

# The Ghost of John

# Chapter 1

I called the number on Ana Doyle's newspaper advertisement in the summer of 1996. It was for a caretaking job. I don't remember exactly what it said, but it was something along the lines of "Caretaker needed for elderly woman. Call this number for further detail." I'll be honest, I was 23, fresh out of college, and in dire need of money. I called.

"Hi, is this Mrs. Doyle?" I asked in my talking-to-someone-older-than-me voice.

"Yes?" a tired, sceptical voice responded.

"I'm calling about the caretaking job. Your ad in the newspaper?"

"Oh, yes!" She sounded relieved, like I had lifted a weight off her shoulders. She never asked for a resume or any experience. I think she felt lucky to have someone, anyone, respond to her silent cry for help. I arrived at the address she gave me in my beat-up Toyota Camry.

"Oh, thank god you came!" An older woman, 65, maybe, ran up her driveway. "I'm Ana Doyle, nice to meet you." She shook my hand, her grasp firm. "Listen, my aunt Florence is ninety-six, she doesn't have very long left, and I really just need someone to

stay with her in her last days.” She began to lead me to the house. It was old, there were shingles missing on the roof, but it wasn’t run-down.

“She’s been like this for years, but her health has really started declining recently.” She didn’t look sad as she said it. She sounded relieved, almost. She reached her hand out to open the front door, when she stopped and turned back to me.

“She,” Ana paused for a second, sounding embarrassed, almost. “She sings this song. She’s been singing it for years. I don’t know who it’s about, my best guess is it’s some children’s rhyme or something. It gets very annoying very quickly.”

I remember that moment very vividly. It didn’t push me away. It should’ve. Lord knows that now, at my age, that sentence would make me spin off my heels and run in the opposite direction. But for some reason, it drew me in, like the song of a siren.

“I don’t mind,” I responded, almost too quickly. She cracked open the front door. The house was quiet. Too quiet. It smelled old, like a library. A single candle burned on a coffee table in the living room. I still, to this day, remember that smell. Ana opened her mouth to speak. That’s when I heard it. From the other room, a quiet, sweet song.

“Have you seen the ghost of John?” The voice rang through the house, even though it wasn’t very loud.

“There it is,” Ava smiled awkwardly.

“Long, white, bones with the skin all gone,” I turned to the source of the noise. There was a door with a 70’s beaded fringe. They clanged against each other as I walked

through them. And there was Florence. She was a small, frail woman, her hair grey, her wrinkles carved deep into her face. She was sitting in a rocking chair, swaying.

“Wouldn’t it be...” She trailed off, trying to find the words, “Wouldn’t...” Her eyes were unfocused, never meeting mine. “It’s chilly...” She said to no one in particular, like it was a part of the song.

“This is my aunt Florence,” Ava looked at her, and then back up to me. “Just... make sure she’s comfortable,” She paused. “She doesn’t have very long left.” She looked at her aunt for a moment, her eyes sunken with exhaustion. “I’ve taken care of her for so long,” She looked at the calendar on the wall, a cheap one with puppies on it. “She’s been like this for 20 years. She’s done nothing but sing this song. I mean, she had always been depressed, as long as I’ve known her, but she just went into this... catatonic state.” I thought for a second. There didn’t seem to be any appropriate response to that.

“Was she ever happy?” I managed to muster up. Ana thought for a moment.

“When she was younger, I think. My mom told me she was rather sweet until ‘34.”

“What happened in ‘34?” Looking back, I sounded like I was prodding, but as a 23 year old, I needed to know why this old woman had sat in a rocking chair and sung the same song on repeat for 20 years. Ana smiled and sighed, then she sat down on the ottoman across from me.

“Some trip to Colorado springs. She left for three years. She didn’t come back the same,”

When I looked at the old woman in that chair in the summer of 1996, I saw an unsolved mystery, a code I needed to crack, a cold case. Sometimes I wish I could feel that again. It was an unparalleled feeling, really. Being able to look at a 96 year old in a rocking chair, with a blanket on her lap and a cup of untouched tea on the coffee table beside her and finding excitement, mystery from it. When I looked at that old woman in the summer of 1996, I didn't have any idea what I was getting myself into.

Florence never annoyed me. Her song, to me, drowned into the background. I'd hear it over and over, every single day, for hours on end, and I never grew tired of it. It wasn't that I liked it, or found it interesting. It was just a passive thing in the background, like the air conditioning or a faucet leaking. If you listened, I mean really listened, it would dig into the grooves of your brain, in the deepest parts of your ears, echoing, replaying, over and over and over, until you went into a sort of madness. All you can hear is the drops, the fan, the sweet song reverberating from the room with the beaded door frame. Then your mind gets occupied with some other thought, and it fades again. Like waves, it would never stay at the forefront of your mind before retreating back again. And she never looked at me. Not once did she look up and acknowledge my presence. I didn't mind. I'd rather that than her being chatty. I didn't really do much. I'd help her change, bathe, go to the bathroom. I didn't have to, Ana came to the house a total of three times for the entire two weeks that I took care of Florence. I felt some sort of obligation to make Florence feel comfortable. I made a promise, I was going to keep it. Sometimes,

when the singing would get too much, I'd take a record (usually Frank Sinatra), out of her extensive record collection, and play it softly. Florence would always stop singing when I put on a record. She'd close her eyes, and just listen. Sometimes she'd sway when there was a part she particularly liked. Then the record would finish and she'd go right back to singing. She'd stop singing when I would talk to her. I'd tell her about my dreams, my then boyfriend, now husband. Looking back, I feel bad for her. She had to listen to a 23 year old go on and on about whatever stupid things I thought were so important. Everytime I'd talk, she would close her eyes, and the corners of her lips would lift. I could never tell if she was smiling, but I like to think she was, that she was genuinely interested in what I was saying. I remember on the fifth day on the job, I wrote down the lyrics of the song. It's not that I thought I wouldn't remember them, they were burned into my memory like the brand on a cow, but I wanted to be sure that I wouldn't twist the words as I grew older, further from the summer of 1996. These are the words as I wrote them down:

Have you seen the Ghost of John,  
Long white bones with the skin all gone.  
Wouldn't it be chilly with no skin on?

Sometimes I'd think about that first day. I wanted to crack the case of Florence Doyle. I wanted to know why she was the way she was. One day, when I was dusting the living

room, listening to Florence sing the same song over and over again, I turned to her and asked,

“Florence, who is John?” It was a stupid question. Not in its content, just by the fact that I expected her to respond. But a strange thing happened that day. It was August, no, September, I remember the puppy calendar. The leaves were still green outside, it was almost sunset, and Florence Doyle spoke for the first time in 20 years. Her eyes met mine. Her voice sweet, she said “John?” Her head tilted, and her mouth formed a real, warm smile. Her eyes had life to them. I didn’t know what to do. It felt like I had just found a lead in a case. I didn’t want to startle her, and softly, I said “Yes, John. Who is he?” Her face softened even more. These are her words as I remember them on that day in September 1996.

## Chapter 2

“John was going to be my husband. He was handsome when we were younger. I believe there’s a photo of him behind that picture frame.” She pointed to a black and white picture of her graduating class hanging on the wall.

“No one knew we were getting married. We did. I knew from the moment I saw him. He was tall, lanky, my Johnny. He had long arms and longer legs and not much in the form of muscles, but I loved him the same. He had dark skin and darker, curly hair that he cut short to make him look tougher. Johnny wasn’t tough. He was sweet, my

Johnny. I would sneak out of this very house to see him. And we'd go to the park at the end of the street, and we'd talk about everything, anything. Then we grew up, and we'd go to the same park, and talk about the same things. And he was my Johnny. "

"Where did you meet him?"

"Oh, I don't remember. My memory's not the same."

"Does your niece know about John?"

"Oh, no. Nobody did. I wasn't allowed to love John. It was..." she thought for a moment, calculating the year. "1918. I wasn't allowed to love him then. But I did. I did."

I put her wrinkled, delicate hand in mine.

"What happened in Colorado Springs?"

"I remember that John began to cough. First it was a light cough, then it sounded like that of a smoker. Then his cheekbones sunk. I told him to see a doctor, he said he didn't have money to see one. I got a job. I was a waitress, and I saved enough money for him to see one. It was too late" she put her head in her hands. "Oh, it was too late." She



lifted her head, and her eyes became unfocused again. Then she looked at me. “John had Tuberculosis. It was already in his blood, they said. I remember, he came to me, skinny and weak, and told me he was saving what little he had and was moving to Colorado Springs. I wanted to come with him. I needed to. He told me he didn’t want me to give it all up just to watch him die. But I did. I sold all my things, and I worked, and we moved. Together. And we found a little house where the air was nice on his lungs.”

“What happened to John?”

“We were there for two years, 46 days. Two years, 46...” she trailed off, rocking in her chair. “He used to always say: ‘Florrie, is there a draft?’ He was cold all of the time.” Her eyes became unfocused again. “Is there a draft, Florrie? A draft...” she kept repeating the same thing over and over again. “Is there a draft, Florrie?”

“Florence?”

She looked at me and furrowed her brow. “He’d get scared sometimes. He’d look at me and he’d tell me, “I don’t want to go, I’m too young,” I never knew what to say. How do you comfort a dying man? A man abandoned by his own government meant to protect the people living in it his whole life. How can you tell a man like that of heaven? That he’ll be judged for the sins his hand had been forced to commit? How do you cushion his

fall? How do you tell him of a life after death, when he never lived a life to begin with? He was thirty-four when he died. A third of his life was spent sick, weak, dying. How do you comfort a dying man?"

We looked at each other for a moment.

"Thirty-three more years." She stared into my eyes, and I swear that she was looking into my soul.

"Until what?"

"We could've gotten married. Loving v. Virginia, 1967. I remember that vividly. I can't say that's normal for me. It was funny, really. Last name Loving and that's exactly what they weren't allowed to do."

"Why?"

"Richard and Mildred Loving. They were jailed because Mildred was black and Richard wasn't, and they got married. The supreme court said they should have the right to love each other in '67. Thirty-three more years, and we could've gotten married."

“I remember in his last days, he’d ask what his legacy would be. What would become of him? He’d ask me if he’d become a children’s rhyme. ‘Lizzie Borden took an axe, and gave her mother 40 whacks. When she saw what she had done, she gave her father 41.’ he’d sing. ‘Is that what I’ll be, Florrie? Is that what I’ve done with my life?’”

“Is that where the song comes from?”

She thought for a moment, almost as if she was connecting the pieces.

“I guess so.” She went through the song again, listening to the lyrics. She sang quietly, though. With intention. “White bones. He would say that when I’d question our marriage. What people would think of it. ‘bones are all white in the end,’ he’d tell me. And I’d never question it.” Then her vision sharpened. She looked more alive than I had ever seen her. “Will you take me to the park? Down the street, where Johnny and I would go?”

That should’ve been a hard decision. Bringing this old lady I barely knew to a park would be a bad choice. Yet, sitting in that living room with the beaded fringe on the door in the summer of 1996, I knew.

She looked at the trees on the way there. Her eyes were open, like she was seeing it for the first time. She gave me directions like she walked the route yesterday,

occasionally mentioning how certain things had changed. It was a small park. There was a pond in the middle, with a bench on its edge. It wasn't immediately visible. She had to point it out to me. The sun filtered through the trees and sat on the park bench like she had with John 70 years ago. She stared, and tilted her head.

"Thirty three more years."

## Chapter 3

Florence died in her sleep six days later. She was quiet after we went to the park. She never said another word. She never sang the song again, nor did she tell me any more about John. It feels odd, bearing the burden of being the only one to hear someone's final words. I carry it with me every day. I never told Ava Doyle that Florence spoke anything but the strange, eerie children's rhyme that she'd repeated for the past twenty years. I never told her about John, or what happened in Colorado Springs. Sometimes I'll wonder if that was the right decision. If that's what Florence would've wanted. Sometimes I'll think of writing Ava a letter. I'll sit at my desk and write the first sentence. I always end up not finishing it. I always feel too guilty. It's far too late now. Ava is about 93 and in the same condition as her aunt. Sending her a letter would only upset her. It was only later that I saw people sharing stories just like Florence's. Two people who weren't allowed to love each other based on the colour of their skin, the things they believed, the things about themselves they couldn't change even if they tried. In all of the stories and memoirs and biographies, they all said the same thing. The writer, the reader, anyone

who bears it on their shoulders, has the sole responsibility of sharing these stories so a world like that never happens again. So love is never outlawed. Every time I would read these stories, I'd feel like a coward. I didn't do my part, I didn't do anything with my responsibility. So here I am, 28 years later, with two kids and a husband of my own, telling Florence's story. I don't think about her very much, but on occasion, I'll remember her story, each time losing more and more detail to my ageing mind. But this time, I wrote it down, and I'm not scared to tell it, Florence, I'm not.