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A Head Full of Ghosts

Written by Paul Tremblay

Published by Titan Books Ltd

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PAUL TREMBLAY

A
HEAD
FULL OF
GHOSTS

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TITANBOOKS

A Head Full of Ghosts
Print edition ISBN: 9781785653674
E-book edition ISBN: 9781785653681

Published by Titan Books
A division of Titan Publishing Group Ltd
144 Southwark Street, London SE1 0UP

First Titan edition: September 2016
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group Ltd.

For Emma, Stewart, and Shirley

Epigraph

**My memory, she was first to the plank,
and the B-movie played in the aisle.**

Future of the Left, "An Idiot's Idea of Ireland"

**It is so pleasant to be out in this great
room and creep around as I please!**

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper"

**Do you wanna know a secret? Will you hold it
close and dear? This will not be made apparent,
but you and I are not alone in here.**

Bad Religion, "My Head Is Full of Ghosts"

PART ONE

“This must be so difficult for you, Meredith.”

Best-selling author Rachel Neville wears a perfect fall ensemble: dark blue hat to match her sensible knee-length skirt and a beige wool jacket with buttons as large as kitten heads. She carefully attempts to keep to the uneven walkway. The slate stones have pitched up, their edges peeking out of the ground, and they wiggle under her feet like loose baby teeth. As a child I used to tie strings of red dental floss around a wiggly tooth and leave the floss dangling there for days and days until the tooth fell out on its own. Marjorie would call me a tease and chase me around the house trying to pull the wax string, and I would scream and cry because it was fun and because I was afraid if I let her pull out one tooth she wouldn't be able to help herself and she'd pull them all out.

Has that much time really passed since we lived here?

I'm only twenty-three but if anyone asks I tell them that I'm a quarter-century-minus-two years old. I like watching people struggle with the math in their heads.

I stay off the stones and walk across the neglected front yard, grown wild and unbounded in spring and summer, now beginning to retreat in the new cold of autumn. Leaves and weedy fingers tickle my ankles and grab at my sneakers. If Marjorie were here now, maybe she'd tell me a quick story about worms, spiders, and mice crawling underneath the decaying greenery, coming to get the young woman foolishly not keeping to the safety of the pathway.

Rachel enters the house first. She has a key and I don't. So I hang back, peel a strip of white paint off the front door, and put it in my jeans pocket. Why shouldn't I have a souvenir? It's a souvenir that so many others have helped themselves to by the looks of the flaking door and dandruffed front stoop.

I didn't realize how much I missed the place. I can't get over how gray it looks now. Was it always this gray?

I slink inside so that the front door is a whisper behind me. Standing on the scuffed hardwood of the front foyer I close my eyes to better see this initial snapshot of my prodigal return: ceilings so high I could never reach anything; cast iron radiators hiding in so many of the corners of the rooms, just itching to get steaming angry again; straight ahead is the dining room, then the kitchen, where we mustn't ever linger, and a hallway, a clear path to the back door; to my right the living room and more hallways, spokes in wheels; below me, under the floor, the basement and its stone and

mortar foundation and its cold dirt floor I can still feel between my toes. To my left is the mouth of the piano-key staircase with its white moldings and railings, and black stair treads and landings. The staircase winds its way up to the second-floor in three sets of stairs and two landings. It goes like this: six stairs up, landing, turn right, then only five stairs up to the next landing, then turn right again and six stairs up to the second-floor hallway. My favorite part was always that you were completely turned around when you reached the second floor, but oh, how I complained about that missing sixth stair in the middle.

I open my eyes. Everything is old and neglected and in some ways exactly the same. But the dust and cobwebs and cracked plaster and peeling wallpaper seem faked somehow. Passage of time as a prop to the story, the story that has been told and retold so often it has lost its meaning, even to those of us who lived through it.

Rachel sits at the far end of a long couch in the almost-empty living room. A drop cloth protects the couch's upholstery from anyone careless enough to sit on it. Or perhaps Rachel is the one being protected, with the cloth saving her from contact with a moldy couch. Her hat settles in her lap, a fragile bird that has been bullied from its nest.

I decide to finally respond to her nonquestion, even if it has expired.

"Yes, this is difficult for me. And please, don't call me Meredith. I prefer Merry."

"I am sorry, Merry. Maybe our coming here is a bad idea." Rachel stands up, her hat flutters to the floor, and she

hides her hands in her jacket pockets. I wonder if she has her own paint chips, or strips of wallpaper, or some other pieces of this place's past hidden in her pockets as well. "We could conduct the interview elsewhere, where you would be more comfortable."

"No. Really. It's okay. I willingly agreed to this. It's just that I'm—"

"Nervous. I totally understand."

"No." I say no in my Mom's lilty, singsong. "That's just it. I'm the opposite of nervous. I'm almost overwhelmed by how comfortable I feel. As weird as it sounds, it's surprisingly nice to be back home. I don't know if that makes sense, and I normally don't carry on like this, so maybe I am nervous. But anyway, please, sit, and I'll join you."

Rachel sits back down on the couch and says, "Merry, I know you don't know me very well at all, but I promise that you can trust me. I will treat your story with the dignity and care it deserves."

"Thank you, and I believe you will. I do," I say and sit on the other end of the couch, which is toadstool soft. I'm thankful for the drop cloth now that I'm sitting. "It's the story itself I don't fully trust. It's certainly not my story. It does not belong to me. And it's going to be tricky navigating our way through some of the uncharted territories." I smile, proud of the metaphor.

"Think of me as a fellow explorer, then." Her smile, so unlike mine, is easy.

I ask, "So, how did you get it?"

"Get what, Merry?"

"The key to the front door. Did you buy the house? Not a terrible idea at all. Sure, giving tours of the infamous Barrett House didn't quite financially work out for the previous owner, but that doesn't mean it can't work out now. It'd be great promotion for the book. You or your agent could start the tours again. You could spice things up with readings and book signings in the dining room. Set up a gift shop in the mud room and sell clever and ghoulish souvenirs along with the books. I could help set up scenes or live action skits in the different rooms upstairs. As—how was it worded in our contract again?—'creative consultant,' I could supply props and stage direction. . . ." I lose myself in what was supposed to be a light joke, which goes on way too long. When I finally stop babbling, I hold up my hands and fit Rachel and the couch between the frames of my thumbs and fingers like an imaginary director.

Rachel laughs politely the whole time I'm talking. "Just to be clear, Merry, my dear creative consultant, I did not purchase your house."

I am aware of how fast I am talking but I can't seem to slow down. "That's probably smart. No accounting for the deteriorated physical condition of the place. And what is it they say about buying houses and buying other people's problems?"

"Per your very reasonable request that no one else accompany us today, I managed to persuade the very kind real estate agent to lend me the key and the time in the house."

"I'm sure that's against some sort of housing authority regulations, but your secret is safe with me."

“Are you good at keeping secrets, Merry?”

“I’m better than some.” I pause, then add, “More often than not, they keep me,” only because it sounds simultaneously mysterious and pithy.

“Is it okay if I start recording now, Merry?”

“What, no notes? I pictured you with a pen at the ready, and a small black notebook that you keep proudly hidden away in a coat pocket. It would be full of color-coded tabs and bookmarks, marking the pages that are research bits, character sketches, and random but poignant observations about love and life.”

“Ha! That’s so not my style.” Rachel visibly relaxes and reaches across and touches my elbow. “If I can share a secret of my own: I can’t read my own scribbles. I think a large part of my motivation for becoming a writer was to stuff it in the faces of all the teachers and kids who made fun of my handwriting.” Her smile is hesitant and real, and it makes me like her a whole lot more. I also like that she doesn’t color her pepper-gray hair, that her posture is correct but not obnoxiously so, that she crosses her left foot over her right, that her ears aren’t too big for her face, and that she hasn’t yet made a remark about what a creepy, empty old house my childhood home has become.

I say, “Ah, revenge! We’ll call your future memoir *The Palmer Method Must Die!* and you’ll send copies to your confused and long since retired former teachers, each copy illegibly signed in red, of course.”

Rachel opens her jacket and pulls out her smartphone.

I slowly bend to the floor and pick up her blue hat. After

politely brushing dust from the brim I place it on top of my head with a flourish. It’s too small.

“Ta-dah!”

“You look better in it than I do.”

“Do you really think so?”

Rachel smiles again. This one I can’t quite read. Her fingers tap and flash across the touch screen of her phone and a bleep fills the empty space of the living room. It’s a terrible sound; cold, final, irrevocable.

She says, “Why don’t you start by telling me about Marjorie and what she was like before everything happened.”

I take her hat off and twirl it around. The centrifugal force of the rotations will either keep the hat on my finger or send it flying across the room. If it flies off, I wonder where in the whole wide house it will land.

I say, “My Marjorie—” And then I pause because I don’t know how to explain to her that my older sister hasn’t aged at all in fifteen-plus years and there never was a *before everything happened*.