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ENG 207 Reading and Writing Fiction Short Story #1

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Your House is Haunted

Lily's house was haunted. Elias didn't know how or why, but he knew something was afoot. He didn't always believe in ghosts: not when his friends would come to school with stories about how they bested the monster under their beds, and not even when his little brother cried to his mom about seeing one in the dark. If he didn't see them, they didn't exist. But he certainly believed in them now.

Elias first learned about ghosts on a school field trip in the second grade. Late at night, he and a few older kids traded stories by the campfire pit. The fire was bigger and warmer than anything Elias had ever seen, and it was up so close he could feel the heat linger on his face. He didn't want to look anywhere else, though, because the darkness all around felt like it was going to swallow him whole. A fifth grader stood up and began telling the story of his own experience with a ghost, and Elias looked up at him curiously.

"What *is* a ghost?" Elias asked. He was never afraid to ask questions, a quality he'd been simultaneously admired and resented for.

"Well, a ghost is invisible. It can move things around your house. It shrieks at night. Sometimes," he pauses, his face illuminated by the flames. "It can hurt you, leave bruises in your sleep. From what I've seen, they can even take over your body– make you act different, strange."

Elias would later forget the exact details of the fifth grader's story, but he would forever remember his vivid description of a ghost. That's why, when he brought it up to Lily for the first time, reciting all the proof he had collected over the weeks, he was shocked her response was so nonchalant: "I don't think ghosts are real."

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Elias met Lily during the sweltering hot first day of third-grade. While playing tag with other kids at recess, a particular girl's long-sleeved shirt drew his attention. He recognized her as the same girl that moved into the house next door from him. He remembered briefly seeing her family arrive in a large truck a few weeks prior. Elias was quick to question her, as usual.

"Hey! Neighbor! What's your name again? And why are you wearing that? Aren't you hot?"

She looked at him, meeting his inquisitiveness with an air of expectation. "Lily. And I'm wearing it because it's cool. I got it from the boy's section. What's your name?"

He liked that response.

"Elias."

Him and Lily would develop a close friendship, one that eventually led to after school expeditions at Elias' treasured tree house.

"My dad used to work as a carpenter, so he built this for me! My mom's a florist, so she put all these decorations here." He shows off the intricately carved wood framed by a row of flowers. "And it's all mine!"

"They built this just for you?" Lily asked, genuinely puzzled. "You're so lucky."

“Yeah, I guess I am. My brother and I share a room, so this is like my own place, just for me. Come on, let’s climb it!” He took her hands and instructed her on how to climb the massive thing. Elias always imagined he was climbing the beanstalk like Jack did in those books he read, one step leading to the other, and he thought if he got high enough, he, too, could reach the gold harp. This thought made him braver– helped him think less about his fear of heights. “Just put your hands here, and your feet here, and keep going up until you reach that door.”

Lily stretches up, but for the first time Elias notices a large bruise on her arm, one that would normally be covered by her long-sleeves. It’s purple and red and swollen, with other faded ones surrounding it.

“Where’d you get that?” Elias points at the bruise.

“Oh, this? My mom said it was an accident, but I’m not supposed to talk about it.” She shrugged. They both climbed to the top and sat down cross-legged in front of each other.

“I had one kind of like that too, last summer when I fell off climbing this treehouse, actually. But it was smaller. It actually didn’t even appear until a few days after I fell. I just woke up, looked at my knee, and it was *right* there! At first, it was bleeding, like *real* blood, and my mom got so scared she almost fainted putting on a band-aid. Dad said she was being dramatic and that she was just scared of blood.”

“Oh, really? I’m scared of blood too. I have to look away when I see it in movies.”

“I’m not.” Elias grinned with pride. “Have you ever watched The Shining? There’s this one scene where the elevator fills with blood and it opens, and bam! Blood *everywhere*. I’ve watched it eight times.”

“No way, that sounds gross!”

They laughed together.

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Elias was about to go to bed that night when he heard noises coming from the house next to him.

A banging noise, a scream, raised voices. It went on for a few minutes.

What Elias most loved about his actual house is that it was always quiet at night. Sleeping next to the window, he liked hearing the wind rustle next to his ear. It was akin to one of the comforting lullabies his parents used to sing to him when he still needed to hear them. The noises were jarring in comparison, and maybe it was him and Lily's talk about The Shining earlier that day, or maybe it was the thought of blood, but he did something he was a bit embarrassed of: he walked into his parents' room, where his mother and father were tucked in the bed, fast asleep. He tugged on their blanket with one hand. His mother woke up almost immediately.

"What's wrong, honey?" She said, cupping his face.

"I keep hearing banging in the house next door. It's scary. I should warn Lily." He said worriedly.

"Honey, that could be anything. Don't worry about it, okay? Lily's probably fast asleep." She assured him. "Try to get some sleep. Mommy and daddy are right here if you need us."

His mother always made him feel better, but she didn't make him any *less* curious. He nodded slowly and returned to his room, where he felt determined to find out what the noises were.

Throughout the night, Elias' heart raced. He jolted up every hour, looked at the clock next to him, and felt a sting of disappointment each time he realized it wasn't time to wake up yet. As soon as he felt the sunlight hit his face from the window, he jumped out of bed. Not bothering to ask his mom to pick out his clothes for the day, he left to investigate the activity in Lily's house. He couldn't get inside, but he found a window short enough for him to peer through.

Inside the house were things he'd never seen before. His eyes darted around the room. Bottles labeled strange things, like *Smir… Noff…*, another one labeled *Cuer.. Vo…* Elias didn't even know the first thing about pronouncing those names. *Why would anyone give water such a complicated name?* Must be a special kind, like straight from the waterfall. There were more bottles smashed on the floor, so he couldn't read their labels. That was odd. In fact, Elias noticed almost everything was in a different order as his house was. The chairs were scattered across the floor. The only time he'd ever seen chairs scattered around was during a game of musical chairs, and it didn't look like anyone was playing that now. He wondered why no one thought to pick them up. Elias had once spilled milk on the counter, and his mom reacted instantly, grabbing the towel from the cabinet and wiping it down before it could spill on the floor. He remembered thinking his mom was just like a robot, so all moms must be some kind of robot, too. But he was wrong, because Lily's mom hadn't reacted at all. The chairs and bottles were still on the ground, rotting away.

Elias had a thousand questions brimming in his mind, ones he couldn't wait to ask a grown up that lived in the house. So when he saw a man coming out of a room, he jumped. "Hello?"

“Whhhhaaaaaat are you doing over there?” the man said, almost falling over.

“I– I just– wanted to see Lily!” He explained. “Are you her dad?”

“L-Lily?” He hiccupped. “She… Not here now, son, come back… Later.” His breath was awful.

“Can I ask you a question about your house, sir? Why is–”

“Nunya business.” A flash of anger passed through his face. Elias had never felt this scared of a grown-up before, but caught himself staring anyway. The man’s beard was so grown out, he almost looked like Santa Claus, but much more haggard. Elias looked back up at him, trying to picture the man’s true face without the beard, but all he could see were his eyes. He had red eyes. Elias thought back to The Shining once again. Jack Torrance also had red eyes when he went crazy.

The man seemed to notice his gaze after a few seconds of silence, and stepped forward. Even though the man was looking straight at Elias, he still wasn’t quite meeting his eyes.

“What the hell are you staring at, kid?”

Elias broke out of his trance and fled the scene– he wasn’t going to get in trouble with that man.

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He spent the next few days with only one thought ruminating in his mind. The bruise, the screaming at night, the disarray around her house, and her father acting strange– it clicked. It was exactly like the kid said at the fire pit. Lily’s house *was* haunted with ghosts.

“Ghosts are just in movies! I think you’ve watched too much of The Shining.”

“No, they’re real! What do you think those movies are based on? Your house was exactly like the ones in the movies, all messy and dark.”

“You went to my house?” She asked.

“Well, I just looked through your window. Also, we always hang out at my house, so why can’t I go to yours?”

“My parents don’t like having guests over, I told you.”

“That’s not normal. Every parent loves having guests. Mine decorate the *entire* house and make me clean my room just for guests.”

“That’s not true. You let strangers into your house? I’ve never had a guest over before. Except my grandma, but she’s not a guest.”

“Not strangers. Friends. What about Christmas, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving? You don’t have *anyone* over?”

Lily stared at him blankly. “Not really.”

Elias had a lightbulb moment. He felt like a genius. “*Aha*! See, I told you! That’s because your house is haunted! Ghosts don’t like guests. It makes total sense. Plus, it would explain your dad’s weird behavior. I think he might be possessed by some evil spirit.”

“My dad… is possessed? By a ghost?” Lily considered that. At last, she seemed to understand what he was saying! Elias finally broke through.

“Yeah. I saw him yesterday. Does he always act that weird? Or maybe since you moved here?”

“He’s always been like that. I guess he’s gotten stranger over the years. I notice the more his breath smells, the worse he acts. Do ghosts have bad breath?” She pauses and thinks.

“Hey, I noticed that too! I don’t know, but his breath is worse than my dog Simba’s. Well, why don’t you live with me in my treehouse for now, while the ghosts are still haunting your house?”

“You think my parents will let me do that?” Lily’s face lit up.

“Yeah, of course! Just explain everything to them. I’m sure they’ll understand. Just make sure to remember everything I said.” Elias recited a list of proof of the haunted house, making Lily repeat after him carefully.

Once Lily could recite everything back to him correctly, she ran off, excited to inform her parents about this new prospect.

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Elias woke up the next morning to the sound of blaring police horns outside. He ran downstairs, his fingers plugged tightly in his ears to mute the noise, and found his mother talking to a police officer in the kitchen. It suddenly occurred to him that he had never seen a police officer so close to him before. The man looked at him, and Elias’ face reddened as he promptly took his fingers out of his ears. He looked serious and distinguished, his badge shiny in the daylight and his uniform neatly tucked into his pants. It reminded him of an old action figure he used to have. His eyes flickered to his name tag: Officer Phoenix Steele. He repeated the name in his head. *Cool*. It sounded just like a character from a movie.

Elias waited patiently by the stairs. His mother had always told him never to interrupt when adults are speaking. He heard the name “Lily” being thrown around in the conversation, and when he looked out the window, the man he had encountered at Lily’s house, who he’d presumed to be her father, was being taken by more police officers. Elias was going to protest. He repeated it in his head a few different times, hoping to impress the officer with his conviction: *But, sir, it’s not his fault, he’s possessed by a ghost! Haven’t you all heard of ghosts before?*

But when his mother turned around, to Elias’ surprise, she cried. He blinked a few times.

He had never seen his mom cry like this before. She cried during sad movies, sometimes, but she'd always laugh it off after. He waited for her to laugh it off this time, too, maybe tell him she was just being silly old mom, but instead she dropped to her knees and gave him a hug. He could feel her warm tears on the back of his neck.

And perhaps, for the first time in his life, Elias was truly afraid to ask what had really happened.