

### “Ghost Hunt”

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Seven of them stood in the twilight. The one building left from the schools rose in front to be outlined by clouds and a gray sky fading into black. The brick expanded to the east and to the west, one long, large block of rooms and rotting wood. This was no mansion, no castle, no estate, however. In size, yes. Not in history. Not one had admitted to being there before, maybe tossing stones when young, or writing on the brick as part of a dare.

Even in 2071, they still heard the stories from other kids of seeing shadows and hearing crying starting in elementary school—getting less concrete as the people telling them grew older. They made a pact that once June came, graduation weekend to be exact, they would explore the school grounds. Really, they would ghost hunt. Brenner had brought the plan to them, the one excited about uncovering mysteries and revealing “truths.” He wanted to know what was left there.

“What really happened? Shouldn’t we know. For sure. Shouldn’t we?” His brown eyes turned round and browner.

The quick static of his words pushed them. His adventures were often fun...in the end. They could feel the excitement, or at least curiosity, float to their own blood. Well, most of them.

“Should we be bringing that to the surface?” Carrie had asked. “The spirits—We could find anything.” She had shivered then when he first brought up the idea. But long-time friends often agreed to things they normally wouldn’t.

“Spirits?” said Brenner. He sighed. “Maybe they need us to do this. Why else would I see it so clearly?”

Carrie stared into his eyes, then carefully searched his face for answers. He seemed serious. She shrugged.

So there they were. Graduated. Holding gear and covered in it. Ground detection devices. EVP machines. Special spirit sonar signaling things that only he knew the function of. Another Brenner desire. He searched around the internet for deals on rentals of the stuff. Gear was so easy to get, ghost hunting a big business in every town now.

Carrie didn’t understand the need. Wasn’t it all there everyday without boxes of electric static and heat readers? But they mostly did everything together—grew up side by side through blood relation and parents who were best friends.

Lena had agreed. They sat on Carrie's bed in the middle of a Chilkat blanket with ovoids and formlines worked into a sea monster. Carrie's aunt by another marriage, not blood, lived in Alaska, married to a Tlingit man. The ghost hunt had made Lena giggle. "Those boys and their toys. It will be fun, though."

They all stared at him, waiting for their directions, Lena and Carrie exchanging glances. Brenner grinned wide. He put the two cases in his hands down on the grass. "We need to get our stuff organized. Let's turn everything on and set up some kind of meet room as a main space."

"Do we know what's safe? Where to walk or stay away from?" Shenan asked. He pushed his glasses up to the bridge of his nose. Wavy blonde hair fell across his eyes. Always practical, he was on safety that night. Or so he decided.

"Yeah. Maybe let's check the blueprints," said Tim.

Jayden stepped forward and strode over to the stairs. "Just go in," he said. He rolled his eyes, which no one else could see. They all knew he did it, though. He dragged his wheeled bag full of equipment up the stairs, scraping wood as he went.

Nonie followed and nearly hopped up the stairs, Brenner right behind her.

A dog howled close to the house. His eyes lit in movements of green and yellow.

Carrie turned to glance behind her and saw the dog's glowing eyes. "This should be fun."

The dark didn't fully dissipate with their headgear and flashlights. Brenner wanted the air to remain mostly black anyway. That way, perhaps the ghosts will feel less disturbed. They decided to use the front room to the left, which appeared to be an office complete with desk and filing cabinets and a screen of cobwebs.

They popped open cases with clicks and snaps. Tripods and other stands set up with one button. Shenan unwound cables and cords. Most everything worked on battery. The small lights emerged from the cases and cast light enough to shine around the room. Yellow spread across their faces and sent shadows along the walls in the shapes of their bodies.

Brenner directed the set up.

The phone implant buzzed music into his mind. Another latest. No one really understood how the implant worked. That had been kept secret. One day in surgery, and there the information began. Feeds ran through his head of phone numbers calling him. Literally contacting him. His brother. His cousin. He ignored them and swiped them away in his mind.

"These cameras will capture the human form. We can then see who they were." He typed on the tiny keyboard and brought up a program. It cast a green light off of the screen when the

camera sent information back. Nothing showed. "Pose in front of the camera." Brenner pointed to Carrie.

She stood there, her hands behind her back.

"Lighting seems good enough," said Brenner.

Carrie stepped immediately aside.

"Didn't your aunt explore caves?" asked Jayden.

Tim shook his head to stop Jayden.

Lena threw Carrie a look, her eyes going from blue to gray.

"Yeah. She did," Carrie said.

"Well, didn't she teach you tips for looking for ghosts?" asked Nonie.

Carrie stared for a minute, blinked, then said, "No. No tips. That wasn't ghosts."

Nonie shrugged.

"That was sooo long ago," said Lena. She waved her hand to move away the moment, and put her arm through the crook of Carrie's. The two steered toward Shenan and his cables.

"You know, she doesn't talk about her family," said Jayden. He moved a camera over a few inches, and then peered through the lens.

"Why did you ask, then?" said Nonie. Her red curls bounced around her shoulders.

"Why not? She could use some prodding."

Nonie laughed and leaned over closer to the camera cheek to cheek with Jayden. He also ignored the buzzing in his head full of numbers and noises.

Brenner sat at the desk, hands crooked behind his head, he leaned back in the creaking chair and took it all in.

Tim and Nonie were the first to put on the equipment, pushing buttons, and setting dark lights to flame. The stairs creaked under their weight with each careful step. Brenner made it clear they went slowly to fully capture everything.

"Turn your heads around. Allow the whole picture to come through." Brenner adjusted their small headgear until he was satisfied. "We want to capture everything!"

With his hand up behind him, Tim kept Nonie just next to him from running ahead.

"What'll we find?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I think maybe it's best that we don't."

"Oh, but to talk about it. We have to. Then we actually proved that they're here. All those things that people don't know about. You know." Nonie peered up at him. He towered over her, he in his six-foot frame and she at five-foot three. Her eyes appeared serious, not the usual bright.

"What do we have to prove?" he asked.

"Their existence, silly. You know, we're not just talking to the air when they're around." Light entered her face.

At the top of the stairs, she sprinted ahead. He let her go. A small smile lifted around his mouth. Before moving in her tread, he caught the edges of a window, dark night hanging on, with moonlight streaming through the glass.

Lena turned on her light and adjusted her equipment. The boxy heft of it all fell mostly on her shoulders.

Brenner pointed to Jayden to go with her. They would cover the grounds outside taking with them a detector—something that wasn't light or easy. There were a number of crumbled buildings out there that might hold some answers.

"Jayden knows the stuff. And he can explore that out there in the pitch black with nothing else if need be," said Brenner.

Lena figured out why. Some of those writings on the walls looked familiar. Words in old language she had heard elders whisper. She sighed. Lena and Jayden had dated for about four months when they were fifteen. The group thought they would get married, considering how Jayden stared at her in hidden moments. So the boys thought. And Carrie. He lost interest really quickly when some new girl with larger breasts gave him saucer brown eyes at his locker every morning. Probably also didn't help that his dad had just gotten out of jail and settled back at home.

"Careful," said Carrie after them. "Some wild dog was out there earlier."

They opened the back door, quite a few rooms away from the front office, and stared out at black. Clouds shifted over the moon, covering most of the orb.

"Well, put on the goggles," said Jayden. He tilted his down on to his nose. "Where's that dog?"

Lena put her goggles on. Ghost hunting became popular again in Rochester in Mount Hope Cemetery the previous summer. A team of paranormal investigators said they had caught Frederick Douglass on camera chatting with Susan B. Anthony. Ghost hunting skyrocketed.

"I don't see him. Think he's gone?"

"This way," said Jayden. He pointed to a large willow in the back, hanging down in strings of leaves.

The goggles gave them night vision without all the bulk.

"Well come on." Jayden tugged on her jean jacket and practically steered her.

"Good lord. Let me go and figure out my own way."

"Stop the feisty act." He paused at the tree and took out the detector. "It doesn't suit you."

Lena yanked a camera out of her backpack. "You're a smart ass." Fiddling with the buttons and the screen, she pulled up the setting for nighttime, outdoors, and ghost apparitions.

"You used to like that."

"Yeah, well, I grew up."

"Off to Yale in the fall?"

"Maybe."

"Seriously. Maybe. All that intelligence going to waste."

She laughed. "Look in the mirror." Even in the dark, and even with night goggles, she could just make out a frown and his turned eyes. "Let's just get this done."

Jayden snapped parts together. With a whirl and a flashing light, the detector blinked on.

Nonie stepped across the wooden floor, which gave way to old age and boards grating against each other. She thought she saw something down at the end of this hallway. Tim followed behind her. He couldn't quite keep up. Most people couldn't quite keep up with Nonie.

"Something's here," she said. "Can you feel it?"

"No," he said. He leaned on the wall and stared down the hallway. The corner of their glasses showed the camera's output—where those of the other side might appear. Nothing.

"Keep going." She waved him on.

They passed a room where the door stood slightly ajar. Nonie pushed the door open. The darkness took over corners. This didn't seem to bother Nonie. She rushed around the room, then shrugged.

Tim wondered, though, and paused. The hairs on his arms prickled and he felt a movement spread up his arms. With a whirl of air, Nonie left the room.

She slowed down only long enough to let questions spin out of her mouth. “What do you think of the new implants?”

“Don’t know as I would want voices in my head.” He shook his head. Tim couldn’t imagine anything good could come from metal in the head that rang in phone calls and music and all manner of other things. It was supposedly a private company start-up, inventing what only science fiction had ever imagined. But where does anyone get that kind of money?

“Well, it’s only as you would choose. You know.” She pointed to her head. “All the music of your choice. Talking with no phone in your hand.” Her legs carried her forward again, into the next room. The words echoed against the walls.

They continued down the hallway, in and out of rooms on either side. Most of the building stood empty. Perhaps people had ransacked the rooms and walked away with items. Some rooms still held objects, left just as if the person would return. Dressers, glistening metal beds, clothes hooks on the walls, and one mirror with corrosion over half the image. Dust and dirt caked everything. A spider sat very still in its web as the two passed by. The silk strands shook ever so slightly.

Tim remained in the room with the beds a bit longer than in the other rooms. Long gone were the mattresses. Empty frames almost said no one was here.

“Tim,” called Nonie.

He sprinted toward her voice.

Her eyes bright, and perhaps frightened, too, blinked. “I saw them.”

Brenner sat in the office flipping from camera channel to camera channel. Nothing but darkness. But he knew something would appear. They would have to be attracted to this attention. These were their ancestors.

The air in the office hung heavy with dust and the smell of wet dirt. It had rained a few days before. And the chill from that lingered in all aspects, even though mud patches around the yard had begun to dry up and become manageable again.

Still, sweat dripped down his forehead. The humidity of the area normally saved for the end of July came earlier—in that moment, in that space.

The music app in his head played “Brokenpromisedland” by Bon Jovi startling Brenner. He hadn’t called up the music and immediately told the notes to quiet.

Darkness crawled into the corners around him, as well. Where there was no light, there was no need to see. So the rooms said.

This didn't bother Brenner. Or really, he didn't notice. He never wavered from his laptop and from the cameras of others. He didn't notice the drawers of the filing cabinets slowly slipping out out out, along the old tracks.

On the first floor, Carrie swung her flashlight around. The strange intensity of the night goggles and the cameras appearing in the corners of their eyes bothered her. She knew it would. Shenan walked next to her, his goggles on over his glasses, creating a strange bulging out along his face.

He continued to try to put his hand on the small of her back, a habit of guiding women, not out of a need to touch her. She saw this, and each time, walked ahead, just out of reach.

"We should slow down a bit," he said. With his head down, he tapped his foot on the boards, checking for rot.

"They made this place pretty indestructible. Not a lot of air gets in here," she said.

Carrie appeared to own the place with her shoulders straight, long strides, and blank eyes. He knew this way she was trying to push back what she felt. She didn't want to give herself away.

"Here," she pulled on a doorknob. Behind the door were stairs, working their way down into the unknown black. Shining her light, they both noted the footprints in the dust. "It's the basement. Maybe one of the others went down."

"Those look fresh." He swiped his fingers in one of the feet. "Yeah." Shenan held out his hand and pushed her back. "Maybe not this way right now."

"Why not?" She steered around him, her shoes hitting stairs with their swift movement.

Back and forth, Jayden moved the detector in slow pivots along the ground, along the trees, along the night air. Lena waited with her hands on her hips. The night noises invaded their space. Cicadas echoed each other, buzzing on low with consistent vibrations. A peeper frog joined, with high pitched peep peep peeps. Then an owl called out. This particular call, she recognized as the hunter aiming for his prey. Trees hung over them, forming motionless straggly arches.

"Nothing" said Jayden.

"Maybe that's a good thing." She stared at the night's deep blackness beyond them. Even though she had passed this place many times during middle school dares, she still couldn't imagine what had occurred here. There were rumors...

Jayden shrugged. "He swears there must be something here. Somewhere."

She pushed her thoughts away. "He has spent a little too long planning this out."

Jayden smiled. "Our whole high school existence." He admired Brenner's intelligence and passion. He had his own thing, which Jayden hadn't yet found.

"What was that?" A twig snapped, close enough to cause her to turn in a 360.

"Nothing is out there." He held the detector steady, but his voice waved her off. He remembered that she got scared easily.

"Then why are we here?"

"I mean nothing out here will hurt us," he retorted. "That dog is probably a neighbor's dog." He walked further and further back, sweeping, crossing his path twice, and then crossing over it again. Electronic waves emanated over the area and outlined trees and momentarily even the dog. But nothing beyond that.

Lena held up the camera, panning it around, also crossing her own digital path.

Jayden stopped.

Lena almost ran into him. She stopped.

He swept the area again. Fast, then slow. Slow, then fast. A dog howled in the distance, or maybe a coyote.

The music in his head turned off, then on. Off, then on. Maybe Beethoven.

"What the fu—"

Tim had caught up to Nonie. They came to the end of the second floor and she finally slowed with fewer places to explore.

"What was in this building, do you think?" asked Nonie.

"Beds, dressers, dorm rooms? Some kind of living quarters. I don't know."

"Medical center?" Her voice went quiet. The last room, this one on the right, stood darker than the rest. If that was possible. The window faced the backyard. However, the moon still held back behind clouds. A long, gray metal table fallen over on its side, and the sink by the door, created a distinct difference between this room and the rest. A stethoscope looped over the clothes hooks.

Tim's heart sunk and quivered. Nonie stood still.

"Those stories..." Nonie whispered.



"Nothing good came of any of these places." He closed his eyes.

Scratching came from the closet now behind him.

Nonie grabbed his sleeve and stared from him, then to the closet. Nothing showed in her goggles.

The basement's musty air floated around them. Carrie had made her way to the center of the room. Or at least what they could see. Nothing hung back in this room. No objects, no leftover materials.

"It just looks like a basement," said Shenan. He scuffed his foot in the dirt floor, sending swirls up in the air he could not see, but felt when he swallowed.

"There isn't anyone else down here," she said. She had shown her light all the way around. The footprints ended at the stairs.

"That a door?"

Carrie squinted her eyes. Far in the right-hand corner, a gleam revealed a doorknob, perhaps. A cobweb marked her face and grabbed onto her hair. She tried to pluck the strands out, but felt it useless. The strings lingered, sending twitches along her arms in response.

Once closer, the door stood only as tall as she and disappeared into the wall, built to match the corners.

"This space isn't as long or far back as the house." Shenan ran his hands over the sides of the hidden door.

"What does that mean?" Carrie asked.

"This can't be all of it."

"Clearly. There's a door." She laughed. The sound floated along the walls and out into the house.

"No. I mean—" He stopped. "That might not be all." He slowly, slowly turned all the way. Nothing else in the room.

The door creaked and groaned. "Come on," she said. She passed through to the other side before Shenan could pull her back in.

His goggles continued to see only outlines of walls and braces rising up not too far above them. He didn't like the sheer emptiness of the space, not for all he knew the brick and wood had once held.

The ceiling dipped in the middle and they would need to bend to continue on through the door.

"It doesn't go any further," she said. This was a small room, smaller than what they had just walked through. The square space was dark, sure, but also empty. A person couldn't hide in that space. But staring inside gave her deep chills. What was the room for?

"Any other doors?"

"No."

They both bent and leaned in to peer all the way back.

The office grew warmer with all of the clicks and whirs of equipment and lights. Brenner leaned back. He should have been out there. But he couldn't leave. His eyes remained on the screens.

The front door slammed.

He couldn't decide between the screen and the door. Screen or door. Finally, he pushed his chair back and broke himself away. The hallway was clear. The extra pair of goggles helped him to see. No people. Or rather no past people. He smirked to himself.

He didn't hear any wind outside or even bursts of breezes.

Out onto the front porch, he scanned the night. Satisfied that he only heard some wind or animal, Brenner headed back to the office. He noticed the filing cabinet drawer rolled out partway.

It wasn't like that before, he thought.

Inside, lined up in rows, stood files upon files. He assumed the other drawers held the same. They wouldn't open. So he flipped through these names. His aunt called and called, her numbers scrolling through his mind, which he ignored as his fingers touched old, old paper.

The scratching stopped. Nonie and Tim stood still. Nonie's eyebrows raised and her hands swayed a bit.

"I am not opening that door," said Tim in response to Nonie's pleading eyes.

"Well, *I'm* not either."

They both stared at the door.

He leaned on the windowsill. She tapped her foot.

"We can't stand here all night," said Nonie. "Why don't the goggles show anything?" She tapped the ends of her frames.

"The wood? ... The closet is by the only exit. I don't know. Brenner didn't exactly explain how all of this works." He paused. "Wait, why aren't we all in communication with one another, or at least with Brenner?"

She shrugged. "That's not the only exit." She twisted her thumb toward the window behind him.

He leaned back and peered down to the grass below. It was too far for them to jump, over... just a ghost. "No."

They both sighed.

"I could've sworn I saw something." Her voice lost most of its perk. As much as she wanted to see one of her ancestors, this was not the way. Her father had told her that her great great aunty and great great grandmother had attended this school. The thought that she could interact with her relatives made her giddy, up until now.

"I know." Tim wanted to relieve her fears. But something began to work up his spine. Their experience reminded him of his cousin warning him not to disturb what couldn't be seen. When he was a child, he had seen shadows and wanted to talk to them.

"Dude, that's Hollywood shit," his cousin had said, shutting Tim down. He had pressed everything back and back after that.

"They were *real* figures. Not ghosts," she emphasized.

"I know." He turned to look out the window again. Jayden and Lena remained side by side. But they had moved, were moving. Lena's hand laid flat against her mouth. And her body may have been trembling.

A yell came from the backyard. Glowing light, the only light, beamed from the detector they leaned over.

"They found something," he said.

"We have to look in there, you know." Nonie touched his arm. He didn't move.

Facing the closet again, he said, "I know."

He arched the detector in circles. And more circles. It continued to pick them up. They were all over the yard in that area past the tree. The notes ran all over his head, in his ear drums, vibrating his blood. Voices from the metal device pushed in.

"How..." Lena stopped. She had been trying to speak for ten minutes. Her words came out in starts. She never finished them. "I..."

He paused at one spot sometimes. But he couldn't help but keep rotating and making more appear on the screen. He couldn't help what was below. But he knew he had to find them all. And he also knew that wasn't possible. He began to use the beat banging along his brain cells, to move with the tone's drive.

"Who..."

He couldn't help her. He couldn't speak. He couldn't stop.

She sighed. Bumps had already worked their way over her arms and legs. The prickles began shortly after. All sounds in the yard seemed to fade into the far back of her ears and mind.

"Shouldn't we..."

She noticed that the grass didn't grow very tall in this area. It did far far back from there. Nobody mowed the property that she knew of. Brown clumps of dirt and moss spread across the entire expanse. Stubby shoots pushed out here and there.

"Nothing grows here."

He stopped and then pivoted around. She was right. They met eye to eye.

That whole area. There could be *hundreds* of them.

The moon pushed away the clouds and filtered down into the basement. Gritty dust and dirt over the panes of glass made the light appear fractured and cloudy.

"There's nothing down here." Shenan felt the walls. The crumbled texture bit at his fingertips and left a damp after touch to them. "Here." He reached for her flashlight. She held on even when he took it. Finally, she let go. He swiped his longer brown hair behind his ears as the strands had fallen across his eyes.

Following the walls, Shenan stooped and stepped around the entire room. He touched each crack, checking for any gap or any other way into the rest of the basement. "It has to be here."

"What?" She turned another 360 degrees slowly, taking in each crack and each shadow.

"More ways under the house."

"Do you think there might be other stairs in another part of the house?"

"Maybe." His voice showed distraction. Once he covered the entire room, he threw his hands up. "Can't find anything more. It just seems so strange."

"The whole place is strange. The whole idea is strange." Carrie shivered and rubbed her hands up and down her arms.

"What do you mean?"

She stared up at the ceiling. Her eyes adjusted to the dark without her flashlight. The lines of the wood showed careful craftsmanship. Grooves fit together just so. Yet knowing its age, she assumed there must be dry rot underneath in the veins of the boards. How did this building still stand, so caught in time?

"There's nothing here and everything here."

Shenan searched her eyes. They had turned downward, and he knew she was sad. He didn't wish to see her that way.

"Let's just go look for other ways down to the other side," she said.

The closet door made no noise as it opened. Tim stepped back, assuming the worst. When nothing ran out, he peered around into the inner depths. His goggles didn't pick up anything. No figures.

Nonie put her hands on his shoulder and leaned in.

"Wow."

"What is going on?" He scratched his head.

"I don't know. They were here. I just know it." She squealed out the last line.

"Well, we've looked at everything. There's nothing here." Maybe mice or something had scrambled about through the rafters, he thought. That seemed more...realistic. "Let's go outside," he said. "See what they found."

As they wandered back through the maze of hallways, around and around, the dark rooms pulled back inside themselves, even just as the light turned outside.

Jayden and Lena startled when Nonie and Tim stepped up next to them.

"Find anything?" asked Tim.

Jayden kept his eyes on the detector. Lena's eyes appeared wild and shifty. Neither spoke.

"Oh, come on. Share," said Nonie. When she peered down into the screen of the detector, she choked on her own saliva. That sent shivers down Tim's spine. She held up her hand to keep him away. Tim pushed past her.

"Good God," said Tim.

Nonie's entire body began shaking. Her arms around herself did not stop this. They followed each other, kind of like geese. When one turned, the rest instinctually reacted in the same turn or step.

"How many?" asked Tim. He had already counted twenty-five in the five minutes they stood there, back and forth, back and forth.

"More," said Lena. "More."

"Should we catalogue them?" asked Tim.

"Catalogue?" said Lena. She stopped, then got close enough to Tim so that they were chest to chest. "They don't belong in a catalogue. Do. You. Hear. Me." Her finger on his chest resulted in a hard swallow from him. She turned back to the screen, then looked back at the house. A deep purple spreading along the skyline changed the hue of the landscape. But the deep brown of the house remained the same, dark.

"Brenner?" Lena peered toward the house, wondering if he saw. If he knew.

The downstairs held many doors. So Shenan and Carrie spent precious time moving around the space and in and out of rooms.

"How is it that this building is so intact?" asked Shenan. He expected to find floors they couldn't cross, ceilings falling down, doors off of hinges. Cobwebs and dust were about the only things that seemed normal about the old place.

Carrie turned every knob and peered into every room. She chose to focus on what was inside rather than Shenan. Every detail, every nook behind each door, she took in and filed away in her memory. These spaces had stories to reveal that perhaps weren't something that evening could offer them. "Maybe a way in doesn't exist."

"It would have been a great waste of space back then if they didn't use all areas."

"Doesn't mean it was built that way. It could have just been filled in from the beginning, concrete or something." She paused at one room in particular, closer to the front of the house. Carrie thought she heard a noise down the hallway and paused. Nothing. This room she stepped into. It was small, perhaps only large enough for a desk and shelves, which no longer existed. What surprised her was how dark the room was, even with their headlamps. Not even a small amount of starlight could alter this darkness. She almost thought she saw a figure writing at a desk, scribbling names, and then it was gone. Carrie shook her head.

"I suppose. Hey, shouldn't we be slowing down as we open those doors? You know, check every room out?"

"I just want to find it if it's here." He hadn't seen her doing just that. Her scans might have been quick, but she would never forget how the rooms made her feel and what she imagined in each piece of wood.

The next door, the one farthest to the left side of the house, released must and damp from its space sealed so long. She smiled and started down.

It was like a large box. Smaller than the other side. One shine of the flashlight, and they could see that there was no other door. No other anything.

"Dust and cobwebs and dirt floor," said Shenan. "Let's go back and check out the other rooms." He wanted to keep them moving and not let her settle into the darkness.

Shadows moved, cutting by the tiny, rectangular windows.

"Fine."

Rooms were small, like the second basement room. Identical box next to identical box.

"These must have all been administrative," said Shenan. "It's odd that there's no living room or dining room or the like."

"It's got to be the main house, then, for sure." Carrie's body and voice revealed defeat. "Everything processed here."

"I haven't heard a thing from anyone else. Where are they all?"

"Don't know." A rising sun caught her attention. From a window in that room, the four others stood still, right at her vantage point. They stayed, locked in their stance as Carrie stared. Lena stared right back at her. "There," she pointed.

She didn't wait for Shenan.

The two emerged on the back porch. Shenan's headlamp flickered off and he saw darkness suddenly flow over him. The only light the glow from the detector. At the site, the others didn't stir. Carrie had run ahead of him, but he knew to take his steps slowly.

"Have you seen Brenner?" asked Lena. Both shook their heads 'no.' "He's not responding to the walkie. I'm going in then. He's got to come out here."

"I'll come with you," Shenan offered. She waved him away.

"What's going on?" asked Carrie. "Lena?" She watched her friend walk away, back straight, and for her, tense. "Y'all?"

Nonie pointed to the screen, still glowing, blue and yellow and white. Glowing.

Her aunt who had cave explored had always told Carrie that the unexpected happened when you believed in those occurrences. But what happened was never what you assumed. The unknown could be more shocking and it could be nothing at all.

"What the hell?" said Carrie. She yanked the detector from Jayden. His grip had tightened so that his knuckles were white. She somehow pried it away with one pull. He stood there, his face contorted into disbelief, disbelief that he had stopped. Disbelief that he could no longer see the screen, see them. He couldn't turn off the music in his head, no matter how much he willed the waves gone.

Carrie held the detector up close to her face, staring down into the light and into the outlines of many small bodies.

"Brenner! Brenner! Where are you?" Lena made her way from the back to the front. "Why aren't you on the walkie?" Once at the office, she found him, eyes on the screens in front. Just as they had left him. "Brenner?"

"Yeah?"

"I've been calling you. On the walkie. Throughout the house."

"Oh." He checked the walkie, pressing buttons. "Battery's dead. Strange. I replaced all of them."

"Maybe it's a dud...Brenner. You need to come outside. Haven't you seen us all out there?"

He looked around. Everything was in order, it seemed. He had visuals for all cameras. And now, they stood outside. All of them. How had he missed that? He shook his head. "No, I didn't notice."

"Jayden and I have been out there nearly three, maybe four hours." She lost her breath and couldn't slow her words down. Her lungs had to work more than usual and all she wanted to do was drag him outside.

Brenner's eyes remained blank. He really hadn't seen them. She snapped her fingers a few times. Then she took his hand and led him out of the room. When he walked ahead of her, she turned back to the room. Everything hummed and whirred and worked. She couldn't see anything to cause worry. The cameras really were fine. Did Brenner fall asleep? After all this planning?



Carrie counted. Just as they all had. The outlines of what used to be bones lay in various positions, curled into a ball, flat out, face up, face down, intact, not fully all there. All white with a blue glow around them from the camera. All in their own suspended, small space. When bones decayed, their degraded materials stood out differently from the rest of the soil. There were marked graveyards at other schools. Carrie had even heard rumors that years ago long before they were born, Canada had findings of mass unmarked graves. But that searching stopped when the long sickness stopped. None of it taught in history class in the US. That much she knew. No one paid attention to human rights when their own life wasn't hanging in the balance. She sighed. And then stopped after a while. She got to twenty. That was enough for her. She knew there were more without asking. She knew the site went back far beyond their scope. When Brenner and Lena returned, she handed the detector over to Brenner.

He stared for a moment. "This isn't what I thought," he said.

"None of us thought," said Shenan. "It's still...something. It's still what we need to know."

"It's not them," said Brenner.

"What the fuck, man. Who is them?" Jayden barked. His hands swung around with his words. "This...Uuughh."

"You know, talk to them. Talk to ghosts. Interact with them. With our ancestors." Brenner blinked. He was serious.

"Nonie heard something. Even saw something, too," said Tim.

Nonie kept her head down, but nodded. "Yeah. I guess. I don't know anymore."

"You did?!" Brenner grabbed her shoulders. "What did they look like?"

"Didn't you get the moment on film?" she asked. "I don't know. I didn't talk to them. It was a fleeting moment. God, Brenner." She threw his hands off of her and leaned on Tim. He put his arms around her.

"Sorry," Tim said. "I thought there was more, I guess."

"Maybe it is on film. But I didn't see anything while watching your walkthrough." Brenner hurried back inside, practically running, running.

"He was weird when I found him," said Lena. "It's like he phased out—maybe the whole time. Maybe part of the time. It...It's like he wasn't there."

They all turned to each other and then back to the house.

They put their equipment away with clicks and pops of cases the only sound. Arms and legs moved slower than set up. The excitement had left everybody.

"It's for the best," said Carrie. When she looked back down the hallway, a shiver passed down her spine. This was not the place to talk to their ancestors. Something terrible lived here. Or maybe nothing at all could be captured there, barren of life.

Lena nodded, as did Shenan. Lena hid a tear sliding down her cheek. The rest kept to themselves, engrossed in packing up.

The seven of them stepped outside into the morning. Some of the cases gleamed. They trudged down the steps and toward the road over the hill.

"It's just an old building," said Jayden.

"You saw those bodies." Shenan's voice rose. He could feel heat rise throughout his chest and face.

"I know. But that doesn't mean the school's haunted. It's not the same..." Jayden shrugged, his arms fully out like he might fly or flap those arms.

"We came for nothing." Brenner's voice spoke softly. The lines of the house stood behind him, just lighting with dawn.

Nonie shook her head. She wrapped her arms around her body. Prickles on the back of her neck had been rippling for several hours. No, maybe it was the whole night or half the night. "I don't think it was nothing," said Nonie.

Tim continued to hold Nonie.

Lena remained quiet. She picked up her equipment.

No one else spoke.

Their silhouettes disappeared, hills rising beyond them.

From behind one corner of the house, shadows hang, maybe watching. Maybe waiting.

**Melissa Michal** is of Seneca, Welsh, and English descent. She is a fiction writer, essayist, photographer, and a professor. She received an NEH summer fellowship and has been grateful to read at the National American Indian Museum in DC and Amerind Museum in Dragoon, AZ. Melissa has work appearing in *The Florida Review*, *Arkana*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, and other spaces. Her short story collection, *Living Along the Borderlines* (2019), out with Feminist Press, was a finalist for the Louise Meriwether first book prize. Her first novel, *Along the Hills*, and non-fiction lyric essay collection, *Broken Blood*, are both finished. She is at work on a new dystopian novel.