

Echoes of Eden

A Collection of Short Stories & Poems

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Kalopsia

Kalopsia [kal-op-see-uh] *Noun.* kalopsia (uncountable) The delusion of things being more beautiful than they are.

The Author - Prelude

British Quantum Physicist, Paul Davies once appropriately stated that "Science is knowledge and knowledge is power – the power to do good or evil. Sometimes ignorance is bliss. Mankind has a habit of uncovering scientific milestones that should never be uncovered".

In 1346 Gabriele De' Mussi realized that victims of the black death could pass on their disease to the people around them, and so in a stroke of absolute madness, De' Mussi decided to stack the bodies of black death victims on a catapult and fling them at the Tartar tribe in the first known instance of Biological warfare almost 600 years ahead of the first World War.

Flash forward to 1935 - Walter Freeman, a psychologist from Philadelphia, begins testing on chimpanzees' frontal lobe to subdue the animal's rage. After toying with a few ideas to penetrate the frontal lobe without causing lasting damage to the patient, the good doctor invents the technique of the "Ice Pick Lobotomy" which he soon thereafter transitions to human trial. Only three years later, German scientists Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann conducted experiments using the very first instances of nuclear fusion. Using Einstein's Mass-energy equivalence, better known as $E=MC^2$, the German-born scientist figured out a way to split the heaviest natural element known to man, Uranium, and in doing so the scientists paved the way for nuclear warfare.

Now let's skip to 2020, an unnamed scientist from Safety Harbor, Florida creates a virus that could be used in biological warfare - a virus so powerful that it will cannibalize its victim.

Essentially, a Florida Man created the zombie virus; unfortunately for the Florida-born scientist, his lab assistant wasn't careful enough with the vial and the virus was released in the lab, creating the world's first zombie outbreak of note. To the Florida Man's credit, he made an effective virus. Soon, many of the residents of the area were affected by the virus. All it took to be infected was a scratch or a bite from an individual already infected by the virus.

The virus became such a problem that Congress put out an evacuation message to all the survivors in the Tampa/St. Pete area. By the end of the week, the government would have no choice but to drop a hydrogen bomb on the area in an effort to eradicate the virus before it could spread any further.

Seemingly everyone took Congress' advice, with two notable exceptions. The first being Papillon Jones, a Journalism major who was born the son of Desmond and Molly Jones. He was a relatively timid, whiny, and emotional boy of a man. His accomplice on the dreadfully macabre mission was Rose Teller, a Christian-born girl who spent most of her time appreciating the mysteries the universe had to offer her and communing with nature. Instead of evacuating the two decided to sneak into an abandoned hotel to wait out their demise, they chose to spend their final hours just killing time.

Papillon - Panic Switch

I'm finding it harder and harder to breathe, the air seems to be sucked away from me every time I exhale. It could be another panic attack but I fail to see the necessity for that in my mind's interest. I know what it is that I have signed on for, I already know what I have lost, and I can't unsee what I have already borne witness to.

All my life I have lived in fear of one day settling into the mediocrity of becoming my father, a once-great man who gave up his dreams to work a dead-end 9 to 5. I saw the sparkle of excitement in his eyes slowly dim down, never did I think I would see his eyes fade to grey. This pessimistic curse robbed the opportunity to regain his love for life, and now I realize I fear becoming my father in a completely new and gut-wrenching way.

I don't believe that is what is making the air feel so thick. Maybe it's the fact that I forgot to bring my favorite red sweater to the hotel, a small inconvenience I understand but still, it was the sweater my sister knitted for me years ago. I never thanked her for that, maybe I should call her. Wait, I already tried that, yesterday. When the other phone answered the only response I heard was white noise.

Does that mean she is dead?

No, if I know her she found a way to escape.

How can you be sure?

I can't but she's strong.

That's what you used to think about dad and look what happened to him.

I know, but she's different.

Come on, be honest with yourself! The Jones family is cursed.

No, it's not.

Cursed to burn in the ashes of Safety Harbor.

Shut up.

You couldn't help but suffer the same fate as your father.

Shut up!

You nothing, man.

SHUT UP!

You might as well kill yourself now so Rose doesn't have to suffer her final hours listening to you bitching.

Old TV, black, with buttons on the front.

If you're going to end it, just make sure you get it right this time, down the street not across the alley.

Green Curtains, a twin-sized bed, and an old porcelain lamp with a mermaid on it.

Her hair is mustard yellow, it looks like she's been in this room for years. Even though she has been worn down from her inception she doesn't look like she's in pain. Her smile isn't sarcastic, it's charming. She doesn't seem trapped; she looks quite free although she has been frozen in place for her entire existence. She isn't upset that her life had been spent watching the passing by of a decaying hotel room, she looks happy simply because she was allowed to live.

In the corner, there is a plastic eggshell table that looks about three and a half feet tall. At first glance, it appeared to be a coffee table but the two wickered chairs accompanying it tells me that the hotel was attempting to pass it off as a dining room table. The dining room set is covered with ashes left from the cigarette butts that have been inhaled in place of a continental breakfast, a promise that the hotel has never kept.

Ok now, what's missing from the room? Rose, where is she? She left for ice a while ago, did she get lost? Oh god, did they find her? Without her, I have nothing here, not even a sweater.

Just as I could feel my mind slipping again, it was interrupted by the creek of the door, standing on the other side a woman holding a bucket of ice. It was Rose; however, something seemed wrong. Her face was expressionless, no smile, not a frown, it was a monotone expression that looked utterly content with the scene before her. It horrified me, we shared the silence of the moment for seemingly an eternity. No words were spoken, we just looked at each other, her standing in the doorway, and myself sitting in a crisscrossed position from atop the twin-sized mattress.

After a few moments, my mind adjusted to the eeriness of her expression and into one of comfort. I was relieved to see her. The fear of what may have been lost was now the joy of what I have. Her presence is proof that I am not alone, she is the reason I don't need to sleep with the TV on, the reason I don't have to burn alone.

After a short eternity, I finally broke the silence "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine"

"You were just gone for a hot minute"

"I'm fine, I just ran into the manager"

"Really?"

"Yeah he was looking to see if the room was to my liking, he asked if I had heard about the continental breakfast, really talked my ear off"

"He was alive, we're not alone?"

"No, not really, I just got lost in the hallway."

"Oh"

“I did see him though, he was the same as the others I’ve seen. His eyes were faded, white kinda like pearls. His skin was dry and peeling over like a snake sheds its skin, he didn’t say anything, he just moaned and hobbled”

Once again the room fell silent, the sight of this man that I had never seen haunts my soul and makes it hard to breathe. An image too difficult to imagine yet so gruesome I can’t forget. I stomach to find the words to put her at ease, or would I rather put myself at ease...

Rose - If You Have Ghosts... (Part I)

Silence can speak louder than any words. An awkward pause can stop a conversation dead in its tracks, I believe that it is a true moment of honesty in any given conversation. A moment to track your thoughts, to comprehend the situation before you, a moment of complete awe that sits heavy on all participating. In this very room; hell, in the past three minutes Pap and I have stood in lifetimes of silence. Staying in Safety Harbor was meant to be a moment of power, a symbol of fearlessness, but when I look into his eyes all I see is a scared boy. Only now in this moment of emptiness can I truly see that I've killed a part of him, I have stolen hope from him, but there's nothing I can do now to change that, all I can do is wait for him to break this moment of honesty.

"Rose?"

"What is it Pap?"

"When you saw the manager..."

"Yeah?"

"Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Put him out of his misery?"

At this very moment, I find myself debating over the difference between quantity and quality, how much of something versus the true actual purity of it. While I could easily say the quantity of disgust I had for the mere mention of killing another human being is so exponential I struggle to fathom the sheer level of hatred I have for it, on the other hand, that does not speak for the quality of ignorance in the thought of murdering a stranger for the simple fact of murdering another human being. Needless to say, each second I take to consider my true feelings for this question posed to me by a frail scared little man-boy, the harder it becomes for me not to

obliterate him with a storm of backhands and fists, a fury likened to that of a hurricane striking the Caribbean and leaving only wreckage in its wake. Instead, I have to react in a way that won't ruin his final night: "What the fuck did you just say to me?"

Now, look at him scattering around in his mind as a way to try to vindicate his question, reasoning for needless slaughter.

"I- I just wanted to know if you-"

"If I what? Murdered him?"

"Well what does it matter he is already dead, it would be no worse than killing a cockroach"

"That cockroach had a life it made decisions just like you, it lived here just like you, it had a family it loved and it lost"

"That part of him is gone, Rose. All he can do now is turn you."

"It seems like you've already turned."

"Turned to what Rose?"

"Murder, you want to kill a man for the simple pleasure of taking a life."

"He could kill either one of us!"

"You don't understand Papi"

"Please, make me understand!"

"Alright, if I do I want you to swear to me that you'll never kill one of them, ever!"

"Fine, just let me get a drink first."

"Hell no!"

"Why not?"

“You sir are the lightest drinker I have met in my life, I need you to be completely sober if I am going to tell you this.”

“Fine, fine!”

“Not another word until I’m done, capiche?”

“Sur-”

“I said not another word, damn! So back when I was really little, my parents used to take me to church every day. I never considered it to be the greatest thing in the world but when you’re a kid what are you gonna do about it? Nothing, it's just the way it is; anyways, none of the shit the folks used to say at the church ever really mattered to me. The church consisted of laying out big picture concepts and there isn’t much to take in if you’re a kid. All you know is to say your prayers and eat your vitamins, basic Hulk Hogan etiquette. One day it all kinda changed for me, you see one day after my mom started to get sick my dad had me stay at the church for a while with the reverend. He told me I was gonna start going there every day after school while he and my mom were at the hospital. So on the first day that I was at the church, Father Damion brought me to go adopt a puppy for him to have at the church. He knew I was little and he could see how confused I was so he thought it would be a good idea for me to take care of something for a while to keep my mind off of all the confusion with my mom.

So we drove to this shelter a couple of blocks away from the church and as soon as we got there we were greeted by an employee who brought us to the back where we found one small puppy sitting alone in a cage. The pup was so small, that it terrified me. He was the only one left from his litter, he was the runt, and nobody wanted him. He’d been refusing to eat, he was abandoned and he knew it. When the man went to give the puppy to the father he grabbed it by its neck. The poor runt wasn’t worth the man’s time or affection to him; it was a thing, something

he didn't want to feed, clean up, or even look at. When the father and I brought him back to the church he had me wash it, feed it, and name it. I named him David, mainly because the father was nice enough to get me a puppy so I felt like the least I could do was give him a biblical name and honestly, that pup was the love of my life. Every day after school was over I would rush to the church just to see him, but as we know nothing gold can stay.

I think it was about two weeks after I named him that he started to get sick, he was so frail and in so much pain and there was nothing I could do. You see the thing about cancer that no one ever really talks about is how helpless the people around you feel. They so badly want to do something, hell anything but there is nothing for them to do, and keep that in mind with the fact that I was a child I didn't understand what was happening. I just wanted to do something. I tried forcing him to eat but he wouldn't, I tried getting him to stand up but he couldn't, all I could do is try to comfort him while he rots from the inside. By the end of the week, he was dead and a week after that my mom was dead too. The only thing that helped me find a single shred of peace was something Father Damion said. He told me that there are three parts to every person: the body, the soul, and the spirit. When someone dies, it is their body that decays and withers away, this is what we the living see; however, what you don't see is that their soul rises to heaven and is greeted by God and Peter's trumpets, and finally, the spirit is released from the body where it can watch after those it loved dearly. The reason I'm telling you this is because I believe what is happening to these poor men and women is that their body is decaying and their spirit has been released, I believe that the soul has been trapped in their bodies and that by killing them you aren't just striking down their body but you're destroying their soul."

The room stood still again, yet this time it was different. The air felt heavy, and the tears that slid down his cheek told me all I needed to know. He knew what he asked was wrong and

the remorse restored his innocence, the penance in his sorrow-filled eyes, he understands. Why is it that which feels so relieving is in actuality supremely melancholy?

“Rose?”

“Yes, Papillon?”

“Can I get that drink now?”

“As long as you get me one as well...”

Author - A Brief Intermission

While the next portion of the story is sweet and heartfelt in an otherwise tragic tale, I have made the decision to leave this portion of the story a secret, meant only for Papillon and Rose. This may seem like a cop-out of sorts to you the reader but I would like to assure you, that I have done this out of respect for the couple. Up to this point in the story, they have seemingly only awaited their young and tragic deaths; in what some (myself included) would identify as a rather bleak affair, and I believe it is only fitting that the two enjoy their time together along the way that they intended.

Yet despite my chivalrous decision to keep their final night together confidential, I suppose it is my duty, as the conductor of the narrative, to fill in some context for their goings-on after Rose's story. Immediately following the last moment in the section when Rose answered Papillon's drink request with the response "As long as you get me one as well...", the following occurred: Papillon downed two quick shots of tequila, leaving Rose to follow suit, after this, they spent a great deal of time destroying adjacent hotel rooms with a mallet Rose brought from home. They visited 4 rooms and left no stone unturned, excepting of course the mermaid lamps, Papillon made it a point to Rose that they would not be touched; however, the televisions, microwaves, wooden tables, and chairs were all obliterated with a Vince Neil Esque precision, they did so being fueled entirely off of adrenaline and the alcoholic rage they had built up throughout the night. As the evening progressed they would go on to imbibe more gin and tequila than they had in their entire two decades on this planet combined. After the annihilation of the rooms, the couple headed back to their room where they then smoked 2 bowls and commenced sexual intercourse on and off for about two and a half hours until eventually Papillon's system became overwhelmed and he threw up in the bathtub for around thirty minutes.

Afterward, the couple made the unanimous decision of migrating to another room that hadn't been destroyed by mallets or vomit. After arriving back in the room they drunkenly sang their two favorite Toto songs and soon after Papillon passed out on the mattress his head gently placed on the lap of Rose Teller.

Rose - If You Have Ghosts... (Part II)

Secrets are a curse, they linger in the back of your mind until time dictates whether or not it is time for them to leer their gloomy heads out of the shadows in your mind. Glaring down at this hollowed-out head using my legs for comfort I'm beginning to wonder what secrets lie in the shadows of his mind - are they hidden in embarrassment or are they lurking in ill-intent? Will they be the crushing blow that breaks my heart? I hope they are, it's only fair. The only thing my secrets do is hurt, tricking me into believing that I would prefer for Papillon to live his final moments in ignorance rather than knowing the person that I truly am.

"Rose?"

"Papillon?"

"No."

I recognize that voice, where do I know that voice from? I know if I look up I'll see him but it can't be. He's gone, he can't be here, I can't look up because then it will be real, everything feels so cold, the air feels heavy again but it's different I can't look up, this can't be real.

"Look at me Rose."

If I just keep my eyes on Papillons' head he will go away. He can't be here, his voice pierces my soul.

"Secrets secrets, are no fun..."

"Go away."

"... secrets hurt someone"

"Go away!"

"Look at me!"

"No, I can't stand the sight of you!"

“BULLSHIT! LOOK AT ME!”

I have no choice. I am doomed to either sit here in this ever waking cycle of torture or look at him. As I tilt my head up from Papillon's lap, I can see his clean red converse, the baggy jeans that he wore the night we met, and now as I stare at him directly in his dark soulless eyes I can see the glare of my waking nightmare, studying me with his grinch like smirk running from ear to ear.

“Why do I get the impression that you aren't excited to see me?”

“Please leave me alone.”

“And leave you here to die with this loser?”

“Don't you dare-”

“What did I overstep? My bad I've been trying to get better about respecting boundaries.”

“You- need to go.”

“Why are you crying? Did I say something to offend you?”

“Leave!”

“Do you want to die tonight with this on your soul? Not sure how much the big guy's gonna like that.”

“I HATE YOU!”

“Fine. I'll go - I know when I'm not wanted”

As he slowly stands up I can feel his aura shift, he's taking steps towards me and not the door, until now he arrived at the front of the bed. I can feel the chill get stronger, slowly and calmly he puts his face inches from mine...His icy fingers run across my cheek like daggers across a sheet of empty canvas, and his lips move even closer to my ear.

“Kyle, please-”

“Rose!”

His voice echoes throughout the room, yet still, Papillon lays silent in his trance. Kyle moves his lips from my mouth to my ear and finally, he whispers:

“Look at the time, it’s a quarter past three. I oughta be going. Have a good last day.”

“Kyl-”

“Ah ah ah, I’ll see ya tomorrow.”

I seal my eyes as tight as I can to ignore the thought of him until his cold lips touch my cheek, he holds the kiss for a moment, and then he releases me from his trance. The chill is beginning to leave and as I open my eyes I see nothing but an empty room.

Papillon - Keep Your Eyes Peeled

In hindsight, I think Rose and I may have made a slight miscalculation when it came to our penultimate night plans. While last night was incredible and will go down as the best night of my life, I'm kickstarting the day I died with the hangover of the century. Even worse than that, how in the hell did we end up in the honeymoon suite? I mean I'm not complaining - it's a marginal improvement to the other rooms - but still. I gotta think that Rose planned this out, she knew I would run past my limit and she had a contingency plan in place. She even brought my favorite sweater, it's right there on the actual-sized table! Is that what this hotel considers to be honeymoon material an actual-sized dinner table? I mean I'm only really half complaining; other than that it doesn't have much.

Let's just hope that the shower in the honeymoon is an upgrade. As I slowly creek open the door I am delighted to receive the visual greeting of a slightly upgraded shower. It looks like this shower has been cleaned in the past decade, the shower in our old room was covered in dirt and had grunge all up in the faucets and whatnot. There at least appeared to be some effort in cleaning this shower, the ones I'd seen in the other rooms looked like people had either deposited some sort of bodily fluid in it or just straight up shit. I'm just thrilled to see even the smallest amount of effort towards cleanliness.

The heat of the warm water running down my back put me into a state of complete nirvana, the way that the shampoo drips down from my hair into the gaps on my arms between the scars gently releasing me back into sobriety. I know I should be planning a getaway from this wasteland but it's so hard to fixate on what's wrong when at this moment everything just feels so fine.

“PAPILLON WE GOTTA GO!”

The hell? Why can't this moment just last a little longer why does there always need to be a problem? Maybe if I say nothing she'll stop banging on the door.

"PAPILLON, THEY'RE COMING WE GOTTA GET OUT OF HERE!"

"Who's coming?"

"WHO DO YOU THINK? THE ZOMBIES!"

"Whoa, you can't call them that!"

"WHAT?"

"It seems a little dehumanizing to me, I mean I thought I saw the news calling them 'The Infected'"

"SERIOUSLY PAPILLON?"

"Well you're little miss DoN't KiLl ThEm tHeY hAvE a SoUl"

"PAPILLON THEY ARE PUSHING AGAINST THE DOOR WE NEED TO LEAVE NOW!"

Finally, I finish putting on my clothes and open the door to the arrival of a bitch slap across the face. I should've told her I was getting dressed while we were talking, probably wouldn't have been slapped, I wish my foresight was as good as my hindsight, I swear.

"Papillon we gotta get to the car."

"Do you know how many are out there?"

The banging on the door is beginning to intensify, and the louder the noise gets the more real the situation becomes to me. It's not just the banging, the moans these people are whaling out seem to make them feel more human to me. They sound so hurt as if the part of them that is still in their bodies is in more anguish than their minds can fathom.

“It sounds like there are easily over a dozen, but there’s no way of knowing until we open the door.”

“Alright, I don’t know exactly where we are. Can you tell me if we are on the first floor or the second story?”

“The second, I brought you upstairs last night after you threw up in the shower”

I’m not one to look past the irony in that.

“Alright, we can’t take the elevator, are we by the stairs?”

“Why can’t we take the elevator?”

“Murphy’s Law, I ain’t gonna risk it.”

“Fair enough, I guess.”

“Rose, are we by the stairs?”

“Sorry- I mean we took the elevator up yesterday and I um- think it was straight across the hall from the stairs.”

“Are you sure?”

“Mostly, yeah”

“Well, I guess that’s gonna have to do. You have everything we need?”

“Yeah, I put the last bottle of Vodka in my bag, got the housekeeping keycard, car keys, and I have both of our phones charged.”

“What about the mallet?”

“What about it?”

“If it comes to killing one of them or losing you, I am going to do what I need to do to ensure that you are alright”

“Absolutely not”

“ROSE WE DON’T HAVE TIME FOR THIS!”

“You’re right, luckily for us the mallet is downstairs in our old room sitting in your vomit.”

“God damn it, Rose.”

“You ready?”

“Yeah, let’s do this thing”

“I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Just before she has time to pull the handle to the door, I reach my hand onto hers. I can feel the anger and fear in the way she squeezes my hand, I feel the pain. She’s exhausted, the bags under her eyes illustrate the limits she has reached, there’s something she can’t bear to hold onto anymore. I wish she would tell me, but I guess that’s not for me to know. All I can do now is be there for her now, slowly I reach in for a kiss.

As our lips meet, I am forced to wonder if this kiss will be our last. Gently, grazing the hair behind her ear I lean in and whisper what could be my last words...

“Well love; it’s been swell, I’ll see you in the next life”

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you to watch ‘LOST’”

As she slowly creaks the door open one of the infected lunges its body forward and thrusts it back at us, Rose immediately breaks into a sprint down the hallway and I tail her. There are fewer of them than it sounded like earlier at the door, there are only three or four down the hall and none of them are grouped together. As we reach the end of the hall Rose arrives at the door to the stairs, thank god she was right. I let out a sigh of relief and begin to open the door, and as I begin to motion for Rose to enter she looks into the stairwell and shrieks.

“PLEASE, NOT NOW GO AWAY”

“ROSE WHAT IS IT?”

“HOW DID HE FIND ME?”

“WHO?”

“ KYLE, HE’S STANDING RIGHT THERE”

“ROSE THERE’S NO ONE THER-”

Looking into the empty stairwell, I notice that there is a smell of rotten eggs. It’s god awful, as I peer my head into the stairwell it begins to grow stronger, it’s coming from below. Turning my head I notice one of the infected lying face up at the bottom step with its brain falling out of the back of its skull. He looks no older than me, he fell backward and crushed his head on the bottom step.

“Rose we gotta go”

“PLEASE LET ME GO”

“ROSE WHAT IS GOING ON?”

Turning to look at her I notice that she’s sobbing, and it looks like she’s having a mental breakdown, I pull her arm to come into the stairwell but she is frozen like a statue. Then the moaning starts, it’s coming from the bottom of the stairwell and every second it seems to get increasingly louder. I have no choice, we gotta take the elevator, I can’t risk taking these stairs anymore, we gotta take the other set. I grab Rose to follow after me and she does, almost purely out of instinct rather than choice. Damn it, the infected are beginning to gather down the hall there is no way we can make it. We’re surrounded, we only have one choice, and it’s my least favorite one by far. I press the button for the elevator and luckily it was already on this floor, Rose stumbles in with me and begins to sob on the floor. As the door begins to close the infected

from the stairs begin to inch closer and closer to the elevator doors. The smell alone is enough to bring tears to my eyes. As the doors begin to shut the hotel manager comes into sight and his pale milky eyes make visual contact with mine. Before we get to the first floor I hit the emergency button and set my attention on Rose.

“Rose who was that?”

“He’s in here with us-”

“Rose we’re alone”

“You can’t see him standing there in the corner? Laughing at me.”

“Rose who is he”

“Papillon, I can’t-”

“ROSE if we are going to make it out of here I NEED YOU TO TELL ME WHAT THE PROBLEM IS!”

“Pap-”

“Rose we still have a chance to live, we can get in the car and drive out of here, but first we need to get out of this hotel!”

“Papillon we’re not getting out”

“Why not, we still have time to get in the car and drive to safety, away from the Harbor we just need to get out of this hotel!”

“Papillon we only have an eighth of a tank left.”

“So what? We’ll get more gas.”

“Where?”

She's right, all the gas stations are out of gas. They had to start taking buses of people to leave because the demand for gas was so high when everybody wanted to leave. Anyone who wanted to escape has already made their efforts.

"We can find like a motorboat or something and drive off the coast"

"Papillon, don't"

"Yeah we can go to the beach and find some keys or something, we still have a chance"

"PAPILLON!"

"What?"

"Stop."

"Stop, what?"

"Trying to give yourself hope."

"But we can still get out of here, we can live!"

"No, we can't. We've made our decision to not leave the rest of our lives to false hopes of possible survival, have you read the news at all since we've been here?"

"No, why?"

"The government sent in the military they are shooting people on sight trying to escape, they sent out a phony evacuation warning because they wanted to contain the situation, why do you think they shut down the airport?"

"No, they wouldn't"

"Yes, they did."

"We had to choose and we chose correctly alright? No amount of begging or pleading will save us, to the outside world we are no better than *them*."

"But, Rose-"

“What Papillon?”

“I don’t want to die, I want to live with you, marry you, have kids, and grow old. I want to LIVE.”

“I’m sorry Papillon, but you can’t.”

Rose - Too Small For Eyes

“Secrets Secrets...” His words echo throughout my skull, I can’t take this anymore. He is driving me insane. The tears on the floor of this elevator are going to drown us before the bomb has a chance to finish us off. I would kill for a second of silence, I need a release.

“Papillon.”

“What is it, Rose?”

I can tell he’s defeated, poor Papillon has been beaten and if I can just tell him my last secret at least he would have the peace of mind to reach clarity.

“The boy you saw in the stairwell”

“What about him?”

“His name was Kyle”

“You knew him?”

“Hardly at all, but still more than I ever wanted to”

“What do you mean?”

“I met him about a year or so ago at a house party, just a little while before you and I met. My friend Maddy’s parents were out of town for work or something. I don’t remember, some kind of cliché high school house party. It was pretty typical teenage festivities, beer pong, shots, shitty trap music, weed, and it was lit almost solely by string LED lights. I wasn’t vibing to the party; didn’t talk to anyone, until Kyle introduced himself. He had just graduated and was hyped to join a fraternity, I thought it was funny because I thought he was gonna get ripped apart with hazing. We talked for a little while, and after about thirty minutes he left to go get us a couple of drinks. Little did I know that he would end up spiking mine.”

“Rose-”

“When it kicked in, he carried me to the restroom, to in his words, ‘Clean her up.’ You see he told the other folks at the party that I had been drinking all night and that he wanted me to be able to leave with my dignity. So he took me into the restroom and fucked my nearly unconscious body, after he was done with me he carried me to Maddy’s brothers’ room and laid me down on the bed. After that, he left and I never saw him again; until yesterday, when I saw his walking corpse on the way back from the ice machine.”

“And you killed him?”

“I didn’t mean to, I mean when I saw him I wanted to. I was going to stab him in the head with the car keys, but I couldn’t bring myself to kill something with a soul-”

“But then?”

“But then when I was turning to walk away from him he grabbed my arm, and I turned around and pushed him out of instinct, I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s not your fault”

“I know, I mean we’re in Florida I could use the stand your ground law”

“No Rose, it’s over he’s gone”

He’s right, Kyle’s gone. It’s only Papillon and me in the elevator we’re finally alone. Finally, alone, my body falls into Papillon’s arms. For the first time, in so long I feel safe, I’m not running from any of my secrets.

“Let’s get the fuck out of this hotel.”

“Alright, what’s the plan?”

“The door to exit is straight to the right of the elevator, correct?”

“Yes”

“Got the vodka?”

“Yes”

“Got the keys?”

“Yes”

“Well Rose, let’s do this thing.”

Firmly Papillon presses the emergency button and we begin to descend to the bottom floor. As the tone alerts us that we have arrived, the doors open, and receive an entire wave of zombies. Papillon drives forward and creates a gap in the mayhem. The sea of white doesn’t quite overwhelm me as much as the smell, it drops me to my knees.

“ROSE!”

“I’m right here!”

Crawling through the sea of peeled flesh, the glow from the red exit sign becomes a beacon. Keeping my head down and crawling is all I can do, my hands carrying me through the poorly vacuumed floor until I finally reach my destination. As soon as I arrive I can feel Papillon's hand grab my arm to pull me up.

“NO ROSE!”

“Shit you’re not Papillon”

The corpse takes me straight to eye level and quickly jerks its head at my throat. I was damn close to watching the bomb drop with Papillon, it’s a damn shame we botched the landing on the escape from the hotel. Just as I prepare for the chomp of the man’s teeth on my larynx, Papillon's fist clubs the man in the face, knocking him to the ground.

“Get your damn hands off of her”

After that obvious Crispin Glover moment, he let out a shriek of pain. It’s still heroic and all that, and I’m thankful, but he definitely just broke his hand. After a micro examination of his

hand, we exit the hotel and make our way to the car. I hit the unlock button as soon as my foot stepped out of the hotel, and we rushed inside. I grab the wheel and he steps into the passenger seat.

“Ok where to? The secret pier?”

“Rose I’m dying”

“Did you get bit?”

“No, but look at my middle finger.”

Upon further examination of his finger, it has become quite clear that he punched that zombie so hard in the face, that one of its teeth was lodged into his finger.

“After all that I’m going to turn into one of them, what the fuck?”

“No, you’re not.”

“Rose, I don’t want to die”

“We’re going to the pier ok?”

“Rose, I’m dying!”

“Quick, wrap this seatbelt around your finger”

“Rose-”

“You’re lucky I still have my secret weapon”

“Wait, your what?”

“My pocket knife!”

I know this is a very serious situation but for some reason, the dumbfounded look he gave me the millisecond he realized I was going to carve off his finger, is one of the funniest moments of my life. Maybe I just have a sick sense of humor. Jamming the knife through his finger didn’t feel too dissimilar from cutting into a carrot. It just popped right off, afterward stopping the

blood flow and the screaming became my second agenda; however, they both had the same solution, jamming his finger stump into the cigarette lighter. Still can't believe he used the Crispin Glover line from *Back to the Future*, what a goon.

True Love Waits

The couple arrived at the dock around thirty minutes after the short notice amputation of Papillon's middle finger. About two hours after they arrived he woke up and promptly threw up in the passenger seat.

"You cut off my fucking finger?"

"Yeah, you're welcome"

"You didn't even give me any notice you just hacked it off!"

"Well, we didn't have time to debate over it, I don't know how long the virus takes to infect the rest of your body, I wasn't willing to risk it."

"And you had the knife all along?"

"Well yeah"

"That would've been helpful earlier!"

"For what killing zombies?"

"We agreed not to call them that and no other things!"

"Like what?"

"Killing the infected"

"Ha!"

After the altercation, they took a moment to soak in the silence. It was the first time it had been truly quiet for Rose in a long time and she thoroughly enjoyed the bliss of the sweet nothing.

"So what now?"

"Well, we have about an hour until the bomb drops, want to go sit on the pier and wait for the world to end?"

“I guess.”

As they begin to walk to the pier Papillon can't help but let the tears flow from his eyes, he begins to become overwhelmed with the reality of the situation.

“Rose?”

“What is it Papillon?”

“Why are you so comfortable with all of this?”

“I think it's because I have lived my entire life just accepting that whatever happens, was destined to happen. There's no use in fighting something that is out of your control, just living life as much as you can while you still can. That's why I asked you to stay with me here in the Harbor. So we could spend our time together living and loving, instead of running.”

“But Rose, that's the thing we aren't living. We're just killing time until the bomb blows us away.”

“Maybe we are, but I'd rather get some kind of closure killing time than spend my remaining time running from my fate.”

“I just wanted more time.”

“You can't have it- Do you want to spend the time we have left here crying because it's over or do you want to live while we still can?”

As the pair arrive at the end of the pier, Papillon lifts Rose onto the wooden guard rail and quickly hops up next to her. They both take a moment to appreciate the skyline in front of them, the lights from the skyway reflect on the harbor water below. The sky is clear and the stars twinkle in the heavens like tiny diamonds spread out by the universe.

“Can't beat this view can ya?”

“No, it's perfect.”

“Have you taken a moment to think about what this bomb has done for you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well think about it you’ll never have to watch me get old, we won’t ever have to live without each other. You won’t ever get trapped in a dead-end job, you don’t have to worry about financial security.”

“I guess, but it still doesn’t seem like enough time.”

“Papillon you’re thinking about the quantity of your life and you are measuring as if it’s the same as quality. Just because you live a long life doesn’t mean you have enjoyed a good life necessarily. Not to say living a long life isn’t filled with many pleasures, but it is filled with as many hardships. Hardships that we will never have to know.”

“What do you think comes after, Rose?”

“I don’t know, probably nothing. That’s what makes living so special.”

“Oh.”

“It’s alright, Papillon. Just look at me and soon you won’t have to worry about it any longer.”

Papillon changes his focus from the skyline to Rose, he studies her eyes and begins to feel a sort of closure that eases his mind, he slowly reaches his lips closer to her and they meet for a kiss. This kiss is more of a sign from Papillon to Rose that he’s ok with this, the kiss in nature is a thank you for being there for him in his final moments. As their lips separate they exchange final words before reuniting for one last kiss.

“Rose, I will love you from this life into the next.”

“You mean more to me than you could ever know.”

As their lips meet once more for a final time, the black sky begins to hue brighter and brighter, until the harbor is eventually swallowed in a white blaze of flames.

The Author - Epilogue

The cruelty of this story is that both characters were created simply to die, in the pointlessness of self-preservation. Despite this, the two spent their final moments in contentment together, in a moment they perceived as complete beauty. The honest truth is that Rose lied to Papillon when she told him that the people attempting to evacuate were being slaughtered. She had done no research, as a matter of fact, she was hungover and in a state of hysteria when she made the allegations. Logistically speaking the couple's possible survival rate at the time was in a thousandth of a percentile. The choice to lie to Papillon should be considered more humane than giving him hope.

The journey of Rose and Papillon while tragic is also a reminder to live life as if every day is your last, live to love, not to kill time.

Death ends a life, not a relationship. - Mitch Albom

God Doesn't Know Where He Came From

Sitting next to the streetlights under the moonlight

The ambiguity increases.

What will happen tomorrow?

Will there be a tomorrow?

Why is cynicism so indulging?

Rather kill thy neighbor than protect him.

When did love become so weak?

The bible never mentions that doing unto others

Had to be so evil.

Is this why I hate myself so much?

Is it my receipt?

Only show mercy,

When you're too tired to set an example.

Fates of Nightstarr

Lucius Nightstarr

Brother has been working excruciatingly hard lately on an experiment. For months now he has been locked in his laboratory by the bay. Every time I see him, he looks like he's falling deeper into insanity. He reeks of untamed body odor, and his once chiseled, well-developed jawline seemed to be covered by grizzly fields of straw-like stubble. His eyes even seem to have sunken down into his skull and his aura has become a void into the darkness of his once untainted soul.

Apart from his tenebrosity, his isolation has begun to drive ME into a pit of loneliness. I can barely fathom what it must be doing to him. We used to speak every day, I would go out to the academy, and he would be the only person I conversed with. We would spend hours discussing the possibilities of leaving the academy and going to explore the stars. We'd become the galaxy's first space rangers, fight Martians, discover planets, and most importantly leave this place.

We never met our parents you see, Daddy and Mummy dearest seemingly disappeared from the face of the earth two months after my birth. Damien was only three when it happened but he told me that they had been taken by things from another world and he swore that one day he would track down whatever it was and kill it.

After our parent's disappearance, our grandmother took us in, at the humble age of 87 no less. Though our time with her was short, the psychological damage that the old hag would bring us would last for a lifetime. Every night before bed she would tell us how our family had a great debt to the ancient space demon Cthulhu. She told us that generations ago our great relative Mercutio the Lost had made a deal with the great space demon.

Legend told that Mercutio the Foreigner as he was once known, had wished for a purpose. Our grandmother had told us that he had been a young child found by the noble Prince Williams, in the rubble of a nasty battle in which the Geates had defeated the Wylings. The young prince had decided to take our forefather in as a token of new beginnings.

As time would go on the prince became the king and, as ruler King Williams II, needed to show that he was a man who must be feared. So he decided to use the foreigner as a whipping boy. Anytime Mercutio stepped out of his element the noble king would strike down upon him.

The king often felt that it was necessary to punish poor Mercutio, for without punishment there is no order. During the late hours of the night, it wasn't at all unexpected that the king would go into Mercutio's chamber with members of his court. On some nights they would come in and take Mercutio from his bed and stab daggers through his bones, on others they would take turns dominating his wife while he sat cold and alone in the stony jet-black corner of his chamber floor. Some say the screams of Mercutio's wife could be heard throughout the halls of the castle.

However, Mercutio never questioned the King or his cruel ways, for the king had spared him from meeting the same fate as his Wyling kind. So the good Mercutio stood by the king's side until one stormy night when the king met the fate of Mercutio's wife's dagger. She had been prepared for another late-night courtship with the king and slit his throat before he could even lower his trousers.

For this Mercutio's wife was hung from the neck until dead and Mercutio and his five children were banished from the kingdom. This is when Mercutio was given the title of The Lost. He searched for any way to obtain money, food, or sustenance of any kind. Unfortunately for the poor man, no one would hire an enemy of the throne.

Mercutio became desperate to find any way to provide for his kin, any way to find something to live for, to find a purpose. So in a desperate attempt to attain some sort of social standing, Mercutio joined the Cult of Cthulhu. The organization prayed to a supreme space demon from a separate dimension than the one we live in now. To join you were required to sacrifice your first of kin, drink the blood of a slaughtered goat, and pledge your undying support to the supreme overlord Cthulu.

Mercutio did everything they asked. EVERYTHING.

Our grandmother even went on to tell us that not only would Mercutio's soul eventually be devoured by Cthulu but all of his kin until his lineage was complete. This included but was not limited to Mercutio the Lost, Mercutio's remaining children, myself, my brother, my parents, and even my grandmother.

Needless to say, this put a damper on our childhood. She always appeared to be more interested in tormenting my brother. The bitter old hag seemed to be grunted by his discomfort. To this day he has never told me all of what she would do to him but he shared some of it. He shared with me that she would wake him in the darkest parts of the night and whip him, she would blame him for our parent's death while doing so, and she left him scarred both physically and mentally. She would often poison his food with some of her "spare" medication, once he reacted so poorly to her pot pie that he began to seize. She rewarded him with a swarm of stomps to the head.

My brother faced this abuse until my grandmother's timely passing around my ninth birthday. She took a stumble down the stairs while my brother and I were at school. As a result of the incident, my brother and I were sent to the Dual Oak Preparatory School. After arriving, my brother became a prodigy in scientific studies. His initial project with the school was creating

an automatically open and closing curtain. He did so with a series of mechanical gears that were triggered by the flip of a switch directly next to the curtain.

For his efforts, Dual Oak Preparatory offered him a laboratory at the nearby bay to allow him full control to create more gear-powered contraptions. When he first moved into the *'Damien Nightstarr Facility for Science'*, a building Dual Oaks decided to name after my brother, things were better for us than they had ever been. I was allowed to take fewer classes in order to assist my brother's important work, we could stay up as long as we wanted, eat whatever we wanted, and create whatever our boundless imagination opened up for us.

However, his focus seemed to become less fixed on works such as everyday appliances like when we began. It seems as if his attention and purpose had become uncentered, I fear his mind has become scattered as well.

On his nightstand, he has issues with texts relating to human anatomy, however, the only pages Brother seems to bookmark are the pages on sleep and the condition of man while unconscious. I fear that amongst all of his research he fails to get any sleep of his own

As of recent Damien has, from at least what I can tell, transcended the scope of our previous works. Night and day he seems to be working on some sort of God-defying contraption. I have even attempted to read some of his notes but all I have been able to decipher is a list of names. Along with that, I have discovered that he has been keeping documents relating to the interdimensional space demon Cthulhu. His documents don't seem to be related to the mythology of Cthulhu but instead, to numbers and astrological hypotheses.

Tomorrow I will confront Damien about his madness but my day has now come to a conclusion, more to come tomorrow.

Damien Nightstarr

My work is finally complete, I have finally overcome my last obstacle and tonight I can take a long-overdue rest. For the past few months, I have been doing work so important that it was integral to the survival of mankind. When I first began this work my endgame was clear but I knew it was important to hide my tasks from public knowledge. Not even Lucius could know, well especially not Lucius.

I have been working all my life to finally eradicate the world of the evils of the Cult of Cthulhu. The beast and his followers have taken everything from me, my parents, my chance at a regular life, and my sanity. I knew all those years ago when grandmother told me of the cult that I was the only one capable of destroying it.

Even at the young age of twelve, I knew the importance of research and my dear grandmother had given me all the resources necessary to learn all I need to about the cult. She herself was a high-ranking member of the organization.

Grandmother was never afraid to show the members that she was willing to make any sacrifice to the great space demon, for fuck's sake she sacrificed her only two children to it. She burned her firstborn alive in the child's infancy, she then patiently waited 30 plus years to murder her second-born and his wife. She took my mother and slit her throat, and drank the blood pouring out of the dying woman, meanwhile she had my poor father hogtied to watch his dearly beloved suffer every second until she passed on into the next dimension where her soul would be devoured by the ancient space demon.

After my mother was slowly taken from this realm my father was burned at the stake like his brother before him. Grandmother always told me the smell of his cook flesh was more

satisfying than the orgasm in which my father was produced. She told me that when the time was right, Lucius and I would be the next to be sacrificed.

I could never let my grandmother kill my brother or myself so I had to take it upon myself to see that she never had the opportunity. I had to act with swiftness and grace to ensure that my brother and I could never face the fates of our parents before us. My first course of action was to find a way to kill my grandmother but still have a way to access scientific equipment to carry on with my duty to destroy the cult after her timely passing.

Using resources from her study I was able to obtain many of her private documents from the organization, including but not limited to the personal accounts of the members of the organization detailing constituent's families and occupations, the meeting places for the group which included a courthouse, a clandestine and remote location in the woods, several churches, and also the group's many transactions with local politicians and financiers.

My first course of action was to study and perfectly mimic my grandmother's penmanship. A task that may sound simple, but with whip marks up my wrist and arm became steadily more challenging every time I met the whip. When I finally mastered her handwriting I wrote a proposal to the president of the Dual Oak Preparatory School, for entry for Lucius and myself. The fact that he had an account with the cult nearly guaranteed our entry into the establishment. From there I embedded the letter with my grandmother's personal stamp on the envelope to legitimize the message.

After sending the letter, my next task was to kill my grandmother without hinting at signs of foul play. Just before my brother and I left for school, I set a tripwire on the top of the staircase which was located a few paces from my grandmother's room. A couple of hours after school had begun I was able to sneak out of class and disassemble the tripwire at the top of the

staircase and return to class as if nothing had ever happened. Seeing her body lifeless at the bottom of the staircase didn't bring me the feeling of relief that I thought it might. Instead, it gave me a feeling of remorse, it made me feel as if I had skipped to the end of my hero's journey with so few tribulations, whereas I knew it had just begun. I vanquished my mortal enemy without a grand monologue. On the other hand, I felt a great deal of satisfaction in knowing that she would never get the pleasure of murdering another member of her bloodline.

On the day of her tumble, both Lucius and I were accepted into Dual Oaks. Subsequent to being accepted I knew I had to make my mark on the school quickly if I wanted to get my master plan off the ground as soon as possible. I decided to start by creating inventions that would please the administration in order to get a place to conduct my research. All I had to do was make a few mechanical inventions that would make the Dean's life easier. I started by giving him an automatic curtain, I went on to make him a cuckoo clock that would ring at times specific to his likings, I even made him a steam-powered mobile chair so he wouldn't even need to stand to give me an award. After a few months of this tedious back and forth I was awarded my own laboratory.

From this point on I had to carry on with my work completely void of any possible interruptions. I immediately isolated myself from the outside world, it was the only course of action that could result in unmitigated success. This included all of the academy's staff, the dean, and most importantly of all Lucius. Separating Lucius from my work was seemingly impossible unless I created an image for myself that not even my own brother could identify with. I stopped showering, stopped shaving, stopped communicating, and even stopped sleeping.

For the first couple of months, he still attempted to converse with me but I haven't found any resistance from him in the past few years. Of recent, I have noticed that he has been trying to

spy on me and my work. However, my experiment has been successful for too long to have any sort of critical cracks of evidence.

For years I have been studying the human mind, but most crucially the mind while a person is asleep. There is a certain trauma that some people have when they sleep, a case of the body giving out while the mind is still active. In this state, a person is completely paralyzed and so immobilized they cannot even speak, all they can do is watch the room around them. Since the mind is still conscious patients have reported seeing figures, and demons while they are in bed motionless and unable to defend themselves from the living nightmare that they find themselves in. This phenomenon is referred to in the scientific community as *sleep paralysis*.

When I was a young boy my grandmother found the perfect mixture of medication to force me into this state. She would often slip into my room to cause my mind to wonder if she was real or just part of the nightmare.

My research was initially to find out the concoction that could cause the same effect. Using rodents and later adult felines I was able to create and produce enough of the serum to cause sleep paralysis in even the healthiest of bodies.

Next, I had to locate all of the members of the Cult of Cthulu's homes. With my grandmother's documents, I was able to uncover over 182 members of the group. My mission was then to go to every single member's home to drug and execute them. I didn't want them to see my face however so I decided it would be most satisfying if the last thing they saw was the face of their overlord. Keeping in mind that they had also sacrificed their families, I had to do what was necessary to rid the world of the cult.

Every time I took one of their lives, I felt myself becoming more powerful than I ever believed, the look of fear I saw on the face of the politician as I slowly took the life of his whore

wife, the terror in the eyes of the pastor as I dragged in the corpse of his daughter. Even the dread and fear in the Dean's expression earlier tonight. By killing them I have taken the sacrifices from Cthulhu and become stronger than they ever could have envisioned. I have in turn become a God, but a God with compassion. I know the struggles Lucius has had throughout his life so I refused to take his life the way I have the others.

Tonight I finally showed Lucius what I have been working on for so long, a machine that could transport us to another dimension so we could finally vanquish Cthulhu. The look of joy he expressed when he discovered that I wanted to do this with him is a feeling that will never leave my vessel.

Of course, there is no actual way to transport to a separate dimension, that's insane. What I had created instead was a room in which I could control the influx and outtake of air. I slowly and very gently took the air away from my brother. For his troubles, I have generated more physical power than any mere mortal man. For his sacrifice, I can finally rise to my full potential.

My next mission is to seek out more members of the cult from overseas, one by one I will cleanse mortality and eradicate this world of Cthulhu.

My Subsequent Nightmares

Each night when I fall asleep,
The sight of your face becomes more discolored.
I begin to fear that your love is out of reach.
The absence of light in your eyes, dark and morbid,
Leaves my tongue in a stutter.
I try to hold on to the thought of once was,
Yet still, I know that is just the dream of a man who lost his will years before.
These are no dreams,
When the piper plays you must pay the bill.
Still, I wonder can I dream again for just one night more?

Memento Vivere

Motion Sickness

Staring out into the vacant soul of Tampa Bay, nineteen-year-old Frankie Clark begins to ponder his existence in a world consumed by plague.

Is it fair, the opportunity of mortality? The notion, as some believe, that everyone who has ever existed should treat the life they are given as a blessing from some higher being? No one ever asked for the privilege to be born, yet we are all cursed with the knowledge that we will all die. The idea of impermanence has never truly been something I could ever wrap my mind around, it honestly seems too obscure for even the sanest to fully comprehend. To be obsessed with death is to disregard life, to ignore death is to live a lie. How is it that I haven't been in this world for two full decades yet the reaper is in my shadow? I could argue that it isn't fair, but in the same breath, I must reference that my birth wasn't fair either.

"The heartbreaking thing is that when your body corrodes from the inside you begin to wonder about what it felt like before the pain was there, how unimaginable is it that we can take for granted the simplicity of a crisp breath of air. The longing for normality becomes maddening, and the situation's reality becomes numbing. No sharp pain, just this static poison killing me."

In between thoughts of nihilistic pessimism, Frankie's phone begins to vibrate intensely as he picks the phone from his pocket he notices the caller id:

'Incoming Call: Lil Bro'.

"God, I can't tell him now. I don't think I'm ready to, Jason has been through enough as it is. I gotta wait until I can articulate my thoughts to help him understand that none of this is his

fault, the world is just going to shit right now and I don't think it's fair to declare myself more important than others. I mean in a way isn't that selflessness?"

The more he begins to justify his evasiveness, the more the young man's anxiety increases, and his breaths become shorter while his coughs in turn become harsher. Slowly he begins to shrink down into the park bench, almost as if the concrete is sucking him in like a vortex into a different reality. His arms become weak and his legs turn to jelly. As he looks around he notices the true vacancy of his surroundings. No one is near him, they have all locked themselves into a personal quarantine, he is left to fester on a bench in this sea of disease and decay. Yet just as quickly as this reality becomes enough for him to conceive, his phone begins to vibrate again, just like before the phone reads: *'Incoming Call: Lil Bro'*. Yet still, it is quickly declined, and the pressure of the conversation becomes too much for the young man to bear. He has isolated himself purposely for the last two years and it is only now, in this year of the plague, that he finally feels the shame of being alone.

The tears begin to slowly scrape down the face of this pitiful sight as the truthfulness of his actions has finally been accepted. In Frankie's mind, he begins to come to terms with the true nature of his scenario. As his thoughts continue to spin in double time, he picks his phone up off the bench and waits.

Without delay the phone begins to buzz again; however, on this occasion, Frankie promptly answers...

I Used to Love Her

“Frankie?”

“Hey Jason, sorry I missed a couple of your calls, I was just talking to a couple of venues about some gigs.”

“Oh shit man, they all get postponed?”

“Nah, they got canceled, apparently some of them don’t know if they’ll survive the pandemic.”

“Shit man, I’m sorry to hear that”

“So what’s going on?”

“Well um, you might want to be sitting down for this.”

Frankie looks down for a moment at the bench, takes a deep breath, and gives Jason the affirmative “Dude, what the hell is going on? Did mom get the disease or something?”

“No man, mom and dad are fine.”

“Well God bless.”

“Seriously? Anyway, it’s Grace. She’s not doing well, she hasn’t been eating her food, she can barely walk, and honestly, she just doesn’t look well.”

“Shit, do you have any idea what it could be? She’s only like three or four years old.”

“When we took her to the vet they told us that she had a tumor in her head”

“How long does she have?”

“The dog has only got about a week or so left in her, I told mom and dad I was going to call you before we take her in.”

“Y’all can’t kill her before I get the chance to say ‘goodbye’, I at least owe her that!”

“You’ll come up?”

“Yeah, I’m going to start heading up there right now.”

“So it’ll be like three or four hours?”

Just as Frankie starts to answer his brother, he begins to cough violently. Each cough more savage than the one before. In between each rasp is a solitary moment of gasping for air, only to be pulled right back into the respiratory storm.

Before Frankie can answer he is interrupted by a frantically worried Jason: “Jesus Christ are you ok?”

“Not really, I should be up there in the next two to...” his response is interrupted by a final runaway cough before he can finish “three days.”

“Two to three days? What the fuck happened to your car?”

“The engine blew.”

“What? Can you get an Uber or Lyft?”

“Not likely, I’m coughing up a storm, wearing a bandana because I couldn’t get a mask, and my Uber and Lyft ratings are shit.”

“Why are they shit?”

“Well I used to only use Uber but then a rapper who was working a gig with me smoked some weed in the back of this five-star dude's car and he was not having it. Then when I got Lyft, I asked if I could smoke in this woman’s car and she thought I meant nicotine so it was all good; but, I hit a pen, and then she got pissed EVEN though the smoke smelled like pineapples, which are delightful!”

“There is no way you made the same mistake twice.”

“I’m not proud of it.”

“You sound proud of it.”

“OK.”

“OK what?”

“I’m a little proud of it”

“How can you both be one of the smartest and stupidest people I have ever met? You’re a fucking idiot.”

“Woah, watch the language, no way mom or dad would keep you under their roof if they knew you were talking like that.” Frankie begins to chuckle at his uninspired wit and is met with some vicious coughs as the laughter fades into sickness.

“Seriously dude what’s up with the coughing? You know you have a compromised immune system. Are you at home?”

“What home?”

“You know the place that you live, where you go after a long day of performing?”

“Bro, I live in my car.”

“You mean to tell me you sleep in a non-functioning car in Florida?”

“Yeah I’ve been trying to save up money for a place, but between fixing up the car, purchasing studio time, and hospital expenses it’s been impossible.”

“What hospital expenses?”

“It’s nothi-”

“No man tell me the TRUTH, what hospital expenses?”

Frankie attempts to take a deep breath but the sickness within won’t allow it. The struggle for breath becomes maddening, the silence on the other line becomes deafening, and the sight of the bay in front of him quickly fades into blackness. As the last shot to save him from the

hopelessness escapes him he finally lets out the truth “Jason, the cancer is back and it’s worse than last time, I’m going to die.”

All My Agony

The line lay dead silent for a few moments after Frankie's confession. The horror of the true reality of the situation became painfully real to both parties, Frankie is dying. The sad truth of the matter wasn't a reality for either of them quite yet. Neither could fathom a world without Frankie in it.

The eternity of silence was a brutality that very few can truly comprehend. A moment so harsh and surreal that the ability to speak is taken from any who experiences it, yet still Jason strove forward and broke the dead air.

"So what are you going to do?"

"The only thing that I can do is, walk."

"No, you need to be in a hospital, like yesterday..."

"Brother, the only safety for me has gone away when the air became plagued with a deadly virus. I'm on borrowed time."

"But you can still get help..."

"Not until I see the dog."

"I'm sorry, WHAT?"

"The dog was there when I was rotting away from the inside out, it's only fair I do the same."

"YOU ARE CURRENTLY ROTTING FROM THE INSIDE OUT!"

"And there is nothing I can do about that. I don't have the money nor the willpower to go through chemo again, but here is what I do have: Two functioning feet, a portable charger, and a bandana. I'm gonna walk Proclaimers style to see that dog."

"Let me see if mom or dad can-"

“No! I will do this myself, I haven’t needed their help for the past two years and I don’t need it now.”

“I don’t feel good about this Frankie.”

“Well you can stay on the phone with me while I walk, my battery can last two straight days and my charger can give me at least two more days of charge.”

“Frankie there has got to be a better way!”

“There probably is, but this is the way it’s gotta be.”

“Why?”

“Because I want one more adventure! I want to be able to leave this life and head into the next one knowing that my legacy is that of a man who would not quit, despite the hand he was given. I will walk through a sea of disease if it means I can say ‘goodbye.’”

“So you’re gonna walk 200 miles?”

“Google maps say I can do it in 198 miles.”

“This will kill you.”

“Jason, have you ever heard the Latin phrase *memento mori*?”

“Yeah, *remember to die*.”

“It feels like all our lives we are told to prepare to die and that our lives are just the journey we embark upon just to end up dead, which in some way holds some truth. Last year I was working this gig with a dude who was in his late fifties rapping some dive bar with me and a couple of other guys. When he walked up I assumed he was the promoter or something and I asked him about my payment, dude just chuckled at me and performed. Let me tell you I have seen more than a few rappers in the last few years, but god damn it if he wasn’t one of the worst I had ever seen. He had little to no flow, no diction, fucker looked like Bert and rapped like Ernie,

yet still, this dude had the confidence and swagger of a rap god. After the show, a couple of kids came up to him and just tore into this motherfucker. Like brutal shit. These assholes were telling him to slit his wrists and drink bleach and whatnot. Still, the dude just sat there smiling drinking his Arizona iced tea or whatever, nothing was gonna ruin this dude's day. So I go on stage to do my rap, and I think it's a pretty decent set, and then kick back to mellow out afterward. Then I notice that he's still in the back chillin'. So I go up to him and ask him why he let those kids go off on him.

He looked at me and he said "Well 'cause they were right, my act was terrible but I didn't want to agree with him or anything."

So I had to ask him why he decided to come to that venue on that night and just absolutely bomb on stage if he could've, you know, just avoided the whole thing altogether.

He told me "When I was a young man there were many great things I wanted to do with my life so I made these tiny promises to myself that I would get around to doing them; but as the days begin to fade into years, I found myself letting these promises fall by the wayside. And as my dreams began to fall into the oblivion that is the 'could've been', I found myself spiraling deeper and deeper into depression. Then about a year ago I decided to make a list of accomplishments to fulfill and every month I checked one or two off the list, and he pulled out like a weird serial killer list of badass goals. It looked like those packets your teacher would give you in elementary school for homework like ten or twelve pages being held together by like five staples on the top left corner, and on the front page in bold letters, it read: **MEMENTO VIVERE**.

I asked him what it meant and he said "It's Latin. It means *remember to live*, and brother this journey is the last check on my list!"

And It Starts...

Shortly after the conclusion of Frankie's story, he and his brother agreed on some ground rules for the voyage:

- Map out the quickest possible route with the least amount of directions.
- While in transit, Frankie must make a phone check-in with Jason every 30 minutes as an assurance of his ongoing mortality.
- When he is not talking to Jason, nor checking the directions, Frankie must have his phone off to preserve battery life.
- Every evening when he decides to crash somewhere for the night, Frankie must share the address with Jason.
- Frankie must stay at least 10 feet away from any other person at all times; because you know, the whole *Great Disease* deal.
- NO HITCHHIKING!
- Until the conclusion of his journey, Jason must not tell Mom or Dad of the situation or Frankie's condition. If this rule is ignored, Frankie goes dark.
- As soon as Frankie has made it to Jacksonville, and has seen the dog, he will immediately go to the hospital.

Follow You Into the Dark

The worst part about Florida during any given time of the year is not the heat or the inconsistency in the weather. Instead, as Frankie has been reminded, the real curse of the Florida climate is the humidity. It robs air from the lungs, it dampens the skin with a thick layer of sweat, and for a 20-year-old with one foot already in the grave, the humidity is just a twisting of the knife. Initially, on his trek to Jacksonville, Frankie found himself doing double time with absolutely no hitch in his movement; but now after an agonizing seven and a half hours, he has found that the motivation of a canine's farewell is the only thing pushing him forward.

To honor his agreement with Jason, Frankie has placed each call to Frankie at 30-minute intervals on the dot; however, as time's arrow marches on, the calls have in turn become much briefer. While Frankie attributes the length of the calls to the preservation of breath, the honesty of it is that there is too much on the table that he is not prepared to acknowledge, gaps in his timeline that he is not ready to relive.

Now as he heads to his final check-in for the night, he readies himself for the inevitability of another opportunity to clear the air. As the dial tones begin to echo from his phone's speaker into his left-side brain the realization of the situation becomes a little bit more real to Frankie. Not that it hadn't before, but he felt as if the pattern of the tone was something more. For every second of silence would be quickly and inevitably conquered by the shudder of a loud unpleasant hum. It felt like he was sitting in an empty room tied up and every tone was a single drop of water on his cranium, the process was maddening. The dials just continue to circulate in perfect time:

BRRRRRR

Silence

BBBBBBBBRRRR

SILENCE

BBBBBBBBRRRRRRRRRR

“Hey Frankie, how you holding up?”

“Not gonna lie to you, I’ve felt better.”

“Are you gonna call it for the night?”

“Yeah, I think so. I’m sweaty, thirsty and my legs feel like they’re fuckin melting.”

“Frankie let me get you a ri-”

“Jason, remember the rules.”

“Frank-”

“Nah man, we made a clear set of rules, I think we should follow ‘em.”

“You’re a rat bastard Frankie, you know that?”

“What, for following the rules or leaving you?”

“I mean... both, right?”

“Shit.”

“This is the most I’ve talked to you since you left.”

“Listen Jaso-”

“No, you left me here alone. I needed you and you ran away. I know that you went through hell and back every day for two straight years, but you know that you never went alone. You had Suzy, the pooch, and me. You told us all that you loved us, but then you just fucking ran. I love that you chased your dreams, but why did you need to do it alone? Did it make you feel like a badass, like some new-age drifter? All of this bull shit about you living in your car to carry out your dreams, you could’ve done that from college. There are programs for the technical

side of music, you were and are smart enough to do it and get things done. But what did you choose instead? Working on a phone and some shitty equipment that you had to borrow from someone else because you wanted to spite mommy and daddy? That's fucking childish, and I know you know that, but your fucking pride is detestable. You say you choose to live, but here you are making no fucking effort at all to maintain and preserve that life. And you know what really fucking sucks? Living your entire life putting your older brother on a pedestal in your own fucking mind because of his resiliency and strength. But you know what? You're not extraordinary, you're human, you are mortal. Worst of all you're a pretty shitty person at that."

Frankie sat for a moment and in the gaps between the dial tones in his mind, he kept listening to the earth-shattering tones and the silence in between them.

"SUZY"

Silence

"SPITE"

Silence

"PRIDE"

Silence

"MORTAL"

When the tones stopped he was just left in the silence of the conversation and the eerie echo of knowing that Jason deserved some sort of vindicated response.

"I didn't know what else to do." Frankie muttered after spending a short lifetime in the pool of dial tones swimming around his left-side brain.

"Why did we have to get cut off?"

“Because I knew the path I was going down was a spiral, and I knew y’all loved me enough to follow me into the dark. Suzy had a lot going for her she was gonna make a D1 cross country team, and I knew if I asked her to come she would’ve dropped all the potential she had built for herself, I couldn’t bring her if there was a possibility that I was going to fail, I couldn’t let her crash and burn.”

“It was never about crashing, we were going to be with you regardless and I think you know that. I can hear that remorse in your voice and I feel like shit to be as mad at you as I am. I don’t feel like I can forgive you; for some god-damn reason, all I want to do is see you and give you a fucking hug. I love you unconditionally and I just thought you felt the same.”

There are some moments in life when you know what you should say. Tragically, at times, even though you know what you are supposed to say you willingly choose to use the wrong words, In cases such as this, the vacancy of the soul becomes apparent. The hollowed hole becomes acutely clear to anyone around. Unfortunately, at this moment the retort from Frankie was: “I’m going to be sleeping in the alleyway behind the Seven-Eleven at Exit 19”

“Sure, sleep well, call me when you wake up tomorrow.”

“Jason I...” before he could finish his thought he was interrupted by a final dial tone. Frankie felt himself marinate in his betrayal, it had taken more from him than he had realized.

He looked around frantically in the alleyway to find some suitable substitutes for a pillow and blanket. Frankie pushed the cigarette buds and half-broken styrofoam cups out of the way to create some room for comfort, yet the young man found that there was no kind of comfort to be found on this night. Instead, he simply rested his back on the convenience store wall behind him and allowed his legs to come out from beneath him. As his mind begins to wash over with thoughts of self-loathing and distress, he gently slips out of consciousness.

Carry On (The Funeral)

The rest that a person gets outside of a gas station amidst a global pandemic is not something that one could qualify as a peaceful one. That being said, it can always get worse. Something that never crossed Frankie's mind is that it would be a poor decision to sleep outside a public place in his condition, coughing and gagging on his own suffering. Acting as a leper during the apocalypse doesn't tend to lend itself to good tidings. So as a six-foot-two double-masked convenience store third-shift employee (who you know has seen some shit) looks down on this dying boy, reality will slowly begin to clash with the unfortunate narrative that Frankie has written for himself.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?!" the man inquired to Frankie amidst a fit of struggled coughs.

"I'm just trying to get some rest..."

"No, you are getting the fuck away from my store!"

Frankie looks up at the man for just a second before the man's size twelve boot caught Frankie in the eye.

"Get the fuck out of here, I'm trying to keep my store open and that's not going to happen if people see patient zero squatting in my god damned alleyway!"

As Frankie struggles to pick his body up off the ground, his chest is once more assaulted by a swift kick from the man. He begins to cough more as his body plummets back to the slick concrete. This only fuels the anger of the man who responds with a flurry of stomps and kicks. Every time his foot makes contact with Frankie it hits harder. The man continues Frankie's punishment for another couple of minutes only to be mercifully interrupted by an incoming

phone call. As he walks away to take the call he looks back and gives the ultimatum “I’m coming back with my gun, best that you’re not still here you fucking rodent!”

In no time at all Frankie picks himself up with the forest green dumpster on his side and begins to hobble away. His lungs seem to be giving way, and breath has become unobtainable at the moment, but a hasty retreat is not an option, it is survival. The second his right foot touches the interstate his body falls to the ground. He begins to cough into his palms uncontrollably, each time he does his body ache increases tenfold. Even the slightest movement seems to be next to impossible. Blood covers his face and hands, and as he lays and stares at the sky the realization sets in that this was it. Looking at the black clouds hanging above him, his mouth turned to a smirk. Nothing was going to be resolved, his story ended here: *Florida Man With Lung Cancer Dies on the Shoulder of I-75 in the Middle of a Pandemic*. All of this effort for what? To not show up? It was too late, and he knew it.

Amidst all of his agony he reached into his pocket and picked up his phone: ‘3 Missed Calls from Lil Bro’, he laughed “Different day, same shit”. He then clicks on the return call option and waits through some more dial tones.

“Hey, where the fuck are you?”

“Hey Jason, I’m gonna talk for a minute so let me speak ok?”

“What?”

“Just let me talk ok?”

“Ok.”

“So I’m gonna level with you. I’m straight up a bad person, I mean at some point I gained your admiration, but truthfully I know who I am. I’m selfish, manipulative, and even worse I’m a letdown. I let Suzy down, the pooch, and more than anyone, You. I told myself I was doing it to

protect y'all but now I see I wasn't. I wanted to be alone because that's what I thought I deserved. I hate a lot about so many of the things that have happened to me. I hate that I got cancer, I hate that I lived, I didn't deserve to be saved, I was a wasted rescue. I think God's wanted me dead for a while, it's only taken this long for the big guy to get one up on me out of stubbornness. I just wanted to let you know before I go..."

"Go?"

"Hey! Don't fucking interrupt me", Frankie begins to wheeze and cough but struggles forward.

"I loved you all, the dog, Suzy, and you. I was hoping to see everyone before I checked out, but that wasn't in the cards. Tell Suzy I'm sorry and be with the pooch when she goes, if you see her out I'll meet her on the other side."

"FRANKIE!"

"Jason, I'm sorry, I love you."

"Frankie?"

"FRANKIE!"

"STAY WITH ME!"

"PLEASE!"

On With the Show: Epilogue

Frankie died just the other night, some say it was suicide but we know how the story goes. At the funeral, Suzy, the dog, and Jason all got together in Frankie's old room. Jason and Suzy talked for hours about Frankie and what he had meant to them, how he met his end, and about *what could have been*.

Jason had become inconsolable except for when he was with Suzy. She was the only person he could look at without crying. She brought him back to an easier time, a time when it was the three of them against the world. After a few hours of hanging out together, Suzy finally asked how long the dog had left. This absolutely destroyed Jason, he began to sob and fell to the floor drowning in his own tears, she quickly knelt beside him and asked:

“Is it that soon?”

In between his tears, he was able to muster out a “No.”

“Isn't that good?”

“Suzy, the dog was never sick.”

“Then why did you tell Frankie the dog was dying?”

“I just wanted my brother back.”

Molly

“She was walking home alone again, every day she walked home alone. She is perfect all the way through. I remember the first time I passed her by on the street, I had to get home to feed myself. It had been two weeks since my last meal and if I kept pushing it off I would've gotten that bad feeling again. I had a plate of ghetti in my hands when our paths first crossed, which I had found in my secret place. When I took my food the mean lady started yelling at me again, but this time she was seriously crazy. She was yelling louder than the lobsters my mommy used to cook in her cooking pot, she even started to run after me with a tiny metal pitchfork. I had to run, and run, and run, and run until I couldn't hear her voice anymore. When I was running I was so focused on getting home that I didn't even care about what was in front of me, I just kept running until I accidentally hit her with my shoulder. She fell, and then I fell, and even my ghetti fell. My arm really hurt, but she made it better when she checked to see how I was.

She picked up my plate for me and asked if I was “ok”. I told her that my arm felt a little funny but that her niceness made me feel alright. Then I finally got a good look at her and saw that she was the most beautiful person I have ever met. She looked like a real-life doll, she especially reminded me of the toy my cousin had when I was a kid, the Molly Candles doll.

After she helped me, she walked away, and ever since then I have been looking out for her.

Not a lot of people like to help me, and that makes me very sad. Dr. Cecilia is the only one who tries to help me anymore. I just need someone to help me be happy all the time and I think that someone could be Molly. I started calling her that because she looked so much like that Molly Candles doll my cousin had when I was little before everything became so icky and scary.

At first, I wanted to get her something nice like the necklace mommy was buried in, but I didn't have enough money for that. For months I sat and wondered what I could do to show her how much I care. I never even told Dr. Cecilia about her, I wanted to wait and see if I was really falling for Molly or not. I didn't know how to thank her for picking up my ghetti so I asked Dr. Cecilia what you get a special girl when you want to impress her. She laughed at me when I asked her that and I quickly told her to "Fuck herself". She told me that she wasn't laughing at me and that she was happy to see that I was making friends. After that, the doctor asked if Molly was my girlfriend. At first, I got a little embarrassed but after a minute I told her that she was and that I just wanted to get her something as special as she was. Dr. Cecilia laughed at me again, and it made me go a little crazy but after a minute she calmed me down. Sometimes I get a little angry, Dr. Cecilia says it's because I'm very emotional and even a little bit too caring. All I want to do is find someone who cares as much as I do. Anyways Dr. Cecilia told me if I wanted to do something special for Molly that I should get her something nice that represents our relationship. I knew just the thing to do, I had to go back to my secret place and get some ghetti!

Before I could leave the doctor asked me a very bad question, she asked me the same question she always asks me when I meet new friends and it makes me so angry. Dr. Cecilia asked me if Molly was real or not.

I got so angry when she asked me this that I walked over to her and told her "If I said she's real, she's REAL"

and she said something like, "Mike, you know sometimes your mind tricks you"

but I told her that "I AM NOT A LIAR, DO YOU THINK I'M FUCKING LYING TO YOU! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE HELPING ME BUT ALL YOU DO IS LAUGH AT ME AND CALL ME A FUCKING LIAR!"

Then she started to cry and it made me even angrier so I pushed her over and hit her and that felt really good, so I hit her again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again until she finally stopped making so much god damn noise.

When it finally got quiet I got nervous that when the doctor got up she wouldn't want to be lying on the floor in that big mess she made me make. So I picked her up, which was super hard because of all the blood all over the place and I had to drag her down into her basement, I didn't want either of her kids to see her like this. I wanted her to have some time to put her face on before she saw them. It's a really good thing that her office is on the first floor because I couldn't have made it if I had to carry her all the way downstairs from the third floor. When I looked at her face it scared me a lot. You really couldn't tell where her nose stopped and where her eyes started, she kinda looked like the house from that movie Poltergeist, that's one of the movies Mommy would let me watch before she left.

When I finally dragged her to the basement I knew she would be safe. Whenever Mommy would get mad at me or the bad people looked for me I would just go to the basement and I knew everything would be OK, just like I know Dr. Cecilia will be safe.

After I was done with my appointment I had to hurry to my secret place to make sure there was still some ghetti left, but when I got there I saw that someone had locked up my secret place. That made me so mad, it wasn't even their place BUT THEY LOCKED IT, NOT ME, THEM! It got me so mad I started to punch my secret place really hard. I was just so mad and then all of a sudden the mean lady started to yell at me again. She even started to call me mean things again. It made me really sad and I stopped hitting my secret place and even after that she still kept yelling at me over and over and OVER again! I asked her to stop but she still kept

screaming and then I started to beg her to stop yelling at me, but she wouldn't OVER AND OVER AND OVER... THE YELLING!

I was so scared so I did the only thing I could do and I started screaming back at her, but she still wouldn't stop screaming, so I started chasing her into HER secret place to see how SHE liked it! She STILL wouldn't stop screaming and while I was running after her she grabbed a blue tube thingy with a medal stick coming out of it.

After about a minute of running, she finally stopped. Then SHE started to beg ME to stop yelling, but that just made me angrier because she was being a hypocrite (Mommy taught me that word). She even made her tube thingie light fire and pointed it at me. I kept walking towards her and she burned me with the tube, that made me angrier than I have ever been in my entire life, so I grabbed the tube from her and I put the fire on her hair and it started to burn her hair and then she started screaming AGAIN. So I grabbed a bottle on the counter next to me and smashed it on her head, but when it did that the fire got bigger and started to burn every part of her and that scared me so I ran out of the door of her secret place.

After that, I made my next and final stop to go give Molly her present, I couldn't get her any ghetti, but I could give her this awesome fire tube! It's so wicked it makes you feel like a total badass when you hold it like George Nada from *'They Watch'*. I knew where she would be because I've been watching out for her for so long now that I know her schedule better than I knew my own.

Usually, she would be leaving her job at the breakfast place and walking to her apartment on Seventh Street. I stayed behind a light pole for a few hours while I waited for her to show up. I hadn't even talked to her since we met that one fateful day. I was a little disappointed that she would have to see me for the first time in so long covered in all of this blood and junk, but

maybe she would be really concerned and heal me up and make me feel all better with hugs and kisses.

After about an hour, it started to rain which at first I thought would make everything so much worse but after a minute I decided that the rain would make everything one thousand times more romantic! The rain even started to rinse the blood off my knuckles and face, it dripped down my shirt a little but I think that's a really good thing. It made it look like I was wearing a red shirt, it even blended in with Dr. Celcilia's blood.

After another hour or so the rain finally ended and thirty minutes after that Molly finally showed up. I was so excited to see her that I ran up to her from behind the street light. I jumped at her and said, "Hey there beautiful, miss me?"

All she did was jump back like she didn't recognize who I was so I told her: "Molly, it's me Mike remember we met a little while ago in the street?" but she still said nothing to me. All she did was stare at me like I was a stranger to her.

After that, she just started to scream and move away from me like I was some sort of monster. I couldn't let her leave like that, I needed a chance to show how much I cared for her so I hit her on the head with the fire tube and put her over my shoulder.

I didn't have a place of my own and I know she has a roommate so I had to bring her somewhere I knew I could be alone with her. After a bit of thinking, I figured it out. I would bring her to Dr. Cecilia's house. I could even bring her to the basement so I could have Dr. Cecilia help me with making my brain say what my heart is feeling.

So with Molly on my shoulder, I carried her all the way to Dr. Cecilia's house. When I got there I had to be very careful that I didn't make any noise so I wouldn't wake up her kids. She doesn't have a husband anymore, he died in an accident like my mommy. When I opened the

door to her basement it kind of stunk in there, it smelled like rotten eggs and fungus. It was so bad that my eyes even started to get all wet.

Even weirder than that Dr. Cecilia was still asleep in the corner that I had put her in when I left to go get Molly's present. She hadn't moved a single inch, her back was still against the corner and her head was lying on her shoulder. The weirdest part of all of it is that her eyes were open and she wasn't even snoring. At first, I thought she was staring at me but her eyes weren't even focused on me. She was looking in my direction, but it wasn't at me, it was more that she was daydreaming silently in the corner. She didn't even reply when I asked how she was.

After I was done messing around with Dr. Cecilia I had to decide what to do with Molly, so I set her down in a chair and then wrapped a bungee cord around her. Usually, when I had to use the bungee cord it was when I would help Dr. Cecilia tie a canoe to her car so she could go on her weekend trips. She would thank me for helping her and tell me that things like that were part of why I was such a special person, that I didn't just care about myself and that I could be selfless. Now I had to use the same bungee cords to be a little selfish, I needed my chance to tell Molly how I felt, and the only way to do that was to tie her down so she couldn't get away before she could have a real chance to love me.

I wanted to make our first date special so I snuck upstairs and I looked for something for us to eat. I don't actually know how to cook so I grabbed a really big box of crackers for us both to share. When I went back down to the basement Molly was finally awake, she was trying hard to say something but I knew it was now or never if I wanted her to love me as I love her. I had to tell her everything right now.

"Hi, Molly it's me Mike" is what I lead off with.

She began to get even louder, I think she was excited to see me, “I know it’s been a while since we first met but honestly, I haven’t ever got you out of my mind, usually when my mind thinks of something it gets all messy in my head, well at least that’s what Dr. Cecilia says.” After that, I pointed at Dr. Cecilia in the corner and Molly got very loud, I think she was so excited that she even started to cry!

“Ever since the first time we met I have been watching over you like your own personal Santa Claus, I see you when you’re sleeping, I know when you’re awake, I know if you’ve been bad or good so be good for goodness sake!” I thought that her picturing me as Santa might be a little funny but she got even louder than before. I was doing it and it was working perfectly!

“You know when that bad man, made you cry at the hospital well I beat him up real good for you, so he could never make you sad again. I even did the same thing to that old guy who said something that made you sad back at your apartment, and I also got rid of your old messy roommate for you”!

After that, she was making more noise than she had been making before but I was starting to get the feeling that she didn’t like all the things I did for her, so I removed her gag to see if I was just being paranoid.

“D-did you kill my dad?” she asked gently as tears began to roll down her face

“You have a dad?” I quickly responded

“I-I did b-but just after my mom died he went away, and no one has seen him”

“Your mom is dead too? When did she die?” I asked

“Yes, about two months ago” she answered

“That’s about when I got rid of that old man for you!” Molly then began to cry really hard it looked like she was really sad, but why? I had done her a favor I got rid of that mean old man.

“WHY?!” Molly shouted at me in tears

“I was doing you a favor, you ungrateful bitch, I did it because I love you! Do you think it was easy following the old man to his home, getting in through a window choking him until he couldn’t move anymore, cutting up both of his arms, then both of his legs and his head, putting them all in different bags and bringing them to the forest and throwing them in the lake. Does any of that sound easy to you?!”

“Y-y-y-you sick fuck” Molly sobbingly replied.

That made me so mad that I hit her across the face real hard and that made her even sadder so I got really scared that maybe she didn’t like me but then I remembered that I had got her a gift!

In the meantime, she had just been yelling “Help me!” over and over and over again, I knew it wouldn’t last for long so I didn’t let it make me mad.

“Molly I almost forgot I got you something very special, I wanted to get you some ghetti, but there was none in my secret place but I could find this badass tube thingie!”

“Jesus Christ, please just let me go, I won’t tell anyone what happened here I can forget everything. I won’t tell them about my roommate, my dad, my ex-boyfriend, or even that lady in the corner. I’ll forget all of it! Please just let me go I won’t say a word I swear!” Molly yelled.

“Why would I want you to forget any of this? Molly, I did all of this for us. This is the beginning of the rest of our lives.” I thought that was pretty smooth.

After I told her that she got really quiet, I think now was the time to make my move it was now or never, I went up to her chair and sat on her lap. Then I put my hand on her face and slowly moved my lips close to hers, after a few seconds they finally touched and we had our first kiss! But right after the kiss, she moved her head back and hit my nose really hard! It even

started to bleed. She quickly tried to say sorry but I had to teach her a lesson, that's not how you kiss people.

So I used the fire tube and I burned a mark into her arm to teach her a lesson: if you kiss like that ever again you get the tube. She looked really hurt after I did that but I couldn't feel too bad because I knew it was necessary.

After her punishment, I remembered we had food so we should probably eat before too long. I thought it would lighten the air if I made a joke out of it so I asked:

"Molly want a cracker?"

"Why do you keep calling me that?" Molly responded

"Because it's your name, silly." she then nodded to let me know that she understood

"Do you think we could play a game?" Molly asked

"Of course I love games" she was finally falling for me I could tell.

"Do you know how to play Hide and Seek?" Molly responded

"Yes" I answered

"Well if you untie me, I can hide while you count to ten. Then when you find me I'll find you!"

"But I don't want to seek first!"

"Well as my boyfriend, your gonna have to make a couple of sacrifices and I think it's really impressive when a man seeks out what he believes is his" Molly told me.

"Really?" I asked her, she then nodded yes.

So I untied her and told her that I was going to count to ten after I untied Molly I turned off the light in the basement so it would be even more fun. Then I put my head against the corner of the basement and counted down from ten.

“10”

“9”

“8”

“7”

“6”

“5”

“4”

“3”

“2”

“2 and a half”

2 and three qaurters”

“1”

“Ready or not, here I come!”

I used the fire tube as a light to look around the basement but I couldn't find her anywhere. She wasn't behind the boxes, she wasn't behind Dr. Cecilia, and she wasn't even under the table. I quickly threw down the tube thingy and ran outside of the house to look for her. I haven't been able to find her for a few days now. She hasn't gone to her usual places her schedule seems to be all messed up now and I'm really worried about her. That is why I am here, to file a missing person report.”

“I understand completely Mike, but before we can put that in I have a few questions for you. Is that ok?” asked the detective.

“Yes sir” mike replied eagerly.

“Do you recognize this restaurant?” the detective held up a photo of an Italian Restaurant.

“Yeah, that’s the mean ladies' secret place!” Mike responded.

“How about this building, and these three people do you recognize them?”

“Yeah, that’s Dr. Cecilia, her house, and her children” confirmed Mike.

“Do you know what happened to that home, after you left?” the detective asked.

“No sir” answered Mike.

“Well son, you left the blowtorch on active in the basement and the house caught fire, the children were asleep on the third floor and did not have a chance to escape, they perished in the fire, as for the doctor she was already dead from the beating you had given her early in the day.”

Mike then started to cry “Where’s Molly?”

“Son, you’re going away for a long time, and to be honest with you, it brings me great joy that while you suffer in that cell and you will never ever get to see that woman ever again” the detective responded.

Then suddenly, Mike charged at the detective but just as quickly as he could move the detective put two bullets through his chest. Mike lay there in a pool of his own blood wondering to himself with his last thought would all of this have happened if he was better at seeking?

The Smile of Jane Cade

“Time is a construct” was what they always said. However, to Jane, time was something much different; it was the enemy. Jane Cade, a thirty-eight-year-old dentist, had many plans that always seemed to be defeated by their expectations of her. When she was young, her father would often take her to the circus. The smell of popcorn, the sights, and spectacles always amused her. She was amazed. Watching the clowns would have her falling off the edge of her seat. Her seat, which has since become an office chair.

Her father always told her that she could do anything she wanted, and well, all she ever wanted to do was run away and join the circus. She wanted to walk the ropes, do the tricks. She wanted to amaze them, the way the circus had made her feel prior. She wanted the rush of having everyone’s eyes lasered in on her performance, captivating the masses. However, plans changed when her father passed away soon after her 12th birthday. Her mother had a different set of expectations for her future.

Jane’s mother was the daughter of a pastor and became exactly what was expected of her: a godly housewife. In fact, she had only married Jane’s father because he made a substantial living in construction and bore a striking resemblance to the Holy Savior, Jesus Christ. After his death, she came to believe her duty was to make her only child into a powerful woman to substitute for her own inability to do so.

Jane reluctantly found herself focusing on her studies rather than her showmanship. She finished every year at the top of her class, sacrificing her social life to do so. Every night, when she came home, she would go straight to her desk and bury her nose in her textbooks or bible.

Though she had vowed to never step foot in a church again due to the images depicting Jesus, a painful reminder of her deceased father.

After seven long years of bible verses and study hall, she was accepted into the University of Michigan for dentistry, where she eventually acquired her D.D.S. in the field. While at said university, she met another young woman by the name of Helena Cornell. Jane fell rather fond of Helena. She was taller than average, with auburn hair and tawny eyes. Jane found that Helena made life more exciting, worth living even, and so she made a habit of seeing her daily.

The two graduated together, and Jane would still see Helena as frequently as possible. One day, however, Helena found the company of a man. His name was Daniel, and Jane had never bothered to learn his last name as it was unimportant to her. As time went on Helena fell deeply in love with Daniel and the pair became engaged to be married. Jane was, of course, chosen to be the maid of honor. She managed to give a touching speech on the integrity of their friendship and the importance of love, all the while feeling an unbearable disgust.

A month had passed, and Jane finds herself alone in her office, as work for the day had concluded. Helena had been away on her honeymoon, and Jane finds herself feeling secluded from the world and stuck inside her own head. She begins to reminisce about her past, the days when she felt joyful and content. She remembered feeling boundless excitement when the clowns were juggling and smiling for her. She could glance to her side and see her biggest supporter, her father, who was ripped from her before she had even reached her prime. Moreover, she would know that same joy when Helena, the love of her life, would smile at her. Yet the love of her life

had fallen for another, and would forever give him a bigger, better smile than she ever would for her.

She knew she couldn't handle the emptiness she felt, the desperation and devastation. She would fix this, one way or another. Jane took the heavy steps toward her cabinet and fumbled with the key, struggling to unlock the drawer. Once open, she retrieved the syringes she had previously filled with anesthesia. She studied the fluid in the instrument and began to weep. Through her tears, she turned her eyes to a photo of her and Helena. She gazed at Helena's face, admiring her beauty, and began to recite Psalm 23:4 "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." As she finished the verse she laid back in her chair and plunged the syringe deep into her arm, pushing the plunger down to fall into sweet release. To her, it felt that by giving in to the temptation, she had freed herself from the misery that was her life, and ever so gently she drifted into unconsciousness.

Her body lay still until the next morning when she was discovered by a horrified James Roth D.D.S. He expeditiously hoisted her body over his shoulder and staggered to his vehicle. Despite his efforts to lay her gently, his hastiness left her body to slump into a lifeless position. He swiftly sped her to the Lone Oak Hospital, which despite being located five miles south of their communicative workspace, he reached in a terrifying three-minute sprint of burnt rubber and blown red lights.

He rushed her lifeless body into the emergency room, yelling desperately for someone to resuscitate the motionless cadaver he had been grasping close to him. She was promptly taken into the hospital's care, and he was left to sit, unsettled, in the waiting room. He waited quietly,

as James was a rather quiet man, not much one to speak his mind if it was unimportant. He was in his early forties, a toned man, especially for his age, who had shoulder-length blonde hair and always wore Clark Kent-style glasses. He had spoken to Jane before, but not enough to understand the severity that led her to her decision to end her life. This left him to silently ponder what could've merited such a heinous resolution.

For three long years, Jane would lay in that same hospital bed, not quite dead but not quite alive. James checked in to see her comatose body nearly every day. He felt obligated to, for he was the Prince Charming to her Aurora. He would come, sit and hold her limp hand before heading in for work. James and Jane had not had a particularly close relationship, work or otherwise, but somehow the office became gradually greyer. He began to buy a new assortment of flowers for her every Friday. After his consistent visits and musing over their past interactions he began to develop some sort of feelings for her. She could become a safe space for him. He could envisage a future for them together, and he knew he would win her over one day.

When Jane's eyes finally flickered open, they fell upon a small television, upon which was an advertisement for a political election that wasn't supposed to be happening yet. She hears the door opening and turns her head to see her coworker Dr. Roth.

"Jane?" James' eyes widened; his jaw slightly opened. He was clearly shocked

Jane opened her mouth to reply, but a doctor walked in behind James and interrupted her before she could speak, "Dr. Cade? You're awake!"

Jane scrunched her eyebrows together, "What's... happening?"

"Dr. Cade, this may be hard to come to terms with, but you've been in a coma"

Jane's lips parted and eyes welled up with tears, "Where is Helena?"

"Who? Ma'am, you've been in a coma for a very long time."

"Where is she?!" Jane yelled with tears beginning to stream down her face.

"Ma'am, you've only had one visitor..."

3 YEARS LATER

Jane wakes to find her husband Dr. James Roth gazing at her. He smiles sweetly when he playfully asks, “Are you ready for another day in paradise honey?”. The same question he would gleefully pose every morning. Jane sighed, nearly every single day had started this way in the Roth-Cade house for three years.

- James would ask, “Are you ready for another day in paradise honey?”
- Jane may sigh, but more often than not she would ignore the question
- Jane would get clean and dressed for work
- James would get bowls of cereal ready for the kids while Jane made toast for herself
- Jane would then wait for the nanny to knock on the door and make sure she had the plan for the cleaning and the kids on said morning
- Jane grabs her key card and her toast
- The two dentists would head out for the day

On their drive to work, James would speak of a new bout of absurdity each week. He always found it very entertaining, though Jane found it mildly irritating. Usually, it would be about a scene from a late-night talk show or something nonsensical a politician had blurted out. This time, however, it was a topic that James took great pleasure in babbling on about: His hair. His hair, which in the last few years had become nearly snow-white, and lay over his chest when let down. Jane’s hair, however, was only just below her collarbones. James began to laugh breathlessly at the prospect that while Jane had three years comatose for her hair to grow, he still had the longer mane.

“You’re not funny” Jane stated, rather directly.

James chuckled and rolled his eyes, “No you just don’t have a sense of humor”

Throughout the workday, James would pop into Jane’s office, whenever the opportunity arose, to continue to make remarks on her hair length. He would squeeze in as many quips and zingers as he could into those few minutes between clients. It felt to Jane that James was poking his head into her office every five minutes. During their lunch break, Jane proposed a bet. If James could go the rest of the workday without making a snark comment on their hair, then she would give him a very special surprise.

This did the trick, for the rest of the workday, James didn’t joke about her mane once. When operations had shut down for the day James walked into Jane’s office, shut the door, and locked both the top and bottom bolts. Jane was sitting at her desk completing some paperwork seeming to pay no mind at all to her husband. With a devilish grin, James declared “Another day in paradise has come to a close.”

“It has” responded Jane still writing at her desk.

“The second part of your day was rather quiet, was it not?”

“It was” Jane confirmed.

“I think somebody-”

Jane interrupted “Sit” and pointed at the dentist’s chair. James sat down and continued to grin, “make yourself comfortable”

Jane walked over to the chair and tightened restraints on both of his arms locking him in the seat. James sat back and admired his spouse from toe to tip, his grin transitioned into a banana smile. Jane pulls a wad of paper from her coat pocket and gags him with it. As she tapes over his stuffed mouth his expression quickly shifts from giddy schoolboy to increasingly

perturbed. Jane walks seductively over to her desk and lays back in her seat, she enjoyed the look on his face. He looked like a child who feared the dentist.

“So you don’t think I have a sense of humor?” She picked up the surgical mask on her desk, flashing the crimson red smile drawn on it, “I’ll have to do something about that.”, and she pulls the mask on.

James looks down at his restraints, eyes widened, trying to find a weak point when he hears a loud buzzing noise pick up. His eyes turn up towards Jane to see her holding an electric razor. She’s closer than the last time he looked up, and she inches the razor closer to him until it’s only an inch from his pupil: Nearly close enough to trim his eyelashes. He winces as much as he can.

“You weren’t supposed to save me!” She screams furiously. She then turns the razor to the crown of her head and shaves a line of hair off, “I wish it could’ve been her, but she couldn’t love me and you don’t even know me! The only one who has ever loved ME died 26 years ago! Worst of all is that you look nothing like him. But don’t worry I’m gonna fix that”

James begins to wail resoundingly but unfortunately for him, his cry for help is to an audience of one. Jane ever so calmly walked over to her husband and began to recite Psalm 23:4. First, she began to wrap a metal wire around his skull. With the first rotation, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” and then with the second time around a powerful “I will fear no evil”, then a third accompanied with “for you are with me”. This would go on until his crown of wire was completed, so tight it was splitting his skin. While Jane was perfecting his crown James had passed out from the terror.

Jane felt no shame in proceeding with her plan, which meant she must impale her husband’s palms and feet. She would do so with her medical scalpel. After making the incision to

his right hand James quickly snapped back to reality. Every time she would stab into her husband's body his howls of anguish would grow even louder. After she had finished with the second part of her surprise she told her husband that “Despite the fun, we have had tonight, I fear that our time is over.”

James began to whimper and beg, do anything he could to plead for his life. This enthralled Jane, so she began to laugh hysterically at her husband's final efforts. After a minute or two of delight and enjoyment, Jane glared her husband in the eye and stabbed him through the heart. He was dead within moments. After he left this plane of existence, Jane untied and unclothed him. She then put him in a T-pose on the floor, she then giggled at her handy work, a vision of beauty: her father. Still smirking she yelled “Another day in paradise” followed by a moment of total silence.

That silence was broken by the shrill sound of a phone call, which Jane ignored. She took a deep breath and turned her scalpel towards herself. She plunged it into her own chest without a second thought. She fell to the ground, her arm knocking the desk on the way down. Her phone fell from the edge and landed right beside her contorting face. Her eyes, fluttering open and shut, were drawn to her phone screen which was still lit and vibrating. The last words Jane Cade would ever read were a notification: 1 Missed Call Helena Lopez.

The Paranormal Encounters at St. Bernard's Church

"Please Stay, Don't Go" (Today)

The siren call of the nothingness consumes me once again, and the sweet sensation of not having to listen to the unsympathetic apologies of the lost souls of this world has begun to drive me into crisis again. The adulterers and pestilent use me as a shrink for the faithless as if one half-baked discussion will absolve them of their sins. They will never understand that you cannot petition the lord with prayer, these men and women have lost their souls long ago.

Father Henry Francis lies on a pew contently in the silence of St. Bernards Church, he looks up at the ceiling and begins to admire the marks on the maple wood strips. While his thoughts on the lack of sincerity regarding recent confessions is a problem he has been having for some time now, it is not what is really on his mind. As of the last few weeks, Father Francis has had run-ins with paranormal spirits regularly.

It began with a visit from a young man, no older than the age of 23 with bleach blonde hair, even more, peculiar to the priest was the fact that the man was dressed in a black and silver marching band uniform. The young man begged the father "Please stay, don't go". Shortly after the young man disappeared. Since this ghostly encounter, Father Francis has spent every night trying to reconnect with the spirit.

The Rat Days (1985)

When Father Francis was a younger man he didn't live the priestly lifestyle that he prides himself on nowadays. His parents perished in a car wreck early in his life robbing him of a proper childhood. He spent his formative years in the foster system and he resented the world for it. Shortly after his 18th birthday, he left his foster home to fend for himself on the streets where he could be alone, he was lost without a soul in the world to look out for him. It wasn't that he was a lonely kid, it's just the fact that he was good at being alone, all the while pushing people aside to help himself. Self-pity is what drove him, the fact that no one was there for him, that his parents were dead, and there was nothing that he could do. Being out on the streets kept him alive, and shaped him into a slim nappy-haired deviant who was more identifiable as a rat than an actual man. His time out in the wild of Hell's Kitchen stretched out from days to weeks, until one day, he looked at himself in a gas station bathroom mirror and didn't recognize the man staring back at him.

He studied his long nappy tangled mane, he looked closely at his face and noticed he could see the outlines of his skull, hell he looked like he survived mummification.

Soon after he headed toward the only building he knew would accept anyone looking for help, he found himself at the steps of St. Bernards Church...

The Phantom of St. Bernard's Church (Today)

Since the first encounter, Father Francis has spent every night the same way he finishes his final service each night around 8 o'clock, which is usually followed by two hours designated for hearing confessions. Each confession he hears drives him a little more mad than the last, yet he stays in search of those souls who genuinely need saving. After confessions, he heads into his study where he will typically shave his face and scalp, followed by eggs and a glass of whiskey. This period of time usually ranges from an hour to an hour and a half. Once he is finished with his meal he says a prayer and then heads back into the chapel. From around midnight until around 3 in the morning, he waits for the phantom of St. Bernard's church to return.

Tonight, was no different than any other night, he still heard his confessions, shaved his head, and ate his eggs. Yet for some reason, it didn't feel like a typical night for Father Francis. He felt very heavy as if all the weight of his grievances from his occupation had laid dormant over his chest until eventually crashing down in one fatal instant, and the holy man finds it incredibly hard to breathe.

It is dead silent in the walls of St. Bernard's Church. The absence of sound is only interrupted by the gasps for air from the priest lying in the pew, until a voice rings out from the back row of the chapel, "Hello? Is anybody there?"

Father Francis slowly lifts himself from the pew, "Yes, I am over here!"

The young phantom looks over at the Father and pleads "Please stay."

"I've got nowhere else to be kid" the Father sharply replies.

The silence of St. Bernard's consumes the two men for a minute, they stare directly into each other eyes, the Phantom had never stayed around for this long, and Father Francis had never had the time to notice the emerald in the young man's eye, he hadn't ever seen noticed the

medals on the jacket of the ghostly visitor. The seconds begin to feel like an eternity until the young man finally interrupts the silence,

“My name is Gerard, I am from Newark, I’ve been conducting a paranormal experiment that can help me communicate with you for the past several months what is your name?” spoke the young man,

“My name is Father Henry Francis, and I believed you are a little confused, you’ve been appearing as an apparition in this room every day for the last 4 months, I want to help you find your peace and move on.”

The Redemption of Henry Francis (1990)

It's been five years now since Henry entered the halls of St. Bernards Church, since that one fateful night he has spent every day and night in prayer, learning to have faith in himself and God.

Over the course of his time at St. Bernard, he has assumed the role of assisting Father Toro who has recently leaned on Henry to help lend a hand with sermons and services. Little did either know in the upcoming year Father Toro would be dead and Father Francis would be born.

Gerard Knight: The Young Phantom

GERARD: Father Francis, I'm not dead.

FATHER FRANCIS: Your spirit is trapped my son, you just need the help to be set free.

GERARD: Father I'm not dead, I don't need you to do anything for me I just want to talk.

FATHER FRANCIS (PANICKED): If you're not dead, then how are you here? Do you expect me to believe that I am the *Phantom of St. Bernard's Church*?

GERARD: No, I am alive and you are alive, we live in the same world but we see things a little differently.

FATHER FRANCIS: What do you mean by seeing things "a little differently"?

GERARD: So you know how there are certain things the human eyes can't see and the human nose can't smell?

FATHER FRANCIS: Like ultraviolet rays?

GERARD: Precisely, just because you can't sense these things doesn't mean that they are not there.

FATHER FRANCIS: What does that have to do with you appearing in my chapel?

GERARD: Well Father, I am actually a scientist who experiments in the paranormal and I have been practicing lowering my kinetic frequencies to discover the mysteries of the world beyond the five senses. I believed that I was entering some sort of ghost dimension but to my surprise, I have found that our realities live on top of each other. I believe that there are certain moments and conditions when organisms from my reality and your reality meet. We attribute this to cases of the paranormal, but instead, I have discovered that we are simply from separate realities.

FATHER FRANCIS (SITS DOWN ON THE PEW): So you can't be saved?

GERARD (CONFUSED): Pardon?

FATHER FRANCIS: I thought, you would be the man I could help to relieve me of my burden. All my life I was alone until I found God and all I want to do with my remaining time is help save one soul. I need them to know that they are not alone.

GERARD: Well Father, you did it. This conversation has broken milestones that shouldn't even be considered possible, I am not alone, you are not alone. You never were. (slowly Gerard fades away)

The Fate of Father Francis

All Henry Francis' life all he worried about was being alone. He searched for many years to find some company in his life, but inevitably everyone went away. He thought he could find his company in God, but the absence of a response drove him further into depression, the first time in his life he felt satisfied is when he met Gerard. Every night after that first night they would talk for hours about the worlds they live in and the realities they came from, it provided Father Francis with the clarity of knowing that he had saved someone's soul, his own.

Flavors of Eden

Is this world worth the lives it has taken?

Do you need a hug?

You look sad.

What kind of apple doomed man

To corruption, to slavery, to politics, to wealth?

What flavor was the forbidden fruit?

It was probably a macintosh.

I saw another dead boy on the news.

They said “It’s the system’s fault”

They were wrong

It was the apple’s fault.

The worst part about being cursed

Is knowing that you’re cursed.

You can acknowledge it or you can forget it.

It doesn’t bother the curse.

The curse doesn’t care,

It simply exists.

Real Dolls: A Brief Tale From a Nihilistic Phantom

The feeling of loss is something that we fear, but why is that? Is it because we are unwilling to accept the world as something that is constantly evolving, is the unknown so frightening that we cannot look beyond the objectification we convey to certain things? Is it all supposed to have a meaning, is the notion that we cannot exist solely as people in a world that spins around a ball of gas and flame only acceptable if we have control?

Ophelia was a twenty-year-old woman born and raised in Orlando, Florida. Her parents divorced when she was young and came into the world amidst a struggle between two co-dependent sides pulling at her. The constant battle took the form of wanting to be the righteous side in what can ultimately be summed up as a loveless affair that was dragged on out of a sense of obligation rather than anything that could be considered true love. Growing up, the idea of love never seemed to be that real to Ophelia - she was more occupied by the idea of survival, the ability to endure no matter the obstacles thrown at her. Money was never something she found herself having in great supply. As soon as she turned 15 she started 20+ hour weeks just to aid her well-being. She worked hard to never let someone hold her fate in their hands, she strove as diligently as possible to create the possibility that she could escape into a world where she could finally stop and take a breath, she just wanted to stop running.

She ended up graduating at the top of her class at the end of high school but chose to spend the first couple of years after to save up money working multiple full-time jobs to help her gain work experience and then pay for community college; however, after her sophomore year, everything would change. She met a charming young man who went by the name Dan.

She met Dan one late night after one of her closing shifts at a diner, the weather was so nasty that it was straight up raining sideways. Clumsy Ophelia ended up slipping and busting her

shoulder on the pavement, luckily hero Dan was there to save the day. He picked her up from the unforgiving sidewalk with a witty one-liner to spare and then brought her up to his apartment which was directly adjacent to the diner. This isn't the part of this tale in which I tell you of the horrific acts Dan committed on poor Ophelia. He was a gentleman in this particular instance, he brought her to his room and let her lie in his bed while he slept on the couch out in the living room.

After this fateful night, the two began dating. Ophelia, a young woman not too familiar with the intricacies of dating followed the gentleman Dan's lead. The young Ophelia intended on this being an arrangement of a casual nature; however, the two took it anything but slow. What started as a fateful meeting, turned into multiple hangouts, and soon evolved into sleepovers, by the time they had reached the one-month mark since their initial encounter Dan had persuaded Ophelia to move into a condo with him.

The gentleman Dan came from a family of great wealth, such wealth in fact that Daddy and Mommy were willing to share with the youthful Dan. The young man had heard of this community of condos from the grapevine of gents from his private school growing up and a great many of them had already lived there.

The community itself was a lovely little suburban paradise with several young couples, it was the stepping stone to a life of blissful mediocrity. All of the inhabitants were future CEOs, bank owners, and yuppies, and each had their carefully curated wives. The community had all the foundations of a truly sensational array of luxuries from a full-size tennis court, to an enormous playground, a resort-like pool, and even a tiki bar!

When the young couple first moved in, Dan made an arrangement that Ophelia didn't have to work. Instead, she could stay at the condo for the first few months and focus on her

online schooling while he went to work for his parents. Young Ophelia decided to find ways to occupy her time while the gentleman Dan was away at work. She started by rearranging the interior of the condo to make it feel more like a home, she started moving pictures and tables in a way that felt more pleasing to the aesthetic of the home. She started jogging around the neighborhood and even made friends while she was out, by the time she would get back home she would just instinctively start making herself something to eat. Around this time Dan would get home from work and find she had made nothing for him. The first time this happened he shrugged it off. As this became a regular occurrence he grew more and more frustrated demanding that she was obligated to prepare his food in return for his rescuing her from poverty and giving her this perfect life.

While it didn't happen immediately, eventually Ophelia began to adjust to the mindset that she couldn't just do things for herself, she needed to have Dan's best interest in the forefront of her mind as well.

As the months began to pass by she began to find that the days would go by so much slower than they use to, she would find herself sitting alone in the condo waiting for Dan to return from work. The independence that once made her resilient had slowly been worn away until she was sitting in the heart of a loveless relationship. She began to notice that she couldn't remember any of the things that made her special. Was she special? Is anyone special? Why do we live in a society that is constantly built on the sentiment that everyone should get a prize? Nothing in her world is real. She was living in a prison furnished by the good folks at IKEA. Her sanity was leaving and her body was becoming numb, sentences would start and then continue into oblivion. On her jogs she began to notice that all of the women she would run with are the same, women with the same lack of taste, the same absence of thought, and most strange of all

the same incredibly active sex life. All of these women that she once called her friends had lost the charm that made them unique; they had fallen into the spell of mediocrity that she had found herself living in.

When she had pressed the gentleman Dan on this he asked her if she wanted to move, yet the young Ophelia declined; she knew that the condo wasn't the issue. She also knew what Dan would never, could never know. That even though they were living in a dollhouse the house wasn't the problem, it was the fact that she was becoming a doll herself. She felt as if she couldn't leave Dan for he was not the problem he was a gentleman. The walls were caving in and she couldn't save herself from life as a doll, all she could do was sit there and smile.

Poor Ophelia couldn't ever find a way to escape the prison that she and the gentleman Dan made themselves a home in and after three years of living in the shell of what used to be her body Ophelia finally broke free. In her final moments, she thought about the life that she had and dreamt of what could've been done differently and how this could've been avoided, her body was found in the bathtub of their beautiful condo with her wrists slit.

Dan was heartbroken and swore that he would never love again, as we all know life is long (for some people) and he would end up going back on his word. He would meet another woman and they would end up living in the same condo. It would be years later until Dan would finally move out of the condo, in the process his wife would find a hidden letter taped under the bathtub the letter said the following: "HE'S THE FUCKING PROBLEM GET OUT WHILE YOU STILL CAN AND INVEST IN A PAIR OF RAINBOOTS YOU STUPID FUCK! -xoxo Ophelia".

Under the Lilac Tree

The Pusher

The worst part of losing something important to you is that it becomes so hard to imagine what life was like before you had it. It's been three years since Julia passed and I still feel no closer to finding what made life worth living before her. I hadn't always been with her; I had flings and lady friends alike before her. Still the day I met her I knew she was the one.

Even though my vessel is still breathing and my heart is still beating, I died the day I buried her.

We met on a cool Pennsylvanian autumn night, at the time I was trying my hand in sales working as a door-to-door Bible salesman. I wasn't a religious man mind you, but I was a damn good salesman. The boys back in the head office always joked that I was such a good salesman I could sell salt to a snail and convince *the snail* it wasn't living dangerously enough! I wasn't just good, I was great... and I always sought a challenge. On this particular fall day, I had decided my challenge was to go to a local music shindig and sell as many bibles as I could carry.

The shindig was at a nearby club called *The Mojo Pin*. It was a newer establishment that held shows for local bands of all genres. I would often find myself stopping by when I was looking for a hookup; however, that was for leisure and on that day it was all business. On this particular evening, there would be a couple of different bands playing. The opening band, whose name I can't remember for the life of me, was more of an artsy band. The second band was as forgettable as the first, but the third band was absolutely spectacular. They called themselves *The Flamerunners*. Although I had never heard of them, the band caught my ear and never let go. The group consisted of four members: a heavyset man on the bass, a young Asian woman on drums, a slim kid with long nappy hair on guitar, and the most spectacularly beautiful woman I

had ever seen on vocals. She appeared to be in her early 20s, close to my age, her hair was wavy yet still only to her shoulders, her eyes were so blue they could pierce the hearts of the coldest diamonds in the cave of darkness, and her skin was snow white, perfectly untouched by a scar or freckle. As for the band itself, the instrumentals weren't anything original; they sounded like any band of the era. The bass and the drums gave the band a heartbeat that was kept alive by the tantalizing sound of the soulful guitar. The band was solid, but the vocals transcended mortal limitations. The only literary comparison I could make was the enticing siren call that lured sailors to their deaths in Homer's Odyssey.

They were so good that it forced me to cease my business for the night so I could meet that woman. After the show, I rushed to the back of the club in the hopes of meeting her, and yet, when I got backstage, I could only find other members of the band. She was nowhere in sight. Her guitarist had told me they would not be in town very long for they had just signed a deal with a major label, and would be moving to Los Angeles by the end of the week.

I looked around the town endlessly for her. Even if I could only speak to her for a moment, my life would feel as if it was finally complete. I went to every club, every park, and every bar, and still had no luck in finding her.

After an entire wasted night of searching, I walked through the town cemetery at the break of dawn. While strolling the ghostly ground, I got a feeling of optimism that I had never known before. I looked up to the sky and saw the sun rising over an enchanting light purple tree; I had to sit down to fully admire the moment. Just as I began to accept my wasted night a voice spoke up, "Beautiful, isn't it?" To the left of me was the woman I had spent so many hours trying to find, yet I didn't have the words to tell her how much I adored her. All I could do was turn and look into her soulful eyes. She seemed to be at complete peace with herself and her surroundings.

“Have you ever heard the story of the lilac tree?” she asked me.

“I don’t believe I have,” I retorted hastily.

“Well, it’s said that the Lilac tree holds special power, it can make you see anything you want to see, make you be who you want to be,” she said.

“Who do you want to be?” I asked gently.

“You know it’s funny if you would’ve asked me yesterday I would have told you I wanted to be a rockstar like Lennon or McCartney, but at this very moment I couldn’t tell you,” she said.

“Well, why’s that?” I replied.

“It all seems so exhausting, working day and night, constantly making new music, going to a new city every day, seeing the same streets with different names. I don’t think I can do it. All I have ever wanted is to find some sort of love. I thought I found it with music, but it just doesn’t feel right, ya know?” was her response.

I could see that despite her mystical appearance, she was just as lost as the rest of us. No better, no worse.

I told her, “The way I look at it is the only thing you can do is fill your life with as much love as you can. I can’t tell you that living the rock and roll lifestyle is what you need to give your life purpose because I think ultimately there is no purpose to life. I believe that when we are born we aren’t given enough time to do something truly meaningful. All we can do is live until we can’t live anymore. If you feel as if living on the road wouldn’t allow you to live all the perks mortality has to offer, now is the time to do something about it.”

After I said that we sat in silence for a few moments, almost as if this was the first time we could genuinely enjoy the sweet bliss of the sunrise. he inevitably broke the silence, “Here is what I’m going to do. I am going to let the Lilac tree decide my fate.”

“How so?” I asked.

“I am going to roll up some of those roots and smoke it,” she replied.

I chuckled, “You’re kidding.”

“Serious as a heart attack,” was her response. She proceeded to stand up, walk over to the tree, tear at its roots, ground the roots down, mixed the rooted remains with another herb she had in her pocket, rolled it into a joint, and smoked it.

While she smoked the joint, neither of us said a word. She sat on the ground next to the tree with her eyes closed with the joint in her hand. I didn’t smoke any of it but just waited patiently to see what she was going to do.

After about an hour of silence, her eyes cracked open, and she proclaimed, “I am quitting the band, you and I will get married right here by the lilac tree, and one day we will both be buried under this same tree.”

That day she ended up quitting the band and on that same day, we got married in the exact place we met, by the lilac tree. Despite our sudden and unexpected marriage, we spent seven wonderful years together. In those years we purchased the cemetery and made it not just a place of death, but one of love and music. We, of course, held funerals, but we also held concerts, birthdays, bar/bat mitzvahs, weddings, and even festivals.

Around our sixth year together we were given the news that she had stage three breast cancer. Our time together was even more limited than we once thought. We would never have children and never celebrate ten years of marriage. It seemed cruel. Despite the fact that she was

dying, little by little each day, she never seemed angry or upset about her situation. She would tell me, “Our journey was always meant to be a footnote on the book of humanity. As long as we spend this time together it will never be time wasted”.

On the dawn of our seventh anniversary, she looked out the window of our home at the lilac tree and told me, “It is time.” She gave me one last kiss and then closed her eyes. All the pain that she had felt had finally been released from its sinister grip. She was free.

My Sweetheart the Drunk

Today I find myself staring at this tree in anguish because the love that I felt ten years ago hasn't left me, it has only grown stronger. I hate that there is nothing I can do. I so badly want to go destroy that tree. I want to grab an axe and smash it into splinters. I could burn it and let the smoke that hazes my heart be set free into the dead of the night.

I can not take this pain any longer. Should I just submit to my grief and leave the world now on my own terms? I cannot stand another day without her. Everything feels so meaningless. Life without love isn't worth living.

I walk to the lilac tree and dig my fingers into the ground and pull up its roots, I tear them out and I begin to study them. The roots look no different than any other plant I have ever seen, yet they are still supposed to have this magical quality. Then it hit me. If all those years ago Julia could see what she wanted to see maybe I could do the same.

I then brought the roots inside and blended them into a fine wine that I had made with Julia years ago. The first sip I took was out of the bottle, I felt nothing, and most importantly I saw nothing. There was nothing the tree could offer me, the only thing left for me to do was numb the pain with the wine. I drank every drop, leaving me incredibly inebriated. I walked around the house that we once shared, aimlessly looking for something to ease the pain. I decided the only way to cure myself of the pain was to cure the world of myself. I grabbed a rope that I had in the attic and tied it around the ceiling fan.

Just before I could tie the noose around my neck I heard a voice, "What are you doing, you foolish man?" I looked up and standing before me was my dearly beloved. I began to weep uncontrollably,

"Julia, I can't do it."

“Can’t do what?”

“Go on another day without you. Everywhere I go I’m reminded of you, and without you, I’m just not strong enough to go on.” She helped me off the stool I was standing on and told me, “You need to move forward. Our journey was great, every moment spent together was perfection, but you still have time to do more wonderful things in your life.”

I cried, “I don’t want to do anything if I can’t do it with you”.

The room stood silent. She looked exactly like she did the day we met, perfect in every way. I had almost forgotten how beautiful she was. Just looking at her brought tears to my eyes. She broke the silence, “You need to leave this place.”

“Never,” I fired back.

“Why not?” she asked.

I responded, “Everything we have is here,”

She said, “But I’m not here!”

“Yes, you are, you’re under that tree and I will never leave your side,” I replied. And then I heard, “Jackson, listen to me...”, but before she could finish the thought she began to vanish until she was once again gone.

Though our time together was short, it gave me more hope than I had had in the three years since her death. I realized I had to make more of the wine if I wanted to see her again. There was nothing that was going to stop me from doing that.

2 Months Later

Every second of sobriety is full of pain since I discovered the true power of the lilac tree. I have spent every night drinking the delicious nectar it offers in its roots.

After the first night, I saw my wife I had to work as diligently as possible to replicate the process that summons her soul from the beyond. Initially, I thought her image was simply the result of a drunken hallucination. So the next night I drank accordingly, but to my dismay, the only thing that happened was I found myself still alone in the home we once shared. The day after that, I came to the realization that it was the power of the lilac tree that allowed me to see my betrothed. In order to see Julia again, I had to make the wine every night. Each time I did so I saw her again, but she seems to be growing more distant. After the first night she appeared, we would have conversations about the cemetery, the town, everything, but as of late she doesn't seem to have anything to say.

Daily Routine

1. Wake up (usually on the floor) and feel sobriety slowly and painfully eclipsing my soul
2. Do work around the cemetery
3. At lunchtime walk to a local drug store and purchase the cheapest bottle of wine available
4. Go back to work
5. At the end of the day tear some roots out of the lilac tree
6. Grind the roots into the wine
7. Drink until Julia reappears

Last Goodbye

This morning started no differently than any other morning, but for some reason, I felt incredibly uneasy. One could argue that would be due to the considerable quantity of wine I've been drinking, but I feel confident in my ability to maintain myself when I drink. Nevertheless, something was wrong. I could feel the dread of death's shadow over me. Death had become a kind acquaintance of mine. Ever since I moved into the cemetery, he had provided me with most of my customers, yet I still loathed him for taking Julia before me. Maybe this was the feeling she had before her early departure from this mortal plane. Was this feeling just me discovering that my time had finally come?

Today was no day to work. Today was a day to celebrate. Accordingly, I blew off work. On my way to the drugstore, I felt a level of pleasure I don't believe I've had in quite some time. The knowledge that my suffering would soon be over brought tears to my eyes.

For this occasion, I would need the finest bottle of wine this Pennsylvanian town had to offer. I decided to go to a local Italian restaurant, *Mama's*, and order a fine chardonnay imported from Venice. The woman who owned the shop had been born in Italy and was raised to work in a wine vineyard. However, when WW2 struck havoc on Europe, she and her family quickly evacuated the continent in fear of what Mussolini would bring down upon their beloved home.

Years ago, Julia and I helped her when she was dealing with the loss of her oldest son. He had gone to Vietnam and, tragically, never come home. When she first saw me entering the restaurant, her face lit with excitement but was then washed over with a look of worry. "Jackson, how are you doing?" she asked me quite sincerely. I responded, "Couldn't be better Mrs. Morosini. How's the family doing?"

“Would you like something to eat? It looks like you haven’t taken a bite of anything in weeks and that is no good,” she retorted

“No, no I’m not hungry, but thank you for the offer. I was actually in the neighborhood to say if I could get one of your delicious bottles of wine,” I replied. She waited a moment to respond, the middle-aged Italian woman checked me up and down, waited a moment, and stared into my eyes, “I think I might just have something for you, on the house.”

I said, “Mrs. Morosini, let me pay. I insist.”

No, my boy I insist, I want your last bottle to be a good one,” she said somberly. “I’ve seen those eyes before. Just after my father died, my mother had those eyes. Without my father, she had lost her amore, she had lost herself. The day I saw that look in the eyes of my mother is the day she died. Just let Julia know I say hello.” She gently put the bottle in my hand, and I left soon after to return home.

As I walked inside the home we once shared I felt as if I could almost hear the patter of death’s feet. I knew my time had come, but I wasn’t quite ready to die yet. I have to see Julia before I take the leap into that void. With a sense of urgency, I used the last grinds of the lilac roots and blended them into Morosini’s wine. Usually, when I drank, I took time to taste the wine and admire the power of the roots, however, this was no time to dawdle. Death was moving closer with every given moment and I knew time was of the utmost importance. In compliance with my time restrictions, I chugged the potion down and hastily awaited the appearance of my phantom bride.

The room sat silent for a few moments. I sat on the floor in utter terror that the Grim Reaper would appear before I could talk to Julia. Suddenly a figure finally appeared and spoke...

JULIA: Jackson why do you keep doing this to yourself?

JACKSON: I do it for you, I do it all for you. The only time my life is worth living is when you're in it.

JULIA: I can't bear to look at you like this, you need help, Jackson! The time we spent together was wonderful, but that doesn't mean nothing else can be good. You need to move on!

JACKSON: Well it looks like the time to change has come and gone, I'm dying Julia. I can feel death's grip reaching close to my soul.

JULIA: No, there is still time to change the road you're on. Nothing is set in stone unless you are the one hammering. THERE IS STILL TIME!

JACKSON: But you didn't get time to change anything. You were cursed to die young. When we married the curse was intertwined with my soul. When you died I was always destined to rot from the inside out, just like you are rotting outside under that godforsaken tree.

JULIA: I wasn't cursed, Jackson, I was blessed. The day we met under the tree when I used its power to see into our future, it didn't just show me the good things it showed me everything. I knew that I was going to die, but I knew that there was nothing that was going to stop me from living the life I wanted to live. A life with you, here in the cemetery, a place where we would both figuratively and literally build our home, bringing light and goodness to a realm of such darkness. When I look at you now, I finally begin to question if this life was the right choice. You let the darkness consume your once beautiful aura, when I look at you I don't see the man I fell in love with, I see his ghost. *(She then suddenly disappears, now only one ghost remains in the room.)*

This isn't how I'm going to say goodbye to my wife, I need another chance to tell her how much she means to me, this can't be it. I quickly rush to the kitchen to see if I have any unopened bottle of wine, something I can blend with the roots to get a final goodbye. Yet in the

haste of scouring through my kitchen the thought that this bottle of wine will be the final nail in the coffin. I searched through the cupboards, closets, everything, until finally when I had thought all hope was lost, I discovered a bottle under my living room couch. The couch was directed straight at the balcony window facing the lilac tree. It seemed only fitting I would find my last drink there of all places.

I bolted out the front door to retrieve the roots necessary to make my fatal cocktail complete. My feet seemed to be heavier than my body which was becoming very hard to control. Every step seemed to get heavier until I finally collapsed at the tree.

I sat down on the ground staring up at the tree admiring the power it held and the gifts it would soon bring me. I began to notice little things on the tree I hadn't seen for what felt like lifetimes, the beauty of the gentle lilacs and the paleness of its bark. While sitting there I heard the crunch of a leaf, but I could not tell from what direction. I don't see anyone around me and I am beginning to fear that death has finally come. He has come too soon, I can't go yet, I need to speak to Julia one more time, please I just need a little more time. Then suddenly I heard another step from behind me. As I slowly turned my head in fear I accepted that the power of death's will overpowered that of my mortality. Finally, I locked my eyes on the one who had been steadily creeping up on me, yet it was not the Grim Reaper. Instead, it was a small husky that could not have been more than a few months old, and he trembled in fear of his surroundings. It appears to me that he has found himself all alone in a world that he does not know. His eyes are so innocent and scared. They are a sort of blue I haven't seen in some time, so blue they pierced through the soul of the undead.

I begin to approach him, and he permits me to pick him up. I whisper to him, "I will call you Mojo. The name means a great deal to me because it's a tribute to the place where I met an

amazing friend.” With the pup in one arm and an open bottle of wine in the other, I walked over to the lilac tree, poured the bottle out onto the roots of the tree, and said, “Every moment I spent with you was the best in my life, and I know that time is over now. I’m going to do my best to become the man you fell in love with. Goodbye, Julia, I will love you always”.

Now with Mojo in my arms, for the first time in three years, I walk towards a new day. A day without grief, a day filled with hope, and, most difficult of all, my first day without my beloved Julia.