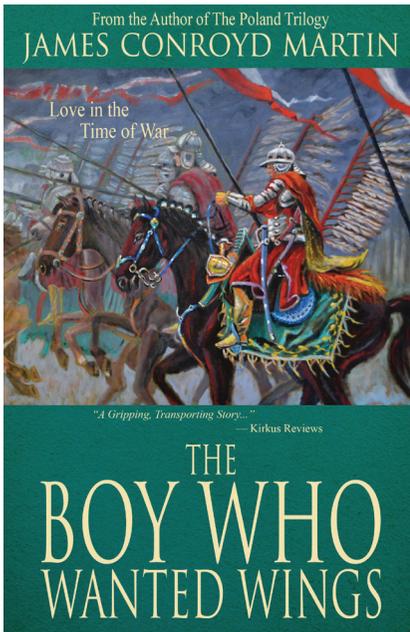


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HOLOGRAM: A HAUNTING

HOLOGRAM: A HAUNTING



AUTHOR OF THE POLAND TRILOGY
JAMES CONROYD MARTIN

HUSSAR
QUILL PRESS



Hologram: A Haunting

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First Print Edition: 2014

Editor: Mary Rita Perkins Mitchell

Cover and Formatting: Streetlight Graphics

House on cover: Houmas House, Burnside, LA; Kevin Kelly, owner www.Houmashouse.com

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For Scott H. Hagenssee

ALSO BY
JAMES CONROYD MARTIN

2017 IPPY GOLD MEDAL WINNER

The Boy Who Wanted Wings

THE POLAND TRILOGY

Push Not the River Book One

Against a Crimson Sky Book Two

The Warsaw Conspiracy Book Three

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS NOVEL WOULD NOT HAVE been possible without the inspiration of Scott Hagensee, his research into the history of a particular Hammond house, the family that had it built, and the characteristics of Hammond, Indiana, in 1910-11. Moreover, occurrences experienced in the house provided the impetus of the fictional story.

Kudos go to editor extraordinaire Mary Rita Perkins Mitchell for her editing skills and incisive continuity suggestions.

This is one of those books writers sometimes set aside for a while. It was brought to the forefront first by Kathryn Mitchell and then by John Rdzak, Ellen Longawa, Linda Hansen, and by master of the science fiction and fantasy genres, Piers Anthony.

Angels, and ministers of grace, defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damn'd.
Bring with thee airs from heaven, or blasts from hell.
Be thy intents wicked or charitable.
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape ...

Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 1.4

PROLOGUE

HAMMOND, INDIANA
JULY 1911

“DAMN!” NINE-YEAR-OLD CLAUDE REICHART WHISPERED under his breath as he kicked a stone across the gravel drive that led to the old barn. His father’s favorite curse tasted good on his tongue. Good enough to repeat it, louder. He kicked again. The dust of a dry summer lifted, eddied, and slowly settled, its effect pleasing the boy.

He looked up at the barn that was being used as a garage, squinting in the glare of the sun. His wire-rimmed spectacles had become dusty. He removed them and wiped the lenses with a hanky, all the while mesmerized by the fading and blistering red of the barn.

Forbidden territory.

Claude replaced the spectacles and looked sideways, to the house. He knew he should return to the swing on the verandah. But it would be another hour, his mother had told him, before he would play for the church ladies, who would whisper and coo and nod, fans flashing and huge hats bobbing. He deemed most of them silly women, their doting something to endure. He was anxious to be back at the black and white keys, feeling the

vibration and noise and power of the music at his command. It was only then that he felt happy.

Now, for once he wished he had a friend to help ease his boredom. Not that he got any pleasure out of the kind of play children his own age found fun.

Claude was too smart not to be aware of his difference from other children. He did have a vague recollection of that day, at four years old, when his father sat him down on a stool in front of a new upright Steinway. Or perhaps his father had repeated the story so many times that he merely thought he remembered. But he could not recall a time before the piano. Music, it seemed had been his existence always, as much a part of him as breathing. His father often remarked that playing and inventing melodies came to him as if to a bird. Mr. Schmidt, the music master his father had hired, agreed.

The heat of the noon sun stung Claude's face and arms and legs, and the discomfort prompted Claude to move. Ahead of him, temptation beckoned. He started slowly toward the two-story structure that housed the family's two electric cars.

He knew the barn was full of curiosities from the past. Harnesses, riding crops, and implements from the days when the land had been farm land. Things to examine, wonder at, touch. Things more modern, too, like the mysteriously massive and intricate transformers that charged the family cars. There was danger in electricity, his father had warned, but Claude was thinking now that it would be cool inside.

After ten or twelve paces, he brought himself up short. He paused, listening to the lilting cadences of the women's laughter, his mother's soprano ringing above the others'.

He sucked in a long breath. He knew that he should return to the verandah, that his mother would look for him there. And yet . . .

He removed his spectacles and wiped at them again. By the time he put them back on, his indecision had evaporated.

His body lurched into motion, and with just a few quick and furtive steps, he slipped into the structure his father had proclaimed *verboten*.



“Where is the child?” Polly Davis questioned. “When shall we hear him play?”

Alicia Reichart nodded in the direction of the dining room door that led out onto the verandah. “Claude’s out on the swing. He’ll play for us after luncheon.”

“Oh, we are so looking forward to it,” Polly said in her throaty voice, nodding to her cluster of friends as if she spoke for all. “You are so fortunate, my dear, having a child like that. A prodigy, the paper says.”

“Everyone says that!” Mabel Tryon said.

Alicia Reichart smiled. She *was* lucky, she knew. Life had certainly blessed her and she thanked God every day for her poor but happy childhood, a fine husband, wealth, status in her church and community—and most of all, little Claude. The tow-headed, green-eyed child was the joy of her days. He was her future. His name—Claude Reichart—would one day be revered along with the masters like Liszt, Chopin, Mozart. And she would be right there with him on his journey toward immortality. She shivered. How *had* she become so fortunate?

Although Hammond had been a thriving Midwest city since the turn of the century and now boasted a bustling downtown center and three opera houses, it would be the name of Reichart that would put it on the map there at the bottom of Lake Michigan in letters large enough to elicit notice, real notice. Alicia had her worries, however. She knew that her son’s talent was destined to one day take him from Hammond. Would it take him from her, as well? There already had been overtures from abroad. Her husband Jason had spent a year in Paris after law school and favored a school

there. Would she be able to send Claude away? Or, if she were to go along, could she part with her husband and the two-year-old twin boys? That Jason could go was out of the question. The family law firm held its considerable success to his involvement on every level.

“Is the stained glass from the Tiffany Company?” The question pulled Alicia from her thoughts. It came from Ruth Mason, a newcomer to the First Presbyterian Church and so a new guest at 33 Springfield Street.

“Yes,” Alicia Reichart replied, holding in check her pride. She dared not appear smug. That is another thing, she thought. This house! How am I ever to leave this house?

They sat in the music room and the conversation turned to other things. Alicia’s eyes were focused on the horizontal panel of three square windows above the Steinway. The sunshine caught every flashing nuance of the glass, both clear and frosted, and of the hues of green and amber. The side windows opened inward and were adjusted now only so far as to admit fresh air, while still allowing for the pleasure of the eye. All three were to have been stationary, like the massive triptych vertical panels on the staircase, but she had insisted that the two side windows be made to open. Although the room had two ordinary windows on the west wall, she knew the western sun could be brutal and that when the shades on those windows had to be drawn, the family would relish a breeze from the north. Jason had seen to it that she confer with the architect on such things throughout the planning and building stages.

Such activities naturally took her away from her children and for this she had felt some sense of guilt. But they did not want for good care and—oddly—it seemed as if the new home had become for her another child.

Nearly a mile due south of the city’s center, the house was the first on a street newly developed on the old Hayley farmstead. The architect had blended the most beautiful and functional aspects of

the Greek, Federal, and other styles. Facing south, away from the sprawling city, the sixteen-room house of planking with its Doric columns and wide windows sat perched like a large unblinking matron in starched white. The views east and south from the balconies were of Indiana's breathtakingly lush green farmland and prairie studded with purple and yellow flowers. Just a stone's throw to the west, across the state line into Illinois, lay the rustic village of West Hammond. Behind and a bit east of the great square structure, at the end of a gravel drive, sat the old Hayley barn. It was an eyesore and Alicia looked forward to the fall when a proper coach house would be erected for their electric carriages, white as the house and replete with living quarters above for a servant or two.



Upon the sound of his mother's voice, Claude Reichart peered down from the hayloft window. His mother stood on the back porch speaking sharply to Della, the kitchen maid. His mother's face looked mean, a meanness mirrored by Butch and Sally, the family dogs who had trailed her. She was scolding the Irish maid for taking time away from her luncheon duties to bring a plate of food out to a hobo. Claude was used to seeing such men, who came through Hammond on freight trains, sometimes stopping in town long enough to find their way south to Springfield Street and the big white house. Drifters, Papa called them. He often warned Claude to steer clear of them. Some could be very dangerous, he said in his deep, disapproving way.

The old hobo was large, his face red beneath a tangled mass of greasy hair, dark but graying. Claude felt the man's embarrassment. Or is it anger? he wondered. Papa's face would turn just as red on those few occasions when he became very angry.

Claude's mother hustled the maid into the house and in the exchange the contents of the plate—chicken salad, beans, corn

bread—fell to the ground. The German Shepherds tore into it at once. His mother's face softened a bit, and she told the man to come back later in the day if he wished food.

After she had gone in, the man attempted to salvage some of the food, but the dogs' low growls were menacing enough to dissuade him. They were not about to share. Incensed, he kicked at the dirt and moved away, out of Claude's sightline.

Claude turned from the window and started to move toward the opening leading down. He knew that he should get back to the verandah. After that little scene he had just witnessed, his mother would be completely out of sorts if she were to find him gone. She insisted that her luncheons go off like clockwork, and could be quite a bear to live with—so his father said—when they didn't. Besides, it would not be long before he would be called in to play. And he had a new piece he was anxious to try out.

His hands had only just touched the ladder that jutted up into the loft when he heard a noise from below. He stopped, his heart pausing as well, then racing.

Wide sliding doors were situated at both the front and back of the barn. It was one of the doors at the rear that was creaking slowly open now, strangely so. A widening angle of light poured in—and with it the gigantic shadow of the hobo in the doorway. He had merely made the pretense of leaving the property, disappearing instead around the rear of the barn and out of sight of the house.

Damn. What am I to do now? Claude was not supposed to be in the barn, much less in the hayloft. Only last week he had begged permission. His father's words rang in his ears now: *What if you were to fall and break an arm or hand? You might never play the same way again!*

The boy trembled. His grip on the ladder tightened. How was he to avoid this man, this hungry and angry man who had lost his chance at a good meal?

Of what terrible things was such a man capable? He had been warned about the transients who came and went with the trains.

Claude stared down. The light that had filled the downstairs suddenly disappeared. The door had been shut again.

He listened.

The man was inside the barn. Claude's heart hammered in his chest. He could hear the man shuffling about below in the shadows, mumbling unhappily to himself.

Then the man came into view, the top of his head framed—as if by a camera—in the square opening leading downstairs. Claude held his breath, praying the man did not look up. Slowly, noiselessly, the boy drew away from the ladder. His head reeled. He sensed danger. He was not usually afraid of strangers, but he felt something stir inside him, something as instinctive as his talent. Something poisonous.

He would not try to get past the man. He would wait.

He swallowed hard, his stomach turning. *Why have I done this? I've been warned.*

Claude heard a familiar metallic noise now. He inched his way to where he could peer down again. He knelt on the floor and brought his head low until he could make out what the intruder was doing. His father had taken his own car to the law office, so it was his mother's Woods Victoria that had caught the man's interest. He was leaning inside now, as if fishing for something.

Claude drew back, wondering if he should attempt the ladder . . . if he were quick enough . . . But when he looked again the man was sitting on the hard ground, absorbed in a paper package he had found. A match flared in the gloom. The man had found Claude's father's cigarettes—or did they belong to his mother?

The rising sulfur and cigarette smoke caused Claude to move back, slowly, carefully. The smell had always caused him to sneeze. He felt a sneeze welling up now and held his breath.

He prayed for the urge to pass. He prayed very hard.

The man won't stay, Claude told himself. He'll be too afraid of getting caught.

The inclination to sneeze passed.

The boy lay down soundlessly on a soft mound of old hay, curling into a fetal position, praying that the man would not venture up the ladder. I'll just wait him out, he thought. He's bound to go soon.

Time passed.



Claude was right. The strange man did rise to leave soon after he finished several cigarettes, but he had stayed long enough for the sense of danger to slow, like Claude's pulse, coaxing the boy into slumber.

One arm was not enough for the man to pull open the wide carriage door. He grunted to himself and freed the other by tossing aside the butt of his last cigarette.



Although the chicken salad hadn't been seasoned in the way she liked—too much pepper, too little poultry seasoning—Alicia Reichart smiled to herself at the way the luncheon was progressing. She prayed that the nanny would be able to keep the twin boys contained once they were awakened from their naps and the recital began.

Overseeing two men hired for the occasion, she was trying to fit as many chairs into the modest music room as she could manage. Only twenty could be accommodated. Some guests would have to be seated in the hall and double parlor. Perhaps, she thought, next time it would be better to have the piano moved to the dining room so that more people could appreciate the sight as well as the sound of little Claude's playing.

"Alicia!" Julia Mulvihill's shrill cry wrenched Alicia from her thoughts. "Alicia! Come at once, there's a fire!"

A cry of alarm rose among the ladies, who were all on their feet in a great crush, pushing toward the dining room door that

led outside. They spilled out onto the columned verandah that flanked the driveway, their faces—like a stage of tragic masks—drawn to the north, their cries rising at what met their eyes.

Alicia pushed through a mass of trailing dresses, silk and laces, shoulders and elbows. Her heart thumped wildly.

What was afire? Was it a fire downtown? The Lion Store? Her mind would not work.

Then she saw the smoke coming up onto the verandah and realized how close the fire must be.

When she got to the door, she could feel the fire's heat and did not look to the left—in the direction of the barn—for she had already determined what it was that was ablaze. Those bulky transformers had given her shivers of fear the very day they were installed. She knew it was the barn and so she shouldered her way onto the porch, looking instead to the right, to the porch swing where she prayed to find Claude sitting.

The swing was empty, completely still.

Her frantic eyes swept the crowded porch for her son. Her heart caught.

"Sweet Jesus in Heaven!" The shrill oath came from Polly Davis. Similar piercing cries and screams rose from the other women. Something terrible had claimed their attention.

Clara Douglas fainted.

Martha Grimes tried to soldier Alicia into the house. Alicia fended her off. She would not be moved.

Pulling free, she turned to see the flames and smoke enveloping the old barn, rendering it a blazing inferno. She could hear the sounds of crackling, splintering wood.

And she saw now, for just a moment before the smoke thickened, what the others had seen. There at the cracked window of the hayloft loomed a blanched and bespectacled face. Claude's face. Behind the dirty glass, the twisted lips mouthed the unmistakable syllables: *Ma-ma. Ma-ma.*

Now, as if in a slow, surreal dream, tentacles of smoke enfolded him and the pale form fell back from sight.

ONE

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
1999

MARGARET FLAHERTY ROCKWELL HAD TWO secrets. The first, that she had seen a ghost, she had—for the moment—forgotten.

It was her second secret that was her ally in this, the first real argument of her two-year marriage.

“Martini?” Kurt called from the little kitchen.

“No thanks,” she heard herself say. She bit at her lower lip. *Yes*, she wanted to say, *with three olives*. Meg listened to the steel and glass tinkling sounds of the quiet, ordered ritual. He’s so certain he’ll have his way, she thought.

She stared out the window, her hands interlocked and unconsciously resting on her belly. The northeast view from the twenty-sixth floor was breathtaking: the park, the golf course, the tiny cars—like her nephew’s hot wheels—following the curve of Lake Shore Drive, and the incomparable lakefront. The view was unobstructed because far below sat the historically designated Pattington, where one of her friends, Wenonah Smythe resided. It was a wonderful old sprawling complex of condominiums that had been—at the turn of the century—rather elite apartments. While out walking, she often found herself daring to breach the

walkways in the double courtyards so that she could stare into the oversized windows, some of which held wondrously curved glass. So much more history in a building like that!

But it wasn't only the characterless feel of the thirty-year-old building they currently occupied that rankled. Or even the vertigo, with which she had wrestled since childhood. No, the fact that this was his condo she had moved into made her feel unsettled, ill-at-ease. Not hers. Not theirs. Oh, she had told herself that moving into Kurt's bachelor condo would be fine. And yet, somehow, it wasn't.

Meg wished that she could steel herself with a martini. But there would be no drinking for a while.

"Sure you don't want anything?" Kurt asked, coming out of the small area that he called a kitchen.

"No," Meg said. She thought of the house she had fallen in love with and took strength from the image. She would have it—or rather, they would.

Kurt sat next to her on the sofa. She didn't turn to watch him; she didn't have to. Her mind's eye pictured him sipping at the martini as if it were liquid confidence. The blond hair—not a strand of gray visible—fell forward as he bent over the glass, hiding for the moment those blue eyes that could so coolly charm. Too damned boyish-looking for thirty-nine, Meg thought. Did she look the younger by two years? Did she look younger at all? Even with the silver which had begun to invade her reddish brown hair?

Not that Meg was wanting in self-esteem. She never had been. She kept herself in shape although she worried sometimes about her classic Irish look. Someone had told her—who was it? Father?—that Celtic beauty faded faster in alien climates. Still, that hadn't kept her out of the sun as a teenager. She knew how well a little color brought out her green eyes. *Emeralds*, Kurt—with his Germanic lineage—called them. *Like the Isle itself* she would answer.

“Dee-licious,” Kurt purred.

He’s doing his corny schtick, Meg thought. She didn’t respond.

“Not too late,” he said. “You can have this one, and I’ll make another.”

“No, thanks.” Meg drew in a deep breath. “Kurt, what I want is the house.”

There, it was out!

“Oh, for Chrissakes, Meg!”

She sat silent, continuing to stare out, listening to the March winds whip around the building. The lake was dark and cold looking, free of vessels. She could feel his eyes on her.

Her silence was annoying him.

“We went to see it on a lark, didn’t we?” Kurt asked, sipping at his drink. “Because that nurse in cardio-pulmonary said it was a real find. Like something out of the Old South and cheap. We went to look, Meg. It was a little day trip. We didn’t go out there to *buy* a house, Meg—and in Indiana, for Chrissakes!”

“It’s only thirty minutes away.”

“From here?” Kurt scoffed. “When?—At three in the morning, maybe.”

“I can get a job out there. You know I hate what’s going on at the hospital. All the politics. And the days of the medical social worker are numbered.”

“Great! And what about me? I’ve worked my ass off to get where I am. I’m a vice-president now, Meg. What about my fricking career?”

“I’m not suggesting you quit. You could commute.”

“Do you know what the expressways are like at rush hour?”

“The South Shore train will take you right into downtown Hammond.”

Kurt laughed. “Downtown Hammond—yeah, right!”

“You say that like it’s an oxymoron.”

“A what?”

“Never mind. Hammond is coming back, didn’t the realtor say so? And those who invest now in the historic district— ”

“Are going to be shit out of luck when they find their realtors are just trying to make a living. Like I do—in Chicago!” Kurt lifted the nearly empty glass as if to toast the lakeshore.

They sat in silence several minutes, watching dusk fall and listening to the whoosh of traffic on the drive and the occasional exclamation of a horn or siren.

Meg’s gray-and-white cat, Rex, sidled up against her legs, then instead of jumping into her lap, he walked away as if he sensed the tension in the room. Meg watched as he carefully avoided the window ledge and the sharp drop that had terrified him the day they had moved into Kurt’s condo. He had leaped onto the man-made marble windowsill, looked down, meowed in fright, and leaped to the safety of the sofa. The twenty-six stories above ground had not amused him. Truth was, the height had terrified them both.

How Rex will love the house, Meg thought.

Kurt spoke at last. “Meg, our friends and family are here in the city.”

Ah, the tactful approach, Meg thought. “And the Cubs?” They were walking distance from Wrigley Field. “You see Sammy Sosa more often than you do your parents.”

“Yeah, and the Cubs. Okay, I won’t deny it. They plan even more night games now.”

“I’m sure our Wrigleyville neighbors will be glad to hear that.”

“Now, don’t go cynical on me.”

Meg turned to look at him now. “Kurt, it’s not Alaska.”

“It’s a 1910 huge frame house, a money pit. Ever see that movie with Tom Hanks? Damned funny, but damned true. Meg, it’s old and in disrepair. It’s going to need everything—paint— ”

“Roof, furnace, plumbing, and electric—we’ve been through all that. But at the price it’s being offered we can do all that as needed.”

He stared at her with what seemed amazement. “You really want this place, don’t you?”

Meg nodded. “Yes.”

Kurt sighed, and without taking his eyes off her, he set the empty martini glass on the steel and glass table she hated. “Why?”

“I—I don’t quite know. I just want it.” That Meg didn’t know came as a sudden revelation to herself. She knew only that from the time she had seen it, it had, in some inexplicable way, become a part of her—or was it the other way around?

“It’s a whim, then?” Kurt’s question was more accusation.

“No, it’s not!” Meg’s immediate and strong reaction surprised even herself.

Kurt was staring at her in a way he never had before.

Had he seen through to her will in this matter? To a determination he had not expected? Was he weakening?

Meg was not about to be intimidated or bullied. Not now. Not about this. Her mother had told her to choose her fights, the ones worth fighting for.

He’s going to concede now, she thought.

“Meg,” he said, the blue eyes round as stones and as serious as she had ever seen, “I won’t live in Hammond—no matter how beautiful, how historic, or how cheap the house is.”

Meg’s heart fell, rebounded. “It’s a home, not a house.”

“Okay, it’s a home—but it’s not ours, Meg.”

His statement was meant to be the final word. He stood. “I think I’ll have another drink. You’re absolutely certain you don’t want one?”

Meg shook her head. “Absolutely certain.” The time had come to play her ace. “Kurt, you said we could one day relocate out of the city.”

“Yeah, I guess I did. I said maybe if we start a family.”

“No, you said *when* we start a family.”

“Okay, when— ”

“Kurt, when is now.”

Kurt Rockwell retraced his steps and dropped down onto the sofa, his square jaw sagging. “You’re not?” His eyes were widening into blue discs of surprise, happiness, childish reprimand.

Meg said nothing.

His gaze moved down, his expression registering the protective way Meg was holding her belly.

Meg smiled.

Kurt tried to speak but couldn’t.

Instead, he reached out for her, pulled her to him, held her. It was not something he did often and the action came a beat or two behind spontaneity, but Meg responded, warmed by his touch. They kissed.

Kurt drew back, launching into a litany of questions: how long had she suspected, when had her test proven positive, how did she feel then, how does she feel now?

One by one, she addressed the questions, assuring him that she was delighted and feeling perfect.

“Now I really do need another drink!” Kurt announced, springing up. “Oh, my God!” he blurted, flushed with excitement and pride. There had been no children in his first marriage. “And I’ll get you some mineral water, young lady!”

Meg lost no time in following up. *Strike while the iron is hot.* Her father had such a fondness for the adage. While Meg hated the cliché, she respected its core truth.

Before Kurt reached the kitchen, Meg made her own announcement. “Mrs. Shaw will be calling back at nine.”

“Mrs. Shaw?”

“Yes, Kurt. The realtor.”



Late into the night, Meg lay awake on her side, staring out to where a quarter moon shone on the darkly placid waters of Lake Michigan.

She had not played fair. She had used her pregnancy to get what she wanted. And after they had given the realtor a go-ahead to prepare a bid on the house, she had encouraged Kurt to make love to her. He had never been so gentle, and instead of easing her guilt at manipulating him, the lovemaking increased it.

But the guilt dissipated as she began to consider the child. The baby was what was important. I have life inside me, she thought, cradling her belly. As her single years had ticked by, she wondered whether this time would ever come. She could remember herself at thirteen telling her mother she would have seventeen children. The memory made her smile. She would settle for one now. This child would be her reason for living, sustaining her, renewing her. After all, her career in medical social work had not lived up to her expectations.

And her marriage . . .

Meg turned away from the window, switching to her other side and toward Kurt, who was sleeping soundly. She watched him. She was glad that he was pleased by the news. Perhaps the decision to marry him had been a good one. She had been doubtful. When his pursuit of her started, she had had her own pursuit: to have a child before time made it dangerous or impossible to do so. The problems facing a single mother didn't faze her, and she had spent the two years before dating Kurt exploring the several avenues that could lead her to motherhood, including adoption. She was determined to have a child.

The appearance of Kurt Rockwell in her life had been a Godsend, or so her mother said, and Meg thought perhaps she was right. He had loved her from the start, she was certain, in a straightforward—if less than impassioned—way of his own. He had been tireless in his attention, quietly persistent despite her initial rebuffs. She had told herself—when she finally agreed to marry him—that she would come to love him.

She took stock of her feelings now. Although she had come to

care for him and worry with and about him in a day-to-day life of big concerns and little details, she knew that she didn't *love* Kurt.

At least not like she had loved Pete. Meg lay on her back now. Just the name conjured up those high school years. Golden years. Golden Peter Stoltmeyer. Two decades later her heart still raced at the thought of him.

Meg's family had just moved from Chicago to a suburb, Oak Park, and without friends her freshman year at Oak Park-River Forest High School had been a disaster. She went through it blindly, head down against the wind, looking forward only to graduation. But in sophomore year she met Pete. He came up to her locker one day and introduced himself.

High school came alive for Meg Flaherty at that moment. A whirling, blinding flash of friends, parties, fun, romance—but, most of all—Pete. Gregarious singer, basketball player, record-setting swimmer, inveterate poker player, passionate lover. The relationship developed, deepening until senior year when they made love for the first time in Pete's old pink Buick Electra convertible, the rain pouring down on the canvas-like roof and beading on the windows.

Pete was the only one from school that year accepted into Yale, but he vowed to decline the offer and go to the University of Iowa—with Meg. She had said nothing to bring him to that decision. He had come to it on his own—and she loved him for it, looking forward to their days in Iowa City.

In retrospect, she sensed something different about Pete in the weeks after graduation, but she had not seen the end moving toward her, like some terrible storm whipped up out of a perfect summer day. In July he told her he had changed his mind—at his parents' urging—and he was to go to Yale after all.

Sick inside, Meg took it with a smile. Despite what he said, what they said to each other, it was the end and she somehow sensed it. There were letters at first when the fall term started, but after Pete stayed out east for the semester break—his parents went

to see him—communication fell off, and by the end of the second semester, stopped altogether. Had she stopped writing, certain that he would awaken to the void in his heart, certain that he would pick up the pursuit? The scenario that he would do so had been a fantasy of hers. Or had he stopped writing, his interests placed elsewhere?

What if distance hadn't separated them? she wondered.

Meg's eye traced a crack in the ceiling. Time is a strange thing, she thought. Twenty years and yet the passion and hurt remained so real, so fresh, like the death of an immediate family member. She could bring it to the surface in a heartbeat. She recalled a Bee Gees' song of the era about mending broken hearts, silly and maudlin to her adult mind, but it had been her anthem after Pete. Her heart hadn't mended; it had tired.

Meg was not one of those who could look back on her past and say, *Oh, it was just one of those high school romances. You know how it was.*

Meg did know how it was, couldn't forget, couldn't let time reduce it in perspective, and for years her memory was her worst enemy, still could be.

Kurt started to snore. He did that when he had had a few drinks. She turned her head to watch him, praying she had done the right thing in marrying him.

The child would make it right, she thought. *The child will make everything right.*

Meg thought back to the evening's argument and the question Kurt had asked, a simple question that somehow unnerved her: Why did she want the house so badly? In truth, she couldn't say. The white house on a triple lot—with its columns, balconies, mullioned windows, stained and leaded glass—was a steal, no doubt about it. But there was something more—a feeling or emotional connection much stronger than wood and glass at a bargain price—that had engaged her heart, some unnamable attraction or affinity to the place.

What was it?

And there was something else. On the day they had seen the house, Meg had witnessed a strange occurrence. Set back from and to the right of the house was a coach house, gray and dilapidated, its shutters askew. Kurt and Meg wondered if it was included in the low price. The realtor assured them that it was.

They had met Mrs. Shaw on the side of the house, halfway up the long gravel drive that led to the coach house. While Kurt and Mrs. Shaw moved toward the the street and around to the entrance of the house, Meg held back, pausing a moment to study the coach house and consider its possibilities. Did it need to be torn down? Could it be fixed up as a rental? A guest house?

Suddenly a movement or shadow at an upper window drew her attention. Meg squinted in the sunlight and shaded her eyes.

There behind the filthy glass, Meg was certain, was the face of a child. A little boy and a mist of some kind that was enveloping him. He seemed to stare out at her with unnaturally large, pleading eyes—his visage like some old Renoir portrait—as if to call for help. Yes, the mouth seemed to be moving . . .

The sun blinded Meg for a moment, and she blinked. When she looked again, the image had vanished.

“Meg! Hurry up!” Kurt called. “We’re going in!”

Inside the main house, she took the realtor aside. Mrs. Shaw laughed politely, her high platinum hair shifting slightly. “A child? In the coach house? Impossible, my dear. Impossible! I’ll tell you the truth, Mrs. Rockwell, the coach house is in falling-down condition, and it’s been sealed tighter than an Egyptian tomb. No child would be at play there, I can assure you. It must have been a reflection you saw.”

“Yes, I suppose it was,” Meg said.

But she knew otherwise.

“Meg!” Kurt was calling from the second floor. “Wait till you see the size of the bathroom up here and the wonderful old fixtures!”

“Coming!” Meg called back.

Later, Meg herself saw the large padlock that secured the entrance to the second floor of the old coach house. As they entered and climbed the long narrow staircase, Mrs. Shaw recounted the building’s history. “It started out as a barn. This was all farmland, of course. Then it was used as a garage and charging facility for electric cars. But a fire took it to the ground. It was rebuilt as a coach house and the upstairs here was fitted out with this very quaint little one-bedroom apartment. Unfortunately, the building is no longer sound.”

“Will we be able to rent it out—with repairs, of course?” Kurt asked.

Mrs. Shaw shook her head. “The city has declared this a dangerous building. I’m just being honest with you, Mr. Rockwell. And, besides the block is zoned for single families. Any grandfather clause that might have pertained expired long ago.”

“I see,” Kurt said, lacking the interest of a motivated buyer.

Mrs. Shaw went on talking, pointing out how a large and modern garage might be erected on the site—once the building was razed.

Meg walked into the small bedroom that fronted the house. She looked out the dirty window and down the drive to where she had stood earlier. The image of the child came back to her. She only now recalled that he had been wearing wire-rimmed glasses. Simultaneous with this image came a rush of cold that penetrated every part of her body. She had never felt such a cold.

“This would make a great little apartment, huh, Meg?” Kurt had followed her into the room, startling her. “But don’t you think,” he whispered, “we’re wasting Mrs. Shaw’s time?”

As she turned to him, she took a step away from the window. The cold dissipated, almost as if it had moved through her.

“Are you okay?”

“What? Oh, yes, just chilled a bit. Come over here, Kurt. Take a look out the window.”

Kurt took Meg's place at the window. "Yeah? Now what?"

"Nothing. I just thought this view of the house was a good one." Kurt had not experienced the cold—that was clear.

"Yeah, it's great architecture all the way around. I'll give you that."

Kurt left the room to check out the little bathroom. "Well, *this* room is hopeless," he called. "The ceiling has fallen in."

Mrs. Shaw appeared in the doorway. "You see? No child. It must have been light and shadows playing tricks on you. Nothing here, Mrs. Rockwell."

Meg smiled. She was not about to press the issue of the little boy. She would have seemed quite the fool to insist that someone had been there. Clearly, no one had lived or played there for many years.

Meg didn't mention it again, certainly not to Kurt. She had already decided that the house was to be theirs and wanted nothing to stand in the way.

She would not admit it to another soul or even to herself, but somewhere, in the smallest, most secret chamber of her heart, Meg knew that she had seen a ghost.

Meg started to leave the little bedroom. Something made her turn around in the doorway. She saw only a dingy room in serious disrepair. At that moment, the cold took her again—possessed her for but fleeting moments—and fell away.

Something had moved through her and out into the hallway. Something not of this world.

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