

— Talking with Dead People —

Yes, I was the one who came up with the name “House of Whacks,” as in “Lizzie Borden took an ax . . .” Like I was someone who could joke about that kind of thing. And yes, it’s true that Elizabeth Mint offered me a partnership in the business and I turned her down. We were college roommates, and I feel comfortable saying I had no business sense whatsoever. If I had seen the same potential in the idea that she did, if I had taken her up on the offer, if I hadn’t called it quits on working with her, I would be a millionaire now.

She called herself Eliza then. Made sure you knew it was EE-LIES-AH and nothing else. She had a weird love-hate relationship with the whole Lizzie Borden thing. Her family lived in South Jersey when she was a kid, and she was a Lizzie then without anyone making a fuss about it. They moved an hour upstate to Teaneck right before she started high school, right when that big Lizzie Borden movie came out. The next thing she knew, she was Lizzie-from-Bordentown and everybody was going around asking her how her parents were. After four years of teasing, she was happy to get a fresh start in college.

Despite all that, or maybe because of it, the story held a fascination for her. I didn’t understand, but I was used to sharing space with people who couldn’t let something go. She dragged me on more than one road trip from Rochester to Fall River, Massachusetts. Dragged me to some other creepy places, too: abandoned sanatoriums, murder

sites, serial-killer homes. I had no idea how many people made pilgrimages to those places. At least Eliza's interest was pragmatic; not that I knew it at first.

I went along because she paid for gas and I had never been more than a hundred miles from home. Having somebody who wanted to go places with me was a novelty, too, though in retrospect that may have been her own self-interest reflecting off me.

On the way back from one of those places in my old Ford Fiesta—she was the only moneyed person I ever met who didn't drive—she always sat silent while I searched my phone for the cheeriest songs I could think of. Then the questions inevitably came.

"Hey, Gwennie, why do you think there was no water in the swimming pool?"

"It's October?"

"Not now. Then. He was found in an empty swimming pool in July."

I'd mull it over. "Do they know whether it was emptied before or after he wound up in there?"

"He didn't drown or fall in. He was dead already. Weren't you paying attention?"

The answer to that was always, "No." I'd had enough of murders and missing people by then. I wandered through the sites with the goal of learning as little as possible about the mystery at hand. The whole thing felt voyeuristic to me, lurid; to my mind, what went on behind a family's closed doors wasn't meant to be seen, much less solved. Instead of paying attention to the clues, I concentrated on the architecture, interior design, gardening, art. I studied the books on the bookshelves, the furniture, the cutlery. Imagined how I'd replicate them in miniature if I were adding that house to the train towns I'd built in my parents' basement.

She'd answer her own question after a while.

"I'll bet the pool was empty because somebody had convinced old Mr. Haygood that there was some expensive repair that needed to be

done while the rest of the family was on vacation. Maybe somebody convinced him that a whole bunch of things needed fixing, the pool needed to be drained, and that he had to pay in advance. Then the family got home and discovered he'd been taken advantage of, and—"

"That's what brought down the most popular American politician of the twenty-first century? A scam? They had money. How does that explain his son in the pool, or Senator Haygood disappearing for three weeks?" I didn't need to pay attention on a tour to know any of that.

"If you don't see it, I'm not going to spell it out, Gwen."

Then I'd skip to a song I could sing along with, and before too long she'd apologize and change the subject to make me stop singing. She covered all this in the memoir, the road trips and the questions she asked herself afterward, though she left me out of that part. More introspection, less interrogation.

I pretty much got one scene in the book. In her telling, we were on the Mass Pike, an hour into the six-hour drive back to school from Fall River, when she turned to me and said, "What if we could ask them questions?"

In real life, I said, "Who?" and she said, "Them. You know." And I said, "I have no idea what you're talking about," and then we played a round of total exasperation. She tightened up the conversation in *Talking with Dead People* for clarity's sake.

In her version, she said, "What if we could ask them questions?"

The fictionalized me, with perfect grasp of her concept, answered, "That would be awesome."

What she meant, of course, was, "What if we gave them a voice?" That was her idea. Asking questions of murderers and monsters and the unjustly accused.

"Like a séance?" I suggested when I got her implication, also after a much briefer period in her book than in real life.

"A séance, but better. You go to Fall River and ask Lizzie Borden actual questions and get actual answers in reply."

I humored her. "You could call it 'House of Whacks.' Get it?" "That's the best idea you've ever had." I could hear the grin behind her words. For the rest of the drive we tried to come up with better names, but that one stuck from the beginning.

The name helped focus the project, too. I think her original idea had been animatronic busts of the killers, which to her mind was cool and to mine was a cross between the Hall of Presidents and the Oz witch with the interchangeable heads. Creepy as hell, uncanny.

She might have stuck with that, but for the fact we didn't know anybody who made the type of sculptures needed to bring those busts to life. Eliza was always good at adapting to what was on hand, and what was on hand was me.

Model making was always my thing. First, broccoli-tree dioramas and ranch dressing dyed river-blue. Then whole train towns in the basement with my parents, before my brother, Tristan, disappeared, then every shop and engineering class my high school offered. Making murder houses wasn't that different; the architectural models I construct now aren't that different, either, for that matter. People ask, "Why houses? Why not the people themselves?" The answer is: we had a choice between fake-looking models of people or real-looking models of houses.

I built the first one in the campus theater's set shop, where I had my work-study gig that year. It was a good job; I liked making things, and I liked that the schedule was a sporadic one, even if that meant I never had much money. Nothing new there.

The prototype was the Borden house, of course. Not Maplecroft, her later home: 92 Second Street. On all our visits, Eliza made reservations for us at the bed and breakfast that operates there now; she'd book early enough to request the room where Lizzie's stepmother was found murdered. I'd always wandered the halls with an eye toward the house itself rather than the murders, but once she'd explained my role in her plan, I paid even more attention. The stairs' width, the orientation of the windows to the day's changing

sunlight. It was easy enough to find floor plans and photos online, but my own experience of the rooms and hallways suffused the project.

"Jesus, Gwen," said Eliza when I showed her the model she'd commissioned.

The west wall swung open on hinges. Every room was in there, in perfect proportion. Tiny replicas of the murder couch, the mirrors, the railings. Functional windows and doors. It stood a foot tall, not including the base, which added about four inches. The Borden house didn't have electricity so I installed fake miniature gas lamps on the tables and the walls.

"It's what you asked for, right?"

"Well, yes. But how long did it take you?"

I added up the days and hours in my head, then shrugged. She'd been working on the programming and the electronics for exactly as long as I'd been building the model. She'd bought all my supplies as I worked on it, too, so she ought to know.

She turned it around, peered in through the windows. "She made all the furniture," she whispered to herself, like I couldn't hear her. "Amazing."

I had left the base hollow, as she'd requested, and she skipped classes the next day to add her electronics. When I got back to the room after dinner, she was lying on her bed reading.

"Turn it on," she said, rolling over to face me.

Her desk was always a mess, in stark contrast to mine; the model sat in the center, with tools scattered around it. One shutter was missing, which gave me a pang of anxiety. I felt around on the base until I found a switch. Nothing happened.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Ask her a question."

Nothing came to my mind, and after a moment Eliza groaned and asked in my place. "Abby, which way were you facing when you were attacked?"

I peered into the house, half-expecting to see figures inside. “Wait. Why Abby? I thought you were questioning Lizzie?”

“When we switched to houses instead of busts, I realized we could put everyone in there.”

She repeated her question. A woman’s voice came through the speakers. I recognized Eliza’s friend Angie. “I was facing my attacker.”

“Abby, where was the first place you were hit?”

“I was hit in the guest room.”

I giggled, and Eliza gave me a hatchet-shaped look. This was a glitch.

“Abby,” she tried again. “Where was the first place on your body you were hit?”

“I was hit on the side of my head.”

Eliza smiled in triumph and continued. “Andrew, where did you go when you left the house the morning of your death?”

A male voice now, one I didn’t recognize. A professor, maybe? The voice sounded older than our friends. “I went for my morning walk.”

“Who attacked you?” I asked. No answer.

“You have to use a name first,” Eliza said.

I felt suddenly shy, formal. “Um, Mr. Borden, who attacked you?”

“I was asleep.”

I cocked my head at Eliza. “What happens if I ask Mrs. Borden that question? Or if I ask Lizzie directly?”

“Try it.”

“Lizzie Borden, did you kill the people you were accused of killing?”

Lizzie Borden answered in Eliza’s awful attempt at a Massachusetts accent. “I was acquitted of those crimes.”

The same voice, lying on the other bed, said, “Cool, huh?”

Something tapped against the window behind my bed: a bee caught between the screen and the glass. I crossed the room to free it.

It glanced off the window a couple more times before bumbling its way down the side of the building. I flopped onto my bed.

“I still don’t get it,” I said. “It doesn’t know any more than anybody else does. It can only say what you’ve programmed it to say. If you don’t know who did it, it won’t know, either.”

Eliza sighed. “This is a prototype. It can only answer questions I programmed in. But I’m pretty sure that if I give the AI enough information, if I feed it every single known detail about every victim and every suspect, I can get it to a point where it’ll be able to answer questions I don’t know the answer to. Make connections I haven’t made, based on what’s been input. Maybe. And even if it doesn’t, people will buy it anyway.”

“But what’s the point?”

“People love unsolved murders,” she said, a line she repeated and expanded upon in her memoir. “And they love murder houses. I—we—are going to make these and sell them to murder-house museums. This one is museum quality. And then we’re going to make smaller, cheaper ones, without furniture or tiny working shutters that fall off when I’m soldering.”

That stung more than I let on. Nothing fell off my models if they were handled right. My little brother, Tristan, wrecked more than his share, before he wasn’t around to do that anymore, but the fault was never in my workmanship. “*We*, huh?”

“We.”

I stood and poked around the desk until I found the missing shutter amid Eliza’s clutter. Fished among my model supplies for the tiny pin that would secure it back in place. “The other voices are good, but your Lizzie sounds fake.”

Two weeks later, she updated the base. The house gave a wider variety of answers. She replaced her own voice with someone who sounded more like the accents we heard in Fall River. On spring break, while

I was home, she took a bus to Massachusetts with the house on her lap. She sold it to a general store in town for a thousand dollars.

She tossed the money on my bed my first day back at school. They'd paid her online, but she'd taken it out of the bank in twenties.

"Gwennie, I need to know if we're partners in this."

"I thought we already were?"

"We can be. I need you to build the models, but I see a couple of ways this can go. Either we're partners and we both put up money to get this business going, and we both make decisions, and we split everything fifty-fifty, or you let me pay you for the models, but it's my business."

"How much would you pay me? For the models?"

"That first one was a work of art. We'll need a few more like that—I've got a list of houses—and then some mini-versions with no frills. No furniture. No working shutters. For the big ones, you'd get six hundred dollars each, plus materials. For the little ones, um, fifty dollars each. I'd pay you for each one, regardless of whether I was able to sell it or not."

"There's nine hundred dollars in that stack, for your hard work on the first one. None of this could happen if I hadn't been able to sell that first one. You can have nine hundred for it if you want to just work for hire. Otherwise I'll take that money back and invest it in the next step and we're fifty-fifty partners. Succeed or fail, equal share."

I looked at the bills stacked on my bed. I'd never seen that much money in my life, and she knew it. My parents weren't particularly well-off, and after the police stopped looking for Tristan, they spent every penny on private investigations. Nine hundred would let me buy new tires and a muffler for my car. With more payments like that, I could cover my own fees for the next semester and not need to ask my parents for money they didn't have. Or I could partner with her. But if nobody actually wanted to buy tiny murder houses with tiny murder voices, I'd be left with said murder houses. Money for

work, no accountability, or money for a share, with a stake I wasn't sure I could afford not to pocket.

"I'll work for you," I said.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a contract. "Let's make it official, then."

I never found out whether there was a second contract for if I'd answered the other way.

"People love solving mysteries," she wrote in her book. "It makes them feel smart."

She had a lot of ideas about what people liked and didn't like, maybe because she saw everybody else as extensions of herself. That part isn't in her book, of course. That's my own theory.

We turned our dorm room into a production factory. When the orders started coming in, she rented space in a warehouse and we moved everything there. It was a sauna in summer and freezing in winter, but nobody complained. She hired other friends to handle different aspects of the business, including a cast of voice actors and a couple of electronics people. Mo Bara painted my models. Samia Gilman built us a website and established a social-media presence.

Whatever the reason, Eliza was right. People wanted the murder houses. Just a few at first, but then someone solved the Haygood murder of 2021 using our model. Got the case reopened, found a way to prove their hypothesis using the actual evidence, exonerated the family. Senator Haygood even wrote to thank us.

After that, the orders came in faster than we could fill them. The waiting list only made them more desirable. We offered a range of houses we could assemble in bulk quantities, then another higher-priced tier for custom jobs. We did a Lindbergh, a Ramsey. I saved up enough money to pay my own tuition the next semester, since I was making more than anyone other than Eliza.

Once in a while I wondered if I'd made a mistake in not taking the partnership. I still wonder. I think I would have enjoyed the houses she built for forensic schools and the FBI, the case-study puzzles they commissioned, like the Nutshell Studies down in Maryland, but with voices and an AI that could follow lines of questioning. I would have been on board with the murder-house owners who paid Eliza for AIs that wired into intercoms or smartphones, so they could charge admission to people walking through the actual rooms.

Even if we hadn't fallen out when we did, we'd probably have fought over some of the other commissioned work she took, which I would have refused. Sensationalist TV shows that licensed our houses to provoke and harass people who had long since been acquitted. Dictators, current cases, things that felt too raw to be examined. At the time, my reason for wanting to stay with work-for-hire was simpler. I saw how much time Eliza spent on all the aspects that weren't craft; I was happy enough making my models and ignoring the business side.

We probably could have continued that way indefinitely if she hadn't gone and done the thing that ended our friendship. She didn't include that anecdote in *Talking with Dead People*, either . . . In the book she skips from our frigid warehouse space to her dropping out before senior year.

What she omitted was her present to me on my twentieth birthday. Our birthdays were fairly close to each other, so all three of the Decembers we roomed together we threw a joint party just before winter exams started, crowded and intimate, filled with our friends and business partners, more or less the same people. She drank Genny Light and I drank cider. I even remember that detail, mostly because later that night I got sick to my stomach, and I haven't been able to touch cider since.

Anyway, a few drinks in, she stood up on my desk and called for attention. Somebody—Mo Bara, I think, though that part is

hazy—somebody handed her a canvas shopping bag. She plugged in a cable dangling from it before she passed it to me. I remember that, too, so I already knew what sort of present it was even if I didn't know the specifics.

I pulled it from the shopping bag. With its plywood base two feet by one foot and sewing-machine-sized building, it was much larger than even my high-end models. The details were crude, and it took me a minute to recognize my own childhood home, but when I did, I had a pretty clear idea what she had done.

In a shaky voice, not yet slurring, I asked the model, "What's your name?"

A voice from inside—not mine, since I hadn't recorded this particular surprise—answered, "Gwen." I couldn't tell who it was. One of the acting-school kids we sometimes paid to do the job, probably.

I looked over at Eliza then. I don't know why she expected me to be excited that she had programmed my life's details as she knew them into an AI box. I guess maybe she wouldn't have minded one of herself, to interrogate and get her own answers back, so she didn't understand how I wouldn't feel the same. But I looked at her, and in that moment I think she realized that maybe it had been a mistake. I glared until the smile died on her face.

Too late, though. People were already pushing past to ask the fake me questions. Did I sleep with Caz Mendelson last year? What about Samia? Did I really flunk Ethics in Engineering? The answers were eerily correct. No. Yes. No—I got an extension to finish it over the summer because I'd been too busy making murder houses, and the professor said I could turn in an essay on the ethics of making murder houses, which I did. These were all things Eliza knew about me from two and a half years in close proximity. The voice, though not my own, carried my speech patterns, my inflections.

The questions took other turns. I waited for the voice to make a mistake, to prove it wasn't me, but it knew my home address, my parents' names, the name of my favorite teacher in high school. I

pictured Eliza secretly reaching out to my family, my online friends, asking them if they wanted to be in on a birthday surprise. I'll bet if anyone said they didn't think I enjoyed surprises, she probably just fed that information into the AI, too.

"How many siblings do you have?" somebody asked, and I think I stopped breathing. They were just asking random questions, I told myself.

"None," the AI said, then paused. "None anymore."

I grabbed my backpack from under my bed, made sure I had keys and wallet and computer, and walked out the door. I could have stayed and kicked everyone else out, but I left them interrogating me. All I knew was that I had to go before I heard any follow-up questions, or worse yet, answers.

I tried knocking on some doors to find a place to crash, but everybody was either at our party or gone from campus already. Freezing rain fell as I headed for my car, but it wasn't unbearably cold. My father made me keep an emergency blanket in the trunk, and I pulled my arms and legs up into my clothes. I woke up once in the middle of the night to vomit by my back tire, slipping on the ice that had accumulated and nearly wiping out in my own sick.

I stayed in other people's rooms for the rest of the exam period and applied to move over the winter break. The school assigned me to another junior whose roommate was studying in Rome for the spring.

I knew I was leaving the company in the lurch in terms of models, but at that point I didn't care. I was done with murder houses. Done with AI voices that knew too much. In my ethics essay, I had justified what we were doing. "In some cases, we're giving voice to the voiceless," I wrote. "The AI can represent all the players in the case. There's no speculation. If it doesn't know an answer, it says 'I don't know' or 'I don't remember.' And sometimes it makes intuitive leaps that somebody involved in the case should have made but didn't. It remains to be seen whether any of those inferences can be proven,

but the possibility of serving justice is exciting and may outweigh any moral or ethical qualms."

I drove two hours up to Rochester on Christmas, in order to pack up my stuff at a time I knew she wouldn't be there. We had cleared all the Christmas orders before the party—yes, people buy each other murder houses for Christmas—and everyone had been rewarded with two whole weeks off. I was pretty sure she was in Barbados with her family.

The room looked exactly as it had when I'd left, minus the people. Red plastic cups and beer bottles everywhere, along with a yeasty smell that said they'd been left where they fell and not rinsed out.

My so-called present was on the desk where I'd abandoned it. Still plugged in. I shouldn't have asked, but I was the only one in the building and I had to know.

"What happened to your brother, Gwen?"

"I don't know," the House of Whacks said.

"But you were watching him that day?"

"Yes."

"And what happened?"

"He was playing in the yard, and I was playing a game on my phone. And then I went upstairs, and he was gone." My words in the police report, verbatim.

"You didn't hear anything?"

"I told the police 'no.'"

"Repeat that answer, please," I said.

"I told the police. No."

I didn't know if I'd imagined the different inflection the first time. Terrifying how that nuance changed my words' meaning. *Its* words. What line of code made the difference between the two? I had one more question.

"What video game were you playing?"

The machine paused. That information had never been in any articles.

"I don't remember," it said at last.

That "I don't remember" kept me from smashing the thing, though I probably should have. I had been playing *Karmic Warrior*. My highest level yet. My highest level to date, I should say, since I never played it again. The machine wasn't me. Eliza hadn't re-created me. It was just an approximation.

It didn't know Tristan had begged me to teach him how to play *Karmic Warrior*. It knew he was wearing his Tyrannosaurus T-shirt and jeans with a torn right knee and sneakers that were starting to pinch his toes—he'd complained about them just that morning—because I told the police exactly what he was wearing. It knew he had a tiny white patch of hair at the crown of his head where he'd earned eight stitches on the corner of the coffee table the year before, because that had fallen under "distinguishing marks."

It didn't know he snorted when he laughed. It didn't know he ran like a tiny drunk, weaving and listing. Nobody had told it about his strange fascination with bees, which he captured gently but sometimes accidentally set loose in the house, and that he had gotten all of us stung more times than we could count. It didn't know I had been chasing my high score in *Karmic Warrior* and told him to get lost. Those exact words, "Get lost," and I never saw him again.

Before I made my final trip across campus with my final box, I unplugged the Gwen AI. I was halfway down the hall when I changed my mind and went back. There was a screwdriver in the top desk drawer; I flipped the model over and unscrewed the base. Removed the chip, shoved it in my pocket. Stopped in the kitchen on the first floor to microwave it. Didn't stick around to see the fireworks.

That party was the last time I ever spoke to Eliza. She tried calling several times, but I didn't answer and eventually she gave up. Going by what I heard from Samia and a couple of the others who were still on the HoW payroll, she couldn't understand what had

offended me, which told me I had made the right choice. To Eliza there was no difference between Lizzie Borden and the Haygood scandal and Tristan's disappearance. We were all just mysteries waiting for her to solve us.