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Things That Happened

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Things That Happened

By Christian Chase

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing

Linfield College

5/15/19

Approved By Signature redacted

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A Whole Lot of Nothing

“Did you know on many highways out west they’ve artificially added turns to them, just because they used to go in a straight line forever and drivers would start getting hypnotized by the road at night and fall into a trance?”

-Ross Scott

“So, apparently, there isn’t a spare tire!” Steven grinned at Marshall toothily, and it took every ounce of self-restraint he had not to throttle the smiling blonde on the spot. Either the look in Marshall’s eyes or the way his hands twitched clued him in on this, and Steven scooched away from Marshall slightly, not having much room to do so in the tiny piece-of-trash car. Steven sort of scrunched himself into the corner while Marshall glowered out the window at the seemingly endless fields that surrounded them. Even if their phones had any charge left, there was no reception out there- somewhere in the midwest. Marshall could tell because of all the *nothing* there was out there.

There’s a *lot* of that in the midwest.

Around the highway, there was nothing but fields of tall, unkempt grass. The cloudless night was illuminated by a glowing moon, hung low in the sky. So far out from the cities, with so little light pollution, the sky was a tapestry of stars.

“If it weren’t for the flat tire,” Marshall mused, voice as straight as the edge of a knife. “I could just kill you and toss your body in one of those fields and disappear and nobody would find out.”

Steven cackled, clapping his hands together as if this little hypothetical murder plot was absolutely delightful to him. “Well what’d be the best way to do it then?”

Marshall leaned back, tipping the seat back a bit as he did, grunting faintly. “Hrm. I guess I could just strangle ya. You’ve got a skinny neck and I’ve got some of those disposable gloves in here somewhere or other. It’s dark and cloudy too. Nobody’d be able to see me, even if they *were* here.”

“You’d have to scrub my hands to make sure I didn’t grab any hair offa you.” Steven shrugged, grinning cheerily. “Or I’d scratch at ya, get some of your skin and blood under my fingers.”

Marshall sucked at the inside of his cheek. “Huhn... Tire iron under the hood? Again, wear the gloves, bash your head, dump you in the tall grass and drive away.”

“Sure.” Steven nodded, thinking. “We’re a long way from home and no one knows we’re here. I’d be just some nameless guy in the grass. Middle of ratfuck-nowhere.”

“I’d have to frisk ya, make sure you didn’t have your ID on you. Pop it in a furnace or a trash compactor.”

“Well you seem like you would be the type to loot a corpse anyway.” Steven shook his head in mock despair. “No respect for the dead.”

“Fuck em.” Marshall shrugged. “They’re dead.”

“So what?” Steven raised an eyebrow. “You’d just boot me outta the car if I died right now?”

“Nah, I’d take your stuff. Then I’d give you a smack fer wasting my time.”

Marshall cracked his knuckles, but there was a grin on his face. “...*Then* I’d boot you out. Only living people are of use to me.”

“You’re a charming guy, Marshall.” Steven said, tone dripping with sarcasm.

Marshall let out a rare chuckle.

It was the kind of conversation that only two friends could have. Discussing one another’s murder.

The conversation ground to a halt at the sight of headlights approaching.

“If this person doesn’t help us, I’m gonna kill them.” Marshall groaned, pinching his brow. The car began to slow, pulling over so that the high beams shone right into the car.

Steven’s smile faded for the first time. “Jackass.” He grumbled, as the brilliant light illuminated the vehicle, forcing the pair to jerk their eyes away, shielding their faces as they tried to fumble for the doors.

“Why’s he need his high beams?” Marshall took a moment to utter a number of creative and vile profanities as he tumbled out of the car, kicking a rock aside with another curse. “It’s full moon out, almost bright as day.”

Steven mumbled some irritated incoherence as the driver rolled the window down. The man smelled strongly of whiskey and his eyes were glazed. He didn’t speak for a few minutes, before grinning, a wide gap-toothed grin and...

Well, he made some slurred noises that could *almost* be mistaken for speech. He stared vacantly, as if expecting the two to respond like he had given an intelligent greeting.

Marshall stared at the man, his expression a cross between stunned disbelief and murderous rage. Without a word, he stomped to his truck, yanking open the hood. After some digging, he yanked out a car jack that was stored near the engine, growling. He dropped it to the ground, before yanking open the passenger seat and opening the glove box, retrieving a lug wrench.

“...What are you doing?” Steven kinked his head from side to side, puzzled. The drunk mumbled more gibberish, still grinning vapidly. Marshall dropped the cross-shaped tool beside the jack, before suddenly whirling a vicious haymaker, clobbering the drunk upside the head, striking him hard across the temple and knocking him out cold.

Steven stared in shock, mouth agape as Marshall wordlessly pushed the jack into position, lifting the drunk’s truck. He didn’t move the entire time that Marshall worked, rooted to the spot and watching in stunned disbelief as Marshall take the front tire off the truck, and lowering the truck back down so it rested awkwardly on the shoulder of the road.

“...So we’re just... taking his tire?” Steven finally managed to gain enough composure to speak up, a bit timidly. Marshall didn’t reply right away, and set to work changing the tire on his own truck. As soon as he had finished, he carried the flat tire and put it in the bed of the drunk man’s trunk. Breathing slowly, Marshall regained

composure and went back to the car. Steven quickly took the hint and jumped in the passenger side, lest he be left behind.

“Fuck him.” Marshall finally said, turning the key, the truck roaring to life. He slammed on the gas, peeling off down the road, leaving the unconscious and stranded drunk behind. Steven let out a drawn-out whistle.

“Wow, okay. Holy shit.”

Marshall didn't reply, his eyes on the road. The air was still, and fields of yellow rushed by as the car sped along through the night, rolling along, passing by the empty world alongside them.

No words were exchanged for several minutes as Steven processed what had just happened.

“...Whole lotta nothing out here.” He finally mumbled, watching the unchanging wheat fields shoot past them.

Grand Artistic Vision

“Then one night as I listened at the door I heard the shrieking viol swell into a chaotic babel of sound; a pandemonium which would have led me to doubt my own shaking sanity had there not come from behind that barred portal a piteous proof that the horror was real...”

-H.P. Lovecraft, *The Music of Erich Zann*

Every day, Mr. Cohen would rise from bed, brew the bitterest coffee he could manage to create without killing himself, and hobble over to his window, peering at the building next door to see if any of his neighbors were in view that he could yell at. After that, he would allow himself to draw his curtains and withdraw to the big armchair at the center of his apartment to take a few moments to just sit back and feel his body slowly continue to age from the outside-in. And then, he would begin painting.

For a man in his late seventies, Cohen had to admit that he was startlingly spry. He owned a cane, but rarely needed it, and could still make it all the way from the bottom of the building, up the stairs to his apartment on the fourteenth floor (technically it was only 13 floors, but it was an old building and floor 13 was simply not labeled as such). Not bad for a fellow who looked as withered as he did. The youthful years he had spent toiling in the sun and wind had driven deep wrinkles into his skin, not to mention the exposure to numerous chemicals during his more experimental paintings, yet beneath the

pockmarks and withering of age, Mr. Cohen still would be able to dart about like he had in his youth for years to come.

But those years were truly coming along far too fast. Cohen was grateful that despite only just beginning to slow down, he could still hold his hand steady, and once he had finished his coffee, would put on some music, lay down some dense sheets to protect the floor, and begin his daily ritual- to paint. Cohen took a palette knife and slowed his breathing, as he watched the crimson paint bleed across the canvas as the blade sliced across. Then, he would cast the blade aside, and lift his brush to drag inky black across the white background. Mr. Cohen would realize that he had stopped breathing, and would pause suck in a slow breath.

The paintings were all different of course, but the one constant was the use of at least a small amount of blood-red. It lead to his home being filled with the color.

Mr. Cohen thought, with some dark amusement, that when he finally died, the folks who would take the things he owned out of his apartment would likely be highly unsettled by the eldritch paintings and sculptures of formless entities, lurking on every wall and tucked into every corner. A cacophony of black and reds and teals and greys covered every wall, staring inward. To a stranger, it would feel intimidating.

To Cohen, it felt like home.

He would continue until either there was no room in the apartment for him to place his work, or until his body could no longer muster the effort required and shut down. Such was the way of the creaky old art teacher.

He could probably afford to open a gallery or live in a bigger and better place, but he was old and set in his ways. Cohen supposed that when he inevitably shuffled off his mortal coil, his art would have nowhere to go. Still, the thought wasn't particularly bothersome to him. He created art for the sake of art, after all. Humming, the elderly man stood, taking another jar of red. He'd need to mix it a bit to get the color right, and there wasn't enough in the jar to finish the painting anyway. It wasn't quite as visceral as he wished. Cohen set the nearly-empty jar aside, and hummed as he slowly creaked towards his closet, washing off the palette knife with a damp rag he kept nearby.

Cohen opened the closet, and calmly gripped the bound and gagged person there, who squirmed fearfully as he dragged the palette knife across their bare arm, gently wounding them, and letting the blood trickle into a paint jar. Cohen hummed softly, letting the blood slowly drain into the jar, before wrapping and bandaging the cut, mixing the red with a few flecks of paint, walking out of the closet again, leaving the person behind, closing the closet and hobbling over to his painting, setting the jar down so he could stir and mix it properly, until he got the color just right- a shade of red that was difficult to make with paint alone.

Once again, he began painting, adding the finishing touches to the wound-like gash on the canvas.

"Perfect." He muttered, admiring his work, taking a long sip from his drink. His vision was coming to life.

Soon, he would return the poor, frightened confused paint-source to freedom. A small dose of a special amnesiac a dear friend of his had created long ago would ensure

the odd, vacant-eyed young adult would not be able to report what had happened. Bits and pieces would be remembered, but nothing that could be conclusive. Most of the trauma would vanish as well. After that, their life was their own.

After that, he'd find someone new. He never used the same source of paint twice- each painting would use someone else's. A week of blood, then freedom. Then again, and again.

Cohen stepped back, studying the painting he'd made, nodding in approval. He set his supplies down, to rest his weary fingers a moment, and hobbled to his bedroom. A tiny bed was crammed in the corner, the rest of the room overtaken by the largest canvas Cohen had worked on. Still unfinished, the painting would nearly cover his entire wall.

It would be the first- and last- painting Cohen ever used blood to paint.

His blood.

"I don't have much time left." He mused, looking up at the painting. A woman made of blood. A patient, saintly Mona-Lisa smile, with red-stained lips. The whole apartment reeked of a powerful coppery scent. Cohen didn't even notice anymore. He shuffled to a small case, patting it. The knives within were for him and him alone. Using well-practiced movements, Cohen rolled his sleeves back, exposing the bandaged and heavily wrapped arms. He undid the gauze, exposing a latticework of pale scars, and, taking the clean blades from their case, gently held his arms up for a moment. He stood, like a warped version of the statue of Christ in Rio de Janeiro, holding his knives high. Cohen didn't move, didn't even breathe at first, holding in his air as long as he could.

Then, with a methodical motion, took each blade and slowly dragged them along his opposite arms, cutting them slowly, careful to not bite too deep or strike a vein. He doubted he had the resilience to stop the bleeding in time if he did. It would be a shame if nobody came to check on him in time to save his poor hostage, or if he were to expire before the magnum opus was finished.

He lowered his arms, watching in fascination as the blood slowly trickled down, along his hands and down his fingertips slowly. The fluid dripped slowly into a pair of buckets, positioned at either side of him. The soft semi-rhythmic tapping of droplets striking metal rung through the still room, echoing faintly. Cohen drew his gaze from the blood, to the painting before him. He counted the drops, slowly, the same way he had every day for the past... the past... how long?

...He could no longer remember how long it had been since he had begun to paint with his own blood. Years, at least.

“Nearly finished.” He murmured, letting the blood pool just a little bit more, before quickly wrapping up his wounds and binding them tightly to stop the bleeding. Cohen doubted he had the talent to perform any kind of transfusion on himself, so he was careful.

Once the bleeding had been halted, he shuffled to his kitchen, fetching a sugar cookie, and a glass of cold tea to replenish himself. He twisted his chair to look over at the painting, thinking.

“I think when I die, I want to be reincarnated.” He mused. “And I’ll be able to paint in a whole new medium.”

He rocked back, before rising to his feet, gripping the table to support himself for a moment before making his way back to the huge painting, taking his assortment of brushes, rolling his shoulders back.

It was time to paint.

Architecture

“When a house is both hungry, and awake, every room becomes a mouth.”

--Anatomy

Alex was rather disconcerted when she woke up in a hospital with no idea how she'd got there or what had happened the past few weeks. Everything was a hazy blur of thoughts and images, disconnected ideas and vague feelings. She remembered being confused and afraid, but... of what?

The doctors told her she had simply been left at the entrance. There were scars and wounds along her arms- most had been cleaned and bandaged, some had scabbed over, and others still had almost totally healed. The light lacerations were shallow, mostly harmless. It was likely that the cuts had caused her to lose a fair amount of blood, but her body had replenished it. Still, they could determine nothing about where she had been or what had happened.

This, Alex realized, with a sense of numb fear, was the *scariest* sensation that she had ever experienced. A gap in memory. She had vanished for a week- maybe longer- and had simply reappeared with nearly no sign of what had happened in that time. The only real thought Alex could clearly conjure was a powerful metallic scent which hung in her nostrils even now. Despite all that, she was discharged with little issue- after a quick checkup she was determined to be mentally sound, physically healthy, and overall just in far better shape than a person with almost no memory of the past week had any right to be. A quick statement was given to the police, but they were very honest about how

pessimistic they were about it being of much use. She couldn't exactly blame them- the last Alex could remember was walking home from a party.

She was given a ride home, and once there, carefully entered her house as if expecting it to belong to someone else. Alex slowly, painstakingly combed over the rooms, but found, aside from a little extra dust, it was untouched.

With a little prickle of relief, Alex hunted down her phone.

116 unread messages.

At least someone had worried about her.

She spent the next hour or two reassuring the people who had tried to call, text or otherwise contact her that she was alive and well. Confused, scared, but well. Alex wasn't sure how exactly to break it to her friends and family that she had no idea what had happened while she had been gone, but she managed.

Everything felt unfamiliar. It was her house, for sure, but it no longer felt like home. It felt hostile, as if in her absence it had grown awake and alive. It was as if it were glaring at her, like she had deliberately left the place alone for however long, and it was staring her down like a jilted lover. Alex couldn't help a little giggle as the mental image of her house talking to her popped into her head, asking "And just where have *you* been?".

She patted the arm of her chair, as if comforting her own home. "There, there." She mumbled to herself, inhaling slowly. Alex took another slow breath, and the home began to feel more her own once again. She remained seated for a long time, perched in her living room.

Her house felt a little more inviting now, at least. When things like this happened and the anxiety began flaring up, personifying inanimate objects and places could allow Alex to reduce the chaos within her head and ease her thoughts. A house was sort of like a human, in a way. The windows were the eyes. Hallways were veins- activity traveled through them, like blood would flow through an organism. The living room, then, could be something like a heart, pushing people through the halls, or gathering them together in the center. It wasn't an analogy she created, but it helped Alex to calm herself. A symbiotic organism within which she lived. It provided warmth, comfort and shelter, and she helped keep it from falling apart by painting the walls, repairing things that broke, keeping out parasites like termites...

It made her feel less alone.

Alex was calm again- or as calm as she could be. Her mind still felt scattered and shaken, but she was approaching a more centered place. She took a few more even breathes, and decided to try and continue this line of thought. She needed to fight off this anxiety with whatever tools she had to battle it.

So, Alex continued dissecting the anatomy of her house. If the heart was the living room and the veins the hallways, did that make the air conditioning system the lungs? It was a bit too literal of a comparison, but she couldn't easily imagine much else that really fit it- and Alex supposed that, if the lungs give air to the blood, and she were to consider herself the house's blood...

Maybe it was a little less literal than Alex had initially considered it to be.

The house creaked a little- the natural settling of wood, sheetrock and plaster. Alex flinched a little, jerking out of her musings. She shifted nervously, hugging her knees on the armchair. It was soft and her weight settled nicely into the cushions, surrounding her by soft warmth.

After resting herself, her nerves began to slowly calm. It was just the natural creak of the timbers, like the way a person's bones crack when moved after a long period of stillness. Alex smiled. The bones of her house.

Her smile faded a bit when she realized that meant she was tucked inside its ribcage, but it was better than being in the stomach she supposed. Alex slowly rose from her chair and walked to the kitchen. Here, her metaphor didn't go anywhere really- it *could* be a mouth, or perhaps a stomach as she'd worried earlier, but overall the thought fell flat. Referring to the kitchen as a stomach was simply an easy shortcut to push through her mental exercise.

She opened the fridge. Empty. Thankfully. She'd been missing as long as she had; if there was any food in the fridge, it all would have been spoiled. Alex closed it slowly, straightening her back and looking around. She was pretty sure there was some canned food in one of these cupboards.

Her certainty was rewarded, but not in any way that helped her. There were some canned ingredients, but nothing she could throw together to make a proper meal. She supposed she could eat some canned tomatoes, but that wasn't particularly appealing to her. Instead, she dug out her phone and checked her accounts. Plenty of cash. She supposed that came from not spending any money for a while. A simple order of chinese

food was placed, and she wandered her house. It was a little dusty, but it was exactly as she had left it.

The stairs to the basement. She looked at it, thinking. What would the basement be, if a house was a body?

A mouth.

She shivered, not sure why that sprang to mind.

The basement was where her laundry hookups were, and the water heater. It was often the noisiest part of the house. Not quite a bustle of activity, since she was the only person who ever really went there. It was dark and surprisingly warm. If the weather was humid enough, it could get a bit damp as well.

Dark, warm, damp. A source of noise. There it was.

Alex felt a bit proud of herself for coming to that analogy.

She continued wandering her house. It was... a lot more empty than she had remembered it.

“Why do I feel so lonely?” She mused, looking up, the sudden realization dawning upon her. She swallowed a bit, throat feeling far more dry than before.

Did houses get lonely too? Alex walked to her bedroom, flopping back on the soft bed for the first time in a while. She shifted a little, feeling the familiar way the mattress sank around her. She felt safer here, nestled up in her bed. Maybe her bedroom was her mind? Or the skull, and her body inside was the mind. A safe place no one could see in if she didn't allow them to. A place Alex could retreat to when things got a bit too noisy.

Her reverie was snapped from her by a loud knock. She huffed, standing, having already forgotten about her food. The delivery person looked exhausted, and a bit hunted. A pang of sympathy caused Alex to hand them a fairly big tip. They left her there, chinese food in hand. Was there another person in their car? They looked ominous, dressed in dark clothes with a hidden face. Alex shivered, closing her door. Her calm had been thrown off once again by something so small as a weirdly-dressed stranger.

She decided to eat in front of the TV. Noise. She needed noise and light. She needed stimulus, regardless of its quality. She set her food on the coffee table, and turned on some cartoon.

The house creaked again softly. This time, rather than startling, Alex decided that it was somewhat comforting. Like a gentle, sleepy groan. She patted the arm of the couch as if it were alive.

“I’m home.” She mused, her voice comforting and smooth. “I’m home.”

The house settled, and Alex settled within it. A strange symbiosis. But a comfortable symbiosis. Alex and her house would coexist together.

She would adjust. Even if she never learned what happened when she had been missing, she would adjust. Eventually. And her safe, warm home would help her.

Hanging Around

“There’s nothing terribly wrong with feeling lost, so long as that feeling precedes some plan on your part to actually do something about it.”

--Jhonen Vasquez, Johnny the Homicidal Maniac #7

When Jez awoke, she was only a little surprised to find herself dangled upside down from a fire escape.

It just seemed like that sort of week.

After a moment of hanging inverted, Jez twisted to see what it was wrapped around her ankles. Some kind of thick, flexible metal cable. At least whoever had left her like this had also wrapped thick rags around her ankles to keep the cable from cutting into her skin.

Also, her hands were untied, so there was that. After a bit of wiggling, Jez managed to begin slowly swing forward and backward, until she could grip the railing of the catwalk that made up the fire escape. She clung and attempted to see if she could drag herself over it, but the cable caught on the level above her, preventing her from remaining there. Also, this was really starting to strain her legs.

Jez groaned, letting go and waiting for the pendulum-like swinging to slow so she could get her bearings. She then, with every bit of effort she had, swung herself up until

she could cling to the cable. She clung tightly to the cable, gasping with exertion as her blood rushed from her head.

“Jezabelle? How the hell’d you end up like that?”

Jez turned a little. In the window in the building across the alley was an ancient, withered man, peering through thick glasses.

Jez forced a sarcastic grin. “Just enjoying the morning air, Mr. Cohen.”

The old man snorted. “...Mhm? Somehow I doubt that.”

“Yep. Dunno how I got here honestly.” Jez shrugged. Her grip was getting a bit slick, sweat on her hands making it difficult to hold on.

“I’ll call the fire department.” Mr. Cohen shouted, retreating inside. “...*hang around.*”

“...Jackass.” Jez muttered, as she clung to the cable. Her legs had some feeling in them now, but in exchange her arms and hands were beginning to grow sore.

Eventually, the firemen arrived to hoist her up onto the catwalk, and cut through the cable with bolt cutters.

“How’d you end up like this?” The fireman with the cutters asked, carefully maneuvering to avoid catching any skin.

“Not sure. Probably someone did it last night. Had a party. Drank a lil too much.”

“Some friends you got.” He snorted. “Wonder what was going through their heads?”

“Rum.” Jez offered. “Or wine. Maybe scotch, depends on which one of them did it. A mix of all these things”

Once Jez was freed, she gave her ankles a vigorous rub, relishing in the feeling that returned to her feet. The fireman checked her head and ankles for injury, before things finally calmed down. Once she'd been coerced into a statement, and finally given a clean bill of health (hangover aside), she was left alone in her apartment again, Jez could begin reconstructing the previous night. She vaguely recalled a party. Some kind of exotic cocktail that she'd been dared to drink.

Which might explain the excruciating headache she had right about now. She'd been distracted by her previous predicament, but now it was really starting to bother her. Jez idly wondered if she had processed the alcohol in her system enough to safely be able to take some painkillers, then decided that even if she hadn't, death was a better alternative to the massive headache and took an aspirin, before returning to her previous train of thought of *what the hell had happened*. The place was a mess, unsurprisingly. But on the bright side, there didn't seem to be any unconscious drunken friends lolling about the place (Although she would have to check the hall closets and other places. Her friends passed out drunk in *strange* places).

Jez considered how she might go about extracting from them what had happened last night. She finally found her phone, and with some finagling, managed to pick it up from under the couch and sat up. She had a few missed texts, but she focused on one.

A: Crazy party last night

Jez growled a bit and texted swiftly.

J: Tell me what happened before I find you and make a necklace out of your teeth.

There was a pregnant pause.

A: You drank some weird mix and then dared us to dangle you out a window and i think we forgot you there

Jez tossed her phone aside. Of course it was all her fault and not someone else's sick prank. Only *she* would talk a bunch of drunks to do something like that to her. At least they'd managed to keep her pretty secure like that somehow... She tried to identify who was at the party without looking at her phone, but found it was fruitless. Her memory had been totally trashed.

"I am never drinking again." She declared to no-one in particular, sitting on her couch.

The cushion clinked. With a puzzled frown, Jez dug in the seats and found a half-empty bottle of wine.

She glanced at the price sticker.

"...I am never drinking again after I finish off this *really* expensive wine." She sighed. Maybe if so much of her income stopped going into alcohol she could afford to live in an actual house.

"It had better be Saturday." She groaned, checking her phone. "Because if I missed work today, I'm going to burn this apartment down with me in it and eke out my existence as a shrieking ghost.

"...I'd make a decent banshee. Not sure if I'm Irish enough, though."

Jez rambled to herself like this while checking her phone again, and relief flooded her when she saw that it was indeed the weekend.

Slowly, she flopped back against the couch.

“Fuck.” She uttered. There was no real cause for the expletive, it just felt like the most succinct summary of her feelings at that particular moment.

Jezebelle felt like she was suddenly and inexplicably completely out of place in life. She had no idea if that was the hangover talking, or an actual epiphany inflicted by the absolutely *bizarre* events of the morning.

“...Whoa.” She mumbled, sitting up. Jez felt numb. She needed to give herself something to do or she’d be trapped in this strange sense of being lost and the ennui would set in. If that happened, Jez was pretty sure it would kill her. She mumbled a string of swear words, before shaking her head.

“Right.” She muttered. “What the hell am I gonna do?”

It did occur to her how strange it was that she was getting this sense thanks to having been strung up by her ankles, but there was no point wallowing in misery and boredom if she wasn’t going to *do* something about it.

She felt kind of like nothing had changed from this morning, that she still was dangling over a chasm.

“Damn it!” She blurted, smashing her fist against the counter. She flinched, seeing it crack a tiny bit. Deciding to do *something* before she lost her mind, Jez grabbed her jacket and went out, heading for the stairs. Tea. She’d go to the cafe and get a tea. It wasn’t fancy, or new, but it was *something*. A start.

Tea sounded good right now, considering how hung over she was. Tea and coffee and a bagel.

No, two bagels.

Jez nodded resolutely to herself, and pushed her way outside, crossing the street with a new sense of purpose.

And was promptly knocked flat on her ass by a car which barely managed to screech to a halt in time to avoid running her right over. The driver, a surly-looking man with a shock of dark hair poked his head out, alarmed.

“Holy shit! You alright?”

Jez sat up, shoving her arms in her jacket pockets as she slowly stood. “Y-yeah!” She called, voice shaken, rising. She could see a passenger who looked about ready to die of shock, poor guy. “Just a scratch. Sorry about that, shouldn’t have crossed then!” The driver was a little hesitant, but Jess backed off the street and waved him off. His car rumbled down the street, turning a corner and vanishing.

This time, instead of jaywalking, Jez waited for the light to change before crossing to the cafe. She went in, placed her order to go. A tea. A coffee. Two bagels. And a muffin. She decided to add that after nearly dying.

Slowly, Jez walked back to her apartment, paying very close attention to the streets, all the while keeping her left hand stuffed in her coat pocket. Back up the steps, into her apartment, closing and locking and bolting the door behind her. She moved in a jerky, zombie fashion, until she reached the counter. She sighed, opening a drawer and digging out a pair of small pliers, placing her arm on the counter.

The dermal covering had been torn badly, and some wires had been knocked loose, under the carbon muscle fibers. She carefully nudged the fibers aside with the tool, until she found the wires.

“Really ought to get these fixed properly.” Jez mused, zooming her vision in so she could see where they went exactly. Her pupils dilated as she adjusted her view of the wires, shifting and working them into the right place. She stretched the covering back over her arm as well as she could, before giving up and just wrapping gauze around the “wound”.

Built, but with no purpose. She grabbed her bag with the drinks and snacks, took a seat and chowed down. Jez would have to talk to her dad about getting a proper diagnostic soon. She swallowed, carefully flexing her fingers to make sure they still functioned fine.

Jez felt a bit bad. Being dangled out above the street was the most extraordinary thing to happen to her in far longer than she cared to remember.

“I guess...” She murmured, looking at her fingers, making sure nothing else was damaged. “I should be lucky to be normal.”

Jezebel lollered her head back, looking up at the ceiling, the alcohol’s simulated (or so she was told) effect on her finally losing its hold. “Still doesn’t help me feel any less lost.”

Jez remained in her chair, listening to the soft sound of her clock ticking away. The gentle twitch of time, marching ever on, while she simply sat.

Hanging out in her house was fine, she supposed. She didn’t have to create her purpose right this moment. She’d find it. All in due time.

Silent Life

“An imagination is a powerful tool. It can tint memories of the past, shape perceptions of the present, or paint a future so vivid that it can entice . . . or terrify, all depending upon how we conduct ourselves today . . . ”

-Jim Davis

Sitting cross-legged on the cool hardwood floor, a young girl began sketching a picture. With slow, mechanical precision, she ran the tip of her pencil over the paper, leaving faint grey lines. As she sketched, her drawing unfolded, from a few simple lines, to a spiderweb patchwork, forming intricate patterns that spiraled and twisted on the paper. A mysterious tangle of abstraction. Slowly, the frail girl rose to her feet, unsteady. She picked up some small pins and carefully stuck the drawing to the wall, positioning it carefully next to earlier drawings which connected to many others, forming a sort of patchwork mural on her wall. Smiling thinly, she picked up another blank sheet, and sank to the floor.

The small girl resumed, taking her time, careful not to make a single mistake- one wrong line would ruin everything. One errant twitch and she would grow frustrated, shred her picture, and toss it into the fireplace. Burn it to ash and then quite literally add them to her new attempt; dabbing her finger in the soot and dragging it across the page.

So focused was she that she was completely unaware of her door being opened, and her older brother Leon awkwardly hovering in the doorway. He halted at the

threshold, not taking another step. To step further without invitation felt like trespassing. He hesitated a moment before sighing and speaking.

"Annabelle." He called to her softly. She ignored him, intensely focused on her paper. "...Annie."

She looked up at him silently, tilting her head to one side, her small grey eyes studying him with a detached fascination, almost as if she were appraising him, like he were some kind of rare bug. In truth, that was actually her normal, default expression, though that didn't stop a shiver of uncertainty working its way down her brother's spine. Leon bit his lip for a moment, lowering his gaze. "...Dinner's almost ready. Will you be coming down, or...?"

She heaved a long-suffering sigh, perhaps ironically, before reluctantly standing, setting down her pencil. The girl was almost ghostly as she slowly walked down the steps, with her brother following haplessly behind her. He frowned just a little. Annabelle never quite seemed like she was fully present, and her brother had not once heard her make so much as a sound. It was unnerving at the best of times, and when she had locked herself in her room for days on end it created an uneasy tension.

For the moment, though, the tension was broken, and her brother could calm himself and pile plenty of food on her plate. Annie gave Leon one of her rare smiles, before wolfing down the food, and he couldn't help but crack a grin at his sister's ravenous appetite. While he doubted Annie locking herself in her room for days on end was healthy, at least she seemed to be eating well. Taking what comfort he could, Leon sat down to eat, eyes low for a moment. When he looked back up, the small girl was

already gone, her dishes neatly by the sink, and he caught a glimpse of her moving up the steps again.

Annie had been strange for a very long time. As an infant, she cried the normal amount, but it quickly became apparent that speech was not something she would ever do. She clearly wasn't deaf- the girl responded when her name was called, jumped at sudden noises, and seemed to perfectly grasp speech. And yet, the closest thing to words that Leon or their parents had ever got from her was a surprised squeak if something startled her or an excited humming noise if she was especially happy- both were rather rare noises, but it was a bit relieving knowing that her vocal cords were in use now and then.

It didn't help that she could change her mood at the drop of a pin, and could be absolutely inscrutable when she felt like it. But Leon still felt drawn to her- protective to her. She was his little sister. People who briefly met Annie called her creepy, weird, stupid, or various other things. She wasn't any of those. Although Leon couldn't really defend her when someone called her strange. It was true. She *was* strange. But she was smart. She was always listening, always observing. Leon *knew* this. He'd lived with her for all twelve years of her life.

Back in her room, Annabelle knelt down, and began to draw once again, as though she'd never gone downstairs. She slowly lifted the pattern, and just as before, tacked it neatly to the wall. Now, with the wall completely covered, it still seemed to form little more than patterns of lines without forming any real images. Her brother peeked in again, and awkwardly bit his lip, studying the images.

"...What is it?" He inquired softly.

Annie grinned at him- the lopsided expression just barely resembling a smile- before suddenly leaping to her feet. With a manic energy, she began rearranging and shifting the papers splayed all across the wall, and her brother watched, as she clambered onto a little step-stool to reach the top rows of pictures. His eyes widened in surprise when he realized that the "meaningless lines" had begun to look like an extremely realistic representation of a face- not a particular face that he could describe, just a broad, mostly featureless visage, with two wide eyes and the shadows where a mouth and nose might be. Leon began to realize what her art teacher meant when he called her a prodigy.

Annie paused to allow her brother to drink it in, before resuming, scrambling the pictures again, once again changing the picture from that of a metaphorical complex spider web, to a literal one- complete with a small arachnid on it. Her brother could only watch in awe as she dashed about, a huge smile growing on her face. Never before had he realized how many levels her mind truly worked on- like a calculating computer that was constantly creating and editing things- all hidden within this silent, staring, little girl.

She was ignoring Leon once again, now entirely focused on her mosaic- changing and altering it. Once again, he felt that creeping sense of intrusion. He didn't feel welcome anymore, and he reluctantly left the room, as his little sister continued her task- whatever she hoped to accomplish, she would not rest until she had. Some part of her would refuse to stop working- a fundamental part of her nature that would never stop, like a machine that had to exhaust whatever fuel it had before it ceased.

If she kept this up, Annabelle would collapse from exhaustion. But there was no stopping the dauntless girl. She would finish her project eventually- whatever it may finally be. And when she did, what then? Would she do something with it? Leave it up? Or simply destroy it and start anew...?

Her brother sighed, feeling unsure. It was always the same. She would make something, and it would seem to just... vanish. The girl was so secretive like that- of course she would be. She never spoke anyway. Why would she talk about her art if she never talked about anything else? He had never once heard her say a single word. She could vocalize- sighs, little growls of frustration, outright screams- both of joy and of happiness- but never a single word.

It was a silent life she lived, and somehow he doubted that anything would ever take it away from them- that the world would remain strange, silent, a mystery, but in a way, it was incredibly enticing, for all its troubles, for all its weariness, for all the problems it caused.

And he knew that, for some reason, it was at once terrifying and beautiful and neither of them would want to change it for all the world.

A Special Dread

“Angel, answer my prayer, answer my prayer tonight

Tell me, if anyone cares if I do what I might.

Angel, Answer my prayer, and tell me if anyone else

Knows how much I am scared, that I might murder myself.”

--The Residents, *The Old Woman*

Every day was *terrifying*. There was not a single day of Rae’s life that they did not expect everything to implode around them. Every time they took a step, they felt as if the ground would give way and the earth would swallow them whole. The most innocuous things seemed sinister and vicious in their presence, such as the little wide-eyed girl being led by her brother- a pretty, mute little girl who lived just next door to Rae. A harmless child, and yet every instinct in Rae’s mind screamed “danger”, even though the logical part of their brain knew otherwise. The truth was, despite being in no true danger, Rae was convinced and certain that death followed them every step of the way.

That was probably because of the stranger in the black robe and hood who kept following them around town, badgering them with questions about their inevitable mortality. The only person who didn’t edge away when they saw Rae was the neighbor

girl, and she had been an odd, wide-eyed girl since even before Death had started following Rae around, so not much really changed on her account.

“Do you think you’ll die tomorrow?” The figure cackled, face obscured. Rae ignored Death as well as they could, eyes firmly fixed ahead of them. They *refused* to acknowledge that Death itself was lurking around just behind them, giggling and laughing. And since Rae didn’t acknowledge its existence, no one else would either. They obviously could see it- they all would spread out whenever Rae was on the streets, deliberately avoiding them.

“What do you have to be so afraid of?” Death snickered in Rae’s ear as they walked home, up the steps onto their porch. “Worried your death to be slow and agonizing? It can hardly be worse than how you’re living now!”

Rae unlocked their front door, slamming it behind them, right in Death’s face. Death was unperturbed and merely walked through it like it wasn’t there. Death shook its head in mock despair.

“Rae, Rae, Rae... *whatever* shall you do? I’m always two steps behind you, and your stride is getting more sluggish.”

The closer Death got, the slower Rae moved. It lurked behind them, smiling coyly, just barely visible under the hood.

Slowly, the shaking Rae set their things down, sinking into a corner slowly, hands clasped over their ears.

“I don’t think it works like that.” Death sneered. “I’m inside your brain. There’s nowhere you can go and nothing you can do. I’ll always be there.”

Rae said nothing, stared into the corner, creeping terror working itself through their bones, and their flesh.

Even though it had not touched them, Rae could feel Death weighing upon their neck, and slowly crawling down their back.

Like spiders.

Like wolves circling just out of sight.

Death wasn't there but it would be back. It had done its job.

It had made sure that once again, Rae would not sleep for the night.

The next time Rae saw Death was late the next morning. It slouched over the couch, watching the news. "So many things, so little time." It mused.

Rae wondered why Death was lounging around their house and not out collecting souls or whatever it was Death was supposed to do. It curled on the couch patiently, grinning at Rae.

"Mm, It's because every human has their own Death." It explained, voice awful on Rae's ears. "Personalized and tailored to that particular human."

Rae tried to ignore it, but it was futile. Death's voice rattled right inside them. "Deaths are formed from their humans own psyches to create the perfect and fitting form." Rae's Death stretched slowly. "Including me. I'm a part of you."

Rae wondered why their Death was being such a dick.

"Well, that's easy." It grinned toothily, responding directly to Rae's thoughts. "Because you hate everything and fear everything. It's only natural you'd make me into

something that would hate you. Isn't it funny? Isn't it hilarious that you were fated to end up this way?"

Rae glanced up, finally directly acknowledging Death instead of only doing so in thoughts.

"Ah, yes. You do believe in fate, don't you?" The Death mused, shifting its billowing frame forward to look Rae closely in the eye. Rae leaned back, cringing at the uncomfortable closeness of it all. "After all, when you examine your time in the world, you can't help but see yourself set on a path. Personally, I think it's nonsense. There is no "fate" or anything like that. Looking back is what imposes any sense of narrative."

Rae felt like they hadn't had enough coffee to have a conversation like this. Death didn't care, and continued rambling on.

"Most humans use fate as an excuse- to absolve them of all blame and responsibility. Not you though, it seems... Seems like you *still* treat everything with the same amount of hate and loathing..."

Hate felt too strong a word. Rae didn't hate coffee. And they didn't hate certain feelings or sights, sounds and scents. They were pretty sure "hate" was just a word that Death was throwing around to make them feel bad. It was sort of working.

"Hmmm... I suppose you're right, hate is too much." Rae *did* hate how Death would respond directly to their private thoughts though. "A profound dislike? That's not accurate either." Death shifted, taking on an even more human-like shape, so that it could extend a finger to rest on its chin to look deep in thought.

"...Fear, though. You fear life."

Rae winced.

“Hit the nail on the head, didn’t I?” Death chuckled nastily. “You’re scared. Why? What do *you* have to fear?” Death’s form whirled and shifted, growing like a dark stormcloud. “You’ve lived your life in relative comfort. You have a job that you don’t despise that keeps you relatively comfortable. You have never been the subject of bullies or prejudice... Well, perhaps not directly.” Death snickered. “You’ve never told anyone ever that you’re agender, have you? They can’t bully you for that simply because they don’t know.”

Death leaned in, seeming to surround and envelop Rae, voice harsh and chilling. “...You have no right to feel the way you feel. You don’t deserve to be afraid. You don’t deserve to be miserable or sad. There are people who have it oh-so-much worse than you. You’re pathetic, aren’t you? You keep telling yourself “I’ll get better or die” but the truth is you don’t want *either* and you just want to feel sorry for yourself.”

Rae slowly sank to their knees, unable to remain standing as the weight of Death’s words pressed down upon their neck, like sin itself resting there, waiting to grow too heavy for the neck to be able to support it.

“You don’t *deserve* to be unhappy.” Death hissed, venom dripping from its words.

“...No.” Rae muttered, voice low and rough from disuse.

For the first time since it had appeared before Rae, Death’s confidence briefly flickered.

“What?” It hissed.

“I said “no”.” Rae uttered, bluntly and chillingly cold. “It’s not true.”

Death leaned in, staring at Rae with cold, empty eyes, voice gone for the moment. Sensing the only opening they could grab, Rae took it, speaking sharply.

“Not true. Anyone can be unhappy.” They looked up, staring through Death, eyes devoid of feeling. “You’re part of me. I know what part. I can’t make you go away- I’ve never been able to. But you’re wrong. I can’t prove it. Not yet. But I will. One day. And you’ll see. You’ll never go away. But when I’m done, you won’t be as strong.”

Death paused, head tilted, seeming uncertain.

“You’ll always come back.” It spoke. “They all do. You’re human. Humans die.”

“I’m not dead yet.” Rae countered. “Not *yet*.”

Death shrugged. “Well, it’s not like we haven’t had this conversation before.”

“Have we?” Rae honestly couldn’t remember anymore. Their memory had been growing hazy from disuse.

“Mm, once or twice. It ended the same way. You clinging to what little hope you could muster before being thrown back into despair.” Death shook its head. “Never really stuck, did it?”

Rae sank back down, slowly falling into the couch. They felt suffocated.

Maybe Death was right. Maybe there was no way out.

But hell.

Rae might as well try to find one.

What did they have to lose? They’d either find happiness or die trying and end the misery anyway... No reason not to give it a shot. They settled down, calming their fried

nerve, taking several heaving breaths. Rae convinced themselves slowly- they would be okay. They could learn how to be okay. One day, on the horizon.

Death didn't speak for the rest of the night. Perhaps for once, Rae would be able to sleep.

Snowbound

"Nothing burns like the cold."

--George R.R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*

Steven had taken a long hitchhike, walking and riding along all the way from the west coast of the United States, heading northeast into Canada, steadily getting more remote until there were barely any roads and it was getting *very* cold. Snow covered most of the ground, and he was being forced to find lodging in more and more hard-to-find locations. The freezing air nipped at his skin with fangs of ice, and the snow around his feet crunched as his boots sank deeper the further he went.

Still, Steven was rather enjoying this little expedition. The place was beautiful, with the grey cloud cover preventing the snow from blinding him. He continued along a trail marked by fence posts with bright pink property tape wrapped around them. Bundled up in a thick parka, Steven steadily advanced towards the latest place he had settled to stay at- a little cabin. It was a sort of inn, tucked away in the mountains like an orange glowing spot in the white expanse. With little thought for the snow, Steven pushed through like a human snowplow and shoved past the white fluff effortlessly. He shuffled, kicking the snow from his boots as he knocked loudly at the door with a meaty fist. The lodge was tucked right up in a copse of trees, a small part of a larger forest, not far from the mountains themselves. It had been a serious hike to get this far out, and Steven

marveled at the thought of whoever built this place having to drag logs and other materials so far from the nearest city.

He was greeted and let in by his host, a small, rather scrawny young woman who appeared to run this little inn all by herself- not that it was exactly the biggest operation. She was energetic and led Steven in cheerily. There were maybe two other guests in the lodge: One was a slightly ragged looking teen- Her clothes were too big, and a little ratty looking. She was also thin and underfed, with a very nervous demeanor. She gave the sense of being a runaway. The other was a wholly unpleasant-looking man, with hawkish, glaring black eyes and a seemingly permanent scowl twisting his features. Neither of them caught Steven's attention that much for the moment. The young woman who ran the place seemed a bit different however. She was always smiling, sometimes a little too wide, and her large grey-blue eyes seemed to be sizing him up. The way she moved was... weird, but in a way that Steven couldn't exactly place. Rather than moving like a person, Steven felt like he was watching some kind of animal skillfully maneuvering through the cabin. She was rather graceful, but a little *too* graceful. Like she should have tripped, or stumbled, or dropped something, but didn't. It could just be Steven's paranoia kicking up. It had bothered him ever since his trip through the midwest.

Steven settled in fairly quickly, and was given a room upstairs, with a nice view of the trees and ground surrounding the cabin. He set his large bag aside, at the foot of the bed. It was warm, and the room was rather tiny with just a bed, a small nightstand and a table. Perfect. After hanging his coat on a rack, Steven went down for dinner. The proprietress apparently cooked the meals herself. The scowl-y looking man piled a small

plate, brusquely pushing past Steven with a grumble as he retreated to his room. The small teen was at the table, her long tangle of dark hair partially obscuring her face. She avoided eye contact, and didn't say anything, but Steven politely greeted her anyway. She sort of peeked up when he said hello, and he offered a lopsided smile. Nothing felt worse than being ignored. The hostess who was busying herself cleaning up a bit, glanced at the raggedy teen with a look of concern in her gaze. It was the first thing she'd done that hadn't unsettled him. Perhaps it was a sort of maternal-instinct thing.

Late at night, before he retired to bed, Steven chanced to look out his window and caught a glimpse of something in the snow. It was lithe and scrawny, and moving quickly, scrambling into the trees. Even from this distance, Steven could tell it was quite large, lanky and heavy. The shadows cast on the moonlight ground prevented him from getting a clear glance, but he felt that it perhaps had a set of antlers...? He wasn't sure what to make of it; unfamiliar with the wildlife in the area. Whatever the creature was, however, it sent a coldness running through his spine- but above that, it filled Steven with an intense curiosity unlike anything he had never felt before.

In the morning, he decided to head out early, before anyone else had awakened, hiking into the woods, curiosity getting the better of him. As he dragged himself through the snow, he came upon tracks. It was difficult to say what had moved through here, only that it had been rather clumsy, as the footprints were barely recognizable. They had been dragged or smeared through the snow, as if their owner had been shuffling rather than walking. After fruitlessly wandering in an attempt to find where the messy tracks led, Steven reluctantly returned.

“Well, morning, you.” The proprietress grinned. It took Steven a moment to recall her name- Kari. “Not often that I see guests who go hiking before the sun’s even all the way out.”

Steven shrugged his shoulders awkwardly, dodging around the woman to hang his coat up, keeping a few feet away from her at all times. “Thought I saw some kinda animal last night. Was pretty dark though.” He decided not to mention how lanky and awkward the thing was. “I was just poking around for some tracks. Got a little curious.”

“Well, there’s plenty of animals out this way.” Kari clicked her tongue, as she went about cleaning the cabin. “I’ve seen moose, bear, even a wolverine once. Probably some wolves out this way too. You really shouldn’t go hiking alone out here.” She added sternly. “Not without a shotgun.”

“I have a pistol but not *with* me.” Steven said sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head. As Kari moved, he found himself moving away from her in tandem, trying to make the movements casual to avoid offending her with his discomfort.

“Little thing like that?” Kari cackled, moving almost like a cat that was curiously stalking a mouse. “You shoot a bear with a toy like that you’ll probably just make it mad.”

Steven stumbled awkwardly as he moved, giving her a weak smile, before heading to the next room. They weren’t talkative, but the other guests were there and something about the presence of others in the room made Steven feel safer. He sat in the small dining room, along with the other guests who were seated at the table. The scowling man was jabbing at his plate of eggs as if expecting them to rear up and hiss at

him, and the teen girl was nervously flickering her fingers against the table in a steady, clutching a cup of coffee. Steven sensed a tension in the air, noting how the pair were adamantly avoiding eye contact with one another, and quietly grabbed a plate and cup of the darkest coffee available, sitting at the table, deciding to avoid conversation for now. The teen seemed to visibly relax when Kari entered the room, all smiles and good business.

“How’s the food, everyone?”

The scowling man gave a surly shrug, but said nothing, having no concrete complaints to put forward. Steven was pretty sure the man hadn’t said six consecutive words to anyone in the building. The teen girl offered a meek smile, offering a much more friendly response. Seems she had begun to open up a little bit.

“It’s good, t-thank you.” She spoke, voice in a soft, awkward stutter. The girl was practically yanking on a short curl of her inky hair.

The surly stranger let out a quiet scoff, but again remained wordless. Steven took a bite of his own breakfast, and found it to his liking. It wasn’t the fanciest of course, but it was warm and nourishing.

“S’better than what I could make.” He chuckled. “But I burn *everything* I make, so take that with a grain of salt, yeah?”

Kari laughed, waving him off, although she shot a less-than-subtle and rather nasty look at the third guest. Steven had barely seen the man, but he’d been nothing but rude to everyone so far. Maybe it was the weather. Only a few hours of sunlight a day could make people cranky.

Or, he was just an asshole. That was possible too.

“What brings you folks up here, then? I never had a chance to ask.” Kari grinned toothily, as she busied herself, cleaning up the breakfast area. It was odd, considering the place was already mostly spotless.

“Wanderlust.” Steven grinned toothily. “I’ve never stayed in one place for a whole long time. Guess you could say I’m a hobo. I wander around, do some work here and there, then wander some more.”

“How irresponsible.” The man in the corner muttered, but Steven ignored him.

“Just had a road trip with a friend that went... weirdly... a few months ago, so I decided to really get out somewhere far away, clear my head.” Steven finished.

Kari was clearly resisting the urge to outright glower at the rude man across the table. Steven had to praise her ability to remain cool in the face of such blatant aggression and rudeness. “Ah, how interesting. You must have been all over. And what about you, dear?” She turned to the teen girl.

“Oh uh, um...” She nervously fiddled with her hair, fingers twining around the dense black strands. “I just really needed to get away f-from home, for a w-while.” She nervously looked aside. “This place is about as “away” a-as you can get. So it’s nice. Not t-too many people.”

“It is definitely out there. And yet, I somehow still am in business.” Kari shook her head, ruefully.

“Surprised I found this place.” The surly man opened up slightly- perhaps he felt left out. “Guess I didn’t expect much anyway. S’in the middle of nowhere.” He chuckled

darkly. "Was hoping to find a place to go hunting eventually, when the season opens up. But this is too remote."

Kari pursed her lips. "Not much to hunt up here other than moose and bear. Seems a bit extreme to go so far just for that."

"Bah. I can do things differently if I want." The man scoffed, finishing his plate, leaving it on the table, and heading out of the room.

"Charming." Steven grimaced, shaking his head. "He seems like he'd be happy being a crazy hermit or something like that."

"I can't stand people like that." Kari confided softly. "Manners never cost anything."

Steven shook his head and tossed back his coffee, finishing the mug off. "No point worrying about it. He'll leave once he's had his fill, and you'll never have to worry about him again."

The day passed fairly uneventfully. Steven spent most of it resting in the warmth of the cabin, watching the others. The rude man stormed out sometime after breakfast to go wandering, and the small girl remained in the living room. Steven managed to get a few words out of her- he learned her name was Amy, and that she was fourteen. That startled him a lot- she was absolutely tiny- she couldn't even be five feet all, but still...

"Really? You gave me the impression of being a bit older." He admitted. Amy curled in a small ball, hugging her knees to her chest, cracking an awkward smile.

"Oh, ah... Yes, that is something I've um, h-heard before..."

“It’s the eyes, dear.” Kira remarked. “You’ve got this... look in your eyes.” The woman leaned forward, her head quirked to one side as she examined Amy. “Ah, forgive me.” She grinned, shaking her head. “I shouldn’t comment on you like that.”

Amy giggled strangely, pitch changing sharply. “T-that’s hardly the worst thing someone could say to me.”

Late that night, watching the ground below, Steven saw the creature in the dark again. The lanky, clumsy creature slowly meandered through the trees, shadowed. It seemed to have no particular goal in mind, and would sometimes duck low. Was it... playing in the snow?

Suddenly, there was an earth-shattering *boom*. Steven nearly jumped out of his skin, as a snowbank suddenly burst up from the ground like something erupting from beneath the ground. The beast leapt, and whirled, fleeing into the woods. The air went silent. Steven clutched his chest, feeling his heart pounding, pulse twitching out of time. That was a gunshot. Not the crack of a pistol, but the powerful blast of what he could roughly assume to be a powerful rifle or shotgun. After staring out at the cold ground for a while, his pulse slowed to normal, and nothing else moved in the night. Reluctantly, he sank onto his bed, prepared for a long sleepless night.

The next morning, as Steven made his way down the stairs he could hear Kari furiously scolding the surly man. When he rounded the corner, she was standing before the taller man brandishing her fists in the air.

“I don’t *care* what you saw out there! You fired a gun *inside*, and at *three in the morning*.” She shrieked, bristling furiously. The woman looked about ready to *kill* the hawkish guest.

The man waved her off with a sneer. “That thing was gettin too close for comfort. You watch, I’ll get it if it comes back.”

Steven silently put his jacket on and went outside, deciding it would be safest to avoid taking part in that particular debate. Besides, he had tracks to follow. The going was slow, but this time he managed to follow the path into the woods. Maybe this was stupid of him, but he couldn’t help it.

Steven’s throat felt dry as he climbed a small hill, pushing some branches aside and his breath died in his throat. Half-frozen in the snow was a mangled animal- an elk, possibly? He had seen the results of a bear attacking a deer, but this was something unlike anything he’d ever seen. The creature looked like it had nearly been sliced in half- far too cleanly to be the work of a bear. Parts of it were devoured- particularly around the legs, where they had been gnawed down to the marrow.

Feeling numb, he slowly returned to the cabin, thinking that it would be prudent to not follow the creature again. If it could do *that*, he would be best keeping far away.

The rest of the day was a lot more peaceful. Kari seemed to take a shine to the teenage girl who had been there, chatting with her in hushed tones, speaking softly, almost motherly. It was sort of charming, in a way. But Steven couldn’t focus on anything but the lanky shadow in his thoughts and the mangled animal corpse.

Another night, and this time, Steven didn't see the shadow. He jumped, however, when an unearthly screech and a yell rang out from below. Leaping from his bed, the large man tore down the steps, into the halls of the cabin. He charged in the direction of the noise, throwing open the door where he had heard the scream.

The surly man was there- or what was left of him. His body lay limply on the floor, eyes wide and glassy. The floor and walls were covered in blood. As crude and unlikable as the man had been, Steven felt a pang of sympathy when he saw the terrified look on the mangled face. But his attention was drawn away from the corpse, to the creature hunched over it. It slowly turned to face Steven and his legs nearly gave out from under him.

Leering down at him, was the creature. Steven's mouth went bone-dry. It loomed over him, even hunched over as it was, antlered head nearly reaching the ceiling, gleaming blue eyes glowing in the dim room. It was rail-thin, with pale, clammy skin stretched taught over its ribcage, as if consumed by hunger. It looked almost like a tall, freakish human from the neck down, but what Steven feared most were the twelve-inch, jagged claws stretching from its fingers. They were like serrated, curved steak knives. It stared down at him, a hunk of the surly man's flesh dangling from its mess of mangled, jagged teeth, blood dribbling from its mouth. Uttering a deep, keening moan, it extended a long finger, as if pointing at Steven.

Steven, ice coursing through his veins, stumbled back, losing his balance. Slipping, he fell, and as he tumbled to the floor, Steven's head cracked against a wooden table. Everything went dark.

When he awoke (which rather surprised him), Steven was in his bed (which surprised him even further). Steven sat up with a slow groan. The back of his head throbbed slightly, but he was alive. He had to admit, he was in better shape than he'd expected to be.

It was real. Surely what he'd seen had been real. *Murder*. It didn't matter how nasty that man had once been, he had still been *murdered*.

Slowly, he rose, creeping out of his room and peering about. He walked carefully, a sense of dread rolling around in his gut. He could see Kari in the main living room. She was chatting with the young teen, smiling, but her face fell slightly when Steven entered. He said nothing, deliberately walking slowly to the dining room, returning with a mug of coffee. Sensing the potential for conflict on some instinctive level, even if she wasn't sure what it might be, the small teen quietly excused herself for a moment, and Steven stared at Kari in silence.

For the first time since meeting her, Steven noticed that Kari had not once blinked since he had met her.

"Who are you, really?" He asked, bluntly. He paused, before taking a deep, shuddery breath. "*What* are you, really?" Kari stared at him for a moment, mouth set in a deep, uncertain frown. Her entire demeanor had changed. To Steven, the woman seemed... smaller somehow. Scared. Like she was afraid of *him*. After a long, hesitant pause, her mouth opened, and she spoke, her voice soft and timid.

"...Have you ever heard of the Wendigo?"

Afterword

To me, writing is not a hobby or a career- it is something that is necessary for my continued mental well-being. To write, and to create is something that prevents me from losing myself to my own anxiety. Throughout my career at Linfield, I have been taught new techniques and given tools to hone these techniques, “sharpening the pen” so to speak. One of the biggest things I learned was my own taste for surrealism, subversive fantasy, and in general, an appetite for fiction.

Prior to Linfield, I was often somewhat reluctant to fix and revise my works. I enjoyed writing “hot off the presses” and often failed to properly acknowledge my own weaknesses until late into high school. I’ve told several professors that I love seeing my work covered in pen and writing. Advice and critique are tools that can be hard to swallow, but I’ve grown to adore them. Throughout my time working on these stories, I frequently showed my work to small groups of friends and acquaintances for reactions, suggestions, ideas and more.

Beyond this, a more technical thing I have been attempting is reduced use of adverbs. Adverbs can be a handy tool from time to time, but they should be limited in their use, as I learned over time. Specifically, adverbs can be somewhat repetitive, or purely “fluff” to add a few extra words in that do not actually add to the pieces quality. For example: “She jogged quickly over” is a bit of a tautology. If she is running, wouldn’t that already imply she was moving quickly? Conversely, “She walked quickly

over” could be a bit more useful, but “quickly” could still be replaced with other words that more naturally or effectively describe what is going on in a particular scene.

Another thing to note are various influences that may have impacted my writing. Writing is inherently iterative: we use ideas gained from life and other works as tools, with which we use to craft our own work. No fiction is made in a vacuum. Influences that impacted me throughout this thesis include both the film and TV series *Fargo*, *Twin Peaks*, the writings of H.P. Lovecraft, animations by David Firth, numerous songs by the band The Residents, and a handful of video game titles such the independent games *Anatomy*, *Space Funeral* and the acclaimed *Silent Hill* series. All these sources have something in common. Strange and fascinating worlds, characters, and occurrences. Well-written surrealism is absolutely fascinating, and one of my favorite things to see. The blending of normal and strange is absolutely wonderful and delightfully frightening. I think these influences can be seen in pieces like *A Whole Lot of Nothing*, *Grand Artistic Vision*, and *A Special Kind of Dread*. Specifically the odd, surreal and strange situations within were drawn from and inspired by creators and works like I mentioned. Of course, there’s more to writing than being influenced. Each piece, I attempt to add my own spin to them. From small bits of dark humor, or taking the things within each piece with varying levels of seriousness.

Working on this thesis has taught me strengths and weaknesses held within my process. First, I brainstorm. I don’t always write things down when I do this, but I will often doodle characters or just mentally come up with various ideas until I reach one that stands out to me. Then, I’ll develop that idea in my head for a bit, before I begin to write

proper. Typically, I write in the late evening, usually after dinner. I make some tea or just get a glass of water, sit down on my bed or in a computer lab if my room feels too distracting, and just write somewhat off-the-cuff, as producing part of a work will often lead to me finding new things that work well with it. So, by writing the beginning, I get new ideas to write about what happens in the middle, and from there can fully put my thoughts together. I will sometimes start at the end of a piece instead, such as in *Snowbound*, where I started with the idea of a Wendigo innkeeper who only eats who she considers to be “bad people.” Once I have that idea, I can refine or alter it to create a different result. After I do this, however, the work is often in a very rough state, so I go over it and work to improve it and revise it. The “first draft” is usually revised once, just so that it is coherent and useful to me and to anyone who may wish to give critique.

One of the weaknesses of this strategy is that it gives a sort of mental sense that I have “Already revised” my work when time comes for an *actual* revision. During the time spent writing this thesis, I found a way to combat this was to simply tell myself “I should have everything be at least four drafts”. That way, instead of stopping early, I would tell myself how many revisions I would be on, which gave me a sort of urge to revise more. By setting these goals, even if they seem arbitrary, I was able to continue and significantly improve my own writing. I couldn’t leave anything as its first draft. In the words of Ernest Hemingway, “The first draft of anything is shit.”

Workshopping is invaluable here. I’ve taken to showing my work to anyone willing to give it a read to get advice. I have a group of good, but brutally honest friends who are often willing to peruse and critique my work, going over flaws and pointing out

strengths to try and emphasize. Not only are they all quite honest about my writing quality, they also all have different tastes in literature, which prevents them from all having the same biases that might affect their critiques, so that everyone has different advice. While it may sound overwhelming, having all these different ideas presented to me is tremendously helpful and I personally can't get enough of it.

Finally, working with my thesis advisor has given me much of the same that working with peers has- more ways to work, more structure to my work schedule, and keeping me aware of goals I may have to work towards. All together, these give me more motivation, and in my opinion, significantly improve my own writing.

I will never stop writing. Even if whatever career I inevitably pursue is not one involving writing, I won't stop. Writing is to me is a source of comfort, structure, a way to vent, a way to create. Currently, I am still writing short stories and am steadily trying my hand at writing a novel. While my progress is a bit slow, it is still progress, and one day I would like to publish it. Before that though, it is more likely that I would publish my short stories and poems- perhaps in a collection, or submitting work to journals and magazines.

As for my career, the next step likely would be something in technical writing, copywriting and other forms of writing. While ultimately, my dream is to write what I want to write for a living, that dream could be a long way off and it's important to me that I have a way to keep myself supported in the meantime. While I do not think I'll be some big-name famous writer, it would be nice to have lots of people read and enjoy my work. My real dream is to just share my creations with the world and for someone to get some

enjoyment from reading what I wrote- maybe even more joy than I got from writing it.

As a writer, that is what is most important to me. *That* is what my ultimate goal- the thing that, as far as writing goes, will be the most important to me.