

EVERY VERSION ENDS IN DEATH

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Long after we had finished our cups of coffee, we found ourselves wandering through the park.

“It’s so weird,” I said. “I expected things to be different, feel different. But it’s as if I’m still fifteen.”

“Nothing ever changes in Clifton,” Sairah said.

“That’s not true,” I said.

“This town is stuck. Nothing comes, nothing goes, we’re all trapped.”

“What about that apartment block?” I pointed across the street.

“It was built when we were in high school.”

“The bookstore?”

“Celebrated its ten-year anniversary last May.”

“Cineplex?”

“Renovated three years ago. But it has that sign saying it’s been open since 2000.”

“School?”

“Went back to talk to the kids about university and it felt like I hadn’t even graduated high school yet. Even the lunch tables are in the same arrangement.”

I tried to think of other examples. I opened my mouth and then closed it.

“We are stuck in some old town, frozen in time. Even our local ghost is over a hundred years old. We haven’t had any new ghosts.”

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*NOTICE: HAYWARD HOUSE SCHEDULED
FOR DEMOLITION*

*The City Council of Clifton has set the demolition of
Hayward House for the end of October 2015.*

Below it, another sign said: *The demolition has been delayed until December 2015.*

A notice below it said: *The demolition is scheduled for June 2016.* The original month had been papered over by “June”, which was now crossed out. Above it, someone had written “September”. I guess they eventually stopped trying to update it.

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I had begun seeing ghosts. Not in the sense that I saw my grandmother walking around the house. But I saw her in my face when I looked in the mirror. In my father’s voice when he told us he’d see us later. In the curls on our heads. In my mother’s turn of phrase when I knocked over a dish. In my father’s expression when he struggled to open a jar of olives. I wondered if when other people saw us, they saw the dead as well. I wondered if we haunted them the way we haunted each other.

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“Do you remember the story of Carolyn from that creepy house on Creek Hill?” I said to Amara on a FaceTime call from my childhood bedroom.

“Oh yeah, the Creep Hill Killer?” she said from her apartment in Chicago.

“What?” I responded. “She didn’t kill people.”

“She totally did.”

“That’s absurd.”

“Of course she did. This is a ghost story.”

“So, she killed people while she was alive? Or after she died?”

“The first. That’s why she became a ghost. Too much guilt.”

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My parents had never moved. I had spent my whole life until the age of eighteen in that house. As I walked through, I could remember where I lost a tooth, where I fell down and twisted my ankle, where I was when I opened my college acceptance letter, my parents on either side of me. I remembered running scared through the dark hallway, avoiding the creaky step on the staircase, slamming the door of my bedroom shut, lugging my suitcase in from the city.

I didn't just remember it, I felt it again, like it was the first time, all at once. As if I was stuck. But also, as if I was all of these people, all of these things and feelings at once.

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"What's the version you heard?" I asked.

"She jumped out of the window," Sairah said. "Suicide."

"What were the other versions?" I asked.

"I heard so many," Sairah said. "I think at some point I combined them in my head. Like, I remember something about a fire. But then that was when we were little and they were teaching us about fire safety."

"Yeah, I remember that."

"So, for a while I thought she jumped out of the window because there was a fire or something like that. But then I think maybe an adult told me that as a child so they wouldn't have to explain suicide to me." After a pause, Sairah continued. "I don't know what's real. I don't even know if she existed. People will construct almost anything."

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I saw Carolyn every time I went for a run. She had a huge gravestone, one of those ornate, enormous marble sculptures. It was a giant statue of her or, I guess, what was supposed to be her. There was no way to confirm, but it didn't really match up to the few illustrations or photos I had seen of her. I wondered who made the decision to mark her grave with a statue. Her parents died before her. She didn't have any other family. She died alone. Or did she? Did she have friends who didn't make it into the ghost stories and history books?

Every time I saw her, I made a left. She was at the corner of a big hill of gravestones, standing out to denote her own importance.

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"Okay, so I asked my mom," Sairah said, as we browsed the farmer's market.

"What did she say?" I asked, lifting up a jar of some kind of jam.

"She died of a broken heart."

“Sounds like something a man would come up with about a woman,” I said, moving on to the next stall.

“Aren’t you even a little bit curious who broke her heart?”

“Umm... maybe her parents dying?”

“Or?”

“Or what?”

“The kind of person most statistically likely to have killed a woman.”

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I walked into the hospital. The walls had been painted a friendly turquoise, rather than the clinical white and sombre beige of my childhood doctor appointments. Everyone was bustling around as usual. There was a mural where the community bulletin board used to be. Tigers and monkeys peered out from brightly coloured, well-defined, uniform leaves. Their eyes looked more googly than real, but they stared out from the acrylic layer and searched my soul. Don’t bother, I felt like telling them, there’s not much here but guilt and grief. Opposite the mural was a set of pamphlets. I grabbed one titled “The History of the Hospital”.

There was a sepia photo of Hayward Manor on it. The photo’s starkness made the house seem even more eerie. The background was that absent shade of beige, outdone in blandness by the Times New Roman font used. I opened it and started reading.

Clifton Children’s Hospital was originally called Hayward Hospital and treated patients of all ages. It was named after its benefactors, Charles and Annabelle Hayward, whose daughter, Carolyn, worked in the hospital as a nurse and, later, in a management position.

Hayward Hospital was renamed Clifton Hospital in the 1950s, as the town of Clifton grew, and the neighbouring towns opened their own hospitals. It was renamed Clifton Children’s Hospital in 1981.

On the opposite flap, there was a portrait of Carolyn, her hair in a tight bun, her features severe and her face expressionless, alongside a description of her:

The daughter of two of the hospital's founders, Carolyn always had an interest in nursing and caretaking. She graduated at the top of her class from the New England College of Nursing and came back home to work. She created the children's wing of the hospital. She worked at Hayward Hospital and lived in Clifton until her mysterious death in 1876.

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I was at Sairah's house when her sister Hena called on FaceTime.

"You remember Creepy Carolyn?" Sairah shouted into the screen, her mouth full of cereal.

Hena nodded and Sairah handed the phone to me.

"Do you remember how the story went?" I asked.

"Yeah, she drowned," Hena said.

"In the bath?" I asked.

"No, in the lake," Hena said.

"We don't have any lakes here, stupid," Sairah said.

"I meant the river," Hena said.

"It's a creek," Sairah corrected.

"The creek, then, whatever it is," Hena said.

"Was it suicide?" I asked.

"No," Hena said. "It was a witch trial."

"A witch trial?" Sairah and I said in unison, looking at each other.

"Yeah," Hena said. "If a woman was thought to be a witch, they would put her in water to test it out. If she didn't drown, she was a witch. But then if she did—"

"We know what the witch trials were, thank you very much," Sairah said.

"So, she drowned," I said. "She wasn't burned at the stake?"

"Drowning was what I heard," Hena said.

"That doesn't make any sense," Sairah said to me. "Is it even the right time period?"

"We're in the right place for it, geographically," I said to Sairah. I turned back towards the phone. "Hena, do you have any idea why she was accused of being a witch?"

Hena and Sairah both said in unison, “She was too smart.”

“Come to think of it, it must have been really easy to accuse people of witchcraft. All you had to do was stand out a little bit, go against someone in some way. Not necessarily challenge them, but do something you weren’t supposed to.”

“And then everyone turns against you,” Sairah said. “For something you didn’t even do.”

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