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CRW 408

Final Essay

Hidden Meanings

At the end of a long path stood a small elementary school. With red brick and black roof, it sat surrounded by open fields and a small forest, the trees spreading their branches like ink across a canvas of sky. The twisting streets that composed the neighborhood curved and blended together, their pavement cracked from weather and use like a grey snake shedding its skin.

Behind my blue grey house, stretching into the sky, stood a small patch of woods. The trees would sway in the wind, groaning to one another as they moved. The red brick townhouse sat quietly at the end of my street. This was the setting of my childhood; the small town of Liverpool nestled in upstate New York, where imagination ran rampant and misconceptions grew on trees.

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 The townhouse was silent for many years. Through the summers and the winters it sat on the corner with no one coming or going. It was the point of much speculation for the neighborhood kids, myself and my older brother Corey included.

At the time, I was seven and he was eleven. He’s four and a half years my elder, tall and skinny with short black hair and glasses. He’s bulked up since then and ditched the glasses for contacts, but that’s how I remember him back then. Wherever he went I went, even when we grew older.

We’d always play together, whether we were Dragon Ball Z characters or wandering swordsman or what have you; he’d play the bad guy and I’d be the hero that saved the day, and we would never pull our punches.

Once, when we were younger and outfront of our house, he appeared as an evil swordsman. I approach slowly and drew my black wooden sword as he unsheathed his. Our eyes met and our swords clashed, splinters of wood flying through the air. I attacked and he parried. I rolled away and sprang to my feet, only to see his sword coming faster than I could block with my blade. His brown sword rushed forward, stabbing the top of my head. We paused, stunned, and looked at each other. I slowly raised my hand to the top of my head, my fingers coming away red and sticky. My eyes welled with tears.

“Evan! No, no nononono, I’m sorry I hurt you, but if you start crying and Mom comes out, she’ll take the swords!” Corey said, throwing his sword down and rushing to my aid. Instantly the gravity of the situation hit me. I sniffled once, twice, and forced the tears away.

“But my head… it's bleeding, what do we tell her?” I said, looking up at my older brother. My eyes slid from him to the rocks next to us, lining the garden in front of our house. “I fell and hit my head?” I said with a shrug. Corey grinned.

“Mooooom!” he called as we both rushed into the house.

Corey is an extremely talented artist, graduating from Maryland Institute/College of Art with a degree in illustration. When we were growing up, he would always be editing photos or drawing pictures on the computer for hours. And no matter what he was working on, I would be sitting beside him, watching him work with great interest. When I was younger I always thought that this annoyed him. Corey laughed when I brought it up.

“It was actually the opposite! I loved when you would just sit there and watch me work, it always made me try and do better. I would try to impress you,” he said.

I was very fortunate to have an older brother like him, letting me follow him and his friends around, showing me the ropes. We were always coming up with stories and adventures, so naturally we would muse over what might have happened to the lady who once lived at the end of our street.

 “Maybe she was kidnapped and can’t come home!”

 “Maybe she was arrested and is sitting in prison!”

 “Maybe she died in the house and now it’s haunted!”

 Each possibility grew in equal parts more grisly and more exciting; the prospect of having a haunted house at the end of the street was so thrilling.

I remember walking into my kitchen once, my mom cooking dinner at the counter.

“Mom, how come nobody ever goes to that house at the end of the street?” I said, sprinting back and forth around the kitchen. I never could manage to stay still.

 She smiled and laughed, “Why do you want to know about that?”

“Me and Brandon and Corey and Cameron were thinking about it, and we think it’s haunted,” I said, coming to a stop beside her, breathless.

“Brendan, Corey, Cameron, and I,” she said correcting me. “It’s not haunted!” she said with a laugh. “Our neighbor Joan said she moved to California to take care of her brother because he’s sick.”

I nodded thoughtfully, spinning on my heels and slipping into my snow gear, eager to find Corey and the other neighborhood kids.

 It’s strange how, even when presented with the facts, we made our own truths about things. I guess the truth of how things really are has just always been less fulfilling. It’s more exciting, maybe even more pleasant, to think a house is haunted, and not just empty and alone.

“Mom said that she’s in California,” I said as we played in the snow.

“California?! No way! What would she go there for?!” Brendan said. He was a small pasty kid with thin wire frame glasses, his face spotted with tiny brown freckles.

“To help her brother. He’s sick,” I said, tunneling into the snow. The snowbanks were large enough for us to build snow forts in.

“That doesn’t sound right to me,” Corey said, throwing handfuls of snow behind him as we swung hammers at the wall of ice before us, “maybe she went to California, but can’t come back for some reason?”

“Yeah! Like, maybe she had to run there because the cops are looking for her,” said Cameron, Brendan’s little brother. He was even more pale than his brother with short blonde hair and sad eyes. They didn’t get along as well as Corey and I; Brendan teased him frequently and he cried often, especially when he lost a game.

“Maybe she got bit by a snake,” I said, falling back into the fluffy snow. “Or, maybe she was eaten by a bear?”

Whichever theory we went with, we were convinced that there was no possibility of her ever coming home.

Then one night, through the ice and the snow, one of the windows of the quiet brick house was suddenly alive, yellow light shining in the distance like a lighthouse on stormy seas.

I saw it one evening from my bedroom. I had two wide windows that let you see all the way to the end of the street. I remember peeking out the window, assessing the weather for a possible snow day, when I noticed the yellow dot glowing in the distance.

I clambered down the stairs and gathered up my snow gear, throwing it on as quick as I could.

“There’s A LIGHT! Corey! There’s a light at the haunted house!” I yelled as I struggled with my boots.

“What?! A light?!” he said, sprinting to the door and scrambling to get his gear on. Soon, we were fully armored against the cold and ready to brave the weather.

We stepped out into the blistery winter night and scaled the snowbanks that stood taller than us. We made our way across the row of houses, climbing up and down the snowbanks and trudging through waist deep snow like arctic explorers.

Finally reaching the house on the corner, we crept up to the window, wiggling our way through the snow on our stomachs like little grubs. We slowly picked our heads up and looked through the window, our eyes rolling over the pink walls and pink furniture wrapped in plastic. On a wooden end table sat a lamp, yellow and gleaming.

We quickly ducked our heads back beneath the window and sat there, wide eyed. The light was on and no one was home. No one, that is, aside from the ghost that in our minds, very clearly had moved into the house.

We scampered back down the street and ran inside, tearing off our snow gear and leaping into our respective beds, minds overflowing with thoughts of ghouls and ghosts conversing on pink couches wrapped in plastic just a few houses away.

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Our wish was granted the next day when we woke up to a blanket of fresh snow. School was canceled, so my brother and I once again donned our snow gear, gloved our hands and pulled our hats low over our ears before stepping out into the swirling snow.

Again we made the trek down the street, sprinting up and down the mounds of snow. This time however we came prepared, bringing along a few pieces of equipment from the wooden chest resting inside my room.

The chest, brown wood with whirlpools of black, was where I kept my arsenal of tools and gadgets, including listening devices and a red plastic periscope. I don’t remember exactly where I acquired my toolset, probably from toy stores and kids’ meals, but I had an impressive variety of spy equipment just waiting for such an occasion to arise. I brought along the periscope and listening equipment, and edible paper too, because frankly, you never know what you’ll need when dealing with the paranormal. It was banana flavored but tasted like the yellow strip on envelopes. We crawled up to the window, tools clutched in our hands, and began our investigation.

Our backs pressed against the house, we passed the periscope back and forth, watching for anything out of the ordinary. When one of us wasn’t looking through the periscope, we’d press the small listening guns against the window and click the button, listening for phantom footsteps or creaky doors, anything that would indicate a presence.

“What’re you boys doing over there?!” My neighbor called from across the street. We froze like deer in headlights, looking from one another to the neighbor. We yelled back an incoherent mix of an excuse. When she said nothing and started walking towards us, we exchanged glances once more and sprinted as fast as we could manage back towards our house, chunks of snow flying through the air.

 When night draped the neighborhood in darkness, I stared out my window once more to find the yellow light shining at the end of the street. Though we never went back to the house to look in the window, that was all the proof we needed to know the house was no longer empty. It never occurred to us that the lights were synced to a timer to create the illusion that someone was constantly there, a comment my mom made off handedly one day years later.

I was sitting at the kitchen table in the middle of enjoying a bowl of cereal, and froze mid bite. “Gee, and you didn’t think you might wanna mention that to your two young sons who looked like they were casing a house?” I said to my mom.

She shrugged, “Yeah, probably. But you two were so tiny and having fun. What could you have done anyway? I didn’t see the harm in letting you two play,” she said without looking up from the dishes she was washing.

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The trees behind my house towered above me, stretching upwards before exploding into leaves of green or yellow and red. The patch of woods seemed so large back then, a private forest to run away to. It didn’t matter that I could see the houses lining either side of the woods, I hardly remember paying any attention to them. I was too busy reading beneath the branches, building forts with my friends, playing manhunt under the cover of night, or hunting for cicada shells in the warm rays of the summer sun. Or, you know, trying to solve the murder of my neighbor.

I couldn’t tell you why I thought she was murdered or why I thought her house was haunted. And I honestly can’t even say it was the last time it happened. I mean, with the hauntings at least. I don’t often think people are murdered but, I do often wonder about ghosts and things beyond us. Things we can’t explain, or even things we can and, the answers are just a let down.

In third or fourth grade I convinced my friends that Zach's house was haunted by a little girl who burned to death in a farmhouse. Then I thought my middle school was haunted for awhile. The basement was pitch black and flooded, filled with mold that gave me headaches and rats that scurried in the dark. So I pictured the lunch lady ghost from *Danny Phantom* swirling about the school, lobbing trays, grey food, and mystery meat at unsuspecting students. Only I would notice though.

My grandma’s friends house was, er, *is*, haunted. But that's legitimate because she collects porcelain dolls, and any place that has that many dolls in one spot has to incur some kind of curse or evil spirit.

I remember walking into her house to feed her cat, the counters covered in opened cat food cans, the kitchen table buried beneath old newspapers and coupon clippings. Passed the table was an entranceway into the den and a hallway to the left. There was a light at the start of it, casting a pale orange glow reminiscent of a street light. The back of the hallway was drenched in shadow. A door hung open halfway down its length. *No thanks,* I thought, shaking my head and walking into the den.

The walls were covered in ticking clocks, a clown lamp stood in the corner. Dolls sat posed in chairs and on the fireplace, black and white photos of people in dark wood frames rested on the two tables. No one was smiling. *Ookay, spooky dark hallway it is!* I thought, spinning on my heels and leaving the nightmarish aesthetic behind.

I walked along the brown shag carpet towards the cracked door, trying my best not to look into the dark beside me. I tentatively pushed it open, and nearly bolted from the house then and there. The room was filled to the brim with porcelain dolls, eyes unblinking, faces painted with erie smiles. They were posed on a bed, in a glass cabinet to the left, and sitting on a shelf lining all four walls. They all stared at me, and I stared at them, waiting for them to make their move. They didn’t. I ran. Needless to say I haven’t been back.

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Maybe two years after we had investigated the red brick house with our spy gear was when I became convinced the owner had been murdered. Corey was now in middle school, and it was the time where our age gap had started to feel more evident. We were still close, but we didn’t hang out as much during those days.

I can’t pinpoint exactly what put me onto the idea, I think it might have been spurred by watching *Final Destination* at my friend Zach’s house. That movie really messed me up for a bit; a kid who already thought ghosts lived down the street from him did not need to know death was around every corner too.

All I remember is feeling with absolute certainty that the lady who had supposedly moved to California to take care of her brother, had actually been murdered in my backyard. It seemed so logical to my nine year old self, like there couldn’t possibly be any other explanation. The only clear line of thought was that the ghost at the end of my street was signaling me to figure out who had murdered her.

So I started to investigate. I gathered clues, none of which made much sense. Most of them were silly realizations I made on the playground of my school, running around with my friends. They were very strange connections; an eraser thrown seemingly from nowhere in the lunchroom, a missing pencil, a dream my friend claimed he had. But it was all the evidence I needed. Somehow, all of these random occurrences came together in my mind to confirm that my neighbor had actually been murdered by her brother in order to collect a large sum of cash. The evidence was right there, providing you knew where to look.

I searched their yard for signs of a struggle, which was hard to do towards the end of winter, as everything was either mud or covered in half melted brown snow. After finding nothing, I went to Zach’s house to discuss our next move. He was tall for a nine year old, with short black hair and a face peppered with freckles. He had more energy than he knew what to do with, coming in sudden bursts like a flash grenade.

I don’t know how we ended up in the woods after that, something to do with the color of the sky. I remember standing in Zach's front yard, pointing to the clouds and explaining to him that, because the clouds were lined up in such a way, and due to the sky being the color of a peach, it meant we had to go back to the woods. Obviously.

So we clambered onto our bikes and pedaled quickly along the grey snake of road that wound from his house to mine. We threw our bikes into my front yard and ran for the the towering trees.

“Do you really think this is where it happened?” Zach said as we sprinted beneath their budding branches.

“Absolutely! Everything we’ve found so far points to this being the place,” I said. We came to a halt half way through the woods and began to comb over every inch of mud and ice.

“Why do you think they’d be out here, anyway?” said Zach.

“Maybe this is where their deal was happening, and, and, something went wrong,” I said.

“Yeah! Maybe someone didn’t bring enough money, or, maybe, like, there was another person that showed up, or--”

“--Dude, look,” I said, stopping Zach in his tracks and pointing to the base of a tree.

The sun had begun to dip along with our hopes, when towards the back of the patch of woods right before they vanished into a field of slush, I spotted a wallet. It was half buried, the brown leather poking out from a small mound of snow.

We crept up to it, walking slowly over as though it might make a break for it should it notice us. I reached down and pulled it free, and looked at Zach. At that moment, things became very real in our minds, our theories seeming more and more concrete. We searched the immediate area and found what looked like drag marks in the ice, spattered with something dried and frozen over, the droplets the color of clay.

We panicked. We ran, fast, from the woods, our minds racing nearly as quick. We had no idea what to do now that we had actual (what we imagined to be anyways) proof that someone had been killed in my backyard. Terrified that we’d be next if someone found out we knew, we lobbed the wallet into the large bushes in front of my house, and forgot the whole ordeal for a number of years. Looking back, the drag marks looked like they had been made by a sled, spattered with what was simply reddish mud. We lived right by the town of Clay, after all.

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One summer, maybe two or three years later, long after the snow had melted, I sat on the front porch with Corey and his friend Jon. He was a few years older than Corey, with brown curly hair and a wolfish grin, the bridge of his nose cut midway with a tiny scar.

 Sitting in the white wicker chairs resting on my front porch and watching the breeze shake the bushes in front of us, it hit me. There, beneath the brush, should be a wallet. Potentially of a murder victim. At the time that seemed very unlikely, as neither I nor Zach had had any contact with the police or heard of anything like that.

I told my brother and Jon the story of how, a few years after we had been discouraged about the haunting in the house, I had gotten it in my head that the owner had actually been murdered, her spirit sending me and my friends on a quest to find out the truth. He and Jon laughed at the thought.

“So you’re telling me there’s someone's wallet underneath these bushes right here?” Jon said, pointing to the bushes with one eyebrow raised.

“I mean I think so, unless someone moved it or we imagined the whole thing,” I said with a shrug.

“Okay, so let’s take a look then,” said Corey, and we all crouched low and peered into the dark beneath the bushes. We glanced at each other to see who would be the one to dig around in the muck.

“I’m the one who put it there so I guess I should be the one that takes it out,” I said. I dug around for a minute, until I pulled out a brown leather wallet, worn and muddy.

“Huh, would you look at that,” Jon said, taking it from me. He flipped through it and pulled out an ID and a five dollar bill. His eyes flicked from Corey to myself before he pocketed it.

Jon wasn’t the nicest of kids. Not entirely his fault, his home life was pretty terrible. His parents were in and out of prison and had some abusive tendencies I think. He and Corey had met in school, and became friends through playing Yu-Gi-Oh.

“Okay, so this address is right down the street, right? So let's go see if anyone’s home,” Jon said, leaping off the tiny ledge at the end of the porch. Corey and I exchanged glances before following after. The address on the ID ended up being the exact opposite end of the street of the red brick house.

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“This is the place,” Jon said, the three of us standing at the base of the driveway. We walked up to the red door and rang the bell, listening for the footsteps leading up to it before a stranger pulled the door open.

“Yes? What can I do for you boys?” the stranger said.

“Excuse me, but I believe you may have lost this a few years ago? We found it in the woods behind my friend’s house,” Jon said.

“Oh wow! I thought this was gone for good. Thanks so much. Wait right here,” the stranger said before closing the door. We heard footsteps and muffled voices. The three of us exchanged looks, eyebrows mimicking one another.

The door opened, and the smiling stranger returned. “Here you are, thanks so much for your kindness!” he said, placing a twenty dollar bill in Jon's outstretched hand.

“No, thank you! We just figured it might be of some use to you, sorry we couldn’t find it sooner!” Jon said, flashing a grin. The stranger smiled once more before closing the door, the three of us turning to leave.

“I bet if two young kids like you and your friend had returned this when you found it, you would’ve gotten waay more than a twenty,” Jon said as we walked back down the street, his hands interlocked on the back of his head, elbows pointed to the sky.

“Yeah, maybe. They were also seven years old and convinced a ghost was telling them to solve her murder, so, acting the way they did is kinda understandable,” Corey said.

“That’s true. I’m glad their first instinct was to hide the evidence though; clearly your parents are doing something right,” Jon said. Corey rolled his eyes. I was too busy staring at the sky and thinking about the amount of candy I could buy at the Red Onion with my newfound wealth. I was just satisfied that my investigation hadn’t ended with a dead body, or me in prison, but instead with a bag of sugary treats and a cold IBC root beer.

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 I think seeing ghosts in empty houses is important. In life, you don’t get special abilities or a letter in the mail when you turn 11 or 18, or find out one of your parents is actually a god in a long forgotten religion, or stumble on a shiny stone that turns out to be a dragon’s egg.

It isn’t like the worlds you see on TV or in the books you read. It’s up to the people who see ghosts or who believe in things that aren’t necessarily there to make it seem like it is.

They are the authors, artists, and creators of the world; the ones who want everyone to see the possibility of adventure and mystery and hidden truths in everything. To keep searching, and to never lose the spark of creativity and ‘what if’ notions.

These people all saw their stories or paintings dance before them once; tugging on people's hair and watching the person swat at it, thinking it was just the wind. But really, it was a ghost. A paranormal thing. Not necessarily a dead person, but, something out of the normal for *that* person. Something on the fringe of their vision that they couldn’t make out.

For some people, that barely seen blob of shadow lurking just out of sight transforms into ghosts or ghouls or tales of strange happenings and things you can’t quite explain. For others, maybe it morphs into an oil painting or a poem, a script or sculpture.

These people see what others can’t and share their ghosts in the hopes of inspiring others to form their own; to keep magic and mysticism and the seeking of adventures and things beyond ourselves alive in the world.

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