Morris from typing my name under that address. I just kept thinking to myself, "You need that paycheck to pay the rent, you need that paycheck to pay your bills; you need that paycheck." I don't know if it speaks more about me or the state of the world as a whole. Either way, ultimately I couldn't bring myself to object when haunted house number ten was added to Bradley's list:

- **3839 [Cherry Glen] Road;** *Stone Mountain, Georgia. The [Donnelly] House (C.B. Arden, Dave Grohl).*

Four days later I was in a rented Ford Mustang sitting in Atlanta traffic, heading towards the one place on earth that I most dreaded.

September 2, 1995...

The wind lifted the leaves that had collected around the two oak trees that lined either side of the house on the early autumn afternoon that the [Donnelly] caravan arrived at their new two-story home. [David Donnelly], a forty-two year-old merchandising manager, backed the large rental truck skillfully into the driveway as the draping, lush branches of the willow in the middle of the yard twisted and reached out at the vehicle like tentacles. Pulling up beside him was his wife, former catalogue model and pre-school teacher, [Kate Donnelly]. She arrived in their green minivan, which was packed to the roof with boxes, bags and the couple's two youngest children; eight year-old [Mabel] and six year-old [Simon].

Two '85 Honda Accord hatch-backs parked along the sidewalk in front of the house. Eighteen year-old [Reese Donnelly]'s black one blared the sounds of Faith No More from its speakers; while from behind the windows of sixteen year-old [Joel Donnelly]'s white one, the stifled sounds of Michael Stipe could be heard. Finally, [Joel]'s long-time girlfriend, [Kelly Nesbit] arrived in [David]'s red '92 Mazda Miata MX-5 convertible, which she drove at a crawling pace. There was no music emanating from the vehicle as she did not dare to touch the stereo.

The [Donnelly] brothers made their way across the yard, each of them unloading their favorite possessions first from their cars. For the older, this was the vintage '57 Gibson Les Paul guitar and its original case he had won over a drunken and heated game of scissor darts. For the younger, this was his brand-new Gateway desktop computer that he had purchased with the paychecks he had saved over the summer.

"Hey, Old Man!" [Reese] called to his father, who had vanished into the depths of the back of the rental truck; "Where are our rooms?"

"You don't have rooms." Their mother replied, gathering the children from the van.

Having been raised in an environment of sarcasm, teasing and practical jokes, the young men never knew when their parents were telling the truth or setting them up for an elaborate prank.

A few years prior, their father spent six consecutive days sneaking into the bathroom each time [Reese] showered and would lob eggs over the curtain railing. Since the seventh day was Sunday, [Reese] knew that his parents would be waking early for church. He waited to hear the sounds of water flowing from the water heater to the master bathroom and tip-toed into his parents' room. There he saw his father's plaid pajama pants, black dress socks and a T-shirt strewn upon the floor. Steam rose from underneath the gap between the floor and the bottom of the bathroom door, which was locked. He had anticipated this, and quickly picked the simple lock using an uncoiled paperclip. With a soft click, the knob turned and [Reese] stealthily crept into the bathroom.

"Only at the end do you realize the power of the dark side, Old Man!" he yelled as he pelted eggs over the opaque shower curtain.

He heard the eggs shatter and splatter onto the tiled floor, missing their target. Just then there was the sound of heavy, mock breathing from behind him.

"*It's a trap!*" [Reese] thought as he spun around to see his father standing in front of him wearing a purple bathrobe. He had been hiding in the linen closet and was holding an egg in each hand.

"Pffhh, chhh. Pffhh, chhh. Luke... I am your father." He said as he nonchalantly cracked one of the eggs onto his son's head. The other he crushed into his son's chest.

Pulling pieces of shell out of his hair, [Reese] chuckled and said, "I love you too, Old Man."

"What do you mean we don't have rooms?" [Joel] asked as the brothers ran to the front door to verify their mother's declaration.

[David] emerged from rear of the rental truck with a large canvas covered in bubble wrap and a large marble urn. He adjusted his arms to comfortably carry the items and called to his sons.

“Hang on and we will all take the tour together.”

-o-

Aside from the willow in the front yard, there was nothing about the house at the end of [Cherry Glen] that stood out as unique. From the street the house looked only marginally different from any of the other houses in the neighborhood. Three steps led up to the front patio and to the blonde stained door which opened into the foyer. Beyond the tiny room was the living room, which contained the fireplace mantle where [Kate] planned to place the marble urn and above which she would hang the giant canvas. Stairs in the foyer led to the second story where the master bedroom was located along with two additional rooms that would become the younger children’s bedrooms. The upstairs hallway ended with a door to the communal bathroom.

Through the living room were the kitchen and two doors. One was to the small back porch that overlooked the fenced backyard where a small toolshed rested beside a pink dogwood tree. The other door led into a black void; from which wafted the smell of dankness the moment [David] opened the door. Only a few of the narrow stairs leading to the basement could be seen before they seemed to disappear. [David] waved the rest of his family along, took three steps down and was swallowed by blackness.

At this point, if the [Donnellys] had lived within a horror movie, ominous music would have surely begun to play as they slowly trekked in single file, using only the wall to navigate down the creaky staircase; the clamor of their many footsteps echoing from below. It’s worth noting that if this had been a horror movie, since [David] was first in line, he would have also likely had been the first to die; but only after his Achilles tendon had been clawed from out of his skin by the nails of the horrific hell-beast that would have resided under the stairs. I should reiterate that the [Donnellys] did not live within a horror movie.

[David] found the bottom of the staircase and struggled in the darkness to locate the thin string that led to the naked light bulb hanging in the center of the room. Light shown down in an amber wedge, scattering cockroaches across the concrete floors. A guttural sound from deep within the house could be heard behind the concrete bricks walls and a thick, stinging and stagnant odor rested low in the room like an invisible fog.

“Don’t tell me this is going to be our rooms.” [Reese] pleaded.

[David] slowly waved the suspended bulb around the basement, shifting the visible area from left to right until he discovered an electrical power strip pushed in the far corner. He released the bulb and fumbled in the dark until he had once again located the power strip. With a flip of the ON switch four florescent lights sputtered to life, enveloping the basement in a soul-sucking glow. [Dave] circled the room, picturing the potential in the vast space.

“Your rooms and my office.” He replied, gesturing to where he envisioned he would place his roll-top desk, “And when you head to college next year, your room will become your mother’s office.”

[Joel] calculated all that would be required to make the basement habitable. Hanging the framework of the rooms, laying the insulation and drywall. Calling an old priest and a new priest. Carpeting, painting and covering the exposed ceiling; but first the room would need to be wired for electricity and air ducts would need to be placed. He knew that his parents could not afford to hire professionals to complete this work. No; this would be an arduous inside job.

“How long do you think that will take?” he asked despondently.

“Six weeks.” Was his estimated reply.

Relenting to the notion that neither he nor his brother could fully unpack for over a month, [Joel] tried to fish for a bright side. Suddenly, he had a thought.

“Shotgun! I call dibs on the good couch!” He shouted.

His older brother glanced around the room and visualized the plans his father had for the basement. From the layout he had mapped in his mind he realized that the wall running to the immediate right of the stairs was predominantly buried underground. This meant he could play his music as loud as he wanted and the sound wouldn't reach the neighbors; a point of contention at their previous home one town over.

"You can have it;" he replied, "The spot by the stairs is my room and as soon as we get all of those boxes off of that truck, I am driving over to [Josh]'s to ask if I can crash on his futon for the next six weeks."

-o-

That evening after all of the unpacking had been completed and the important things such as mattresses, the dining room table and the television had been set in temporary positions, [Reese] kissed his mother, mussed the top of his father's thinning salt-and-pepper hair, grabbed his second-hand, black leather jacket and his guitar and prepared to venture out in his hatchback. Before he could leave however, he had to read his youngest brother a bedtime story.

This had become part of [Reese]'s nightly routine for the past six months, beginning when their father's company had promoted him to a position that forced him to travel to various locations in the tri-state area for two and a half weeks each month. For the first few weeks, [Kate] thanked her oldest son for the help and assured him that he did not have to feel obligated to do so; but [Simon] preferred the way that his brother told the stories. At first this made [Kate] a little jealous, until [Reese] explained the way in which he read each story.

The [Donnelly] children were all gifted, each in their own unique way. [Reese] was the twistedly creative, resourceful artist. [Joel] understood math and the rapidly growing computer industry in ways that no teen of the time should (in the nineties it was highly unorthodox for a teenager to know about setting up complex wireless networks and increasing internet bandwidth speeds- things that any fifth-grader could do today). [Mabel] kept company with

multiple imaginary friends for years to the point that [David] and [Kate] began to worry; but before talks about pills came to surface, the invisible friends vanished and their daughter started to show interest in singing and piano. The [Donnellys] were quick to be supportive of this new hobby and promptly bought her a Casio keyboard, which she used to learn to play and sing the entire soundtrack to *The Little Mermaid*.

Because he was so young, any skill or talent that [Simon] may have had only manifested itself in quirkiness. He was highly in tune and fascinated by human mortality, sincerely thought that he became Billy the Kid whenever he wore his fringed leather jacket, faux leather boots and matching brown cowboy hat and he questioned everything. This is why he enjoyed his brother's stories most of all.

At the end of each story when the last page said the tale was over, [Simon] would often ask, "What happened next?"

"They lived happily ever after." Would be his mother's reply; then she would kiss him on the forehead and shut off the light.

His father would simply answer, "And then they all went to sleep."

[Reese], however, would sit up with the youngest [Donnelly] and answer him with convoluted continuations of the stories. According to [Reese], The Fork spent a lifetime searching for The Spoon and ultimately never found love again. Goldie Locks was mauled to pieces by the Three Bears; who were acquitted of all charges because she was robbing their home of precious porridge. In [Reese]'s version, Sam-I-Am and the unnamed narrator get a small business loan together and start a green eggs and ham food truck. They slowly gain a customer base, ditch the truck and expand into a couple of actual brick-and-mortar locations, but lose all their money when they are ultimately sued after selling tainted pork to a bunch of customers (after all, how can anyone tell when green ham turns bad?). On this particular early autumn evening Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty all got in a very heated argument at the Wonderland Spring Formal when they realized that they had all been dating Prince Charming. He got his comeuppance

when he was obliterated by the carcass of a supersonic cow re-entering the earth's atmosphere on its return trip from the moon.

After the brothers chuckled at the revised ending, [Reese] high-fived [Simon] and wished him sweet dreams. On his way out of the room, he passed by his parents who were waiting their turn to tuck in their youngest child.

"Why do the endings have to be so dark, Honey?" [Kate] asked her son.

[Reese] gave his aforementioned goodbyes and replied, "The original endings are just as dark. After all, the guys who wrote them were named Grimm."

-o-

The [Donnellys] clinked their glasses of wine as they lounged on the flannel-side of two unzipped sleeping bags in front of the fire that popped in the fireplace and warmed their new living room. This was tradition for the first night they spent in a new home so they had suggested that [Joel] sleep in the master bedroom on their king sized mattress after his girlfriend had left.

"Red or white?" [Kate] asked her husband.

[David] inspected the pink liquid in his glass and replied, "I think Zinfandel is a class all its own, Babe."

[Kate] giggled and corrected him, "I mean for the walls."

"You want to paint the walls red?"

"Only above the molding."

"Ah. That will actually look good."

"And maybe the front door."

They could hear the pinging sounds of their middle son tinkering on a computer upstairs.

"Do you think we will be happy here?" [Kate] asked.

"The kids will be back at their old schools, they will be with their old friends. I think they will be fine as long as the boys can hold off from killing each other until we can build their rooms."

"Do you think *we* will be happy here?"

“Oh... Of course.”

[Kate] nestled her head deep into her husband’s chest. She glanced around her new home and up to the fireplace mantel, where she had already placed the marble urn that held her mother’s ashes and had hung the large impressionistic oil-paint portrait of her and her family that her mother had painted for her shortly before her passing. A hopeful tear fell from her eye.

“I think we are going to be happy here too.” She said.

“Good.” [David] whispered as he wrapped his arm tighter around her and kissed her sweetly.

Meanwhile, upstairs their daughter sat on edge of her bed, wearing pink and purple unicorn pajamas and hugged one of her favorite stuffed animals while she held a conversation with the shadow in her closet.

1988...

I experienced my first crush when I was ten years old. Her name was [Ilsy Ellison], a freckled girl in my fourth-grade class and it lasted all of twenty minutes.

We've already established that I was a fat kid with little confidence growing up (not that I'm in fantastic shape now, but riding a bike in the city and avoiding the urge to shovel so much garbage into my mouth has made an incredible impact on my physique over the years). Now envision that fat kid sitting lonely on a schoolyard swing on an ordinary Saturday afternoon.

My mother had demanded that I play outside after discovering that I had not changed out of my pajamas and had spent the day watching cartoons and eating Lucky Charms straight from the box. Reluctantly, I put on my favorite Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles T-shirt, laced up my Roos sneakers and walked to the end of the neighborhood and down the block to the elementary school. I figured that there was a good chance that some classmates may be there; maybe even enough to start a game of tag or kickball. However, when I arrived the playground was devoid of any sign of children except for two abandoned bicycles that had been carelessly left on their sides.

At first, having a vacant playground to myself seemed a blessing. I could climb up the slides, simply dangle from the monkey bars if I chose and the jungle gym was mine to misuse as I pleased. I could play without consequence or judgment- which is a silly thing to say, but the reality is that kids can be cruel for some of the strangest reasons. I suppose it has something to do with their desire to be thought of as mature; which is a shame, since we spend the rest of our lives chasing the feelings we squandered when we were young. One of the things I found most incredible about the [Donnelly] family was that they never needed to chase after those feelings of youth. I think it's because they shared a rare ability to constantly be in a childlike state of wonder. With little provocation, any member of the [Donnelly] family could be easily sent into their own unique and spontaneous form of what could only be called *play*. Like the [Donnellys], in that moment I didn't have to worry

that my every action would be judged by my peers. I could skip, cheer and genuinely *play* like all people should.

Imagining I was an intergalactic Space Ranger, I darted over the see-saw and took cover behind a trashcan. Using my finger and thumb as a ray gun, I “pew-pew”-ed at imaginary slime creatures from a distant and evil, alternate dimension. Dashing as fast as I could, I hopped onto a plastic horse which was mounted to a giant spring (my jet-powered Space Cycle) and took hold of the metal handlebars that impaled the horse through the ears. I jostled it back and forth with all of my weight, pushing the spring to its limits; all the while firing lasers at the dastardly extra-terrestrials.

It didn’t take long before I learned that even the most imaginative of minds will quickly lose focus and interest when left alone. Soon, I had given up on saving the universe from the slime creatures and finding new ways to misuse the playground equipment. With little else to do, I meandered over to the swings and thought of how fun the deserted playground would be if only I had someone else to enjoy it with. After all, every Space Ranger needs a side-kick. It wasn’t that I didn’t have friends or that I was the class pariah or anything like that; I just didn’t have the kind of friends that would show up at my front door and ask if I wanted to join a game of softball. My friends were comic book readers, video gamers and sci-fi aficionados; they weren’t outdoor kids.

So, I sat in solitude; a lonely lump with my feet dangling inches from the ground. My slight movements sent the swing into a subtle sway, which caused my tip of my sneaker to involuntarily trace ever-shrinking infinity signs in the sand. Feeling myself growing increasingly bored, I wondered if enough time would pass to appease my mother if I were to walk home very slowly. I thought about borrowing one of the bikes that lay across the grounds, if only to ride circles around the parking lot. I debated whether this could be considered stealing, even though I had every intention of putting it back when I was done- using the kickstand no less. That’s when I saw a small figure emerge from the nearby woods.

“Hey Ches!” it shouted in a girl’s voice and waved to me as it approached the swings.

As she got closer, I saw that the figure was [Ilsy Ellison] and that she was wearing a pink over-sized top and zebra printed leggings, which had been scuffed at the knees with grass stains. Her crimped sandy blonde hair was pulled into a pony tail that hung from the right side of her head; her heavily hair-sprayed bangs bouncing across her freckled cheeks and nose.

I smiled shyly and waved back. No one had ever called me ‘Ches’ before. I liked it. [Ilsy] dropped into the swing beside me and kicked off, casting herself backwards. On her trip past me and upward, she asked, “What are you doing up here?”

I shrugged awkwardly. I had recently reached the age where instead of avoiding girls and their cooties, I sought them out; the only problem was that I had not yet reached the age where I had learned how to talk to them. Instead, I nervously started shifting around in my seat as if I had suddenly forgotten how the swing functioned.

“I was just at the waterfall with Trent Campbell and the ‘Rat-tail Twins’¹.” [Ilsy] continued, lifting higher and moving faster with each pass. The “waterfall” was a series of rocks that cut through the creek behind the school that the older kids in town used for graffiti and as a make-out spot. Trent Campbell was in our class as well. He was a good-looking kid, short-stop for the school baseball team and was terribly misguided. His neighbors, A.J. and D.J. Hornish were a year younger than us and were nicknamed the ‘Rat-Tail Twins’ because they both sported the wispy straggles of hair that trailed down their backs. Since their family was trailer-park-poor and because the brothers spoke with a thick, southern drawl and lacked basic intelligence, it was assumed that they acted as Trent’s lackeys. In all actuality, every theft, fight and act of general douche-baggery that the trio committed originated at the suggestion of one of the Hornish brothers.

¹ You may have noticed that I didn’t alter the names of these individuals. That’s because Trent Campbell, A.J. Hornish and his brother D.J. are all human garbage and I don’t mind sharing that with the world. You may also think that this is a harsh thing to say about the deceased, but a few pages ago I mentioned that we arranged to have a young pop star spend the night in a haunted *public restroom* for a magazine article and I bet you glossed right over that without a second thought- so don’t judge me.

“Gnarly.” I replied; or maybe not. I might have said ‘radical’ or ‘bitchin’ or something equally absurd; the point to take away here is that I came across as whatever the polar opposite of smooth is.

“They told me they were going to spray paint ‘WOLVERINES’ or ‘SAVE FERRIS’ out there but it turns out A.J. swiped a pack of his dad’s Parliaments and they were going to smoke them; so I left... What are you going to do for your science project?” she inexplicably continued.

We had been going to school together since we were five and this was officially the most she had ever said to me at one time. I shrugged again and muttered a bashful, “I dunno.”

Which was a lie; I was already halfway finished with my study of crystals. The kitchen counter at home was lined with numerous cups filled with various colorful liquids, each with a string suspended in the middle that had accumulated a thick, chunky crust. My project involved allowing the crust to accumulate over an established period of time and then I would measure the results (Read: making, eating and rating rock candy).

[Illy] zipped back by me, “I snuck a bunch of old meat into [Ms. McDougall]’s greenhouse and hid it. I’m going to see how long it takes for that bitch to notice.”

The chains to her swing arched to the sky and she released them, casting her from her seat and into the air. She hit the ground feet first then fell backwards, surrounded by the pillar of sand she had cast into the air. She rolled onto her feet, bowing as if this was her intent all along. That was the moment my crush began.

June 18, 2008...

The hardest part of writing any article is finding the angle; deciding what the story is going to be about. This involves talking to a litany of people, getting their side of the story and then cross-referencing that with a myriad of facts. The hope is that somewhere in the middle of this process, something compelling will reveal itself. This used to require hours of phone calls and days of traveling; fortunately, today a lot the initial footwork can be done from a laptop in a sports bar.

I had left the hotel and took off in the rental car with no real destination planned. I shuffled through the radio dial until I found something suitable to listen to and wheeled the car over the hills of North Avenue as memories of my youth raced through my head. From the moment I was given the assignment, I knew that I didn't want my article to rehash all the gruesome details that had already been covered in the media. This was partly because I had too much professional pride to regurgitate an old story, but mostly because I didn't want to relive any of it. I wanted to show respect for the family and present the angle in a way that would once and for all end the sensationalism around the [Donnelly] house; I simply had no idea where to start.

"What do you know about the house at the end of [Cherry Glen]?"

I tried to hold on to the happier memories of my brief time spent with the [Donnellys], but my mind kept turning to thoughts of darkness and blood. So much blood. Shadows of twisted branches crawled over the windshield as the car crossed under the canopies of Ponce de Leon. I tried to let go of these vivid images by singing along to the song that had come over the radio and before long I was thinking about lighter times. At some point my internal navigation set in and I sub-consciously began turning down familiar streets and long-forgotten parts of town. As I crossed Adair Park, I remembered that I was only a few blocks away from the bar I frequented back in my college years.

Walking in, I was comforted to see that the décor had not changed even after so much time. An aged mahogany bar extended from the left wall; behind it, several bottles were dimly illuminated under bulb-powered lanterns and the bluish glow of neon bar signs emanating from the nearby pool room. Loose pages from Tom Sawyer, the Prince and the Pauper and Huck Finn had been shellacked to the walls in lieu of wallpaper. It had always struck me as a desperate cry to prove that the place was too intellectual of an establishment to be called a 'dive bar' more so than it seemed to be a quirky decorative choice. Regardless, after a few drinks I always ended up reading the pages on the walls anyway.

I set up a makeshift workstation in the back corner booth, away from the college kids, right around the chapters in which Tom and Huck search for treasure in an ominous house. Settling in for a long afternoon of research, I found the closest outlet to plug my laptop cord into; and ordered some greasy bar food with a bourbon-and-Diet Coke from a server wearing an ironic moustache and a bowler hat.

Ideally, I would have been able to find [Mabel Donnelly] on one of the larger social media websites and could have just asked her about her family, the house and what approach she'd prefer that I take for the article. Unfortunately, locating her would take nothing short of a miracle. Long before any of the cameras and cops arrived it was decided to remove her from the situation entirely; so she was sent to live with relatives and in an effort to give her a completely fresh start where she was also eventually given a new name. Because I knew this, I only spent the first hour actively searching her out. It cost me a number of favors, but the last official documentation regarding [Mabel Donnelly] that I could locate were the approved legal forms solidifying her new identity. Large sections of this document had been permanently blotted out as though they contained evidence that aliens walk among us.

While I didn't waste much time looking for [Mabel], I spent quite a bit of time searching for [Kelly Nesbit] and was shocked to discover that she was just as difficult to find. I was unable to uncover any presence of her online or in any public records after 1999. I emailed every extended family member and friend of the [Donnelly] family whose contact information I came across in my

research; but I failed to find the slightest hints or lead to [Kelly]'s whereabouts. A family member (possibly her father) had died in the CSX 8888 Incident in 2001, but only her brothers were mentioned in the obituary. Her cousin had married but [Kelly] was not in any of the wedding photos nor did she "like this status". I sipped on my second drink and wondered if she had moved overseas or if she too had decided to become a new person entirely. Given what she had experienced, neither would have surprised me.

The first person I was able to successfully contact was [Josh Frye]. I found his Facebook profile which stated that he was living on the other side of town, was married and was now bald. From the picture he had posted, I couldn't tell if the latter was an involuntary or deliberate decision. I also wasn't sure if he would even read the message I sent to him asking if I could interview him for the article. There was a strong possibility that he wouldn't remember me from the handful of times we hung out in high school and thusly, I was afraid he may assume that it was junk mail.

My suspicions were somewhat confirmed after reading his reply, which gave the impression that he had to refer to a yearbook to associate my name with my then-chubby face; and that he likely only replied because I mentioned in my email that the article I was working on was for [Publication Omitted].

Even though it seems that no one really reads anymore, working for [Publication Omitted] still provides its share of privileges and clout; especially when the person you are dealing with is a musician. At the end of his email, [Josh] insisted that I join him at his house the next evening, where he would be happy to answer any of my questions and added that he had 'some stuff' that I might be interested in. I assumed that this was a coy way of saying "my band's demo". This is the downside to working for [Publication Omitted]; though I have never written an article about music, my home and office are riddled with terrible recordings of mediocre bands sent from all across the nation. Nevertheless, I was happy to be making progress; in just a few hours I was able to nail down my first interview. Soon, I had additional responses from [David Donnelly]'s sister, a niece and from [Ashley St. James]. What would have taken days just a few decades ago took me a matter of hours thanks to the convenience of the internet.

As I finished my drink, I looked up from my computer. The bar was now crowded with undergrads; countless twenty-somethings who each appeared to have gone through the trouble to look their best, only to spend most of their time with their heads down, buried in their phones. I briefly wondered what kind of world this new generation would end up leaving their children; but then decided it best not to think of such disparaging things. Perhaps it was because I had finally allowed myself to concentrate a little less or maybe it was because something deep in my subconscious was triggered, but suddenly I became aware of the odd selection of music being played throughout the bar.

*"A lover's promise never came with a maybe,
So many words are left unspoken;
The silent voices are driving me crazy..."*

1991...

[Ms. McDougal], the middle school art teacher was an avid botanist, a salvia enthusiast and was flamboyantly over-dramatic. It was common for her to fly into sudden fits of rage and lock herself in the small room in the rear of the class that would sometimes double as a development dark room; but not before assigning the students some asinine project. On the day that [Reese] met [Josh], she stumbled violently into class with her arms heavy with papers, her purse, a ceramic coffee mug and a boom box. Her clothes wrinkled, her hair disheveled and her eyes glazed over and bloodshot; she glanced around the class, mumbled some obscenity about the vice principal and then lifted her arms high over her head.

"I've had it!" she exclaimed as she tossed all she held to the ground with a shocking crash. The contents of her purse spilled onto coffee stained papers that covered the floor, surrounded by shards of ceramic and plastic. The tape from a cassette unspooled from the fractured husk of the portable stereo until it had toppled over into the puddle that had formed on the floor. [Ms. McDougal] stormed to the back room and before slamming the door ordered to her befuddled students, "Draw it."

Halfway through class, a dark haired classmate that [Reese] had never spoken to before leaned over to inspect his work. [Reese] had a penchant for completing assignments in ways that would guarantee an 'A', but would also insure that it would be granted to him reluctantly. The project he was working on was an impressive representation of [Ms. McDougal]'s aftermath, except that in place of the stereo dials, he had sketched large, realistic-looking nipples. The kid that [Reese] had never met chuckled and said, "Knobs. I get it; but I don't know how you'll ever get away with it."

"The key is to do the assignment really well and then twist it to the point where your teacher will get offended but will know that it isn't worth their time to fight you over it." [Reese] explained as he drew two wily hairs out of the volume nipple.

“I don’t know if I could pull that off.”

[Reese] looked over at the dark-haired classmate’s work, which was an exceptional still-life in color pencils. The piece would surely get one of the highest marks in the class, “Go ahead and toss something stupid in there; you will still get a good grade. You’ll see.”

The kid took a step away from his work and inspected it, “Like if I put a little cow right here that’s squirting milk out of its own udders into the puddle of coffee?”

“Yes! You have to do that!” [Reese] pleaded.

The dark-haired classmate began to pencil-in a black-and-white heifer standing on its hind hooves, squeezing its udders with its front hooves. As the boy giggled at his own work, he extended his hand and added “By the way, I’m [Josh].”

“You play a Takamine G, right?”

“Yeah. How’d you know that?”

“You ride my bus. I’m [Reese].”

“Are you that kid that..?”

“Probably.”

The boys bantered back and forth, daring each other to add increasingly absurd items into their pieces.

“Do you think I should give the cow an alien head?”

“Yes I do.”

“You should hide a penis somewhere in yours.”

“Can’t; I did that two assignments ago.”

“Then spell out the F-word in the puddle.”

“You still call it the ‘F-word’?”

“We’re in school. If I get detention, my mom would flip.”

“Our teacher is holed up in a closet. I think you are in the clear... What do you think she does in there anyway?”

“Nervous breakdown.”

“Dances around a pentagram on the floor.”

“Smokes and drinks.”

“Huffs chemicals.”

“If it killed her would we all get A’s?”

The conversation continued in this way through the rest of the period as the boys discovered a mutual fondness for music, movies and sassy brunettes. That day and every day after, they met at [Josh]’s house after school or work (eventually, they would both get jobs at the local record store) to play guitar and pal around. This tradition and bond continued into high school, where they eventually started a band that they named, *The Trouble with Jenny’s Ear*. The band consisted of [Reese] and [Josh] who would both sing and play guitar, [Ilsy Ellison] was recruited as their bass player because as [Josh] explained, “bands with chicks are badass.” [Peter “Geech” Tertiary] was asked to play percussion because he was the only guy they knew that had a van.

The Trouble with Jenny’s Ear gained a fair following with the kids at our school, had booked a couple of gigs at frat parties and even in a couple of bars that were willing to overlook the fact that the musicians’ IDs were clearly fake. The band would start each show with a beautiful version of The Beatles’ “*Because*” and would quickly shift into fast-past oddities that contained non sequitur lyrics and absurdist imagery. Set lists would include songs with titles such as:

“*Pencil Suicide*”

“*Little Blind Pig*”

“*Pretty Ballerinas and Petty Hyenas*”

“*This is Our Sexy Song*”

“*We Killed Laura Palmer*”

“*Two Teeth*”

...and “*Up, Up, Down, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right*”; the lyrics to which were nothing more than a rhyming reading of a medical textbook’s outline for performing a standard STD test. It was truly terrible stuff, yet so bizarre and fun-hearted that it was

hard not to enjoy a performance if you were lucky enough to have stumbled upon one.

Just as the band would open with a classic song that would showcase their actual talent, they also chose to close each set with a quirky but brilliant rock cover of the pseudo-classic from the adult-contemporary pop band, *Simply Red* that was currently playing loudly over the speakers in a bar filled with patrons who were far too young to appreciate the nostalgia of the song, even on an ironic level.

June 18, 2008...

“...I want to fall from the stars;

Straight into your arms.

I, I feel you,

I hope you comprehend.”

I surveyed the young patrons, wondering who in the room would actively choose to play this song². From across room I saw a familiar, albeit disenchanted, freckled face. [Ilsy Ellison] stood behind the bar shaking a metal tin while she mouthed the lyrics to herself. She wore a black t-shirt that had the bar’s logo printed on it; the collar was frayed so that the shirt hung over her right shoulder, exposing a portion of a tattoo of an angel with its face done up like a Dia de los Muertos styled skull. She also had gauged earrings and a tired, distant gaze; none of which existed the last time I saw her some twenty-odd years prior.

I gathered the loose papers that had scattered over the tabletop and slid them between the pages of the spiral notebook that contained all my notes and new contacts. I tucked the notebook and my laptop into my satchel and approached the bar to order a drink.

“Can I get a bourbon and diet, please?” I asked, trying to sound aloof, as though I had no idea that years prior the bartender was the first girl I was interested in that wasn’t stapled to my wall.

[Ilsy] turned her attention to me and with a forced, friendly smile said, “Sure thing.”

She paused upon seeing me and I could tell that she was trying to place who I was and how she knew me. I couldn’t help but smirk as she set my drink in front of me, baffled and growing frustrated. The wild sparkle in her eyes returned as she finally realized who I was; though she still was not certain, so she asked, “Ches?”

² I think it’s important to make clear that the author is in no way intentionally slighting the band *Simply Red* or their song, “*Stars*”; and reiterate that the author’s statements do not reflect the opinions of [Publication Omitted].

I admit; hearing her call me this brought back the thousands of longing thoughts once dreamt by a younger, chunkier me. I nodded to [Ilsey] and her mouth dropped agape with disbelief.

“Look at you!” She exclaimed, “You’re like half of you.”

“Yeah, I lost a bit.” I replied as modestly as I could while holding in my remaining paunch. [Ilsey] took a customer’s order and began pouring a pitcher of beer.

“Well, you look amazing.” She said, turning her attention back to me as she topped off the pitcher.

“Thanks.” I replied, “So do you.”

She blushed and brushed her hair away from her face, “Oh whatever; I know I look terrible.”

“You look just as you did the last time I saw you.”

“That was so long ago.”

“Yes it was.”

“Right after...”

“Yeah.”

There was a brief pause in the conversation as we both tried to figure out the best way to tiptoe around our nightmarish memories of our last days spent with [Reese Donnelly], while still acknowledging that the last time we spoke was in a courthouse.

“What do you know about the house at the end of [Cherry Glen]?”

[Ilsey] poured two shots of Jameson and slid one across the bar to me; holding the other, she said, “To better times.”

She tossed back the shot and I followed. She slammed the glass upside down on the bar top and once she had recovered her breath from the whiskey recoil said, “What brings you back, Ches?”

“The house is actually kind of why I am here...” I confessed.

As she made drinks for the line of hipsters that had formed beside my barstool I brought her up-to-speed on my life; college,

New York, job at [Publication Omitted]³, back in Atlanta for an assignment to write an article about and have a slumber party with Dave Grohl in the house at the end of [Cherry Glen], but first I had to interview family and friends of the [Donnellys]. When I mentioned [Ashley St. James], [Ilsy] got wide-eyed and excited. I had forgotten that the girls were best friends through high school.

“I haven’t seen her since she moved to Savannah.” She sighed, “I would love to see her again. I’ve just been so busy since I started going back to school.”

As she checked a young girl’s I.D., [Ilsy] explained that she had made some bad decisions after she left high school, had recently gotten her G.E.D. and was now attending the local community college to get her degree in medical clerical work. She was working at the bar to pay her tuition. Eventually, her thoughts went back to her old friend and she said, “Tell [Ashley] to call me when you see her; I really do miss her.”

Just then, I saw an opportunity to add one more interview and to spend more time with [Ilsy], so I half-jokingly suggested, “If you let me interview you about your memories of [Reese], I could bring you along as my intern.”

[Ilsy] nearly dropped the margarita glass she was lining with salt, “Are you serious?”

“Uhh, sure.” I replied. While I thought it was a clever idea, I never expected her to take me up on it. I never traveled with interns. In fact, in the past I had explicitly stated that I would never require an intern or assistant. Since most of the field work I covered involved attending technology and comic conventions, I always feared that having an associate tag-along would impede my ability to have fun (and would inhibit me from dressing in cosplay). Despite this, I continued, “I’ll have to notify my editor and you will have to fax over your information, but since you are a student and since you would be contributing to the article, I’m sure we can bring you on.”

³ I think it’s important to make clear that the author was intentionally mentioning his job at [Publication Omitted] to show-off; and reiterate that the author’s actions are not representative of [Publication Omitted].

“Oh my god, Ches; that would be incredible!” She leaned over the bar and wrapped her arms around my neck.

“It’s only a thirty dollar per-diem, and...”

“That’s all fine.” She exclaimed, giddy as she was that day on the swings, “When do we leave?”

“I’m meeting with [Josh Frye] tomorrow, then I’m heading to Savannah, then to Athens to have Fourth of July dinner with [Reese]’s family.”

“I am totally in!” She cheered, “I just need to take off work.”

She handed a patron their bill, looked around the room until she had spotted her manager and shouted to him, “[Bill], I need the next few weekends off.”

The manager shook his head, “School just got out and I need you here.”

To which [Ilsy] defiantly replied, “Then I quit for the next three weekends.”

She proceeded to pour two shots and handed me one. My fingertips lightly ran across hers as I took the small, cold glass.

“Ches, Ches, Ches...” she said as she clinked her shot glass to mine, tapped it down on the bar top, casting whisky from the glass onto the sticky wooden surface. She threw her head back and tossed the liquor intently to the back of her throat. Forcefully setting the empty glass upside-down on the bar, she smiled, “...It’s damn good to see you.”

I stared at that smile and let it brand itself into my memory as the rest of the night turned to a bourbon-laced haze.

September 13, 1995...

[Mabel Donnelly] poured invisible liquid from a tiny ceramic tea pot into a tiny pink teacup that was placed in front of a large, plush, polka-dotted elephant that had been stuffed into one of [Mabel]'s frilly dresses. She curtsied and said, "Your tea, Mrs. Peanut."

She moved down the table, pouring imaginary tea for a Barbie doll in a dinner gown, her younger brother (who was dressed in full cowboy regalia and whom she addressed as, "Mr. Billy the Kid."), and for a cup that rested in front of a seemingly vacant seat that was placed in the open yet unlit closet.

"Would you like any sugar with your tea, Lady Shade?" [Mabel] asked and spooned air from a bowl on the table into the unfilled cup in front of the unfilled seat.

"Oh, why thank you Lady Shade; you are so kind." [Mabel] blushed as she took a seat across from her brother and next to the only transparent party member, "Mr. the Kid, Lady Shade would like me to remind you that it's rude to have your hat on at the table."

The young cowboy tipped his hat and removed it from his head so that it hung down his back by the cord that pulled against his neck.

"Pardon ma'am." He replied with a twangy drawl.

[Mabel] put her lips to her cup and added, "She also wants to know if we want to play a game."

"What game?" [Simon]/Billy the Kid inquired.

[Mabel] leaned towards the darkened closet and held her hand to her ear as though she were being whispered to. Nodding, she replied, "Lady Shade says she wants to play *Hide-'n'-Seek*."

-o-

The sound of water running through the pipes echoed through the exposed basement where [David] and his two eldest sons were in the beginning stages of making the area more

habitable. [David] had drawn a square along one of the bricked walls above the level where they had planned to place the drop-ceiling.

“You boys are going to knock a hole here, and then we will feed the vent tubes through it.” He explained. It was an unspoken rule that the family patriarch was no longer allowed to use hammers. Their previous homes all had numerous wall patches from where [David] had unsuccessfully attempted to hang pictures, shelves and the like.

As his sons began taking alternating blows to the wall with the heavy sledgehammers, he continued between the thunderous booms, “Listen boys, your mother has been having stress headaches and I’m gonna need your help.”

The boys each took swings at the bricks, breaking them so that the adjacent crawlspace began to reveal itself from behind the wall. They began pulling the loosened bricks free.

“[Mabel]’s talking to imaginary friends again, and well... we may need to end up putting her on medication.”

“Oh, Lady Shade? She’s by far the creepiest one she’s ever had.”

“Yeah, I know. Have you asked [Mabel] what she looked like?”

“Yeah, and she told me she was a tall shadow woman.”

“She told me she was a smoky girl.”

“Well, your mother is not taking it well; and with the move and all the work she’s been doing to get the house in order, she needs some cheering up.”

“Sure.” [Joel] agreed, “What do you need?”

[Reese] hoisted himself up to look into the hole that they had created as his father answered, “I need you boys to pull the biggest prank you ever have on her. Kind of break the house in, you know?”

The sons willingly agreed and [Reese] dropped down from his hanging position, “Break the house. Got it.”

[David] chuckled with his sons and then asked, “Do you think you boys can fit in that hole?”

“Why don’t you go in?”

“Mom and I only gave birth to you so we didn’t have to do every stupid thing on our own. I’m going to hand you the tubing from this side.”

The boys pulled themselves through the small hole that they created, while their father stayed on the basement side, feeding them a flashlight and the vent tubing through the opening. Had the [Donnelly] brothers lived within a horror movie, they would have been surrounded by a mound of human skulls once on the other side of the wall. Instead, they found themselves in a narrow crevasse; the concrete bricks at their back and in front of them the foundation to the house. There was a gap between the clay behind the foundation wall and the base of the house that a person could crawl through. The boys shined their lights into the opening, revealing rows of spider webs built across the beams that held the structure in place.

“I think there’s something back there.” [Reese] said as he steadied his light. A metallic object sparkled in the corner.

He hoisted himself over the foundation wall and began to crawl towards the back to investigate. [Joel] stayed in the crevasse, lighting his brother’s way and asked, “What is it?”

[Reese] raked aside the cobwebs and edged deeper into the depths as the light behind him wavered from side-to-side, making it difficult for him to navigate. His back scraped against one of the house’s support beams, forcing him onto his stomach.

“I don’t know yet; keep the light still.” He replied with a groan. His brother steadied the light and he continued towards the mysterious, glistening object.

“It’s a box.” He declared as soon as he was able to make out the shape. Still on his stomach, he reached to retrieve it; finding that he had to jostle it free from the years of settling in the southern red clay.

The boys emerged from the crawlspace with their ornate discovery, which looked as though it had been abandoned or hidden for years. Portions of clay had solidified around the corners, the hinges had been rotted shut and the lock looked inoperable, even if they had access to the key- which they didn't.

"What is that?" [David] asked.

"It was half-buried in the crawlspace; it must have been under there for years." [Reese] replied. He shook the box and it gave a low, knocking rattle revealing that there was something inside. He knelt down to inspect the dulled metallic container and brushed off the thick layer of dirt from the lid, exposing a small engraved plaque.

"Hey, Old Man; I think *you* should open it." He said, running his finger over the intricate etchings, "It's got your name all over it"

[David] bent down and saw that the plaque read:

[D.S.D.]

...Which just happened to be [David]'s initials.

-o-

In the days after the [Donnellys] moved into their new home, [Kate] had painted every wall, the front door and shutters, unpacked the boxes for every room and arranged the furniture several times until the layout suited her liking. Through all of this she battled numerous onsets of increasingly severe migraines that she attributed to the paint fumes, the stress of the move and worrying about the mental state of her daughter. She checked on her youngest children, who were in the middle of a tea party, then went through her room and into the master bathroom to relax in the first bubble bath she had been able to enjoy since the move.

[Kate] checked her face in the mirror and spotted hints of silver in her thick, dark hair.

"I'll need to make an appointment at the old salon." She thought as she ran her fingers across the puffy rings that were starting to show around her exhausted eyes.

From the basement below came an echoing, pounding sound that shook the floors and exasperated her headache. She switched on the small radio in attempt to stifle the noise and removed a lighter and a bottle of aspirin from the medicine cabinet. Taking two of the pills, [Kate] then lit the large candle that rested on the counter and dimmed the lights. She ran her hand through the hot, foamy, vanilla-scented water and then slid into the tub and settled into a comfortable recline.

-o-

"Do you remember how to play Hide-'n'-Seek?" [Mabel] asked her younger, anxious brother who nodded excitedly. She leaned towards the closet again, whispered something into the shadows and continued, "Lady Shade says you should be it first. Go into the closet, close your eyes and count to ten; then come find us."

Billy the Kid ([Simon]) stared into the closet. A rainbow of puffy dresses lined the walls and a plush menagerie filled the shelves along the back; their lifeless plastic eyes peering through the darkness, "I don't want to go in the closet [Mabel]."

[Mabel] took her brother by the shoulders and asked, "Who are you?"

[Simon] lifted his hat from behind his back, placed it back on his head and in his manliest voice replied assuredly, "Billy the Kid."

"That's funny. I heard that Billy the Kid was the toughest cowboy in all the West."

"Yes ma'am."

"And he's the best shooter ever."

“Yes ma’am.” Billy the Kid confirmed, drawing his toy pistol and spinning it clumsily around his tiny index finger.

[Mabel] smiled coyly, “Then he shouldn’t be afraid of a little girl’s closet, right?”

This was sound logic to the young outlaw, who holstered his sidearm and with as much bravery as a kindergartener could muster said, “No ma’am.”

He checked his boots, straightened his fringed jacket, placed his hands over his eyes and trotted into his sister’s wardrobe.

“One... Two... Three...”

-o-

[Joel] inspected the box, searching for a way to open it and in awe of the incredible coincidence regarding the scribing on the lid. He noticed that it was heavier than he would have anticipated. Adjusting his glasses, he called across the basement to his father; who was searching his toolbox for something he could use to pry the container open, “Do you know anything about the prior residents?”

“Not a thing, son.” He answered as he pulled a small crowbar from the pile of tools.

[Joel] flipped the box over and searched for the creator’s markings. “I don’t think we should use that, Dad.” he advised as his father returned with the crowbar and a rubber mallet.

“Mallets don’t count as hammers son, it will be fine.”

“No dad, I think this is silver. Like *real* silver. We shouldn’t do anything that could break it.” He pointed out the maker’s mark on the bottom of the box; a crown sitting above Russian lettering and the number 84.

“I think this is really old, Dad. Like 1880’s old.”

[Reese] took the box from his father. Now that he knew what it was, the weight of the item held far more importance to

him, “Even if it’s not a valuable antique, there’s gotta be close to a thousand dollars’ worth of silver here.”

“Well, we should find try to find the key or pay a locksmith if we want to know what’s inside. If this is a well-known marking here, that thousand could easily be tripled.”

“How do you know so much about this stuff?” [David] inquired.

“Mom’s been watching a lot of *Antiques Roadshow*.” [Joel] answered.

“If you go get me your eyeglass repair kit, I think I might be able to pick this lock” [Reese] suggested.

“Where did you learn to pick locks?” His father asked.

“*Antiques Roadshow*?”

“*Four...*”

[Joel] once again interjected, “We shouldn’t try to do anything like that. If this is as old as I think it is, we shouldn’t do anything to it that could mess the lock up any further.”

[Reese] took the silver antique over to the toolbox and rummaged around until he found a stray finishing nail, which he used to pop the small hinge pegs loose. Taking the tiny pin heads in his fingers he gently wiggled each of them free, providing the slightest of gaps. He held the box lock-side up and shook it vigorously. Eventually, a rounded paper corner slipped through the space.

“I’ve got something.” He declared, as he gently pulled the corner through the gap, “It’s just an old picture.”

“*Five...*”

He held a very old looking photograph; the edges of which were worn due to exposure and an image of a woman on a beach

that had faded to an orange tint over time. The woman was wearing a polka-dotted, fifties-fashion, two-piece swimsuit and stared stoically to the sea, away from the camera. She held in her hand the silver box and around her neck appeared to be the key for its lock. The photo had faded so that the right side of the woman's face appeared to vanish into a white blur.

“Six...”

[Reese] flipped the photograph over; in faded, almost-illegible cursive it read:

Coney Island, N.Y.

Ester Caine

1956

“Seven...”

-o-

The stabbing pain that had run through the center of [Kate]'s forehead had subsided, thanks to the aspirin and the therapeutic ambiance of the master bathroom. She turned the faucet knob with her toes, adding more hot water to her bath and rejuvenating the sudsy bubbles. She placed a wet cloth over her closed eyes and laid her head back against the tub. She heard footsteps scurry across her bedroom and past the open bathroom door.

“Eight...”

“Kids, please don’t make a mess in my room.” She shouted, refusing to move from her relaxing state. As the water reached her preferred temperature, she nudged the faucet off with her toes.

“Nine...”

She heard a rattling sound from the bedroom, then the footsteps again. With a sigh [Kate] once again called out from the bathroom, pleading to her youngest children to grant her a moment of peace, “Out of the room, please!”

It was too late; she felt a pin-prick pain return to the center of her brow. The pain made her eyes water as though she could cry and the fact that she couldn’t seem to shake it made her want to. She pulled the cloth from her face and submerged her head beneath the scented suds.

“Ten...”

[Kate] stayed under water as long as she could; clenching her eyes tightly and releasing her breath in a slow series of bubbles. She couldn’t remember if it was hiccups or headaches that controlled breathing was supposed to cure, but she hoped it was headaches.

As she came up for air, she heard heavy stomping across the bedroom floor. Angered at her children’s subordination, she glared towards the doorway, getting soapy residue in her eyes and just in time to see a dark, blurred figure quickly pass by the entryway. It was too large and far too fast to be one of the children. [Kate] rubbed her burning retinas, certain that her stinging eyes were playing tricks on her.

“Here I come.”

She heard the bedroom door open and the clomping sound of her youngest son’s cowboy boots approach the bathroom. [Simon]/Billy the Kid appeared in the doorway and frantically

asked, “Mommy, have you seen Lady Shade? [Mabel] says she is hiding in here.”

R. HEDGES 2015

June 19, 2008...

R. HEDGES 2015