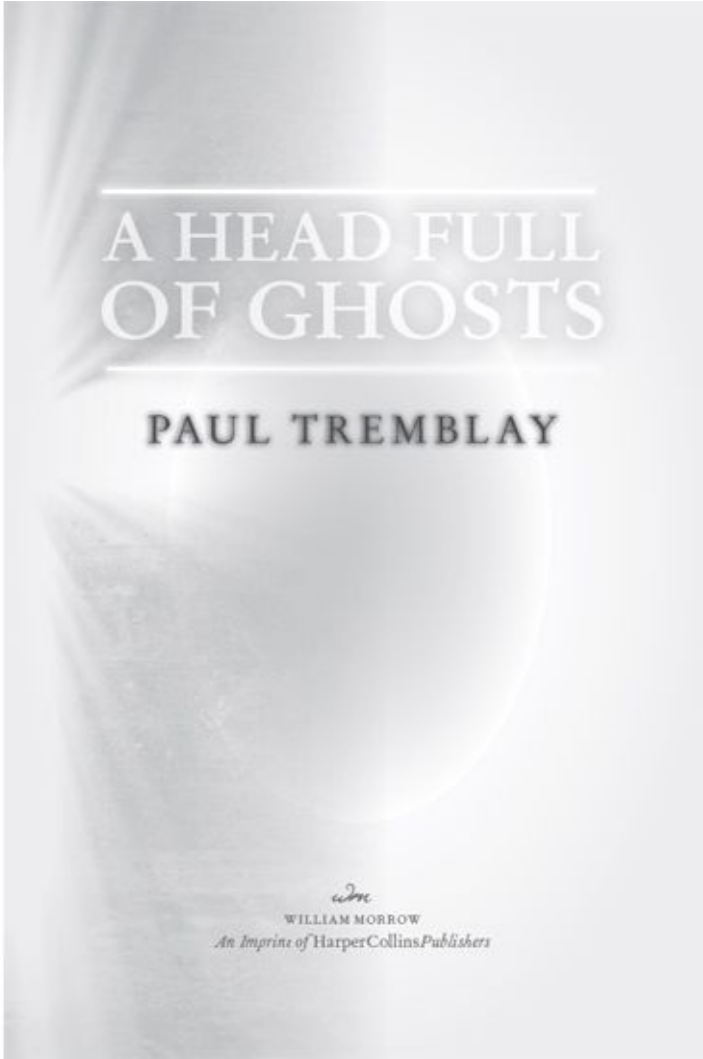


**A
HEAD
FULL
OF
GHOSTS**

A NOVEL

**PAUL
TREMBLAY**



A HEAD FULL OF GHOSTS

PAUL TREMBLAY

WM

WILLIAM MORROW

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DEDICATION

For Emma, Stewart, and Shirley

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EPIGRAPHS

My memory, she was first to the plank, and the B-movie played in the aisle. —*Future of the Left*, “*An Idiot’s Idea of Ireland*”

It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please! —*Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, “*The Yellow Wallpaper*”

Do you wanna know a secret? Will you hold it close and dear? This will not be made apparent, but you and I are not alone in here. —*Bad Religion*, “*My Head Is Full of Ghosts*”

CHAPTER 1

“THIS MUST BE so difficult for you, Meredith.”

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

Has that much time really passed since we lived here? I'm only twenty-three but if anyone asks I tell them that I'm a quarter-century-minus-two years old. I like watching people struggle with the math in their heads.

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

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

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

I slink inside so that the front door is a whisper behind me. Standing on the scuffed hardwood of the front foyer I close my eyes to better see this initial snapshot of my prodigal return: ceilings so high I could never reach anything; cast iron radiators hiding in so many of the corners of the rooms, just itching

to get steaming angry again; straight ahead is the dining room, then the kitchen, where we mustn't ever linger, and a hallway, a clear path to the back door; to my right the living room and more hallways, spokes in wheels; below me, under the floor, the basement and its stone and mortar foundation and its cold dirt floor I can still feel between my toes. To my left is the mouth of the piano-key staircase with its white moldings and railings, and black stair treads and landings. The staircase winds its way up to the second-floor in three sets of stairs and two landings. It goes like this: six stairs up, landing, turn right, then only five stairs up to the next landing, then turn right again and six stairs up to the second-floor hallway. My favorite part was always that you were completely turned around when you reached the second floor, but oh, how I complained about that missing sixth stair in the middle.

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

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

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

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

"I am sorry, Merry. Maybe our coming here is a bad idea." Rachel stands up, her hat flutters to the floor, and she hides her hands in her jacket pockets. I wonder if she has her own paint chips, or strips of wallpaper, or some other pieces of this place's past hidden in her pockets as well. "We could conduct the interview elsewhere, where you would be more comfortable."

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

"Nervous. I totally understand."

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

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