

5-2018

Eyes that Shut Forever

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EYES THAT SHUT FOREVER

A Thesis

by

JONATHAN SOLIS

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2018

Major Subject: Creative Writing

EYES THAT SHUT FOREVER

A Thesis
by
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May 2018

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ABSTRACT

Solis, Jonathan, Eyes that Shut Forever. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2018, 110 pp, references, 19 titles.

This thesis explores a part of society which is often not explored due to controversial content. The six stories in this collection contain characters with mental illnesses. The stories center on the struggle for normalcy and reality vs. fiction and conformity. As a writer, it is important for me to embody each of my characters, as a way of understanding how each one feels and thinks. Mental illness is a tragic story in itself. Many individuals with mental illness are denied the proper help, while others succumb to their demons in silence. Sight is important too, because by the end of each story, the eyes of every protagonist will shut forever.

DEDICATION

The completion and compilation of this thesis collection would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of my family. To my mother, Teresa Solis, my father, Jesus Solis, my brothers, Nathan, and Joseph Solis, and my sister, Megan Solis. Thank you for your love and loyalty.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Christopher Carmona, chair of my thesis committee, for his advice and mentoring through the process. Through research and manuscript editing, he has helped me through every step of the way to pave the path for my stories. Very special thanks goes out to my thesis committee members: Dr. Amy Cummins, Dr. Robert Johnson, and Dr. John Lowdermilk. Their advice, comments and input for my thesis content helped to shape the foundation upon which I built each story.

I would also like to thank Dr. Philip Zwerling, the previous Director of the MFA program, for his guidance and help in getting me into the program.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Eyes that Shut Forever

Mental illness is a serious issue affecting many individuals around the world and often misinterpreted by the populace as a whole. People are more sympathetic to what they can see, not what is happening inside someone's head, because what someone can't see can't possibly be real. But imagine for a moment every time you ever felt helpless or when you wanted to say something but could not because someone interrupted you. That is the struggle people with mental illness face every single day. These stories illustrate a downward spiral, much like in tragic tales of old where protagonist were dehumanized and succumbed to their tragic flaws.

Writing about mental illness is a sensitive enough subject without having to worry about the scrutiny behind it. It is one thing to read about someone's struggles with paranoia, but complete understanding comes only from experiencing it. A writer's method is just as effective as the story being told. Many writers use what they've read as a template for how the story will be written and interpreted by others. But acclaimed writer David Foster Wallace created his own way of writing to differentiate himself from the competition. David Lipsky perfectly describes David Foster Wallace's work in his opening article, "*Wallace Invented 'New Style, New Comedy.'*" He asserts, "To read David Foster Wallace was to feel your eyelids pulled open" (Lipsky 14). That is what each of these stories will convey; the experience of having these mental illnesses. As Lipsky further illustrates, "You didn't slip into the books looking for story,

information but for a particular experience. The sensation, for a certain number of pages, of being David Foster Wallace” (Lipsky 1217). The moment is the most important and essential component to understanding the struggle that many endure in silence. Reading David Foster Wallace’s novel ‘*Interview with Hideous Men*’, gave me the mindset I wanted to use when writing my stories. This includes the feeling of uneasiness and social alienation since mental illness causes difficulty in creating social bonds outside of familial obligations.

Understanding what makes something a mental illness is just as important as understanding how it is perceived by others. Certain classifications like depression and addiction are not viewed as illnesses unless they affect the person’s ability to function as a contributing member of society. In addition, medication is required to treat illnesses. It is true that, “If you can treat it with medicines, some think, then it cannot be *mental*” (Scruton 38). But if that is true, then why do so many people believe that depression is a mental illness, or that schizophrenia is a mental disorder? The difference between the two is that depending on the severity of depression, it can be treated with therapy and not medication. Schizophrenia requires medication, regardless of the severity because of the behavioral aspects and unpredictability as the afflicted becomes older. The truth is, “Even most psychoanalysts agree that there is no way to talk to someone out of schizophrenia; yet it *can* be treated with drugs” (Scruton 38). This creates a designation both of place and bearing for people with mental illness, who are immediately classified with pill bottles and a regimen that they must follow to control their impulses. Like a dog on a chain, those who suffer from mental illness become further trapped in their own heads by the very people trying to help them.

In today’s society, certain mental illnesses are seen as taboo, such as Schizophrenia, and Erotomania. The mere mention of these illnesses in the media is cause for the recipients to react

with disgust and scrutiny. According to Dr. Friedman, “When people feel that an individual with mental illness is dangerous, that results in fear and increased social distance. This social distancing may result in the experience of social isolation or loneliness on the part of people with mental illness” (Friedman 2932). In a lot of ways, this is because of the way the media has portrayed these illnesses. Schizophrenia is often thought to include both seeing and hearing things although it is different for every individual. Some may only see things, while others hear things. Furthermore, individuals with schizophrenia are not always volatile but they do have heightened emotional distress rates. Erotomania has its fair share of controversy, especially in reference to the assassination attempt on former U.S. President Ronald Reagan. John Hinckley Jr obsessed over Jodie Foster and tried to gain her attention by appearing on television as a criminal. The actions of these individuals who suffer from the mental illnesses in this collection should be judged not by the mental illness each face, but how their actions are driven by what they suffer. This goes hand in hand with self-stigma, as it “will often undermine self-efficacy, resulting in a ‘why try’ attitude that can worsen prospects of recovery,” (Friedman 44-46). The story that best shows this case in point is “The Glad Eye.” In this story, the main protagonist lives in exile of himself, and as a result becomes an unhinged individual whose chance for redemption has dwindled by the end of the story.

Media can be seen as a villain in these stories as well as in the battle against mental illness. It shapes the way people view mentally ill individuals, and as a result can either bring the truth to light or overshadow it with half-truths and lies. In an article concerning the stigma behind mental illness, there is an ad from the National Association for Mental Health which was published in *Hospitals* magazine. In it, there is a picture of a girl who has never smiled in her life. The ad goes on to promote the need for research and encourage others to take part in the

healing of the child and others who suffer from her affliction. But as the article wisely puts, “If all concerned parties were around on her birthday to make sure of this, then there’s a chance she had Moebius Syndrome, a congenital disease that causes weakness or paralysis of the facial muscles” (Diesing 1416). This misconception can also be related to the mental illnesses in this thesis, and how each one is viewed both by the afflicted and those who see it happening to them.

The problem with mental illness and stigma is how in today’s culture and society people are strongly influenced by the media. In an era when gun shootings have become as prominent as Sunday Football, people are overly reliant on the news to inform them of what is happening in the world. This includes the mass shootings at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida orchestrated by Nikolas Cruz. Almost immediately mental illness was claimed to explain the reason he committed the murders. The assumption is that in today’s society, a person with no mental illness would not commit acts of violence against another person. It is true also that, “While it is important to control access to firearms by those who are prone to violence (not just those with mental illness), it is more important that we fix the flawed mental health system, starting with increasing the funding for, and availability of, mental health services” (Wolf & Rosen 854). Shootings dealing with mentally ill individuals are nothing new in the media, but because of the number of incidents from the Valentine’s Day 2018 Florida school shootings to the October 2017 Las Vegas shootings and more recently the March shooting at YouTube headquarters in California, there is even more cause for the media to use mental illness as the cause for these attacks. Every character in these stories could possibly benefit greatly from medication, but the reason they do not seek help in this regard, except in the more severe cases, is that in real life, not everyone with mental illness has access to medical means. Some issues that many with mental illness deal with include, “The high cost of mental health care, the

shortage of mental health professionals around the country, and the public's negative attitudes about mental illness all prevent individuals from seeking help" (Wolf & Rosen 856). Because of this, many go untreated for mental illness and become dangers to society and themselves. The biggest drawback though to mental illness and the stigma with gun violence is the "recent gun control legislation targets the mentally ill which exacerbates the stigma about violence and mental illness and may deter individuals from seeking the care they need" (Wolf & Rosen 856). That is the tragedy of each of these stories; mental illness is not hopeless, but its cause has less hope. Although there are many wonderful causes that are bringing to light all the injustices of mental illness stigma such as Treatment Advocacy Center and Brain & Behavior Research Foundation, the media is ultimately fueling more fear in already fragile situation. This is because of the stereotypical way mental illness is portrayed in modern society.

Too often the media tends to take mental illnesses and turn them into advertisement for holidays such as Valentine's Day. In one such article, The Vermont Teddy Bear Company sparked controversy over a bear with the tagline, "Crazy for You." The bear in question wore a straightjacket, had a heart embroiled on its chest, and had a tag which read: Commitment Report= Can't Eat, Can't Sleep, My Heart's Racing. Diagnosis: CRAZY FOR YOU!" Naturally, this advocacy was met with a polarizing response, but mostly negative from those who suffer from mental illness. The company who made this bear responded with, "We recognize that this is a sensitive, human issue and sincerely apologize if we have offended anyone. That was certainly not our intent. The bear was created in the spirit of Valentine's Day and as with all our bears, it was designed to be a lighthearted depiction of the sentiment of love" (Associated Press, January 13, 2005) (Eisenhauer 13). This wasn't the only example displayed in the article. Others used art to illustrate mental illness, taking many forms from a crazed man chained up like the Hunchback

of Notre Dame, and using a horse's face to represent a 'long face' and compare it to human facial features. While the intent could be seen as educational by some, it can be perceived as insensitive or inaccurate to many others. An important note though is that, "Medical illustration is an important part of the visual culture of mental illness and represents a desire to identify and control mental illness through its visual identification" (Eisenhauer 15). The problem that happens with the media is how it aims more to exploit mental illness rather than display the truth of what it is really about. Because it is easier to write about a certain spectrum, than to explore the wide ranges of different parts of mental illness.

Perception is one of the most important aspects of these stories, as the eye is a symbolism not only of human fragility, but of the mind itself. Our eyes allow us to see things that our mind then processes like how a computer downloads information. People with mental illness see the world through fixed lenses that come in all shapes and sizes. This can cause a distortion of their reality which may hinder the way they react to certain things. Some adjust to change better than others, just as everyone reacts to certain things in a way based on their past experiences. There is the old notion of nature vs. nurture. Many believe that if you have a good childhood, you will grow up to become a productive citizen, while if you suffered abuse, then you are likely to repeat the cycle again at some point in your life. Human nature dictates the way certain people will embrace situations like something beyond their control, or irreconcilable love. While mental illness can be influenced by familial issues, the main culprit is usually the afflicted themselves and how their brain is hardwired.

For instance, a child with sociopathic tendencies may have a grasp or an idea of what right and wrong is, but can choose to commit acts of violence without any remorse or concern for the consequences. This causes them to be viewed as dangerous to others, while the individual in

question has a choice to make; to act out on their primal instincts, or to better themselves beyond their limitations. A person with mental illness won't admit that their viewpoint is wrong. To them, their actions are justified. The protests of others come to them as nagging. Society also dictates the viewpoint of individuals with mental illness. If a child feels a certain way and is chastised for it, they will grow up believing they are wrong, and the world is right. For those suffering with mental illness, this point of view is even more fragile.

The way each story is structured is from mild to most intense to create a feeling of discomfort for the reader. While the first story, "The Put Down", is by no means a pleasant one, it doesn't become as heart wrenching as the final story in this collection. The idea is to portray mental illness as it really is and not promote awareness by showing only parts of the struggle. The first story, which deals with sociopathic tendencies, shows a young man who is shaped and molded by the events that happen in his life to become someone potentially dangerous in the future. Considering this is the mildest story in the selections, a single violent act is committed in this story, whereas the others feature more brutal and tragic ends. Hollywood and the media try to downplay mental illness as something that can be healed through medicine, praying, or discouraging certain behaviors related to the mental illness. But the truth of the matter is that many of these people do not have happy endings. Many meet grisly ends, with little to no one mourning them, and the world unable to comprehend their struggle.

"The Put Down" is the story of a boy named Daniel who has to kill his dog after the latter is terminally ill. Two meanings of "The Put Down" are shown in this story. Daniel's father refuses to pay medical expenses for the dog and in turn puts his own son down throughout the whole story. Reading this story aloud during one of my classes in the MFA program allowed me a privilege I am rarely honored with: to physically portray my character. I read my character's

inner thoughts and for a moment became the boy in my story. The ending especially gave me more chills reading it aloud than writing it because it suggests the boy's sociopathic nature will play a major role in his life going forward. One of the central themes of the story is loss, and how it influences people to become their worst selves. Daniel's father became withdrawn and cruel after his wife died giving birth to his son. Daniel also suffers the loss of his best friend, and later his dog, who was the last of his companions. These events leave his future marred and forlorn. The ending is purposefully ambiguous because the hints are all there. There is enough to suggest that Daniel will embrace a hard life going forward, and become a menace to society. Some can argue, though, that Daniel could emerge from his pain stronger and by having learned how to cope with loss, can eventually become a better person than his father. The end result is an unsure future where nothing is certain.

Loss is a profound topic that is found in all these stories. Daniel loses his dog, Randall loses his sanity, Aiden lost his brother, Jared lost the object of his affection, Carl lost his freedom, and Will lost his life. Loss does not have to be of a physical object, but must be meaningful to the character. For Daniel, the loss of his mother causes his father to lash out at him, and the loss of his dog causes him to become a dangerous individual in the future. Interestingly, "Part of the adaptation process entrails understanding of self, or identity, at the time of loss" (Tubbs & Boss 286). Daniel's father is unable to move past his wife's death, and treats his son like a plague, with everyone around him suffering grim fates, such as Daniel's friend and his dog. This is also like how Will's mother is calloused towards her son for his part in her husband's suicide. When an individual has a sense of self, they are better able to adapt to traumatic situations in life and can improve themselves. After all, "Identity not only affects adaptation to loss but also the response" (Tubbs & Boss 286). Daniel's losses shape the man he

is destined to become, while his father is stuck in a moment where his son is the cause of his misfortune. Both are trapped in an ambiguous vortex where the destination will always be nowhere.

One of the more intense stories in this thesis collection, “Return,” ended up being the most emotionally draining of all due to its very mature themes. The main protagonist, Will, struggles with schizophrenia as well as lapses in the abuse he suffered from his father who also suffered from the same mental illness. The story is about the dehumanizing of my main protagonist who by the end is so tired of fighting that he succumbs to his demons in the darkest way possible. What frightened me as a writer was the revelation that the father’s suicide was due to his son breaking his promise not to tell his mother what was happening. I struggled with the ramifications of this, with those close to me who read it claiming Will did nothing wrong. Lee R. Edwards describes the narrative of schizophrenia as “not designated thereby as the residence of representation of psychosis, but rather as its manifestation and its mechanism, as schizophrenia’s linguistic incarnation” (Edwards 25). This allows me the flexibility as a writer to create an unreliable narrator, with the story being told from his eyes. Because of this, the audience is relying on the protagonist to tell an accurate story, yet his mental illness causes him to have a distorted form of reality.

Will, like Daniel, is put down by a paternal figure, further reinforcing family dysfunction as a likely cause in mental illness. The exact cause for schizophrenia is never outwardly a main point of contention. It is always associated with genetics, or in some cases environmental. I purposefully leave the idea ambiguous in the story, but state that the father of Will suffered from it as well, strongly suggesting he inherited the illness. Additional actions in the story indicate that Will was constricted by his father in life, being told to smile even when he wasn’t happy, and not

to cry in front of his mother. After his father's suicide, he does both, which casts him in a very subvert light in the eyes of his mother. Regardless of my hesitations, I realized the turmoil I felt writing the story was essential to make the ending so impactful because the audience will recognize how wrong the situation is, while Will has no way forward due to events set in motion. What makes Will's perspective so unique among all the stories in this collection is how it's distinguished by the mental illness from which he suffers. It is, in essence, "the study of the world without self, a world established solely as a text that plays itself out infinitely, immeasurably in its encounter with an infinity of other texts" (Edwards, 29). In that sense, Will's suffering ends at last because the only peace he can ever find is in a world with no self from the one of which he has lived in terror.

Living with schizophrenia is a challenge in itself. Imagine waking up to the sound of the same exact voice, saying the same thing over and over again, every day, since you could process language. Now try to turn it off. The problem is you cannot. Will hears three very distinct voices: a man, a woman and a child. Each very individualistic in the way they speak, all representing a part of Will that is missing. Oftentimes, the media portrays schizophrenia incorrectly, as displayed in the critically acclaimed film, *A Beautiful Mind*. While based on the life of John Nash, much of his life is obscured by the struggle he endured from schizophrenia, but it was dramatized for thematic purposes rather than an accurate portrayal. While there is nothing wrong with this approach, it can create an unreliable narration, much like the one I have constructed with "Return." This brings to mind one myth that I quickly dispelled: the fact that people with schizophrenia have multiple personalities. As Scott O. Lilienfeld and Hal Arkowitz explain in '*Scientific American Mind*', "People with schizophrenia possess one personality, but that personality has been shattered, with severe impairments in thinking, emotion and motivation"

(Lilienfeld & Arkowitz (67). Another really big inconsistency is that all people who suffer schizophrenia suffer the same symptoms; they see apparitions of a person or people, hear voices that sound loud and incoherent, and they are a danger to society. These are myths, but one of the biggest truths that is often glossed over is that “others mainly have ‘negative’ symptoms, such as social withdrawal and diminished emotional and verbal expression” (Lilienfeld & Arkowitz 67). Will demonstrates not only the ability to hear and see things, but also social isolation caused by the abuse he suffered as a child and still endures from his only living paternal figure. Finally another big myth that is also untrue is that schizophrenia is caused by family behavior and treatment. While it isn’t always the leading cause, it could suggest “that intense familial criticism may hasten its relapse” (Lilienfeld & Arkowitz 67). The story implies that Will’s abuse from both his deceased father and his living mother attribute to his condition manifesting itself as the story unfolds.

Another emotionally challenging story was “The Cord,” which I was hesitant to write about and even more to discuss as it deals with depression, a condition that has been a struggle for most of my young adult life. The most difficult decision was how Aiden would turn out, if his last suicide attempt would be the end, or if he could find a way out of his darkness. The way the story ends is the most optimistic way for all my stories, in large part because my protagonist is regretful for the role he played in his brother’s death. Characters who suffer but come to see their own faults are often rewarded in my stories with happy or at the very least bittersweet resolutions. The strongest theme that can be found in this story is rebirth, because a cord symbolizes both the umbilical cord that gives us life, and for the unfortunate who choose to take their own life.

Aiden displays many symptoms related to depression, from his lack of social interaction, his less than intimate relationship with his girlfriend, and desire to take his own life. One area in which he suffers greatly from is his self-esteem, which before his brother's death was intact. In addition, Aiden "may acknowledge this, and say that he feels he has been bad, no good, worthless, or is being punished" (Crary 474). Before the end, Aiden is prepared to die for the past, because he feels he doesn't deserve a future. Another aspect of Aiden's life which causes him depression is his difficult relationship with his mother. In an article by Scott M. Monroe and Mark. W Reid, it has been proven that there are many possibilities for someone to develop depression. For instance, "child abuse and early trauma have been associated with heightened risk for depression later in life, perhaps sensitizing the individuals to the depressogenic effects of later stressors" (Hammen 2005) (Monroe & Reid 70). This also suggests that while Aiden's depression was amplified by the death of his brother, the abuse he suffered in his childhood from his mother was the beginning of his depressive state. In the end though, he comes to the realization that life is precious and that his brother is at peace. Aiden also makes peace with his mother, who is near death, and although his battle with depression is not over, he has won the fight.

"The Glad Eye" went through multiple revisions before reaching its current form and title. One notable revelation I made through the writing process of this story was the idea of repression and the consequences it can lead too. The main character, Randall, is a closeted homosexual, a fact of which I had no prior knowledge until I reread my work more closely. This went with his sensitivity to the derogatory word "Fag" and his violent actions afterwards. The idea that he is struggling with this part of himself as well as denying that he is alive also shows deep psychological motifs of loneliness, denial, and reality vs. fiction. The reason it will rank as

one of the most intense of my works is because in a lot of ways it is a twisted love story where the main protagonist decides to live out his days inside his own head with Leo, the personification of the kind of man he would have wanted to be with. This story drew a lot from the idea of someone subjecting themselves in a personal hell, as a sort of punishment due to something that wasn't their fault. The timeline is purposefully left out because even in these times, when most people are accepting of homosexual relations, there are still places in the world that do not. As with all these stories, the purpose is not to shine a light on dark situations, but to show them as they are for how they are.

The cause for Cotard's Delusion varies due to the rarity of the illness. The most enduring theory is trauma to the brain as a possible cause. Randall's development of the illness happened as a result of being brutalized at a young age. While he recovered from his trauma and went on with his life, he never fully returned to his normal self and instead lived in exile from himself. Regarding this, "Cotard's delusion is associated with a style of explanation associated with depressive personalities: attributing the cause of events to oneself" (Gerrans 591). Because Randall lived in a lie, denying his homosexuality, he attributes his regression as a form of death, hiding his pain away as it manifests itself into Leo. Leo becomes the embodiment of what Randall denied himself from, which is both meant to torture him and give him reprieve for the imprisonment he is set to face. For Randall, he is in a self-defense mode where his delusion of being dead is to hide from the word he was called as a child. It is because of this mindset that Randall would never be able to face the truth even when presented by it from a physical person. Sadly, "This tenacity is explained in terms of damaged sub personal affective processing which produces phenomenal states of unfamiliarity which are not altered by the acquisition of new beliefs at the personal level" (Gerrans 595). Tragically, Randall is doomed to a life where he will

never be able to tell what is real or what isn't, except for his newfound devotion to Leo, who will never be real enough for him to have a reality with.

“Those Eyes” was an experiment of sorts, in large part because I knew of Erotomania, but only understood it to be a fixation and unreciprocated love for another. Subjecting myself into the main protagonist's mind frame was difficult, largely because I had to draw a line between ethical and inappropriate behavior such as acting like my characters. For instance, there is a part in the story where the character tries on his factitious lover's makeup to emulate her appearance. I researched beauty products and found my web history was flooded with cosmetics. This story ended up being challenging physically because of its demand for me to understand the necessity of appearance. When a story makes you examine the way you are right down to how you see yourself in the mirror, it makes a lasting impression.

An article that deals with erotomania details a case where a group of women displayed an autoerotic fixation for pieces of stolen silk. As described, “their sexual use of stolen fabric gave them feelings of pleasure more intense and intoxicating than the response they elicited from alcohol, drugs, erotic fantasies, or sexual partners” (Shera 158). Jared Hick, the protagonist of “Those Eyes”, fixates on a television actress who releases a desire in him that causes delusions of erotic fantasies and pleasure where none exists. A famous case of erotomania is John Hinckley Jr., who attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan and gain Jodie Foster's attention. The obsession with silk is akin to Jared's obsession to equal his fixations beauty. When he breaks into her trailer and tries on her makeup, he is not displaying homosexual behavior but rather living out a fantasy to recreate the beauty he sees from the television screen. When it does not work out the way he wishes, Jared lashes out and is consumed even more with the idea of confronting the person he is obsessed with. During a study of the four cases involving women sexually aroused

by silk, one such woman, designated as “B”, confessed that while she loved a certain type of silk, she was unable to wear it, which caused her anxiety and afterwards is consumed by an overwhelming amount of pleasure. She is so lost in her fantasies that anything which doesn’t match it becomes foreign and frightening. Just as Jared is trapped in an endless cycle of wanting something he can never have. The idea that Jared is in love with the television actress is inaccurate because she is not meant to evoke feelings of a romantic nature but rather of a yearning that is missing in his life. What makes his illness even more tragic than the rest here is that his delusions are, “”partial and limited” rather than being characteristically violent, perverting the whole being, and causing the subject to believe everything to be exciting, oppositional and irritating” (Shera 163). In a way, this makes Jared almost childlike in his obsession, because male children may develop fixations with older female actresses, known as puppy love. But with Jared, he has created unrealistic expectations surrounding the object of his affection, heights she can never reach.

Finally, “It’s a Bug’s Life” is a close look at the mind of a man with a deep seated grudge against someone from his past. This story explores addiction as shown by Carl’s overreliance on spray insecticide which he uses to kill bug’s in his daily job. This becomes Carl’s undoing as he is unable to discern reality from fiction when he murders Martin and proceeds to attack himself during a hallucinatory attack. Addiction, as seen in this story, is the antagonist that drives Carl into killing Martin for an unreliable reason. The gruesome ending came to fruition as a result of me staying up till four in the morning and writing continuously for more than three hours. The ambiguity also leaves the ending open to interpretation as to Carl’s fate.

The person Carl was before his addiction is shown from the eyes of Martin, who regards him with desperation and fails to acknowledge him beyond a source of salvation for his own

damnation. This causes Carl to lash out at him, having already had the seeds of destruction planted by years of abuse from his bully. In a way, his drug addiction becomes an excuse to vent out his frustrations, because the illness “causes a relentless destruction of character and releases criminal tendencies” (O’Donnell 374). Carl’s narcotic drug uses are the cause of his criminal behavior and downfall. There is a clear cut way to connect Carl’s narcotic addiction with criminal behavior. For instance, he is noted for saving the insecticide with the intention of abusing it later. At the root of it all, though, Carl’s mental illness is addiction itself, which manifested itself from his feelings of inadequacy and insignificance against his bully. Of the four classified addictions from *A Clinical Sociology Perspective*, Carl falls under the Beta addiction, where his overreliance on narcotics cause him to have a destructive mind frame. As described, “The Beta type usually has its toll on the way we think, the way we feel, and the way we act. This type illustrates the integration between the body, the cognitive, and emotional makeup of humans” (Fatayer 91). The effects of addiction are wide and varied, but they all share one aspect in common; they are destructive to the person and those around them. Like Carl’s profession, addiction is akin to a parasite, leeching off the person until all that is left is a shell of their former self.

The strain method writing takes is a necessary component in order to create the damaged individuals who emerge in each story I write. When creating characters, the first thing that is necessary is to give every character a flaw, whether it is someone who compulsively lies, or believes they are right and the world is wrong. Method writing itself though is a fairly new and still widely discussed form of writing that is akin to method acting. One such writer, Thomas W Hodgkinson, identifies as such. Steven McIntosh, a reporter for BBC Radio, quotes Hodgkinson as saying, “I wrote the bulk of my new novel, *Memoirs of a Stalker*, whilst lying flat on my back

in one of the cupboards in my home. I was trying to get into the mindset of my main character, who breaks into his ex-girlfriend's house and lives there for months without her knowing.” (McIntosh 1213, 1516). It is being accepted though that some notable authors like James Joyce and William Faulkner could be considered method writers for their meticulous forms of writing and graphing out the stories that they weaved individually. Other writers, such as Jack Kerouac, are considered a pioneer for method writing because of his meticulous form of writing. He wrote one of his most famous works, *On the Road*, in the span of 2 weeks by writing continuously.

Themes I have written into many of my stories range from loneliness, death, fate vs. free will, unrequited love, jealousy, identity, human nature, and coming of age. Some of these themes can be found in the thesis stories I have included on here. Coming of age is most prominently featured in “The Put Down” where Daniel by the end is no longer a child but a master manipulator and killer capable of great atrocities. Identity and loneliness are central in “The Glad Eye” because of my main protagonist's inner torment and struggling with his sexual orientation. “Those Eyes” deals a lot with unrequited love, but takes what could be an innocent love story and twists it with a sick fantasy that can never become reality. “Return” employs the concept of fate vs. free will because Will is trapped in a cycle of psychological trauma that he ultimately breaks from in the end. “The Cord” has a heavy emphasis on death because of the main character's guilt over his part in his brother's death. Finally “It's a Bug's Life” contains allegories for human nature in its comparison with humans and bug's, with jealousy also exemplified in Carl's bitter grudge against Martin who was the epiphany of perfection in High School.

Every character in these stories feels lonely, unfulfilled in some way. Daniel has no paternal figure or companionship to guide him from childhood to adulthood. Randall has been

unsuccessful in finding someone to be with and denied to live as himself. Aiden lost his brother and cannot come to terms with the loss even when those around him try to help. Carl's addiction makes him lonely and vindictive. Jared idolizes a television actress to embody everything he is missing in his life. Will lost his father and lives in exile from his mother's affection. The human spirit displays itself greatest in the darkest moments. It is then, "we find, that they all are suffering from the same thing" (Singh 109). Every character in my stories comes from familial troubles. It is a real problem that is only becoming more apparent through each new generation in society. The evidence shows that, "The rising family disintegration, divorce, parent child alienation, variation in family systems, teenage problems, child and spouse abuse, addiction, crime, suicides and homicides just reflect the experiential variations in people's efforts to end loneliness" (Singh 110). All the characters in these stories seek acceptance and some form of love. Even more than media, loneliness is a cunning villain because it affects everyone. It is "the greatest dynamic behind depression, anxiety, guilt and sense of self depreciation. It is not only painful but fatal at times" (Singh 110). The drive to fill that void causes every character to their actions, and the choices they make will irrevocably change their lives for better or worse.

Finding a story's theme is always paramount in understanding what direction it will take. I always think of it as a road trip. Some people let the road take them to their destinations, while others need direction. Most authors can only operate within a set parameter of careful planning before embarking on the task of writing a story. My way has always been to let the story unfold before me. All I do is set the stage for the performance of my story. The only stage direction I often require is what form it will take from beginning to end. The most notable example I've used to illustrate this point is in the writing of my main book series, Camp Supernatural, which is set in a summer camp where children have abilities related to their disabilities. In this story I

wrote a character named Daniel Harrison who was meant to serve as a brotherly/mentor figure for my main protagonist. I had his dialogue and story all set. Eventually, there came a point in the story when they were alone, and Daniel's friendly demeanor turned resentful as his character took on a life of his own. It was at this moment when the writer in me was born, and I realized that this is what I wanted to do with my life.

This would prove to be only the first of many revelations over the course of my writing experience. I've had many moments where the characters morph before my eyes and become total opposites of what I thought. An example that can be found here in my thesis collection include the revelation that Randall, my main protagonist in "Glad Eye", is a closeted homosexual. I have reservations about writing LGBT themes because of the delicate subject matter. But with "Glad Eye" I embraced this idea because it weaved itself together even in my first draft when Randall is still sensitive to the word "Fag". Another instance I did not plan for was the title for "Put Down" and "Return". When turning in the drafts for both, my peers praised me for choosing such fitting titles, although I admitted that it was accidental. "Put Down" was for me suitable because that's what the boy does to his dog, and "Return" felt like two phrases; Re, like living the old life once, and turn, like to become the new one.

Additionally, names hold just as much significance as the title of any work. For example, Will, short for William, goes with my characters struggle to ignore the voices in his head, while the name Aiden symbolizes Fire, or Little Fire, and can be seen as the fire that burns inside of everyone, which in "The Cord" is constantly tested due to the protagonist's struggle with depression. In truth, the names of these characters are not chosen due to their meaning, but randomly, just as people in life do not choose their own names in birth. That way each character is allowed to grow and form in their own way as the story unfolds.

By the end of these stories, my hope is to do what acclaimed storytellers such as Shakespeare and Sophocles once accomplished; to demonstrate the fragility and beauty of the human soul in its darkest moments. Every character in these stories is flawed, beyond reproach, and either finds themselves succumbing to their mental illnesses, or triumph due to their desire to win. Henry James once said, and this has been influential in all my works, “the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life.” In this venture, that is what each of these stories is conveying; the search not just for meaning, but how the struggle is sometimes stronger than the compromise. Though medical science has advanced largely in the last couple of years, further research is still being done to study the causes of certain mental illnesses, and diagnoses are not always correct in their execution.

Much like the peripheral viewpoint of each story, individuals with mental illness have different views of how the world works. Some understand and comprehend social interactions and dangerous situations fully, while others are naïve and incapable of recognizing danger even when faced with it. Despite the futility, there is hope. It is in that, “The future for people diagnosed with mental illness depends on a commitment to research and education, which can alter the public image of a ‘typical’ patient; to improved availability of and access to services for every socioeconomic group; and to support for mental health advocates, consumers, families, and communities” (Travis 42). The need for self-improvement must first start with the patient themselves. In order to become a better person, the person in question must want to improve themselves. They cannot be forced into it because anything half ventured into is always half-done. Things that need to be accounted for and changed in the judicial system include: “judges’ attitudes toward patients, counsels’ attitudes toward patients, understanding that patients have a right to refuse treatment, and why, correcting the misperception that drugs are the only “cure””

(Travis 42). Many lives could be saved if more people were willing to speak out and prevent a small problem from becoming a bigger one. The problem plaguing many of these characters is neglect and misunderstanding. When someone is left to their own devices, with a broken moral compass, it is like a ship adrift at sea. If the tides are uninviting and harsh, they will crash against the forlorn ship and an unnecessary conflict will ensue. However, if each character were given their innate desires, someone would have to be harmed in the process. Their illnesses are self-destructive, but when left unchecked, are destructive to others.

In conclusion, summarizing each story is like watching a preview for a film, only receiving a piece of the information that exists. The first story, “Put Down”, sets the tone for what is to come with a tragic outcome that becomes the centerpiece of “Return”. Few stories in this collection hold hope the way “The Cord” does, while “The Glad Eye,” “Those Eyes” and “It’s a Bug’s Life,” embraces the darkness of mental illness and how each manifest when left unchecked. The goal ultimately is not to raise awareness for mental illness; there are enough causes out there that are doing a wonderful job already. The purpose of this thesis is to show how people are influenced by things we do not understand, an unforeseen force that only the sufferers can properly interpret, and how darkness is like eyes that shut forever. They remain still, forever, a part of the world, but unseen and fearful from the prejudice of others.

CHAPTER II

THE PUT DOWN

I feel nothing.

When Daniel opened his eyes, he no longer saw his dog anymore. Mason had become lifeless and still, his body sinking itself into the ambivalent earth. He remembered hearing the gunshot and cry from his dog for the last time. He thought that it would be harder. Instead it felt easy. The gun was still in hand, and he hadn't moved since the sound.

Daniel thought about Mason, his dog of four years. Mason was a golden retriever with a life full of possibilities, until heartworms nestled themselves within him. Although Mason was not beyond the miracle of medicine, his father refused to pay the expenses. This led to Daniel remembering what his father said before he brought Mason home from the pound.

“If he gets sick, you have to put him down. I don't want him shitting or puking all over this house.” Now he said it again. But this time, Daniel did not feel the same apprehension as before.

Better to die now than later.

Daniel possessed some experience with guns, but mostly with a pistol. His father used to show him how to use one, and even took Mason with them to a shooting range a few times. The dog would whine and cry out from anguish of the loud noises, but his father forced Mason to

continue. “It’s good for him to hear these sounds,” Daniel’s father had said. “That way when the day comes, you’ll both know what is coming.”

Just a few hours ago, his father gave Daniel his pistol and ordered him to kill Mason by the end of the day, or he would toss the dog out. Daniel knew his father’s threat to be real, as he had no compassion for Mason.

All I wanted was to hear those words, “I’m proud of you.”

When his best friend, David, killed himself, instead of crying, Daniel compartmentalized himself and was as lifeless as a statue. Though his father was impressed, he berated his son for being friends with David in the first place.

“He was weak, and you are too for being his friend.”

He was right. I am weak.

These memories and thoughts flew and projected themselves inside Daniel’s head as he led Mason into the outskirts of his family’s ranch. Beyond his home was land free of the human touch, with trees and the sound of nature surrounding them as if being somewhere that time held no dominion over. When the sun was low enough, it would cast a shadow from the sentries of trees which appeared in the shape of tall figures. Instead of being fearful, Daniel closed his eyes and welcomed the darkness.

As the sun began to retreat, time showed no such haste. He felt the breeze approaching with a blistering kiss that was neither tender nor gentle.

If I don’t do this now, I never will.

He had settled himself and Mason on the farthest part of the land, where he was sure no one would hear anything. Steadily, Daniel pulled the pistol from the back of his pants and aimed it at the dog. Intuitively, Mason began to bark and growl. As his dog barked at him hysterically, Daniel ran his free hand through his covered forearm, feeling the lined scars that decorated his wrists and forearm.

When Mason couldn't cheer him up, Daniel took comfort in his father's razor blade.

All I wanted was to feel something, anything. No matter how big the scar was, or how much blood trickled down, I felt nothing.

He wondered often if his friend had done the same on his last days of life. Daniel remembered David becoming depressed over his parents' divorce, and the idea of living with his similarly domineering father. The gun David used to kill himself belonged to his father, who appeared as unmoved as he had been during the funeral.

I wanted to talk to him, offer my condolences. Instead I listened to a stranger talk about how funerals always brought people together.

Daniel knew after this he'd have nothing left to lose.

I don't care if my father approves of me or not. I would trade my own life if it meant Mason could live for another day.

Swatting away those sentimental thoughts, he called to mind his training with the gun. Daniel knew where he had to shoot, and cocked the pistol.

When shooting a target, his father instructed him to aim for the head, in-between the eyes to ensure hitting the brain. “You’re a natural, Daniel,” his father had said. “You were born to kill. Better to know that now than later in life.”

I wish it was hard, but like my father said, I was born for this. I know that now.

As the sun positioned its head upward, Mason began to bark more loudly, so much so that Daniel pulled the trigger. Numbness washed over him like a sleeping limb, even as the chill of the wind forced him to wrap his left arm around his chest. He hadn’t blinked since the shot rang through his ears. Not one tear revealed itself. He just stared motionlessly at his dead friend, whose body looked no more alive than a rag doll. A gaping hole appeared between the dog’s eyes, as if he had grown a third eye. Red tears streamed down, but Daniel still refused to allow the sadness entry into his swollen heart.

It’s done. I feel nothing, no pain or sorrow. Just... nothing.

Hazily, still holding the gun, Daniel turned so that his back was to Mason, and began walking home. He no longer cared what his father would think of what he did, and instead thought of the comforting touch of the razor blade.

I wonder how much longer it will have to be before I have to put something else down or maybe... someone.

CHAPTER III

THE CORD

I remember what it was like to be in my mother's womb. I once told my psychiatrist this, and I saw her write something down in her notebook. I knew it meant something because the next day I was prescribed antidepressant pills. For some reason, remembering something I shouldn't meant I needed to be doped up and kept from thinking the thought too much.

My girlfriend once told me that I remember things like that because God makes everyone special and unique in their own way. I don't believe in God. I believe that when we die we all go into a dark empty abyss. At least it's more comforting than thinking I could ever be happy. Since I was born my mother has reminded me of the debt I owe her. "I brought you into this world Aiden," she'd say. "I gave you a name, and all your father gave you was his junk. Don't you dare ever bring up that conversation again." This led to my first suicide attempt.

I wrapped a rope around my neck, making sure it was tight enough to squeeze me so hard that my neck would snap like a bone. I hadn't kicked the chair yet, but I thought about what people would say about this. I thought about my brother, Spencer, who always smiled even when shit kept happening to him. My sister Barbara was the youngest and unfortunately the blunt tool my mother often used to whip the rest of us into shape. There was this one Christmas when Barbara wanted an easy bake oven. They had just come out, and she wanted one more than anything. When my mom overheard us talking about it, she screeched, "You want an oven, I'll

give you one,” and took my sister’s hand firmly. She was about to press her hand on the hot burner when I intervened and knocked her backwards. My mother’s head crashed against the cabinets and made a loud crunch, like the sound of someone eating a Butterfinger.

That was the sound I heard when I kicked the chair. I thought it would be the end, I wanted to die. I was turning twenty-one the next day. For me that was just another year of living. I hated the idea of getting older and watching people I loved die. I saw my aunt succumb to breast cancer, my uncle die from wounds he sustained in a car crash, and my brother overdose on cocaine. The worst part was I gave him that cocaine, and told him, “Knock yourself out pal.”

His body was still warm when I found him. His mouth foaming with sick and the crap he injected himself with. I saw the needle still suck on his elbow, and tried my best to remove it, but it stuck firmly on. The rubber tube he used to wrap around his arm was tight as well, like the rope on my neck. I looked up, asking God, “Is this what happens to people? Do they die, while others live?” It wasn’t an inspiring speech, but it was loud enough to awake one of the neighbors and have them call an ambulance. His funeral was small and attended only by myself, Barbara, and my wheelchair ridden mother. She was momentarily unable to move around on her own, but recovered after a year of physical therapy. That didn’t mean she made our lives any easier. Nothing she ever did to us, hitting us, yelling at us, or humiliating us, ever frightened me more than when she began to sob uncontrollably at the sight of Spencer’s body.

She kept crying, “What have I done? What have I done?” It was like she had just realized how shitty she had been to her children. It took someone’s death for her to finally realize that. After that, she made every effort to try and mend relations with me and Barbara. She even went so far as to travel in her chair to my apartment complex and make me breakfast in bed. I brushed

her off every time, even when she persisted. Barbara proved to be the more forgiving between us. She took in my mother when I would have sooner seen her in a nursing home. My sister's son was named Spenser with an S in honor of our brother, and even bore his green eyes and specks of light brown hair.

“Dear Aiden,” Barbara wrote to me last Christmas, “I just wanted to tell you that mother is sick with terminal lung cancer. The doctors have only given her two months to live. Me and Edward are doing our best to care for her, but it hasn't been easy with Spenser. Your nephew misses his uncle. Please come visit soon. Your sister, Barbara.”

I read that letter over and over, as I took the bus towards downtown Manhattan, where my sister lived. My apartment was outside of the city, but since my job allowed me to work at home, it meant I didn't have to go out too often. I liked it that way. I thought about asking my girlfriend Patty to come with me, but I didn't want to upset her during the holidays.

This was a week before my second attempt. The first time I had the help my brother did not. Barbara and I had been sharing an apartment before she got pregnant when she found me near death. I begged her to let me die. I still had the rope around my throat but I managed to croak, “I don't want to live. Please don't let me live.” Barbara did not honor my wish, and instead saved my life.

A part of me wanted to hate her, even more so than I hated my mother. When I saw her entering my apartment, I ended up wrapping my arms around her in an embrace. I felt my body betray my otherwise conflicted feelings, as I saw my mother, bedridden, and coughing up mucus. Edward, my sister's fiancé, shook my hand and greeted me with a warm smile.

“Spenser will be happy to see you,” he said, as the small child appeared. He looked so much like my brother it made me tear up. I clasped my scarf, making sure it was wrapped tight around my throat.

Barbara welcomed me into her home and told me to sit by our mother’s side.

She appeared so fragile, like I was after my first attempt. I had the urge to smother her right there and then, even with my nephew watching. Then I thought, this was justice. Bitter, but right.

My mother recognized me and mustered a thin smile, her lips so chapped that small cuts decorated them.

“Aiden,” she said, tearfully. “My sweet boy, you’re here.”

I shook my head and glared at her.

“You’re right where you belong, you old bitch.”

Barbara overheard me and grabbed my shoulder.

“Aiden! Don’t talk to our mother that way. Not now, please, not now.”

I made my sister cry, as Edward comforted her. He took her to the bedroom, while my nephew remained. He laid a toy on his grandmother’s bed, and said in such a low voice it made me want to cry as well.

“You can have it, grandmamma.”

He looked at me and smiled. I clasped his hand and he pointed at my scarf.

“What is that?”

I touched it softly, as my mother looked at me with tearful eyes.

“I did something bad, Spencer,” I said, thinking back to the rope, and how it had wrapped itself around my neck so tight that the paramedics had a hard time removing the rope from me.

“What did you do that was bad?”

I kept a sob in, as my mother’s hand flew up. I always recognized this as her indication that a beating was coming. Instead she grabbed my scarf and tried to touch the part of my neck where the rope had nestled in. When she found it, she began to cough uncontrollably, as I grabbed a tissue.

“I am so sorry,” she wheezed. “I am sorry for everything I ever said and did to you. You have every right to hate me. Your brother... he would still be alive if it wasn’t for me.”

I admit, for a long time I blamed my mother for his death. I experimented with drugs as a way to cope with the abuse I suffered from her, both physical and mental. Still, she wasn’t the one who gave him the coke, or the one who told him to go all out. That was my cross to bear, like the God I stubbornly did not believe in.

“You have enough blame to answer for mother,” I told her, “but my brother’s death, your son, was my fault.”

I could see that this was the equivalent of saying, “I love you,” which were words I could not muster for the life of me. Still, it was what my mother needed to hear. She smiled, the first time I had seen her smile in years, and looked at the toy my nephew gave him.

“It’s called a slinky,” he said, smiling as my mother cradled it in her hands. It looked like waves along the beach shores. My mother looked at me and offered it to me.

“Go, play with your nephew,” she encouraged, in a soft voice. I nodded and took it from her.

I thought about playing with that slinky with Spencer, and imagined the times I played with my brother. He had that same smile, the one my mother now bore, as she turned her head and looked away from us. I removed my scarf and handed it to Spenser and said, “Give this to your mother. Tell her there’s somewhere I need to be.”

I left before Barbara could return. She kept trying to call me frantically, as I touched my scarred neck. The ringlet I had was dark and reddened, like frostbite. It had been like this ever since my first attempt.

I looked at my phone, and heard all the voicemails my sister left me. I walked downtown Manhattan, taking in the smells of people smoking, drinking hot coffee, and the polluted air. I wondered if this is what life meant; everyone has a burden to bear. Some burdens are more visible than others. I wore mine around my neck. Even before it was visible, I always felt that tug, like someone trying to get me to do something I’d regret later. I knew it was wrong to want to die. Some were not fortunate enough to live long. They could only dream of a life outside of a hospital room or spending time with a loved one. I had it all, a girlfriend, a mother, for as long as she remained alive, a loving sister, and a young nephew. So why did I keep touching that wound on my neck. I felt like I was scratching a scab, hoping it would open and become lethal once more.

Finally I arrived where it all started; my old room. I found it all just as I left it. This is where Barbara found me, when I first consummated my relationship with Patricia, and the choice I made. The ceiling looked cracked and delicate, with small lines like the blisters on my mother's lips. I found a cord on the floor. It was from the television set. I guessed that whoever now lived here hadn't connected it yet.

Taking the cord in my hands, I put it on the bed, and sat beside it. My phone began to vibrate, but the person calling me wasn't my sister. My girlfriend kept sending me texts like, "Where are you?" "Are you coming home yet?" "How did it go with your mother?"

I put her and Barbara on ignore, turning back to the cord. I thought about God, and how this divine being, who supposedly was benevolent, and kind, let people die. He let me kill my brother without meaning it. He let my aunt die a slow and painful death. My uncle, who was the purest man I ever knew and more of a father to me than my own, died thinking I hated him.

"Is this what it means," I cried out, taking the cord in my hand. "I just want to know what it means? What am I supposed to do?"

No one answered. I felt the tears swelling in my eyes, my body tensing, and my throat getting a lump. I wanted nothing more than to remove that lump. I wrapped the cord around my neck, and threw it against the fan's wings, making sure it was secured. All I had to do was step off the bed. If it broke, I could end up hurt, possibly crippled as my mother had been. The thought of death felt more comforting than life, though.

I was about to do it, when I heard something. I heard someone outside saying something that made me stop. I looked out the window and saw this man in a wheelchair. He was coughing up phlegm and was trying to rally people to his side.

“We are not born into this world wanting,” he cried out to passersby. “God only gives us as much as we are prepared to handle. If you choose life over death, you’re not weaker for it. Weak is living as if you’re dead. Strength is dying as you live. Life is about death, and death brings life. You cannot live without the other. It is a part of every one of god’s creatures. To live is to give the gift to others, to die is to deprive others of that gift.”

One of my feet’s was already dangling in front of the bed’s head. My other foot stubbornly glued itself to the head, trying so hard not to remove itself.

“Come on,” I cried out. “This isn’t worth it. This life isn’t worth it.”

“Your life means something,” the crippled preacher said. I felt as if he saw me through the window. “I cry for everyone who dies without cause. No death is without reason. Just as no life is without meaning. Give yourself a reason, and you will find meaning.”

My toes were already on the edge of the bed. All I needed was my whole foot to go, and I’d be right where I was years ago. I was born in a struggle like this. I felt the tug to stay inside, while my mother tried to bring life into me. I realized, even as she instilled hate in me, she also gave me endurance, and a sort of vigor. I thought about her face, and how she turned away from me before I left. I knew what it meant; I read the texts and heard the frantic voice messages. I didn’t need to be there to see it. Just as I didn’t want her here, or anyone to see this.

I was about to jump when I heard the crippled preacher say, “God only saves those who want salvation. If he could save us all he would, but we make his job impossible by taking it upon ourselves to expedite the process. Ecclesiastes 12:6; ‘Remember Him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the

cistern is crushed.’ I remembered this verse well, because it was one I heard several times during the sermons I attended with Patricia.

The door’s handle began to shake up and down, as someone banged on the door. I shook my head and ignored the inaudible voice as I jumped. The cord snapped in an instant, causing me to land down on my face. I felt no pain, as if I had landed on a pillow instead of a hard floor.

I don’t remember being escorted out, only that I was in the back of a police car with someone claiming that I broke into their apartment and did something bad there.

The old crippled preacher wheeled towards us and saw me handcuffed in the backseat. He said something to the man and the officer, with both nodding their heads.

The officer who arrested me opened the door and waited until I was out of the car.

The old crippled preacher gave me a soft smile and wheeled away.

I was about to ask the officer what the old man said until I realized my voice was gone.

The officer glanced at me with blank expression and got into the driver’s seat but said something before closing the door.

“I don’t understand. That old man told me to open the backseat door, when there was no one there. The guy he was talking about was in the other car.”

I didn’t know what he meant until I saw an ambulance car pass by. Before I could understand what was happening, my phone rang. I looked to see that it was an unknown number. When I picked it up, it was a voice I had long forgotten.

“Hey bro,” Spencer said, with such a shrill voice that I thought he sounded distorted. I began to cry, just as my hands touched my neck. There was no scar or newly made wound, just a regular throat. “Looks like you made it.”

I tried to speak again, but nothing came out. Only a struggled grunt, like when someone is choking.

“Yeah that’s going to happen for a while. When you get in, it’s like how you went out. Since I overdosed, I kept feeling the chemicals I pumped into myself over and over until finally it all stopped and I was allowed a peaceful respite.”

I wanted to ask Spencer what was happening, and why I couldn’t speak, but he did the talking for me.

“You’re home Aiden, your real home,” Spencer said, his voice suddenly becoming normal. “You don’t have to be sad anymore. In fact, you won’t be sad ever again. All you’ll be doing now is just resting, for how long I don’t know.”

Finally I mustered a sound, at least one that I could hear, asking my deceased brother one question.

“Am I dead?” I croaked.

Spencer didn’t answer immediately. Instead he groaned and then responded.

“Not exactly. You’re in the place between life and death. Call it an out of body experience, but what you’re going through will pass. Once you’re out, though, I need you to do something for me.”

I nodded and then responded with a yes.

“Forgive mother. Be a brother to Patricia, and make peace with yourself. If you get another chance to live, live. Don’t throw your life away anymore. Please.”

I repeated the yes, just as my eyes began to close. When they opened again it was to florescent lights. I was somewhere I hadn’t been in since my last attempt. I didn’t know what I was waking up too, or how my physical body would react to my sudden return. I touched my neck and felt the scar again. That’s when I knew I was alive, at least for the time being.

I thought about what Spencer said, about forgiving my mother and being a brother to Patricia. When she eventually tracked me down from the hospital, she had me released to her care. Since then I’ve just been doing my best helping her raise my nephew and caring for my mother on her last days.

The day before my mother died, we finally made peace with each other.

“I’ll never be happy again mother, not really. But I can still live life, and I want too. Do you forgive me for Spencer? I know you always loved him more than me.”

“That’s not true. I love all three of you with all my heart. One day we’ll see each other again, won’t we?”

I nodded and looked at Spencer, who was busy playing with a new toy I bought for him.

“On that day, we’ll be home,” I said, remembering what my brother told me.

I knew then, after attending her funeral and taking up a new responsibility that I had a purpose now. That purpose is to live, through the good and bad, but to live.

CHAPTER IV

THE GLAD EYE

I drove down the same dirt road in Nevada, Texas in the year 1999. By now I felt like I lived here, even more so than the coffin I called home. The blistering sun scorched the outside of my pickup truck, as I drove along a seemingly endless road with no intersection in sight. It reminded me of a dream I frequently had. Every time, I would touch my forehead and find blood running down the side of my face. My cries were always inaudible, as was the sound I made falling backwards. I never knew what came after the fall, and before the blood.

In all the times I drove through here, I never saw anyone else but me. That's when I saw him: a young hitchhiker whose clothing suggested he wasn't from here. He had a white long sleeve worn underneath a red flannel, a black leather hat, worn-down boots, and torn jeans that exposed his bruised knees. His skin appeared tanned, unlike my chalky skin. When I pulled over to the side, his eyes looked so indifferently towards mine that I could have sworn he seemed unsurprised by my action. What got me though was his smile. Something about it seemed warm, inviting even. I couldn't help but glance in his direction. He clambered over towards the passenger side and crudely entered.

"Much obliged mister," said the good looking hitchhiker with a heavy accent.

I nodded, shifted gear, and began to make my way back onto the road.

"Nice to meet you sir," I meekly said. "I'm Randall."

The young hitchhiker looked hesitant at first, but then relaxed. He appeared lean, thin, handsome, a man likely to make any woman swoon head over heels for him.

“Is that so? I’m Leo. I don’t have a last name, not one that I know of anyways, so just call me Leo for now.”

I nodded and pulled a pack of cigarettes from my shirt pocket. I offered one to him but he shook his head.

“I’m still too young to be smoking those things,” said Leo, as I prepared to light my cigarette. “Why do you suppose people smoke? Is it because it looks good, or it feels good?”

I shrugged, not knowing the intent of the question.

“This is how I see things: We live our lives comfortably, the average American citizen. We go to school, get a job, get hitched, and become part of what I like to call the modernization of civilization. What defines citizen? To me, it is someone who obeys the rules, and is always on time to work. Riddle me this, where do you fall in the spectrum?”

I had to think about this. I didn’t know much about this young man, except that he had been on this road for what appeared to be a good long while. He seemed amiable enough, but I sensed a hidden motive behind his question.

“What spectrum? I don’t understand the question.”

“The spectrum of life mister. It’s the one we all live in, whether we know it or not. Some live in the now, which is the moment. Others live in the past, which is the gone. The few, and I mean dangerously few, don’t live anywhere. They are like a vegetable. They can see everything, but they cannot touch. I get the feeling you fancy that side of life.”

“I still don’t understand why you’re calling me a vegetable,” I said. I began to fume with anger.

Leo chuckled and popped his neck.

“Because you look like someone who just crawled out of a hole. When was the last time you took a shower?”

This I understood. I looked at myself in the rearview mirror, seeing sulking eyes, pasty skin, and swollen lips, like I got stung by a bee.

“Where were you heading before I picked you up?”

“I’m not sure yet. Did you notice that this road seemingly has no end?” Leo had abruptly changed the subject, which I noted with some suspicion.

“Yes. It’s not always like this. Some days there is a fork at the end.”

Leo laughed, making me wonder what I said that was so damn funny.

“Do you know the meaning of life, stranger?”

I shrugged. Finishing my cigarette, I flicked it out the window where it landed against the white line on the side of the road.

“It is the meaning of being. To be is to exist, to feel important is to matter, and to die is to return to that which was.”

I did not understand any of his philosophical points, which might have been why Leo adjusted his use of words into simpler terms.

“We have a life, then we don’t. We fear death, yet we have no choice but to embrace it. Like love, right?”

I nodded, and fiddled with the air conditioner.

“It’s hot out here,” I said, trying to drive the conversation into a dead end.

“I don’t feel a thing,” Leo commented dryly. “It’s nice when all the senses suddenly leave your body and make room for more useful things. Do you know what I mean?”

I did not. When I felt the coolness of the air conditioner working, it was like the weather had changed to fall instead of winter.

“Have you ever taken a life?” Leo suddenly asked.

I felt as if he had just asked me a trick question.

“Not that I am aware of,” I said, casually.

“It’s really not that big a deal as people say it is. Don’t you agree?”

I shook my head.

“Why, because people say it’s wrong? At least have the courage to think up an original thought here.”

I did not answer. I hoped he would change the subject. Then he continued.

“I had this dream not too long ago about being in a field near a school. Some scrawny boys came towards me with rocks in their hands and screamed faggot. At first I cried, but then I begged for mercy. Each time I said something my words were countered with one rock, then

two, and then five. All at once, as if my body were made of glass, my head splits open. I never feel the impact my back makes after the fall, or what becomes of the after. How do you suppose a dream like that ought to end?"

I didn't know why, but I felt as if Leo were saying the story of my life. Strangely, I couldn't remember my life as a child. I know most people as they get older forget the past, but I couldn't recall a single moment in time where I felt young, able-bodied, and whole. I still didn't trust Leo, but I began to feel a certain familiarity with him, as if I had known him my whole life.

"What was the point of that story?" I asked, dubiously.

"That something can come back from a broken thing. As long as you don't mind a few pieces missing then it's all good."

I sighed, and began to feel fatigue.

"What's the matter Mister? Are you feeling tired? Maybe I should take the wheel."

I shook my head and swatted his hand away.

"You don't trust me now, after our heart-to-heart about troubled lives? I hope this isn't forward or nothing. But are you a fag?"

I gasped for air, grabbing the wheel of my chair to the point of feeling pain in my hands.

"What are you talking about? I'm not a faggot. I never even looked at a man that way."

Leo tugged at my arm as if he meant to yank it off.

“You gave me the glad eye when I first came in the truck. Don’t think I wasn’t looking. I know you know what I am talking about.”

I denied this with every ounce I had of free will.

“No, I didn’t. And I want you to go, right now.”

“Why would I do that?” Leo asked with a grin. “You’ll just end up running into me again later on today.”

“No I won’t. I’ll take a different road on the way back.”

Leo seemed hurt by this, but not for too long. His mood shifted as my head throbbed with pain.

“When I asked you before if you had ever taken a life, you said not that you were aware of. Why did you say that instead of no?”

“Because it’s the truth.”

“So you may not be aware of it?”

My fists became hardened, like water turning into ice. I wanted to pummel Leo right then and there. I knew I could kill him, but didn’t know if I should. He just smiled crookedly at me and shrugged.

“When was the last time you fought someone?”

I had to think again about this. I grimaced and felt a stinging sensation on the side of my forehead. I heard sounds like the end of a telephone line. I wanted the pain to stop. Then I started to remember something which made the pain weaken somewhat.

“I was at a gas station the other day. There was a man who thought I was looking at him funny. He spit in my face and called me a name.”

I paused, not wanting to remember this, but as I looked at Leo I suddenly found myself recalling every moment.

“What did he call you Randall?”

“A faggot.”

Leo nodded and waited for me to continue.

“I tackled the sonofabitch to the ground, and crushed his windpipe with my bare hands. I... couldn't see his eyes. His whole body fought to live. Why am I now just remembering this? There was something about his face, it was like...”

“...An Inkblot,” Leo finished for me.

I nodded, and began to sob. Leo blew a raspberry and sighed.

“I don't know what came over me. That word has always angered me. You don't know what that's like, to have something like that on your conscious.”

“Don't worry about any of it. It's not on your conscience anymore. Jiminy Cricket left a long time ago, before you had a chance to become a real boy.”

I put my hands firmly on the wheel and turned to face him.

“I need you to get out of here right now,” I roared.

“Not until you admit to yourself what you did.”

I shook my head, tears streaming down my beaten cheeks.

Suddenly, as if drawn to my current dilemma, a police vehicle pulled towards my truck. I had the strong urge to rush out and signal for help. Leo never gave me the opportunity.

“Now I wonder what they want with us,” Leo said, as the police vehicle parked behind my truck. “Admit what you did now, before it’s too late.”

“I don’t want to do this,” I cried. “Please don’t make me do this.”

“Do what? You’ve already done it. That was the hard part. Now all you have to do is own up to it.”

As Leo’s voice became louder with each word, I saw the police car stop in place.

“Stop this please. Don’t make me remember this.”

Leo chuckled, and itched towards the passenger door.

“You have to. You can’t keep living this fantasy out all the time. You think I enjoy this? I’d be on a beach somewhere watching women bathe in the sun. Why couldn’t your fucking personal hell be there?”

I shook violently, like a bee hive. Finally deciding I couldn’t take it anymore, the words began to materialize before me.

“I did it,” I admitted, feeling as if a wave had washed against my cold, motionless body. “I killed that man. I think I might have killed someone else, or others before that, but I don’t remember. Please, I don’t want to be here anymore.”

Leo shook his head and opened the passenger seat.

“This is the end of the road. At least now you’re making progress.”

Suddenly, I heard a tap on my window, and I saw the blurred faces of the two officers whose skins were shiny and radiant like diamonds.

“Step out of the vehicle,” I heard one say, though his voice sounded muffled.

“Step out of the vehicle now!” another said with the same distortion.

I turned to look but when I saw the passenger seat, Leo had already left.

I don’t remember how I ended up in handcuffs, or why I was covered in bits of glass like raindrops.

This is my written confession: *My life ended after that dream in the field. Those bullies who threw rocks at me have faces now like inkblots. The man at the gas station looked like them too. My glad eye never wavered, while my heart did. Leo was everything I once wanted, and more. I didn’t know if he was real, and I didn’t care. I just wanted to see him again.*

When I tried to tell the police that someone had been in the truck with me, they insisted that I had been alone the whole time. I was told to shower and shave before appearing in court. I had almost forgotten what it felt like to have water run down against my body, and to see the face that had long been buried. The swollen eyes and paste like skin remained, but I saw a sad

lonely man, where happiness had long departed. As I was being led into the courtroom, I spotted Leo amongst the crowd, grinning at me as if I had something funny about me. I smiled at him, beyond happy that he was there with me. I knew whatever I said it didn't matter because he'd be there with me to the end. That's when the judge asked how I wanted to plead. I gave Leo my glad eye, and he nodded.

“Guilty.”

CHAPTER V

IT'S A BUG'S LIFE

Carl Manchester liked his job as an exterminator. It wasn't so much the pay as it was the frustration he got from doing a difficult job.

It's not the best job in the world though. What I really wanted to do was put dogs down and watch them breathe their last, Carl thought, as he pulled a small pack of insecticide from his glove compartment.

Every day was like being in the highs and lows of a mood swing. He'd get called, go to the person's house, spray insecticide, but never enough to get the job done in one sitting, and after being paid he returned to his one bedroom apartment. Often when daylight still lingered, Carl took the insecticide he saved and used it to raise his spirits.

This shit always smells funny, like gingivitis. But the sensation it gives me makes up for it.

Something Carl especially loved to do while he felt this way was clean his apartment, because it gave him a chance to find everything wrong with his room and correct it.

Fucking bitch. I tried telling her that my toilet wasn't working, and she said she'd call the plumber. It's been five fucking weeks now.

Later that same afternoon, Carl received a phone call from a past that wasn't so buried after all.

“Chris, hey Chris, you there?” said the overwrought voice.

“Who is this?” asked Carl.

“It’s me. Martin. Don’t you remember me?”

Carl felt as if the high had suddenly become a low.

Do I remember you? Do I remember you, motherfucker! Chris wanted to say. You made my life a living hell until you left to find yourself in Arizona. How’d that work out for you huh? Did you find out you’re a dick while you were there?

Instead, Carl said, “Oh yeah, I remember you alright. How did you get this number?”

“Good, that’s good to know. Listen, I need your help. I can’t tell you all the details over the phone. Can we meet somewhere?”

Carl almost considered his apartment, but thought of somewhere else instead.

There’s this abandoned park that hasn’t been renovated in years, Carl noted. Hopefully, it’s stayed that way since the last time I saw it.

He relayed the idea to Martin, who was too delirious to consider the location’s significance.

“Alright, meet me there in half an hour. Don’t bring your phone with you. They’ll know.”

After Martin hung up, Carl clenched his phone hard as if strangling someone.

The fucking bastard doesn’t remember does he? Well I do. I’ll make sure when this is over that he remembers everything.

Contemplating for a moment, Carl nodded and got dressed. He took his cellphone with him anyways, but planned to leave it inside his vehicle. Driving to the old park wasn't difficult, especially with the afternoon turning into evening fast. He found a spot not too far from the park and positioned his truck there.

Carl looked through his glove compartment and found containers of leftover insecticide, some of which were new batches for extermination projects.

The only thing better than killing small bug's is getting the big ones.

He left the insecticide in his glove compartment and walked out of his truck. The door never closed fully, which is why Carl was relieved for the moment that it didn't fail him.

If I need to make a quick getaway, I may as well have a near opened door.

The park appeared forlorn, like the remnants of some great battle. The swings were disfigured, with one hanging by a knot like someone who committed suicide. A tire swing still swung, but it was encircled with an elaborate spider web.

It didn't take long for Carl to spot someone sitting on the Merry-go-round, the one object in the park that seemed intact. The man turned to look at him and rose steadily. His hoodie appeared mangled, as if ravaged by an angry mongrel. His bare hands were decorated with red markings, like leech marks, which became more apparent as Martin got closer to Carl.

As his face came into view, Carl noted that Martin's appearance had changed drastically since High School. His hair was mangled and had lost much of its original color, even for a man in his late twenties. His eyes hung low and bore thick bags like bumps. His neck and cheeks also had red marks that appeared caused by excessive scratching.

Martin was the best looking guy in High School. Every girl wanted to date him and every guy was his best friend, except me...

Martin limped towards Carl, putting one firm foot over a twisted one.

“It’s good to see you again, my friend,” Martin said, his voice sounding hoarser than on the phone.

“Acquaintance seems more appropriate,” Carl noted, impassively.

“You always were good with big words, Chris. I need your help with something.”

Carl was about to ask when Martin cut him off.

“Do you know where I can find something to kill bugs?”

When Carl nodded, his disgruntled acquaintance sighed with relief.

“Good, that’s very good. I need some of that stuff to kill whatever is inside of me. I feel an itching sensation all the time man. Like fucking mosquito bites. Do you know what it’s like, to feel high for one moment, and then low the next? It’s...”

“...A bug’s life?” Carl said, with a sardonic smirk, “Yeah, I got a good idea of what you’re talking about.”

“Well then you know why I need whatever kills bug’s. If you can give that to me, I’ll pay you once I get money.”

Carl thought for a moment, and then shook his head.

“I’m not a pharmacy Martin,” the exterminator said, condescendingly. “Besides what you’re asking for isn’t cheap, or legal. You’re crazy to think otherwise.”

At first Martin looked as if he might actually do it. But then Carl noticed to his dismay that he understood the insult well.

“I’m not crazy, Chris,” Martin stressed, his fists clenching. Carl noticed blood trickling down his acquaintances palms as if his skin were paper thin. “I spent five years in Arizona after I left High School. You remember I went there to stay with my uncle. Well anyway I got involved in a group, like a gang. I don’t want to talk about everything that happened, but I got taken by these guys who hated the gang I was in. They did stuff to me, man. Stuff you can’t even begin to imagine.”

As he spoke, Martin began to scratch himself, as if he had fleas.

“They liked to put me in a box, this coffin like box, everytime I fought back. Things got in while I was in there, all kinds of little maggots and insects, as if they were trying to eat me alive. I can even tell you how some of them sounded, what it felt like to have a spider crawling over your opened eye lid. It’s a fucking nightmare.”

Carl tried to feign interest, but he was beginning to lose his cool.

“Alright, so you’re afraid of bugs because you were trapped in a coffin with them. That’s nice. It kind of reminds me of when you used to stuff me inside my locker. Do you remember that?”

Martin shook his head.

“It’s not the same thing man. Every time I got out, I knew I’d be going back in, so I just learned how to adapt to it. Now, they are with me, inside of me.”

Martin groaned and began to scratch his cheeks. One cheek opened up right there and then and began to gush out like a broken faucet.

“Sorry, if you see something crawling out, let me know. It will help me to find out where they are hiding themselves.”

Carl nodded and then turned to his truck.

“You know, now that I think about it, I got something that could help you. Just wait here.”

Carl ran over to his truck and opened the side door to reach into his glove compartment. Right next to the insecticide he found a bottle of Neem oil, something he particularly liked to keep for himself.

Its uses are far and wide. It’s especially hard to come by when considering I’m only given some of the most basic of insecticide materials.

He took the vial with him and walked over to Martin. His disgruntled acquaintance looked at the liquid as if it were a juicy steak.

“This kills most bug’s upon first contact,” Carl said, as he held the bottle up. “You can inject it, drink it, hell, if you’re as daring as you once were you can even use it like eye drops. Just make sure that you use the whole thing, not at once, but gradually. You’ll see the difference in a couple of days.”

Martin took the vial with one hand and with his marked hand grabbed Carl's other hand.

"Thank you my friend. I will not forget this. I am sorry for everything I did in school."

Carl shrugged and patted Martin's shoulder.

"What are old friends for, right?"

Carl watched as Martin opened the vial and drink it all.

Good health.

Carl drove home, feeling as if a weight were lifted from his shoulders. Years of feeling insignificant, like the bug's he killed, suddenly became a distant memory.

Bug's live short life spans. Humans are no different. One dies, one is born, the cycle continues. There will always be a Martin, but there is only one Carl.

He looked to the side, at his passenger. Martin was fast asleep, his body twitching every time they hit a speed bump.

How do you kill a bug? You squish it. But humans require a little bit more exertion. The first thing you learn about killing bug's is always do it quick, before they realize what is about to happen.

Even as he pulled into the parking lot of his apartment, Martin still lay motionless, as if he were dead. Carl softly touched his shoulder and heard him groan.

Think of better days. It will make this seem like a bad dream.

Carl unloaded Martin, and made it look as if his acquaintance were intoxicated.

After hoisting him inside his apartment, he laid him on his bed and sighed.

“Now, what to do with your shell, old pal,” Carl said, to a still unconscious Martin.

“I’ll make it quick at least, which is more than you deserve.”

Martin began to mumble, as if he were coming to his senses.

“Bah...Bah...Banter...Fry...Fry...Frightened.”

Carl wasn’t sure how much of the insecticide inside of him was still active, but swore he heard the words in that order.

Banter. Frightened? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

Instead of waiting for an answer, Carl unloaded his exterminating bad and went through its contents. He noticed more Neem and used it as eye drops. His high suddenly felt as if he had sprouted wings and grown more muscles.

I feel like I could crush the life out of Martin right here and now.

Before he could, Carl staggered backwards, and sighed.

I’ve done this before. It’s always a bit dicey in the beginning, but once I mount the horse, I can ride it on through.

Martin continued to mumble as Carl restrained him to the bed with an extension cord. When he was secured, the exterminator prepared a syringe and filled it with another bug killing poison

Thallium. The end of every bug’s life comes before they know what is coming.

Carl was about to inject the poison into Martin's vein when suddenly he became lucid.

"Carl?" Martin said, sounding as if he had just recognized him for the first time in years.

"Martin? This isn't what it looks like."

"No? Am I dying?"

Carl nodded, and pointed to the syringe.

"This is going to help you. It's medicine. It will make you feel ten years younger."

Martin mustered a small smile, with some teeth noticeably missing.

"Thank you for everything. You always were a good friend."

Carl quickly injected the syringe into Martin, and waited for the poison to take effect. As it did, his acquaintance began to struggle and cry out in pain, as he realized what was happening. Carl jabbed a book in his mouth and held it there until Martin stopped fighting.

When the struggle was over, both men were still. Carl was suddenly experiencing the low the drug caused him. He looked at Martin's lifeless body, with the book still in his mouth.

What have I done? Carl said, as he was beginning to regain cognitive feeling. *Is he really dead this time?*

He touched the carcass's shoulder again, and when he did he heard a small thump, as if someone were knocking on his door. He tapped on the shoulder again, and the thump appeared to be in synchronization with him.

"Hey, wake up buddy," Carl said, trying to arouse the lifeless corpse.

Suddenly, something began to make its way out of the mouth and through the book. It had long dangly legs, and a hairy black body. It's head was like a hornet, and it bore eyes that looked like pools of blood. Covered in saliva, mucus and puke, the large insect pulled itself out of the corpse's mouth and tore through the book.

Carl lay there, looking as still as Martin had when he first brought him in. The thumping continued, as he heard both the disfigured insect's growl and the door's eventual cataclysmic opening, as if the world has just exploded before his eyes.

He couldn't remember what came first, the large gash that had suddenly appeared on his throat, opening large amounts of blood, or the police officers who suddenly began to swarm his apartment room like locusts. Before long he was being hoisted up, blood dripping down from him as if he were pissing himself. Carl heard various sounds on his way out the door, ranging from, "We got another one," to "The sick fuck tried to kill himself."

Placing a firm hand on his throat, the paramedics did all they could to keep Carl conscious and alive, but the exterminator had one last request, and it was a small one. With what little vocal abilities he possessed, he whispered to the leading nurse, "Squaaash...Meee."

His eyes began to betray him, as the leading nurse's hands pressed on his throat, clasping upon him as if to either suffocate him or keep him from dying. He wasn't sure, but the last sight he saw before closing his eyes was a small fly that had found itself entangled in a spider's web, about to get eaten.

CHAPTER VI

THOSE EYES

I remember the first time I saw you on the television screen. You winked at me and said, “I see you watching me.”

Do you remember that?

I thought about that moment the first time I saw you in the street in Hollywood Boulevard. I didn't know if you saw me then, but the way you looked was like a dream. The way your dress hung from your shoulders in such a systematic way that I thought you must be a goddess, or related to one at the very least.

None of your features could have prepared me for your eyes though. Imperfect, perhaps the one part of you that I thought did not fit your otherwise majestic figure. They looked like the ones on porcelain dolls. I had seen many pictures of you on the internet where you wore sunglasses, and suddenly I wished I had caught you on a better day.

Even your hair was better than the last picture I saw. You wore it down instead of up, like in your TV show. I imagined I was amongst the laughing crowd of people who saw you during the shoots, and that you were secretly asking for me to follow you out of the stage. That is why I asked one of your men in uniform if I could see your dresser. I seem to recall his name was Eric, with his head resembling that of a fat fly. He called me “one of those freaks”. I thought about gouging his eyes out and pummeling him until his face was like basketball with no air.

Instead I snuck past the other men like him and found my way towards your trailer. Of course you weren't there, but I knew you wouldn't mind if I looked through your stuff. I saw the essentials you used for your beauty, right down to the lipstick you wore, the eyeliner, and what you covered yourself with that made you smell so wonderful. I only dreamt of moments like this until then. Never had I thought you wore Velvet Tip Eyeliner, which made you look like an Egyptian Priestess. I researched how you applied the eyeliner based on some of your videos where you demonstrated such skills. I noticed the way you held the liner with such delicacy, like a painter, and how you brushed the tip ever so gently against the edges of your eyelids.

I followed these strokes to the best of my memory, but paled in comparison to your majestic example. I next found your lipstick that you wore, and applied it on myself, thinking it would look just as good on me as it did on you. Unfortunately I was wrong. It was naked, like I felt at that moment. I looked in the mirror and imagined you entering the trailer just as I was about to leave. I thought about what I would say and what your response would be.

Based on your visual cues, I'd say you're more likely to ask, "Are you the handsome gentlemen I've been expecting?" with my response being, "Only if you're the beautiful maiden I've been dreaming of." From there we can reenact all the moments I've imagined us having. I thought about taking your car and driving to the coast where the fish always spoke to me.

That's where you could see the world as I do, just as I wish to see the way you look at me. I want more than anything to understand how someone as lovely and wonderful as you can ever love a man such as me. A man who by most accounts would sooner go out swimming on a Friday night rather than watch the Football game. Instead of drinking beer, I prefer to ingest avocado slushies. They are quite remarkable, especially once you add in the tasting factor in the

form of mushrooms. I often used them in many of my recreational activities such as when I engage with relations. It helps me to loosen my tongue because so often I feel like the cat is holding my ability to speak hostage. I cry best after each dosage, enough at least to acquire the sympathy from those around me.

Of course I would never dream of using such treachery on you. On the contrary, we have been more honest with each other than I ever was with my former exploits. Before I could never express myself as I have with you. I can't explain more until I see you again, but I know you must feel the same way. You've said so before in all the times I've watched you. Even when you were too young for formulate a thought or become a woman, you must have thought I was waiting for you to blossom just for me. It's moments like this in your trailer that make me appreciate you even more than I had before.

I wanted so much to stay in plain sight for you to see me, but I knew you weren't ready to see me, and I was not prepared to give myself to you just yet. That is why I hid in your closet, and covered myself with your dresses. The scent of lavender encompassed me like a tumultuous wave, and I felt the strong urge to press myself against each dress, so that my scent and yours merged together as one. I knew it wasn't the experience either one of us desired, but for the moment it was enough. While I waited for your departure, I began to write a letter to you using a notepad I always carried with me. I scribbled down a riddle, something only you would know, because you always were good at solving stuff. It read, '*What is the center of every person's being, and hums faster than the wings of a mockingbird?*'

Eventually I found my way out by way of one of your insect sentries. This one's head looked so much like a fly that I swatted him away before his eyes could fall upon me.

Incidentally, this pest had your contact information in his pocket, which allowed me to begin making myself known to you. I adopted the name “Lester Corve” because it’s an anagram for ‘Secret Lover’ which was always the phrase you used in that show you were on. Every time a guy tried to hit on you, you always said, “You better watch out, because my secret lover sees everything.” I always recorded the episodes as they aired, and rewound the parts where you looked at the camera and winked at me.

The first time, I called you I realized I had never really heard your real voice. I only heard what the television projected at the time. Your real voice sounded almost impure. I attributed this to my poor phone plan. I thought about trying to call you using someone else’s phone, but decided against that since I wanted to be as close to you as possible. When you answered you wanted to know who I was. I was about to say my real name until I remembered the anagram.

“Lester Corve,” I said. “I tried to see you a few days ago. Did you solve the riddle I left you? It’s important that you did.”

When you didn’t answer, I began to panic. My hand closed so tightly on the phone that I thought it would crumble into bits.

“I don’t know who this is, but you need to stay away from me,” you said, frantically.

“It was a heart,” I revealed. “It’s a reference to that one episode where you said your secret lover makes your heart swoon faster than a mockingbird’s wings. I thought you knew that.”

“Were you the one who hurt John? He got sent to the fucking hospital because of you, you psycho.”

I felt my heart flutter, and not like a mockingbird. You made it jump up and down with such levity that I began to stomp the ground as if squishing grapes.

“I know you don’t mean that. It’s just one of those things you always do when you don’t want anyone to know about your secret lover. But I know. It’s our secret.”

“I’m calling the police, and if you ever come near me again I’ll have Eric take you down.”

That was the first and last time we ever spoke. I felt such anticipation of our next encounter that I inquired as to where you’d be on September 14th. As it turns out, we were to be at the same place, as if per chance. That’s when I saw you for the first time without your trademark sunglasses that you always wore in front of cameras. Something about your eyes made me want you even more, despite the imperfections in them. It was how plain they looked compared to the rest of you. I wanted to splash some of that velvet color on you, the way you had it on your show.

I made my move towards you but suddenly felt my body betray me. Every instinct told me to keep my distance, and watch you from afar, as I have done thus far. To create anticipation for myself, I thought of how we should introduce ourselves to each other. I realized my first attempt was more fantastical than I previously thought. Suddenly I remembered I read that you enjoyed surprise parties. I thought of going to your place of habitation and decorating it with references from your show. I saw your walls dazzling with scarlet colors, like your favorite color, according to one of the websites I read. Your bed would be filled with confetti, like rose petals, because in one episode you said it surprised you more than anything ever had. Lastly, I’d

make you a banner with the words, “Roses are Red, Violets are Blue, but then I saw you.” I knew you would get the joke once I explained it to you.

It wasn't long before I was forced to move from my original apartment, because flies began to swarm the place as if I had left a body there. That's when I found out where you were staying and made a move to include myself as close to you as possible. When checking in, I decided to use my fake name so that you would know I was here for you. Finding the room you stayed in was the easiest task, what with the amount of attention that went into the hallway to mark your presence like a black stain on a white shirt. All I had to do was acquire the necessary clothing, and impersonate the mannerisms of your insect sentries.

Rather than maneuver myself towards you with a directorial approach, I took a strategic approach and studied the entry points with such careful attention. I noticed how the maid would enter your premises right on time as if conditioned to do so, and would leave with not a moment to spare at the designated time. This told me that you were, like me, prudent. I appreciated the sentiment as it was further a sign of your devotion towards me. Even as I listened to our very important conversation on repeat through my earphones, I couldn't help but notice the cryptic message you left me.

You claimed to not know who I was, and immediately demanded that I stay away from you. This of course does not mean you don't know me, but rather you might not have been familiar with my anagram, which I should have explained better. I understand your desire for me to stay away, but upon repeated plays, I recognized your tone was suggesting that I should, “stay on the way.” See, the way you said it was ‘away’ but then if you remove the ‘a’ and keep ‘way’ it is merely a matter of adding ‘on the’ in the middle, which you knew I'd be able to do.

The next part of your message was a bit harder to decipher, which is why I had to borrow another place of habitation to think better. You called me a “psycho” but in the film the man has a sick fixation on his deceased mother, which suggests you believe I love my mother. While this is true, I do not love her as I love you. I had a hard time discerning the difference between the names ‘John’ and ‘Eric.’ Both were four letter words, but shared little in common with each other beyond that. Both names are popular amongst males, with their female equivalents being Joan, and Erica. It wasn’t until I asked the maid what her name was when the significance began to pour in. As it happened her name was Jane, which further convinced me of my mission. I took her keys and proceeded to memorize each one’s significance, including the one I needed for us to see each other.

When I was sure you were not in your apartment, I entered your place of comfort and proceeded to make it my rest stop. I examined your tabletop, which was filled with your various forms of beauty products, as well as fan mails. I skimmed through the first few to see sickos, true degenerates who did not deserve your affection as I did. Had I the time and means, I would have memorized the names of every one of those individuals and made sure their eyes were blinded to your beauty forever. I went through your trash as it was still full of exotic contents, including your favorite bubblegum, as described from a magazine I read. You enjoyed cinnamon red gum. Even as I tasted it, I realized it was like living out every fantasy I ever had of us. Your breath was minty, and hot at the same time, like warm soda. I continued to dig until I found condoms.

I found five of them, all used, but what perplexed me most is why you had them. In your show you were a virgin, always getting hit on but always resisting. I even researched your sex history and found nothing to suggest you are promiscuous. The smell in your trash was more intoxicating than the dresses you wore. It was as if I was meeting you for the first time. I had to

keep myself plain in the head because I wanted our first meeting to be at my best. I looked at myself in the mirror and memorized my features. My damp hair looked as if I had just run for miles, although I didn't recall what caused me to sweat so much. I hadn't slept since a few nights ago, trying my best to memorize as much of the show for you as I could. Of course I knew you would know every reference I threw at you. I wanted to be sure I provided as many clues as possible.

The thing that offended me most was the lack of color on my face. That's when I found your blush, which I applied to myself carefully, giving me the same color as you. Now I knew we were perfect for each other. Before I could memorize my new face, I had to hide away once more when you came back into the room. I found your dressing closet, which was smaller than your last, but what I didn't realize is that someone else was joining us this evening.

I watched as you entered, wearing a blue short-sleeved shirt with your still new jeans, holding hands with a man I had only seen in a few tabloid pictures. I knew of him, but not like we knew each other. I watched as you two entered, both smiling, and wrapping each other in a close embrace. My fingers dug into your fluffy carpet floor, as if I had my hands on your throat. It wasn't long before the two of you found your way to the bed, with me only a few inches from a quick escape. I heard you squeal, and the growl of your guest. The sounds that began to come were like when a wolf devours its prey. I wanted to save you. That was always my intention. I never meant for things to escalate as they did.

I don't remember much of the details surrounding this point, where I am now facing charges for stalking, and first-degree murder. I only know what I've been told. According to one of the insect sentries who escorted me to the police, I took to hammering down your assailant,

thereby saving you, at the cost of your guest. As it turned out, you were too frightened to formulate a response, and even more so fearful when I made an attempt on you. I know it must have been difficult to have seen me after our failed communications. I just want you to know that after tomorrow's sentencing I'm going to request the recordings I made of your show so that I can view them. They assured me that despite my crimes, I'll be allowed to see you whenever I want.

The place they are taking me to is a place where people like me, or so they say, are encouraged to live out their systematic needs in a contained environment. So I we will have to resume our communication through the confines of the television screen, but at least then I know you'll always be there, in that perfect light where I know you belong. Perhaps one day we'll meet again, and this time I won't have to swat anyone away from you, because you'll be all mine. Like you said before, I always see everything you do, and everyone you're with. I always will.

For you always, my love, Jared Hick.

CHAPTER VII

RETURN

The hardest thing I ever had to do every day of my life was wake up. Very early in life I developed an innate fear of waking up, because that is when I could no longer fall back to the comforts that sleep brought me. I was thrust into a world where my eyes deceived me at every waking turn, and where my ears reacted without the intent to.

This year would be my last in High School. I was never the popular kid, never class valedictorian, or anything for that matter. I was just a boy who always spoke to himself even when there were others around. It wasn't because I sought attention, as my mother claimed, or that I spoke my mind, as my father used to say, but instead the sounds I heard when I was alone were more audible than those around me.

Don't look at that girl, a male voice said, in such a shrill sound that their physical manifestation could be hovering near me. *She's a whore, they are all whores.*

I knew it was true. The girl I looked at lost her virginity in 6th grade and from what I heard she was fulfilling a misogynistic desire to bed every kind of guy. I never understood the intricacies or desire for a romantic opposite. I often found myself alone during lunch, and without a neighbor when sitting in class.

Like what you see? A female voice screeched, directing me towards one side of the school hallway. *All you have to do is step forward.* I felt a sudden sense of terror, as my mind

had a temporary but daunting lapse. I couldn't remember reaching the end of the hallway, or exiting the building. I didn't even recognize one of the teachers who saw me wandering outside of the campus. According to him, I was rambling on about someone watching me from a red sedan. He investigated the empty vehicle and regarded me with a look of annoyance. It was a look I was more than familiar with.

Nobody likes you, a child's voice called out to me. Everyone think you're a freak.

The child made me anxious. I always felt a watchful presence every time I heard the child. The woman gave me a nauseous feeling, like her voice was causing my insides to explode with each syllable she screeched. The man's voice was the worst of all. His words churned my insides, like an old familiar voice that was now distant and cold.

The medicine I was supposed to take regularly were green pills that always made me feel low. That's when the voices stopped. With my mind so quiet at those times I couldn't be sure when they would return or how to prepare for a possible contingency. Usually my father used to help me with the condition, since he had it, but when I was twelve, he killed himself. My mother never looked at me the same way again. My father told me he heard an old ladie's voice, like my deceased grandmother. Every time he heard the voice, he would cut himself in the arms. I took to doing this as well, and also cutting my legs.

All I had to remember my father by were pictures. Each one displayed a happy man, who was a loving husband and parent. Sometimes I saw him walking the streets of New Mexico, glancing at me with a soft smile. He always looked the same, but for some reason I could never reach him; he was always gone before I got to the end of the street.

See that girl? the child's voice said with a laugh. *She wants you, but you can't have her. She needs you, but you cannot need her.*

I looked at the provocatively dressed female who glowered at me as if I disgusted her. I couldn't tell if that look was for me or perhaps the man next to me.

He had this odor that suggested perhaps his home was inside a shithole. I didn't know if there were any around the city, but I had the urge to direct him towards one. The look he gave me made me want to vomit. It was like looking at an unplumbed toilet.

Like what ya see? the man asked me. His voice was like a radio announcer. *Where can I find anything good to eat around here?*

I shook my head and made it so that I wasn't talking to this man.

Pal, you going to move? Do you want me to move on my own? The man cracked his elbows, so loud that I thought he was going to crack open his skull as well. The birds hanging from telephone poles remained still, but I felt my heart flutter faster than was preferable.

I undid my coat and tried to reach in for my pills inside my shirt pocket.

What are you doing that for? The female voice demanded. *Why do you want to keep us quiet? Without us you're only you. You are nothing when it's only you.*

I made my way past the crowded streets towards my house, where my mother was talking on the phone with another possible lover.

She's a whore isn't she? The child asked me, to which I tried to say no but found myself nodding softly. *I'll bet she can please any man with what's between her legs. After all you would know right?*

I hit myself on the head so hard that I fell to the side and hit the other side of my head against the wall. My mother heard and came to me.

“William,” she said, still holding the phone in her hand. “I am trying to talk to someone on the phone. Go to your room and fix the wall when you take your meds.”

I didn't understand why she wanted me to do that. I looked at the wall and it appeared as it always did.

Don't touch it, the ugly man said. *Wash your hands, that's disgusting. Save the touching for later, you disgusting pig.*

Going into my room was the only comfort of the day I afforded myself besides sleep. I plugged in my earphones and began listening to loud music, attempting to drown out the various sounds I heard.

Hea...r....m...e...e...e...fucker! screeched one of the voices. I couldn't discern which voice it was so I assumed it was the child. *Don....t....shu...u....u...u...t...me...e...e...out fucker!*

I listened as the guitar riffs were like lightning in the rain. I let the drums beat out the breath out of me, as I tried so hard to fall asleep. I took the pills but they still needed time to take effect.

I'll...be...e...e...e...ba...a...a...a..ck. I heard as the ugly man's voice was drowned out, followed by the child and the female.

Sleep was the moment where I didn't have to hear anything. My dreams were like a silent picture, always moving but never making its presence known. I saw a picture of a father, and of a little boy sitting on his lap as he always did. They both looked so happy, but something was happening that I had a hard time discerning. I couldn't tell because the father's figure became shadowy, and the boy began to cry.

"Don't cry," he told the boy. "Mama is telling me to do this. She says she loves you, and that you have to love her too." The boy's cries became shrieks, and then grunts. I tried to look away, but my eyes went through my hands. The shadow engulfed the child, until his figure as well became like the father.

The cries became like cracking knuckles as I awoke.

Welcome back to the land of the living, the female said, cackling after she said this. *Don't cry, your mama won't like that.*

I went to the restroom and touched my chest. I tried to remember the way the father held his son, delicately.

Don't be stupid, the child told me. *You remember the way he felt. The way he made you feel. You promised not to tell.*

I shook my head and got ready for school. My mother was crying in the living room, her phone was broken with the pieces all over the floor like a ridden down tire.

"You're still here," she said, with a venomous tone. "Shouldn't you be somewhere else? Don't come home tonight. Go be someone else's problem."

I knew better than to ask. The last time I did I felt her nails mark my face. When the teacher asked what happened I told her a cat scratched my cheek.

A cat called Whore, said the female voice. She can't get enough love from you so she looks for it elsewhere. A son should please his mother, just as you pleased father. You used to think so.

I got dressed and looked through my backpack. I never packed a notebook or pencils like most kids did. I always had prescription pills, and a knife tucked underneath it all. Most people who ever bothered to look would only ever see the pills and immediately let me off with a repulsed look.

The knife is for when you're good, the man told me, with a snicker following his comment. It marks your arms and legs better than any hug can. The knife loves you more than your mother does.

Of all the things I was sure of in my daily life, it was the pain I always felt from the love my knife gave me. Where some boys my age had love bites from a significant other, mine came from the physical scars I bore, making it the only real thing I had to show for my existence besides the breaths of life I took.

I rarely listened to the lectures in class but today the teacher discussed an interesting topic. He asked each of us to come up with an answer to one question, which would be read in front of the class: What makes you happy?

The knife, the man thought for me.

Your whore mother dead, the woman told me.

Your father dead, the child asserted, as my eyes fluttered at the thought.

I looked around at my other classmates. I felt their eyes on me. On the back of my neck, my cheeks, and on my forehead. It was like being in front of cameras, with even the smallest moment being captured forever. It reminded me of when my father always told me to smile before taking a picture.

Smile, the feeling will last forever, the man promised, before cackling as if telling a joke.
Don't let her see you cry.

I dropped my pencil and heard someone snicker. I felt the impulse to rise from my seat, and it wasn't long before I was in front of the classroom, holding a piece of paper in my hand.

“What makes you happy, Will?” my teacher asked, as the rest of the classroom waited for my answer.

They are all looking at you now, the woman said, making a continuous sound like a stutter. *Don't let her see you cry.*

I looked down at my paper. There was nothing. In the middle of the blank paper was a black dot, which looked so small I could barely see it. As I tried to think of something to say though, I could have sworn the spot began to get bigger.

“What makes me happy...” I was going to continue when I stared over at the corner and saw the shadow move.

Don't let her see you cry and wet yourself, the child said. *You promised not to tell her.*

“I’m happy when I feel...,” I said softly. The class continued to look at me, their eyes pressing themselves on me so hard I felt like I was being suffocated.

Don’t tell your mother, the man commanded. Don’t let her see you.

I moved backwards, until I was touching the board. My teacher gave me a look, the kind I recognized to be concern.

Look at the dot, the woman said, as my eyes saw the now bolder dot. Don’t let her see you cry.

My eyes began to burn, like the love I felt from the knife. That is when I felt something on my arm, something which upset me greatly.

Don’t let her see you, the child said in a fierce tone. Don’t let her touch you.

I yanked myself free from my teacher’s grip.

“What makes me happy,” I repeated, looking at my teacher’s even more concerned look, as well as the eyes all around me. “What makes me happy is when I feel love.”

I waited for some kind of approval, the sound of applause. The classroom’s eyes continued to suffocate me, like hands on my throat, until I had a hard time breathing.

Don’t cry, the man said, with a tense voice. Don’t let her see you cry.

Don’t let her touch you, the woman said, as tears drenched my eyes. Don’t tell her anything.

Close your eyes, the child commanded. Think about love, and how it touches your arms and legs.

I closed my eyes and felt the same touch on my arm again. This time I got so surprised by it that I felt something against my knuckles. It was like a wall, hard and stubborn. The eyes that were previously glued to me were now impaling my teacher, as he staggered backwards and leaned backwards as his face looked upwards.

Don't wet yourself, the man said, as I stared at my shaking hand. It was bruised, and from my view looked like vomit. That was when I found myself outside of the classroom, my shirt covered in sick and my head spinning so badly that all I could do to stay standing was grab onto the wall. I felt the eyes of everyone staring at me, even before the child spoke.

They all know what you did, the child said. Run until your legs fall off.

My legs took me towards the edge of the hall, where I was surrounded by a group of other students who gave me their eyes. I tried to rebuff every offer, but it was as if they were force feeding them to me.

Run until your legs fall off, the woman said. You're disgusting; it's all over you now. She'll see you if you stop running.

Tears continued to escape from the shelter of my eyes, and etched themselves on my cheeks. I tried to open one of the doors leading outside of the hall but a hand prevented me from doing so.

“William, can you hear me?” said one of the students. I couldn't see their face, like they were scratched off a photo. “We're going to get you help. Hey, come over here.”

I shook my head and continued to push the door open. It wouldn't budge, until finally my legs fell off and I landed on the floor face first. I hit the floor so hard I nearly lost consciousness. That is when I looked up and saw that the student had vanished into the crowd of other students who all stared at me in horror.

"Don't look at me," I cried, saying it so softly I doubted anyone had heard me.

Finally I was taken away by two grown men, who wore matching uniforms. I tried to protest as they touched me, but my cries were ignored. I started to gnash my teeth, biting the insides of my mouth and lips until I bled. I didn't remember arriving in the hospital, or being strapped to the bed, but I remember incoherent voices talking about me, and how I almost swallowed my own tongue, which explained the hard feeling inbetween my teeth.

You cannot die yet, said the man. Not until you return.

The voices outside the room I was in continued, as the monitor near me beeped steadily with each breath I took.

After a while the voices calmed outside, but not the ones inside.

They know everything, said the woman. They will tell her if you don't.

I dug my nails into the fabric of my bed as if I meant to dig myself out of my imprisonment. I tried so hard to ignore the voices, but they sounded louder than usual. In all the confusion that was happening, I remembered that I hadn't taken the usual dosage I was so accustomed to.

We are always here, said the child in a soothing voice. The medicine kept us away, but we will never leave you. Not until you return.

I shook my head as the face of my father appeared in front of me. He smiled with such a sad face that I could not hold the tears back any longer.

“Please don’t go, father,” I thought, as he continued to look at me with that same smile as the days we spent alone. *“I don’t want to be alone.”*

“You are never alone,” my father said, tears drenching his face as well. “I will never leave you son. Your mother would never understand. That’s why I made you promise not to tell her. Can you do that for me?”

I nodded and tried to bite my tongue, but the restraint kept me from doing so. I thought about my mother, and how she didn’t want me home again tonight. The last time she was like this was about a week ago, but even after every tear I shed, it kept pushing me further away from her instead of closer.

You disgust me, said the woman. *You should be dead already.*

I tried to see my father’s face again. His sad expression was like an inkblot in my eyes. A voice came into the room and tried to soothe me into contentment.

“I’m a doctor,” the voice said, but I couldn’t see a face. “We are going to help you now, son.”

Don’t cry, said the man’s voice soothingly. *Don’t tell your Mommy. She will hate you for it.*

Hands were clutching the sides of my arms and feet, even as the restraints continued to make me docile.

Close your eyes, said the child with care. It will all be over soon.

I felt a soft prick on my arm, with my eyelids fluttering in submission.

Mommy loves you dear, said the mother in a whisper. She doesn't want to know why you cry, but she will hug you.

I thought about the last time my mother hugged me. It was when my father died. She held me so tight that she squeezed my arms. I had bruises the next day. I remember thinking I deserved to feel that pain because I couldn't understand why my father killed himself.

Daddy loves you son, said the father with an echoing voice. He doesn't want to make you cry, but he has to or she will.

I started thinking about something my father once told me about my grandma. She died when my father was eight, but she was diagnosed with OCD, and had a compulsion to touching him repeatedly. When he told her to stop one day, she slapped him so hard that she slashed his left cheek open. It was the last time he fought and since then became as docile as a beaten down dog.

He wore her nails from that day on, said the child, as I touched my own cheek. The day she died was confusing for him too.

The figures had all left him alone, but he still felt as if his body had been violated by an unknown entity.

It's okay to be sad all the time, the child said, with aggression in his tone. Just don't tell anyone you're sad. They'll lock you someplace where no one will love you.

That was what my father always told me before I saw my mother. He told me to tell her that I was happy because I had to be.

You can't be sad, because then everyone will know it, said the man, with his voice becoming more distorted than before. *If you're happy, no one will care about you.*

Finally, as if possessed by an evil spirit, I felt my bones crack and tear themselves apart from each other in a struggle. The restraints became nothing more than unknotted rope, as I effortlessly slump from my imprisonment. I undid the restraint in my mouth, with my teeth clenching themselves like a pair of joined hands.

Now you can return, said the woman to me, *run until your legs fall off.*

I nodded and ran out the door and outside of the building I was in. I managed to find my clothing and make myself appear as I had before. My shirt still smelled of the events from before but my nose must not have been bothered by it.

I kept walking down one of the streets I used to take on my way home. I wanted to ask the voices where I was being taken, but each question was met with no answer.

I looked at all the houses in the block, each one had its own unique face. The windows were all shut down, and the mouths were closed in order to discourage entry. I found one house which was inviting. The door was slightly open while the windows had holes where pieces of glass should have been.

“This is where you died,” I said aloud, looking at the old familiar house. “I watched you cry once inside this house. You left everything just the way it was.”

It is time, said the man, *to return home now.*

I stepped past the opened door, making my inside the living room of the house.

See what is inside, said the woman, he is waiting for you to return.

I closed my eyes and heard a soft creak like the closing of a door.

You don't have to be sad anymore, said the child, all you have to do is smile.

I tried to smile, but when I opened my eyes no one was there to tell me not too. I entered the rundown house, which stank of urine and feces. I didn't care though, it was fitting that my father died with his bowels loose just as the place now had the same aroma.

Then my father's face appeared again.

"Before your eyes close again, you'll see my face one last time," my father promised. "But before that, you need to know why I died."

I didn't know if this was real and I didn't care. I just knew that I had to be here. I owed myself and my father that much.

"I died because of you," my father said, in such a sad voice that I thought I heard a crash outside. "I trusted you to lie just as I once did. To know that mother wouldn't understand, just as mine didn't. But you broke your promise to me."

I shook my head, trying so hard not to say it aloud.

You told her what he did to you, said the man, that's why she hates you.

She thinks you're repulsive, said the woman, because she knows why.

You wanted to cry, said the child, but instead you smiled at your father's corpse.

I started clawing at my face, as if trying to rid myself of a stain. I ended up etching marks all over until all I saw was red falling on my eyes. I didn't want this to be real. I didn't want to admit that I had broken my promise. That's why he killed himself.

"That's why my mother hates me," I said aloud, as I looked over at a broken mirror. Shards lay on the floor, all around like water puddles. "I smiled because you died."

I took a piece of glass and held it so tight it tore into my skin.

If you can't see you can't tell, anyone what happened said the man.

You can't cry if you can't see the tears before they fall, said the woman.

Without eyes you can sleep forever and not wake up, said the child.

After what felt like less than a minute, all I saw was pitch black. There was nothing like everyone used to say. No light. All I felt was the soft touch of someone's hand on my shoulder.

"Welcome home," my father's voice said, as I let my body become violated by the shadow that was now engulfing me.

Cry again for me

Don't say nothing for me

Smile inside for me

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jonathan Solis graduated from Grulla High School in 2011. He received his Bachelor's Degree in the fall of 2014 with a major in English at UTRGV. Jonathan earned his Master's Degree in Creative Writing under the Masters in Fine Arts program in the spring of 2018. Jonathan is currently employed as a Substitute teacher in Grulla High School. His passions lie in writing, creating morally complex characters, and watching various television series. He will be pursuing a career as a teacher at the High School level and upper levels while also publishing works of fiction. He lives in Rio Grande City, TX with his parents and younger siblings. Jonathan can be reached at yora217@gmail.com, regarding inquiries of any kind.