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Phantasms of the Modern Age: Rewriting the ghost story for the 21st century

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Phantasms of the Modern Age:  
Rewriting the ghost story for the 21st century

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A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of MA by Research in Creative Writing

University of Huddersfield  
School of Music, Media, and Humanities

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## The Foundling Home

As she sat in the back of the car, with her bags placed on the seat beside to her, Jessica looked out of the window at the row of identical houses passing by. There were no gardens out front. Not like back at the children's home she had left and then returned to time and time again. It wasn't her fault, that she was certain of. Nobody just seemed to like her. At least not enough to keep her around for longer than a few months. In her brief fifteen years—eleven of which she had spent inside “the system” as she had often heard it called—Jessica had basically mastered the routine. Keep your head down, do not make a fuss, and, for the love of God, keep your private life to yourself.

As the car turned sharply right, one of Jessica's bags that she had not secured properly slammed against her side. She looked out of the window again; the identical houses had gone and been replaced with a large wood, whose leaves had just begun to fall in preparation for winter. Ahead of the car, at the end of the long road, was her new home. Jessica counted three rows of windows at the front of the house. The house's left side was covered in a dull green layer of ivy which had worked its way into the grey bricks and looked like it was trying to drag the house into the ground.

“How old is this place?” she said, leaning forward to make sure Abigail heard her.

Abigail looked back at Jessica in the mirror before pulling into the driveway and Jessica looked at her in turn. To Jessica, Abigail looked much too young to be married to a man like Joe, who she guessed based on their prior meetings had to be twenty years older than Abigail at the very least.

“Oh, I don't know,” said Abigail as she parked the car in front of the house and turned off the engine. “You're best asking Joe about that. He can tell you absolutely anything about this house. Literally everything. Name a thing in here and he'll tell you who bought it, when they did, and probably how much they paid for it too.”

As if he had been waiting off stage for his cue, Joe walked out of the house to greet the two of them. He opened the car door for Jessica, let her step out, and then carried out her bags. His dark blue jumper, which clung to his slender frame, appeared to be much older than Jessica and smelt so too.

He took the bags inside and placed them down on the landing before coming outside again. Jessica saw Abigail smile awkwardly as Joe moved in to kiss her. She closed her eyes and flinched as his lips touched her cheek. It did not look like disgust or anything like that, but Abigail clearly wasn't the one in charge of the house and Joe seemed to like reminding her of that.

Then Joe turned his attention to Jessica.

"You're looking much better than you were when I last saw you," he said. He ran his fingers through her newly washed hair, and Jessica made sure to grasp onto Abigail's hand as hard as she could. Jessica smiled at Joe and laughed at a small joke he said to her. *Don't make a fuss* repeated in her head.

"Do you like the house?" Joe asked, finally bring his hands back down to his side. "I'm sure that Abigail's told you a lot about it."

Jessica shook her head. "Not really," she said.

Joe shot a glance at Abigail, who lowered her head to try and avoid it.

"I thought that it would be best to have you tell her instead, Joe," she said, trying to save herself from his scorn. "It's just that you tell it all in a way that I could never match even if I tried."

"Well, if you insist," Joe said, turning on his heel and walking into the house. Abigail and Jessica followed closely behind. "The house was built just under two-hundred years ago by a distant relative of mine. After he died, he left it to the family to use as a holiday home of sorts." Jessica was confused by this. How could a house so close to the city be any sort of holiday home? Joe noticed this confusion and kept on talking. "You don't have to go to the country to have a holiday, Jessica. All you need to do is get away from everything. That's what this place was. A getaway from a dull and busy life working in the city."

It was well past midnight by the time Joe and Abigail excused themselves and went to bed, leaving Jessica alone in the house. She piled up the plates and mugs left by Joe and Abigail and carried them

into the kitchen. Joe had told her that the three of them would all take turns cleaning up each evening, but a feeling in Jessica's gut told her that was unlikely to be the case.

For a house of its size, the kitchen was very small. Only a single gas ring and a refrigerator that looked to be at least four decades old. By the sound they made when she turned on the taps to wash the plates, the pipes must have been twice as old as the fridge if not older. They sounded like a dying crow in the jaws of a cat, screeching into the silence of the night.

She dried up the plates and mugs and put them away where she had seen Abigail take them out earlier and then headed upstairs to her new bedroom. The room itself was a decent size, but the walls were bare and in desperate need of a new coat of paint. The bed itself was small, barely even a single, but it was enough. Aside from the light bulb hanging from the ceiling, the only other source of light was a round window. It was small, roughly the size of a large dinner plate, and faced directly into the large garden which extended out into the nearby woods. The grass was long, and the fresh dew shone in the moonlight. Across the garden, small heaps of earth raised up and from them grew wilting flowers.

As Jessica looked out, she saw a shift in the moonlight. In the corner of her eye, a flash of light and the hint of a face moved from one side of the garden to the other. She saw the smallest detail of a person, a young child whose eyes were sunken deep within its skull and a rope around its neck. She rubbed her eyes, certain that she was imagining things in her sleep deprived state. Choosing to ignore it, she got herself ready for bed, brushed her teeth, and settled down for the night. It didn't take long for her to drift off.

Jessica woke at dawn. It was the cold that had woken her up. Despite the thick woollen blanket, she laid under, every part of her body stung with the pain brought on by the chill. Her breath condensed in the air in front of her. She pulled up her legs and began to rub them. Anything that would get them warm enough.

Even though the floor was carpeted, her feet almost froze to the floor. She felt that she lost small amounts of skin from the soles of her feet with every step that she took.

Outside, the sun was trying to burst through the thick, grey clouds, and fight away the cold. It was going to be an icy autumn day.

She was looking forward to freshly cooked bacon and eggs that she had imagined when Joe and Abigail had promised to take her in. But when she came downstairs everything was as she had left it the night before. Nothing had been touched.

Disheartened, she searched the kitchen for food. Anything that could settle her increasingly uncomfortable appetite. She sifted through the cupboards and found some porridge oats in a small plastic container. She boiled some water in a pan on the stove, added the oats, and sat down to eat.

Thirty minutes later, Abigail came downstairs. She was wearing a silk nightgown that, to Jessica, looked like something that the queen might wear to bed.

“Good morning,” said Abigail as she poured hot water into a large mug. “You sleep ok?”

“Alright,” said Jessica.

“Just alright?”

“I mean, I guess it was pretty good, now that I think about it.”

“That’s good,” said Abigail with a smile.

Abigail took out two teabags and placed them in the mug. Jessica thought that she was going to sit down with her at the table, but, instead, Abigail headed back to where she came from.

Jessica listened closely to hear what was being said upstairs. She could tell that Joe was speaking but was only able to make out a few words. “Her,” “House,” “Time,” and “Bitch.”

Eventually the conversation faded, and Jessica sat alone in the kitchen.

“Hello?” came a soft voice from behind her.

Jessica turned around. A young girl was standing by the door and smiling at her. She estimated the girl to be no older than eight or nine years old. The girl was small, almost too small for a girl of her age.

“Hello,” said Jessica. Neither Joe nor Abigail had mentioned having a daughter. “Are you ok?”

The little girl stepped back, trying to hide herself behind the door into the hall which led to the bedrooms. “Is Abigail your mum?”

The girl nodded.

“And is Joe your dad?”

The girl shook her head violently. She murmured “No, no, no” repeatedly. Jessica got up from the table and bent down closer to the girl.

“It’s alright,” she said, trying to calm the girl down. “I’m not going to hurt you. I was just curious, that’s all.”

The girl looked up at Jessica, her eyes seemed to go on forever into her head as she stared at Jessica.

“Why are you here?” the little girl asked. “You shouldn’t be here. This isn’t your house. This is Joe’s house and Joe doesn’t like it when strangers come into his house.

“Joe and your mum have adopted me,” she said. “They asked me to come and live with them. They must have told you.”

“Why did you say yes? Why did you come?”

“Because they seemed nice, I guess.”

“Oh no,” said the girl. She began shaking her head again. “Joe’s not nice. Not nice at all. He hurts—”

The opening of the door from the hallway disrupted the girl, who dashed away into the corner of the room. Jessica looked in the corner. The girl was curled up in a ball, her body shaking.

It was Abigail who walked into the room, wearing the same dressing gown that she had been wearing earlier. In her hand was the mug that she had taken upstairs.

“Who were you talking to just then?” Abigail asked.

“The little girl,” said Jessica.

Abigail gave Jessica a confused stare. “What little girl?” she said.

“She said that she was your daughter.”

“I don’t have a daughter,” said Abigail sternly before leaving the room again.

Jessica spent the rest of the day searching the house for the little girl. In doing so, she realised that the house was much bigger than she had thought after casually walking around the day before. She found room after room that she hadn’t noticed. Most of the doors were locked shut and the keyholes had been filled in with a sealant of some kind that meant that Jessica was unable to even get the smallest of looks inside. The doors that were unlocked mostly led into rooms filled with junk. Chairs, shelves, and wardrobes stacked against the walls and on top of each other. What looked like decades of furniture all left to gather dust and rot in well over a dozen rooms in the house.

By the time that Jessica had reached the entrance up into the attic, she had begun to lose hope in finding any sort of clue pointing towards the little girl. There didn’t appear to be a bedroom that belonged to her in the entire house. She was left with her last resort: the attic. Jessica climbed atop a nearby cabinet and reached across to pull down the hatch into the attic. A small ladder came down and Jessica climbed up into the darkness.

There were no windows to let in any light from outside. Only tiny cracks in the floorboards and the hatch provided a small amount of light into the attic. Jessica reached around the space, she found a string, prayed that it was for the light, and pulled it. She was correct. A single bulb hanging from a wire, a common feature, Jessica had noticed, in Joe’s house.

As with many of the rooms in the house, the attic was covered in a thin layer of dust. Cardboard boxes that had dampened in their time in the attic and a small set of table and chairs were all that Jessica could see on the floor. But a small shine caught her eye. A metal ring was attached to the wall furthest away from her. The brickwork around it looked to be as old as the house but the metal shone as if it had just been polished that day. The floor surrounding the ring, however, was as dust covered as the rest of the attic, so whoever had polished the metal had done so without touching the floor, at least that was the only explanation that made any sense to Jessica.

Before she had a chance to explore the attic further, she was interrupted by Joe's voice coming from below her.

"What are you doing up there?" he asked.

"Exploring," said Jessica quickly. "Just exploring."

"Well, come down. That ladder is old, and I don't want to find you on the floor having broken your back falling off it."

Jessica slowly climbed down the ladder and stood facing Joe.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I just was thinking that, if I'm going to be staying here, I should know the house more."

Joe gently moved Jessica aside and pushed up the ladder to close the entrance to the attic before replying to Jessica

"Look, Jessica," he said in a calm tone, "this is an old house and a lot of it is in dire need of repair. If you want to explore, do it in the garden out back. It extends out for ages. And if you want to know about this house you can always ask me."

"Ok," Jessica said. "Why is there a metal ring in the attic?"

Joe froze for a moment. Just long enough for Jessica to notice.

"A metal ring?" he said with a laugh under his voice. "What on earth do you mean?"

"Up in the attic on the far wall, there's a metal ring built into the brick."

"Well, I don't remember seeing that, but I assume it must have been used to keep things held down in place. Nothing to keep you up at night, Jessica."

But it did keep Jessica up at night. Not just the presence of the ring but how it shone in the light when nothing around it, not even the dust covered floor, appeared to have been touched in years. She looked at the clock beside her bed. It was well past three in the morning and Jessica knew that she was unlikely to sleep tonight. She got up in her bed and looked out of the window. The wind was blowing through the trees, carrying with it a sound. Jessica opened the window to better hear it.

A gentle ringing of bells in a quick tempo. The metal clanging rang out into the night. Jessica smiled at the music; it was a pleasant sound to her ears. She quietly started to laugh, not knowing why, and underneath the sound of the bells, someone else was joining in her laughter.

She then stopped laughing.

When she looked out of her window to locate the source of the laughter, she saw a small child playing in the unkempt grass of the garden. In the dark, Jessica could not be sure if the child was the same as the one which she had spoken to earlier that day.

She got dressed and made her way downstairs and into the garden, being careful not to disturb Joe or Abigail. When she got outside the child was gone. But still, the laughter continued.

At the edge of the garden, Jessica saw small lights. They were only faint but reminded her of Christmas lights at the very end of their life. The dull luminescence called out to her across the garden. She began walking towards them.

After five minutes of chasing the lights, she had lost any sense of direction. There were no electric lights on the horizon to guide her back towards her new home. And still the lights and the laughter continued to draw her further and further away from the house.

As she stopped and cursed herself for getting caught in this ridiculous situation in the first place, the laughter stopped, and the lights faded. Jessica held her breath and could hear her heart beating faster, firing blood around her body. She was prepared for anything the woods might throw at her.

She took a deep breath in and focused her mind.. As she did so, she felt a tugging on her arm. It was not forceful but gentle, like an old friend quietly trying to get her attention without distracting any others. She looked down by her side. Stood beside her was the little girl from breakfast. Her skin was glowing white in the moonlight.

“Follow me,” the little girl said. “Everyone would like to meet you.”

The little girl guided Jessica through the woods and towards a small clearing where a dozen children were playing. Like the little girl, they were all small and glowed brilliantly in the moonlight.

“Everyone,” said the little girl. “This is Jessica.”

Jessica was about to ask how the girl knew her name when the children came closer to her. The glow of their skin faded. She saw lengths of rope hanging from their necks and their ankles. Unlike the little girl that had guided Jessica here, none of them wore any clothes. But they did not seem ashamed of their nakedness.

As they got closer and closer towards her, Jessica saw the damage done to their flesh. The severity of the injuries varied from child to child, but every one of them shared the same type of wound. Something had slashed against their bodies, leaving gaping holes in their flesh. For some, it appeared to only be skin deep. But for most of them, it went down to the brilliant white of their bones.

Jessica's eyes couldn't move away from the mutilation in front of her. These small children, all torn apart, were running about as if there was nothing wrong. She looked at the girl beside her. Compared to the others, she lacked the severe damage done to the others but her eyes had begun to sink deep into her face and her hair had begun to thin ever so slightly.

"Are you all ok?" she asked. "Does it hurt?"

"Does what hurt, miss?" replied a young boy with large slashes across his chest. "Nothing hurts, miss. We're all happy."

Another child, a girl of eight or so, came up to Jessica. Jessica knelt down to talk to the girl. She saw how the girl's eyes were darkened and the iris was pure black.

"Have you come to play with us?" asked the girl.

"Yes," said the boy. "Did Sam bring you to play with us?"

Jessica looked down at the little girl still stood beside her.

"Sam?" she said.

The little girl looked up at her. "Will you stay with them? They're all alone out here," she said.

"Can't they come into the house?" asked Jessica.

"No. No. No," said the boy. "The house hurts us. House is where bad things happen. Very bad things."

"Did they hurt you?" said Jessica. "Did Joe and Abigail do this to you?"

The children all stared at Jessica and spoke with a single voice. “They tied us up and he cut us. They hurt us until we went to sleep and never woke up.”

Jessica’s heart was racing. Adrenaline pumped through her body. Sweat began to form on her brow. She turned around towards the house. It couldn’t be that far, could it? She hadn’t been walking for very long. If she ran, she could get back in no time. She looked around at the children. Surely, they couldn’t be real. This had to be a dream. But she wasn’t going to take any chances. She ran as fast as she could. The cold night air rushing past her. If this was in fact a dream, she wanted out as fast as she could.

The days following her time in the woods with the children past slowly. Jessica, despite how hard she tried, struggled to focus on anything else but the images of the mutilated skin and the exposed bones of the children. She struggled to speak to either Joe or Abigail, and whenever she did so, her responses were often monosyllabic. A quick “Yes,” or an “Uh huh”. She considered telling one of them what exactly she had seen but, a sickly feeling rose in her stomach whenever she thought about it, so she decided against it.

She had stopped exploring the house and did not dare to even approach the woods behind it. Most of her time was spent either in her room—mostly looking through pictures or reading one of the old books she had found on the shelves throughout the house—or simply losing herself in her imagination, which often lead her down a much darker path than she desired.

Both Joe and Abigail appeared to be experiencing a similar affliction. Jessica only saw them both during meals and, even then, nobody spoke to each other. Not a real conversation anyway. Abigail seemed to be throwing herself into her work—something at a local school if Jessica remembered correctly—and Joe spent almost the entirety of his time in his office.

Jessica did, one time, go into Joe’s office. She needed to know where she could find a spare lightbulb for her room and, after unsuccessfully searching the house, decided to ask Joe. When she

entered the room, Joe was busy typing away at his computer. The office walls were lined with bookshelves, filled up with countless books, most appearing to be many years older than Jessica. Sunlight spilt into the room through the large window facing out into the garden. Joe didn't notice her at first and it was only when she loudly closed the door, that he looked up from his screen.

“Jessica!” he said. “What are you doing?”

“I was just...” She noticed a small black and white photograph on his desk. It was of a group of half a dozen children, all sat in the garden smiling at the camera. Stood behind them was a young man, dressed in a well-worn suit. It took a while for Jessica to notice, but she was certain. This was a young Joe.

Joe noticed the object of Jessica's attention.

“Ah,” he said, picking up the photograph. “This must have been, oh God, at least thirty years ago now, probably more if I'm totally honest with you. Not long after I moved in here if I remember rightly.”

“Who are they?” Jessica asked. “All those children.”

“Oh, them. My aunt and uncle, who owned the house before I did, ran a home for children like you—children without a home of their own to go to—and those were their kids. That's how they thought of them. Their kids.”

“I thought you said this used to be a holiday home.”

“Can it not be a holiday home and a place for children without a family to go to? The two of them are not mutually exclusive, Jessica.”

“It must have been very crowded.”

Joe laughed at little a Jessica's comment. “It could be, yes. But you got used to it.”

“What happened to the children?” said Jessica, beginning to suspect that Joe's story was not exactly the truth.

“There was an illness,” said Joe. “It flew through the whole house, I'm afraid. You were asking about the attic and, well, I looked into it and that seemed to be where they kept the sick. A basic

attempt at quarantine I guess.” There was a momentary pause between the two of them. “What was it you came here for anyway?”

“Oh, I was wondering if there were any spare lightbulbs. The one in my room has gone out, and the window doesn’t give enough light for me to read by.”

“There should be some in the kitchen; right at the back, under the sink,” said Joe before quickly dismissing Jessica and getting back to whatever work he was doing when she entered the room.

There were no lightbulbs under the sink. In fact, there was nothing stored there. Only the plumbing. Jessica reached to the back of the cupboard and ran her fingers across the floor behind the pipes. The only thing that she found was a splinter in her finger. As she tried to remove it, she heard faint voices. She tried to focus her hearing, but it didn’t help. Putting the wooden annoyance in her finger to the back of her mind, she stood up and headed in the direction of the noise.

The voices belonged to Joe and Abigail. The two of them were not shouting but the tone was definitely not a friendly one. They were in Joe’s office and the door was locked—a key was in the door so Jessica couldn’t even look through the keyhole.

“She told me that she saw her, Joe,” said Abigail.

“Did she say Sam’s name specifically?” said Joe.

“Well, no, but—”

“Then how can you be sure? Maybe she just saw a reflection in the mirror,” said Joe forcefully.

“Joe, girls Jessica’s age don’t talk to reflections.”

“Maybe she does? Maybe she’s gone crazy in this old house?”

“She had been here for less than a day.”

The conversation went on for a while. Joe and Abigail arguing back and forth about the truth of what Jessica had told Abigail. Jessica had confidence in her ability to tell what was real and what was not. She’d never been someone who would confuse a dream for something that actually had happened or lose herself to flights of fancy when she was younger.

“Are they talking about us?” said a familiar voice behind Jessica, who was crouched down with her ear to the door. Jessica looked behind her. It was Sam.

“Yes,” said Jessica quietly, “but keep your voice down. We don’t want them to know we’re listening”

If Jessica had gone crazy like Joe appeared to be suggesting, she was definitely willing to go along with the fantasy now.

“Abigail,” said Joe. “Sam’s dead. Our girl is—”

“Don’t you dare say that. She was never our girl. She was my daughter. Not yours.”

Jessica slowly began to stand up, but despite her efforts to not do so, she heard herself knock against the door. She froze. Sam, sat on the floor next to her, looked up at Jessica. Her lip was quivering.

“It’s ok,” Jessica whispered.

“Jessica?” shouted Joe. “Is that you?”

She didn’t respond.

“You can come in, dear,” said Abigail.

“Yes,” said Joe. “Just a little disagreement. That’s all. Nothing to worry about.”

Jessica heard the key turn in the door. She slowly opened the door and made her way into the office. Without the sunlight streaming in from outside, the walls of books looked oppressive. Like they could all fall down upon her at a moment’s notice.

“It didn’t sound little,” Jessica said before quickly turning around to see if Sam had followed her in. The little girl hadn’t. She hid by the door, only slightly peaking inside the room.

“Are we keeping you from something,” said Joe.

Jessica snapped back around.

“No, no,” said Jessica quickly. “Just thought I saw something.”

“What did you see? Or think you saw?” said Joe.

“It was nothing. Really.”

“No, it wasn’t. Go on, tell us.”

“Joe, really,” said Abigail, “if she says it was nothing, it was nothing.”

“I want to know,” said Joe sharply to Abigail. “It’s an old house, it can play tricks on the mind sometimes.” He paused. Jessica wondered if he knew about what she had seen. Sam and the other children in the woods. “It’s the dust. It catches the light. Convinces you that there’s something there when there isn’t.”

Jessica knew it then. She didn’t know how but she knew that Joe didn’t believe that it was dust. Joe knew about the children in the woods. He knew about Sam. The look in Joe’s eyes confirmed it. They were scared of him and she was beginning to see why. He didn’t have the stare of a kind man.

“You really want to know,” she said, trying to see if he would drop the whole thing and move on.

“I do, Jessica. Very much so.”

“I saw a little girl,” said Jessica. “Abigail’s little girl I think. Her name’s Sam.”

Abigail gasped at Jessica’s confession.

“Jessica, if you think this is some sort of game...” said Abigail weepily.

“She’s telling the truth, dear,” said Joe. “I know she is.”

Abigail turned around to face Joe. Tears were beginning to well up in her eyes.

“Joe, what do you mean?” she said.

Joe chuckled at Abigail’s tears.

“Sam’s dead, Abigail. But she’s here. All the children who lived in this house are here.”

The tears flowed freely from Abigail’s eyes.

“Joe, I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

Joe pointed to the photograph on his desk that Jessica had spoken to him about earlier.

“The children. Those that lived in this house all those years. Did you really think that a disease would take them all one at a time? Diseases don’t take rests, Abigail.”

“They were murdered,” said Jessica. “By you?”

“The family,” said Joe. “Like I said, you don’t have to go abroad to have an enjoyable holiday.”

“And Sam?” said Jessica.

Joe placed a single hand on Abigail’s shoulder.

Abigail violently pushed Joe’s hand off her. “What happened, Joe?” she insisted but Joe did not answer. “Tell me!” she yelled.

“A distant member of the family,” said a monotone Joe. “He got a little carried away.”

Abigail’s face fell into her hands and her sobbing intensified. As her mother mourned her murder, Sam entered the room and approached Abigail. She did not, or Jessica guessed likely could not, notice her daughter. Sam tried to hug Abigail but found that she was unable to.

Joe looked at Sam with horror. He could see her. His eyes widened, his breathing quickened, and his mouth opened slightly.

Outside the window, Jessica could see the children looking in. Their wounds looked fresher than they had before, as if they had only just been inflicted upon them. The rope that once hung around their necks was now in their hands. Jessica could tell that they intended it for Joe and by the look on Joe’s face, he knew that as well.

Joe started stepping back towards the wall until his back hit the shelves of books. One of the books, from the very top shelf, fell onto the floor beside him. Joe’s eyes darted down to look at it.

Whilst he was doing so, the children entered the room. One of them, the young boy that Jessica had spoken to, went over to Sam, who was still stood with her mother, and took her hand. He guided her towards Joe and handed her a piece of rope.

While all this was happening, Abigail took Jessica by the hand.

“Come on,” she said. “You don’t need to see this.”

Jessica wondered if Abigail could see what was really happening or if she simply believed that Joe was suffering from a breakdown of some sort. Either way, Jessica did not want to spend any more time in Joe’s office, watching him squirm and cower against the shelves of books that he had built up over the years.

As she looked back after leaving the room, Jessica could see through a small crack in between the door and its frame. The children had tied Joe's hands and feet together. Sam looked at Jessica and slowly raised her hand to wave goodbye before the door closed.

Jessica guided the still weeping Abigail out of the house and into the car parked out front. The two of them simply sat in the car as Abigail attempted to compose herself into a state where she would be able to drive both herself and Jessica away. Jessica hoped that, whatever decision Abigail would make, it would mean that she would never have to return to the house. That she would be able to let it simply fade away into the back of her mind and forget about it. But from the look that she saw on Abigail's face, Jessica doubted that this would be the case.

## Men in the Church

Even as Edward sat down in the pew, he was unsure why he had decided to enter the church. Was it just to get away from the busy street outside and to be with his thoughts, or had the hymns at school all those years ago finally bubbled up to the surface? Whatever the reason, he found peace in the brief solitude.

For a time, it appeared to Edward that he was alone in the old church. Just him, the Christmas decorations ready for the season, and the saints in the stained glass, looking down at him. The dying Christ, arms outstretched, body hanging down, and his face looking on, relaxed as if to say, “It’s ok, everything is going to be fine.”

“Excuse me,” said someone behind him.

Edward turned to face the voice. A frail looking man in his sixties wearing a black cassock and collar was walking towards him. “Just to let you know that we are about to close up,” said the old priest.

“Oh,” said Edward, standing up to leave, “I’ll get out of your way then.”

“There’s no need,” said the old priest. “I’m not going to force you out if you want to talk.”

Edward settled back onto the pew. “Really, if you need to—”

“Relax,” said the old priest with a smile. “Things like this are part of the job. Let’s start out simple: My name is Michael.”

“Edward.”

“What’s on your mind, Edward?”

He did not know how to answer. How much should he tell him? How much did he even know himself? He thought of all that had happened, everything that had led him here. That night wrapped up in Daniel’s arms, the two of them just talking until they both fell asleep. Was that where it had all started? A feeling of shame. Not at what he’d done—that he knew was not something to feel ashamed

about—but in how he had reacted afterwards. Again and again and again. He always did the same thing. The same stupid thing.

Noticing Edward's hesitation, Michael decided to take the lead. "To start off, just to get the big question out of the way: Are you a person of faith?"

"I honestly don't know," said Edward.

"That's ok, most people don't really know."

"So, you're not going to try and convert me?"

"That's not my job, at least not how I see it. I'm here to help those who need it. So, what's on your mind?"

"I just... It doesn't matter. You wouldn't be able to help me anyway."

"Why won't I? I've been around for a long time, son. I'm sure I could at least offer you an ear."

"Well, I just feel like I'm not deserving."

"Not deserving of what?"

"Of love."

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The clock had just struck eleven when Michael put down his book—Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, a favourite of his since childhood—and put out the fire before leaving the small living room of his bungalow. The tight walls of the corridor were made even tighter by the piles of books on both walls—some piles reaching up to his chest. Decades worth of texts, every one of them read and put aside in the hope of future relevance. But never touched again.

By the time he arrived at his bedroom and sat down upon his bed—the old springs creaking beneath him as he lowered himself onto the mattress—he took half a dozen slow and deep breathes in order to relax himself, ready for his nightly prayers. He closed his eyes, clasped his hands out in front of him and began to pray.

*Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done;  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
Amen.*

He then moved on to the more personal: “God,” he said out loud, “I pray for those both a part of the church and separate from it. I pray for the forgiveness of their sins and for their wellbeing. I pray for the poor and the needy. I pray for those soul of my friend”—he knew he was lying calling him a friend, but he had no other way of describing him—“Steven, who you decided to take so early. I pray for the lost and the hated, both by others and by themselves, so that they may find a peaceful life in your grace.”

As he spoke the final words, the air around him grew cold and the ticking of his desk clock, usually a constant and relaxing presence in the room, stopped. Michael turned his head to look at the clock. The mechanics appeared to still be in working order. The second hand continued its constant journey around the clock face but the sound that had once accompanied it had stopped.

The cold around him grew more intense. His breath condensed in front of him and he felt the sweat on his skin begin to freeze, his pyjamas sticking to his skin and hardening until they barely moved with his movements.

A knock at the door into the room broke the unnatural silence.

Surprised, Michael got up, opened the door, and checked the corridor. It was empty. Nothing but a hallway of darkness. He closed the door and began to head back towards his bed.

A second knock against the door.

Michael froze on the spot. He turned again but didn't dare to open the door a second time.

The knocking continued. A constant rhythm against the wood, perfectly timed to match the ever-increasing beating of Michael's heart.

"Hello?" he said quietly. "Is somebody there?"

There was no response. The sound simply continued.

"If you're trying to scare me, it won't work," he said, trying to convince himself more than the intruder.

The knocking ceased. Before he had the chance to relax, Michael felt the air around him begin to warm and a small pressure pressing down into his right shoulder. He closed his eyes and began to pray again: "Our father, who art in heaven..."

As he continued, the pressure increased more and more until he was struggling to remain upright.

"Don't be afraid, Michael," whispered a voice in the old man's ear. A voice that he had not heard in four decades. It was soft and kind, but sounded worn down, as if speaking with sand in the mouth. "Don't be afraid of who you are and what you need to do."

"Steven?" said Michael before a wave of sleep fell over him and he fell onto the bed for the night.

He awoke with the rising of the sun. His eyes strained at the light pouring in through the window and painting the room in a faint orange glow. He rubbed his temples with his thumbs, moving them in a circular motion and pressing down hard. Usually, this relieved his near-constant headaches—it had been working for the past twenty years—but, that morning, nothing could put an end to the thumping inside his skull.

Eventually, the pain subsided, so Michael got dressed, ate his breakfast, and headed out into his day. Thoughts of the night's events remained at the forefront of his mind.

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When Edward left, Daniel was still asleep. He had done this many times before, leaving without saying goodbye. He didn't do it out of shame or because he didn't care, at least that's what he told himself. He just wanted to make sure that he didn't ruin things or make everything much more complicated than it needed to be. It probably wasn't the smartest thing to do, and it definitely wasn't the kindest thing on Daniel, but he didn't know how else to go about things. His history of relationships was marked with times when he'd gotten too close to a person just to see them run away when things got too serious. If things never got to that point, then he'd never have to suffer through a broken heart again.

Half an hour later, whilst Edward was sitting on the bus heading into the city and to work, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He knew that it was Daniel. He didn't even need to check, he hoped that it wouldn't be him, but he knew hoping wouldn't change the result. After a brief consideration of letting it go to voicemail like he'd done countless times before, he answered the phone.

"Edward?" the soft voice on the other end of the phone said.

"Yeah..."

"Edward, you can't keep doing this. I just don't understand you. We can spend an entire weekend together but the second the sun is up on a Monday morning you're gone. I mean, it's not like we do anything. For Christ's sake, you sleep on the bloody sofa."

Edward didn't know what to say. What could he say? He didn't have an excuse or an explanation. All that he had was his actions and it was those that had trapped him in the corner he found himself in.

“Look,” said an exasperated Daniel, “if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine. But I thought that we had something special—or were on our way to having something. Just think about it. Please. If not for me, then for yourself.”

And the line went dead. Edward put the phone back into his pocket. He let his head fall into his hands and, no matter how hard he tried, he failed to hold back his tears.

The bus came to a stop outside the hospital. About a dozen or so people stepped onto the bus and took a seat. One of them, a handsome looking man that looked to be around eighteen years old, sat directly behind Edward, who wiped his face and stealthily turned around to glance at a shining badge pinned upon the man’s long dark coat.

“Hello,” said the man.

“Sorry,” said Edward, panicking at being noticed. “I was just trying to read your badge.” He pointed at the badge and prayed that it would be a viable excuse.

The man took the badge off his shirt and handed it to Edward.

“This old thing,” he said, “it’s nothing really. It’s older than you are, I’d guess. But it’s a present...” The man paused for a moment to smile to himself. “A present from a very good friend of mine.”

Edward looked at the badge and moved it around in his hands. Behind its smooth plastic surface, which had reflected the sun’s light when Edward’s eye was first drawn to it, was a photograph of the man and another, about the same age. The two of them were standing at an old-fashioned seaside fairground. Edward was reminded of photos that his grandparents had hung up on their walls. The two men looked happy, with their arms around each other’s shoulders. Printed on the photograph, just below the two men, in clear black letters was the phrase: “Always and forever.” He turned the badge around. Scratched roughly and messily into the metal on the back was a date. 4/11/79.

“Who is this in the photo? Your brother?”

“The man I loved. The person who gave it to me.”

Edward shrugged his shoulders and took one final look at the badge, his eyes drawn to the face of the second figure in the photograph before passing it back to the man. As he did so, the bus came to a stop. Edward looked up and out of the window. It was his stop. He then stood up, said goodbye to the stranger, and got off the bus. As it drove away, Edward saw the man pin the badge back onto the breast of his coat, look out of the window and at him with a gentle smile.

That night, Edward slept soundly. Neither the banging of the old radiator in his room or the sound of the cars passing by just outside his window did anything to rouse him from his deep and peaceful slumber. He had drifted off thinking of the good times with Daniel. He remembered the first time that they met and how Daniel had smiled at him from across the room. When Edward awoke, a similar smile was on his face.

As he got ready for his day, he felt renewed with a sense of vigour the likes of which he had never experienced before. This feeling filled him so much that he did not feel the need for breakfast. Instead, he simply got showered, dressed, and stepped out into the world.

It took only a few steps out from the door for Edward to realise that everything was not as good as he felt.

No birds were flying through the sky above and filling the air with their pleasant morning song. No cars raced down the road, and the workers, many of whom Edward had come to know over in the months of living in his current house, were nowhere to be seen. The usual rush to the café at the end of the street for a full English before their shift started had vanished. The only movement on the street that Edward could see was his own.

As he walked down the street, he saw a figure standing in the centre of the road staring at the sky. He tried calling out to the figure, but this had no effect. He then attempted to get its attention by waving his arms around above him, making as much visible movement as he was able. But, again, this did nothing. Finally, he decided upon a more direct approach. He burst into a run, heading directly for the person. As he got closer and closer to the figure, a familiar image came into view. The person

was tall, slender, and was wearing a freshly pressed white shirt with buttons that looked to be made from a dark green gemstone and wore a familiar dark coat with a button pinned upon his breast.

“Hello Edward,” said the man from the bus.

“How do you...? How do you know my name?” said Edward in between deep breathes as he tried to settle his racing heartbeat.

“I know a lot about you. That’s why you’re here.” Edward didn’t have time to question the man before he stretched out his hand, “I’m Steven.”

“Am I dead?”

Steven laughed, whilst Edward struggled to find the humour in what had just been said.

“No, you’re not dead. You’re just...” Stephen paused for a second, as if trying to find the words.

“You’re just sort of dreaming.”

“But why am I here?”

“Because you need my help and I need yours.”

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As Michael walked back home, he whistled a gentle tune which guided his feet gracefully through the field near his small cottage. He let the water on the grass seep into his shoes, cooling his feet and dampening his socks. By the time that he had walked through the gate and out of the field, the entire lower half of Michael’s trousers were soaking wet. As soon as he got home, he took off his trousers, placed them on the nearest radiator to dry, and put on a pair of old worn denim jeans. An evening of peaceful relaxation laid ahead for Michael.

After finishing a cup of tea and a few pieces of shortbread, Michael got himself ready for bed, said his prayers, and went to sleep.

Michael was awoken from his sleep by a loud banging upon the window of his bedroom. He glanced at the window. Nothing had been broken and nothing, it appeared to Michael, was close

enough to have been the cause of the disruption. He looked at the clock: half past five. He knew that it was extremely unlikely for him to be able to get back to sleep before he had to be up later in the morning, so, instead, he decided to start his day early.

He went downstairs, ate his breakfast, got washed and dressed, and looked out the window. The sun was poking up just above the horizon. But the idyllic visage was disrupted by the unnatural stillness of the scene. Something was wrong, and Michael knew it in his gut.

As he closed the curtains of his window, there was a knocking at the door. After first acknowledging the irregularity of a caller so early in the morning, Michael moved to open the door. By the time he his hand was on the door ready to open it, there was another round of knocking, this time much more urgent.

When he opened the door, Michael was stunned by what he saw on the other side. Edward, the young man who he had seen in the church two days earlier, stood alongside a face he had not seen in decades, and one that did not appear to have been touched by the ravage of time that had so cruelly taken Michael's youth from him.

“Hello Michael,” said Steven.

Michael froze. Whatever was happening, he knew that it couldn't be real.

“Steven, you're dead. I know you are. I went to your damn funeral.”

Before he could close the door on his visitors, Stephen gently took hold of Michael's hand.

“Michael,” Stephen said, “I'm here. This is real. I know this must be hard—”

“No, Stephen. Losing you was hard. This is just cruel.”

Edward stepped forward from behind Stephen. “Isn't this nice though? Being able to see him again.”

“It is a bit, I suppose.”

Michael led Stephen and Edward into the living room and took a seat in his favourite armchair, whilst his two guests both sat on the nearby sofa.

“Stephen, I just don't understand. If all of this is real, then why are you here? Why now?”

Michael saw Stephen look first at Edward and then to him. There was a sadness in his face that Michael knew. All those years ago, it was a common sight to him. Michael knew that Stephen had tried to hide it from him, but there was no hiding the sadness inside of him behind a mask of happiness.

“Because he needs your help,” said Stephen. “So, he doesn’t make the same mistake that you did.”

The children were playing in the woods. They hid behind the trunks of trees and in the large bushes, but not too far in as to be pricked by the thorns. Everyone laughed as they ran around, falling over roots sticking out from the ground and landing on their faces and muddying up their clothes. Steven, Michael, and Edward all walked through these woods. The children ran past them, not paying any notice to the three men.

“Steven,” said Michael, falling to his knees and grabbing onto the nearby Edward for both balance as well as a confirmation that all of this was, in fact, happening right in front of him. “That’s me.” He pointed to the smallest of the children, at least two years younger than the rest, running about and trying to keep up with everyone else. “Right there—do you see him? —that’s me. God, I must have only just started school.”

“You started last Monday,” said Steven.

“But that... That’s impossible. I mean, I’m right here. I’m only a few years away from retirement, for Christ’s sake.” Michael stood up again and stared at Steven. “What did you do?”

“Just look.”

The children ran out of the woods and across the field. Michael could not look away from them. He knew that what he saw in front of him could not be real. It was impossible for Steven to be stood next to him. Steven had been dead and buried for years. But there he stood. As freshly faced as he had been the day before he died. Time had not been as cruel to Steven as it had been to Michael. The years had made him weak. The body that, at one time, he had been proud of was gone. Instead, he was a layer of skin holding together his old bones.

Slowly, Michael started walking forward. He followed the path the children had taken moments earlier. A few steps behind him, Steven and Edward followed. The three of them left the woods and headed towards a small building in the middle of the field. It wasn't much; just two floors and bare grey walls. He saw the children walk in through the doors at the front. By the time that he reached the doors, Steven and Edward were a step behind him. He looked back at them. Edward looked to be as confused as he was, but Steven was smiling at him. That smile that had remained in his memory for all this time. A smile that was enough to inspire the confidence to head inside.

Michael closed his eyes, breathed in, and stepped through the doors into the building.

The crowd inside the building was rowdy. Up on the small stage, a local band slammed on their instruments whilst their singer screamed down the microphone at the audience. As the three of them made their way through the crowd, Michael looked around the large open room. Just off the centre of the crowd, Michael saw two men, their arms around each other as they moved with the music. They weren't moving as fast or as violently as the others in the crowd. It was almost like the pair was moving to music that only they could hear.

"Oh my God," said Michael as he recognised himself and a younger Steven.

"Jesus," said Edward as he looked over at the pair, fresh out of high school, "I didn't know that they let people like you become vicars."

"They don't know," said Michael in return. "Nobody does."

"And what is that like?" said Stephen.

"Hell," said Michael. "It's hell."

Stephen took hold of Michael's hand. "It doesn't have to be," he said.

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Edward was awoken by a knock at the door. His ears popped as if the air pressure in a plane's cabin had just changed and his eyes screamed as the light from the sun streaming in through the gap in the curtains hit them. The knocking continued. It was louder than before. Edward got himself out of bed, stretched his aching body, and wrapped himself up in his dressing gown. He left his room and opened the front door. Anything to stop that awful knocking.

When the door opened, he was greeted to a happy sight. Daniel was stood in the doorway, two coffees and a bag of pastries in his hands.

"You look like shit," said Daniel, walking into the house. He placed the coffee and food on the table. "Like, really, you look like you've gotten back from hell or something." He reached out to move a small strand of Edward's hair back to the rest of it.

"Thanks," said Edward as he rubbed his eyes. "I just had a weird night is all."

Daniel took a drink of his coffee and handed the other cup to Edward, who, hesitantly at first, took a sip. All that hiding that he had done from Daniel, all the late-night exits, and still Daniel came to him with breakfast.

"Want to talk about it?" said Daniel.

"Maybe later, if I can remember any of it," said Edward, reaching into the bag for one of the pastries.

"Must have been a good night then."

"It wasn't like that." Edward smiled at Daniel's joke. "It was a dream." He took another sip of the coffee. It was sweet and not too strong, exactly how he liked it. "At least that's what I think it was."

"Anyway, get dressed," said Daniel.

"Why?"

"Because me and you are going out today. And there's no way that I'm letting you worm your way out of this. Not today."

The two of them spent the rest of the morning at the park. They laid together in the warm sun and stared up at the sky. There wasn't a cloud in sight. The blue simply looked as if it went on all the way to infinity.

Edward grinned as he saw from the corner of his eye that Daniel was looking at him.

"What?" he said.

Daniel said nothing.

"What?!" he repeated, stronger this time.

"Nothing," said Daniel. "It's just nice to actually spend some time with you. That's all."

"See, now you're making me feel that you've done something and you're trying to make up for it."

Edward let his mind wander whilst he lay next to Daniel. Had it all been a dream? He didn't think so. It couldn't have been. Something like that? Nobody could ever imagine something like that. Something so personal.

This didn't stay at the forefront of his mind for long. Now, Edward had better things to think about. He didn't have to run from anything. No more sneaking out in the mornings, he told himself. From now on, he wouldn't hide from any part of his life.

Daniel decided that they would spend the rest of the day "Immersing themselves in culture." This was what initially attracted him to Daniel. His cavalier attitude to what he always referred to as "The monuments to heteronormativity." Even now, Edward was unsure if that was meant as an insult to centuries of art or as a simple statement of his interpretation. But, either way, he struggled to imagine a better way to spend an afternoon than at a gallery with Daniel.

The afternoon hours past slowly but Edward had no reason to complain. As the two of them made their way from room to room inside the gallery, marvelling at the artwork on display, Edward realised that this day with Daniel had been the longest that the two of them had been together as a couple in public. He had no way of describing his sudden change in attitude, not even when Daniel asked him about it. A day ago, Edward would not have dared to take hold of Daniel's hand in public,

but their hands remained locked together for almost the entirety of their visit to the gallery. Even a harsh stare, that would have once put the fear of god into Edward, no longer made him feel ashamed of himself.

On the Sunday of that week, Edward surprised Daniel when he said that he was planning on going to church that morning. Never in all their time together had Edward expressed any inclination towards religion, and any time the two had broached the subject it had always been in a joking and light-hearted manner. But Daniel was adamant that he had to go, that it was just something that he had to do, "For a friend," he told Edward.

The church was half full that morning, a particularly good turnout all things considered. Edward and Daniel sat furthest in the back, trying their best not to draw any attention to themselves. The two of them only half paid attention to the service. They mimed and hummed their way through the readings, more out of politeness than anything close to faith, and did not take part in the communion that closed the service.

As the faithful slowly emptied the church, Edward asked Daniel if he would be willing to wait for him outside. Daniel said that he would on the condition that Edward promised to take him out for lunch later in the day. Edward agreed and Daniel left the church.

Michael smiled when he saw Edward walking up to him after the service and the usual updates from the parishioners on the lives of grandchildren, nieces and nephews, and the like.

"Err... Hi," said Edward.

"Hello again," said Michael. "It feels different now, doesn't it? This place. After everything we've been through."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

Michael looked at the space next to him. “He doesn’t remember, Steven,” he said to the empty space. Edward usually would have thought that Michael was mad, talking to thin air, but the look in Michael’s eye told him that he was completely sane.

The vague feeling in the back of his head that told him that something had changed in him. This sudden comfort with himself was not something that just happened overnight, like somebody had flipped a switch. He knew that he had been somewhere and done something. Something important with this man standing in front of him.

Edward felt tears falling down his face. “I remember,” he said. “But I don’t understand something. Why are you still here? Why haven’t you quit? I mean, you know that they’ll never accept you.”

Michael looked up to the large, stained-glass window above him.

“I’m happy here,” he said. “I love my job. Yes, it can be tough at times, and, yes, I have to keep some things private, but I also get to help people and see the best of them.” He looked again at Edward. “The way I see it is this, all those years ago with Steven were the best years of my life and I wouldn’t change a single minute of it. Losing him meant losing a part of myself, one that I’ll probably never get back, even now.” He looked to the space next to him and smiled. “But I’m no longer lying to myself, Edward. I’m not pretending to be something that I’m not.”

“I understand,” said Edward. “At least I think I do.” The space next to Michael began to shimmer slightly. It could have been a simple trick of the light pouring in through the windows, but Edward chose to believe that it wasn’t. To him, and this he knew in the deepest part of his being to be true, it was Steven stood next to the man he loved.

“Oh, and I’ve got something for you,” said Michael before quickly heading into the small room by the entrance filled with boxes, a kettle, some cups, and a small metal sink. He came out with a small plastic box and handed it to Edward. “I thought you should have this. As a keepsake of sorts.

Edward looked into the box. It was the badge that Steven had been wearing on the bus.

“Take a look at the back,” said Michael

Edward did as instructed. The date was no longer there. In its place was a new inscription: 'To a man in love,' it read, 'so you will never forget our time together.'

## The Dying Miner

### 1.

Whenever possible, Nic tried to avoid family get-togethers. Weddings, christenings, funerals. Even their siblings' birthdays. If they could put together a semi-plausible story that meant that they didn't have to go, it would be worth the months of scorn from the family when everyone found out that they had been lying. It had been three years since, Nic had seen most of their extended family, and it was almost a year to the day since they had last seen their parents and their siblings. But, as is often the case, a death in the family threw a spanner into Nic's plan for familial isolation.

It was Oliver that broke the news to Nic about their grandmother. In the two and a half years since they got together, Oliver—who tried his best to make sure that he wasn't seen as “The one who stole our Nic”—attempted to maintain a semi-regular correspondence with Nic's family, hoping that, with enough time, Nic would reconsider the position that they had taken regarding their family. Oliver had been informed of the passing just after lunch but decided to wait until dinner to tell Nic. As the two of them sat eating a roast dinner Oliver had prepared, he broke the news.

At first, it appeared that Nic hadn't heard what had been said. But, upon a closer look, Oliver saw that Nic was reaching for the phone in their pocket. Nic took a deep breath and called their mother.

The funeral was a traditional affair. Whilst Nic's grandmother hadn't been religious in the traditional sense of attending Sunday service, she had always appreciated the pageantry and ritual which came with the tradition. So, it was decided that the funeral would be held in the local church—a four-hundred-year-old building in dire need of repair as noted by the donation box and the stagnant fundraising display outside—and the entire family descended upon the small town of Folkly in which Nic's grandmother had lived her whole life.

Nic sat at the back of the church, trying not to draw attention to themselves. It wasn't the time or the place for a patented Hill family argument. Especially as Nic's grandfather sat at the front with a slow but constant stream of tears working their way down his face. They tried to imagine how it must feel for their grandfather, how he no longer had his wife of forty years beside him.

After the service and the wake at the local pub, the family slowly made their way back to their homes. Cousins spread from the northernmost islands of Scotland to the Channel Islands, was the old Hill family saying. And the immediate family, Nic included, moved to the house now solely owned by Nic's grandfather.

Before they left for home, Nic decided that it was time to put the past behind them and try, in some little way at least, to reconnect with their grandfather, who sat in his old chair by the fireplace nursing a six-hour old glass of whisky.

"Grandad," said Nic as they leant down against the arm of the chair. "I'm going to be going now and I just wanted to say..." A thousand different options as what to say next ran through their mind. Almost by instinct, Nic grabbed a nearby pen and wrote their phone number on a letter from the small table beside their grandfather's chair.

"This is my mobile, Grandad," they said. "If you need anything, absolutely anything at all, you call me, OK?"

Nic's grandfather looked up at Nic and, for the first time all day, smiled at them, and nodded gently.

With their duty done, Nic turned to leave the house. Their mother had been making sly glances at Nic throughout the day. Nic knew that they weren't the type of glances that meant that she was worried about them. Quite the opposite in fact. The looks were saying that their mother was not happy that they had attended the funeral, and probably felt even worse that they had come back to the house.

"You're looking well," she said, after finally coming over to speak to Nic.

"I am," Nic said. "Doing well, I mean."

"Good," she said. "That's good. And how is...?"

“Oliver, Mum. His name’s Oliver. And he’s good. We’re both happy.”

“I know his name, Nic. And that’s nice. Good to hear.” Their mother looked away from them for a moment. “And when were you going to tell me that you moved back home?” She immediately locked eyes with Nic.

“Well, considering that I haven’t, why would I tell you?” said Nic, their eyes checking the front door.

Their mother shook her head before replying.

“You moved in six streets down from me. I’d call that moving back home. Do you know how embarrassing it is having to find out that your own son has moved in that close from Janet at the shop? Can you even imagine what that must be like?”

Nic held back the urge to let loose a string of insults and complaints that had built up over years. *It’s because you can’t accept me!* they thought about screaming at her.

“I’m sorry,” they said instead. “Alright, is that what you want to hear?”

Before their mother could respond, Nic had already begun to walk towards the door out of the house. They said their goodbyes to the rest of the family that they passed on the way out as pleasantly as they could and then left the house.

When they got home, Oliver asked them how the day had gone. Nic’s statement of “As expected” told him everything that he needed to know.

Nic’s grandfather had worked in the coal mines and often, when Nic was young, he would tell them stories of what it was like. How, every day, he had to get into the cage and go deep into the ground to work away at the coal face in order to do his part in fuelling the country. In the weeks after the funeral, Nic had begun to visit their grandfather often. Unlike the rest of their family, Nic’s grandfather was not one to hold grudges. He said that he had seen too many people ruined by holding onto past, he told Nic during their first regular visit.

“It was tough work,” Nic’s grandfather said late one winter night, “but somebody had to do it. And we were the only ones good enough at the job to actually do it properly. That’s what we all thought anyway.”

When he spoke of those years, back when he was young and Nic’s mother was only a child, his eyes glimmered with the hope of youth, something that one loses as the years pass and can never regain, not truly.

“Life was simple back then,” he said. “Not like today. You didn’t have to worry about all this internet and smart phone stuff and what’s else is going on in the rest of the world. When you got a job, you had it for the rest of your life. A man was proud of his work, especially us down in the pit. You built up a proper sense of trust when you’re down there with the lads. You knew that there was always the possibility that something could go wrong, and, if it did, you’d be relying on them to get you out. So, you made friends with everyone you could.

“I guess that’s why we always ended the week in the club drinking ourselves silly and then waddling home to our wives at the early hours of the morning. An old friend used to say it was our way of letting it all out. The stress I mean. But it was a nice life. A good honest one.”

Nic asked him when everything changed. Their grandfather paused and ran his hand over his face, as if he was wiping away the memories of the days long gone.

“When Bill went missing,” he said. “That was when everything changed.” His voice softened and became much more sombre. “It’s not like we were naive or anything, we knew bad things happened in the world—we had fathers, grandfathers, and uncles that had fought in both of the wars, for Christ’s sake. Everything like that just seemed so far away from us. ‘That’s what happens when you move to city,’ we would jokingly say. But then, of course, it had to hit home.

“I’d gone to school with Bill, grown up down the street from him and his mum. The two of us never really got on that well, but it wasn’t like we disliked each other. We were just two different types of people who happened to both work the same job. But Bill, he was...” Nic’s grandfather

paused again. This time he closed his eyes. “He was, and I know it isn’t very politically correct for me to say this, he was a puff. A queer. What’s the word?”

“You mean gay, Grandad,” Nic said.

“Yes, he was gay. Now I never had any problem with that. What a man does in his bedroom is none of my business. But some of the lads down the pit, they didn’t take too kindly to having somebody like him working beside them. So, when nobody saw him for a week, they didn’t make too much of a fuss about it.” He stopped talking, looked down at the floor, and took a deep breath before speaking again. “Sure, his mum was worried, and all the ladies on the street made sure that she was okay, but, at work, it was just business as usual. No one had time to go looking for him. For all we knew, he’d run off to the city or something like that where he could be more accepted.

“The thing was, he hadn’t actually left the town.” Their grandfather’s voice began to quiver slightly. “They ended up finding him four or five weeks later—I can’t remember exactly how long—in a ditch by the road out to the country. By the time they got him out, most of his face had been eaten by foxes and the like. But they knew it was him. Still had his wallet on him, you see. In it was his driving license. Without it, the coppers said they wouldn’t have been able to identify him at all.”

Nic asked him if they ever found out how he had died, but their grandfather closed his eyes and took in a deep breath before telling them that nobody ever did. That after a while it just became a sort of thing that you didn’t talk about.

“Weird thing was, he didn’t seem to go away. The lads that went down the pit would tell everyone that they kept seeing him down at the furthest bit of the mine after they got a few pints down them.

“‘Still working, he is,’ they’d say. ‘Always at the same bit, the one he was the last day we saw him.’

“Nobody believed them, of course, least of all me. I guess that they could have thought they was telling the truth. But I doubt it though.”

“Did you ever go down there?” Nic asked. “To the end of the mine, where he was supposed to be?”

“Did I go there? Well, only when there was a problem with the lights or the wiring or something like that. And I bet you’re going to ask if I ever saw anything, aren’t you? Well, I didn’t. Didn’t see or feel anything out of the ordinary down there. Was just like the rest of the place. Dirty, dark, and bloody scary at times.”

The story stuck in Nic's mind. They weren't sure why. At first, they thought that it was simply the unsolved aspect of the story. Who could resist a mystery? That was what Oliver thought it was that had so obsessed Nic about it. And maybe he was right. Even years later, nobody knew the exact cause of death and how the body ended up where it did. All the local paper ran about it was a brief, two-sentence obituary, nothing else. No stories following up on his death or detailing any investigation by the police. The only other reference to him that Nic could find was a mention in the obituary of his mother, who died only three months after her son. This time a cause of death was listed: suicide. It appeared that she could not live without her son. *That made sense*, Nic thought, *from what granddad told me, the two of them seemed to be awfully close, even for mother and son.* It appeared to Nic that all they had were each other.

But Nic felt that it could be simply an instinct to play amateur detective that drew them to the story. Ever since they heard it, they couldn't stop mulling it over in their head. How their grandfather seemed certain those that told him they had seen Bill down the pit after he had died were telling the truth. Nic was partially convinced that it could all be explained as simply guilt at having treated Bill differently simply because he was gay. Nic knew from their own experience that being different, being labelled as "a deviant", was hard enough in a small town when they were growing up. They couldn't imagine what it must have been like all those years ago.

So Nic made it their new mission in life to find out what had happened to Bill. Maybe, they would end up in the paper, or, if they were lucky, on the local news. They set up a website; it was basic, a brief description of their goals and fortnightly updates on what it was that Nic had been doing. Nic was lucky if they received any engagement on the site at all, but they didn't care. It was better to have an archive of this stuff than not to, they had rationalised to themselves.

On their days off work, Nic went to the local library and looked through old newspapers, digitised and archived online, and books on local history detailing the closing of the mines and the

impact that it had had on the towns Nic had grown up in and around. Anything that they thought might be relevant, from a sentence in a paper about a birthday to a page in a book about what it was like in the mines, Nic wrote down in a thick, tightly bound notebook.

Nic spent many late evenings walking through the estate where the Glass family of two had lived. It was only a slight detour from their usual route. The estate had barely changed in the decades since William and his mother's deaths. The buildings had a new coat of paint and some trees had been planted in the large shared area, but aside from that, it was the same. A long street with others branching off after every ten or so houses, each featuring the exact same house, with the only difference being that some had clearly been added to in the years following their initial construction.

As Nic walked the path time and time again, they let their mind wander. They imagined that they were William Glass, walking home from the mine, their face still not entirely clean of coal dust and mud. They imagined the children running by, without a care in the world—the 'stranger danger' years nothing but a tiny glint upon the horizon. Neighbours leant against walls, talking over the day's events, and providing updates on how their children were performing at school, gave William a slight glance as he walked by. *You're not like us*, it would say. *You're not normal*.

William, in Nic's imagination, would take this to heart. He would lower his head and continue walking home, being sure not to look at anything but the floor and the space directly ahead of him. He knew what everyone thought of him and how they saw people like him, so he would do his best to prove them wrong. To prove that, even if he wasn't exactly like everyone else on the estate, he at least wasn't going to hurt anyone.

When he got inside, he would take off his coat, sit down in his favourite chair, and settle in for the night with his mother. A simple existence for Nic's imaginary Bill Glass. One that, whether it happened or not, gave comfort to Nic. Bill's imagined life may not be what he would have wanted it to be, but at least Bill was not living an imagined life of horror.

Bill and the events surrounding his death had become a full time obsession by the time that Nic finally made the decision to go down into the mine. It had closed thirty-seven years ago. A victim of policy that decided that the old mines were no longer worth it, and that the country should move on from the industry of old. Nic had grown up hearing about this. About how everyone had striked and complained but ultimately failed under the might of 'The Iron Lady' and her vision of a new Britain. They told Nic that the coal was still there, waiting to be mined, and, if someone wanted to, they could reopen the mines. But they lay empty now. The mines had collapsed, flooded, or were just left to be reclaimed by nature.

The walk to the mine was long, muddy, and overgrown in many places. On either side of the path, large trees reached for the sky, blocking out enough light in the path to make it look as if the sun was already halfway set. Within five minutes it became clear that the trainers Nic had chosen to wear were wholly unsuited to the terrain, but they continued. They had invested too much time already to simply give up because of a poor choice of footwear.

The gates to the mine were chained shut and atop the heavy fencings was a thick coil of barbed wire. Large yellow signs with bold black lettering told any prospective intruders to KEEP OUT and threatened the prosecution of anyone stupid enough not to follow the instructions. There was no way that Nic would have been able to get into the mine, they knew that upon seeing what was left. The mine had been capped, the pumps stopped when the mines closed, and the British weather did the rest. If there was a way in, which Nic guessed was extremely unlikely, they weren't the type of person to be able to find it. Nic walked the whole edge of the property, looking for any break in the fencing or weakness in the metal of any kind. Just a small spot where they would be able to sneak in.

At the back end of the complex, behind a collection of thick bushes covered with thorns, was a ditch of a sort, clearly made by an animal trying to find any scraps of food left on the premises. After some digging of their own, Nic was able to squeeze their way under the fencing and onto the abandoned property.

All that was left was old red bricked buildings covered in moss, which had already dug its way into the gaps in the worn cement. The outer layers of the bricks had begun to fall off, which had littered the ground around the buildings with a fine rust-red rubble. The ground underfoot was overgrown and wet. A mulch of dead and decaying plants, decades of fresh natural fertiliser, had meant that the ground had become a haven for grasses, weeds, and other small plants. All of this stopped near the entrance to the main building, inside of which Nic had been told was the cage down into the mine. A three-metre radius around the entrance was devoid of any noticeable life. No grasses, no weeds, not even the sign of any bugs scurrying around on the ground. Hesitantly, Nic made their way into the building.

The inside was empty. Only the walls were left, and they did not look to be in a stable condition. Any machinery or metal of any kind must have been taken away, either for use elsewhere or simply to be sold for scrap. Only the smallest fragments of metal, rusted almost to the point of breaking apart at the slightest pressure, remained. Small pieces to remind any intruders of the machines that once filled the building. Nic had read that the land had been deemed unsafe for use by the public, farmers, or any other industry. Something about a strange chemical in the soil, which Nic guessed was the cause of the absence of plant life around the main building.

They made their ways towards the centre of the building. The floor, which at one point, Nic thought, must have been concrete or a similar material, had been worn down by years of rain and cold until a muddy layer was all that remained.

Nic took out their phone to take some photographs but the screen on the phone appeared to be broken. There was no outward sign of any damage but the images on the screen were scattered around like the phone had been hit with a hammer or something similar.

Nic then decided to head home. With their phone not working, the reason for going to the mine—to take photographs of what was left—had gone. But as they left the grounds, they felt their phone buzzing in their pocket. They pulled it out. It was working perfectly.

Nic's car was on its last legs. They had bought it four years ago from a friend of their uncle for two hundred pounds and had gotten what they'd paid for. It barely ran. Within three months, Nic had spent more on repairs and general upkeep than they had paid for the thing. *Four wheels topped with a pile of rust*, that's what Oliver had once called it and Nic found it hard disagree with him.

It finally ground to a halt three miles outside of town. As Nic got out to pop open the bonnet and have a look at the engine, they scanned the horizon. The closest building must have been a mile away or more. Everything else was just farmers' fields and barely used dusty roads.

"This is what I get for living in the middle of fucking nowhere," they said to themselves whilst lifting the front of the car.

Nic didn't know anything about cars. At least nothing that would be useful in a situation like this. They knew not to put diesel in a petrol engine and how to drive one, but that was all.

They looked at the grey metal guts of the car. To their untrained eye, everything looked perfectly fine. There was nothing that they could see that was out of place, or broken, or burning up like they had seen on TV and in movies.

They checked their phone. They had a signal. For once, their decision to go for the more expensive network had paid off. It promised total coverage and, much to their surprise, the network had delivered in their time of need.

They called their breakdown cover. It would be two hours at least for them to get to Nic. Clearly, the promise of a speedy service wherever you are was a lie.

On the horizon, the sun was beginning to set. It was early for the sun to be setting at this time of the year, but Nic thought little of it. If you cannot change it, there was no point in worrying about it. That was the motto that Mr. Lyles, their old history teacher in high school, had told them and, so far, it had worked out fine.

As the light began to turn orange, Nic noticed a shimmer on the other side of the road. They closed their eyes, shook their head, then rubbed their eyes. Nic was convinced that it must be something in their head or on their eyes, like a small piece of dust getting in the way of them seeing properly. But when they opened their eyes it was still there.

It hovered at the edge of the road, directly opposite from them. Its shape, if it could be said to have one, constantly shifted. The only thing that gave the shimmer the appearance of a form of sorts was the disturbance of the light passing through it and the faintest hint of a shadow on the ground beneath. One could easily walk past rather slowly and fail to see it. But Nic could see it. Maybe clearer than it had ever been seen before. And, by the feeling in their gut, they knew that it was seeing them too. They knew that it did not have eyes. It had no way of seeing, at least not a way that Nic could imagine as being possible, but they were being watched by it. They were each studying each other.

Nic was unable to focus for days following their encounter on the road. They spent all their time convinced that, whatever it was that they saw, it was still nearby. Nic didn't want to pretend that nothing was wrong, but, for Oliver's sake, they chose to lie and say that they were fine whenever asked about it.

Nic's office had become a sanctuary away from the world. Even as their enthusiasm for the research began to fade after all the time that they had put in had resulted in very little, the simple atmosphere created by the single window with its old blind that refused to raise in order to let in sunlight, had been a comfort to Nic. In the room, they didn't have to worry about things. In there an unaccepting family was something for another time.

As Nic sat at their computer, not taking in anything that they were looking at, just moving through the page to at least be able to say that they had done something, Oliver came into the room. In each hand was a cup of coffee, freshly made Nic guessed from the steam coming off them, and a copy of the local paper under his right arm. Oliver set one on the desk next to Nic's computer, put the paper down on the floor, and sat down on the second chair to the side of Nic.

"Your mum called, yesterday," Oliver said. "She said that she'd like to come round one day for tea or something."

"And what did you say?" said Nic.

"I told her that I'd ask you what you thought and then get back to her."

Nic took a drink of the hot coffee and went back to staring at the screen. They could feel Oliver staring at them. His eyes simply begging for them to continue with the conversation.

"I know that you two don't exactly get on," he said, "but maybe this could be nice."

It took a while for Nic to turn from the screen and look at Oliver. When they did, they tried to make it clear that this was not a subject worth perusing for much longer. But try as they may, Oliver did not appear to be letting Nic slip out of it.

“How did she even get our number anyway?” said Nic.

“I don’t know, I guess she got it off your granddad. But do you think that’s really what you should be focusing on now? She’s reaching out to you, Nic. After all this time, she’s the one wanting to talk. Why don’t you just save all your stuff and call her?”

“Maybe,” said Nic. “Let me think about it, OK?”

Oliver sighed with relief and then picked up the paper from the floor. Nic never really understood why Oliver appeared to be the only person below the age of fifty that regularly bought the local paper and when they had asked him about it, he just said it was something his dad had done and he’d picked it up.

Nic saved the files on the computer and shut it down. As the light from the screen faded, Nic reached and turned on the nearby lamp. The light hit the paper in Oliver’s hands.

#### FARMER FINDS BODY IN FIELD

Nic tried to read the article but struggled to read past the first line. Something that they could not explain told them that this wasn’t a thing that they should ignore.

“What’s that?” they asked Oliver.

“What’s what?”

Nic took the paper from Oliver’s hands and turned to the front page where they had seen the headline.

“That.”

Oliver explained to them how a farmer had found a body in one of his fields a mile out from the town and how he had said that the body looked like it had just been buried.

Nic read through the article. *‘He had everything in his pockets, he did. Like he’d just collapsed into the mud,’* the farmer had told the paper. Nic looked through the article for the farmer’s name. Frank Westkey. Nic recognised the name. They had gone to school with his grandson and Frank had been a friend of their grandparents.

Nic messaged Frank's grandson and, after a bit of explaining, was able to get a hold of Frank's phone number.

They called him and, to Nic's surprise, he was willing to let Nic come to the farm to discuss what he had found. They agree on a time, half past four, and then Frank hung up.

Nic arrived at the farm just after five o'clock, half an hour later than they had agreed on. They tried to explain that their car was still at the garage, but the old farmer refused to take back his feelings of offence.

The two sat down at the table in the kitchen of the house at the back of the farm. Frank took out a driving license and placed it on the table. Nic picked it up and ran their fingers over it. The smooth laminated plastic felt like it had only just been made yesterday, but the date of issue told them that it had been made decades ago. The name on it was clear: WILLIAM GLASS.

"Found it on the body," said Frank. "Out on the field."

"Why didn't the police take this?" said Nic, trying their best to sound professional.

"I don't know, they didn't really seem to be interested in it, if I'm honest. They had a look at it, took my statement, and then had the body taken away. This had dropped on the ground and they didn't bother to pick it up."

"And did anything seem weird about them? The police, I mean."

"The guy in charge looked a bit shaken, but I just assume that's how anyone would react to a dead body."

"Did you get his name?"

"Parker, or something like that. Can't quite remember."

Nic put the license back on the table and took out their notebook. They noted down the name of the detective and the dates on the license.

"It just doesn't make any sense," they said. "The police found the driving license with the body years ago."

“I can just tell you what I found, son.” Nic cringed at the mode of address but chose not to bring it up to the old farmer. “And I found it on a clean body.”

“Did you move it? The body.”

“I did not.” Frank, again, seemed offended by Nic’s demeanour. As if the mere thought that he had disturbed the dead was enough to send him into a rage. “We respect the deceased out here. We know not to disturb them.”

Nic stayed for dinner at Frank’s request. A payment of sorts for Nic having come out to see him at such short notice, Frank had told them. Nic wasn’t quite sure what he meant but decided it would be rude to ask him to explain himself. The two ate in almost complete silence. Only Nic spoke during the meal—a quickly thrown together dish of a salted meat of some sort and scrambled eggs—and all they did was compliment Frank’s cooking. After dinner, the two of them sat and talked over drinks. Nic listened to Frank talk of his youth and the times that he had spent out in the fields with his friends. The way he described it made it sound like something out an adventure book that Nic would have read when they were a child. Children free of the adult world, going off and exploring without a worry of safety or their parents’ feelings.

“You ever do anything like that? Go off exploring the fields, woods, and the like with your friends?” Frank asked, after finishing off a long and exhaustingly detailed monologue.

“Only a dozen times at the most,” Nic said. “And nothing like what you did.”

“Shame. But times were simpler back then, I guess. The world seemed less cruel than it does right now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s all doom and gloom now, isn’t it?”

Nic arrived home late. And drunk. They clambered out of the taxi that they had taken from Frank's farm and handed the driver the cash—four pounds too much, but the driver didn't seem to care about the overpayment—before gently slotting the key into the door and stepping inside.

Oliver was sitting at the table in the kitchen when Nic got inside. His usual calm and content demeanour had been replaced by a wave of disgrace. Nic leant against the worktop to stabilise themselves. They'd drunk more than they thought they had and was now beginning to feel it.

"You could have called," said Oliver. "Just a quick call to say that you'll be home late."

"Can we do this tomorrow, please?"

"No. We're doing this now, before you wake up in the morning and forget why I'm mad at you."

Nic felt their stomach begin to turn around and prepare for evacuation.

"And your mother called again today. She said—"

"I don't care what she said."

"Well, I do. She said that Joel called her today. Apparently, you haven't turned up to work for a week."

"That's bullshit and you know it. Joel's been wanting a reason to get rid of me for months. You know what he's like. And what right does he have to call my bloody mum it anyway?"

"Sure, he's a bigoted prick, but it would be nice to eat sometimes. We do have bills to pay, remember?"

"Please, can we just leave this for tonight?"

"No, Nic, I'm not leaving this. Where even were you?"

"I was with a friend of the family."

"And I'm supposed to believe you. Because that smells like a lie if I ever heard one."

"You were there when I talk to him on the phone!"

"All I heard was you agree on a time and then hang up. Not a word about where you were going or what you were doing."

Nic left the stability of the worktop and began to walk towards the stairs. With each step, they knew that they were closer to emptying their stomach all over the floor, so they quickened their pace.

“Believe me or don’t, I really don’t care at the moment,” they said. “I’m just going to be sick and then go to bed.”

As they laid in bed, slowly drifting off to sleep, it came into their bedroom. The thing that Nic had seen on the road days before. It was more concrete now. What, back then, had only appeared to be a slight shimmer in the air was now almost like a heavy mist on a cold winter’s morning. It had the rough outline of a human being, but it was constantly changing like ink in water. The body, if it could be said to possess one, was not solid in any way that Nic could comprehend. In their inebriated state, Nic struggled to see it but an electric feel at the back of their neck told them that what they were seeing wasn’t a dream or something conjured up by the drink.

It moved closer to them. A smell of mud and dank filled their nostrils. It moved until its being was hovering in the air directly over them and then lowered itself down until it consumed the space around Nic completely.

William sat alone as his pint got warmer. Like most of the men down the mine, William liked to finish a day's work with a pint at Folkly Working Men's Club, but unlike the others William often sat alone at a table. It was only when it was busy that he had company and said company that did nothing to hide their displeasure at having to share a table with him.

He quickly finished his drink. As he left, he did his best not to draw attention to himself. He'd always been told to keep himself to himself and he had no intention of going against the instruction.

Outside, the winter's wind was beginning to crawl in from the coast—only fifty miles or so from the town—and the clouds had darkened, an early warning to head inside if you hadn't brought you raincoat with you. William closed his coat and pulled up the collar in preparation for the downpour that he was sure was going to come.

Five minutes into his walk home, the rain arrived. It quickly soaked all the way through William's coat and seeped through into his boots. He increased his pace, determined to get home before he would catch the cold that was inevitably coming.

Behind him, he heard the engine of a car. He turned around to see the lights shining at him through the rain and off the wet tarmac. The car slowed down before pulling up beside him. William looked inside. There were three men. As one of them wound down the window, he recognised them. It was Harry, John, and Eric from the mine. The three of them had started a few months before William and had never tried to hide the fact they weren't happy having a "Fucking shit-stabber" working alongside them.

"Fancy a lift, Bill?" said Harry, who was at the wheel of the car.

"No thank you," said William. "I'll be alright. Not much further to go."

"Come on, it's no trouble," said John, sat in the passenger seat. "We've got the room."

William knew that it was probably against his better judgement to get in the car, but the rain had worked its way through his coat and boots. If the weather had been better, he would have continued walking, but he decided to get in the car.

He sat in the seat next to Eric in the back of the car. Eric didn't even look at him, he just stared out of the window. Not even a second had passed after he closed the door before the car sped up and made its way down the road. They passed the turn off to head into town and kept on driving. William didn't dare ask where they were going. He had learnt over the years that it was best, in situations like this, to just shut up and hope for the best.

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It was half past ten when Nic awoke. The hangover that they had brought upon themselves from the nights drinking made even the simplest of tasks a herculean effort. They sat up on the bed. Beside them, Oliver slept. Clearly he had decided that the argument the night before wasn't enough to constitute a night on the sofa, but Nic was sure that, sometime that day, the two of them would have to discuss what had been said.

After a quick shower, Nic got dressed, made their way downstairs, and headed into the kitchen. A few letters were on the floor by the door. Nic picked them up and placed them on the table before turning on the kettle.

As they sat down at the table to check through the mail, they felt their phone buzz in their pocket. It was an unrecognised number but Nic answered it.

“Hello?” they said.

“Nic, is that you?” said Nic's grandad.

“Yes, grandad. It's me.”

“Oh good. I know that you’re not supposed to come round today, but I was hoping that you would be free this afternoon to just pop over for a bit. There’s some things that I want to talk to you about.”

Nic arrived at their grandfather’s house just after lunch. They had told Oliver where they were going to try and avoid a repeat of the previous night, but he didn’t seem very bothered when he came downstairs. A problem for later, Nic had decided.

Nic’s grandfather greeted them at the door. The usual smile that they received when they arrived was nowhere to be seen. It had been replaced with a solemn stare.

“Nic,” he said, “come in.”

Inside the house, the floor to the living room was littered with papers yellowed with age.

“Grandad,” Nic said, “what’s all this?”

“The truth,” he said. “Buried for a long time.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Sit down and I’ll tell you.”

Their grandfather sat down in his old chair, worn down by more years of use than Nic had been alive.

“You remember what I told you a while back? About Bill Glass?”

“Yes. I do. I’ve actually been trying to find out what happened to him.”

Nic’s grandfather sighed and lowered his head.

“I haven’t really found out that much,” Nic said. “At least nothing that makes any sense.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was talking to Frank Westkey—do you remember him? —and he found a body in one of his fields a few days ago. He found a driving license with it. It had Bill’s name on it. It couldn’t be real, though. It looked like it was made yesterday, not nearly forty years ago.”

Their grandfather began to gently shake his head. "I'm sorry," he said. He looked up at Nic and froze almost immediately.

"Granddad?" Nic said.

They quickly realised that it wasn't them that their grandfather was looking at. He was looking past them. Nic turned around but saw nothing.

"What wrong, grandad?"

"I'm sorry, Bill," their grandfather said. "I'm so sorry. I tried to talk them out of it, but I couldn't. Please, you know what they were like back then."

Nic looked around the room but again there was nothing that they could see. Their grandfather's gaze moved to Nic.

"Nic," he said, "I did a terrible thing, all those years ago. I didn't tell anyone. I knew what had happened, but I didn't tell anyone. I was too scared."

"Grandad, what do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"They killed him, Nic. They killed Bill. I just stood there and watch them do it, but I didn't say a thing." He began to tear up. "They just kept kicking him. He screamed and screamed but they wouldn't stop. Its not like it is today. Enough people thought that people like him deserved it. That they were hurt kids and that. They would just look the other way if someone like him went missing."

He looked behind Nic again.

"Am I the only one left?" he asked the empty space.

There was a low hum from behind Nic. They turned to see the same shimmer that they had seen on the road the evening when their car broke down. But this time, its form was clear. It was a person. Or at least it looked like one.

"Parker? Harry Parker? He works for the police now. Bill, please I'm sorry. I know I should have told someone."

The shimmer moved from behind Nic towards their grandfather. It bent down and leant in towards him.

“I know,” their grandfather said. “I know why they... Why we did it.”

The shimmer stood up and moved towards Nic. It didn't lean down this time. It just kept moving and passed through them. As it moved through Nic, they could feel a cold and emptiness like they'd never felt before. Tears began to well up in their eyes.

It turned again and reached out towards their grandfather but stopped inches away from touching them. Their grandfather was staring at Nic. They had never seen anyone look at them the way that their grandfather was looking at them.

“Please,” their grandfather said to it, “don't hurt them.”

It pulled back from Nic's grandfather and moved into the space between him and Nic. Nic felt its gaze upon them for what felt like hours but couldn't have been more than a few moments.

It moved towards the window looking outside and passed through it, leaving Nic and their grandfather alone again. Nic looked down at the papers on the floor. They were letters addressed from Harry Parker and John Kettle.

“Granddad,” Nic said, “how could you?”

“There was nothing I could have done, Nic.”

“A man died in front of you. You could have pulled them back, or gotten in the way of them, or just done something. Anything.”

“I was scared,” their grandfather said, still shaken up. “Not just of Harry and John, but what they'd say if they were found out I told someone. They said that they had friends in the police. That they'd pin it all on me, Nic. Please, just try and understand.”

Nic didn't know what to say. How could they? Knowing that their grandfather had been involved in something so brutal, Nic didn't even know if they would be able to look at him the same way. They'd always had this image in their mind that their grandfather was someone they could depend upon. The one person in their family that would be accepting of them, no matter what. But now, knowing that he had been so careless, so cruel to someone like them, Nic began to question if

their grandfather had really ever accepted them. Could it be that he was willing to ignore everything just so he could have Nic's company?

"It's killed me inside, keeping it a secret."

Nic stared at their grandfather.

"Would you have ever told me, or anyone else?"

"No," their grandfather lowered his head. "I don't think I would have."

"So, all of this is a lie then? I thought you were different, granddad. I really did. But you're worse than the rest of them."

"I'm not," their grandfather said with tears forming in his eyes. "Nic, I'm not. I'm just a cowardly old man."

Nic decided to leave their grandfather alone. Once they got out of the house, they called their mother. Nic wasn't sure exactly why they decided to do it, but once the phone started to ring, they knew that there was no going back.

"Hello? Nic?" said their mother.

"Hi Mum," said Nic. "I just wanted to call to let you know that you should probably keep an eye on granddad for a while."

"Why?" she said. "What have you done now? Hasn't he suffered enough?"

"I haven't—" They knew that they would be lying if they said that they'd done nothing. It was, after all, their decision to dig deeper into the story that their grandfather had told them. But maybe that was what he wanted. Maybe it was a form of confession.

"We just had a disagreement, that's all. It might take a while to calm down, you know?"

"Ok, I'll make sure I pop round more often."

"Thank you."

After a brief pause, Nic lowered the phone from their ear, ready to hang up.

"And Nic," said their mother.

"Yeah?"

“It was nice to hear from you.”

## Critical Essay

### Introduction

This is a submission of three ghost stories. For as long as I can remember I have been drawn to stories of the supernatural and, as I matured as both a reader and as a writer, this attraction to supernatural fiction only got stronger. I discovered writers from the gothic revival of the late Victorian era and the early twentieth century as well as more contemporary authors of supernatural fiction such as Stephen King, Clive Barker, Susan Hill, and Shirley Jackson. I do not appear to be alone in this fascination with the supernatural. M.R. James, one of the most influential writers of supernatural fiction in the twentieth century, opened his essay ‘Ghost Stories’ (2005, p. 245) with the statement that: “Everyone, I think, has an innate love of the supernatural” and I find it difficult to disagree with him on this topic. Even in some of the earliest surviving literary texts, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* from around 1700B.C.E., one can find examples of the supernatural: “a descent into the underworld, prophetic dreams, and ghosts and monsters of various sorts”. (Joshi, 2014, p. 17) Even if one is to look outside of literature, the supernatural is still extremely prevalent within popular culture. In cinema, *The Conjuring* franchise of horror movies, which began in 2013, has grossed over 1.5 billion dollars across five entries with further entries in the franchise in various stages of development, demonstrates that supernatural horror fiction is not irrelevant to a modern audience. (Box Office Mojo, 2020)

When deciding upon what type of stories to produce for my Masters by Research, I kept coming back to the stories of M.R. James in particular, alongside other writers of ghost stories such as Charles Dickens, Walter de la Mare, Sheridan Le Fanu, E.F. Benson, and more contemporary writers such as the aforementioned Susan Hill and Clive Barker. I noticed that, for the most part, the popular ghost story appeared to be struggling to move away from the mode established by Dickens and Le Fanu and perfected by James in the early decades of the twentieth century. These stories often fall into the epical mode, with the withholding of information to the reader being a major factor in the building of

a sense of suspense and jeopardy, with the final revelation, often of the supernatural nature of the issue, acting to both relieve the tension created earlier in the story but to also leaves the reader with a sense of unease.

This apparent struggle to move away from the mode of the Victorian era likely comes from the large amount of ghost stories produced during the nineteenth century. Mike Ashley notes that: “there must have been around 3,000 such anthologies [of ghost stories] published in the English language.” (Ashley, 2018, p. 7) But, despite this, ghost stories remain popular even to a contemporary audience. Charles Dickens’ two most famous ghost stories are a prime example of this. ‘The Signalman’ is amongst the most reprinted of all ghost stories often appearing in anthologies published even today and *A Christmas Carol* remains one of the most popular stories of its time, being adapted for film, television, and many other mediums on an almost annual basis. (Ashley, 2018, p. 8) Even as recently as Christmas 2019, the BBC broadcast a prime time adaptation of the story from writer Steven Knight across three nights leading up to Christmas eve.

But the longevity of these late nineteenth and early twentieth century stories and works heavily influenced by them demonstrates the issues which I had in mind when I sat down to plan out and write my three stories. The massive influence of writers such as Dickens, James, and others as well as their consistent popularity has led many writers to restrain themselves to writing ghost stories in a similar vein. Often more contemporary writers decided upon late-Victorian or early twentieth century settings of the stories, as is the case with the Susan Hill’s *The Woman in Black*, which has remained popular in print and through a long running stage show and two film adaptations. This common choice of setting may easily be explained away as simply a stylistic choice, as the popular imagination of said period is heavily influenced by the literature that was produced in that time, often that of the gothic revival. But, in limiting themselves to a non-contemporary setting, writers are making it more difficult upon themselves when it comes to dealing with themes and issues much more relevant to a contemporary readership.

With each of the three stories that I produced I intended to explore a different aspect of the ghost story. The first story, entitled ‘The Foundling Home’, takes direct inspiration from two of my favourite ghost stories: M.R. James’ ‘Lost Hearts’, which I was first introduced to via the 1973 BBC adaptation of the story, and Guillermo del Toro’s 2001 film *The Devil’s Backbone*. Both James’ short story and del Toro’s film tell the story of a young boy coming to a new home – a uncle’s country mansion in ‘Lost Hearts’ and an orphanage during the Spanish civil war in *The Devil’s Backbone* – where they encounter ghostly apparitions that sets the protagonists to discover the true nature of their hosts, the uncle in James’ story and the caretaker of the orphanage in del Toro’s film, these are examples of the withholding of information from the audience commonly found within ghost stories as I outlined previously. As a set up for a story, it allows for a lot of leeway on the part of the writer to explore different aspects of character and theme. The major changes that I made to the set up for my own piece I believe to be two-fold: a modern day setting and a female protagonist. Both of these decisions I made in direct contrast to the common view of the ghost story. A regular feature of the ghost story is of the solitary male protagonist, usually an older, single man who is drawn into the narrative and, whilst there are exceptions as both ‘Lost Hearts’ and *The Devil’s Backbone* feature much younger protagonists, they are the outliers when compared to the larger body of work within the genre.

The second story that I produced is entitled ‘Men in the Church’ and acts as my own take on a ghost story in a similar fashion to Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. The story features dual protagonists: Edward, a young man struggling with feelings of shame around his sexuality, and Michael, an older priest who has had to hide his sexuality from the world. In the story, the supernatural, the ghost of Michael’s dead lover, is used as a catalyst for change for both of protagonists. It is the younger Edward who takes the centre stage in the second half of the story. His experience of the supernatural becomes a catalyst for the character to move past any feeling of shame that they may possess surrounding their sexuality. The story also deals with contemporary issues of both mental health and

wellbeing and of the experience of queer men in contemporary society and the difference between the lived experience of older queer people and younger queer people through the character of Edward and Michael.

With the final story, entitled ‘The Dying Miner’, my intention was to write a traditional style ghost story but to use that style to address contemporary issues surrounding sexuality and gender identity. Through the use of a non-binary protagonist who uses singular they/them pronouns who investigates the death of a gay man in the early eighties, my intention was to move away from the standard protagonist found in the traditional style ghost story. In the popular style of the ghost story, often the protagonist is male and often presented in a somewhat asexual manner—M.R. James’ stories with their primarily stiff academics exemplify this archetype. Through my use of a non-binary protagonist, I aimed to deal with contemporary issues in modern society, the on-going battle for LGBTQ+ rights, and the legacy of anti-LGBTQ+ actions in the not-too-distant past.

### Updating the Victorian ghost story

One of the reasons that I was drawn to writing ghost stories was the challenge that writing a convincing ghost story in the modern landscape offers. As with everything, the passage of time changes the audience’s expectations and attitudes. It is no coincidence that the height of the ghost story in the mid to late Victorian era and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century coincides with the peak of the spiritualist movement. As Jennifer Bann (2009, p. 664) writes:

“both spiritualism and the ghost story grew rapidly in the 1850s, peaked in popularity during the last decades of the nineteenth century, and faded to relative obscurity by the 1930s.”

This decline in the belief in spiritualism may be one of the major factors in the persistence of the style of ghost story exemplified by M.R. James and his contemporaries. In order to write convincing ghost

stories, the writer must be able to maintain a suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader and, in today's modern age, the writer cannot simply assume a belief in the supernatural that would have been more common just over a century ago. So, in keeping to this style, the writer has to work less in order to convince the reader of the supernatural within the world of the story which they are writing. The modern writer of ghost stories must convincingly create a world within their fiction that can allow for the existence of ghosts and other supernatural entities and perhaps the use of a setting where belief in the supernatural was more prevalent as well as the image in the popular consciousness of the late Victorian era as one of supernaturalism, heavily influenced by the texts of the gothic revival of that period, is used to circumvent the issue of realism. Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* is set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and is an example of a highly successful, both as a piece of literature and financially, ghost story. Hill uses the setting to great effect within her novel, but the historical setting creates a distance between the characters within the novel and the readership. Even during the time that the novel was published, 1983, the world had changed considerably. Not only had great advances been made in terms of technology but social attitudes had been altered considerably. This has the effect of making Hill's novel, despite its many strengths, feel like a relic of a previous time. Something that limits the reader's ability to connect with the text on a deeper level. But, if the writer aims for a more realistic approach and a contemporary setting, a subtle hand is needed when approaching the supernatural in their story.

An example of a more contemporary story that succeeds in grounding a ghostly figure in a modern setting is Clive Barker's short story 'The Forbidden' first published in 1985 in volume 5 of Barker's *Books of Blood* short story collections. The story on its surface bears a passing resemblance to a story in the Jamesian style, with its protagonist being an academic—which was a common feature in M.R. James' fiction. In Barker's story, the protagonist, Helen, is writing a thesis on graffiti which leads her to discover a local urban legend known as the Candyman. In the story, Barker spends a considerable number of pages dedicated to the history of the housing estate where the story takes place and on

Helen's meetings with the people who live there, each of whom tell Helen a different story regarding the Candyman. It is only in the final pages of the story that Barker introduces the supernatural and presents it as both something to fear and something hypnotic before concluding in Helen dying in a bonfire, held from escaping by the Candyman. "Though she couldn't see his eyes," Barker writes upon Helen's meeting with the ghostly Candyman, "she felt them on her, and they made her feel drowsy, like that summer that sang in her head." (2007, p. 31) But even as the supernatural is presented as something that can have a real psychological effect upon those who experience it, the horror in 'The Forbidden' comes from a real concrete thing: the urban decay and poverty caused by the real life political and social decisions made that impacted those living in council estates. "[T]he supernaturalism of 'The Forbidden'... seems almost secondary, if not irrelevant," writes Darryl Jones (2018, p. 37-38) in his essay on Barker's short stories and how they relate to the political landscape of the eighties.

With this attitude and approach in mind, I wrote the stories with the mindset that any horror that I intended to create should not wholly be a product of the supernatural as this may have the unintended effect of making the stories seem stale or old-fashioned. As time has progressed the readership for supernatural and horror fiction has become more sophisticated and this has to be reflected in the work that is being produced. As mentioned previously, the collapse in the wider belief in spiritualism has meant that the readership has become much more hesitant to simply accept blatant representations of the supernatural in fiction. One of the ways that writers have dealt with this shift in the audiences' attitude is often to ground the supernatural in a concrete realistic mode—an explanation that can easily draw a humorous comparison to the Scooby-Doo cartoon franchise, where the supernatural is always explained away as trickery on the part of one of the characters—but also to attempt to ground the supernatural in a psychological or thematic mode. Through doing this, the supernatural moves beyond a simple way for the writer to scare or disturb the readership and towards a literary device that is used to explore the psychology of a character and the themes of their fiction. If a writer makes

use of the supernatural in a manner that is used to expand upon the already existing themes within their fiction, the supernatural elements will fit easier into the text than if they were used simply as a tool to scare or unsettle the audience.

My intention was to root the horror in the human experience and the psychology of my characters in order to create something that the reader could empathise with. It would have been simple for me to have written stories about an abusive household, coming to terms with one's own sexuality, or the history of anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice, but in choosing to write ghost stories I have explicitly chosen to place my work alongside those who have come before.

In his 1931 essay 'Ghost—Treat Them Gently!', M.R. James outlines three key features that, to him, makes an effectively ghost story. He states that: "The literary ghost... has to justify his existence by some startling demonstration, or short of that, must be furnished with a background that will... make him the central feature", and that "Setting or environment, then, is to me a principal point, and the more readily appreciable the setting is to our ordinary reader the better", and finally that writers should avoid an over-reliance on violence, what James refers to as the "charnel house", as well as sex altogether, according to James, acts to "spoil the whole business." (James, 2006, pp. 261-263)

With both James' key features and the stories of writers such as Barker in mind, my focus when approaching the supernatural aspects of my stories became fixated upon creating and maintaining an effective suspension of disbelief in my reader. For example, in 'The Foundling Home', all but two scenes take place within the walls of the titular home, so the construction within the story of a setting which the reader can easily imagine based on the text became a major focus for myself during the writing of the story. While the old and worn-down house is a common setting for ghost and horror stories, a writer of those stories cannot be totally reliant on the assumed previous knowledge of their reader. As James noted, and Barker demonstrated, the writer must be willing put in the effort to create a realistic and effective setting in order for the horror in the story to work. Within my story, I describe how "Most of the doors were locked shut and the keyholes had been filled in with a sealant" and that

the rooms were “filled with junk” and that the pipes “sounded like a dying crow in the jaws of a cat, screeching into the silence of the night.” With these descriptions, I aimed to create a sense of unease and foreboding in my reader surrounding the house in which the story takes place but also create a sense that the space in which the story takes place has a history to it, like any building of its type would have in the real world. This makes sure that when I do introduce the supernatural elements into the story, the reader should react with the same sense of unease and jeopardy as my protagonist as the realistic setting of the story is encroached upon by the supernatural.

A similar function happens when I introduce the ghostly children into the story. The first two experiences with the ghosts take place when the protagonist, Jessica, is alone and they do not appear to place a threat onto her person. So, when the children make their appearance at the conclusion of the story to terrorise the antagonist, Joe, the “startling demonstration” as described by M.R. James takes place. The ghosts move from something that could easily be dismissed as a feature of Jessica’s imagination to something that concretely exists and has an impact upon the world of the story. The ghosts move from an almost passive role within the narrative, acting admitted as a tool for exposition and building mystery at first, to a palpable force of vengeance towards those that have harmed them, or at least continued to maintain the system that harmed them. It is here, at the story’s conclusion, that the tension I have built up throughout the story surrounding the history of the house in which it takes place and the events that may or may not have taken place there is relieved. The truth is revealed to both the characters and the reader and a comeuppance is dealt to the character of Joe.

### Queering the ghost story

The second major feature of the stories that I have produced is the presence of explicitly LGBTQ+ characters and themes—which I will refer to under the umbrella term of queer going forward—something which I view as lacking in the landscape of ghost stories. As mentioned previously, the longevity and influence of the Victorian and early twentieth century style of ghost story has limited

the type of stories that are told within the umbrella of the ghost story. Often these stories are focused upon characters who the audience knows little about aside from their actions within the story and, although the form of the short story greatly limits the amount of character information that the writer is able to dictate to their reader, characters in short fiction do not have to be loosely constructed, especially when it comes to horror fiction.

Many popular and long-lasting writers of ghost stories, notably the aforementioned M.R. James but also his contemporary E.F. Benson, made regular use of “single men with no real base who encounter ghosts and monsters in their ramblings”. (Davies, 2012, p. ix) With both James and Benson, the reader is provided very little in the way of biographical information about these characters and, while often we are shown them to have friendships both professional and not, when it comes to issues of romance the characters are noticeable lacking these relationships. Now this may have been a result of both Benson and James’ lifelong bachelorship, where the two writers simply follow the adage of ‘write what you know’ and both writers are likely to have been writing for an audience not too dissimilar to themselves—for example, M.R. James often premiered his stories at gatherings of the Cambridge University literary society, the Chit Chat Club of which he and Benson were members (Davies, 2012, p. viii)—and this lack of information regarding their protagonists is not without its strengths. If one is to look at one of M.R. James most famous stories, ‘Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad’: James’ protagonist for the story, the Cambridge professor Parkins, is described in very little detail and James provides only a note that: “Parkins was, indeed, scrupulously polite and strictly truthful” and that he does not believe in the supernatural as his colleagues appear to do. (James, 2005, p. 82) This lack of information regard his protagonist, allows the reader to imprint themselves onto Parkins, especially those who lived a similar life to James, who Parkins appears to be an analogue of.

But this lack of information provided to the reader regarding the protagonists that is common in the more traditional style of ghost story, acts to hold them back from acting as anything other than chilling exercises in tension and unease. The common lack of anything regarding the sexual attitudes of the

characters along with other aspects of their lives can, and often does, make the protagonists of these stories appear stale in comparison to those found in more realistic fiction. But, as I aimed to demonstrate in my own stories, this does not have to be the case and that the ghost story can be used as a powerful tool for a writer to explore issues surrounding human sexuality.

As Julia Briggs outlines in her entry about the ghost story in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, a constant element of the ghost story is that they challenge “the rational order and the observed laws of nature” and that the horror found in ghost stories “may even come from such characteristically human ambitions and activities as war, oppression, and persecution” and not just the fear of a spirit living beyond the grave. (Briggs, 2012, p. 176)

All three of the stories that I have produced deal with themes of human cruelty towards others or themselves, but it is only two of the three stories, ‘Men in the Church’ and ‘The Dying Miner’ that explicitly tackles queer themes and feature queer characters. Both stories feature queer protagonists. In ‘Men in the Church’, both of the dual protagonists are queer and the story is directly about their queerness and the effect that the hiding of said queerness, both from the wider society and from oneself, can have upon a person, and in ‘The Dying Miner’, my use of a non-binary protagonist who feels persecuted against by their own family, represented within the story by their mother, mirrors the homophobic act of violence that triggers the events of the story, although not to the same degree of brutality.

While both stories draw upon my own experiences as a queer person, I believe that simply writing these stories as realistically as possible would be a weakness. In using the supernatural in the stories, I am able to solidify concepts into figures within the story. This is not an original concept of my own invention. Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* makes use of the supernatural figures of the three ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future, as literary devices for the development of Scrooge and as a way for Dickens’ to develop on his social message of the plight of the working class. While only

‘Men in the Church’ draws a direct parallel between my story and Dickens’, the use of the ghostly figure is used in a similar manner in ‘The Dying Miner’ as well.

In ‘The Dying Miner’, I made the decision to feature a non-binary protagonist not just because of the noted lack of diversity in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity within the traditional mode of ghost stories, but also because of my own experiences as a non-binary person. The term non-binary refers to:

“individuals who have a gender identity that does not fall exclusively in man/male or woman/female normative categories [and is] situated beyond the gender binary, fluctuates between genders, or rejects the gender binary [altogether].” (Scandurra, et al., 2019, p. 2)

In the United Kingdom, non-binary people lack a legal form of recognition, with a judge in March of 2020 ruling that the “Home Office’s refusal to issue gender-neutral “X” passports to UK citizens is currently lawful.” (Bowcott, 2020) This lack of legal recognition alongside discrimination in both the media and in person is what inspired me to write a non-binary protagonist. Through the use of the ghost of a murdered gay man, my intention was to draw a parallel between the legal discrimination of the past, such as the notorious section 28 which passed in 1988, and the lack of recognition for non-binary people today. Within the story, the attitudes directed towards the character of William Glass, the murdered man who returns as a ghost, and those directed towards the protagonist, Nic, are compared to each other, both by the text and the characters within it.

When writing ‘The Dying Miner’, I made sure to include instances of casual misgendering—being referred to by others as the incorrect gender, often through the use of incorrect pronoun usage—from Nic’s mother towards them. Early in the story, during a conversation with their mother, she refers to Nic as her “son”. This is one of two instances in the story that the character is referred to in a gender specific manner, at every other point in the story, either in the prose itself or in dialogue, Nic is referred to through non-gendered terms. I decided to include this example of misgendering in the

story in order to demonstrate the small ways in which the words and actions of others, intentional or not, can have a negative effect upon the wellbeing of queer people, particularly both binary and non-binary trans people. At other points in the story, I also make reference to other issues faced by queer people, such as employment discrimination, something that non-binary people suffer at a much greater level than their cisgender colleagues. (Scandurra, et al., 2019, p. 7)

It is through a shared experience of discrimination that I have Nic empathise with the dead William Glass and act as a catalyst for their investigation into his death that makes up the majority of the story. The discrimination experienced by both characters, although Nic experiences a much less violent form, attempts to demonstrate the way in which queer people are still marginalised and othered in contemporary society and through my use of the ghost story, I am able to literalise this legacy into the figure of the ghost of William Glass, who haunts those who enacted violence upon him.

Similarly, a shared empathy between queer people features heavily in 'Men in the Church' as well. But, unlike in 'The Dying Miner', the story features an empathy between the dual protagonists of the story, Edward and Michael, based upon their sexuality. In this story, the ghostly figure of Steven appears to both protagonists and shows them both events in Michael's life where he was happy and did not hide his sexuality. This acts as a catalyst for both characters and their development. Where this story differs from the traditional style of the ghost story is that the focus is almost entirely upon the internal conflict of the characters instead of the external conflict that is common in the traditional mode of the ghost story. As mentioned above, the standard protagonist in a ghost story often lacks any real development in terms of character and simply acts as a vehicle for the story to progress. This is not inherently a negative thing as not every piece of fiction needs to be an in-depth character study, but my intention in writing both 'Men in the Church' and 'The Dying Miner' was to attempt to move the ghost story away from the two-dimensional protagonists often found within the genre and towards a much more character driven focus.

## Conclusion

In writing the three ghost stories for the completion of my M. Res. I believe that I have demonstrated that the short ghost story as a form is not simply an antiquated relic of the past useful only as a chilling read at Christmas time but that it can be used as a tool to not only unsettle the reader but also to address contemporary issues and themes of note. One major thing that I realised over the course of completing this MA is that the initial attitude that I set out with, that the ghost story is in need of a massive overhaul in order to stay relevant to a contemporary readership, was somewhat overblown. As I believe I have demonstrated, the ghost story is not in need of a massive wide-ranging change but in fact is simply awaiting new perspectives in order to move the form beyond its Victorian and early twentieth century roots. This is not to say, however, that one should simply dismiss the works of Charles Dickens, M.R. James, E.F. Benson, Elizabeth Gaskell, and others. Instead, I believe that contemporary writers should look at these works and see what they should maintain for a contemporary readership and build upon those elements. The three major elements that M.R. James outlined in ‘Ghosts—Treat Them Gently!’ I believe can still be used as important guidelines to those who desire to write ghost stories today.

One thing that I learnt about myself and my skills and limitations as a writer during this undertaking is that I should have more confidence in myself and the viewpoint that I can bring to my work and provide for the readership. This was a major factor during the rewriting process of each of the three stories as initially all three of them did little to hide their influences and, unfortunately came across as mere imitations of the works of previous writers. It was only during the rewriting and editing phases that I noted the ways in which I had, inadvertently, begun to stray ever so slightly from the mould set forth by my predecessors and that these were the elements of the stories that stood out as the strongest. For example, initially the protagonist of ‘The Dying Miner’ was cisgender, but I noted that the elements of the story, as well as in ‘Men in the Church’, that drew from my own experiences

held the most emotional truth, I made the decision to change the protagonist to be non-binary like myself.

Going forward, it is my aim to produce more ghost stories in a similar vein, with the final goal being to be able to submit some to magazines and anthologies for publication as well as be able to produce a collection of ghost stories all attempting a similar goal to the three that I have produced for this MA. I have found that, for myself as a writer, the ghost story is a useful mode of the short story to write in. It allows me to draw upon my own affection for the stories of the past that have influenced me, but also provides a wide enough framework that I am not boxed in to writing about the same issues over and over again, as can be the case for some other genres.

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