

David A. Knadler
322 N. Old Manor Rd.
Wichita, KS 67208

The Gray Lady

By David A. Knadler

“She was staring at us and we ran,” the girl said. “Then I came back to look through the window and she was gone.”

Deputy Sheriff John Ennis wanted these kids gone, too. He had a long list of things to do this afternoon, including a talk at the high school for which he was ill prepared. He cleared his throat.

“So: You two entered a private residence. You saw someone at the stairs. You bugged out without so much as a hello – possibly because you’d been caught breaking and entering. Then you decided to peep through the window, but this time couldn’t see anybody.”

The girl, Laurel Hogue, shook her head firmly. “We weren’t breaking and entering. The door was open. The house is vacant. We’re only telling you about it because this old guy next door saw us and said he was calling the cops. We weren’t doing anything wrong. And this has happened before. Last year, when I was a sophomore. Josh and I wanted to investigate.”

“You’ve broken in before?”

“I told you, it wasn’t locked. That house, it’s empty a lot of the time. It has a reputation. Last Halloween, my sister Heather and some friends, they were talking about the Gray Lady and snuck over there one night. They all swore they saw her!”

“Who’s the Gray Lady?”

Now the boy, Josh Randa, spoke up. He had trouble making eye contact. “Some of the kids think she’s a ghost. They talk about it sometimes. I always thought it was B.S., but now ...”

“A ghost,” Ennis said. He smiled.

Laurel’s face reddened. It wasn’t embarrassment.

“You think we grew up on too many Scooby Doo reruns, right? Just stupid kids. Well, this isn’t funny. I saw something. It was scary; there was this feeling about it, very ...” She saw Ennis glance at his watch and stood abruptly. “Oh God, just forget it. Come on, Josh. I think we’re cutting into the deputy’s donut break.”

Josh got to his feet with an apologetic little smile. “Well, uh, thanks.”

“Oh, right,” Laurel said. “Thanks for nothing.”

Ennis, who was not on break and didn’t like donuts, watched them go: the tentative slacker in the baggy pants, the goth girl with her short red hair and shorter skirt. He remembered himself at that age and slightly regretted that he’d taken such a dismissive tone. He didn’t mind a good ghost story, really. It probably wouldn’t have hurt to play along just a little.

#

Larry Swan, who taught English and creative writing at Kootenai County High School, laughed when Ennis mentioned his interview with the two students.

“Of course I’ve heard of the Gray Lady,” he said. “Every year I get a dreadful story or two about her. The last involved a spectral chain saw.”

They were standing in the high school parking lot. Ennis had been asked to speak to the faculty about recognizing drug use among students. It had not gone particularly well. After hearing him drone on for 35 minutes, most of the teachers looked as if they themselves had been

abusing barbiturates. Swan found that amusing too.

“By the way, next time I have trouble sleeping at night, I’ll know who to call. You should work some levity into your routine.”

Ennis didn’t mention that his carefully crafted laugh lines had sunk without a ripple in the vast silence of the faculty lounge. The important thing was, the ordeal was over.

“Thanks for the tip. About those kids, I was probably a little short with them. I thought they were pulling my chain.”

Swan unlocked his convertible. “Ah, John; your Philadelphia cynicism is boundless. Of course, it’s possible they were pulling your chain, this close to Halloween. But I know those two. I’m sure they meant no harm.”

“The house has a ‘reputation,’ huh? I guess every town has one.”

“Yes, it seems to fill some primal need, doesn’t it? Where life lacks darkness and mystery, we must create it. But to give the kids credit, the place does have at least a slight whiff of ... something. Beyond being merely vacant. I understand there was a suicide at some point.” He shrugged. “Even small tragedies can grow into legends, given time. All it takes is a bit of the unknown. And a fair amount of retelling.”

“What’s the unknown part?”

Swan gave him a long-suffering look. “If I knew, it wouldn’t be unknown, would it?” He tossed his briefcase on the passenger seat and got in the car. “One of my students mentioned something about it. Last year. I think she had done some research for a short story...” He brightened. “You know, I think it was the same girl you spoke with today: Laurel Hogue.”

“Ah.”

“Again with the cynicism. Weren’t you ever young, John?”

#

The house at 221 Linda looked more cursed than haunted: cursed by a crappy location and years of neglectful tenants. It was hard by the Montana Rail Link tracks and definitely on the wrong side of them. The weedy lawn was long dead; the misshapen little pine by the mailbox soon would be. Beside it, the sign for Shining Mountains Realty creaked and swayed in the October wind.

Not exactly Hill House, Ennis thought. Outwardly, it resembled every other place in this little neighborhood known as the Belker Addition: Single level, disintegrating carport, clapboard siding in dreary beige. All this one lacked was a couple of junk cars out front. Why had the kids of Worland decided this would be the haunted one? There were no deserted Gothic mansions in the area, but still ...

Well, he'd been mildly curious to see it. If a place had a "reputation," however unearned, sooner or later it would probably figure in some youth activity involving the use of illicit substances. Ennis sighed. And when it did, Worland's stalwart defender against that sort of thing – that would be himself – would have the lay of the land.

Down the rutted street, a maroon Honda Accord was approaching, slowly maneuvering through a minefield of potholes. It stopped opposite him. He began to pull out, but the thin blonde woman driving caught his eye and waved both hands. She wore a nervous smile as both their windows slid down.

"Hi! Say, could I ask you a really big favor?"

Ennis looked at his watch. "Sure."

"I need to run in here a minute? I was just wondering if, well, if you'd mind waiting while I do? I promise it'll be quick."

He got out of the Blazer and waited for the woman to hurry across the street. Behind her, the Accord beeped and its lights flashed. People in Worland liked to say it was the kind of town where you didn't have to lock your car, but a lot of people seemed to anyway.

"This is so nice of you. I'm Libby. Libby Howell?" She extended a manicured hand. The wind gusted and Ennis grabbed for his hat; her lacquered hair was unaffected. He caught the scent of perfume and hair spray, both liberally applied. "I'm with Shining Mountains? I know this is strange, but since you're here I'd just feel better if ..." Her voice trailed off as she looked over Ennis's shoulder. "I don't know, I just get an odd feeling being in there by myself."

He followed her gaze. Out here in the cold the house seemed even drearier than it had from the car. Libby Howell must be new to the agency, he thought, to be the one stuck trying to move listings like this.

"I just need to do a quick check on a couple of things," she said. "Would you like to come in and look? As long as you're here? You know, the seller is very motivated on this one."

Ennis was about to demur, but he caught a slight note of desperation in her voice.

"OK, just for a minute."

He followed her up the crumbling walk and waited while she fumbled with a ring of keys. The lock box resisted her initial efforts and she muttered a curse. When it finally yielded, she took the keys and inserted one in the battered door knob. Before she could turn it, the door slipped open on its own. She blinked and swore again.

"This is the third time," she said. "I keep locking it and I keep finding it unlocked. See, it's things like that."

"Probably just needs to be adjusted."

She gave him a dubious smile. "Yes, I'm sure that's it. I guess I'll have to get it looked at.

The owner is out of state. Every time his tenants move out, he fixes it up and tries to sell it.”

He followed her inside. The door opened directly onto a square of gray linoleum surrounded by new tan carpet: he guessed this was the living room. The place was freezing. The chemical scent of the carpet and fresh paint couldn't quite mask the aroma of vacancy – dust in dead air, coagulated drains, old cigarette smoke, perhaps the dark blush of mold in some unseen corner. Ennis, never particularly ebullient, felt a sudden decline in his mood. Like a cheap motel room, the place seemed to radiate hopelessness.

Libby Howell only wrinkled her nose. “I should probably leave a window open or something, but then you worry about the pipes. And vandals.”

“Has that been a problem?”

“No, not really. Not yet. The last time I came here the door was wide open, but nobody had been in, that I could tell.”

Ennis decided not to tell her about the two students and their paranormal investigations.

“I just have to check the thermostat.” She walked across the living room, her high-heeled boots leaving sharp imprints in the new carpet. Ennis noted other faint depressions, veering toward the basement stairs and stopping in the middle of the room.

Libby peered at the thermostat and gave an exasperated sigh.

“Look! I set it at 55 degrees, to keep the pipes from freezing, but it's so cold in here! That's just weird!”

Her breath was visible as she spoke. She was right – it was nowhere near 55 degrees. Libby clutched her arms around her thin leather coat. “God, this house. I guess I should check the furnace?”

She looked toward the basement stairs but made no move toward them. Ennis understood

that she was waiting for a gallant gesture.

“Would you like me to have a look?”

“Would you? That would be super.”

The basement was smaller than he expected. Someone had made a half-hearted attempt at finishing what might optimistically be called the family room, a windowless space about 12 feet by 16. On the far wall, some major flaws in the sheet-rock were plainly visible beneath the fresh coat of beige paint. The room was lit by a cheap fluorescent fixture that flickered intermittently. Some family room, Ennis thought. He had seen homier parking garages.

“Partial basement,” Libby said. “That’s another drawback. The rest of the houses in the neighborhood have full basements; I don’t what the builder could have been thinking. The furnace is in here.”

A door off the family room stood open. The furnace burners were lit; the loud fan exhaled lukewarm air into the room. Ever chivalrous, Ennis checked the filters. They seemed fine too. He looked at the realtor and shrugged.

He was glad to get outside in the cold air. Libby Howell pulled the door shut and insisted Ennis try the lock. It seemed secure. She smiled and touched his sleeve as he got into the Blazer. “Thanks so much. You must think I’m just a worry wart. I don’t know what it is about that place.”

Ennis didn’t know either. But he didn’t think she’d be selling it soon.

#

Ennis contemplated the clutch of black-clad girls smoking cigarettes outside Ray’s Bistro, across from the high school. He was thinking of his own high school days, the time when such girls might smile when he passed them in the hall, or sat next to them in class, or asked them to

dance. Now, of course, middle age had made him a different species – perhaps a different genus. He might as well be a house plant for all the smiles he'd get now.

Among the girls was Laurel Hogue. She chanced to look his way, then frowned and leaned past a girlfriend to look again. He waved her over. The other girls laughed as she warily crossed the street. Ennis ran the window down.

“I had a look at your haunted house,” he said.

She had done her small mouth in lipstick that was almost black. She took a careless drag of her cigarette and looked away, radiating boredom. She was quite pretty, even if Ennis wasn't sure about the little silver ring she wore in one nostril.

“How brave. Did you go inside?”

“Yes. With the realtor. I'm thinking of buying it.”

This got her attention. He smiled.

“Kidding. I wanted to see if you guys did any damage.”

“I told you, the door was open.”

“So it was. But I'd recommend you not try another expedition. If that neighbor gets around to reporting it, I might have to do something about it.”

“Whatever. You think we made it up, don't you?”

“Did you?”

She tossed her cigarette away and brushed hair from her eyes.

“I saw her.”

“The Gray Lady.”

“Look. Officer. Sheriff. What do they call you anyway? You can think what you want. This isn't something I made up to amuse you, or the idiots in this school. That house is haunted. And I

know why.”

“A teacher of yours mentioned something about a suicide.”

“You mean Mr. Swan? Yes, there was a suicide.” She leaned closer. “But I think there was something else: I think there was also a murder.”

She was looking him in the eye when she said it. She didn’t smile and she didn’t blink. Now she had his attention.

#

The girl agreed to speak to him after school at Café Solaris, which was across the street from the Town Hall. Ennis told her to bring Josh along – it was a small town, and there was no point in inciting gossip by being seen having coffee alone with an underage girl.

Josh clearly didn’t want to be there, but Ennis had the feeling the kid was going to be doing her bidding as long as she kept him around. Laurel slid in next to her boyfriend. She produced a pack of Marlboros and lit one, ignoring the signs and the waitress’ concerned look.

“So, what do you want to know?”

“You mentioned a murder,” Ennis said.

Laurel took a deep drag and exhaled theatrically. “I don’t have any proof, if that’s what you want. Most of what I know about it comes from my mom. But it’s true. It has to be.”

“OK, let’s hear it.”

“First I want to show you this.” She took a weathered high-school yearbook from her bag and slid it across the table: Worland Wolves, class of ’74. She opened it at a bookmark and pointed to a picture halfway down the page.

“That’s Sophie Morigeau. She was my Mom’s best friend when they were in high school.”

The plain-looking girl wore an odd smile and huge glasses. Like about two-thirds of the

other sophomore girls pictured, her lank hair was parted in the middle and hung straight to her shoulders.

“Sophie and her folks lived in that house. The one on Linda. The mother’s name was Lisette and I don’t know the dad’s name. My mom’s family was living in the same neighborhood then, Belker.”

Ennis nodded.

“Sophie told Mom she was being abused at home. Bad. Her parents both drank a lot, I guess. She’d come to school with all kinds of bruises, sometimes cuts. Once she showed Mom some cigarette burns on her back. But she always made Mom promise not to tell.”

Josh didn’t look up. He was folding a napkin into a compact square. He seemed to have heard the story before.

Laurel leaned forward. “Then one day, Sophie quit coming to school. I mean just stopped. My mom would call and Lisette would grab the phone out of Sophie’s hands. Finally she told Mom to quit calling, She said Sophie had gone to live with her dad and wouldn’t be back. That’s what she told the school too.”

“Maybe that’s what happened,” Ennis said.

Laurel shook her head. “Except a few years later, my Mom ran into the dad, this Mr. Morigeau. It was in a bar, down in Kalispell. This was after she quit school. My Mom, uh, she had kind of a drinking problem too. Anyway she asked about Sophie. And the dad just looked at her and said he hadn’t seen Sophie since he walked out. He said Lisette wouldn’t allow it.

“Anyway, Mom never saw Sophie again. But she knew Lisette had lied. And she thought was only one reason for a lie like that.”

Josh decided not to wait for the punch line. “Killed her own daughter,” he said.

Ennis wasn't quite ready to make the same leap. "Or ran away, more likely. Your mom ever talk to the cops?"

Laurel gave him a look. "Didn't do any good. She said she talked to a sheriff once and he blew her off. I mean, I guess it didn't help that she was always drinking and everybody just thought ... well, nobody pays attention to a drunk. And it wasn't long after that she heard about Lisette killing herself. Right there in that house. So I guess she thought there was no point."

"Think your mother would like to talk to me about it now?"

Josh reddened and concentrated on the napkin. Laurel stabbed the cigarette out.

"I'm sure she'd love to. Except she's dead."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

She shrugged, but wouldn't look at him.

"Two years ago. Like I said, she was an alcoholic. But it wasn't the drinking. It was breast cancer." She took a deep breath. "Anyway, that's the story. I think Lisette Morigeau's mom killed her daughter and then killed herself."

She forced a little smile. "Think that's enough to haunt a house?"

Ennis considered the tale: A collection of secondhand details, originating with a longtime alcoholic and amplified through a generation of slumber parties. But the girl's interest seemed genuine, more than just a desire to spice up a dreary autumn in Worland. Maybe it was the link to her dead mother, a question of closure. Or maybe she wanted to right an old wrong against a girl her own age.

"Tell you what: I'll look into it." He slid out of the booth, left a five on table. "As soon as I have time. I'll let you know what I find out."

#

A call later that afternoon took him back to the Belker Addition: Two doors down from 221 Linda, a woman was threatening to shoot her neighbor's barking pit bull, if not the neighbor himself. It took him most of an hour to establish a tenuous truce, and he returned wearily to his vehicle. It was time to call it a day.

He was getting in when the wind gusted. He grabbed for his hat too late and cursed as it bounded up the street, past the realty sign at 221 Linda. It came to rest against the board fence separating the house from the one next door.

Crossing the yard, Ennis saw the upper half of a gray head watching him from across the fence. He lifted a hand in greeting. The guy didn't wave back.

A raspy voice called out, "You again? What the hell's going on over there?"

Ennis brushed off the hat and clamped it down tight. The fence concealed all but the guy's wispy hair, wrinkled forehead and pale blue eyes.

"You live here?"

"No, I'm enjoying the goddamn view. Of course I live here. What're you doing?"

Ennis became annoyed. "Nothing. See you around."

"Somebody file a complaint? I know them damned kids have been breaking in there."

"You the one who caught them over here last night?"

The blue eyes narrowed. "I'm getting tired of the little shits. Trespassing. They keep it up, somebody's going to get hurt."

Ennis was getting tired of talking to half a face. He walked around the end of the fence to the neighbor's front gate. The old man was carrying an oxygen tank connected to a nasal breathing tube slung over his ears. His eyes widened and he sidled toward his house as Ennis came across the yard.

“I don’t want to hear about anybody getting hurt,” Ennis said.

“Yeah? They better stay off private property then.”

“You own the place?”

“No, do you? I’m a concerned citizen. Been here since this neighborhood was built. Somebody’s got to keep an eye on things.” A sneer crept into his voice. “Damn sure the law around here won’t.”

“If you’ve been here that long, you know why kids come around.”

“Oh yeah, it’s haunted, right?” The old man spat. “That’s bullshit. I knew the people who lived there. And I know kids. Little bastards, just looking for a place to diddle.”

“What’s your name?”

“What’s it to you?” Ennis gave the man a look; he edged closer to his porch. “Gardner. Charles Gardner. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“You knew the Morigeaus?”

The name seemed to surprise him. He licked his lips and looked away.

“Yeah, I knew ’em,” he said. “He wasn’t worth a damn. Carpenter, worked on the dam project. Little pissant, I had to clean his clock once. I got on OK with the missus though.”

“You remember a daughter?”

Gardner’s eyes shifted between Ennis and his front steps.

“Who? Oh. Yeah, I guess maybe there was a kid. Now that you mention it.”

“You know what became of her?”

The old man coughed. He dredged up phlegm from deep within his ruined lungs and spat. “Ran off. Just like her old man. That’s what I heard. Left her mom all alone. It was me found Lisette hanging down there, couple years after. That was a sweet sight, let me tell you.”

Gardner slapped at his shirt pocket and withdrew a pack of Camels.

“Couldn’t stand living alone, I guess.” He shook out a cigarette and took it in his mouth.

“Got a light?”

“No. When’s the last time you saw the daughter?”

“I don’t know. And I don’t give a shit. Long time ago. Now it’s cold and I gotta get back inside.”

Ennis watched Gardner mount the front steps. The old man turned and gave him a smile that might have looked strange even without the oxygen tube below his beak and the cigarette bobbing below that.

Ennis didn’t smile back. The old man chuckled and went back inside.

#

Ennis’ next day off wasn’t until Thursday. He spent the first part of it in a dim alcove of the Kootenai County Courthouse, examining the few official details concerning the death of Lisette Morigeau, 42. It seemed Laurel Hogue’s mother, and the old man next door, had gotten at least that part of the story right.

The woman had been found in the basement of her Worland home on the afternoon of Oct. 30, 1976. The coroner thought the actual death had occurred three days earlier. A neighbor had reported finding the front door open in freezing weather. A cat mewling in the basement had led him to the body.

There was a heavy-duty extension cord around the woman’s neck, secured to a floor joist above. It made the cause of death self-evident: asphyxiation by hanging. The coroner’s notes suggested Lisette had entertained second thoughts at precisely the moment it became too late to do so: there were abrasions on her neck and fingernails on both hands were damaged. That

wasn't uncommon in such suicides, Ennis knew; he had seen a couple like that during his days with the force in Philadelphia. He pictured the woman clawing at the cord as the squalid little basement around her faded to black. He shook his head. It seemed a particularly a hellish way to check out.

Returning the records, Ennis asked about the coroner who had signed the certificate, Huntley Collins. The obese woman at the counter pleasantly informed him that Mr. Collins had succumbed to a heart attack in 1998.

He had expected as much, three decades after the fact, but it left him little else to do in Libby after the hour-long drive from Worland. Outside the courthouse, the iron-gray sky seemed low enough to touch and it smelled like snow. He considered heading home, but decided to stop off first at the Northwest News. It called itself the newspaper of record in Kootenai County – maybe it had published an obituary for Lisette Morigeau.

It took him two hours to find it. Not because of any shortcomings in the newspaper's microfiche archive, but because he kept getting sidetracked by the history of 1976 that flowed across the screen: President Gerald Ford planning to attend the dedication of Libby Dam, which had created the long, useless reservoir that now stretched between Libby and Worland. The Montana Legislature legalizing Keno – what a great leap forward that had been. Ennis tried to imagine the state without the seedy casinos that now infested every bar and restaurant.

He also found himself lingering over the movie ads of that year: Rocky, Marathon Man, The Omen. It was only when he saw the ad for Carrie, opening in September at the Orpheus Theater in Libby, that he remembered his interest in Lisette Morigeau.

The obituary ran Nov. 4, a Thursday. It was low on the page and was accompanied by a small picture of the deceased. Ennis supposed it had been cropped from a snapshot. Lisette M

Morigeau's eyes were little more than pinpoints in shadow; she was not smiling. The obituary consisted of five sentences. It was the fourth that interested Ennis the most: "She is survived by a daughter, Sophia."

He pondered that on the drive back to Worland. It was dark and snow swirled in the headlights. Survived by a daughter. The Morigeaus didn't seem like a particularly close-knit family; maybe that detail had been a supposition, supplied to the funeral home by a relative who believed the girl had been sent to live with her father. It was probably more likely that Sophia had moved elsewhere, or had simply run away. If the account of Laurel's mother was anywhere close to the truth, she had good reason to go.

If so, where was she now? Ennis divided his attention between that question and the more immediate problem of keeping his 6-year-old Subaru between the ditches. This highway could be tricky in good weather; now it was getting slick. As he drove, white crosses occasionally materialized in his headlights before slipping past like silent wraiths. The State of Montana used them to mark the sites of fatal accidents on state highways. There were 17 between here and home; Ennis had counted. Another pair loomed up and he let the car slow. The curve almost doubled back on itself before angling down toward the black reservoir. He kept both hands on the wheel and resisted the urge to touch the brakes. All the while wondering: What had become of Sophia?

#

It seemed much later than it was when Ennis got back to Worland: 9 p.m. – still early enough to grab some dinner. He didn't feel like returning to his trailer at Pine View Court just yet.

There were only three cars in the parking lot at Pizza Station; one of them was a maroon

Accord. Libby Howell was seated by herself in the corner, a small pitcher of beer and half a small pizza before her. She was staring moodily out the window, but brightened and waved him over when he walked in.

“Would you like some? It’s a veggie combo; I can’t finish all of it.”

Ennis had been thinking along the lines of the meat lovers’ special. “That’s OK, I’ll just ...”

“At least help me finish this pitcher. I’ll get another glass.” She was off to the counter before Ennis could protest. He sat down, leaving his coat on.

Libby set the glass before him. She looked a bit haggard as she sat down. “I’m celebrating,” she said. The brittle cheeriness in her tone was not infectious.

“Business is good?”

“Hardly. No, I’m just happy to have lost my least-favorite listing. You know the house.”

“It’s off the market?”

“Probably my fault. I called the owner about the lock, and he got kind of pissy and then one thing led to another and, voila! – my sign no longer graces the front lawn of 221 Linda.”

Ennis took a sip of beer. Light beer, so light as to be tasteless. “Sorry it didn’t work out.”

“Oh, don’t be.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “I hated that house. Just hated it. And just between you and me, I am now prepared to say it’s haunted.”

Ennis began to suspect this was not Libby’s first pitcher of beer. “Really? Why?”

“Besides the ghost, you mean?” she tried to laugh, but it came out as kind of a choking sound. “I saw it, John. Can I call you John? I saw something. Last night, when I down to collect the lock box, I thought I’d do a quick walk-through, just so the owner couldn’t come back on me later.”

She sipped nervously at her beer. “I just had this strong feeling that somebody was in the

house with me. You know? It was eerie. I collected the cards and the info sheets on the counter and I felt someone watching me. I felt it so strongly I looked around.” Libby swallowed hard.

“And there she was.”

“She.”

“There was somebody standing there! At the top of the stairs. In gray, a dress or something. She looked at me.”

Libby was looking into his eyes. Ennis decided the fear there was real. He waited a few seconds before clearing his throat.

“Well, it could have been ...”

“I know what you’re going to say. Some kid, having fun before Halloween. Or just my imagination in poor lighting. But trust me. If you had been there ...”

He looked at his beer. She smiled wanly. “I know, crazy woman, right? I guess I should ask you not to mention this to anyone else. That old neighbor next door, he probably thinks I’m crazy too. I saw him watching from his side window when I ran out of there.”

Ennis wanted to reassure her, tell her he believed her, but in fact he didn’t. The world was full of people who wanted to see ghosts. It wasn’t surprising when their imaginations obliged. He could think of nothing to say. Libby sighed and drained her glass. “Sorry. I just thought ... Well, at least that damned house is not my problem any more, right?” She stood to go. “I honestly don’t think it’ll ever sell. If it were up to me, I’d just rip it down.”

#

Ennis was the last to leave the Pizza Station. It was getting late. The snow had stopped but the wind still gusted and sighed through the darkened town. It was time to go home.

Instead, he found himself driving through town and across the railroad tracks. He took the

right turn down Linda Street. There was the house; the front window faintly illuminated from somewhere within. Libby Howell's sign was gone. Somehow the place looked even more desolate because of it. He parked out front. In the dead of night, and knowing what he now knew of its past, he supposed he could understand how kids might call it haunted.

As he watched, a faint thread of light appeared at the door and he realized it had come open. Ennis shook his head. Somebody should really get that thing fixed. He got out of the Subaru with his big Maglite and approached the house.

The door stood open about half an inch. Ennis pushed it wider and stepped through. He stood on the linoleum entry and listened. Maybe another contingent of teen ghost hunters had arrived. The furnace was going downstairs, but he could hear no other sound.

He found his gaze drawn to the top of the basement stairs. It was barely visible and he turned on the flashlight. There was no sign anyone had stood there recently, although faint depressions did suggest Libby Howell's path from the front door to the kitchen. He was considering this when he heard a faint sound downstairs. A scrape, like a chair against a concrete floor.

So: Maybe Laurel and Josh had returned for another thrill. He hoped not. She seemed a troubled girl and he seemed merely hapless; he wasn't in the mood to reprimand them.

He couldn't locate a light switch at the top of the stairs. He followed his flashlight beam down the steps, pausing again to listen. Nothing. He reached the landing and played the beam around the small basement room. The furnace kicked off; he flicked the beam in that direction. Nothing there but naked pipes along the wall, the bulk of the furnace cloaked in shadow. It made a clicking noise as it cooled.

Now the silence seemed vast. Ennis caught a flicker of movement at the corner of his eye.

He turned quickly but his flashlight found only the blank concrete wall. A reflection, then. So why the sudden tingling at the back of his scalp?

He thought of the 30-year-old death certificate he had seen that afternoon. Today was Oct. 27. According the Kootenai County coroner, it was the date of Lisette Morigeau's death. He realized he was probably standing exactly where it had occurred. He moved further out into the room, now aware of his own heartbeat. If ghosts existed, Ennis thought, this would be precise time and place he might expect to see one.

At the door to the furnace room he found a light switch and flipped it on. The fluorescent fixture snapped and hummed; a sickly flickering light filled the room. Ennis looked around.

The wall next to the stairs landing was bare concrete; part of the foundation. A new coat of paint couldn't hide the cracks that angled from ceiling to floor like bolts of black lightning. The wall at the end of the room was clad in sheet rock, inexpertly installed, the joint tape and mud still visible beneath layers of paint. Standing next to the wall, he could also detect a slight indentation in the middle of it: A poor job of framing, too, or very crooked lumber. He put his face against the wall and sighted along it. The indentation, if there was one, might be about the size of a door.

Ennis ran his hands over the painted sheet rock. Libby Howell had said this was a partial basement. If so, this wall would be concrete too. People often covered over basement walls, but why finish one and not the other?

He was pondering this when the footstep sounded behind him. He whirled around, heart thudding. A leather work boot was visible on the stairs. Then another, and a leg clad in khaki work pants. Charles Gardner descended carefully to the landing. This time he wasn't carrying the oxygen bottle, but a Model 1911 Army Colt. The mean smile Ennis had seen before.

“Well, well. Thought I’d catch somebody in here,” he said.

“Sheriff’s office,” Ennis said. “I’m the guy you talked to earlier.”

Gardner shook his head. “That right? Where’s your uniform? And that don’t look like a sheriff’s car out front. Look like a goddamn burglar to me. What the hell you doing down here?”

“That’s none of your business.”

The smile got meaner. “Hell it ain’t. People coming and going at all hours. I’m getting a little tired of it.”

He brought the pistol up, thumbed back the hammer. Ennis stared, unsure now whether he was dealing with malice or dementia.

“You want to see my ID?”

“Keep your hands where they are. Goddamn little punk, trying to browbeat me in my own goddamn yard.” Gardner coughed into his fist and spat. He drew a raspy breath with some difficulty.

“Figured it out, huh? She said somebody would, sooner or later.”

“Who?”

“Shut up. You know who. I told her, ‘You’re the one let her die, cuffed to the bed down here, now you got to deal with it.’ But of course it ends up my problem, useless bitch.” He nodded at the wall. “Pretty good job, I thought, for one day’s work. Only way we could be sure.”

The old man coughed again. He pulled at his nose, examined the results. “Could have used more lime, I guess, or more plastic. Smelled for awhile, but it wasn’t like Lisette got much company. Went away after awhile.”

Ennis felt sick. At least some of it was fear. He was beginning to believe Charles Gardner wasn’t telling him this to ease his conscience. He found his voice.

“Come down to the office with me and talk about this. Might be better that way.”

Gardner stared, and then laughed. This provoked another round of coughing. Ennis thought to rush him then, but the gun didn't waver. The old man's eyes were rheumy as he caught his breath.

“Think I'm confessing? You dumb bastard. Just feels good talking about it after all these years. Ain't like you're going to tell anybody. And me, well, I figure a bullet in the brain is better than lung cancer.” He shrugged. “Or maybe not. I'll see how it goes after they find you.”

Now the Gardner's grin seemed pure evil. “You were asking about the daughter. I knew her alright. Knew her pretty damn good before the end. Funny thing, that was Lisette's idea. Takes all kinds, huh? Woman was crazy, all that demon shit. I can see why she hung herself.”

He pointed the .45 at the deputy's chest. “Hell of it was, I never did get my extension cord back.”

Afterward, Ennis never could say what it was that made Charles Gardner glance back up the stairs. Or what he saw there that took the smile from his face as completely as if he'd been stabbed. The old man gasped out something and began to cough, three raw barks that stretched into long, wheezing heaves. He doubled over, the gun barrel dropping lower with each upheaval.

Ennis took the chance. He jumped to his right and slapped at the light switch. There was a flash in the darkness as the pistol roared. He scrambled forward blindly, tripped on the landing and collapsed on top of Gardner. He was still holding the Maglite and began hammering away at the old man's heaving form. The muzzle flashed again and he swung in a panic, sure he'd been hit. It took most of a minute before he realized that Charles Gardner's body had gone limp.

He got up, panting. The flashlight still worked. A pool of blood bloomed under the motionless figure of the old man, who appeared to have shot himself in the abdomen during the

struggle. Ennis checked for a pulse. He got out his cell phone tried to dial 911, missing the first couple of tries. While it was ringing, he flipped on the overhead light.

There was another bullet hole in the middle of the sheet-rock wall. He walked to it, angled the flashlight so he could peer through. He saw only blackness on the other side.

#

Ennis leaned against the patrol car and watched as the last wall at 221 Linda went down. It was the first day of spring and a brisk breeze snatched away the dust cloud.

A car pulled up behind his. Laurel Hogue got out and came to stand beside him.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“I wanted to see this. Mr. Swan said it was OK.”

Ennis couldn’t blame her. He suspected she’d also been out to the cemetery, where the remains of another 16-year-old girl were finally resting after thirty years unmourned in a walled-off room. Ennis had stopped by himself, had noticed the fresh flowers on the grave.

They watched as the Michigan loader churned forward through the mud, scooping up debris from the flattened house. Some of it took flight: bits of insulation and wallpaper, a flash of yellow that Ennis thought might be a remnant of crime-scene tape.

“I was thinking about the Gray Lady,” Laurel said. “I always thought it was the mother. You know, an evil spirit. But now I wonder.”

Ennis wondered too. Not that he was going to admit it, or get into a discussion about spirits, evil or otherwise. But he often replayed the night in the basement, sometimes imagining he’d heard a word of recognition in the last gasp of Charles Gardner, just before the coughing fit had felled him.

Had he? He went back and forth on it. But if there was a word, he thought, it might well have been “Sophie.”

THE END