

Introduction

People seem to place a lot of importance on first sentences in books, so I'll put this right here and we can avoid that altogether.

Hello, dear reader, it's your old friend, Dr. Cecil H.H. Mills: celebrated wordsmith and oftentimes controversial figurehead in the literary world. You're no doubt browsing through this novel in the Young Adult section of your bookstore, so you may not have heard of my work before. You see, I'm used to having my books placed in the Adult Fiction section. While I may not have done much—or any—research on what exactly constitutes a “Young Adult” reader, I assume that since my old books were placed above a normal human adult's shoulder height, they must have been unreachable to you. Which is fine.

My adult books are very good books, okay? So good that I was inevitably unrestricted by form or marketability. I received carte blanche to let fire flow from my fingers and beauty seep from my pores. It was glorious, the work I could do in my thousand-page tomes. The page was my medium and truth was my ink.

Then some things happened that I don't really want to talk about, and gambling debts being what they are, I found myself taking whatever work the publishers would buy from me. So here I am! Writing a mystery book for adolescent readers! And not a nuanced examination of humanity's descent into the comforting, venomous clutches of technology as

the myth of the American dream fades away. I didn't even want to write that anyway. No siree!

Okay, kid, go take this book up to the cashier and buy it so that we can get started.

I'll wait.

Are we good? Did you pay for this? Great.

Now, before we begin the story of the Ghost Hunters Adventure Club, I think it's important that something be said about the Watts brothers, the co-founders of said club. Not about their past, mind you, which remains relatively unimportant and partially expunged from police records thanks to their both recently turning eighteen. I wish instead to talk about them now, in the present, in the hopes that it might give you a hint as to why they do what they do. Perhaps the best way to achieve that is to paint a portrait of them in a specific moment at a specific time:

Currently J.J. and Valentine Watts are puttering up a frigid mountain road as fast as their decades-old motorcycle beneath them will allow. J.J., the eldest by a short amount of time, is at the handlebars and is just barely keeping them from careening into a snowbank. He has a scar across the bridge of his nose. He doesn't like to talk about how he got it.

Valentine, glasses fogged, clings for dear life behind him while he tracks the minute-by-minute loss of feeling in his fingers. He had full use of them once. For most of his life, actually. Riding up a winding road into increasingly inclement conditions is an abstract, rough existence that is a statistical outlier to his usual, more terrestrial rough existence.

(The motorcycle will be ignored after the first couple minutes of the story; however, it's worth knowing that it was received as remuneration following a game of dice and a short fist fight.)

Valentine shouts something that J.J. either can't hear or chooses not to. Probably something about his fingers. Neither are equipped for a ride up to higher altitude, wearing matching sweaters for a reason that will be deduced later by someone smarter than them.

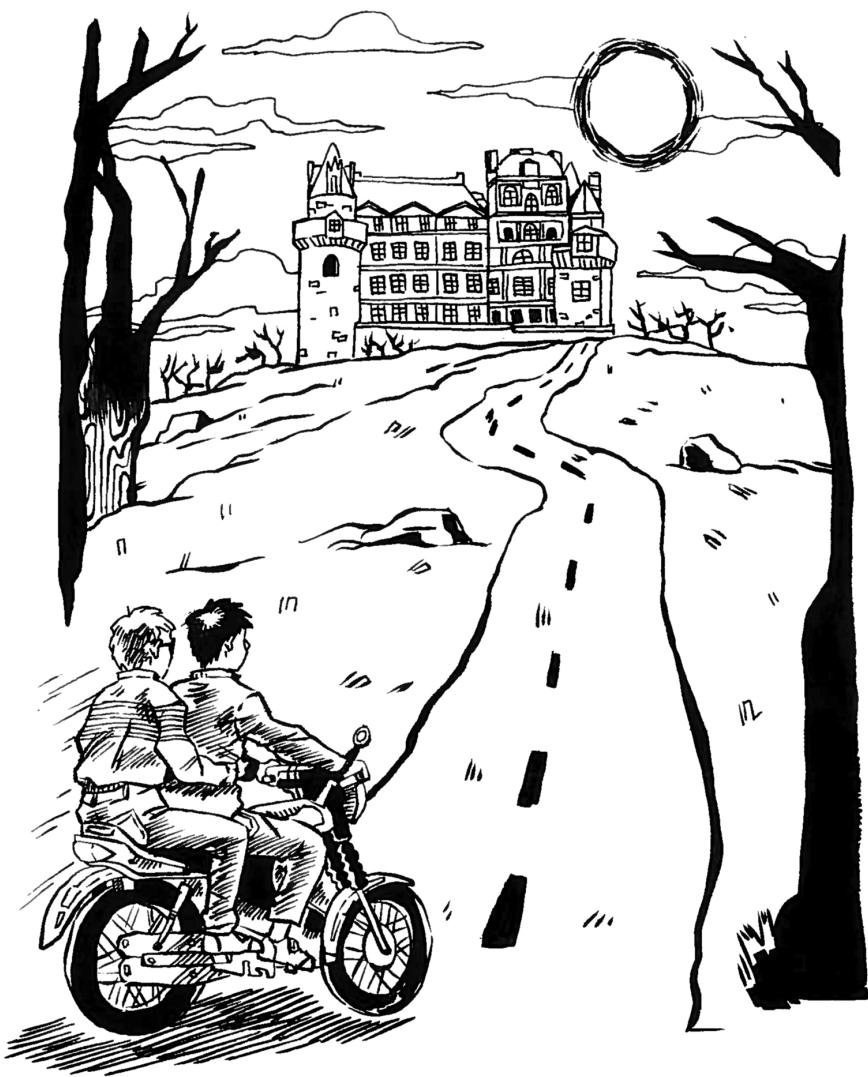
They're almost to where they are going.

Now I'll stop here as I feel that I might be outstaying my welcome, dear reader. That's probably a good primer on these brothers, which, and I can't believe I almost forgot to say this, but it's a little dubious as to whether or not they're actually brothers in the first place. But that will be definitively figured out some other time.

That all being said, it's time to begin the tale of the Watts boys and their crime solving organization, the Ghost Hunters Adventure Club. Now allow your humble narrator to see if he can shut his trap for a minute, switch elegantly to past tense, and let the brothers do the talking.

Act One





CHAPTER 1

An Explosive Beginning

J.J. and Valentine Watts dismounted their motorcycle. Remembering that they had traded the kickstand for gas at the base of the mountain, J.J. laid it gingerly on the snowy pavement near a row of sportscars that might have been driven up in better weather. Before them stood the Grande Chateau, a snowy escape overlooking the cascading mountains a short drive away from Harborville, the boys' hometown. A warm glow was emanating from its windows. Valentine immediately tucked his hands into the armpits of his powder-blue sweater. Perhaps he'd keep his fingers after all.

"Hmm," said Valentine.

"What is it?" asked J.J., shaking the frost off of his red sweater.

"Well, for a place called the Grande Chateau, don't you think it's kind of...regular-sized?"

"C'mon, we'll be late," said J.J. "If someone pays us to solve the Mystery of the Regular-Sized Chateau then we'll go and solve the Mystery of the Regular-Sized Chateau."

"Do you think this guy's serious about the ghosts?" asked Valentine.

"Does it make a difference?"

"To me, yeah."

J.J. warmed up his hands by rubbing them and cupping them over his mouth. He slung his leather satchel around his shoulder. "He's serious enough to pay us, and that's all that matters to me."

Valentine looked up at the sky, noting the approach of dark and billowing clouds.

"Looks ominous," he said.

They did their secret handshake and walked toward the chateau.

* * *

AFTER SNAKING THEIR WAY THROUGH some bellhops and luggage carriers, the two entered the relative warmth of the Grande Chateau's lobby. Inside they found a wide, regal reception room decorated wall to wall with mounted game animal heads, hunting knickknacks, and comfy couches. There was a painting there at the far end of the room—a gargantuan one of a man cradling an ornate hunting rifle, a bested black bear lying lifeless at his feet. Chateau patrons milled around, some lounging and some returning from their ski trips down the mountain. It was barely noon and the bartender was already handing out complimentary glasses of wine as she laughed with the hotel patrons. She had short red hair and an apparently affable demeanor, as far as either of them could tell from this far away.

The boys paused for a moment to stop shivering, then located the front desk and stood patiently behind an older man with a ponytail and sunglasses wearing nothing but a bath towel.

"Listen," said the man to the clerk, "I'm not happy that I'm currently in a hotel lobby in a towel, and that up until a few seconds ago I didn't even have the towel, but sometimes a man takes his breakfast tray out of his bedroom without thinking too far into the future and sometimes he forgets to bring his hotel key."

The clerk had her nose buried in a novel. Appearing close in age to the brothers and wearing a pair of glasses that could make Valentine

jealous, she gave nods and “mhms” at regular intervals to create the illusion of sympathy.

“If I could just get a new—”

Without looking up, the woman handed the man a new key. He marched off in a huff, snagging a glass of complimentary wine for the trip upstairs.

J.J. sidled up to the counter and produced a business card. This was his time to shine. “How do you do,” he said. “My name is J.J. Watts, and the less-handsome gentleman behind me is my brother and close confidant, Valentine Watts. Together we make up the Ghost Hunters Adventure Club, Harborville’s foremost crime-fighting and mystery-solving duo.”

J.J. paused for a reaction. The young woman gave him and Valentine a cursory glance before returning to her book. He retracted the business card, peering over the desk to better see the woman engrossed in her novel.

He coughed politely, trying to get her attention. “What, um...what are you reading?”

“No, you’re not,” replied the young woman.

“Excuse me?”

“Brothers. You’re not brothers.”

Taken aback, J.J. furrowed his brow. “Now wait a minute...”

“Look,” said the woman, closing her book and adjusting her glasses. “You have black hair and brown eyes and your ‘brother’ has blonde hair and blue eyes. It’s rare, but not impossible. Then I noticed that you have detached earlobes while your ‘brother’ doesn’t. Another genetic dissimilarity. If you wanna play the Punnett square game to even the odds, I could see if either of you can roll your tongue.”

“Hey, hey, slow down,” said J.J. “There’s plenty of different ways we could be brothers. We might be adopted siblings for all you know.”

“Right, see, that was what I was looking for. Instead of maintaining that you were brothers, you brought up more hypotheticals. You’ve been

thinking about what someone would say if they accused you of not being brothers.” She leaned forward, a curt smile appearing on her lips. “That, combined with the matching sweaters, which, I’ll add, your friend forgot to take the price tag off of...”

Valentine ripped off the tag dangling from his wrist and stuck it in his back pocket, embarrassed.

“...leads me to deduce that you’re not actually brothers, and you’re probably just doing this for the bit. Or the brand. Seems like you guys are trying to make money.”

J.J. stood there in shocked silence.

“And the book is *Bones of Desire* by Wallace P. Gross,” said the woman as she leaned back and began reading again. “Real page turner of a sleuth story.”

J.J.’s senses returned to him and he pointed a finger at the woman. “Now listen here you little—”

“Whoa! Let me apologize for my dear brother,” said Valentine, jumping between the two. “He was raised by wild animals and failed out of finishing school because he started a fight club. Did you say you were reading Wallace P. Gross?”

“Mhmm.”

“He’s who we’re here to see.”

“Oh yeah?” said the woman. “He writes out of the chateau. His stuff’s pretty good too, if a little on the nose.”

J.J. folded his arms and scoffed. “I’m sure he’s a fine author, but he’s no Dr. Cecil H.H. Mills. Now *there’s* a letter pusher.”¹

“Gentlemen,” said a voice from behind them.

The brothers turned around to see an older woman in a sharp business suit and a sour look. Her lapel was embroidered with the logo of the establishment. She extended her manicured hand in greeting.

“Madame Fournier, hotelier of the Grande Chateau, at your service.”

¹ Editor’s note: We were contractually obligated to keep this nod to the author in the book.

“It’s sort of regular-sized, isn’t it?” remarked Valentine.

“Hmm?”

J.J. accepted the woman’s hand. “Please excuse my brother’s manners, ma’am. He was a transitory circus performer during his formative years.”

J.J. re-produced the business card. “J.J. Watts, the better half of the Watts Brothers and lead investigator of the Ghost Hunters Adventure Club. Charmed to make your acquaintance.”

“I’m glad you two were able to make it in before the blizzard struck,” she said, accepting and regarding the card with a manner that seemed to give them more credit than they deserved. “If you were out there for another couple minutes you surely would have frozen to death.”

“Danger is a core tenet of the Ghost Hunters Adventure Club life-style,” said J.J.

“As is neglecting to check the weather report before making a long distance trip,” added Valentine.

“Now pardon my manners,” said Madame Fournier, “but I couldn’t help but overhear you were looking for a Mr. Wallace P. Gross.”

“Yes,” said Valentine. “He asked us to come up here to discuss business.”

“Very well then. Let me show you to his study.”

Madame Fournier led the boys up the grand staircase at the end of the lobby and down a long hallway. J.J. tried to sneak in one last hateful glare to the young woman at the front desk, but her nose was still buried in her book.

“Mr. Gross has been a guest of ours for a long while,” Madame Fournier told them. “He always comes up to the chateau to work on his mystery novels, which you might know have garnered him worldwide acclaim.”

“He always comes up here?” asked J.J.

“Yes, he’s a bit of a superstitious type. He wrote his first novel here decades ago and refuses to work anywhere else. He’s been at the latest manuscript for the past three years.”

The hotelier stopped at a large set of wooden doors and turned to the boys. "I must warn you, however, that Mr. Gross has gotten on in his years and has become a little...eccentric."

"How so?" asked Valentine.

"Well, to start, he just called up two ghost hunters to meet him at a hotel in the mountains."

"Ghost hunters *and* super sleuths," J.J. cut in. "We'll do landscaping, too, if there's a paycheck in it."

"Right. Well, just be warned."

The double doors swung open with an audible squeak and in the center of the room was an old man with frazzled gray hair that stood on end. He stood there, looking distinguished with a tweed vest and knotted bowtie.

"The Ghost Hunters Adventure Club!" he exclaimed. "Please, please, come in."

Madame Fournier took her leave as J.J. and Valentine entered the study, their senses flooding with the smell of rolled tobacco and old hard-covers. The room was lined with bookshelves and enormous, arched windows overlooking the snowscape outside.

Wallace P. Gross walked a circle around the room, gesticulating with an artistic flourish. "J.J. and Valentine Watts. Harborville's finest brother detectives and private investigators! No job too small or too great."

"You've read our website, I see," said J.J.

"I have. You two *are* the brightest minds that Harborville has to offer, yes?"

"Either that or the most search engine optimized," said Valentine.

"I'm sorry, what?"

J.J. coughed. "He meant to say that we're unparalleled in our brightness. We're brightness all-stars. The brightest. Too bright, some might argue."

Wallace rubbed his chin, thinking. "Hmm, right. You'll have to do, then. In that case I must give you the tour."

Wallace P. Gross grabbed his coat and started forward. The boys followed behind dutifully, and the three stepped out into the hall.

“First on the docket,” Wallace began, “I’d like to introduce you two to the Grande Chateau. It’s a place that I’ve called home for the past three years now, and a place I’ve called home many times throughout my life and career. Built over a century ago, this sanctuary was initially meant for Harborville’s wealthy elite and urban socialites to unwind from their busy city lives and indulge in their opium-fueled cabalistic indulgences.”

J.J. and Valentine shared a glance.

“They had non-opium-fueled cabalistic indulgences too, although that’s less important.”

The trio rounded a corner and walked into a room filled floor-to-ceiling with books. Gigantic tomes lay stacked on tables throughout, and from the many stained glass windows the boys could see snow coming down at a steadier and steadier rate.

“The library,” Wallace said. “That starts with an ‘L,’ mind you.”

The boys, while maybe not smart enough to understand many things, were at least smart enough to know that the word “library” started with the letter “L.” They exchanged a confused look.

Wallace went on. “Home to a variety of first editions, encyclopediae, religious texts, and so forth. When not in my study, it is here that I do all of my research for my pantheon of bestselling and award-winning mystery novels.”

“It looks very...bookly,” J.J. commented.

“Astute observation. Please, please. There’s more to see.”

Wallace ushered the boys down the stairs and out through the back side of the chateau. They walked out into what must have been a vast and beautiful garden, were it not covered in snow. J.J. and Valentine immediately began shivering in their store-bought, non-woolen sweaters. Wallace didn’t appear to mind the cold.

Valentine could see the mountain drop off into a sheer cliff just beyond a winter-worn forest, and a green storage shed stood in the distance.

Clearing snow in front of its doorway was whom he presumed to be the groundskeeper. Even from this distance he could tell that this man stood a head taller than the average man.

“The courtyard,” he said. “That starts with the letter ‘C.’ Are you remembering all of this?”

“It’s really cold out here,” said Valentine, his teeth beginning to chatter.

A smile spread across Wallace P. Gross’s face. “Perfect.”

The boys followed Wallace down a snowy path. An old woman in a fur coat and black scarf sat on a bench next to a stone statue of an angel. She didn’t seem to mind the cold either.

Looking up at them, her face turned from a scowl to a deeper, more pronounced scowl. “If it isn’t my intellectually impotent ex-husband,” the woman said.

“Don’t look her in the eyes, boys,” Wallace warned, the smile sliding from his face. “You’ll turn to stone.”

J.J. and Valentine glanced at Wallace, trying to assess the validity of his statement.

“J.J., Valentine, I’d like to introduce you to my ex-wife and perennial thorn in my side, Marcella P. Gross.”

“Wait,” interrupted Valentine, “you have the same middle initial?”

“I took it the same way I took half this man’s fortune in the divorce,” snapped Marcella.

Valentine gulped.

“Your sense of humor remains sharp,” said Wallace. “Whose soul did you sell for it?”

“What...” said J.J., trying to defuse the situation, “...what, um...are you doing out here in the snow, ma’am? It’s getting pretty cold out here.”

“She wanted to be in a place where her heart felt warm, no doubt.”

“What are *you* doing out here, Wallace? Finally looking for a spot to keel over and die?”

“I’ll die when I’m good and ready, you frigid ice queen. Come on, boys.” Wallace marched toward the chateau.

“It was nice to meet you, ma’am,” said Valentine.

“Get lost, Jack.”

They entered again through the backside of the chateau, where Wallace led them down another hallway.

“I hope that this isn’t being too forward, sir,” J.J. said, “but what’s your ex-wife doing here at the chateau?”

“You’re asking questions that aren’t important right now,” Mr. Gross replied. He paused for a moment, as if he were either lost in thought or his old man programing had encountered a bug. “That’s funny, she was sitting on the bench where we first met.”

He shook his head and pressed forward. “Nearly there, come along.”

They arrived at a wide room with a vaulted ceiling. A huge chandelier hung above an intricately-woven carpet. Chairs and tables, presumably used for special occasions, were stacked in a corner and also placed haphazardly throughout the room.

“The Grande Ballroom, or Ballroom for short. Starts with the letter ‘B.’ It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Lovely,” said J.J. out of politeness.

“I didn’t want to show it for any other reason than I thought it was nice. Great for dancing. Maybe you two ought to cut a rug in here on your free time.”

“We will...put that on the docket,” said J.J.

Wallace P. Gross nodded vigorously, his wire-like hair swaying back and forth. “Nearly finished with the tour, gents. This way.”

In the hallway, J.J. and Valentine hung back, just out of earshot of the author.

“Are you getting kind of a...I don’t know, a ‘not all there’ vibe from Wallace?” whispered Valentine.

“Was it the casual socialite-cabalistic-ritual dialog or the ping pong match of death threats between him and Marcella that made you think that?”

J.J. sighed. "Look, I'm not personally enamored by the situation at hand either, and I know what you're about to say."

"This isn't right," said Val.

"See? That. I knew you were gonna say that," J.J. replied. "Look, finances being what they are, if we want to eat tonight we're gonna have to at least listen to the guy."

Valentine shook his head. "I don't like that."

"I know you don't. But if you wanna make it in the detective business you're gonna have to take a few bum cases."

They followed the old man back to the chateau lobby and up the stairs to Wallace's study. He closed the door behind them with another squeak from the door's hinges and stood in the center of the room.

"Final stop of the tour," he said. "Study. Starts with an 'S.'"

The boys stood there, waiting for Wallace to say something more. After a moment of wordless smiling, J.J. broke the silence. "So how would you like us to help, Mr. Gross?"

"Ah, yes," said Wallace, snapping back to attention. "As you boys know, I needed the employ of Harborville's finest detectives for a reason. You see," he said, his fingers beginning to tremble, "I'm being haunted."

"Right, ghosts," said J.J. "My brother and I are well-versed in ghost detection and expulsion. However, do keep in mind that we charge extra for poltergeists and ghosts in corporeal form. You pay out of pocket if we have to bring in either an old priest or young priest."

"Take more pride in listening rather than speaking, young man." Wallace's face grew grim. "It might do you some good down the line."

The boys looked at each other, confused.

The author paced around the room, peering out of his window into what had turned into a threatening blizzard outside. "I've known for some time now that a ghost has been watching me. Watching over my latest work. For the past three years I've been consumed by this obsession, this specter, unable to finish my manuscript."

He returned to the center of the room and addressed the boys directly. He heaved a very heavy sigh. "Now I fear my time is short, for I've put together everything and I can see clearly. There are a great many more mysteries to the Grande Chateau than you'd initially believe."

And just as he finished his sentence, Wallace P. Gross's head exploded.