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# THE STRANGE LAMP

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SHORT STORIES ON THE NATURE OF MONSTROCITY AND IDENTITY IN  
AN INCONSISTENT REALITY



By Jordan Richo

## **Artist Statement:**

This collection is called “The Strange Lamp”. The title is in reference to the phenomenon in which people are snapped out of their perceptions of reality by a single, out of place object, thus revealing the horrific dreamlike state they had previously been living happily within. To exist in this world as a person of color is to be both subconsciously aware and willfully unaware of both a real and imagined identity. The black body has often been a stand-in for inherent monstrosity. And when you are contending with a violent history, while consuming media and language that seeks to dehumanize you until you believe that your own nature is comparatively disturbed, there is a third point of view that manifests as dreams or fantasy. The out of body experience that Dubois coined as- double consciousness. I wanted to explore these out of body experiences with identity. I wanted to explore how fear and violence manifest in third spaces of reality. How histories of violence and hatred can burrow deep into even our most comfortable spaces and in turn infect our perceptions of our relationships and ourselves. I think it’s interesting to think about hate as the overarching terror in a horror story. It’s so easy to say that hate is the root of all evil despite it being as easy and innate as love. It’s especially interesting when dissecting what can lead one to hatred and violence. The Black and brown experience is the constant poking and goading of an intolerance that is idolized, and when it goes too far, or when someone retaliates, we are told we’ve become the monsters they’ve always imagined us being. Throughout this collection, I wanted to stretch the boundaries of the horror genre, and overlay gothic elements into dreamy narratives that warp the reader’s perception of reality and speak directly to the inner shadow- the thoughts and feelings that make us feel guilt or shame. Overall, I wanted to blend Black storytelling, history, and spaces with the darkness and, yet, warmth of those very same places in hopes of finding a pocket where our shadows can meet and start to understand themselves better.

## The Town

Dust whips across the dirt streets. It's midnight. The old clock on the church tower makes no record of this. Its hands sit stiffly at 5am. Or 5pm. The church, once a painted-white outpost. A sign of life or civilization, was a silent memory holding the land hostage in its ceremonial weight. The moonlight dims in the well-worn metal of its bell tower- as soundless as the invisible revelry in the streets below. The bell, though without its signature luster, seems to cast judgment on the emptiness below. No light illuminates from home windows. Despite the hour, the bar doors are locked shut, the windows hatched, and the instruments- much like the songs they created and the hands that once held them- were lost somewhere between life and death. There is no music in this town. Unless you count the wind, as it whistles and hums through the cracks in siding and wooden walls, beneath floorboards, resting in beds that haven't known warmth in an unknown amount of time. Likely a time when there was a necessity to church bells and to those who ring them. A time when one could imagine passing through the town rather than passing it by- craning their necks in morbid curiosity, in hopes to see some sort of clue as to how or why this place could exist in such a living death. Maybe they'd see a sign of life. A ringing of that once sacred bell. A light on in a parlor. The sound of fiddle music drowned out by drunken laughter. Or maybe they'd search, hope, for a sign of death. Bullet holes through bar windows. A charred entryway. A noose hanging from the belltower.

What of their books? If they had any, they would have been stored in the church basement. Piled high on ceiling to floor shelves. Locked away in plain chests or on display in glass cases. Religious tomes and old preacher's journals. A sign of something. A clue. Papers strewn across the floor as someone searched desperately to find an answer to remedy whatever topical, specific apocalypse had forsaken this land. There's nothing to find though. No books, or papers, no journal, no manuscripts. In the same way you'd find no bones. And one would wonder, if anyone ever lived here at all. And perhaps that's what the land, the story, had intended. Perhaps the same thing that keeps future inhabitants at a safe distance. Possibly another

story being whispered, with heads bowed closely, as if it is an incantation too volatile to be spoken aloud. But a town is not meant to be empty. The idea of it being such seems like a paradox. However, I- like anyone else- am nothing more than a passerby. And while these thoughts will stop me briefly in my tracks. The way a car crash would. I'll continue on without giving it a second thought. As was always intended.

## The Stars

Once upon a time, there was a little girl they called “Songbird” and she dreamed of stars. Every night, Songbird’s daddy would set up his telescope in their backyard, and together they would practice naming the constellations. Songbird decided back then that she would be one of those stars, or at least her name would be. She hoped it would be something large and important, like the morning star. Something beautiful and kind. Something loved. She hoped it would be something that twinkled. Twinkled so boldly and so brightly that people would write songs about it. Songs like lullabies that mothers would sing to their babies as they fell asleep. Songbird hoped to be a wishing star like the kind she prayed to at her bedside when times got especially tough. The star she prayed to when her daddy had to sell his old telescope. However, as soon as the telescope was put up in the window of the downtown pawn shop, Songbird had found a new hobby. She began singing at church, louder than she had before. Louder than what was considered polite. No one seemed to mind it though. Songbird’s voice was so loud and so lovely it mirrored that of her namesake. As melodic as the mockingbirds that nested in the old hawthorn tree behind her family home. As boisterous as the blue jays that danced around the streetlamps downtown. As wistful as the mourning doves, which sat gracefully on the edges of the church’s rooftop.

Songbird sang so beautifully that her voice seemed to drift through the church walls and through every window, every door, past every blocked off passageway reading “White’s Only”, and into the ears of everyone in town. And once everyone in town had heard Songbird sing, that voice took off into the sky and filled every ear in every city. People traveled from miles away to hear her voice in person.

When Songbird had gotten quite a bit older, and just about everyone in her small corner of the world knew her name, a man came knocking at her door. He came with a promise, a promise to fulfill her biggest dream. Immediately, Songbird thought back to that old telescope. She thought back to all those nights with her hands clasped tightly together beneath her bedroom window, whispering frantic wishes beneath the light of the wishing star, and she decided to

accept the man's offer. Suddenly, she was whisked away to a land far away from anything she had ever known. Past sprawling green fields, over triumphant, snow-capped mountains, and across rivers lined with pure gold to a place where the air smelled of salt, the sky was never gray, and the stars fell so close to the earth that they walked on human legs. Songbird knew that she could become one of them too. And so did the man, as he set to work to make sure everyone would know her name. Soon they did. Songbird sang at every place that would have her. Even places that weren't used to hosting singers that looked like Songbird. She didn't care though. She was brightest when she was singing, beneath the stage lights, glowing in everyone's eyes. When Songbird was on stage, everyone looked the same. Dark and hazy, she could only see their teeth, smiling as her voice danced throughout each jazz club, each bar, and into the streets. Beckoning travelers into the warmth of her atmosphere.

After a while, Songbird became too bright for the city of stars, and the man decided she should travel and share her gift with the world. Songbird imagined the constellations, how they too traveled across the sky, and accepted the man's offer. Songbird's daddy, who was now very old, was worried about her traveling. Some of the towns were dangerous for people like Songbird, he said. Though people in the city of stars were kind to her, he believed people in those other places, the places where the stars were far up in the sky, where the nights were pitch black, and where "Whites Only" signs weren't so easily removed, wouldn't be so welcoming to the dark-colored songbird. And though she too was worried, for the first time in her life Songbird decided not to listen to her daddy. She believed in the man's promise so deeply that nothing on earth could move her from his path. However, on the road, Songbird began hearing stories. Stories about arms and legs that swung from trees like the leaves of a willow. Of gray faces in newspapers and missing children. But Songbird paid no mind to these. She believed in the man's promise. Of her dreams. Of safety. And so she continued on.

Songbird continued on until one night. They had stopped for a show, one night only, in one of those towns her daddy had spoken of. The kind with cop cars on street corners at sunset.

The kind with side eyes and sharp whispers. But, Songbird paid no mind to these. She would do what she did best, she would sing and her singing would open the hearts of this cold-blooded town. And so she did. She sang and her singing brought people in from every corner of town. But as she stood on that stage, she felt a distance, a remoteness, she had not once felt while singing. Typically, every bar, every jazz club, would become her church. They would be like family, or neighbors, who sat in the booth-shaped pews and followed her music like it was a sort of prayer. In that bar, she wasn't a pastor, she wasn't a guiding light. She was a spectacle. And, Songbird tried to pay it no mind, but something in it hurt more than the sideways glances.

Once Songbird finished, she was led out the back doors to her car. However, she soon realized her company was larger than it originally had been. Three boys, as red and white as the stripes on the flag hanging over the bar, had followed her. Songbird heard them before she saw them, smelled them before even that. Boys like that, she thought, were much louder than they looked, especially when drunk. Much stupider too. More dangerous, her daddy would say. They sought to corner her. They said awful things about her color and tried to make her feel afraid, and while she tried to pay this no mind, she was much smaller than them and though her voice was strong, there was not much it could do to defend her. However, her luck, or rather her driver, rescued her from the trio. And despite how rude they had been, Songbird found herself apologizing to them as she hastily entered her car. All the while, she began thinking about the man. The man who had driven with her to the bar, and was now nowhere to be found. Songbird didn't have long to dwell on that thought before the driver was speeding off into the night.

Songbird thought that would be all of the excitement she'd have to endure, but it seemed other plans were made. As the car reached a particularly long stretch of road, two headlights appeared behind them in the dark. The driver attempted to speed up, but the lights seemed to follow. Every maneuver made was copied. Every light skipped, every turn made. Songbird tried to pay it no mind, but she couldn't help but think about her throat. About how hard it would be to sing when she was a willow tree leaf. She looked out the window, in hopes of seeing her wishing

star, but they were so far away in that sky. Songbird couldn't begin to make out all of the constellations when they seemed as small as particles of dust. So instead she focused on the lights that traveled scarily close to her orbit.

The two cars sped down each winding country road until they came upon a bridge. That was when the lights got closer. So close that Songbird could feel them burning her skin. And suddenly. As suddenly as you blink or gasp. As suddenly as a splash of water. Songbird felt something very large and very heavy push her world over an edge. An edge that led into a deep, inky darkness that was darker than anything she could ever imagine. It was a dark and shocking cold. Colder than anything she ever felt in her life. A cold that froze her lungs, and smothered her voice until she could no longer sing.

Then, Songbird saw a light. Different from any light she saw in the city of stars, a light like the one in her family parlor. Large and warm and yellow. The kind of light that was lovely and sweet. The kind she could stare at forever without it blinding her. The kind that people write songs about. And it twinkled too. Songbird smiled at the light. She wrapped her arms tightly around it as it blanketed her in warmth. And once she did, she heard a song humming from within it. Something like a lullaby her mother used to sing her to sleep with. Finally, Songbird's dream had come true. Yet all she could think was, what if my daddy could see me now?



## The House

*Dear Bernice,*

I wanted to thank you for your time spent serving our wonderful family. It seems it was just yesterday the ship arrived on the shores of your beautiful country, yet somehow a century since we moved into this great big house. Never had I seen such acres of land before here. Our townhouse in London, our modest home in Venice, all pale in comparison to the vastness of this estate. And you were always so good at keeping it tidy- which was something I'm afraid I've never been good at. And you were always so good with discretion. Which was quite appreciated, with us being the only free Black family for miles.

I felt so sure of myself before sitting down to write this to you, but all at once, the weight of this decision came crashing down on me. I've always thought myself a prisoner in my own mind. Even during our time together, I often kept to myself or to John. And I'm sure you always had questions about us. Our wonderful family. So, I thought, seeing as you have precious little time left, I should tell you everything you must know.

Much like you, I'm rather new to this. These people, I should say. I came into Ama's custody when I was already mature, but she is the only mother I've ever known. And she taught me all the things a mother ought to teach their daughter. How to read, write, play piano; how to dress herself, and how to behave before company. I struggle to remember how I was before then. The lord and lady of the house I serviced never found a need to teach me these necessities. I must have been quite an animal when Ama had found me. Or rather, when the boys had found me. The boys lived there before I did, and they helped Ama keep safe while they lived in the modest house in Venice. They too could read and write. John was only sixteen when Ama took him in, and he still likes to pray when he's alone- despite everything. Paul and I don't speak much, but he likes to read and I think Ama likes him almost as much as she likes me.

Things used to be so simple. At first, I would spend my days with Ama as she turned me from a heathen into a lady. When I was awarded breaks during these sessions, I would spend them with John. I think John has changed the least. He was always quiet. He was always polite. He was always sorry. Sorry. Even writing it now, it seems like a foreign word or concept. John is the only person I have ever known to say sorry. Or to be sorry. John never tried to teach me how to read The Bible, but I knew what it meant to him. John and I understand each other and how we fit into this family for the most part. But being around John makes me feel wrong. As if there is something wrong with me. Some part of me I can't change. The part of me that hates. And despite how much I love him, it makes me hate him just a little too.

Paul is different. Paul never tried to care for me like John. To me, he was always Ama's guard. He did as she said, when she said. In many ways, I learned more from Paul than I have from

anyone else. Paul taught me things in the way animals teach. He would do a task and I was expected to mirror him. In a way, I preferred this. But, we don't speak much. Our conversations are often limited to useful subjects. Means to ends. Logistics. He was Ama's favorite before me. I can tell because, despite the time we've spent as a family, he is not used to competing- or rather, failing to compete- for her attention. I'm intrigued by Paul. I think, if he had the strength, the chance, or the guts, he would kill me.

Ama isn't an affectionate woman. I don't know how long it's been since she was. But I understand why. Despite the line that constantly spreads and deepens between us, I will always understand the way she is. Since moving to this great house, I have learned that she was quite uninvolved with me when we lived elsewhere. Her leash on me was looser and her words more lenient. Now it seems she is constantly watching me. She taught me how to control myself long ago, when I was nothing more than a ravenous beast at her table. And it seems she is unable to see me as anything more. And I can never get myself to understand why she can't understand me the way I understand her.

I said this house was great and your country was beautiful, but even as I write this, I can't help but feel the same poisonous presence hovering behind me, drooling its venom down the back of my neck. I told Ama that I thought this house was evil. I feel like I can hear voices crying out through the walls. Human decay reeking beneath the floorboards. I feel even worse in the land behind the estate, which bleeds rancid blood, staining pure, white cotton. This house overtakes me with sudden and frequent sensations of rusted chains being wrapped around my neck, tightened, and shoved down my throat. Everywhere I am, I am forced to swallow that heavy, metallic, lump. It tears my throat to shreds and anchors me in place. Ama never believes me, and says I ought to be grateful for all she's done for us. I am grateful, but the longer I think about her, and all that she's done, I feel a feeling stronger than gratefulness or love- something that is either its equal or its opposite- that I am too afraid to admit even in writing.

I've had many conversations with Ama about what I want. What I would do with all of the hate I have stored within me. How I could make it useful. How I could make us more. More than rats, bloated and waiting for death in an old reeking dusty house. More than pathetic ghosts, haunting a house unknown to us in a land unknown to us. Doing nothing. Being nothing. Forever. Every time, she'd ask, where do you plan to put all of them? I would tell her, they would be free. She never understood. She is sad, and because she is sad, she believes there is nothing she can do to fix what is broken in this world. She's content living like an animal, amongst animals, and fulfilled blessing us few, poor, pitiful souls.

I cannot see her gift as such when she wants me to use it how she pleases. When she wants me to sit in this stinking, bleeding house, and play family. Play family forever. Forever, her treating me like a daughter but pushing me away when I reciprocate. She is the only mother I've ever known, and yet I wonder if I've ever known motherhood. I wonder if she's been this way so long that she has forgotten what love feels like. But no, she hasn't. Because she sits at the window, and she thinks of a man who is long dead, and she waits for a man who is long dead, and she grieves for

a man who is long dead, and she feels guilty over a man who is long dead. And she emotionally neglects the family she created. So, we all sit here, forever, in this steady storm of resentment and loss. And despite that, I still love her. I love her so much it has become a deep aching loathing. A disgust when she enters the room, and yet I have no urge to run. She knows I'd never leave her or this family, because I have no one and nothing else. And that is all because of her.

Bernice, I hope you have a comfortable death. I hope you read this and it makes sense to you. When you are gone, things will not get less complicated for me, but that does not need to worry you. I wish you nothing but peace in whatever the afterlife is. I wish I had read scripture like John and understood what people meant when they spoke of a God. But I know whoever and whatever it is will bring you safely onward. In your absence, the house will likely collapse under the weight of our differences. And I am trying to understand if this violence is innate.

## The Parlor

Fade in

EXT. Night - An old colonial-style house, clearly abandoned, seen through an iron gate covered in vines and moss. Three bikes lean against the outside of the gate.

The old Quincy house was a stain on the quaint town of Thicket Falls. It seemed as though everything moved in its dark shadow. Each townsfolk told the story a little differently. But they all agree that Mr. Quincy had been a mean, reclusive old man. They agree that he had a housekeeper who practiced black magic. They agree that something had happened that caused both of them to die. And they agree that there's a curse on the house and the patch of land it sits on. And as small towns with curses seem to go, every year a group of kids decided to go explore it to see if all the stories were true.

Fade out.

Fade in

Int. Quincy house foyer- night.

Three kids, gasp as the front door slams shut behind them.  
The house is dark and covered in dust and cobwebs.

Kid in hat

[Fake Laugh]

You both are wimps! That was just the wind.

Kid with glasses

[still visibly shaking]

I wasn't scared!

Kid with backpack

[chiming in before kid with hat can speak again]

I think we should leave. This wasn't a good idea.

Kid with hat

No! Come on, don't wuss out now!

Before anyone else can speak, the three kids hear creaking  
footsteps coming down the staircase behind them.

[the kids slowly turn around]

A girl, about the same age as the kids but in Edwardian era  
clothing, is slowly descending the stairs. She carries a

candelabra, which illuminates her dusty brown skin and her pale, pupil-less eyes.

Ghost girl

[smiles]

Finally! New friends!

Kid with glasses tries not to faint from fear.

Ghost girl

My name is Leanore.

Kid with hat

Are you dead?

Kid with backpack

[whispers to Kid with hat- nudging their shoulder]

That's rude!

Leanore

Yes, I'm dead.

Kid with hat

Oh.

Kid with glasses

Are you gonna kill us?

Kid with backpack shakes their head, sighing.

Leanore

No! I'm so bored. I've been waiting for new friends to talk  
to.

The kids look at each other, confused.

Leanore

Besides, even if I wanted to kill you, I'm dead and cannot  
touch you.

Kid with glasses

[sighs in relief]

That's good to know.

Kid with backpack

I don't mean to be rude, but...how did you die?

Kid with hat

And can you tell us more about the curse!

Leanore

Curse?

They all stand in awkward silence for a moment. Something flashes across Leanore's face. Perhaps a memory, or some recognition.

Leanore

I see. Let us sit in the parlor.

We follow the kids and Leanore through the dark Quincy house. On the walls we see faded paintings of Mr. Quincy. The pictures seem to age as they walk deeper into the house. He starts as a happy, rich-looking man, sitting proudly outside his house. As he gets older, he looks angrier and his home looks more and more decrepit.

Leanore finally leads the kids into a parlor that you can imagine was once beautiful. The emerald green carpet is now nearly black. The cushions of the same color are now gray. The fireplace mantle is crumbling. The wooden tables are all chipped.



Leanore

Please sit.

She sets the candelabra on a side table. The kids sit in a clump on a long couch across from Leanore.

Leanore

I'm afraid I cannot truly answer either question.

Kid with hat

Why not?

Leanore

I don't know how I died.

Kid with glasses

How is that possible?

Leanore

I don't know. One day I was alive and the next I was like  
this.

Kid with backpack

That must've been scary.

Leanore

[eyes wide, as if remembering something]

Oh, it was! And I was alone too. Everyone was gone.

All Kids

I'm sorry

Leanore

Oh please don't be. Nothing can be done.

Kid with hat

What about the witch?

Leanore

There was no witch.

Kid with hat

But everyone says there was a witch.

Kid with glasses

Yeah, that she killed the old guy and cursed this house.

Leanore

[remembers something, seems irritated]

There was no witch.

Kid with glasses

But-

Leanore

Please listen. There was no witch. There was me, Mama, and  
Mr. Quincy.

Kid with hat

[leaning forward]

Well, what happened?

Leanore

Be patient, my memory is strange. See, I understand that I  
have been dead a long time, but sometimes it feels as  
though I was alive just yesterday.

Kid with backpack

[glaring at kid with hat]

Sorry, we won't interrupt again.

Leanore

[nods]

Well...

Mr. Quincy didn't like everyone else. He just liked my mama, and he liked me. Other people didn't quite like Mr. Quincy either. I was only a baby when he took us in. We only had a few visitors. Mr. Quincy's bookkeeper, his shop boy, the mail man and some of his relatives. They thought mama was his servant, but really, she was his friend.

I didn't leave the grounds much when I was alive. And I never went to town. On warm summer afternoons, we would walk off property, me and mama, along the river. We'd bring a basket of sweets along, and mama would read me stories. I quite liked Peter Pan. I liked that there could be a place where bad people always lost, and children never had to grow old.

Mama already knew how to read before she met Mr. Quincy, but he was the first person to buy her storybooks.

I liked my life. I liked Mr. Quincy. He was stern and cold at times, but he was always family, and I never knew anyone or anything else.

People never looked me and mama in the eyes when they spoke to us. The bookkeeper, the shop boy, the mail man. Mr. Quincy's relatives least of all. They talked about us oftentimes as if we were nothing more than household appliances or furniture. Mr. Quincy never made us work in the house. Especially when company was around. Most people didn't quite like that. But, as time went on, we saw people less. Mr. Quincy wrote out less. Mr. Quincy worked less. He seemingly shut himself out from the world. And in turn, he shut us out as well.

Mama often said she missed being around people like us. She liked it here, she liked Mr. Quincy, but she remembered what it was like to truly belong. She remembered her own mama. When she was really little and living in the bad place, her mama would

make her little dolls out of grass. These dolls would protect her from bad things. Whenever mama was scared, all she had to do was hold her doll close to her heart, whisper her wish, and she would be safe. She taught me how to do this too. She told me once that even though she was older, she was often scared. She still needed these dolls to help her feel safe and protected- even though she knew she would be ok.

She made a doll for Mr. Quincy because, even though he'd never say it out loud, he was often scared too.

The last day I remember seeing mama or Mr. Quincy was a summer afternoon. It was raining. I don't remember the games I played, or the stories I read, or the conversations I had. I remember seeing mama sitting across from Mr. Quincy with his hands clasped in hers. Their heads bowed. They said nothing. But there was a silent prayer between the two of them. Something that felt like sadness, and terror.

The next thing I remember, everyone was gone, and I was dead.

Int. Parlor - Night

Silence. The kids look at Leanore. Leanore looks at the kids. Leanore reaches into the front pocket of her apron and pulls out a grass doll. She places it on the coffee table between her and the kids.

Dissolve to EXT. Quincy manor - Night.

Wind howls. 3 bikes lean against the front gate.

Fade to black.

## The Clock

*Twenty minutes.* I'm shuttering, knees pressed against me, I'm cold. I'm sweating. I'm always sweating. My skin is wet, but still so dry. The corner of my eyes hurt. It's daytime. I sit on the floor. I have twenty minutes.

*Eighteen minutes.* I can feel every part of my body. Every piece of skin presses up against every other piece of skin. They mold and mesh and form into one lump of body. I feel myself creasing everywhere. It makes my fingers flex and my feet press harder into the ground. Like I could will all of the skin from my body. If I tried hard enough, it would all melt and flop off of my bones, and I'd sit here, with the wind whipping through me like that. The wind through me. Not an obstacle. Not a burden. Not a thing.

*Fifteen minutes.* I need to stand up. I'm crying. I stop. But it's pathetic. Because now. I'm just. Quietly. Whimpering. Like an. Animal.

*Fourteen minutes.* My surroundings are normal. But there is a spotlight on just me. In my normal room. On my normal floor. With a spotlight on just me. Edges of my vision begin to blur. I need to stand up.

*Twelve minutes.* I try to stand up. I stand up. I don't remember standing up. Or how to stand up. But somehow my body did it. This body isn't mine. But it is. I have to live with it. I look at my normal room to avoid looking down at myself. My clothes are on the bed. I'm not by my bed. I only have

*Ten minutes.* I bite my nails. They got too long. My hands are shaking. My fingers shake in my mouth. It feels good to relieve the pressure. Of nails. On my fingers. I look down at my hands. My hands are shaking. I instantly regret biting my nails. I don't have pretty hands. My hands are gross. My hands are wet. I have no nails.

I have *8 minutes.* I look at the clothes on my bed. A large pile of clothes. Different colors. Red, blue, black, white, green, purple. Different items of clothing. Stacked high. It reaches the ceiling. A mound. A mountain. Looming down. Casting a shadow. On my spotlight. I can't see my bed. I know it was there. All of my clothes are on my bed. Staring down at me. I can't touch it. I can't disturb it. There is nothing to wear.

There are *5 minutes.* My forehead is wet. I'm not alone. I'm here with another thing. And it watches me. It watches me. It sits in my spotlight. And it waits. I can avoid it. I should avoid it. I shouldn't look. It wants me to look. It has no power if I don't look. I'm sweating, but the light on me is cold. It's a white light. And it illuminates shadows. I avoid touching my own body. I can't bear to feel myself. I stand like a paper doll. I wish I was a paper doll. So I would be flat and temporary. I'm horrifyingly permanent.

*4 minutes.* I'm horrifying.

*3 minutes.* This is permanent.

*2 minutes.* I shouldn't look, but I know I will. I always look.

*1 minute.* What is tha-

0 minutes. I'm out the door and ready for my day.

## The Bed

I heard the calling late one night. Far before anything had ever happened. I remember it, sitting at my writing desk for what had to be the hundredth night. My husband had come by and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, he had said something to the effect of *Darling, please come to bed, it feels much too cold and empty without you*, and I remember feeling a deep disdain build from within me. He kissed my temple and I thought, *what did **he** have to offer me?* I laid in bed that night unable to fall asleep. I had the inescapable feeling that I had forgotten to do something. Like I had left a candle going in the study, but I had no real motivation to do anything about it. I laid still and awake searching my mind for some missing piece of memory when I saw it. It was a flash of inconsistency, a golden light behind my open eyes. A light that felt like love, but not really. It felt like the edge of some form of love, or maybe like what love always was. It was something viscous and rancid. Something that stung like a cat's scratch, but was much more compelling. It was love that caused one to grow sick, to lie, to kill. And in that second, that second that felt like every complication I'd felt since I first held a boy's hand, I was asked a question.

“What do you want?”

I felt the weight of the presence at my back, this offending body, and I knew without recoil, without shame, what the answer was.

The following day went by restlessly. I saw the plan being laid before me, and yet I felt no urge to act on it. Humanity clawed at me with the same fervor as the growing lust for the unknown. An uncanny placement of the steak knife at lunch, or the recollection of the steep drop from our master balcony. I ignored these though, opting to sink into the mundanity of my current situation as any prospect for true happiness slipped further and further from my grasp. During this time, I endured sleepless night after sleepless night. Our bed had become a patch of briars within which I was helplessly caught, feeling a consistent poking and prodding. A frequent, yet slow, blood-letting that made me want to scratch at every exposed part of my skin. The only solace I felt was at my writing desk, yet the right poem could never quite come to me. And I was always interrupted by the same call to bed. The same iron-cold arms wrenching me from my place of warmth back to the unhappiness of our shared bed.

I received a letter one morning, our first real correspondence. Me and that voice. Until then, I hadn't been sure if it was real. This would be our first of many, many letters. This one was brief though. It had just become spring. Our maid had passed it off to me at breakfast, and I left to read it in private. It was a short, thin piece of parchment that smelled like oranges and had flowers drawn across it in pen. Between those flowers read a single phrase: *It really is so easy to have everything you've ever wanted. You just have to listen.*

I thought I would sleep better. My restless nights found a new location. I would sit for hours in the study, writing poem after poem, but none were good enough. The voice would taunt



me in my mind, or through my lips on the opposite side of a mirror. It would wear my face around often, but only for my own personal torture.

“There are many words for what you are,” It would said, “and none of them are widow.”

And despite everything, I knew I needed it.

It was late one night, and I was, once again, at that desk. It'd been two months since my last burst of inspiration. My desk was covered in half-written poems and endless postcards and letters from an “unknown” sender. My eyes were so blood-shot I was starting to feel my heart beat behind them. That was when I felt the pull to the window, where outside I saw a single white rabbit. It had been two months of this. Two months of these vague calls to action. Yet each time I would move, as if I was a marionette, to find the tool best suited to complete the job. My mindless state brought me to the master bedroom, where I found a pair of shoes to step into. Walking in them proved difficult due to their size, and the fact that I had not stopped to tie them. I then walked to the parlor to grab my husband, sorry, ex-husband's hunting rifle.

My feet sunk into the soft ground surrounding the estate, the dewy grass tickled my bare calves. It took considerable effort to trudge toward my prey. Which sat perfectly still despite my clumsy approach. Illuminated in the moonlight, it stared stupidly up at me. As if it was about to speak. It said nothing. It just twitched its nose at the sky and waited. I stood back, about six feet away, and aimed the rifle at its quivering little body. My finger rested over the trigger, and I had the sensation of a phantom hand over mine urging me to shoot.

But I didn't. I felt the night rising around me. I felt a cold breeze against the back of my neck, and my eyes wandered down to the ground. The strange patch of dirt beneath me led to a slab of rock. I didn't need to read the inscription to know what or who it was commemorating. It was then that I realized I was standing directly on his chest, or about where his chest would be. All at once I had the sobering realization of the image I had created. Then I realized I was wearing his boots.

## The Table

“Georgia, please,” I sighed, reaching at her, my chest pressed to the table, “please look at me.”

Her shoulders shook, but there was no muffled sob, no noise. Her arms sat stiffly by her side, and she glared forward.

“Georgia-,”

“Sorry,” she spat. And it hung in the air, flat and dry, the voice more rugged, seemingly not belonging to the little girl.

Stillness.

There are pictures on the wall of us, and in the pictures she’s smiling. She was missing teeth in each of them. Different teeth each time. They still aren’t all grown in. She smiled without her eyes. The wallpaper is white with thin vines spreading across, small yellow flowers splattered on each. The doors were closed in the dining room, the two of us sat at the long table. Her sisters were playing upstairs.

I swallowed slowly because I didn’t want to disturb the stillness. Splayed out before her, I couldn’t seem to move. She didn’t look at me.

The room was suffocating, the air was dry and hot and humming with an undisturbed disturbed energy. It filled my nostrils and wrapped itself around my lungs until I realized I wasn’t breathing. So, I tried to learn how to again. It was quiet outside the room. The world was still. The table was empty. The doors were closed. She sat and stared at the wall. She sat and glared at the wall. I sat and stared at her.

I waited, but waiting was not the right word. I was hiding in the corner of her eye that she couldn’t quite catch me in. Her blind spot. I was just alive enough that she knew I was there. But not active enough to be addressed.

Her eyes were wet, the tip of her nose red, and her jaw set so firmly, I was afraid her remaining baby teeth would shatter under the pressure. But I couldn’t touch her, or ease her. She hated it when I touched her.

I told her she couldn't play anymore.

She plays too rough with her sisters.

She plays too rough with other kids.

She plays too rough with me.

I need her to look at me when she apologizes, so I know she means it.

I can't be angry when she cries, even if she cries so I won't be angry. Or because she doesn't know what else to do.

This dining room wasn't her prison. I hoped it would be her sanctuary, and that we could talk and I would suddenly understand.

The house was old, it was my grandmother's house, and when she died, it became mine. The carpeting was outdated and the wood floors were scratched in ways I will never be able to repair. But it still settled sometimes. I heard it moaning and creaking often. But it had a big yard that the kids liked to play in.

I've heard Georgia talking in her room at night, though she sleeps alone because she can't be trusted around her sisters without supervision.

Sometimes I think she's trying to scare me.

She stared at the wall in the dining room, and a part of me thought she was staring at something, someone. Something hidden in the wallpaper. Behind those vines. Resting beneath the flower petals. Something speaking to her. Something that would explain the marks on the floors. Something that would explain the groaning in the walls. Something that would help me understand why she plays so rough with her sisters. Why she hates me. Something that would explain the scratch across my cheekbone.

It stung. It stung and yet, she was crying. Wet eyes, staring at the wall. Finger nails chipping the seat of her wooden chair. Feet hanging, dangling, lightly swinging.

My feet pressed to the floor, arms across the table, open mouth breathing, staring at her. Waiting, still.

Wondering, what turned her into this. This growling, scratching, screaming, shoving, biting, angry thing.

“Georgia, please,” I whispered.

“I said what you wanted,” she whipped her head at me, “now let me out!”

I jumped back.

“That wasn’t a good apology,” she was glaring at me. Not the pictures on the wall, or the vines on the wall, or the marks on the floor, or the chips in her chair, or the streaks on the table, “ten more minutes.”

She started screaming, screaming in an unearthly sense, like she was in distress and like her limbs were falling off and like she was being burned alive. Screaming with a ragged and raw throat, that sounded less than human and somehow more than that too. But it did pass along a message. And I quickly shut the door behind me, but it still passed through.

Stillness. I stood in the bathroom and I looked at the impressive little scratch. Impressive how deep her short nails could get. And a feeling came over me. Instead of seeing myself as I was in the mirror, I saw the image of myself, sprawled out across the table, shuttering. Less of a mother and more of her prey. And a feeling came over me.

My throat was ragged and I was breathing heavily, my mouth was open. I was gripping the sink so tight, I felt I might pull it from the wall. My nails digging into the clean porcelain, my shoulders arching uncomfortably, my ears deaf to whatever sound was pushed out of me. And in the mirror, I saw myself red-faced and pupils dilated. And I felt that, if I wanted to, I could put my fist through the wall. Maybe I would.

All the while I wondered how my daughter became such a monster.

## The Diner

My head emerged from a small body of water. I was surrounded by five of my closest friends, but I couldn't quite seem to make out their faces. It was nighttime, and there were white lights shining in the water. It was black and murky otherwise. That wasn't our swimming pool, and we weren't in bathing suits. I was in my clothes, and so were they. But they were talking and laughing. It's then that I realized I look different than them. They were all pale, light. I could see them when they went under water. I don't know who I am or how I look. But they talked and laughed with me and it all molded together like background noise.

Suddenly, I was very tired. I don't remember a time when I was as tired as then, and as soon as my eyes started to sink, I was waking up in the back seat of a car. It was nice, a convertible, red, vintage looking. We all were asleep there, sprawled on top of each other, like we had done it dozens of times, like this was normal for us. All half naked and sleeping comfortably in a small space.

Then, I was hungry. And suddenly we were all awake, and settling in to a parking space before a small diner, also red, also vintage. The concrete looked like it rained recently, with dark patches blooming from the uncovered sections of pavement. It wasn't warm, but it was sweaty. The humidity lingered against my forehead, it spread across my scalp, and I could feel my hair retreating back with it. Inside was slightly better. We were cramped into a booth, which shouldn't have been cramped, but the boys amongst us decided to extend their legs as far as they could manage, in order to be the most comfortable. We were all still half dressed. There was a wooden fan overhead, and it made no noise. The table was red and white, and menus were scattered across it. No one looked at the menus or even talked. The diner was kind of empty. Only a small family at a table nearby and a man at the counter nursing a white mug of coffee. The waitresses were dressed in pink dresses- akin to something you would see at a classic, 50s diner, and they wore rollerblades. They all sort of looked the same. They had the same complexion as my friends. They had shiny brown hair that was done up so tight, they almost looked like they were wearing helmets.

Then, I had the urge to use the bathroom, though I didn't really have to use the bathroom. I walked down a long corridor that seemed like a hallway, and it was covered with paintings. Paintings of dead fish. Dead fish painted in vibrant, dark colors, with their eyes wide. They were all laying on plates with their stomachs split open. Their eyes followed me as I made my way down the hallway. The walls were a yellowed wood, the floors a dark wood with a long red carpet trailing from entrance to bathroom, which was the only door at the end of the hallway. The fish were purple, blue, and green, and they repeated that pattern as far and as long as the hallway was, which was quite a bit. The bathroom was similar to the hallway, all yellows, reds, greens, and blues, and all seeming somewhat murky, as if the colors had been left in dirt or found on an old boat. Different from the sleek vintage mystique of the main diner seating area. The stall doors were thick and wooden with an unfortunately large gap between the edge of the door and

the edge of the stall. But I sat down and waited almost like using the bathroom was a performance that I was trying to do accurately.

Suddenly, a man wandered in. He was different from everyone else, he seemed not to understand this place, and didn't seem to attempt to try to in the way I was. He seemed somewhat manic, this darker skinned man. He was panting, sweating, and he peered in through the gap-his eyes following mine-, and feeling that something about this wasn't right, I started screaming. His eyes were brown and bloodshot and he was wearing a dirty brown jacket only a few shades lighter than his skin. He stumbled out of the bathroom at my sudden reaction. I followed him out.

I saw him slowly walking down the uncanny hallway. I stood at the bathroom door watching him walk away. Then, two of the waitresses rolled over, blocking his path. I stared as he stopped in place. The waitresses pulled out long, shining steak knives and jammed them into his stomach. They pulled the knives out and did it again. Again and again. And there was nothing on their faces but plain neutrality. I stood at the other end screaming. *It's ok. It's ok. He's fine, he didn't do anything wrong. Please stop.* But it was as if I was muted. It was as if this was what they had intended to do anyways. The paintings on the wall seemed to stare too, their dead eyes gazing down at their companion. And I kept screaming. All the while, my friends talked, and spread out on the booth, half naked, waiting for my next urge.

## The Store

Warm light filtered in through boarded up windows, turning dust particles into snow as they drifted through the musty air. Roger tried to clear his throat, but was soon doubled over, coughing into the pit of his elbow as he braced himself against the counter. Linus sat still at one of the high-top tables, waiting to re-capture Roger's attention.

It was late one night, and Linus had been catching a cab home when he caught sight of the condemned building he would soon find himself sitting in. He had told the driver to pull over, there was something about that place that seemed to call to him. Something so out of place about it in this particular neighborhood. Where all of the buildings surrounding it, visibly, even at that time of night, were covered in nice brown brick overlaid with bright green vines and trellises overflowing with flowers of every color, with iron railings leading up perfect stone staircases; this building was the kind of old that people kept away from. The kind of old that sensible people, like the one's who lived in this neighborhood, would cover up with classy vintage wallpaper, or knock down to build something newer, better. Linus read the name, in worn, chipped, faded red letters: Dr. Red's. He tried to peer in, through the cracks in the boards on the windows, and he felt a deep chill move through his body. Almost as if a ghost had walked through him. He could see nothing but pitch, black darkness. But a part of him felt that if he looked long enough, tempting fate, he would see something staring back. He quickly backed away after that realization, and then was struck with another. He became very aware of how he looked. How a man like him couldn't afford to be scoping out an old building late at night in a neighborhood like this. Especially alone. Linus took a quick picture of the address, and rushed back to the cab silently waiting for him by the curb.

That was all the night before, that morning, Linus had returned to Dr. Red's and had gone straight back to those windows again, in hopes of seeing something new in the daylight. To his surprise, it looked just like any other corner store. Except, it was quite big, and there looked to be a few tables where Linus could imagine people loudly chatting over a small coffee and a newspaper. A large but weak hand grasping onto Linus' shoulder scared him out of his imagination. When he turned around, he saw Roger. First, Linus had assumed the man was homeless and was perhaps attempting to solicit him. He was a lot older than the other people Linus had seen walking by, and the only other black person he'd seen since entering the neighborhood. He wore a big brown coat and smelled of cigarette smoke, and his eyes took up most of his face. However, when the man introduced himself as the last living relative of Dr. Red, and the owner of the now, decrepit shop, Linus felt more than a little bit ashamed of himself. But Roger said he'd tell Linus everything about Dr. Red's.

The shop used to be amazing, Linus thought. It had to have been the spot. The floors, covered in a thick layer of dust and dirt- and horribly cracked as well-, were a brown and cream tile. The walls had been covered in wall shelves and framed photos, that were now shattered and cracked, and barely hanging. The table Linus opted to sit at still had an old box of cards sitting upright in the center.

“Everyone knew him as Dr. Red,” Roger said, his back facing Linus, “I knew him as Uncle James...”

Uncle James grew up on this street. Back then, this street was home. Back then, stores like this took up the whole block. The townhouses were full of mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, who looked just like us. Black people, brown people. And we all knew each other's names. I remember still, the old women in the townhouse at the other end of the block, would invite me and my older brothers over for dinner every Sunday after church. I played cards with the men who worked at the old factory- it used to be a ways down from here. And sometimes, when I was deep in my thoughts, I'd just wander the streets at night. Somehow, I'd always find my way back here, to this store. Dr. Red's wasn't just my uncle's store. It was his father's, and it was the community's. It started as an apothecary. Something Dr. Red senior decided was needed with places in the area denying people like us. He would sell home remedies, and later on, real medicine. After a while he decided to make it a real corner store. Selling anything anyone could need on short notice. But mostly. It was just a spot where folks would come and listen to the radio, read the paper, gossip, play cards, smoke a bit, laugh, sing, cry. My uncle James had big shoes to fill after Dr. Red senior died, but as far as I'm concerned, he was the only Dr. Red to me.

Now, uncle James was different from his father. Uncle James saved up money to go to a real university. He was the first in his family to do so. He studied medical science. Uncle James wanted to be an actual doctor, and he believed that, by doing so, he could set his family up for life, financially. From what I've heard, uncle James was a genius. He could've been a real doctor, and sometimes I like to think what it would've been like if he had been. Unfortunately, when his father got sick, he had to move home and take over at the store. I always wondered if he resented Dr. Red. If, behind that smile he always had, he wished his life would've turned out differently. If he hated us for what his life became. But he was always happy, uncle James.

I remember when the change started. There was a sign on one of the townhouse doors. An eviction notice. They said the building would be torn down, and they needed everyone and everything out by the end of the next week. That sign appeared on more doors. It spread like a plague across the neighborhood. Soon, the same thing started with the businesses. There was a laundromat down where that gas station is now, the old man who owned that was one of the lucky ones. He got paid out under the table, to take everything and move in silence. Ernie, the owner of a jukebox diner that used to be down the road a ways, was less lucky. He woke up one morning to his things being hauled away. I remember the police dragging him off as he tried to enter the empty diner that had been in his family for generations.

Soon, new people began moving in. They redid all of the townhouses to make them look nice and new. While mine was full. Full of families both related and unrelated to me, people who had no place else to go. I remember sleeping in a room with seven other kids, some older than me, some younger. Some nights we wouldn't even sleep, we'd stare out the window and watch as more trucks came and knocked stuff over. As more strangers moved in.

Uncle James seemed to change the most though. He was always nice. Always smiling. But he had more secrets. I used to assume that that was just what happened when you got older.



You keep more to yourself. And I guess now, I understand. But back then, it was strange. People came by the store less. The strangers were too afraid to come in. I started working for uncle James around that time. I mainly just restocked shelves, kept the back room clean, wiped down tables. The usual type of work you give a kid to keep him busy. I remember walking up to the store one day, and seeing some horrible word spray painted on the front window. I knew the word, I knew what it meant, and I could damn- sure bet on who did it. There was this kid who had moved in, a few years older than me, to one of the newer townhouses. And he made it clear he didn't like us. Any of us. Uncle James didn't seem mad about the word or the paint. He just gave me a rag and a bucket, then went back to work.

When the store was quiet, uncle James would read. He read science books mainly. With words I could never imagine knowing. Lots of pictures though. Of people. Bodies. He would read something, then he would write or draw something in his notebook. I remember asking him once what he was doing, what all of that was for. 'Nothing, just thinking' was all he'd ever say.

Two weeks after the paint incident, I woke up to police cars on our street. There was a white lady in her bathrobe crying, and a white man with a big mustache rubbing her shoulder, saying something, pointing at our building. That afternoon, each of our parents sat down with the police and answered questions. I sat at the top of the stairs and listened. The boy had gone missing. They weren't blaming us, they said, but they came back every day to watch us.

I went to work that night, to help uncle James restock before the morning. He was sitting at the counter again, reading and drawing. He looked tired. I asked him if he heard what happened to that boy. He said yes. We didn't talk about it more. The next day, another business was torn down, and another family moved in. My mother said that soon, they would try to push us out.

That was the worst summer I'd ever lived through. As more strangers moved in, the less the neighborhood felt like home. I was often chased through the streets on my way back from the park by the white kids on the block. My uncle's store was often painted on or egged. And constantly, the early morning beeping and gasping of demolition trucks. I worked more hours then, I felt safe around uncle James.

That summer, more people went missing on our street. More police were around. Every day was a new name, and a new set of questions. A new officer in our house. Soon they started questioning us, the kids. They went through our room one day. They never found anything. One night, they came into my uncle's store, tried to scare him. I remember what they said. Soon, all of us would be out. This wasn't our neighborhood anymore. Uncle James smiled at them. He was never angry.

That same night, I remember tossing and turning in bed. I left something at the store. Every time I think back to that night, the item changes. All I know for sure is that something brought me back to the shop that night. And whatever it was I decided to quickly go back and grab it. It was late though. Every time I try to remember it, the time changes. I know it was

between midnight and four in the morning. I had snuck past my parents' room, down the stairs, and found myself picking the lock to the old store. I remember there was a light on. The store room light was on, despite the rest of the store being dark. I heard talking. I heard my uncle James. And another voice, but I couldn't make out any words. I quietly crept through the store, and over to the store room. I squinted into the crack in the door and I saw my uncle James with something, or someone, huge.

The thing was sitting on a long table in the back room almost like it was an operating table, and my uncle was leaning over it doing something that I couldn't quite see properly. That's when I noticed the smell. It was the kind of smell that sticks in your nose even after fifty-nine years. It involuntarily caused bile to rise in the back of my throat. A thick, rotten smell. Then I saw, when I squinted even harder, that my uncle's sleeves were stained a deep dark red. And on the floor, was an object that looked almost like a foot, or a leg. I tried so long to forget I had seen anything. Maybe I was tired. Maybe I was sleep-walking. But I know now what I saw was real. The longer I stared at the thing, I began to notice that legs on it were two different sizes, one slightly thinner than the other. The arms were the same, but one was a little shorter. I never saw the face, or I never wanted to see the face. But if I had, I'm sure it would have been the same. Mismatched and horrifying. And my uncle James was doing something with it. I don't know exactly what it was, but it made him look like a real doctor.

I slipped out, making sure I wasn't heard, and spent the rest of the night lying awake. I loved the store. I loved uncle James. I was dreading going to work. I was dreading seeing him. I wished everything had been a dream.

The next morning, the police were back. Patrolling. I felt guilty. Guilty as I watched them from my window. Guilty as I passed them on the sidewalks.

I went to work that day, expecting to smell death, but smelling nothing but coffee. Uncle James was working on something in his journal. I felt ashamed of myself, watching him, because I felt afraid. Afraid of him for the first time in my life. The day went on in silence. We barely had any customers anymore. So, I spent the day cleaning and sweeping and reorganizing. No one defiled the building anymore. Something in that made me feel strange. Uneasy. Sick.

As the day ended, my uncle called my name. I remember being terrified that he knew I'd seen him. That he'd feed me to his monster. Or worse. He'd cut me up and put my arms or legs on it too. But he smiled sadly down at me. And he sighed. I remember what he said.

'I love this neighborhood,' he looked off, over my head as he said it, 'my father loved this neighborhood too, and all the folks that live in it. I know we're in hard times. That things get worse before they can get better. But if I can, I'll do anything to protect this place and these people.'

He paused for a long time.

'Dr. Red. My father. It's a big name to live up to. He was everything to these people. I wasn't here when he got sick, and when I got back, he wasn't dead, but he was gone. I think, if I could've gotten here sooner, I could have helped him. I know that doesn't help anyone, thinking

like that. But I'm tired. Scared most of the time. And I'm angry. Police have been around here a lot. Asking a lot of questions. People are suspicious. I want you to know, no matter what happens to this place, to me, to us, that everything I do is for our family. No...no matter what, we'll be ok. I'll make sure we'll be ok.'

The end of summer was hotter than any other summer before. It made certain stinks unbearable. Someone reported a smell coming out of Dr. Red's. The next thing I knew, there were sirens, police tape, and a crowd of people watching as black, leather boots smashed through the glass door.

My uncle was already dead by the time they had gone in to arrest him. I guess he knew it was too late. But they found his project too. On that long table. Also, dead. Or less alive than when I had first seen it. They found bodies in that back room. Suddenly, everything had made complete sense, and yet, no sense at all.

In the coming weeks, tension grew in the neighborhood. The papers came out, making my uncle sound like a maniac. Like he was always insane. Reporters came by a lot, walking through the store, which was quickly boarded up and condemned. They were interested in the bodies. What my uncle had done with them. Most papers called him crazy. A couple called him what he was. A genius. Whether or not what he did was right or wrong. No one could deny that my uncle James was a genius. And somehow, that made him more horrifying than a maniac. That made us more horrifying.

My townhouse was the last to fall. We moved out that winter. We moved deeper into the city to live with my mother's family. I never saw those old neighbors, the kids I used to share a room with, again. But every once in a while, I'd walk through this neighborhood.

Uncle James used to say, when he died, the store would be mine. He had no next of kin. He was young when he died. Younger than I am now. So, a part of me felt a responsibility to it. I would pass it, just to make sure it was still there. And it always was. I remember sometime long ago I asked why, after everything, it was still standing on the corner. They said no one with half a brain would build on that spot. Something about it being cursed.

I've been checking in on it every day for the past fifty-nine years, and I started to think, maybe that's what this was all for. In some way, uncle James had done it. In some way, he protected this store.

I've been coming by for fifty-nine years, and I'd never seen someone take an interest to this place. Not until today. I've never told anyone any of this. I've carried all of this with me my entire life. But, I don't know, I think someone ought to know him. Someone ought to keep it alive."

Roger hadn't looked at Linus the whole time. But something heavy sunk into Linus' stomach. It wasn't pity, fear, it was a nagging sadness that he felt had rested into the air, and was now a part of the store. Linus could've been anyone, he thought. Roger didn't care. For a moment, Linus

wondered if this man truly was insane. That Roger had lured him in there to rob him or kill him or both. But Linus sat there and watched Roger for another minute. In that minute, he swore he could smell a hint of rot in the back of his nose. Behind the scent of mold and dust. And he wondered if it was all just his mind playing tricks on him. But Linus decided, regardless of what was or wasn't real, he wanted to trust Roger. It was quiet for a long time, but soon they both left, going their separate ways. Linus would never speak of the store, or Roger, to anyone, but on random winter afternoons, he'd pass it by just to check if it was still there.

## The Edge

“I thought I’d find you out here,” Sonar sighed as they fished through their pockets for the front door key. Raygun stared out silently. They watched as the mauve sky dimmed into a deep indigo, and as transport ships whirred across the empty desert. Outpost 98 was a rest stop for these kinds of ships. The kind that doesn’t have a specific purpose aside from getting folks from one place to the other. Raygun had seen these ships in all corners of the galaxy. At some point, Raygun might’ve even ridden one. Perhaps when escaping corrupt unregistered planetary militias. Or in hot pursuit of political bounty hunters. Back when Raygun’s life was chronicled through sequences of action and adventure.

Lost deep in their thoughts, Raygun didn’t notice Sonar slowly easing themselves down beside them. Sonar leaned back on their hands, sighing once again. They both swung their legs off the edge of the floating platform, spurred by an awkward fascination with the windspeed at this hour of night.

“Have you ever been to Edge?” Raygun broke the silence.

“No?”

“It’s a small planet on the outskirts of the Meridian Cluster, near Station Z 84-”

“Why does this matter?” Sonar groaned, collapsing onto their back.

“I’ve only been there once. It’s a little planet. Most people forget to log it in most navigation systems,” Raygun looked straight down at the fog blanketing the bottom edge of the platform. They were so high up, the ground seemed like nothing more than an assumption, a metaphor, a conception, “I think about it a lot though...”

Edge was a red planet. It was rocky and warm, but there were native plants. Water could be found deep in the ground, or in random craters in the barren wasteland the locals called “The Rafters”. There were two cities there, and they were practically on top of one another. One was Fade the other was End. Fade was a vibrant community. They didn’t work much, they mainly made music. They mainly talked. They mainly danced. Every night was a celebration. Fade’s streets were lined in scarves of many different colors. The way the people spoke was like silk. The most important part about Fade was that no one ever died. They seemed to be fueled by passion and art and love for one another.

End was a proud community. The citizens of End worked the land day in and day out. They never ran out of laborers. And they seemed content with their lives. They woke up before the suns rose and slept early. They took little to no breaks, and they bonded over their work ethics. The city itself was less colorful than Fade. End focused on its function more than its style. All houses looked exactly the same. All people looked exactly the same. In End, it seemed, no

one was ever born. As soon as one worker died, another of the exact same type would replace them.

The two cities lived in harmony despite their differences. The planet thrived in that way. The cities thrived, and “The Rafters” was off limits to both. And not by any written law. As far as anyone was concerned, there were no laws on Edge, but this unspoken rule was upheld out of a fear for whatever existed in that uncontrolled space.

“Why were you there?” Sonar had sat back up halfway through the story, engaged.

“They had found a body,” Raygun no longer beheld the majesty of Outpost 98, now seeing visions of Edge embedded into the horizon, “out in ‘The Rafters’, they found it face down in one of the craters.”

Sonar sat quietly, a million questions running through their head, none persistent enough to make it past their lips.

“No one could tell which city the body came from, or how they died,” Raygun clasped their hands together in their lap, “and for a moment there was panic because there was no logical reasoning or situation that could explain how or why this person was dead or out in ‘The Rafters’.”

“So, what happened?” Sonar watched intently as Raygun thought through their answer.

“Nothing, we all just...moved on.”

*"An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger."*

**James Baldwin**