

[/lit/ writing competition; February 2025; organized by yodo !cLLpbu6HI

Theme Requirement: The work must explore the boundaries between reality and illusion.

Character Requirement: The work must feature a female character who is an unreliable narrator.]

THE MYTH OF THE MACHINE  
Giovanni Drogo

I felt it first as a slackening in my pelvic floor. Waves of dissipated tension radiating from what felt like the bottom of my spine. Taillights started streaking in front of me, leaving long red trails that swirled into a tunnel. Nothing I hadn't seen before . . . but I knew I at this point I may have misjudged my dosage.

You were on drugs?

Yes sir, but really, it was nothing I couldn't handle. Since I was on the road, I didn't have a scale on hand. So, I eye-balled it, and went a little overboard. But you have to understand I was only trying to break up the monotony. And the messages were clear. I was only supposed to be in Ohio for two months, working on the lithography installations. I got extended to four months. I was working the nightshift, twelve hours a night. Very little human contact that wasn't behind a faceless cleanroom suit . . . I was living in a world of white silhouettes. Intel had a lot riding on the mega-fab. With all of the tension around Taiwan, TSMC was in a weak position and Intel needed to prove they were capable of operating a foundry. Apple and Google had already signed contracts. Chip production was shifting back to the states and everyone was desperate to meet the demand. So, Kumagaya-Yoshimi Semiconductor—my company—extended all of the work contracts for us technicians, and authorized unlimited overtime. I was working seven nights a week. It was by choice. I could have stuck to the normal four on, four off schedule, but what can I say? I was compelled to work.

Was it normal for a field technician to work seven nights a week?

It wasn't unheard of. Especially on shorter one-month assignments. Guys like to make the travel worth the money. If you aren't working overtime, the only extra pay you're getting is in per diem. But I wasn't doing it for the money. I only wanted to work. To exercise moral discipline through a total acquiescence to the banality of ritual and labor. It was going well for the first two months. I was comfortably in my routine. Fixing the machines all night. Spending all night with the machines in the humming air, under the yellow lights. I lost myself. I felt a flattening of my potentiality. The Machine is old . . . you do realize this? It has had thousands of years to perfect the incorporation of fresh components. It knows all the tricks to virtually lobotomize people. This mega-fab was only one manifestation of The Machine. The pyramids were built by The Machine . . . not to mention pre-historic social structures. It's an entity, and I started to become aware of its malevolent components. How it automatizes people. How it grinds them down until they are as smooth as a mirror. The cleanroom at the Ohio fab is one mile long and one half a mile wide. The space is unbroken by walls. Rows of machines stretch down the open space and seem to curve down at the horizon. There is one strip of aluminum flooring splitting the cleanroom down the middle. Technicians in white jumpsuits are always scurrying up and down this silver strip before turning off down one of the countless rows of machines. It can be disorienting. The ceilings are thirty feet high and covered with crisscrossing tracks that carry thousands of robots. These robots carry the wafers between the different machines. Photolithography is only one step in the process, you see. Each wafer is carried to dozens of machines that perform their own specialized tasks. The robots never leave the ceiling; they unfurl thirty-foot elastic tongues down to the machines and retract the wafer-boxes back to the ceiling before zipping away. Each robot is labeled with a number, and yes, I was being delivered messages via those numbers.

Ok, Ruby, could you tell us again exactly how these robots were sending you messages? When did you first start to receive them?

I've already explained it to the police officer.

Yes, I understand Ruby. I just want us all to be on the same page. Were these messages coming from 'The Machine'?

No, I don't think you do understand. There needed to be a balance, a correction. Of course the messages were from The Machine, but it was only operating in everyone's best interest. What will be left in the world when we are eclipsed totally by The Machine and lose all subjective contribution? We have become over-domesticated. It is a process The Machine has been overseeing since the first neolithic caveman sat down and started scraping flint rocks together—and here I am today, essentially doing the same thing; patiently applying myself to monotonous work, simple motions, advancing slowly, almost imperceptibly . . . it is ritual pushed almost beyond human endurance. Now, this isn't to say work is all bad. Ritual regularity and repetition help man control chaotic outpourings of the unconscious, but like I said, it's about balance. And The Machine is sensitive to this. So, I was chosen as a vessel for the correction. All night long I would sit with my machine, caressing it, listening to it, and I would watch the robots going by overhead. I started to recognize patterns in the sequences. Certain series of numbers would pass in regular intervals. I began to record them in my notebook at the start of my third month in the fab, and by the end of the month I understood what was expected of me.

And what was The Machine asking you to do?

To restore balance, of course. To stop production. To contaminate the system. A significant enough delay in the production cycle would bankrupt the company and many of the contractors. It would have a global impact. Really, it was The Machine self-flagellating. It isn't all malevolence. It works in ways we can't comprehend. But the messages were clear enough to me. I only needed to introduce impurity into the system. Copper has special properties that allow it to easily diffuse through silicon. It is used in many processes during chip manufacturing, but needs to be closely monitored and controlled to avoid contamination. Putting a copper wafer into a non-copper machine will lead to millions in damages and repairs and lost profits. Putting copper into the air itself would be catastrophic. The Ohio fab was sacrificing itself. So, I needed copper powder. The Machine wanted to breathe copper into the cleanroom. You can buy all of the raw material at any hardware store. It's a simple reaction between copper chloride and iron. I filled my bathtub with the copper chloride and a bucket of nails. The reaction generates a lot of heat so I added a few gallons of water to slow it down, too. After a few days of processing the copper powder I had enough to fill my backpack. I wasn't getting much sleep at the time. I had to do all of this work in the twelve-hour intervals between shifts.

I see . . . and what did you do next?

I did what I was told to do. All environmental variables are tightly controlled in a cleanroom. The air inside the fab is extremely pure. There are less than ten particles per cubic meter of air. A room like this one we are in now has millions of particles per cubic meter. All I needed to do was introduce the impurity into the ducts after the filtration system. It was easy. There isn't much security during the day and there is even less at night. People don't ask questions. The air in the fab moves from the top down, cycling through the cleanroom and then through the perforated floor tiles to the sub-fab before being exchanged for fresh air. I took my bag of copper dust and walked along the catwalk at the top of the cleanroom, amongst the robots, stopping to pour copper dust into every duct that was pushing air. And soon the white metal in the fab was coated rusty orange. It was everywhere. Alarms started blaring from thousands of machines. They were screaming for help. They were dying. Every screen had an error message. White silhouettes on the silver highway were running between machines. I sat on the catwalk and watched the robots flying by, and The Machine spoke to me as it died, saying it would be reborn.

Does the machine still talk to you, Ruby?

Yes, of course. This interview is a part of the correction. Talk to me and know thyself, Machine.

-the end-

[END OF 'The Myth of the Machine' BY GiovanniDrogo]

THE TOWN  
Hogan

At the end of the world it is always hot. God promised the next time He destroyed the world he would do it by fire, but I have never seen a naked flame. We have nothing to burn, only things to lose - in this land without wood there are dilapidated buildings made from log and timber. The only thing burning I can see is the sun above, dominating an empty sky day after day, casting endless heat upon the vast and empty plains below.

It's why I'm usually inside, and there are a lot of options in this town. Sheds, houses, and storehouses are scattered across the plain in a general clumping, before the marks of civilisation ebb away into the dry beyond. Some parts are made from brick, including the watchtower. When we're finished we like to climb its winding stone stairs and look out over the plain; the empty land that stretches on and on while colour fades from the sky. She keeps a lamp for the way back down.

Some days I don't know where she goes or what she does and it feels like I'm alone on this planet, but she's always nestled away somewhere. There's nowhere else to go; nothing out there to hunt or find. We like to make use of the full range of abandoned buildings in this town; the Mayor used to live where we sleep - I wish I could remember his face.

I have had a lot of trouble with my head since the accident. I'm sure I was born here, although I cannot remember the house - I only know which one it is because Rose told me it held my things. My mother died in childbirth and my father died before the end of the end, and I know these things because they have their own graves. The town buried them in plots marked by crossed stakes in the ground, themselves symbols of the lost art of stonemasonry. Rose had come to town shortly before my accident.

They interrogated and feared her, and those who minded our stores loathed her. With her stories the town leaders debated whether to send an expedition outward - if Rose had walked here then clearly people lived elsewhere; it never went because nobody figured out a way to transport food. These things I remember in patches and flashes that come sometimes, among them my father's excitement for a world that carried on outside, as well as the first time I saw Rose.

When I woke up much had gone. Her soft white face lingered over mine and a cool, uncalloused hand touched my head. I blinked open slowly with a powerful headache, aggravated by her joyful sputtering.  
"What happened?"

"You've been asleep for a few days," she said, and then she sobered. "Something has happened."

There is no doubt the building I spend the most time in is the Library, although it was not built for such things. I have seen from a note on a book inside it belonged to David, who left behind swathes of neatly ordered literature when he died. Here remains the total work of every major contributor to world literature, at my fingertips, because what remains here is all that there is of world literature. If there's somebody missing, well, I've never heard of him - and who is there to tell me otherwise?

When I'm done reading I leave the Library and go to the Sanctuary, the only place where she is not to come and visit. My work lives there, and perhaps some books I've taken with me piled up in the corner. Stored in the drawers below is what she found after the end came - two enormous piles of blank paper and a single black pen. I double-side every page and write in handwriting so small my palm aches, with the fear that my pen, encased in white plastic so I can't see the cartridge below, will run dry.

Reading great literature is essential to writing great literature. She doesn't understand that; sometimes she thinks I'm plagiarising. She doesn't read anything but she listens to the poems I write, and sometimes I disguise the poems and stories of others because I know she'll like it or I want to see what she thinks; my only misjudgement was when I read out the Revelation. Those stories are mine alone, and I have worried about what will happen to them when I die.

Death used to worry me more. Despite the confusion my waking day had chilled my blood with dread. She guided me through ghost streets, the only inhabitant on the earth, holding my hand and talking slowly and asking me questions to work out what I could remember and what I couldn't.

"My father ..." I said, "yes. I remember," although the only thing that sticks out in my mind around his death is a crowd of people surrounding a hole in the earth. Rose had to tell me how he died.

"But what about everyone else?" I cried, the lots of houses overwhelming me by their emptiness. "What happened?!"

She took a deep breath and narrated. "Another woman arrived two days after your father died. She was talking to the Mayor on the edge of town when you fell. That night we'd done everything we could for you and now we had to wait, and everyone except me came to see the new woman. Things were exciting again. She'd come in a different direction from me, and people were sure there had to be more out there.

"Everybody died of plague over the next two days. That woman did first, she wilted in the sun complaining of a fever, and then it seemed everyone was sick. I wouldn't let anyone in to see you because we couldn't feed you anyway. I sat with you for four days, and when I came out everyone was gone."

Her voice had become soft and reflective and I knew her feeling was fragile, but I was too overwhelmed to speak. I rubbed my eyes. We had already gone inside some buildings, and I saw even the corpses were taken away.

"I buried everybody in a big ditch out past the watchtower," she answered. "You woke up that evening. When I left you to sleep I went and laid down and wept like I've never done in my life."

We built our routines from there, until one morning a long time after we went out to admire the plain. I looked sideways at her, shoulder to shoulder in the shadow of the watchtower.

"What are you doing today Sam?"

"I think I'm going to skip the reading."

She made a noise.

"I'm feeling inspired," I replied. "I don't know. What about you?"

"Oh, I've got some preparation to do," she said. "I'll be home when you get there. Love you."

Then she kissed me on the cheek and turned. I watched her go and then I went too, along an unusual path; I wanted to walk past that other building which stimulates me so much - the church.

The church was built on another planet. It is taller than the watchtower because its stone spires reach up into the sky, shaped and moulded by artisan hands whose craft has been lost with their names. It stands with coloured glass still in its walls and has a fine green carpet within. Upon its altar long ago I found the last Bible in the world rested open, the epistles of Paul sounding out without audience. I remember when I brought it out and stored it in the Library, Rose cried out with surprise as if she'd been burned.

I feel that after me and Rose, the church is the next-closest living thing in the village. I was drawn in by its energy, where an enormous cross stood over pew and after pew and decay waited, even though the church had been abandoned before the plague. Only one person had ever gone in there - Mojo - an emaciated man with knotted and shaggy brown hair who lived there alone. I don't know anything more about him, but my memories of him are from before my fall.

I found his body that morning, laid on its back and with his arm across his stomach and wide open eyes. He was not killed by plague; Mojo was starved to death. I paced around the church and found two more - nobody bore sign of cannibalisation. I turned and hurried through the church doors with the feeling these were a people under siege.

I sat in the Sanctuary for hours to think about it, and did not write for the rest of the day. It was on my mind when I walked home. Rose was bringing things to the table when I came in. I kissed her and following the niceties I asked:

"Have you ever been in the church?"

She glanced up at me, and her face had not changed a whit. "No. Why?"

"You've never been in there before?"

"I guess not. Why? Is there something in there?"

I stopped and thought. "No. Not really."

Though our house was hot and decaying she was warm and soft, the softest thing left in the world. And when she saw me she smiled and kissed me, and asked questions about my day, about my work. And I stopped and thought that tomorrow, tomorrow, and all days after would look much like the days before - reading in the morning, writing in the afternoon, hot supper and love in the watchtower in the evening.

I remembered what she promised that day I woke up, that she would take care of me. I looked into her eyes and she smiled, and glanced down at the table. I saw two tall glasses of fresh water, the cold still visible on the glass.

"Look," she said. "Meat for dinner."

I put Mojo and the plague from my mind. I believe everything she tells me.

[END OF 'The Town' BY Hogan]

I swear I saw the breath leave his body.  
meteor

I swear I saw the breath leave his body.

The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. Why is it impossible for me to see the breath leave? There is a soul.

I wanted to name my grandson after a saint. I sometimes wander into the grocery store and steal the passion flowers

for him, but I don't remember where his grave is. So I place them at a park bench near my house. Once I tried to plant them beneath the shade of a hickory tree but it was very late at night and I was caught by a police officer. He turned off his flashlight and took me by the hand and gently asked me if I wanted to go home. I said I don't have a home anymore. I ventured to feel his clean shaven face, and I wanted to tell him he reminded me of my son. I was touched by his kindness, and I'm sorry to say that I wept.

Most of the time I am high or drunk. I didn't tell the officer this but I'm sure he understood my bloodshot eyes. Why didn't he take me in? Is it because I am old and not good for anything anymore?

I write letters beneath a pull switch bulb in the old abandoned gas station beneath the ramp. I write such beautiful letters. My penmanship is flawless. My prose is level and lyrical, and sometimes it even convinces me of absolution. In the letters I deglove my soul, and I end them with I'm sorry, son. I'm so sorry.

In addiction, there is the temporary suspension of the quotidian, but that is ancillary. It's nearly orthogonal to what addiction truly is: a narrowing of being, a life in a tunnel or in the gullet of a snake, looped into itself, consuming itself.

"Let's go back," says the officer. "It's OK," he says. His voice is fragile and it frightens me.

I want to get out of the car. But I don't want to be rude, and my hands are shaking. There's a liquor bottle in my coat's pocket but I don't want to take it out in front of him. I'm ashamed to do that in front of this nice, polite officer who looks so much like my son who will never forgive me.

There are monsters in my past. My father. My husband. I can remember beatings so savage that I'm certain I have died in them and what I am now is someone else altogether.

But I drink to excess in order to remember my grandson. Because in the bottled dream I can touch his face and know it again uncorrugated by burning water. I can unhear the scream and return the pale smoothness to his palm.

The officer's eyes are in the rearview mirror. There are little tears in them, of pity or of sympathy, but I hope he will drop me off at the shelter. I don't recognize these roads, but for me, such details are difficult to order and keep apart. I have to be careful in my reminiscences, not to wander into dark chasms by a coincidence of association.

I don't want to be in this car. I don't want to look at those eyes. I feel the terrible patience we had to endure as they wrapped the child with bandages. Why? my son wanted to know. Just that. Not that I was making tea. Not that I had put him to sleep. Not that I was sure I had set a kitchen timer that would wake me up. Why? His wife was muted, white with horror at what life lay now before them, her hands clasped too tight even for prayer.

I drink to excess because it feels good. Because at least it doesn't feel bad. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

The officer is saying something about a birthday, but I feel a mounting panic and a pressure beneath my eyes.

"Let me out," I say. I try the door. "Please. Let me out."

"We're almost there," he says, pleading with me. "It's OK," he says.

I keep trying the door, banging my hands against the window until they begin to hurt. I don't want to remember that scream. Please, God. That immense silence, the mouth, the hand swelling and blistering, and the steam rising from the water on the floor, no, please God, and then the endless announcement of his pain.

Please, God, kill him. I will burn in hell. To have thought this while they raced him away to surgery, one of the orderlies straddling him on the gurney and driving needles into him, I know I will never be forgiven. But if he is dead, his breath shall join with the Father's, who art in Heaven, who gives his beloved sleep, who saw the spikes driven into his only son. The shepherd shall lead him beside still waters.

I am weeping now, and the car is still. The officer's head is in his hands. I beg him, softly, to open the door. I shouldn't be here with him. I don't want to remember.

"OK, ma," he whispers, wiping his nose.

He comes around and opens the door for me. The place he's brought me to seems so familiar. The trim lawn and the cul-de-sac and the white pillars on the stone porch. There is a shadow at the bay window, the dark outline of a child's hands pressed against the glass. In a moment, he'll lean back and wave at me. The light behind him will fall on his face and that terrible hand, and I'll see him.

I turn away before that happens. I don't know him. I fumble in my coat's pocket.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'm so sorry." And then I'm warm again. I feel my grandson's sleek tiny paw in my weathered hands. I am reassured by his ghost. He is dead. I saw the breath leave his body.  
[END OF "I swear I saw the breath leave his body" BY meteor]

What you need to know is that I'm in trouble, and I'm too scared to be alone.  
BicFlair

Mr. E. Reading 112 Seaside Avenue Brewerton, New York 10012

What you need to know is that I'm in trouble, and I'm too scared to be alone.

Really, I need your help, could you come over soon?

I thought I'd write you a letter before I file an official police report, I'm sure you can sort it all out without getting the force involved.

That's it, I do need your help, Eddie; you see, I think someone is living in my house while I'm not there, one of the builders perhaps.

That sounds crazy, doesn't it?

Enright estate, you remember it?

Now that the rebuilding is complete and the builders are gone the floorboards won't stay down. From morning to noon, they come up, and they creek in the night, and they rattle in the wind, and in the attic, strange noises at all hours of the night. Really, it's getting to the point that I've started wearing earplugs just to stop the noise from disrupting my sleep. Obviously, it goes without saying-it's a new house, the wood just needs to settle a little and the noises will stop. Maybe that's it, maybe not, maybe I'm just acting crazy again. Anyway, I've started dusting the hallways with powder so that I can check in the morning for footprints. Powder, like baby powder? I've been doing it for a few nights now and no dice. Last night was the strangest of them all, and actually the reason I've written to you. All I can say - and believe me, I've rewritten this a thousand times now - is that someone was moving around in my room while I slept. Not exactly; I didn't see anyone per se; I heard floorboards creaking and breathing; I was really afraid that if I looked, they would rape me or something. Could you swing by the house, Eddie? Hell, I'll even pick you up if you don't want to waste money on gas. Every night is the same. That feeling like I'm being watched sometimes I wake up, and the room is different, and things have moved, and clothes are kicked across the floor. That latch is tough; you remember that, don't you? Then explain how the door can be open in the morning and a light can be on in the hall. Even if I have to file an official report, I'm happy to do that if you just come and have a look.

Did you get my last letter about the mirror? Oh, it was really awful. And I'm sure I saw something in that air vent through the reflection just the other night. Now, I know it's impossible. I thought I saw Jack in it, and he was reaching out to me from inside that walk-in cupboard. The one you hid in... Oh, but you should have seen him. Then, last night, when I heard that intruder in my room I thought I saw him walking across the lawn, he loved to stroll down by the water. Can you come as soon as possible? I've started having horrible dreams. Like I'm watching myself from the cupboard while I sleep. Only that I'm not sure I can take another night here alone, you can sleep in the guest room if it's too much for you. My ceiling keeps shaking at night, as if there's someone up there, and sometimes dust falls down onto the bed. Eyes, I remember the hue of his eyes in the mirror. I woke up the other day down by the river, Eddie. And I was on the peer just where he went in, they left the police tape where they found him, you know? My God, I can't take another night here; I can't call the police for an emergency, can I? And does it count as an emergency if the intruder hasn't done anything? Let yourself in when you get here Eddie, keys in the same place as always. Really, I haven't been feeling right lately, even when I'm out of the house. I'm tired and lonely and the world kind of feels like a horrible dream. Each morning, I wake up and watch my body move without me; I've started taking those pills again just to try and stay focused. Actually, I don't know if they're helping. It's like I'm watching through a veil, and on it is projected a horrible lie, but I can't seem to lift it or look away. Do you know what I mean? You can only imagine how mortified I am in writing to you. Like pictures Eddie, pictures projected onto my wedding dress, pictures that I can't unsee. Don't let me down Eddie. I'm so afraid and I don't know why, could it really be him? Exactly on the dot, at twelve, I hear the attic creaking like clockwork and the creaking like someone's moving around, and the banging starts again. And I'm scared. I'm scared someone is going to come down in the night and really hurt me. Please, I'm saying please now, could you please come over? Did I never tell you how sorry I was for not telling you about Jack in the first place?

Trish.

PS: Please read and reread this letter, Eddie. I want you to find it for yourself... But I don't know how to help you. My life is in all directions, up and down. I am not alone.

[END OF 'What you need to know is that I'm in trouble, and I'm too scared to be alone.' BY BicFlair]

The Day I Made Someone Disappear  
Emilia

It's not like being asleep. Or having your eyes closed - it's not black. It's nothing. And this nothing is the treacle I wade through, searching for something but with no direction, no markers except a deep swooshing noise like waves lapping on the beach. An oil slick of colour flares up as the lapping quickens and grows louder like the rising beat of a drum. These periods are all I can hinge my existence on. I wonder if I am the universe and each flare of slicked colour is the colliding of suns, the creation of galaxies. And with that thought, suddenly, I am very far away. But it's the pain, the pain brings me back. I'm sick with that wretch you get leaning back in your chair, that split-second when you tip too far, that kick - but it's stretched out so it's constant, so I'm stuck in it, reaching for something to hold, something forever just out of reach. Ping, a mobile phone. Wheels growl on linoleum. Porcelain's rattle and clink. This tension maps a shape. For a moment, I'm just a lump of sense impressions like a slug in the dark. She should have woken by now. She's probably still in shock. Poor thing. Emilia, can you hear me? The voice has a face. A personality. An African nurse with impossibly smooth hands. I try to form the oil slick into something recognisable. Treacle thins into fog, allowing only the most basic thoughts. I have a mouth and a tongue, a dry tongue and I taste bad breath. Above the taste, a head. Now, I'm aware. Sweat gathers where my bruised thighs touch. Hair rustles against starched pillow.

Emilia, speak to me. The nurse is closer now, coffee breath. It centres around this point. Speak to me. Coffee breath and weak mints. Emilia, speak to me. A hinge in my life, the swinging door that cannot be closed.  
My mother's voice, Emilia, speak to me.

—  
"Hell of hack today, don't you think Emmie?" Mr. Crowley said, dismounting.  
Emilia didn't move. Mr. Crowley hobbled around his horse to hers. "Dotty was on good form." He stroked her nose and gave her a kiss. "Yes, you were."  
"It's too slow," Emilia said. "I want to go fast and do the gallop."  
"You can't run before you can walk."  
"I can walk."  
"It's a saying, Emmie." He tapped her calf. "Jump off now, come on."  
"I'm not stupid. I can walk, trot and soon I'll canter."  
Mr. Crowley laughed and began to unpack Spirit. "I'm sure next week you'll win the Ascot."  
"Yes, I'll win," she replied, not knowing what he meant but knowing that winning is something she liked. "I always win."  
There was something keeping her on the horse. A warm moisture between her legs that at first felt like sweat but now — she tried to think. Had she wet herself?  
"Can you show me how to look after them? What do you do now, before going into the stables?"  
Emilia ungracefully dismounted. "Bridle off, saddle off, then rope on the halter."  
"Always remember lead rope on the halter, well done. Let's take them in then."  
"I want to go inside now." I've wet myself, she thought.  
"Come on now, Emmie, you have to keep these boys good and clean." He moved into the stables, holding both lead ropes in one hand. She stayed outside.  
"What's this called?" he asked, turning his head, looking about for her.  
"I told you before I'm not stupid. I want to go inside."  
"You need to learn."  
"You can't tell me what to do. You're not my daddy."  
"Don't be rude, now, Emmie. Don't make this hard."  
She loudly crossed her arms. She was stuck in decision. She wanted to run inside but the invisible rope of authority and rules and doing-what-you're-told lassoed her in place.  
"You're making this hard." Mr. Crowley rubbed Dotty down, humming a hymn as he did. "Going to be a dandy brush kind of job, don't you think?"  
"I need to go toilet." Her voice wobbled.  
Mr. Crowley raised his big grey eyebrows and in the musty light of the stables, took on an equine appearance. "Do you really?"  
"I really really."  
"Are you just saying this to me so you don't have to clean the boys?"  
"No."  
"Imagine if you didn't bath, you'd be all dirty wouldn't you?"  
"I'm not dirty! You're stupid!" And she ran away from the stables, back into her house, through the door, swinging on its hinges.

—  
I haven't thought about my horse in so long. I don't tell people I used to ride. I'm such a cliché. But I remember Dotty, my appaloosa, I remember the sound of her feet clopping on the tamped mud paths behind our house. It's not like having a dog. When you feel a horse's trust, it grips you — ties you in a bond stretching back through time. I'm not that girl anymore, am I? I drop my t's. I pretend I've never been skiing. No, I'm not that girl, I'm now a woman, a woman who allows other people's opinion to shape who I am. Who am I really? Am I that same girl, waiting on horseback in the yard with old Mr. Crowley? Is that girl the same as this one, in a hospital bed, with the pity of the world on my shoulders?

Mr. Crowley had been a good instructor. He had these eyebrows thick and coarse as brush. Almost as long as they were wide; grey, peppered with a ginger tint. They moved about like caterpillars trying to wriggle free. I wonder where he is now. I hope he found peace in the end.  
Emilia, are you awake? The nurse. If I keep my eyes closed maybe none of this ever happened. Maybe I can live forever in a world of oily forms suspended above the world with no now and then, no today or tomorrow. No last night. No morning after.  
Do you know where you are? You were very drunk when you came in.

All Mr. Crowley had done was try and get me to groom Dotty. I knew how important it was. I loved running the body brush with the grain of Dotty's caramel neck, down to his vanilla and chocolate-chipped body. But I'm a spoilt bitch, you should know that by now.  
My hand twitches. The nurse leaves the room with slow heavy steps.

Mr Crowley, in the stables. My mother, in the doorway. I'm there now, it's not the past, I'm there in the mudroom with the hinges screeching on the old wooden door and blood on my fingers and my pants and mother breathless as me. Emilia, speak to me!  
The jodhpurs were new. Expensive, mother had reminded me. I was such a lucky girl. But they were ruined, I'd ruined them somehow, got blood on them, wet myself with blood, I thought, and panic gushed out of me. I was overrun by what it meant. I was only ten. The part of my body most secret, that changes and feels and opens as if it has a mind of its own. Blood dried on my fingertips as mother got down on one knee and begged me to say something. Mr. Crowley. In the stables.  
The tension rose — I thought I was in trouble. Those jodhpurs were new and stained and in the movies blood was murder and killing and bad and I wasn't bad, I thought. And suddenly — fear. The word sex broke into my mind. Nights on the stairs listening to mother and father arguing, words thrown like plates that crash into the wall and shatter. They'd been shouting about babies, about sex, the word sex used like an axe, something about the X in the word my little mind flinched at. I knew it was serious. I knew down there was where it all centred.  
"Mr. Crowley, in the stables. It was his fault." I put into motion an unstoppable force. "He said I was making it harder." These words congealed in my throat and now I hock them up like phlegm in the sink to bare its disgusting form. "He said I was dirty and needed a bath."  
I remember mother's scream. I remember her pushing me and running outside and I remember never seeing Mr. Crowley again. I remember I did that. I made him disappear.

[END OF 'The Day I Made Someone Disappear' BY Emilia]

My Dear Friend Jenny  
Beineberg

Sometimes, in life, you meet people that are just... special. Something else. You see them, there in the crowd, the way they walk, the way they talk, the way they pick off a leaf that fell on their fluffy pink sweater, and something tells you that you are seeing something truly original. You approach them, you see that something behind their eyes, and as they toss their hair and tell you their name, you realize that you are looking at just the tip of an endlessly deep iceberg.

For me, that was Jenny. Even in high school, she was already so complete. There was a wholeness and direction behind her every move that I could have only dreamed of. Even when she was saying completely regular things—what she bought, where she went, how her boyfriend took her to the movies—with the way she said it, you could tell she meant more by it than anyone else. She meant more by everything. When she wore that pink sweater that all the other girls complimented her on, she soaked in the praise and then gave me a meaningful look because she knew that I knew that this fashion choice was not at all arbitrary. She wore pink as a subversion, as irony, as a mockery of expectations, and maybe, as an expression of her trapped intellect.

Every single thing she said was a joke, a piece of performance art, and I often was the only one to get it. That was my role. It did hurt at times. She'd be laughing with her friends, and I walked behind them like a lonely puppy, staring into their backs. She was so funny, so clever, yet I often felt like I wasn't allowed to talk to her much. But then she'd look back at me, I saw her eyes, and I knew that no matter what it looked like, I really was special to her. I'd smile at her, she'd turn back to her group, and I'd spend the rest of the day thinking about how lucky I was to know her.

Despite our deep connection, we did have our troubles. Looking back, it was all my fault. There's this one particular incident that still gives me shivers. It was my 18th birthday party. Well, it wasn't much of a party. I invited my parents, but they were too busy to come. And besides them, Jenny. My dear, dear friend Jenny. She arrived quite late, I almost thought she wouldn't. But of course she did. She gifted me a lipstick with the price tag still glued on. It was a strong color, the "Pink Stunner," as the brand called it. Jenny must have known that I would have never worn a color like this. I tried to express to her that I knew that this was simply a joke, perhaps a jab at the beauty industry and how it often gives us things we don't truly need, and she laughed. And I laughed. And so we joked around, for once, just the two of us. This is one of my happiest memories.

But of course, I ruined it. I got a bit too happy, too playful. I saw a spray bottle on the table, probably left by my mother when she was cleaning. Without thinking, I grabbed it and sprayed what I thought was water right into Jenny's face. It was disinfectant.

She shrieked, and I apologized, apologized, apologized so much. I got on my knees to ask for forgiveness, but she was already getting up to leave. As she was walking out the door, she called me a couple really nasty things. But I knew she didn't mean anything bad by it. She never did. We were friends, after all.

After this incident, I wanted to atone, but she refused to talk to me. I could tell that I have hurt her deeply. We had a connection, and for once, she was having fun with someone who knew how special she was, but then I had to ruin it. So, so stupid. And for what? I'm quite sure that even if it was water, she would have stopped talking to me, because it was just so childish, so below her level. For the rest of the school year, I put notes on her desk, apologizing for what I had done, but she never responded. And she was right to do so. I was sad that we didn't hang out anymore. I felt bad for her, not because I was so great or anything, but because I was the only one who truly understood her. At first glance, she seemed so happy with her other friends, but I knew she was dying on the inside. All because of my stupid mistake.

After high school, we went to different colleges. I didn't see Jenny for years, but I never truly forgot about her. The way she talked, the way she walked, the way she threw my apology notes right into the trash without a second thought. I never met anyone quite like her again; everyone seemed so bland and empty when put next to the memory of my dear, dear friend Jenny.

But one day, a small miracle happened. I saw her again in a restaurant with her new friends. Her face was a bit sharper and her hair a bit longer, but she was still Jenny, through and through. I barely contained my excitement, holding off talking to her until her friends were gone. She didn't like it when I talked to her while other people were around.

I waited for a few hours, slowly eating my dessert and listening in on Jenny, being as fascinating as ever. She always looked so happy in groups, but I knew the truth. Eventually, she and her friends paid and left. I waited for a few minutes before following them. They hugged and separated. I approached Jenny. As I said her name, she seemed rather confused. She didn't seem to recognize me. Was it really that long? An odd thought bubbled up in my head, but I swatted it away. She wasn't the kind of person to forget someone. Maybe someone like her thinks about so many wonderful things that someone like me is just a small detail...

I tried to remind her. I told her about all the meaningful glances we shared, all the times she let me sit at the same lunch table, but she either didn't remember or pretended not to. Either was possible.

Finally, I told her the story of when she was at my birthday party. I pulled out the lipstick from my purse, still unopened. I shoved it in her hands. I told her how much it meant to me, that I kept it on me for years as a good luck charm.

She stared at it for a moment. Then she smiled, so cutely, so ironically, like she always did. She said she would never buy her friends something so cheap. She said that I must have mistaken her for someone else because she truly did not remember anything about me.

For a moment, I was stunned. But then I smiled. I nodded along. I understood the joke. This was all a part of a big, long joke.

Same as years ago, she turned around and walked away, and as I once again watched her back, I thought about, how she was truly growing into a woman beyond my understanding. I wished her the best.

[END OF 'My Dear Friend Jenny' BY Beineberg]

Phantom Hunger  
Logan

Raw meat is perfectly fine for consumption, you know? Our ancestors ate it long before they discovered fire. They just started cooking it for convenience. Now that I think about it, convenience is at the center of it all, isn't it? That's why everyone went so insane so quickly. They were used to having it easy, living to see the next day being taken for granted, assumed, like it was owed to them and not something that you had to work for. Now that they have to struggle for every bit of comfort and wonder whether every meal will be the last one, is it any wonder they turned rabid?

Then again, after what I just ate, what right do I even have to judge people anymore? I'm pretty sure the knife under my collarbone isn't going anywhere any time soon. I don't know how I'm not bleeding to death right now. Maybe it got in at a perfect angle and didn't hit anything important, in which case trying to move it could be bad. On the other hand it staying there could lead to infection, not that I would know how to take care of the wound after the knife is gone. Oh well, moving it would hurt, so I'll just leave it there for now. The idea of it doesn't bother me as much as it probably should. Not as much as it probably would at the begging. I'm not exactly sure how the whole thing started; one day everything was relatively normal, and the next people are dying left and right, seemingly without cause, just to come back to life so they can start attacking and eating the living. Bona fide zombie apocalypse just like in the movies, except in movies there's always a group of people the main character would join and then they would work together to survive, and have interesting things happen to them. In real life, everyone either runs away or shoots at you on sight. Happened to me more than I can count by this point; it's a small miracle I wasn't killed yet by these psychos. I've seen a teacher from my school the other day, nice lady, would always let me bring my homework the next day if I forgot about it. She ran away as soon as she saw me. Even my own family turned against me, at some point deciding there wasn't enough stuff to go around; they actually tried to kill me. Before I realized what exactly was happening, we were fighting. Eventually I managed to overpower and knock them out; don't ask me how a teenage girl managed to overpower two adults and one younger sister; I don't know, must have been adrenaline. I was so shocked I left as soon as I could without even taking anything with me. That would have proven to be a mistake.

Finding food has to be one of the hardest things to do when society isn't working. Actually, that's a lie; finding food is easy; finding food that's still edible is the problem. All the time I would run into something that looked like it was good to eat just for it to turn out to be spoiled each time, giving me no choice but to ignore it and look somewhere else. The rats were having a blast, though; they didn't mind the rotten stuff at all. The walking corpses would ignore them for some reason, only being interested in people. I got so hungry at some point I considered trying to catch one to roast it or something but decided against it. Even with my stomach trying to digest itself, I was too disgusted with the idea. I couldn't sleep; the hunger wouldn't let me. I got so desperate to find something to eat that I was wandering the streets day and night looking for something. Pretty risky course of action considering how often I found myself nearly surrounded by groups of the living dead, somehow managing to hide from them or otherwise avoid their attention. Nowhere near as risky as what I pulled just now, however. Zombies? They're dumb; not getting caught by them has become almost mundane compared to avoiding other people; they won't alert others in their vicinity; they won't pull out a gun or a knife on you the moment you show yourself. But I was so hungry by this point I couldn't care less; I decided I was going to walk up to the first person I could find.

I heard them first—a man and a woman arguing about something I didn't have energy to care about. Walking in their direction, I saw them before they saw me. The man said something—a goodbye, I think, and left with his back to me, not noticing my approach at any time. I began to follow him but then stopped. Hearing a cry, I turned around to see the woman. She was holding a bundle of cloth from which the cry was coming from in one hand and a knife in the other. She saw me; her eyes went wide as she said, "Stay back!" I recognized the look in her eyes—the same look my parents had when they decided keeping me around wasn't worth it. I had to make a choice here; I could turn around like she wanted me to, go back to searching, probably starving within a few days anyway, or try to somehow stop this crazed and armed woman from killing a child she already had in her own hands. I didn't want to do this, but ignoring that child right now would mean leaving it to die. I lunged at her as she stabbed the knife at my chest. No matter what, either me or that woman was going to be dead soon.

The woman was dead. The child was also dead. Not as a result of the fight, mind you; what was left of that child was dead long before I got here. Whether something else got to it before and she simply went insane as a result or she herself couldn't bear her hunger, I didn't want to know. I have done something with the woman's body that I don't know whether I will be able to live with. Ironically enough, what I had done will allow me to live for longer. As it turns out, raw meat is perfectly fine to eat, albeit not easy on the teeth. I don't remember the last time when I felt at peace like I do now. I don't remember the last time when I slept. What I've done is reprehensible on all fronts; I'm not sure how much I can claim to be better from all the people I considered insane. Then again, why should I try to be better than they? What had anyone done to deserve any effort on my part? Everyone is insane; the whole world is insane. Strangers try to shoot me; people I knew run away from me; my own family tries to kill me. Why shouldn't I only do things for my sake? And what about that woman? How did she survive this long alone with a child? She must have killed some people too; she probably ate them as well. I bet she tricked them into thinking she was a lonely, innocent mother so people would lower their guard, only for her to stab them.

Suddenly, I heard a sound, taking my attention away from my ruminations and my meal. I could hear the steps of a single person. Someone was coming from the direction the man from before left, maybe even the man himself. If he saw me right now, he could jump to conclusions. I was getting up to leave when I changed my mind. It's better to explain things to him now than let him create his own version of events. I decided to go where the sound was coming from.

[END OF 'Phantom Hunger' BY Logan]

Emma  
Pancakesyrup

In a windowless police interview room, the female officer opposite Emma pushed a mobile phone out into the middle of the lacquered imitation wood table and pressed play. It was only the two of them in the room. Emma then heard her own voice on the loudspeaker. At first she heard the fairly sober account of a horse race. It didn't last.

"The race is leaving along like a chalk, like humming on the green. Ha-ha, wow. It is really humming here and there are horses between the horses, if you see what I mean. I'm not sure who's winning yet - the crowd is kind of melting

into one."

At some point Emma convinced the commentator to get her a drink. She then locked him out of the booth. His subsequent banging at the door caused her druggy dissolution to devolve into a distressed paranoia and her babbling, which the crowd had hitherto ignored, became a frightening exhortation to evacuate - and the crowd, conditioned by modern habit obliged. First slowly, then unstopably. People spilled over onto the race track, in some cases narrowly avoiding a clash with the horses. Some had managed to go out the front gates into the road.

The door being smashed down interrupted Emma's singing and the recording came to an end. The officer swallowed what was nearly a smile, reached out and pocketed the phone. Emma, head bowed, had begun to sob, and the interview was paused to bring in a cup of tea. By the time it got to her it was already cold. She drank it anyway and slowly recollected herself.

When the officer felt Emma was ready she pressed on with her questioning.

"At the time of arrest you were clearly under the influence of something. And this is probably no surprise to you but your umbrella handle, the one you hollowed out and filled with spirits, the one you've been caught on CCTV bringing into the event, the one that was found in the booth with you after causing the crush, has now been confirmed by the lab to contain traces of LSD. So please - I would like to get your version of events that day."

Emma profaned slightly, put the mug back on the table and began.

"Honestly, it's the first time I've ever done anything like this. I don't mean, like, ruining a whole event for everyone." She smiled at herself in self-deprecation. "I mean, it was the first time I've ever done anything that posh, you know, wearing a dress, going to the races and all that. I remember just being taken away by it all. I met Renwick on a random night out at uni and he said he could get me free tickets. So I think his family owns it, or knows the jockeys or something. He hasn't spoken to me since. Anyway, it was a parasol, not an umbrella, and yes I did sneak it in but the drugs definitely weren't mine".

Emma felt the eyes of the officer on her. They were large, wide eyes, slightly prized apart, like the eyes of a horse or the Gallagher brothers. She continued.

"We got in, me and Renwick, got a drink at the bar before the queues and met up with his friends already on the lawn by the track. More people crowded onto the lawns, the races began and in the middle of that all that's we formed a circle all poured our drinks out into the glasses. I had the parasol. Renwick had his tippie inside a fake pair of binoculars. Another girl's handbag had a secret compartment sewn into it which she popped and emptied like a cask. Everyone had their little trick. And it didn't matter whose drink belonged to who, anyway, 'cos we all finished off each other's for a laugh. And I'm certain that's what has done me in - someone else, or even everyone else there, had filled their own one with LSD. So it was all getting passed around, and that's how the traces got into mine. And that's when Renwick took me to the commentator booth. He said I'd won a raffle or something, to give guest commentary."

The officer regarded her skeptically, swinging her long chestnut ponytail to and fro. "And when the other commentator left for the toilet, you locked yourself in and that's when the trip started?"

"Correct, madam."

"And you all drank like that, not just you but everyone sharing their drinks, but you are the only one who reacted in this way?"

"Yeah because I'd never took anything like that before."

The officer moved forward in her chair and placed her elbows on the table. Emma saw the natural fibres glisten and ripple in her regulation fleece. There was something sinewy about that tight fit.

"Let me get this clear," said the officer, looking serious, "are you implying in any way that someone spiked your drink?"

Emma's gaze snapped off from the fleece.

"No, of course not. Just that it was an honest mistake, is all."

"How do you think people will react when the girl, who was quite plainly under the influence and single-handedly caused a near-fatal crush and cancellation of a beloved British institution, accuses everyone else at the event of being on drugs? Do you think they will believe you?"

Emma found it hard to move her lips. Instead stared at the female officer's long and luxurious ponytail. It flapped about independently in pretty little orbs of motion.

"Let me tell you something else you might not be aware of. No other vessels from that day - smuggled or otherwise - have been found to contain any traces of drugs. At all. None except your parasol. When we watched back the CCTV, the only people we saw holding your parasol were you - and Renwick."

Emma laughed at the coincidental mention of Renwick, because at that mention a jockey-sized version of him was riding the neck of the officer and striking violently at her shoulder with a leather crop.

"What's so funny?" asked the officer, sternly.

Emma closed her eyes and shook out her head. Renwick must have jumped off.

"So," said the officer, "if you are convinced drugs had anything to do with this, and not that your apocalyptic calls on commentary were down to just having too much to drink, then we will definitely have some questions for Renwick."

Those bright blue horse eyes! She was the horse! With Renwick - they are horse and jockey. She must have seen herself

on the CCTV? Renwick was riding her. That's what he said. She was there. Emma looked over at the door in the room. People were trying to get in. A lot of people. Some of them were dying. It wasn't Renwick's fault.

"I feel sick," blurted out Emma.

"So does Renwick, and his family, Emma. What happened last week was a tragedy. A tragedy that wasn't their fault. They told me they want a quiet end to this. They aren't looking to be vindictive. In your position, I think it would behoove you to go along with it. Don't you?"

"Yes. Yes I do. It's my fault."

Nausea overcame Emma. She reached for the empty cup of tea and moved as if to wretch into it, but stopped, admiring the galaxy of tea granules at the bottom. The galaxy of tea granules, liquid spectators of a porcelain island galaxy, of a barrow hippodrome.

She swirled the last of the tea water and watched it bunch up in every corner. Her mouth gaped in helpless realisation at something. She looked up at Officer Horse, who had crossed her hooves.

[END OF 'Emma' BY Pancakesyrup]

A Week From the Diary of Sasake Yume  
ChineseDracula

2024-04-15

I killed my boss today.

It was after a client dinner, and he and the clients were knee deep in sake by the end of the night. They had been teasing me all night about my slow pace, and my boss decided to bring up the story from my first week when I underestimated my tolerance and embarrassed myself in front of a different set of clients, losing their contract as a result. They all laughed. I pretended to.

I guess it wasn't enough for him scold me in front of the rest of the office if I dare show up two minutes late, or make me the designated unpaid overtimer, or make lewd comments about my skirt length when he thought no one else was listening. When he's not putting on a good face for others, his favorite passtime is taking me down a peg. This was last straw of many that had been accumulating over the past two years.

I made up my mind about it while they laughed. Before the clients left, I told them I'd ensure my boss made it home safe. When we got to his penthouse by the nice part of Shibuya, I guided him over to the bathroom. I took a knife from his kitchen, got undressed, and stabbed him until he stopped writhing on the floor. I made sure to face his head away as I did it. I didn't want to give him the final benefit of seeing me in my underwear. I let him bleed for a while before sawing his limbs, throwing them into a trash bag, cleaning the bathroom and myself, and then hauling the bag into the building's incinerator chute.

People will wonder why he's missing tomorrow, and they'll know I was the last person to see him. I'll have an alibi: I escorted him home and then took out his trash for him before I left.

2024-04-16

The boss showed up for work this morning. I'm sure I killed him, but there he was, in his usual meetings and making his typical rounds about the office. I think I would've preferred to be interrogated by the police than see the man I dismembered last night alive and well. I didn't know what to expect when called me into his office in the afternoon, but it definatly wasn't recieving praise on the client dinner the preivous night. I think I must've looked very pale, because he asked me if I needed to go home early. I said yes, and he told me to be sure to make up the hours sometime this week.

I've just gotten back from his penthouse. I went there once the sun went down and rang his door. He was hesitant to let me in, but I said it was something important that couldn't wait until tomorrow. When he let me in, I knocked him out with a hammer and threw his body over the balcony. I left fast out a back entrance to the building before the news and EMTs showed up. If anyone asks, I'll say he tried to rape me, but I managed to escape, and that I hadn't been there when he jumped.

2024-04-17

He was alive again today. I nearly had a heart attack when he wished me good morning. He's never done that before today, acknowledge me in such an unformal way. He smiled more today than he ever had in all the time I've been working here. He slipped me a note after lunch inviting me to drinks that night. I brought rat poison with me, and waited untill he went to use the restroom to pour it into his drink. It must have been the beer, but for some reason he looked and sounded more handsome than I had ever thought in my life. I'm not sure why I started to regret spiking him as the night went on. He started to feel sick so I suggested we walk outside on one of the quieter streets. I waited a while to call for help when he started to cough up blood.

He looked at me like a traitor while I stood over him, watching him die. His eyes had an angelic quality to them. They entranced me, and when the light faded from them, I felt sad. The police asked questions when they showed up. I can't remember the lies I told. They'll probably get me for this one. I'll be fine with that as long as he's dead.

2024-04-18

I don't know why I thought it would work this time. He kept giving me glances during the morning. At lunch, he pulled me into the custodian's closet and started kissing me. I didn't pull back for what felt like a minute until he started to try and unbutton my blouse. I pushed him away and said something about not while at work. I felt hot all afternoon.

He waited for me after quitting time, and walked me to the train station. The conversations was nice, and almost

distracted me from my hatred of him. He rode the train with me as if he was coming to my apartment. When we got off at the station, he said something about how I should go ahead and quit before he proposes so HR won't raise eyes. I pushed him into the oncoming train. People were there to see it this time. Maybe if others witness it, it'll be permanent. I can't wait for the police to knock on the door and take me away.

2024-04-19

He was laying next to me when I woke up this morning. I got up and made coffee and breakfast for the both of us. I straightened his tie and kissed him before he left for the office. There's a picture of our wedding on the shelf in the kitchen. I feel sick. Sick and happy.

[END OF 'A Week From the Diary of Sasake Yume' BY ChineseDracula]

Taste for Blood  
VampDaddy

He puts his drink aside, and kisses me, then he leads me to the bedroom where we splay out on a mattress on the floor. Soon he's on top of me and it's revolting; his worm-like lips slither across mine, and he occasionally thrusts his tongue into my mouth, like an eel probing the seabed. If I was capable of it, I would have thrown up right here and now.

Suddenly, he pulls back.

"Hey, are you alright? You feel kinda cold." he says.

His affection is equally disgusting. The sweet-talking tone with which he asked the question, his way of communicating some sort of sincere tenderness in what is otherwise a transient affair -it makes me want to gauge his eyes out.

"I'm okay," I whisper, with a feigned but timid smile "I've just been feeling a bit under the weather lately -I don't know why, maybe I'm catching a cold."

"We don't have to do this, you know?" he says, again with that disgustingly saccharine tone.

"Really?" I reply.

"Of course." and he gently begins to caress my hair.

I can't restrain myself any longer -can't stand his sickly sweetness bearing down on me- so I look deeply into his eyes. At first he mistakes my mesmeric gaze for something caring, something tender but soon he is gripped by a terrible dread. I can only imagine how he feels; first a sinking feeling in his stomach, some overwhelming sense that something has gone wrong, recognized by the most primal recesses of his being, who immediately begin to kick and scream and scramble for survival; then a feeling as if falling, tumbling head-over-heels, spinning round-and-round before his mind shoots through his skull, hurled off into an infinitely disorienting distance.

His eyes glaze over and he disappears; disconnected from this world -he goes limp and I drag him off the bed and start carrying him to the bathroom.

I picked him up at some worn-down dive bar. I sat close to him, shooting timid glances and playful smiles. Soon enough he approached me, and I even let him buy me a drink. He seemed revolting to me even then, but you don't have a choice, not these days.

Feeding on the mature can only be described as abhorrent. The longer they live, the more taint they take on; nasty habits accumulate and when they don't it is natural decay that spoils the meal. I can taste every tumor, every cavity, every ulcer in your stomach; I can taste every cigarette you ever smoked, every drug you've ever shot up or snorted up your nose; I can taste twenty years of working a soul-crushing job and chronic sleep deprivation -and it is absolutely, totally and completely revolting. .

Anyway, I brought him back to my apartment. An old building where, over a hundred years ago, laborers lived within a stone's throw of the factories they worked in; where the steel and glass cityscape pours over into brown bricks and smoking chimneys; where warehouses and factories seem like they could stretch out forever, were it not for the river halting their expansive march -and that river is a good friend of mine. In its boundless generosity it takes everything; the toxic sludge of industry and dead bodies, it swallows them both. It used to be that you didn't need to bother with things like that, you would snatch one here and there, and leave them right where you drained them; you could nearly feed once per day and none would be the wiser, now I regularly starve.

I gently kick at the bathroom door to swing it open all the way and drag him inside. The bathtub is probably as old as the apartment itself; cast iron lined with porcelain -I throw his body in it, head first and leave his feet sticking out. I tie his legs together and hoist him up; I've made a pulley system just for this occasion; a shabby construction, but it's good enough.

I hoist him as far as he will go, and hang him over the bath. I take a razor, the type men used to shave with not too long ago but don't anymore, and slice his throat. The skin gives way to the blade easily, as if to say 'by all means, enjoy' and at once blood begins to pour from his throat; profusely.

I quickly thrust myself underneath the wound, my mouth agape The liquid cascades down his face and drips down like a grotesque miniature waterfall into my own mouth. It tastes sickening, yet even the most nauseating blood has something blissful about it and the cold, ever-present pit that is otherwise present at the center of my being temporarily abates while I gorge myself on the ecstatic fullness.

I stay like this until every last drop of blood has seeped from his body and into me -then the blissfulness fades. The coldness creeps back in, the little flame inside of me goes out and I feel nothing again. Then I begin to heave; my diaphragm contracts and I brace myself against the loose tiles of my bathroom floor. I can feel it coming up through my stomach and then my throat, like a languid wave slowly encroaching the shore, and finally blood spews from out of my mouth.

The sun is starting to come up; a ray of light sneaks through the curtained window -it hits my skin and stings, but just a little.

[END OF 'Taste for Blood' BY VampDaddy]

Secret Spot  
MaMaMi

I'm in a big, open field on the side of a crumbling country road. The field itself should be about three and a half acres total, but because of all the overgrowth and shit there's about an acre of space left. It's been passed down for a few generations in my family, but ever since it was inherited by the incapable, insufferable fucking man-

children that are my father and brother, I think its days are numbered. There's broken glass, mould and rats under every single fucking floorboard in the old house on the hill, even though the pair of retards have collectively spent years coming down here to apparently 'sort everything out'.

I'm with some old friends. In the past, when there wasn't so much black mould lining the walls, or mice talking underground, we'd run and roll around on the grass together, chasing birds and picking elderflower to make cordial. When I think back, I find myself missing the old me more than the old them - I was a lot skinnier. I'm fat now. I got diagnosed with an eating disorder last year. I can't run anymore and rolling would just be embarrassing.

My friends and I decided to make a campfire to cook some food: we brought some beans and pork to stew. I prod the burning logs with a stick and the white wood is pulverised into jagged glowing embers. A plume of dust poofs up into the air and smoke rushes directly into my face. For fucks sake. I just switched seats. My friends can tell I'm annoyed and they all giggle. My eyes are very dry and I can feel tears start to well up, plus some of the smoke I breathed in is irritating my throat. I get up and say I need to piss. Someone says something about how good the food tastes.

Walking up the hill to the old family house, I can hear the strained voices of cyclists shouting to one another, and I see muted car headlights whizz pass behind the thicket of blackthorn and bramble. I look back at the campfire. It's nighttime now, about 8:00pm, so none of the others see me. I decide to trudge back down the hill, but toward the rotting, short wooden gate guarding the entrance of the field. I heave myself over, almost slipping on the slimy rot but making it to the other side. A few cars shoot past me and cool me down, as some sweat starts to trickle down my armpits and forehead. I walk a few yards down to a bend in the road. I stand at just the perfect spot by the bend. Distant headlights, slowly creeping over the horizon, are suddenly ten feet away from me. I can make out the scruffy beard and bored eyes of the driver. For a split second, this huge painted hunk of metal is pointing directly at me and I can picture it trampling the curb and shredding my body. Then, it smoothly turns away. I let out a nervous laugh. My skin feels cold now but my cheeks are burning. I feel sweat drip between my thighs and down behind my knees.

I start walking back.

Someone asks what took me so long. Someone else mentions how all the food is all gone and the rest giggle because eating less will be good for me. I tell them about my secret spot and how I go there every night to picture exactly what it would look like right before I kill myself, which, I say, I'm planning on doing a week from now. Their faces shrivel and squint - at first it looks like suspicion but the gleam of orange-yellow light in the tears dribbling down their pale, smooth, slender faces makes me realise they're crying. Then they start wailing. They plead with me not to do it. They stare at me and tell me how there's still so much to do together, how they were discussing moving in with me and how they all feel sorry for the shitty, abrupt, unexplained way they stopped responding to my text messages. They tell me that they know they'd been spending too much time with their new friends and that they feel awful for not inviting me. They offer me the rest of the food still in their bowls and I eat it all.

I make my way up to the house on the hill. I want to go inside but I know the smell of damp will make me throw up, so I squat and piss by the front door. I walk back down to the campfire and sit silently in my chair. I think the others are telling horror stories. There's enough food left to make myself a bowl, so I do - it does actually taste good; whoever said that was right.

[END OF 'Secret Spot' BY MaMaMi]

My Immortal  
Abes

I'm laying down, gazing upon the infinite night sky. My husband lies next to me, in this lush, green forest. We had been hiking for a few hours and decided to rest for some time in an open clearing, a rare sight in the thickness of these woods.

Suddenly bringing me out of my reverie, he spoke; "You know how people usually say looking at the stars and planets at night makes them feel insignificant and small? I think they couldn't be more incorrect; they gloss over how not just people, but all creatures of Earth, big or small, strong or weak, intelligent or dumb, are connected. Hell, I might even say that non-sentient objects have a share in that connection too." I turned my head to him, smiling playfully. "How so?" "Well, what appear as different beings, with different motives, different levels, if you will, of awareness of consciousness, share a common attribute among them. They are all striving towards something. To live, yes, to remain alive. Not necessarily consciously, by the way. But you can see it clearly in their behavior. They all seek to carry out their will upon life. Most non-human animals, as far as we are aware, at least, do this for reasons of food or procreation. Or protecting their offspring, too. Lions will hunt gazelles for food, a male bird will dance, sing, and display its bright colors to attract a mate for reproduction, and plants will extend their branches towards the sunlight.

Through this behavior, as different as it may look among the many living beings on Earth, that carrying out of their will, the many become one. When hundreds of ants march along in line, carrying leaves or breadcrumbs with their jaws, the many become one. We could say in this sense, that they become one will. All individuality and multiplicity fade away."

I listened attentively, his words, despite the strangeness of the idea, were captivating and driving to something interesting. His philosophical inclinations had always attracted me, and he would often go into deep monologues of bizarre ideas and explanations, though I always appreciated them and paid attention, even if I didn't understand everything. He continued. "What seems to be the truly outstanding thing, is that in this sense, the many, by becoming one, become immortal. If some person walking along were to step on one of these ants, that ant, in the sense I'm suggesting, never dies. His will is transported, and therefore his whole being, so to speak, to the other ants. Therefore, as long as ants live no ant perishes, but lives forever, through their collective will. We can say the same about pretty much any living being on the planet. And even more strangely, the same can also apply to non-living beings. It may seem strange to suggest something like an asteroid, for example, barreling through space, has a will, but even this non-sentient object imposes itself upon reality. It releases its force as if it were alive, like any other living being. So, in this sense, a non-sentient object like a meteor could have a will."

He seemed fascinated explaining all this, and for sure it was interesting, but it seems by now it was becoming too esoteric and unorthodox. Where was he getting all this from? He finished his rambling with a final revelation. "What this all means is that everything is one. Where we normally see multiplicity and plurality is only an illusion of the senses, the only thing that truly exists is a single cosmic, capital W will that reigns supreme." To push back a little, I decided to butt in with some questions. "Do we work like that though? We are human beings, we are not ants,

plants, or meteors. Our actions go beyond trying to feed ourselves, reproduce, protect our kin. We do that too, yes, but we don't stop there, and these other creatures do. Perhaps, by adding humans into the discussion, reality becomes a competition of many different wills that struggle against each other, rather than a single universal, capital W will." He looked at me for a few seconds, then he smiled. "Maybe. Maybe that was all nonsense. But it does sound more poetic, doesn't it? That you and me, and all the human race, and creatures of the universe are one. We'd probably treat each other better if we believed that, wouldn't we?" I gaze into his eyes. "You and I are one. The two become one flesh. It's time to wake up".

"Mom? Are you awake?" I'm not in the forest anymore. It's not night, there are no stars, and he's gone. I lift my head up. I'm laying down in a strange room, in a bed I don't recognize and see a woman I don't recognize. "Who are you?" I see her lips quivering, her eyes well up. "It's me mom, don't you recognize me?" I look at her closely, trying to recall if I know this person. Memories start rushing back. I know her. She's my daughter, isn't she? Her name is Sophia. I reply. "Yes. Sorry honey, I didn't recognize you for a moment. I think I've dreamt of your father." She comes closer, drying tears from her face. "Really? What was it about?" I start recalling things. I tell her about the forest, the ants, meteors, the competing wills and the cosmic capital W will. The eloquence of her father. By the time I'm done, I can tell her mood has improved. "That's beautiful, mom. I'm surprised you remember all that, I usually forget my dreams immediately." I think for a moment. "Well, now that you mention it, I'm not sure if it was just a dream". Was it just a dream? Maybe I was remembering it particularly well because it wasn't just a dream. But I couldn't be certain. "I think I prefer his conclusion. He'll live through me and you, and through your children and their children. Through all the ants, plants, birds, and meteors flying through space. I hope he was right. I hope he was right."

[END OF 'My Immortal' BY Abes]

Zachary  
Z. N.

Zachary, I need your help. They sent me to the boondocks, and the boondocks house zombies. I've killed about a thousand by now. The first one appeared after I crashed my car. It happened deep in the forest that my tires spun out of control and barreled me down a mountain. The rain obscured the wormhole-dark. My headlights, weak in the fog, illuminated infinite depths.

"Zachary!" I called your name, but you didn't respond.

The lights of my car flickered and danced. They illuminated a corpse as I ran it over. Perhaps I ran it over before that, and it rolled over the hood.

"That wasn't very nice of you," the zombie said. At least it seemed to be a zombie. It had knocked on my window and asked me to roll it down. Now its rotten-apple breath hung in my face.

"I beckon," I said, "your pardon," I said, "as this is my first time here," I said. I said each line from three different mouths. Then a missile shot out from my wet vagina that homed in on the zombie's face. Its pupa-green, now exploded face.

"Zachary!" I called, but you didn't respond.

A second zombie soon arrived. This one had a gunshot front-center in its brains. I turned my hand into a miniature drill, then thrust it into the zombie's wound, elbows deep. His body swung around the torque of my arm like the blades of a new windmill.

"Zachary!" No response.

For eighteen years, I did things of the sort. No one counted, but by the candles of my cake, eighteen years had passed. When the zombies stopped their assault, the dark lightened up, and around me a rural village materialized. Blood and gore caked the ground. Stone pavements colored red, not gray, supported my feet, as well as the bodies of men, women and children. I stood, the only one alive in a city of dead. For another eighteen years, I cried my soul black, then packed my bags and left. By the time I looked back, the village bustled with people.

"Zachary," I said as I washed myself in the nearby river.

[END OF 'Zachary' BY Z. N.]

Weavers  
mintjulia

Save for the sports cars zooming down the street it was a pleasant enough afternoon and I was sitting outside a local cafe waiting for a friend, adjusting the tiny, unreasonably wobbly table once in a while to make myself look busy.

"Hey there," Marie said. "I hope you didn't have to wait long."

"It's all good." I smiled and invited her to sit down. The waitress took our orders.

"A crazy thing just happened to me," she said.

Everyone who spent some time around Marie gradually came to the conclusion that she must be embellishing her stories for some kind of dramatic effect. She seemed barely interested in other people's personal lives, commenting on them with passing remarks before returning to the middle of her own tale. I did not mind assuming the role of an engaged listener.

Every time I saw her I was immediately reminded of university days, that nebulous time when we first met each other one city over. I remember one of our early meetings at a pizza place near the campus. It was the first time when I picked up on this storytelling quirk of hers. We were sitting down at a rather greasy table when she told me that her sister had recently been in a car crash.

I could feel my face assuming the conventional expression of worry as I thought back to some earlier conversation during which she had told me she is an only child. Still, I couldn't stop imagining a girl splayed out on the hood of a car, her bare shoulders touching the cold metal, one foot dangling in front of a headlight like a poor man's shadow puppet. The image was so vivid I knew it came from somewhere else. Right after I wrapped up my display of empathy I felt a wave of guilt, as if it was unbecoming of me to keep up the pretense, maybe moreso than of her to create it.

It had always been hard for me to react strongly to any life events. When an inebriated man nearly rammed his car into my legs a month earlier, I barely reacted, staring him down as he stopped in front of me with a dumbfounded look on his rough-shaven, kinda-cute face. I had talked to him twice before. Either way, I seemed to take pride in this approach to life, as if none of it could truly reach me.

At one point during my university days I began to devote a part of my attention to actively predicting events just so none of them would sneak up and surprise me. The downside of that was that it really worked. When a friend would approach me in our dorm crying her heart out about a cheating boyfriend, I could barely force myself to reply, feeling more quiet satisfaction than any kind of empathy. Look, it's not that I didn't have it. I just knew what kinds of things happen in the world. Even if a giant spaceship appeared right in front of me, I would have some frame of reference for how an alien invasion usually goes. Relationship problems did not rank highly on my list of Things Hard To Imagine. My nightmares were filled with incomprehensible shapes devoid of human-made forms. Most of the people I knew seemed quietly annoyed at this trait of mine, gradually moving away, keeping me at the distance of casual acquaintances. I wasn't someone they felt they could really confide in. At the same time they were becoming wary of Marie's tales. It seemed like we turned to each other for some kind of comfort. This is why as I sat in the pizza place and cringed internally at my own cliché response, she looked half-satisfied, as if it was really working, the most obvious reaction being the right one. Gentle tears landed on her smile as she told me that everything would turn out alright.

At the cafe we were in the middle of our usual monologue when she stopped abruptly, her stare trailing off into the distance. She had mentioned something related to trust, or the lack of it. I thought this time I would finally speak up. I looked her in the eyes and opened my mouth, adamant to get something out, but then I noticed her looking back at me in a way that suddenly struck me as aware, aware of too much, desperately trying to leave some things unsaid. Another car zipped down the street and right after that Marie began another tale and I let myself get swept up in it.

I had become so used to her stories that in a way it was comforting to hear a new version, a clear contradiction here and there. Our friendship was strong enough to allow for those. Come to think of it, back when she had vented to me about Michael, it was the only time I knew she was telling the truth. To an outside observer our conversation must have looked very typical, a sip of coffee here and there, exclamations, dramatic twists, me reacting with shock. It did not really matter that underneath it all we were both using lies to carve out some space for each other out of some common need. They were just different kinds of lies.

[END OF 'Weavers' BY mintjulia]

A trillion lifetimes of agony compressed into a singular, blinding instant  
Jeff

A trillion lifetimes of agony compressed into a singular, blinding instant. The collective suffering of the entire human race sharpened to an impossibly fine edge - a needle of pure, searing anguish driven straight through each synapse in my brain. Time ceases to flow, all that remains is now. I try to scream but nothing comes out. My throat is a raw, gaping wound, my vocal cords shredded into a fine, bloody mist. I am neither dead nor alive. I am undone. My body is a canvas of ruin, a grotesque sculpture painted in blood and bile. Bones jut through my flesh like jagged spears, muscles hang in tattered ribbons, and my organs spill out of my abdomen in a glistening, pulsating heap. Blood pools beneath me, thick and black, the stench of decay so vile it seeps into my pores, into my soul. I'm no longer human. I'm someone's plaything, a pile of meat and misery.

A voice? No... not a voice. A presence. It slithers into my mind, serpentine and merciless, coiling around each of my thoughts. It is calm, almost tender, and that makes me fear it more.

"Oh, good," it purrs, dripping with mock relief. "Do you feel that?"

I try to plead, to beg, to ask what's happening, but my mouth is a ruin, my words swallowed by the abyss. The voice doesn't wait for me to respond. It doesn't need to. It already knows what I would scream if I could.

"You're probably wondering why this is happening, Kate." it murmurs, its grip tightening around my consciousness like a vice. "But you already know, don't you? You remember."

And then the pain shifts. It's no longer just physical. It's deeper, sharper, as though invisible hands have reached into my chest and grabbed hold of my soul. I feel my awareness being pulled, stretched, torn apart into a thousand screaming fragments. Kaleidoscopic visions flood my mind, violent and unrelenting. A birthday party. The cake writhes with maggots, the candles are jagged shards of bone. My childhood friends laugh as they peel strips of flesh from my arms. My first kiss. His teeth sink into my lips, tearing them away in a single cruel movement, blood cascading down my chin as I try to let out a howl. A car crash. But it's not an accident. I'm behind the wheel, and I can't stop, can't slow down, can't do anything but watch as I plow into a crowd of people, their bodies exploding like ripe fruit, their screams echoing through my skull.

The voice is whispering now, soft and intimate, like a lover. "Do you remember?" it asks. "Do you remember what you've done? What you are?"

I don't. I can't. But the images keep coming, faster and faster, a fucking deluge of horror. A funeral. I'm in the coffin. I'm alive, trapped, suffocating, as dirt rains down on me, filling my nose, my mouth, my lungs. A hospital? No, a lab, and I'm on the table, and they're cutting me open, pulling out my organs one by one, holding them up to the light like trophies. My liver, my heart, my lungs are laid out on a tray, still twitching, still alive. I can feel them, even as they're removed. I'm a mother, holding my dead baby in my arms, screaming until my voice gives out. I'm a prisoner, strapped to a chair, electrodes clamped to my temples, my brain frying like an egg as they force me to confess to crimes I didn't commit. I'm a lover, watching as my partner is torn apart by dogs, his screams ringing in my ears as I beg to god for mercy.

And then, just as suddenly as it began, it stops.

The pain is gone. The visions are gone. I'm whole again, my body intact, my mind clear. I'm strapped to a cold, metal table, the sterile white light of the room blinding me. The voice is gone, replaced by the soft hum of machinery. My eyes dart around the room, my heart pounding, my breath coming in ragged gasps. A door hisses open and a man strides in. He's clad in a white lab coat, his face a mask of clinical detachment. His eyes, cold and calculating, sweep over me as though I'm nothing more than a specimen pinned to a board.

"Good," the man says, his voice flat, devoid of emotion. "You're awake."

I turn my head to face him, my mind racing. "What... what happened to me?" I ask, my voice trembling.

The man doesn't answer right away. He walks over to a monitor and begins typing something into the keyboard. "You were undergoing a new experimental procedure," he says finally. "A form of psychological rehabilitation. It's designed to help individuals confront their past actions and come to terms with them."

I shake my head, confused. "But... I don't understand. I didn't do anything. I'm not a criminal."

The man stops typing and turns to look at me, his expression unreadable. I open my mouth to protest, to insist that I'm innocent, but the words are caught in my throat.

He stares down at me, his eyes cold and calculating. "Don't play dumb with me, Kate" he says. "You know what you are."

I want to deny it, to scream that it's not true, that I'm not a monster. But the words won't come. I stare at the ceiling and shake my head, tears beginning to well up in my eyes.

The man nods, as if my silence confirms everything. "Alright," he says. "Then we can begin again."

And before I can react, before I can even scream, the pain returns, worse than before. The room dissolves into chaos, the walls melt away, the floor crumbles beneath me. I am falling, spinning, tumbling through an endless void of hurt.

[END OF 'A trillion lifetimes of agony compressed into a singular, blinding instant' BY Jeff]

Constipation—that's what brought me to the Seamerstreet Collection.  
ineptia

Constipation—that's what brought me to the Seamerstreet Collection. They say humans don't hibernate during the winter, but, jeez, our insides sure do. If it were sunny out, and the sidewalk not slicked, I'd be out running right now, working on my half-marathon time, instead of plodding up, down and around these five seasonally-decorated levels (that's three levels for structure #1 & two levels structure #2). Should I have just joined a gym? Would that have kept my plumbing without hiccups? Probably, but exercising in a small space makes my, like, soul sick or something—treadmill THUMPS covering up heartbeat THUMPS: Not my style. Better—was my thinking at the first big snow-dump—to forgo kinesiology altogether and focus on more sedentary disciplines—reading, writing, drawing, playing piano, maybe get in love with watching movies again... The possibilities of how to lazily-but-engagingly spend my time were endless, and I was fine abandoning my strict Instagram-body regiment, not "losing" my gains, per se, but just giving them a well-deserved break—what I'm running towards should cycle with the seasons; all it takes is to invert the horizon of the outside world into an interior one for myself. No school, no work, just a long winter vacation—maybe even my last—back at home before graduating. I was actually having great success exploring my new "muscles" by getting at what I thought was beautiful and/or worthwhile. I've always wanted to be sort of a Renaissance Woman (at least a Jane of All Trades), and as late in the game it may be to finally really know how poetry works, and despite its not really gelling with my aims for pre-med, when else am I going to get the chance? I can make a whole universe for myself from a few words or notes or lines, a world free from the endless (and mostly depressing) medical jargon of chondrosarcomas and ovarian hypoplasias, at least for a few weeks. Gross anatomy—as fascinating as it can be—IS called gross for a reason, after all. And it's not healthy for anybody to focus solely on that kind of stuff anyway; a true ideal-world wouldn't have any of those visceral terms or their real-life equivalents—even less extreme things like blood-blisters and ingrown toenails—; a true, beautiful world would tick smoothly and flow—"Rrrrrgh..." And then the colon cramps started, and before I even realized it, I had just spent thirteen hours tinkering with a subpar maiden-voyage chord-composition in MuseScore without really eating anything "good" at all the entire day: The perfect recipe for a colonic logjam. After a harsher-than-usual BM, I went out for a cautious walk (more like a minesweep) around my block, now coated white as a thrashed tongue—ice was everywhere beneath my feet, and what used to take three minutes to run to the end of my street now took fifteen minutes of pitiful penguin-shuffling. An anathema experience—to say nothing of the chill which was just as bitter—that made me feel dumb for even trying, "pretending" it was even close to being okay-enough outside... Repeat this cycle of desk-bound deep-diving into poor diet into abdominal cramps into progressively unsatisfying exertions, and you get the kind of scenario that drives a (not to brag, but: very) healthy twenty-two-year-old woman to mall-walk every day like a goddamn senior citizen.

Collection-walk, technically. "Malls" are an extinct idea—"collections," commercially and linguistically, are unmistakably the next link in the chain of concrete capitalistic cathedrals. I always loved roving through malls. In middle school, it was such a rush to out-of-the-blue see a friend, or eye a teacher in the wild, or just plain people-watch. As we got older and earned our licenses, my friend-group's default meet-up spot would always be the local mall, and, solitarily pacing around Seamerstreet today, I've reminded myself of some of those more subtle moments of ours: Scrounging for change underneath vending machines to throw away into the fountain; a friend realizing they've forgotten their phone in a changing room, and the mad, adventurous panic of us all racing back to retrieve it; the sneaking around into the mall's then-closed-off mini-cinema, only to instantly regret it and become paranoid at having been security-camera-recorded and getting sent to prison... Fuck me, is this what it means to get older? To "reminisce" about our goeey teenage-girl stuff? I haven't even had contact with any one of them in, like, over three years now... That's different career paths, for you, I guess...

So, yeah, exposition or whatever over: Every day I walk around Seamerstreet for at least two hours in order my fucking colon doesn't turn into a stopped-in-traffic cement-mixer. I started off listening to audiobooks on my consumer-brisk circumambulations, treating the place like one big track, but I've since relegated Brontë to the car stereo; I've grown fond of the "vox mallana"—the mishmash-overlay of one storefront's speakers' trashy pop-music over its neighbor's; the cooing of young parents to their unruly offspring; the sneaker-skittering of grinning up-to-no-good teenagers probably getting more of a workout than I am... It's chill; I like it here. And also—yeah, it's no lake-front horizon at the park, but—Seamerstreet is MASSIVE. I was listening to this philosophy podcast, and there's this phrase about 'not being able to be in the same river twice', or something; it has to do with how the world is always changing. Seamerstreet is, like, a river of bloodstreams—it's rare to see the same person again. In that way, it reminds me a lot of university—I big ol' revolving-door organ. Replace the carrels and classrooms with shops, and violá—it's the same hemogloblastic story of deposit and withdraw, an exchange of paper and plastic for cloth and cologne, intakes on top of outakes, fluid-fueled as the hydroneumatics of the elevator-flanked fountain in structure #1, up and down and back and forth—clockwork.

I think thinking about things this way is the perfect in-between between vigorous exercise & lost-in-thought dreaming – a kind of blurry motion that pulls you in as much as you push from it... Speaking of pushing...

Out of all the small comforts in the world, (and yes, this includes women) perhaps none of them are more important than taking a good dump. Sweet equilibrium. Don't mess it up now by going for an Auntie Annie's Pretzel or anything, lol. God, fastfood's so disgusting to me now... Now that I know what it can-what it does to your...-I eye a family of some overweight collection-goers-I wish they could see what I see, see the interplay between balances in their own "collections"...

I find penny on the ground-heads-up; minted my birth year. I stroll over to the façade-marble aquamarine fountain-pool: "Please let everyone see what I see," I say in my head, and flip it in, breaching the membrane of the pool's surface tension and injecting its mettalic optimism into the sanguine-blue solution.

Immediately, just as the coin deliers a muffled clink at the bottom of the empty basin, something strange happens—the lights go dark. The bright, red-&green-themed tinsel festooned all around extinguishes itself, replaced by a meager soft-blue light. I look up, and see the full moon hanging out above the glass roof, drooping its beams on me... and me alone. I'm naked, but there's no one to see... No metrosexual IT guys on their dates; no wannabe-valley-girls wandering with their cliques; no sunglassed out-of-place Texas-hat-wearers... They're all gone. Seamerstreet's empty-shuttered. I another pain in my abdomen, sharper than before.

END

[END OF 'Constipation-that's what brought me to the Seamerstreet Collection.' BY ineptia]

The Fear of God  
trippo

You see, I didn't steal it. I didn't steal anything at all and that's God's truth. Not God's honest truth, though. Even God lies. Just ask Abraham. No, I shouldn't say that.

I'd never steal from them. I've been going there every Sunday since I moved to town, very diligently. I love-- loved Canon Siddeley like as if he was my own father. I suppose in a sense that's the point of the job, but you know what I mean, of course. I couldn't ever steal from him. Or anyone, for that matter. And really, who'd steal from a church?

Like I told you, I only came in that evening to say some prayers. I'd had a tough day and I wanted some relief. In fact the whole week had been tough. Usually I would have only stuck to Sundays, but that day I felt like I needed this. You know, there really is something about getting religion. If you'd have asked me when I was fifteen I'd have told you I'd never in a thousand years go to church. I'd never thought it could be so comforting.

That's the word. 'Comforting'. Like it's some peaceful blanket. Are you religious at all?

Okay. So I went into the church, I don't recall seeing anything off or out of place. Nothing unusual. In any case I don't remember much at all. Like I said, it had been a really tough day. Tough week. Just felt like all I could think of was myself. Didn't feel too well about it, which is why I came along in the first place, but I wasn't paying attention much to the outside world. I'd hardly made the drive over. Wasn't driving dangerous or anything like that, mind. Just felt so out of it.

Oh, what was wrong? Ah, well. I haven't even given it a second thought since. With all else that's happened now, it just seems so silly. What was it exactly? Right, of course:

It was at work. I work at a perfume counter, just in one of those small expensive boutique places. You probably have the name already. I used to work in Debenhams, the one in the shopping centre, had been there for years, but you know how that turned out. But anyway, my point is, I'm used to it. I know my job. What had happened was this other girl I work with at the counter had a real go at me that day. And I mean a real, proper, go at me, like she's any better than me. Only reason she thinks she can give me shit is because she was there before me, and because our manager gives me a hard time sometimes as well. Even though she's hardly even half my age! It's so ridiculous.

I'm sorry. I was... frustrated, that day. Guess I still am. It's a quiet shop most of the time, since we're a little out of the way, so this girl - Lucy Mitchell, her name is, if you want to look her up too - this girl just starts nattering on about everything I'm apparently getting wrong. And no one's coming in so she just goes on and on for literally hours. And all Lucy was saying about me was just regurgitated from what she'd heard our boss saying. Not one single original thought. Just accusations and nagging and hate. "You didn't clean this with the right spray, you didn't ring that up on the till right, I'm going to talk to Janice". On and on, almost the whole day. So yes, I had a go at her too when we closed. Quite rightly. It was the least she deserved.

I'm not ashamed to admit that. I regret it happened, yes, but I'm not ashamed about it. Besides, I've already cleared it all up with management. They know what happened and it's all fine now. But yes, that's why I was the way that I was when I came to the church.

I didn't see anything. I had my head down when I came in, just because I, ah... I didn't want anybody to see my tears. You know how you can get so bloody mad you just cry? Even when you're not even sad? It was that. I just kept my head down and went forwards. All I was focussing on was my own footsteps. That's all I heard. It's a good sound, with all the stone floor, brick walls, and that big old roof. Great sound. I just strode straight up to the altar. I didn't think about it much, or look up. I've been there enough times to know the place like the back of my hand. People don't mind me there. I'm a regular.

No, I didn't see the collection plate. I swear on my life. As God is my witness, I did not see the plate on the altar. At all. One hundred percent. I suppose it was there before, but like I said, I wasn't paying attention to anything else. I just wanted to pray and calm down and then I was going to leave.

I... don't really want to tell you what I was praying about. It's between me and Him. That's kind of the whole point, you know?

Fine. Fine, okay. If you need to know, then yes, I was praying for some... solution to my job and that Lucy. I don't like working there but especially hate working there along with her. That's all. It was bitter, but that's all.

I really don't know why Canon Siddeley thought I was going for the collection. Like I said, I would never do that. The church, and him, before all this happened, has done so much for me. Without them, I don't know where I'd be. I mean, I dunno. I don't know what I think about it now. This whole situation is just... I dunno. Maybe Andy thought it looked like that 'cause of the way I was kneeling. I think he came out from the side room, you know, just to the left of the lectern. All I was doing was praying, but I guess it must have looked different to him, because I remember all of a sudden hearing these footsteps slamming against the stones right towards me. Nearly jumped out of my skin. Certainly that didn't help how I was feeling, let me tell you.

Well yes, Andy's a little old, but he's still a big guy. Look - I'm not exactly a very tall woman. It is intimidating. He's storming up in my state as well, can you blame me for how I reacted? Jesus, I actually thought it was some rapist for a second. Not that he was. It just-- it seriously gave me such a fright.

Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, it's been hard.

No. Absolutely not! I did not attack him first. He grabbed my arm - really quite forcefully, actually - and dragged me up by my elbow, hard, right back away from the altar. Of course I kicked out at him. I think that's how the plate got knocked to the floor and all the cash went everywhere. I panicked. He assaulted me, if anything. I know, I know, I'm not pressing charges, but I'm just saying, that's what he did. I think I've still got the bruises, and my legs are all scraped. Stone slabs hurt.

Okay. You know what I'm going to say, and I know you don't believe it. I can't blame you for that, at all - but it's the truth. So. I'll repeat it, for your sakes. I don't care if you don't believe it. But it's what happened. I certainly wouldn't come up with something like this by myself. Alright, I'll just tell you what I already told the other two:

Andy - Canon Siddeley - is dragging me back down the church to the exit. He's holding onto me tight. There's nobody else there, even though I'm making a lot of noise. At this point I think Andy still thought I was robbing him, so he's ranting about me, quote, "defiling this sacred house," end quote. That's all I can directly remember. I'm afraid I didn't catch much of what he said. I was just focussed on struggling, panicking. He had a surprisingly strong grip for an old priest. He's kind of shaking me back and forth, shouting down at me with this thundering fire-and-brimstone voice. He's right in my face and I'm just terrified, honestly almost freaking out from all that's happened, and I'm kicking back and forth and trying to break free but, he just keeps holding on. I think I may have clipped him a few times as well, not deliberately, but that only made him hold on tighter. I don't know what came over him. I probably never will. We're halfway down the aisle, he's still dragging me backwards, when I kind of notice something weird with the cross on the altar. There's sunlight coming through the window, quite a strong beam, like something out of a cartoon, landing on the cross and only the cross. I know I said I was out of it earlier, coming into the church, but I remember it had been so grim and grey the entire day. You'd know that as well. And Andy saw the light too, because he sort of trailed off on his ranting, so I know it wasn't just me. He lets me go - sort of throws me to the ground - and he slowly walks back over to the altar. The cross isn't just lit up. It's actually glowing, now. I just half-sat there, trying to catch my breath. I stayed well away but I kept watching.

What happened next is the truth. I know it's a cliché, but, God is my witness, it's really the truth. You have to believe me.

So Andy's right up to the altar. Obviously his back's to me, so I can't see what he's saying or anything. I guess he was probably still pent up. The cross is really, really bright. I almost had to squint. Remember that photo of Notre Dame? After the fire? It was exactly that, except even more so. Andy stops in front of it for a second, like he's waiting for it to explode or something, and then once it doesn't he reaches out to touch it. I couldn't see if he actually did, but as soon as he raises his arm this great shining light comes out of the cross and moves up above the altar. It was like, five metres in the air. This tiny little sunball came out of nowhere and lit up the whole church. You couldn't even look at it. I-- I thought I was scared before, but this was different. I can't explain it. It was like this royal terror. I wanted to get up and get right out but I couldn't.

Ugh, God only knows what Canon Siddeley was thinking. He was right next to it, I think about as petrified as I was. I still couldn't see his face but - I dunno - I thought it seemed like it was talking to him. I didn't hear anything, but it looked like Andy was playing out half a conversation, in silence. I was still on the ground watching him out of the corner of my eye gesturing wildly, almost passionately, completely silent. And I don't know if-- if the light said anything but then after a minute, he - Andy - he just stops. And, and then the light went out. It was like a thunderclap or a bomb going off. It threw me back flat on the ground. The church seems way too dark now. And -- and then I get up, and Canon Siddeley is just a few feet away from me. I think the explosion threw him back too even harder. H-his head had hit one of the pews and split right open. Lord, it was just gushing. That's when I finally ran out.

Ohh, I sound almost crazy. I know what you must think. Same as my boss - all the religious people are crazy, right? But I'm not a liar. I know what I saw. Andy saw it too, if he was here to say it. Though you'd probably be investigating him if he was, considering what his replacement found out about the church funds. The gall of that man, to accuse me of stealing from a pithy little collection bowl when he was spending all that on himself. It sickens me. Honestly, it's a miracle he got what was coming to him.

[END OF 'The Fear of God' BY trippo]