



This Title in no way  
Denotes the Quality of the  
Writing in the Short Stories  
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A Collective

Avaris Clari

Advertisement.....	1
Harold and Suzon (Paintings I) .....	3
The Free World.....	6
A Night at the Symphony .....	9
Beastly .....	12
Graham Crackers .....	17
Chessie.....	20
Adoption .....	22
Date Night .....	25
Festival .....	28
Good Morning .....	30
An Act of God .....	32
Impulse .....	35
Harold and Anna (Paintings Part II).....	39
Libraries.....	42
Forests and Snow.....	46
Night .....	49
No Idea .....	51
The Apartment.....	54
Questions .....	56
Rain.....	58
Snowflake, Arizona .....	60
The Reception.....	63
The Plan.....	66
Struggle.....	70
The Duel .....	72
The Flies .....	76
Wine, Women, and Song .....	77
Harold and Hitler (Paintings III) .....	79
The Globe Cleaner.....	82
The Siege of New York .....	85
The Trees .....	87
The Wedding.....	97
Today .....	101
The Gospel of Jebus .....	104
Unknown Giant Creatures .....	107
Universal Tour .....	111
Peaceful Winter Day.....	114
Emotions.....	115
Ramblings.....	117
Castaways .....	119
People .....	122
Good Boy.....	125
The Triad .....	131

# Advertisement

Dash, zoom, blast and crash. From dizzying depths to heart pounding heights, the drama is non stop. The world has never seen something quite like this, and it never will again. With a simple change, watch as excitement fills your eyes.

Wow! Isn't that awesome? Don't look away just yet! Watch what happens when we add in a mix of zaniness and wham! What's this? Oh no, watch out! It only gets better from here!

Did you hear that? Crash! Oh man, this is gonna be so good! If only someone could stop it, but... OH WOW! Jeez, these guys know what's up!

If they can do it so can I, that's what you were thinking! Well not so fast there Billy and/or Jane! We still have a long way to go, just... OH MY! Now pay careful attention to this part and... Yeah, I knew you'd like that! What? You want MORE? Well since you asked so nicely...

The world is blooming before you, a new dawn on the horizon. The wind blows past you, showing a fantastic haircut, a thirst for adventure spread all over your face. Pick up that spatula, you've got a lot of work ahead of you.

Do you know what this is? Just watch as we add water and woah! It's different now! Just stay back because... POOF! Isn't this just fun? Oh we see you're getting tired, that's just fine!

With this, you will sleep the night away without any fear in absolute comfort. It lights up when there's danger, and sings soft lullabies until you sleep. No need to worry about scary battery death voices either, since it uses solar energy to recharge during the day! Sleep without fear and then wake up tomorrow bright and refreshed!

Breakfast time! We have just the thing for you, too! Packed with essential nutrients, our patented Cereal Tech® is a complete breakfast for you and your loved ones! Don't you feel full of energy now? The whole day is your oyster! Now available in Oyster Flavor!

School sucks, doesn't it? Why not be the talk of the class with your own stylish pencil? Just put this on it and WOWZAH you are now the envy of every kid in school! With your new clothes from our discount retailer, you don't need to worry about being behind in fashion either! Oh, look, the one you have a crush on is asking you to homecoming!

--click--

# Harold and Suzon (Paintings I)

Many have often wanted to just walk into a piece of art to live there or perhaps to talk with the residents. It's not all it's cracked up to be. Sure, it can be fun hopping into a painting and jumping along various keys on a giant piano or living in a beautiful cottage, but some of the residents are, so to speak, less than thrilled with the intrusion.

Take it from Harold. Harold had always had this strange ability to hop from one painting to another. He could even enter films and television shows. Harold didn't much care for television shows. Everyone always acted like he was being rude, even if he was in the background enjoying a drink. Films, he could easily go unnoticed. He especially liked going into the heavy dramas from the sixties.

There was one painting Harold kept coming back to and he wasn't sure why. *Rondout, New York* by Leon Dabo. There was something peaceful about it and Harold contemplated building a home there a few times. Of course, he couldn't do that; it would ruin the painting. If anyone noticed, they would see it as vandalism. He could always live on the boat, but the owner of it was a gruff fellow who didn't bathe and Harold thought better of it.

While Harold could go from one art piece to another, he didn't have to be near them anymore. He didn't understand how it happened but now he could think of the art piece and there he was. One time when he was a teenager he had been thinking about the famous Marilyn Monroe photograph with the billowing skirt. Not even thirty seconds later, he was standing on a sidewalk watching her walk away with a fresh hand print on his face.

There was one thing Harold couldn't enter, and he had a few suspicions as to why. He couldn't enter anything written that had no bearing in reality. He could enter illustrations and photos in the various written forms, but he couldn't enter the worlds themselves. Harold thought it might be because the worlds themselves were abstract, appearing different to different people.

Once, he spent a whole day staring at a copy of *Flatland*, desperately trying to enter it's world, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't. He could enter video games, but he usually refrained from it. Most video game worlds were extremely dangerous. From fire breathing dragons to giant jewels crashing down around him, Harold developed a fear of video games.

Harold decided it was time to go visit his girlfriend, and hopped over to *A Bar at Folies-Bergere*. He took Suzon in his arms and kissed her softly. She pulled away, glaring at him.

"Why are you mad at me?"

"You know why, liar."

"*That?! I'm telling you, I really can.*"

"OH STOP IT! I thought hard about asking you to move in with me, but you keep insisting on this fantasy that this is a painting with nowhere to go outside this bar. If there was nowhere outside of it, where do you go?"

"Suzon, I go from painting to painting at will. That's all there is to it. Why won't you let me bring you along?"

Suzon pushed him into the bar, making Harold lose his balance, falling to the floor. She turned her back to him and told him to leave. She was done with him. Harold, in a moment of fury, grabbed her skirt and popped out, dragging her with him.

A wave of nausea swept over Suzon as she looked around in wonder. She then saw the painting on the wall, herself standing there at the bar. She turned to Harold, dumbstruck. He was pale as a ghost, a look of fear on his face.

“I-I... I shouldn’t... No, I have to take you back!”

Harold stood up quickly, reaching for her. Suzon stepped back before turning and running. Harold swore and started chasing after her trying to catch up. On the wall, Suzon started fading from the painting.

Five years passed since Harold’s mistake. He had never been able to catch up to Suzon. She was gone from the painting as well. He never meant to bring her to the real world. It seemed the real world didn’t care, however. No one noticed she was gone. Even replicas and photos showed the bar without it’s maiden. Harold had avoided returning to paintings since, terrified of his own abilities. He stuck with the real world, always with his eyes peeled for Suzon.

# The Free World

*Why wish for a dream? What ever the world says, I'm free.*

A soft breeze rustled the trees, shifting his sleeves. He smiled as he looked up toward the sun, the sky clear as far as he could run. The whole world stretched out before him, and he couldn't wait to see it all. With a simple sack on his back, he stepped out of the shade of the trees and started moving through the rustling green grass that played at his calves.

The meadow spread before him, filled with flowers and butterflies floating lazily in the summer breeze. He hadn't a worry in the world and walked through the meadow toward the creek that hummed softly through the air. It was perfectly clear with a few fish swimming along in the current. He bent down, refilling his canteen. He observed his reflection in the creek, seeing a calm face filled with joy and youthful wonder staring back. He laughed, startling a nearby bird, before he jumped over the creek and continued on his path.

He wasn't walking anywhere in particular; he had no where to be. He could be places if he so chose, but he didn't have to, causing a few people to call him a layabout or a bum. He would just brush them off with a polite smile on his face and respond in turn.

"If I am happy and free, what does my life matter to you? I don't beg for scraps, and I haven't sat outside your market asking for alms. I only pass through, wanting to see what the world can offer me."

He thought that people should just be like him, happy and free to do what they willed. Then again, maybe some people were happy being miserable. He hadn't considered that and felt it explained

why some people married ugly partners. It certainly wasn't love since they both usually hated each other.

He whistled a soft tune as he walked; a tune that was both wild and spontaneous. It had no particular beat or melody, and that suited him just fine. He thought for a second how far it was to the nearest village. What kind of people live in this one? He started running, excited. The world was a very interesting place and he just had to see it all for himself.

It was sundown when he came at last across the village. He knew he was near when the scent changed on the breeze from soft dirt and grass to the scent of civilization. This village seemed to be a traders hub, filled with people from all over. He stopped at a stand that was getting ready to close and got himself an apple before looking for an inn. He may be free spirited, but he always made sure to not push everyone else's boundaries.

At the inn, a young woman showed him to his room and asked if he required anything else. Her hand brushed his arm and he politely smiled before saying that he was satisfied with the evening. She turned to leave him and he watched after her. This wasn't the first time someone had made a pass at him but he never felt an urge to act upon it. In some places to do so meant he would be chased by a murderous mob.

He untied his sack on the bed, opening it to reveal a hand drawn map on the inside of the sack folded several times over. When he spread it out, he pulled out a pencil and traced his path for the day, adding in the terrain that he had passed. He may not know where the forest ended to the east or where the creek came from, but perhaps one day he would come back this way and find out. His path was haphazard, sometimes in one direction for days at a time, other times completely random to the point of no progress at all. It mattered little to him, he just loved being able to go anywhere.

When it came to money, it was of little consequence to him. He came from a wealthy family, but thought little of continuing the family business. His father was greatly upset when he told him, but

he asked his father for a pittance and promised he would one day return to take it over. His father saw no point in arguing and agreed. He was given a lump sum that would make most balk and he traveled on with no worries.

He had been robbed a few times, but he was usually able to charm his way out of paying huge amounts. Once, he had taken the thieves out to dinner and had all of them drunk and loud by the end of the evening. He had few enemies as he saw the entire world as his friend. All of it started with a poem he read long ago; the last line still resonating with him.

If someone ever looked at his map, they wouldn't know where he was from. It was partially because he didn't have his map-sack until a few months into his journey. He saw so many wonders wandering through the world, he wanted to document their location, but didn't want to use a map made by someone else. After all, the world was alive, not stagnant like the maps portrayed. One forest he passed through ended several kilometers farther south than a map he had looked at. He didn't care if his map was inaccurate by the time he returned home, he only wanted to bring what he saw in the world to a form that he could share with his father when he finally went back. His freedom meant nothing to him if his father couldn't experience it too.

# A Night at the Symphony

He tapped on the lectern briefly, grabbing everyone's attention. His hands rose and started turning. The strings started a slow harmony, slowly filling the air with their vibrations. A hush fell behind him as the violins took charge, rushing into a flurry, rising and falling, never losing tempo. The viola's struck back, a harsh countermand to the violins.

Not to be deterred, the cellos started a low murmur in the background, as though resenting the showy viols. There was a shift as the basses kicked in, strumming a beat like a war chant, the viols softening as though out of fear. The cellos took over, powering into a heavy march, moving forward steadily, their voices refusing to be silenced. A pulse was working through the entire orchestra now, its source barely detectable.

Then, just as it started, everything stopped. A heavy silence fell throughout the auditorium. With a barely noticeable gesture, a trumpet resounded, a peaceful rejoinder to the warlike cry of the strings. The rest of the brass filled in in a simple canon, each instrument further punctuating the others, calling for the armies to stop.

The viols came back, a soft breeze fluttering through the battlefield now, brushing the grass as the armies stood at the ready. The brass softened further, a low hum drifting over everything. The basses raised their bows, ready to strike at the first call.

Before they could strike, a soft humming came from the rear. A light chorus started chanting a simple verse as the percussion opened up, a soft rain pouring over everyone. The viols picked up speed

again, turning the rain into a torrent, pelting the battlefield with each drop, dust flying from the dry earth with each cymbal. A steel drum rolled in the back, a thunderous boom echoing overhead.

A chirrup erupted from the woodwinds, as wild beasts flew from their homes, fleeing the field. A flute flew through the air as a bassoon charged between the armies, it's tempo quick and frightened. The steel drums rolled again, louder, as the storm came closer. The tension between the armies only heightened; the chorus grew softer.

The xylophone began to dance and the rain raced down, drenching everyone to the bone. A harp opened up with a simple melody, sounding as if it were inspiring the armies to courage. The basses dropped their bows and a low stirring hum began to rise. The cellos beat at their strings, a steady beat rising from their bows. The violas hissed like a thousand swords unsheathing.

The bass of the chorus resumed, both sides calling to the opposite armies, daring them to charge. The woodwinds chimed in again as the cavalry reared, their horses snorting with nervous fury. Timpani drums joined the percussion as the armies marched toward each other. The cellos cried out, calling for blood; the basses offset their beat, double timing the march as the flutes joined in, the young officers ready for their first fight.

A loud crash came from the cymbals as the armies clashed, the chorus roaring now. The violins jumped around, their bows dancing as swords waving through the air, each staccato a mark being hit. Their flurry rushed ahead of the violas, whose vibrato was steady and careful with a pizzicato sounding as though a wall of bullets were being fired towards the opposing lines. The secondary violins shrieked in a downward scale as soldiers fell, a solid staccato of their bodies abruptly striking the ground.

He raised his hands and brought them down in a a strong sweeping gesture and then... silence. He eyed the symphony carefully, watching each section as he turned the page on his lectern. He slowly raised his baton, and from the silence came a single rain stick, slowly vibrating the air. His finger motioned gently, calling forth a slow beat from the percussion. The brass let out a cry, sounding to the

world like a wife in distress, mourning the loss of her husband. A washboard started crinkling the foil wound around it as though a fire was kindled, lighting the scene.

The violins returned, bringing out the villagers in a slow shuffle. The cellos carried the dead over to the fire, the washboard resounding with each body tossed in. A soft murmur came from the chorus; priests offering prayers over the bodies as they burned. Owls could be heard as clarinets joined in on a low note.

The percussion picked up in volume with a section changing their beat to be slightly off. The flutes trilled vibrantly as the strings softened again, the night turning to day. Woodwinds started playing and bringing the world back to life. The rain stick was joined by others, a gentle downpour washing away the sins of the world.

A trumpet loudly called forth along with the chorus who had once again picked up in tone. The viols started a mass dissonant tune, as though a crowd was flowing through. The xylophones and triangles joined in as a market came to life with coins passing hands. The brass joined in a rambunctious flurry, the hurried step of a busy merchant. The trombones called out wares while the woodwinds told of exotic animals for trade.

He gestured meticulously, swelling up the noise as the crowd became almost unbearable. The brass picked up tempo while the viols flourished madly. The basses plucked out a low note as the xylophones and triangles sped up. With one last grand gesture, he pulled everyone into one huge cacophony and the gong sounded, bringing everything to an end.

He stood there panting heavily, pride swelling in him. He looked over his orchestra, proud to have served as their conductor. The audience sat there stunned before slowly standing up and clapping. He turned to them and bowed along with his orchestra. It was their night, not his, and they earned it.

# Beastly

It laid there scared, shivering from fear, whimpering in pain. I looked deep in its eyes as I filled with guilt. This beast was only out minding it's own business and I forced it into a fight. I hurt it with only the desire to capture it for myself. I had done this many times, but I never realized how much of a monster I am. We had whole tournaments around using captured beasts to fight for our own "honor." I felt sick thinking about it.

I sat down on the ground, watching it. I wanted to apologize, but I knew it wouldn't understand. I slowly, carefully, reached into my pack and pulled out some food and laid it on the ground as close to the beast as I dared to get. It winced back, barely able to move, and I felt a resurgence of the guilt eating away at my gut.

I sat back as clouds rolled by. My conscience sure picked a beautiful day to kick in. The sun beat down on me, filling my body with it's heat. I let out a soft sigh as I continued to watch the beast cower. I thought back on everything, wondering how many other beasters ever felt this way. There were ones who helped bring ones from near extinction back to healthy populations. Maybe them? I shook my head.

My own beast had curled up behind me and my thoughts turned to it. Did it ever hate me for capturing it? Sure, it loved me now, but how much of that is out of fear? Did it ever feel bad for the other beasts it attacked under my command? It always calmed down after a fight, and always acted happy to have done well, but that made me feel worse.

I pulled my knees to my chest, laying my face in them as I watched the beast. It had barely moved, most likely scared it'll be attacked again. I didn't want to just leave it here, all beat up, but I couldn't bear the thought of capturing it now. It would be like all the other beasts, forced to love that which had hurt it so horribly.

The day marched on painfully slow. The creature let out a sharp cry, hoping to scare me off, but it instead bit me further. I teared up briefly but restrained myself. Any noises or sudden movements from me would only make things worse. I had already put myself in a position of weakness, if it got scared even more, it may attack me, and my beast may be unable to stop it.

My beast. *My beast*. The words echoed in my head. It wasn't *my beast*. It was it's own beast, a beautiful creature with a brain and heart. It could move on it's own and I had no right to think of it possessively. I started feeling frustrated at myself for thinking that I ever owned any of the beasts I had captured. It took all the effort I had to not reach back and pet it, no matter how much I felt I need comfort.

The hurt beast stirred in front of me, and moved towards the food I left for it. It paused, looking at me. It sniffed at the food, never taking its eyes off me. The beast backed up and laid down again, closer to the food now, eyeing me. It had every right to distrust me after what I did, but it still looked hungry.

The sun began to set, yet I still felt I shouldn't budge. The beast still eyed me warily, but at this point I had committed myself. I looked at it as my eyes grew heavy. I had finally stopped beating myself up, but I knew I was still guilty. I couldn't erase what I had done, but I could move forward. My companion had already fallen asleep, as I would soon.

My eyes grew wide as the injured beast stepped gingerly closer and nibbled at the food cautiously. I watched it take small careful bites, its gaze never drifting from me. I watched as it nimbly chewed. A new appreciation for the various beasts in our world grew in me.

I fell asleep shortly after watching the beast eat, and woke to rain falling on me. I looked over and saw the beast curled up as the rain poured over us. I reached in my pack and pulled out a folding lean-to and carefully set it up over the beast to help keep it dry. It shifted in it's sleep and whimpered.

This close to it, I could see the injuries it had sustained from our fight. There were lesions all over it, blood dried in patches. One of it's legs looked broken. I felt repulsed by the cruelty I had brought to this beast. I bit my lip, trying to hold back tears again.

The night came and went without anymore disturbances. My companion and I ate briefly before the beast woke, and I left food near it again. I almost laughed when it fell over trying to scurry away from the lean-to, but then I remembered that it's my fault it's in this condition. The beast squawked and hissed at me, and I shrunk back, giving it space.

It was so pathetic, and every time it moved, I felt horrible. I had a dark feeling building in me, but I wasn't sure what. I just felt like I had to do something. I couldn't let this beast suffer anymore. The cool morning air seemed to chill me to the bone as I watched it struggle to get to the food and eat it.

By noon, the beast had fallen back asleep, trying to nurse its wounds. I decided then that I would fight and help it. I reached in my pack and pulled out some rope and a first aid kit. I quickly tied the beast so it couldn't move and injure itself or me, and got to work. When I started cleaning its wounds, it squawked loudly, but couldn't fight back. I sewed a large gash shut, grimacing as I did so, and looked at its leg. As I had suspected, it was broken.

I dug around looking for a stick, but my search was fruitless. I sent my companion beast out to get me one while I returned to the injured one. I crushed some berries I had in my pack and drained them into it's mouth to help quench its thirst. As I cradled its head, I realized the beast had a fever. I started to panic. Tears ran down my face as I apologized over and over for hurting it.

My companion returned with a stick and I whittled off any offshoots as I cried. I did my best to gently make a tight wrap around the broken leg, setting it. I untied the beast carefully, still making sure to keep it trapped enough for it to not injure itself further, but freeing its snout so it could eat and drink.

I whispered softly to it as I caressed its head. The beast was too tired to fight back now, and I watched it drift to sleep, its head in my lap. My tears had dried up at this point and all I wanted to do was save this beautiful creature, and I was scared I wasn't up to it. I sat there, not moving, as it slept. Its breathing was gentle, but labored. I didn't have any medicine to help fight a fever, and now more than ever, I cursed my frugality.

My companion whimpered and I fed it again. The sun had started to go down in the sky, but the afternoon air was humid. It was as though the world itself was fighting a fever, and I was the sickness brought into it. I looked at the injured creature as it ate slowly, struggling to chew now.. I gave it some water. I could only watch helplessly as it struggled to overcome what I had done to it now.

The heat beat down on me, its weight pushing me further down. I was struggling not to scream out in anger. It's not my fault, I wanted to cry. I was only doing as I had been raised. I wanted to shout until my throat was raw, and then shout some more. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. I should have learned sooner what I had been doing was wrong. All the tournaments I had won meant nothing. My defeats felt even more bitter as I had hurt my own companions. I wanted to punch the ground until my hands were damaged more than anything I had hurt in the past.

The injured beast whimpered and my attention returned to it. It was so small. I hadn't noticed that before. It seemed so fragile, more so than I had ever imagined. I ran my fingers along it, gently brushing the beast as it laid there. It felt so light now, when it had been so heavy earlier. It was fading fast, and I couldn't do anything about it. I was the one who did this to it.

The beast nuzzled my hand, as though trying to comfort me. I smiled softly, though not genuinely. I whispered to it about how it was going to be fine, and did my best to keep it comfortable. I

let out a soft sigh as the sun dropped past the horizon. As night fell, the beast faded in my hands. Tears welled up in my eyes again as I felt its final shudders before it went completely limp.

I gently laid down the lifeless body and pulled my spade out of my pack. I started digging. The ground was hard here, but I didn't care. I worked hard to dig a hole deep enough for the beast. I kept digging as though I was trying to bury my guilt as well. At one point, I had to climb out and run to the side to avoid vomiting in its grave. After about an hour, it was deep enough and I lowered the beast into its new home. Tears streamed down my face as I saw it laying in the hole, so feeble, so tiny now. I tossed the dirt on it, filling in the hole. As I patted the last of the dirt down, I turned to my companion.

I kneeled down to it and took its head between my hands. I looked it hard in the eyes and told it that it owes me nothing. I apologized for everything I had ever put it through. I told it that it could leave if it so chose. I didn't want to hurt another beast ever again. It turned and stepped away from me after I finished talking.

I stood up and started walking in the opposite direction. I grabbed my pack as I passed it and set my heading for the nearest road. I didn't look back to see where my companion was going, nor did I pause as I passed the grave. I just wanted to put distance between myself and the damage I had wrought.

# Graham Crackers

A loud crunch emanated through the air, as flakes and dust spread. A snapping noise followed, with more flakes. I gleefully chewed on my graham cracker, thinking of the chaos it involved. I felt like a little kid, knowing that I shouldn't make such a mess, but graham crackers always brought me back.

I imagined what it would be like to be on a graham cracker as it was being eaten. The whole ground shaking violently, rupturing around you. Whole boulders flying through the air. It would be like several tons of dynamite going off nearby.

A soldier running through the wasteland, the ground exploding around him. No escape from the splitting earth, his only hope to survive is to make it to the edge and jump. He didn't know of anyone ever coming back from the edge, but it was better to jump than to get swallowed by the ground.

The ground surged as the sky swept nauseatingly overhead, a large white pool approaching at high speed. It would take the soldier all his will to hold on to the ground as it plummeted into the pool, quickly soaking it in and losing further stability. He could feel himself sinking into the ground, and made a mad rush for the edge.

I took another bite of the graham cracker speculating further on the lives of the tiny people who would live in fear of these wastelands. A single clap from me would be like a sonic boom or a thunder crack to them. The kitchen would go from a navigable box to a treacherous terrain where one slip and you would die.

I wondered if the sink would be a pool or lake for them? Or would they see it as a sewage facility? Even clean sinks don't have clean drains and the stench from those would be devastating to someone that small.

The refrigerator would be a mountain akin to Everest, or maybe just the Appalachians. What about other foods? Bread would be like a loamy fertile land for them; soft and pliable, they would grow edible molds there. Butter would be something exciting mayhap, or feared. Like a warm iceberg, they could go slipping and sliding to their hearts content. Sugar would be gems of great value to them, along with salt.

Their clothes would be made from tanned apple hides, properly crisped to a hard shell. The cucumber would be an excellent water reservoir for winter. Wait, would they have winter? In a modern climate controlled home, winter would probably be summer. But during summer is when the kitchen has a plethora of fresh foods. Their society would boom during the coldest time of year.

What of music? Would their instruments be made from twist ties and strings? The more I thought about this, the more confused I got. Maybe I'm making them too human. Then again, maybe they're more human than us. They could live in a peaceful society, knowing nothing of war and hate.

I put away the graham crackers and went into the living room. Yes, why didn't I think of that? What would they do with a TV? Would it be the words of God to them? I cringed at that thought. Imagine a race of creatures worshipping Dr. Phil as a God, or even Carlos Mencia. The idea alone was horrifying.

What about music? I turned on VH1, and watched a video for a pop song. It wasn't something I liked, but I was thinking about how these people would react to it. Would it terrify them or excite them? A man started twerking on screen, and I turned it off. It would definitely terrify them.

Would these people know that the "inside" is safe, and the "outside" is the wild? I thought about it more. Maybe the inside of the house would be like a city to us. Almost no wild creatures, mostly

sanitary in comparison, and you don't have to sleep in fear of being eaten. But outside is also where the country is, where they may actually farm.

I continued exploring the world through their eyes, going outside. The road would most certainly be a toxic desert to them, but what of the forest? The forest is bigger than a house. The bark of the trees would certainly have better footholds, too. Maybe they live with the squirrels and birds, above us all. They don't live in a house with us, that would be crazy. I chuckled, looking up. To think, all this started with a graham cracker.

# Chessie

The ground shattered around them, rocks and dust flying in the air. Alice looked around panicking, unsure of what to do. She thought for a moment, and pulled a pastry out, biting into it. With a scream, she rose into the air, several times her original height.

White Rabbit stepped back, his cackle no longer echoing. The clock on his chest plate cracked, as he careened to the ground, Alice's hand where his head was a moment before. She spit on his body before walking off, determined to finish off the Hearts Army once and for all.

Cheshire hurried after her, not wanting to miss a thing. She grinned her famous grin as she passed the corpse of White Rabbit. Queen had no idea what was headed her way.

"Alice, you need to learn to hold back. It's not a fun fight if you just end them in one blow."

'Chessie, you need to learn to watch your tone. I know how you like to push buttons, but as you are QUITE aware, I push right back, and you can't resist it."

Cheshire turned red as Alice returned to her normal size. Alice took her hand, and smiled. The world was once a scary, crazy, antic place, but they had worked hard and come far, taking on any who opposed them, sometimes fearing death, others watching as someone they cared about fell.

The wind blew past them as they crested a hill, a valley spreading out below them. At the far side of the valley was a castle, red banners flying over it. Alice looked at Cheshire and kissed her briefly before starting down the hill.

At the bottom, a full army was waiting. Alice's eyes flashed as she looked over them, the four generals standing at the rear. She flashed a toothy grin as the Aces looked down upon her, daring her to

strike, when a toothy grin appeared behind them. Cheshire struck hard, knocking one of the generals down, causing a panic among the troops. Alice rushed in dodging and fighting her way through. No one stood before her long, and the the other Aces only grew angrier.

They let out an audible cry across the army and Alice turned as a shadow formed over her. They formed a veritable house of cards, constantly flowing and reworking itself. Alice shrunk back, unsure if she could even dent it. Cheshire rushed to her side and looked up.

“Should we?”

“I.. would it work this time?”

“Only one way to find out...”

They joined hands and shared a pastry, their lips meeting as they bit. A flash of light flooded the battlefield as the two joined, becoming one. They towered over the combined army force and let out a laugh.

“You thought you could cast a shadow over us? We are the ones who have been tearing the very shadows from this land. We are shining light in the darkest corners. You want to stop us and keep the land trapped in it’s dark state. We will purge you from the land and bring back hope to everyone!”

The army reshaped itself into a towering humanoid and let out a roar as it thrust it’s fist at them. They blocked and let out a sweeping kick, taking the army down to the ground. They grinned, and the army tried kicking back. They stepped aside, grabbing the “leg” and heaving them through the air, slamming the force into the very walls of the castle, scattering them and the stones.

“Here us now, Queen. We are coming for you!”

# Adoption

He wandered through the cages, looking at the various dogs in the shelter. Several were growling or barking, obviously scared to be there. He was looking to adopt, and knew what kinds he wanted and what he didn't. He passed one cage with a full grown pup who backed away, tail between his legs, growling.

He immediately went to the counter and asked if he could have a moment with that dog. They told him that the dog wasn't good with kids or other dogs, and he nodded. He responded that it was fine, as he only wanted the one dog and he didn't have kids. They brought him to a small room and brought the dog in.

He looked at the scared dog, and got down on one knee. He reached his hand out and let the dog sniff it. The dog growled again and he laughed. He looked at the volunteer and asked them to let Dallas off the leash. They looked unsure, but he shrugged it off.

The volunteer unlatched the clasp holding the leash to the dog. The dog hurried to a corner of the room and stayed there, cowering. He sat down in the middle, his legs crossed and patiently waited. The dog stared at him, obviously unsure of this strange man.

He one again held out his hand and waited. The dog started back again, before slowly coming over. It sniffed the hand again and the ma slowly turned and pet the dog. It jumped at his touch, but didn't move away. He looked in the dogs eyes and saw the fear and sadness in them. This dog had been through something, though he didn't know what.

He spoke softly to the dog, trying to calm it down. He was soon told time was up and the volunteer leashed the dog back up and led it away. The dog seemed eager to go, though it certainly wasn't happy here. The man stood up and walked over to the counter. He asked if he could come back soon and see the dog again.

A few days later, he was back. He sat in a corner of the room this time, and had the dog off the leash again. The dog ran in circles, constantly going back to the volunteer, obviously more comfortable with him. The man asked the volunteer why the dog seemed to be okay with him when it was scared of everything. The volunteer told him that the dog had been brought in as a puppy with no name, and the he had named it. He said that he made sure to take extra care of the dog, though he couldn't adopt it. The man smiled and thanked him.

After a bit, he called the dog over, and pet it a bit. The dog was getting more comfortable with him, and he smiled. He wanted to take the dog home, but couldn't just yet. He knew he had found the right companion, shy, but good to the people who treat it right.

He left the shelter and went to the store to get supplies. He bought fencing, food, bowls, and a leash. He smiled as he set up the fence in the early hours of the morning,, ready to bring his new friend home.

He returned to the shelter, after having gone through the interview process for adoption. He smiled at the dog as he was handed the leash, and paid the adoption fee. The dog tugged at the leash, eager to go outside. He laughed and led it to his car to take home.

The first few days were trying. The dog was nervous and jumpy. It was housebroken, but still went to the bathroom inside. He didn't regret his decision though. The man kept punishment to a bare minimum, patiently waiting for the dog to adjust to its new home. The dog was already starting to get excited when he came back from work or the store.

The man walked in his front door and hugged the dog. It bounced happily into his arms, and he laughed. He reached into his bag and pulled out a squeaky toy. The dog danced for joy as the man tossed the toy. It bounced a few times and the dog snapped it up. It ran and hopped on the couch, chewing happily at its new toy. The man sat down next to it and pet it softly while it chewed on its toy.

He walked the dog diligently, taking it to the local park. The man would walk the dog up the hill every day, keeping hard at making sure they both got some exercise. After a while, the walks slowed down a bit, but he still made sure they got the walks in. The dog had become protective of its new home as well, guarding against unknown persons, keeping them at bay. The man had to snap at the dog on occasion when it was a trusted person, but he knew the dog did it out of love. He could look in the dog's eyes and see that it regarded him as his friend.

The dog had aged a bit, as had the man. While it hadn't been long, the two had grown close. The man couldn't imagine life without the dog anymore. It had become his buddy, his companion. He looked forward to coming home every day and giving his dog a hug. He loved the little moments when his dog was just happy to curl up next to him and sleep. The man sometimes struggled to feed himself, but he always made sure the dog had food. He would rather starve than make the dog go hungry.

Time went on, and the man had to find a new place to live. Everywhere he looked, he couldn't find anywhere that would rent to him as long as he had the dog. Every rental had weight limits below the dog's size or refused dogs entirely. He got frustrated, but continued to look. His friend suggested they buy a house together, so the dog could stay with them. The man smiled, and said this was a good idea.

# Date Night

The soup smelled really good so far. He looked at her, smiling. It was a simple recipe, sure, but it was delicious, and he loved cooking it for people. It was cheesy potato soup, one of his specialties.

This was his first date in years, and he was nervous. Well, nervous was an understatement. He didn't know how to do any of it anymore. He felt like he was expecting more than he should, and it worried him. He looked her over, feeling a mild sense of desperation. That's not to say she was bad looking, far from it. He just was terrified to get back in the game.

He was terrified of a lot of things. The whole world scared him. Finding a new place to live, getting a new job, even going to a new restaurant. Everything made him feel anxious, but he always felt better afterward for having forced himself to do it. There were things he regretted doing immediately after doing them, but not for any reason other than he was scared. All those things involved a social life.

He met her on a dating site, and immediately turned off his computer after he messaged her. It's not that he wasn't confident in himself. He knew he could do most of the things he wanted, but he felt anxious at everything, and the slightest bit of hate or rejection made him feel worse than the smallest praise made him feel good.

In fact, he hated praise. It made him embarrassed. If he received any praise, it made him want to crawl in a whole and hide. There were people who lived to be the center of attention, wanting everyone to love them.

He wanted to be liked too, but he didn't understand everyone else. They would talk about mundane things like getting high or drunk, or going to the club. His idea of fun wasn't that at all. His idea of fun was spending the day at the bookstore or at home. Maybe take his dog to the park. He liked taking the long way home just to see what was hiding from everyone else's view.

He set the table for them, and saw her looking bored. His heart pulled, and he started panicking. He did his best to hide it, and tried striking up a conversation. She smiled and talked with him while they ate. He calmed himself down and tried to have fun.

When they finished eating, they went for a walk. It was a beautiful day, and he moved a bit closer to her. She pulled out her phone and started texting. He started getting downhearted. He showed her where he wanted to open his own business one day, and she seemed impressed. They kept walking for awhile, talking about this and that, and he took her hand in his. She didn't pull away and he smiled inwardly. They worked their way back, and he picked her a rose someone offered them.

They stood on the porch, talking and he really enjoyed his time with her. Everything that day was perfect, and he didn't want her to leave, not yet. However, she had to go home because she had to work early. He hugged her, and they made plans for a second date, before she left.

He was really anxious now. He didn't know if he should talk to her again that day, or wait until the next. He sent her a quick text a few hours later to make sure she made it home safe, and went to bed, his heart pounding.

He pored over every detail of their day, remembering every subtle movement of hers. He felt like a creep doing it, but he was trying to see if he made any mistakes. He didn't want to mess up again. The last time nearly destroyed him, and this one felt right again. He hadn't been able to think of women the same since his last relationship.

He started having a small panic attack again, and went to get himself a drink. He grabbed a water bottle from the fridge and downed it in a few gulps before going to his room. His phone was

flashing, and he checked the messages. She had responded that she was fine, and to have a good night. He went to sleep, feeling happy again.

When he woke, he flashed her a quick good morning message. He showered, brushed his hair, and got dressed for work. He had some breakfast before leaving, and when he got to work, he wouldn't stop gushing about her. Every time he went on break, he would check his phone. No responses. He slowly got more and more disheartened. After his shift was up, he sent her a good night message. He didn't bother to send another after. She wasn't interested, and he decided if that's how she felt, he wouldn't push it.

# Festival

Lights swooped, dancing in every direction; reds and blues sweeping from the ground to the sky, yellows and purples streaking left and right, disappearing and reappearing. It was a summer night, cool winds blowing from the east, the heat from the day disappearing like an old memory, and the festival was in full swing. Everyone clamored toward the fair grounds where the festival was taking place while I stood there drinking everything in, wanting to know everything, not just experience it.

When she came up to me, I turned to her and smiled. She was wearing a red sun dress with a light brown hat; the lights reflected in her brown eyes as she took my hand, her white smile brightening the night further. We stepped toward the festival letting the crowds and noise take us.

All around the grounds we spied games, food carts, and rides, all with people barking at the crowds and dancing, trying to bring people in. I spotted a rifle game that had a giant rabbit prize and paid the booth runner for my attempts. It took me a few shots, but I managed to win the rabbit which I gave her, a smile spreading on my face. She hugged it tight and leaned on me as we continued down the festival taking in the sights.

We worked our way to the podium in the center of the festival where the mayor and some of the town's dignitaries gathered. We were celebrating 150 years as a town, with people gathering from all over to celebrate with us. The mayor thanked everyone from all over as well as the various charitable folks who helped fund the festival. Our town wasn't very big or rich, but the festival made us feel like we were among the grandest in the world. The speech came to an end with the mayor stepping from the podium. The crowd applauded him and even I felt compelled to clap for him.

I looked at her, wrapped my arm around her shoulder, and started walking toward some of the stands. We went through various ones trying on silly hats and glasses we found, laughing at the copyright offending spray on clothes, and just having a wonderful time. We stopped at one stand and got caricatures drawn of us. It was interesting how he made her taller than me, making her look like a tree with me as a kid climbing her. I thought it was silly and was intent on hanging it up when I got home.

We ran into some people we knew at one point and stood there for a few minutes, chatting idly. She held her rabbit in one arm with her hand squeezing mine. I felt as though I was in a dream or even heaven. The rich scent of fresh grass blew past us on the summer breeze as we made our way to one last spot in the festival, the giant Ferris wheel you could see from the other side of town. I paid for our seat and we climbed in with her sitting on one side of the carriage while I sat on the other.

I placed my hand over hers on the pole as we climbed up into the sky, coming to overlook the whole town. The Ferris wheel came to a halt with us near the top. The town looked beautiful and tiny from way up here and this moment felt perfect. I slid over to her and wrapped my arm around her; she leaned into me and nuzzled my neck as we looked out at the stars overhead.

Right at that moment a single scream split the night air followed by a flash and a loud boom. We looked over in delight as the Ferris wheel started moving again and fireworks filled the sky. I watched them with childlike wonder, feeling her hand squeeze mine tight. I turned towards her, placed my hand on her cheek, and turned her face towards mine before leaning in, kissing her.

# Good Morning

The sun rose, lighting a clouded, gray sky. Not even the birds were chirping today. A car passed by on the street, it's engine revving as it passed by. It looked like it would rain soon, but that was of no matter.

He sighed, drinking from his glass of tea. It was a small pleasure of his. He would wake up, brew a fresh cup of tea, and watch the world wake up. The weather didn't bother him in the slightest. He actually delighted when it wasn't sunny. It was a change of pace, letting the world drink or cover itself in a cold blanket.

The neighbor came out and got in their car, rushing as always. He didn't understand why everyone had to hurry everything. There was plenty of time in a day to do things, so there was no need to hurry. Even at his job, everyone hurried, even though there was no need to.

He felt people would be a lot happier if they would slow down. The only thing he ever hurried was his thought process, but that wasn't by choice. His mind was constantly racing, one thought chasing a hundred others, all fighting for domination, to be the thing he was to concentrate on for an extended time.

There goes his next door neighbor, off to do her job as a nurse. She never seemed to hurry, but it was still obvious she did. Maybe it was because she was older that made her seem less hurried. He knew better, though. The day was only beginning, and yet everyone *had* to hurry, and he just watched.

When he finished his tea, he went for a walk. He preferred walking in the mornings while it was still cool out. He didn't like the heat much. He hated summers, it was always too hot and humid. Still, he didn't walk like he was in a hurry. He didn't do it for exercise. He just liked to walk in the morning.

It slowly got brighter, as the horizon was clear of clouds, even if the sky was mostly covered. He waved at someone coming out their door to their car. They frowned at him, and he kept walking. There was no reason to be bothered by their reaction, most people acted that way in the morning. It was always nice when they greeted him of their own will, but he didn't want to pressure anyone.

A dog came up to him, and he leaned down, patting it's head. The dog's tail wagged, happy at the attention. He pulled a treat out of his pocket, handing it to the dog. He liked to keep one or two on his person for when he ran into the neighborhood pets. Seeing an animal happy was a good way to start the day, and he was glad to do so. A whistle was heard, and the dog ran off toward it. He kept walking, not turning back.

He walked past someone going into their home after a long night at work. He waved at them; they waved back. He kept on. It was going to be a beautiful day, he thought, as he rounded a turn. A lady was already outside, pruning her flowers and weeding the garden bed. He called good morning to her. She gave him a flower, as she smiled and wished him a good day.

The sun was fully up now, and the roads were starting to fill with traffic for the day. He turned another corner, looking ahead, twirling the flower between his fingers. The world was awake now, and the dew on the lawns would soon be dry. He headed home, and got ready for his day.

# An Act of God

If only the world never stopped believing. That was what he thought to himself as he hung over the ruins of the city. Sure, man had proven there was no god, but in doing so, opened up a new can of worms. Some people couldn't accept it. If there was no god, why did they do what they did?

Your war loses a lot of justification when you can no longer say God is on your side. What of ethics? Sure, a huge population of the world kept them anyway, saying ethics rose from empathy, not faith, but there were some who felt ethics only mattered if there was a god.

That's what killed this world. One person ran for leadership on the platform of "Bringing Back God", and released Hell upon us. When he took office, he stripped everyone of their rights, making it easy to push the button. When no one had the right to say no, he had every right to say yes.

He knew it was wrong, and that's why he wandered these streets now, though they were filled with radiation, slowly poisoning him, he kept moving. He couldn't undo what he did. He didn't regret it at all. He still believed that God was punishing him for his actions, even though he lived in a world without a god.

If everyone still believed, no one would have needed to push the button. That was his justification. An act of God, as only God had the right to end all of humanity. His stomach roared, making him stumble. It had been a week since he finished his food, and he hadn't found any new stores since.

He didn't really look either. Food was no longer a problem, not when everything was dead. He had continued on for fifteen years, not seeing any other survivors. God had put him in his position, and

he acted on the behalf of God. That's why he had been spared a quick death, instead being dragged into a slow, painful one. The world continued spinning, ignoring the creature crawling along it.

He came across an old school as the sun went down and a chill started settling in. He stepped inside, and built a small fire. Winter was almost here, and he didn't know if he'd survive another one. He thought this every year, but each year became more certain that he would die. He was nothing but bones now, his beard down to his stomach. He wore the barest of clothing, just enough to keep warm in the cold.

Night fell completely, as he stared into the fire, slowly drifting to sleep. He meditated on his actions, praying that the Lord would forgive him. A year after he ended everything, he had nearly died from a building collapsing near him. When he finished digging his way out from the rubble that landed on him, he was scared. No one was left to help him. He was shaking, tears running down his face. He looked up at the sky and screamed. He screamed over and over, his throat dry and hoarse. He yelled at the universe, for being so cruel, and at God for making him do it. Why did it have to be him?

He woke with a start, seeing the horizon gray. He stood up, and marched forward. He was almost to the coast. He had walked from one end of the country to the other, surviving on meager rations. He originally had been walking aimlessly, from Maine to Georgia. He thought about that for a second. He could remember those names, but couldn't remember the faces of his coworkers anymore. It was weird how places that don't exist anymore are what he remembered. He even struggled to recall his own name. He hadn't needed it in so long.

A storm rumbled in the distance. He hurried along, feeling near his destination. He didn't know exactly where he was going, but he was being pulled somewhere. He felt deep down that he wouldn't be allowed to perish before reaching it. A destroyed road stretched in front of him, broken in various spots. There was a flipped vehicle nearby, looked like a Jeep, but he wasn't sure. He didn't want to look inside for supplies. He knew there was a body in there, shriveled up, unable to decompose. The

only survivors from what he could tell were deep sea life. They were too far down for the bombs to reach.

He was surprised the world was still in one piece. When the bombs went around the world, triggering everyone else's responses, it felt like the ground was being torn asunder. It was possible one of the plates was altered, but he wasn't a scientist. He was very close now. He stepped off the road, and headed past the flipped vehicle, into the wasteland.

He trudged on for two hours his senses telling him it was nearby. He didn't know what it was, but his heart was pounding. It felt like he was in a vice, and he stumbled forward. The world shifted around him. He thought he heard a bird chirping, as everything turned green, then red. Finally everything turned black, as he hit the ground. Blood trickled out of his mouth, puddling up. It was in heavy contrast with the brown of the ground, as the clouds overhead broke, and rain started pouring. The blood trickled down the cracks in the ground, as a green stem unfolded in the rain.

# Impulse

*She should never have looked at me...*

The party was dark, but I saw her from the other side of the room. She was having a blast, and I couldn't blame her. She was beautiful, had a brilliant smile, and I could hear her laugh ringing like a bell. She flashed her eyes my way and my heart stopped. I wanted to desperately talk to her, but with the crowd around her, I felt I couldn't make my way to her. She danced up with the crowd as she looked my way.

*...If she meant I should not love her!*

I grew hot, and excused myself. I went to the kitchen and got myself a water, drinking it greedily. I looked up and saw her through the door frame, looking over at me again. Her eyes danced over me, her lips parted in a beautiful laugh that made me feel light on my feet. The crowd grew around her again and I got a second water, trying to keep myself calm.

*There are plenty... men, you call such...*

I saw someone come up and take her hand, leading her outside. I watched as jealousy swelled in my breast, threatening to burst through. I longed to be the one who made her laugh, who had the courage to take her outside. I wanted to dance with her under the moon, see it reflected in her eyes.

*...I suppose... she may discover...*

My thoughts wandered into an imaginary world. I longed to feel her touch upon me, her soft hand in mine as I relinquish all the love my heart can muster unto her. Hear her soft gasp as I take her in my arms and pull her close, my eyes peering deep in hers. I thought of the press of her sweet lips upon mine, the sweet ecstasy as her perfume invades me, her body pressing into mine.

*...All her soul to, if she pleases...*

My passionate thoughts were perturbed as the man who took her out invaded them. The jealousy returned twofold, my fists clenching white. I started toward the door, but then I caught her eyes. They were pained, wet, an ugly sight on that face of angelic bliss. I started toward her as I unclenched my fist.

*...And yet leave as much as she found them...*

We sat on a step overlooking the party. Everyone looked happy, though I felt sorry. I spoke to her and asked what had made her distraught. My heart was pounding, sitting this close to her. She sniffed and told me that the guy who had asked her outside had only wanted her alone. He didn't do much, but that's because she had fought back. Him, being a coward, inspired new courage in me.

*...But I'm not so and she knew it...*

I didn't touch her. I only sat there in silence next to her and let her watch the party. She smiled softly and apologized. She said she must look awful, the tears having run her makeup. I said no, you look fine. I wanted to say how beautiful she was, like an angel brought down to the Earth for my eyes to behold. I lacked the courage to, but she still smiled softly and thanked me.

*...When she fixed me, glancing round them...*

She started talking, requiring no real prompt from me. She told me her name, where she was going to school, and even about her pets. She spent about five minutes telling me all about herself, and I closed my eyes, content. She looked over and apologized for boring me, but I insisted that I wasn't bored. She placed her hand on mine as it rested on the step. I turned it over so our palms met and took hers.

*...What? To fix me thus meant nothing?*

She pulled away and looked down. I felt stupid, having pushed my own desires on her. I didn't go as far as him, but I was no better to her. She opened up to me and I mistook her gesture as one of affection or mutual attraction and now I was another fool who only wanted her for her looks. I excused myself and started down the steps.

*...But I can't tell (there's my weakness)...*

I paused at the bottom, hoping to hear some call. Her ringing voice stayed silent and I walked away. I returned to the kitchen and got myself another glass of water. Idiot. The word echoed in my head. I tossed the water down my throat hurriedly, almost choking on it. It wasn't the first time I misread someone. If I found them attractive, I was inclined to be weak towards them. I was an impulsive fool.

# Harold and Anna (Paintings Part II)

Harold examined the painting closely. He was tempted to jump in and was struggling to resist the urge. It had been years since his last jump. Not since he accidentally brought a painting to life had he even tried. He never found her, but then again it didn't seem to matter. Every replica of the painting, whether in memory, photo, or any other form which people copied the painting, had forgotten her. It was as though she was never part of it.

He felt guilty for ruining a beautiful painting. He could still see her in it and he wanted more than anything to put her back, but knew that it was impossible. In all the years since the accident, he never once even saw a glimpse of her. He even hired a P.I. to find her, to no avail. Harold wondered if she disappeared in the world like she had from the painting. He also wondered if this had happened before. He doubted he was the first with this ability.

When he used to jump, he would sometimes inquire about whether or not anyone else had ever appeared from outside into the paintings. Harold eventually gave up on that line of inquiry, however, as every painting believed they were the real world, so of course people came and went. That was just the way of things, after all.

There were two paintings he knew of that were aware of their "condition" so to speak. Mona Lisa and American Gothic. The pair in the painting were siblings and somehow knew what people said about them. They found it disgusting so many thought they were husband and wife. Whenever Harold inquired as to how they knew of their predicament, the two sets would always just say that it was obvious because nothing changes.

This bothered Harold, as the other paintings swore that things changed constantly, as though that proved they weren't artwork. Harold resumed examining the painting closely, wondering if he could jump into the painting in the background of the painting. He had never tried and it was making him itch. Of course it would freak out the resident, he was sure of that. He didn't want to bother the woman sitting in her chair and he was terrified to jump again, but he just had to know. The next thing he knew, he was nested.

He was looking out at the lady that was sitting in the chair from across a river. He didn't mean to jump, and he was starting to feel anxious. Even more so since he had somehow skipped a layer. He didn't know this was possible and was terrified to move from his spot. He turned around to see a watermill with some silos climbing a forested hill and was surprised at the level of detail this far down.

When Harold turned back, the lady was staring right at him. She could *see* him. This also had never happened before and Harold wasn't sure if it was because he was nested in a painting within a painting, or if there was another reason. Then a raspy noise made him jump.

"Oh, hello there."

Harold froze, horrified. The lady laughed. She sat back down, looking at him.

"It's been forever since I've had a visitor. Yes, I know about you. My son was able to do this, too. Even after the real me passed, he would come visit me. He used to call it dripping. Said it felt like the drops of rain sliding off of you, except that it's you falling in."

Harold took a tentative step closer to the foreground of the painting, hesitant to jump to the main section. The lady continued on, introducing herself as Anna. Her son painted this version of her in 1871. She remembered how old he looked when he visited her for the final time.

Harold jumped to the foreground appearing in full figure before Anna. He introduced himself, his mind filled with wonder at this woman. Harold had tried art himself years before, but never had a knack for it. He asked Anna about her son.

“Oh he was always a special boy. I never once believed his gift to be a curse, but a blessing from the Lord.”

Harold smiled and bowed to her. He asked her if her son had ever pulled someone out. Anna shook her head.

“I honestly have no idea. I’m only the replication. He claimed he told his real mother everything, but they’re both long gone now.”

Harold continued to talk with her, late into the night. Ever since her conception, the painting had had seven visitors. Her son, James, a man named Whitcomb, a man who claimed he was the president of America and a cowboy (this made her chuckle at the memory), a man with a toothbrush mustache who wanted to be a painter, a girl named Rosa who wanted to change the world, and Harold.

Harold thought he knew who each of these people were and was shocked that all of them influenced the world in one way or the other. He felt shamed because they all did something, not all of them good, and he just wiled his time away exploring the worlds of paintings. Anna shushed him, saying that it didn’t matter what you do with your life so long as you enjoy living it.

Harold realized he did. He knew more about these paintings than most people. He loved exploring them, seeing the details that most couldn’t. He thanked Anna before leaving. Harold returned home for the night, his mind racing with ideas.

# Libraries

I turned over the volume in my hands, fingers caressing the binding. I smiled, and opened to the title page, taking a deep breath. I started to read it briefly, before returning the book to its shelf. This is something I love, from the crisp of the pages to the fold in the binding. Going from books with uneven pages to books with elaborate covers.

I walked down the next aisle, looking for a book I knew well. There were hundreds lined up, green, red, paper, leather, such a wondrous sight. I found the book I was looking for, and opened it up, my face brightening as the familiar characters leaped from the pages. I closed the book, and walked over to the counter area.

I took a seat behind the counter and continued reading. It didn't matter whether it was an old book or new, as long as it was a good read, I was happy. I love watching whole worlds spring to life. Whether it was far off places or completely alien environments, I loved to watch the words turn into something more.

"Excuse me."

I looked up from the book, and smiled at the patron. I took their books and scanned each one, looking over them. I tapped on one and commented on how amazing the writer is, but they just frowned at me and left after they were done.

I shrugged and sat back down. I flipped to my favorite passage in the book, and started reading it. This passage always got to me, making me feel like I was actually there.

*"Poor boy," I heard him say in a tone of deep commiseration.*

*I was profoundly touched by these words, being by no means accustomed to signs of womanly weakness in the Professor. I caught his trembling hands in mine and gave them a gentle pressure. He allowed me to do so without resistance, looking at me kindly all the time. His eyes were wet with tears.*

*I then saw him take the gourd which he wore at his side. To my surprise, or rather to my stupefaction, he placed it to my lips.*

*"Drink, my boy," he said.*

I closed the book again, feeling full of hope for humanity. I returned to the shelf it was on and placed it back. I lovingly traced the embroidered binding. *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. A true classic that still holds up. I frowned slightly, seeing some of the shelves getting dusty.

I returned to the counter area and retrieved the duster. I hummed slightly as I walked down the aisles dusting the shelves. Surrounded by all these titles, I felt alive. I might not be able to visit most of these places, but I loved being able to through these pages. Different authors kept jumping out at me. Thorne Smith, V.E Schwab, Sandy Tolan, Douglas Adams, Alexandre Dumas, Somerset Maugham. I loved seeing the worlds they could bring me to.

Every shelf I dusted had books that jumped out to me. From the classics like *The Iliad*, to the greats like *Foundation*, even modern books like *A Man Called Ove*. I felt like I was dancing as I walked down the aisles. My personal collection paled to what the library had, but that didn't mean my love for it paled.

I ended my shift and headed home to my own library. My books weren't organized like they are at the library, but I knew where each one was. On this shelf was *Redwall*, along with *Tales from the Twilight Zone*, while over on the shelf on the other side of the room was *The Hitchhikers Guide to the*

*Galaxy*. My personal collection held just over 300 books, with only half of them read, but that's what was great about it. I have plenty of worlds to revisit, and even more to explore. I could go visit Mars from the comfort of my chair, or see a wonderful relationship unfold while laying on the couch.

The best part was when my dog curled up against me while I read. I sometimes would brew tea as well, usually an orange and rose blend, always black, never herbal. I dreamed every day of one day owning my own house where I could line the walls with shelves full of books. If I had a child, I would place the books from top to bottom in order of family friendly. The bottom shelves would contain books like *Carry on Mr Bowditch* and *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*. Just above those would be dramas, Shakespeare, Homer, and others. The top shelves would contain books that are difficult subject matters, from Hawking to Frank Harris.

I always wished I knew how to fill others with the love for books I have, for now, I just help them find ones they'll love. I always made sure to pass on books when I felt that someone would give it a better home. I could always get a new copy for myself some other time.

I flicked through my own books, reaching for my first edition of *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*. Browning was always one of my favorite poets, along with Silverstein and James Russel Lowell. One of my favorite Browning poems was Cristina.

*“Oh, we’re sunk enough here, God knows!*

*But not quite so sunk that moments,*

*Sure tho’ seldom, are denied us,*

*When the spirit’s true endowments*

*Stand out plainly from its false ones,*

*And apprise it if pursuing*

*Or the right way or the wrong way,*

*To its triumph or undoing.”*

The poem always spoke to me of a single chance meeting of love, with nothing acted upon.

Some regrets towards a single night where something could have happened, but you let your nerves get in the way. I decided then to finish reading through *The Ring*, one of Robert Browning's dramas. I settled down in my chair and began to read.

# Forests and Snow

Verdant hills rose and fell, buried under trees. The trees were numerous, far too many for anyone to count, spreading out before everyone. The children excitedly tugged on their parents shirts, while the parents were too awestruck to move.

“We welcome you to the HoloForest: Summer. Within these walls, you can explore the world humanity knew 200 years ago. As you all are aware, forests have been extinct for decades now, and attempts to rebuild them have failed. This is the only way to see them with your own eyes, currently.”

At least, what’s they told us to say. I looked over our audience, my fake smile beaming at them. I dismissed them to “run” through the woods and see what they could for themselves. Forests weren’t really extinct though. In the America’s, yes. The US was taken over by a businessman with no regard for other people, let alone the environment. Eventually he was able to bully other countries into removing all restrictions on logging, and we went in, taking everything.

The logging industry boomed, for a bit. Of course it did. You could travel anywhere in the America’s, meet new people, get paid well, and there were literally millions of jobs. Scientists fought back as best they could, but the people wouldn’t listen. They called them liars, fake news, hypocrites. After all, why would anyone be against American capitalism unless they were communists?

I went to the break room and looked at the pamphlet I stashed in my locker. I vowed to save up enough to visit the Congo and see a forest before I died. The hologram was modeled after it, but it wasn’t the same. I wanted to *smell* the forest air. I had to be careful though. I wasn’t allowed to speak

of the forests on the other side of the world. None of us were allowed, because our company would lose money, and we couldn't have that. I put the pamphlet away, and returned to the holo-room.

"Thank you for coming today. Don't forget that anyone with a seasonal pass can come back for our Autumn and Winter showing later in the day."

That was something that I knew I wouldn't ever see, not in my life. Winter was "dead." The world had gotten too warm for snow to fall just about anywhere, and everywhere it did fall was off limits to civilians. My father told me about snow, and spoke of it with passion. He told me about how it had started dwindling where he lived when he was a young man. Everyone he knew would complain about it, and he didn't understand why. He knew the snow was a good thing, and loved how beautiful it made the world. He showed me photos, tears welling in his eyes. He didn't live too far south either. He lived in the Midwest, once famous for its winters.

I read many old books, the ones that survived anyway, and even places my father didn't know to have snow used to. Hearing about even Texas getting snow every winter was a strange thought. Texas was one of the hottest parts of the US.

"We welcome you to the HoloForest: Autumn. Within these walls, you can explore the world humanity knew 200 years ago. As you all are aware, forests have been extinct for decades now, and attempts to rebuild them have failed. This is the only way to see them with your own eyes, currently."

If only we tried to undo what we did instead of leaving it for the next generation, I might have been able to sled in winter. Dad loved sledding. He loved snowballs, and liked building snowmen. That was one that was censored to keep the public from getting in an uproar. Frosty the Snowman wasn't available publicly anymore. I saw it with my father every year for CHRISTmas. He always insisted it was called Chris-mus, but the ads everywhere telling you that your kids won't love you if you don't get them this toy said CHRIST-mus.

I know my father didn't lie to me. My grandfather always confirmed his stories and he seemed saddened by them too. My aunt grew up between my father and me, being halfway between our generations. She remembered the last "blizzard" that they ever had, giving them a whopping three feet of snow. She remembered the forests with the greatest clarity. She always smelled woody to me, and I think she was what forests must smell like. I would not die before I saw one, even if I died there. I wanted to see what my father and aunt cherished so much.

# Night

So tired. I can barely keep my eyes open, but the I can't bring myself to sleep. I can feel it watching me, waiting. I was always told there was nothing under my bed, but I always knew better. It's waiting for me to go to sleep.

I can hear it breathing. Even my dog won't go off my bed. He seems just as scared as me. I reach over and pet him, feeling him trembling. I pull him close and hold him tight.

Time passes slowly, the minutes each feeling like hours. I hear a growl, but not from my dog. I pull the covers up tighter around me, as I shake in fear. I can barely move, I don't want to make it attack me.

My bladder is starting to hurt, but I can't get up. The bathroom is far enough that I wouldn't stand a chance of making it. Tears welled up in my eyes as I felt the end nearing. My dog whimpers softly and the bed lurches. I cling on tight to the mattress as it calms back down.

The darkness is stifling as it presses down on me. I can feel the heat from the creature breathing, it's hunger vibrating the air around me. I clench my eyes tightly shut wishing as hard as I can that it will leave.

[illegible]

I'm chanting now as fear fully envelops me, pulling me deeper into the darkness. My heart reaches a new calm, the kind that is felt when you are truly certain that you are going to die. I swallow hard.

Just as I can't take it anymore, dawn breaks and I let out a sigh of relief. I get up and go to the bathroom before going to sleep.

# No Idea

He sat there staring at the blank screen, the cursor flashing. He had no idea what to write, and it was driving him nuts. The screen provided no answers, and he just wanted to go listen to Gilbert and Sullivan. His mind was blank, and he needed a drink.

He stood up and went to his kitchen, pulling out the bottle of wine. He popped the cork out and took a large swig feeling the heat rushing through his body. He felt a little better, and frowned at the thought. He didn't like the idea of alcohol making him feel better, though he knew it was something that just happened.

He went back to his computer and stared at the screen, wondering what he should write about. He thought of graham crackers, then shook his head. That was an absurd idea. Maybe about a man who ended the world? He pondered that one a bit before he began typing.

*He sat there, staring at the flashing cursor on the blank screen. He had many ideas on what to write, but he didn't know which one he should do. The world was full of possibilities, and he could put so many of them to paper.*

*Maybe a whale that hunted humans, or a wedding between two people that hate each other's guts. He chuckled at the idea of a genie that only grants wishes for everyone except the human that freed him. He had so many ideas, he didn't know which to put down on the page.*

*He went to his kitchen and made himself a glass of hot tea, and inhaled the aroma. He relaxed a bit and took a drink, enjoying the taste of fresh brewed tea. His favorite drinks were tea and hot chocolate, and he wouldn't pass on either of them for the world.*

*He went back to his computer and flipped a coin. His hands were already on the keyboard ready before the coin hit the desk, bouncing, flipping. He started writing, knowing what he should write about.*

“He was tapping his fingers on the desk, getting upset. He stared at a blank screen, frustration permeating through him. He hated having writers block, but this was worse than normal. He had a notepad full of notes, ideas, and various factoids he had picked up hoping something would jump at him.

No inspiration would come. He wanted to just throw his keyboard on the ground and storm off. Instead, he went into the kitchen and made himself a glass of milk. He drank it in a few gulps, and sighed. He felt he had to write something, but if anything came to him, it wasn’t good enough.

He walked over to his desk and sat down, defeated. His dog came over and he sat there petting him for a moment. He suddenly knew what to write and put his hands on the keyboard.”

*“He stood there, looking at the blank screen, thinking about the various things he could write about. He thought of writing about a composer, writing his latest masterpiece, or maybe even a football player that gets MVP despite having to drop out of the league due to injury. He wanted to write something inspirational today, and every idea was hitting him left and right.*

*He walked away from his standing desk, and went to the kitchen. He decided to make himself some fresh lemonade while he decided what he wanted to write about. He pulled out some lemons and cut them in quarters, pulling out the seeds. He pressed them, releasing the juice into a mixture of water and sugar, stirring it as he did. He poured himself a glass before returning to his computer.*

*He looked out the window, taking a sip of his lemonade, admiring the sunset. It had been a good day, and he wanted to make sure every one felt as happy as he did. He pulled out his keyboard and started writing.”*

He stared at the screen, looking at the abomination he just wrote. No one would want to read a recursive story. He cleared the screen, and started thinking on it. Now the ideas were flowing, and he started writing a new story. On the screen, he typed “Good Luck, Cowboy.”

# The Apartment

The display turned on, showing stock market from the day before. A voice chimed over some speakers, announcing that it was time for breakfast. In the kitchen, the stove fired up, as the sizzle of sausage filled the air.

A table was set for one, sunny side eggs, sausage and toast, with a glass of orange juice. After an hour, the table was cleared, the food dropped in the disposal, the juice drained. The dishes were loaded in the washer and cleaned.

There was a knock at the door, a package was delivered. It was brought inside, the door closed. The display powered off, plunging the room in darkness. The overhead light turned on, barely lighting the space. An announcement over the intercom broke the silence.

“Today is Saturday, November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2025. It is currently 8 A.M. The current weather is a sunny 70° Fahrenheit. The high for today is 95°.”

The announcement was met with silence. The intercom went silent again. The music player started playing, reverberating off the bare walls. In another room, a vacuum was heard starting. The clothes washer was loaded and started running.

As things were getting cleaned, the display came back on. It swapped to a cartoon, playing on a local station. The cartoon showed a kid running through a white substance, rolling it into balls and throwing it at other kids. Another kid was making bigger balls and stacking them on each other. They were dressed rather warmly.

The day went on as the cleaning tasks were finished. The intercom crackled to life again, announcing that it was time for the afternoon exercise period. The display changed to a fitness program, showing people doing jumping jacks and push-ups.

The program ran for thirty minutes before ending. The intercom announced the end of mandatory exercise, but encouraged everyone to continue for the betterment of themselves. The display turned off, and the blinds covering the window opened. Outside, cars moved past, as others walked in the streets in shorts, some shirtless. The sun loomed nearly overhead, baking the world. A whirring was heard as the air conditioner kicked in.

“A few reminders. In two days, your account will be charged \$450 for a new smog filter. In one week, your rent is due at \$1500.46, and your electric bill for this month will be charged as well at \$750.”

The blinds narrowed, letting some of the light in, but keeping the room relatively dim. The overhead light, sensing the new source, turned off. An air freshener went off, the scent of lilac and cinnamon wafting through the room. Another knock, another package.

A couple of hours passed with no event, before the intercom went off again, announcing a visitor. The door opened, letting a woman in. She was wearing a dress, her hair resting at her shoulders. She walked over to the couch and smiled. The man who lived there smiled at her and stood up, taking her hand. They walked out the door together, the room going dark as the door shut behind them.

# Questions

What if the US wasn't founded by Europeans? What if it was the Native Americans? What if Hawaii had remained its own Kingdom? Thoughts like this constantly flow through my head. What if I had chicken instead of beef for dinner? I have no idea. I'm not a genius in any of these fields. I can say that if I had beef instead, it would have probably been delicious, but I'd be asking the same question in reverse.

I question everything around me. What if my friends really hate me? What if I actually get along great with everyone, but am paranoid about everyone? What if the sky isn't blue like everyone claims, but is actually violet? I'm not a skeptic, I just feel it's a good idea to make sure of things.

Maybe that's why I have trouble with relationships. Then again, I may just be a terrible person. I'm atheist and I still question sometimes about whether there is a God. I wonder why I only have allergies in fall and spring, but not summer.

My thoughts wander constantly, and I'm constantly coming up with ideas for stories and games, but I never remember most of them. Sometimes I write them down, but it doesn't help. I see the notes and remember the parts I wrote down, but there's a detail always missing and my head hurts trying to recall it.

What if Superman wasn't Clark Kent, but Clark Kent's son, a result of a Kryptonian-Human hybrid? It would make more sense in my opinion, but it doesn't change the story. I want to know who would win a fight between Aang the Avatar and Captain Planet. If the world ended tomorrow, who

would be found by an alien civilization recovering our information first? Why do schools pass over the rest of the world during the Dark Ages, or the War of 1812?

Education is important. A good education will make you question everything, want to learn more. But what if I'm wrong on that? Did I have a terrible education and want to fix it? I wonder what the guy who lives on the border of Russia is saying to his neighbor in Mongolia? Does he even speak their language?

What's your favorite story? Have you read anything by Robert Heinlein? What about Robert Browning? Why does it seem there a lot of authors named Robert? In my own library, 14 of the authors are named Robert. I'm pretty sure that's one of the highest repeating names.

If I worked in forced labor camps, would I ask so many questions? I think I would. The little parts of history I do know show that the workers did. They had to, to be willing to risk their lives and turn on their leaders. I have a few What If books, and none really help me stop asking questions.

Some questions just repeat themselves to me because I forget the answers. There's a painting I really like at the local art museum, but I always have to visit their website to remember it's name. After around five or six years of doing that, you'd think I'd remember, but I can't. Always, always, there are so many questions, and some I may never know the answer to. I won't stop asking though. What if I do, though?

# Rain

Rain poured down, rivulets forming down the slope as they traced their way to the flow in the ditch. The ditch formed a fast flowing stream, moving towards a nearby drain. A body was laying in the middle, forcing water over it.

She opened her eyes and looked up at the pouring rain. She looked as though she was defeated, with no sense of hope left. She just laid there, undisturbed by the rain. The rain continued pouring, undisturbed by the woman below it.

If one were to see her, they'd think she was drunk. Her eyes kept twitching, her mouth moving but forming no words. Her hair was plastered in mud, her shirt soaked till it stuck to her form. She rolled her head, before leaning her chin on her chest.

The rain wasn't going to let up anytime soon; the clouds rolled overhead, heavy. A tree by a nearby river bent over dangerously, most of the dirt under it washed away. The rain pattered off the leaves, the tree swaying in the wind. Dirt crumbled from under the tree, as it leaned over further. A bird shrilled wildly as it flew away from the tree.

The tree was old and strong though, it's roots deep in the bank. It refused to topple over. The rain kept pushing down on the leaves and branches, trickling down them, following paths in the bark. The water went around a squirrel hole, to the base of the tree, following the roots down to the river.

The river was flowing high from the rain, as it coursed along the valley. A beaver dam was up ahead, being pummeled by the current, but holding. Water splashed over it, but beavers were masters of their craft, and the dam was a real piece of craftsmanship.

The river continued past the dam, fed up ahead by rerouted water from the beavers. It passed by an old cabin, covered in moss. It had been abandoned for a long time. No one knew it was even there, and rain fell freely through holes in the roof. The cabin was built on a colonial style, somehow having stood the test of time, from weathering to infestations like ants and termites.

Past the cabin was a forest, stretching out for miles. The forest was staying mostly dry due to the thick canopy, but the rain resounded through the forest, sounding like a distant drum line. A few spots where the sun was starting to fill through clouds were filled with brilliant sun beams. The forest was at peace, and the rain started to slow.

As the rain slowed, so did the flow in the ditch. The woman finally stood up, and started wandering down the road. She headed home, and showered, putting on fresh clothes after. The rain was done, as was her episode. She looked outside at the setting sun, the light flashing in her soft eyes, as the valley glistened from the rain, spread out before her like a canvas.

# Snowflake, Arizona

The whole world was vibrating. She could feel it in her bones, filling her. A sense of power surged through her body as a thunderous roar escaped. Everything became a blur, no matter which way she faced. In her ear, she heard a voice.

“First turn, coming up!”

She slammed the steering wheel to the right, turning deftly into the curve. Another car pulled up beside her, going to pass. She smiled, shifting into a higher gear and zooming past him. She always got goosebumps when racing.

“To your left, someone’s going for a bump.”

She accelerated, moving in front of them, feeling the tires grip the road like they were holding on for life. She turned to the left, feeling the g-forces hit her like a hammer. This was her road. She spent over 400 hours practicing this one track. She knew it better than she knew herself.

A car passed her, the driver smugly revving his engine. She let him pass, knowing what was ahead. The world may be a near blur for her, but she knew how sharp the turn ahead was. She overturned the steering wheel, accelerating into a drift, going through the tight S turn without much speed loss, passing the other driver again.

“Showoff.”

She smirked at her spotter’s comment, shifting the car into it’s highest gear, gunning it. She wanted as much space as possible between herself and the cars behind. The straightway was the best place to do this before they got to the hills.

What had originated as a cross country drive on back roads slowly evolved into an annual race. The only rules were to stay off the major highways except for crossings and in towns, and always keep your GPS on. The GPS allowed your spotter to locate you and, when conditions were favorable, guide you from helicopter. For practiced racers, the spotter was almost unnecessary; they were really only there to warn of weather conditions.

The hills came up and she slowed her pace. It had been three hours since the race started, and if the weather proved favorable, another 6 until the first leg was over. The race stretched over 3,400 miles, from California to Maine. The first leg stretched from Dulzura, California to Snowflake, Arizona. There were plenty of routes to take, but she preferred the one that skirted the Gila River.

She made a turn, crossing the Colorado River, passing into Arizona. From here it was about five hours until the end of the first leg. She drove south along Cibola Lake Road, taking a slight right at the various forks, curving around to Red Cloud Mine Road.

She checked in with her spotter, seeing clouds ahead. The spotter assured her that at this current point, there was no rain, but it may happen within the next 2 hours. She picked up the pace, wanting to beat the rain. The spotter signed off, letting her know he'd keep her informed.

She passed by the Los Angeles Wash, taking a left onto Airstrip Road. The first leg of the trip was always the worst. It was a virtual wasteland, especially for a northerner like her. She turned right at the end of Airstrip onto an unmarked road. She followed it down to 95, crossing it to the other side, following the roads until she reached a road running along the south side of the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge. She couldn't get any closer due to noise restrictions, but it was nice to see a bit more green than there had been so far.

At Welton Kofa Rd, she made a right turn, then a left at the next road. She followed it until the road came to an end, turning left right before it did. She continued a crazy zig zag, following the roads

until she ended up on Palomas Road, heading Northeast. She pulled off when she arrived at Hyder, refilling her gas tank.

After getting a small snack and using the restroom, she continued on her route, letting her spotter know she was reentering the roads. Her spotter warned her of a storm ahead in Wintersburg. She swore slightly, and gunned it, trying to cut down as much time as she could before getting there. From Wintersburg, the route took her through Palo Verde, up to Surprise on the northern edge of Pheonix. Going around to the southeast side of Pheonix, she headed along Apache Trail to Roosevelt, taking in the view of the lake as she slowed down.

“Hey, one is almost there.”

She swore again, slamming on the gas, peeling out of Roosevelt, curving up to Willow and Young, cutting along 300. She turned on to Old Verde Road, then going up E Buckskin Rd. She passed through a small corner of Heber-Overgaard, turning onto another unmarked road, aiming toward Aripine. She took Zeniff Rd up to another unmarked road, doing a sharp turn to the right, headed southeast past Novo Biopower, turning north upon seeing it, and curving around to some train tracks.

Knowing she was on the edge of Snowflake, she sped up, following the road to Highland Road, turning right, then left onto Lost Drive, with another right onto Broadway drive. She passed over 277, turning onto Papermill road.

“You’re almost there. I can almost see you.”

She followed Papermill to Centennial Blvd, the streets cleared with people cheering on either side as she and a few other drivers pulled in. It was the final stretch of the first leg, and no one hurried anymore. Everyone was tired from the early pass. She was coming in third for the first part, as they turned onto Main Street and slowed down for the police escort to Cedar Motel.

After parking, she climbed out of her car and stretched. She could feel the muscles in her legs turned jelly from the vibrations of her car. She called her maintenance head to come down and make

sure it was good for tomorrows leg, as she went inside and went to her room. She was asleep before her head hit the pillows.

# The Reception

Like the flash of a shooting star, the flame danced on the beach. Some friends surrounded it, roasting marshmallows, laughing, drinking, and having a good time. It was a beautiful summer night, about 23 degrees. The stars sparkled overhead, reflecting off the ocean. A soft breeze blew, rustling the trees nearby.

“To Eric and James!”

Everyone raised their glasses, cheering on the newlyweds. They had a small ceremony earlier that day, and were celebrating the reception. While the ceremony was simple, it was beautiful. They had been wedded in a grove in the woods nearby. It was about 5 in the afternoon, and the grove was emerald, the blades of grass shifting in the breeze. The justice had officiated the wedding, glad to see his friends married.

Eric and James looked at each other and smiled. They had known each other for fifteen years, and been together eight. One of their friends started shouting kiss repeatedly, and James took Eric’s face and leaned in, giving him a soft deep kiss. Everyone around them cheered.

“So, the honeymoon. You guys said you were going sailing right?”

“Yeah. We couldn’t agree on any specific location, but when we thought about it, sailing sounded right. We can stop anywhere along the coast and see the various towns, while at the same time enjoying plenty of alone time.”

A sly look passed from Eric to James, unnoticed by all but one. Mariana looked at them and chuckled. She knew they were up to something, but she didn't know what. She was Eric's little sister, and she knew of the pranks the two liked to get up to.

"Alright everyone, it was fun, but we must head out. Got an early day tomorrow."

A couple of the friends groaned and stood up. Eric kicked some sand onto the fire, dousing it. They walked back to the campsite they had set up. Tomorrow they'd be out in the open waters, so tonight was the last night for three weeks they'd see their friends. He was planning on making the most of tonight.

Back at camp, everyone split up and went to their tents. Eric and James entered theirs, and watched to make sure everyone was in their tents. Eric started counting.

"Five, four, three, two... one..."

All the tents lit up as everyone's phones went off at once. Eric grinned wickedly as James leaned down, nibbling on his earlobe. He whispered into his ear, asking if he thought they were enjoying the surprise. Mariana stormed out of her tent to their and climbed in.

"WHAT THE HELL, ERIC?!"

Eric just smiled innocently. James looked at her, trying not to laugh. Mariana held out her phone to him, fuming.

"YOU THINK THIS IS FUNNY?"

On the phone was a video playing of a much younger Mariana in the bathtub with Eric. She was splashing the water and laughing, while Eric played with a rubber duck.

The rest of the camp was filled with laughter, as Eric tried placating her. Mariana's phone went off again, and she checked it. Louise was already running over to the tent.

"ERIC!"

The phones now had a video of Louise drunkenly talking about how she thought Eric's sister was hot and how much she wanted her. She was red faced and swaying, barely able to stand up. Mariana balked at the video, turning bright red.

James couldn't hold it in anymore and started laughing wildly as the phones went off a third time. Everyone gathered out at the center of the site, intent on making sure that no one was left unembarrassed. It took an hour for the phones to stop going off. By the end of it, no one was even mad anymore. It was too surreal to be mad. They didn't know how Eric got the footage he did of some of them, but he did.

Eric and James stepped out and hugged each and ever one of their friends. James looked at Eric, who nodded. Everyone's phones went off again, with a single message.

"Look up."

They turned their eyes to the sky right as a high pitched whistle pierced the night, followed by a pop. The sky was illuminated with fireworks, in various colors. Eric leaned against James, looking like the happiest man in the world.

Mariana turned to them. "How could you afford this?"

"How could we not? You guys have been there with us through everything. You're our friends, our family. We love you, and not seeing you for three weeks was going to be a pain for all of us. We saved up a few years to be able to do this."

Everyone fell silent as the last of the fireworks went off. They didn't say a word, but stood their as the night became still around them. A soft breeze flowed through the campsite.

# The Plan

“Alright. Show time.”

He pulled the yellow mask down over his face and jumped off the top of the building. Using the rope attached to his belt, he twisted around in the air, swinging his feet straight towards a window a few stories down. He slammed into it full force shattering the window and taking the men inside by surprise. He quickly assessed the situation to try to drop the chances himself dying.

“Shit! He’s here!”

“Hey, boys. Miss me?”

He tilted his head saluting them as they started firing on him. He deftly dodged them, throwing a smoke grenade as he did. He winced as one bullet grazed his calf and doubled up taking aim.

“Much obliged, gentlemen!”

He leapt forward and slammed his fist into one of the goons, knocking him out. Using his momentum, he flipped up over another one, wrapped his legs around the thug’s neck, and flipped him back and over, slamming him on the ground.

“Where is he? C’mon ya dirty coward, show yerself. We didn’t think Hawk was a chicken, did we boys?”

Hawk tapped the guy on the shoulder before slamming his elbow into his nose when he turned. The thug fell to the floor with his nose pouring blood, broken. Hawk ran for the elevator and climbed in.

“It was nice dancin’ with ya! Tell the wife I said hi.” The elevator door shut, as one of the goons radioed the boss. He ran to the stair case, and started running up. Hawk watched his tracker from in the elevator shaft as the elevator climbed to the highest floor and the goon stopped one floor short.

“Gotcha.”

He shot his wrist grapple up, pulling himself through the elevator roof. He then latched it onto the elevator as he swung under, dropping a floor. Hawk pulled out a small explosive charge and lined the door with it before jumping to the other side of the shaft. He fired at it which blew the doors outward. He jumped through the hole, rolling as he made contact with the floor.

“Hawk, so glad you could join us.”

He strode over to the long table, pulled out a chair, and sat back with his feet on the table. He gazed at his adversary across the table. The two had been going back and forth for years and at this point would probably keep going for many more.

“So, Greaser, what’s on the agenda today?”

“Oh, Hawk, going to skip the pleasantries?”

“Well, ya know. Me hero, you villain, and I’m in kind of a hurry.”

Greaser made a gesture and the table was laid out with a full feast. Hawk continued to watch Greaser, wondering what his game was. They may have been fighting for years, but Hawk knew Greaser better than the villain’s therapist.

“Trying to butter me up?”

“Well, I didn’t make all this for myself. Don’t you know what today is?”

Oh, Hawk knew alright. He could still remember that day years ago, when he had accidentally ruined a civilian’s life. Greaser had just been a normal guy back then. He was out at a bar when Hawk showed up looking for information. Greaser didn’t know that he was in a villain establishment, and when a fight broke loose he tried running. Hawk reacted as any hero would in the situation. He thought

that Greaser was the goon he was looking for. He chased him through the back into the alleyway and threw a bolo at him, tripping Greaser.

“What’s Arbiter’s plan, scum?”

Greaser looked up at Hawk, his face soaked with tears and mucus, fear surging through him like a newborn. Hawk lifted him by his shirt and slammed him against the wall.

“TALK!”

“I-I swear I don’t know anything. Please, I thought you were a hero!”

Greaser proceeded to soil himself as Hawk dropped him. Realizing his mistake, he cut the bolo and let the man run off. Greaser in his fear and blinded by his tears ran back into the bar, tripping in the kitchen. He landed face first in the fryer, permanently changing his complexion and earning his new moniker. When he got out of the hospital, he swore revenge on Hawk for ruining his life.

Now Greaser was head of the criminal empire and wasn’t out for revenge anymore. Hawk knew that, and he also knew that if Greaser was planning something it’d be better for him to get on the ground floor to stop as much as possible. He took a grape, popping it in his mouth.

“Look, Greaser, we’ve been doing this for years. We’re both getting tired of it, so why don’t you tell me what the plan is this time, I’ll go stop as many of your lackeys as I can, you’ll of course get away with it because any ties you have to it are tentative at best, and we can repeat this rodeo another time.”

“Ah, but Hawk, there is no plan. I’ll even grant you full access to my systems with no worries about my men trying to disembowel you. Though I do ask that you pay for a new window to replace the one you smashed.”

Hawk knew Greaser wasn’t lying, and sighed. He tapped his knuckles on the table a few times before standing up and turning around. He looked back at Greaser, tossing a USB on the table.

“Welp, guess I’m off then.”

Greaser took the USB knowing it would wire money into his account for the window from an unknown source. Hawk was good at covering his tracks. When Greaser looked up, Hawk had vanished.

# Struggle

This is a story that I never wanted to write. I was struggling to write other stories so I just felt like writing something about that. Struggle is a huge pain, and I need to find good ways to deal with it. Currently when I struggle, I distract myself, procrastinate, read, etc. I hate doing it, but it's how it goes sometimes. The world can keep on turning but every once in a while I'll sit there looking at a story that started well and is now only 300 words in and there's nothing left.

*Three. Hundred. Words.* I cannot stress that enough! Do you have any idea how weak that feels? Have an excerpt from the latest atrocity I couldn't bring myself to finish. It is an absolute piece of garbage and I can not bring myself to want to finish it.

"John said goodbye to Charles and they left. On their way out, Eric asked John what all that was about, but John merely shrugged."

You don't need context to know that that isn't very good. I sit here tapping away at my keyboard and racking my brain for ideas. I can come up with all kinds of worlds, but some don't transfer very well. I'm still proud of my time travel story and my symphony orchestra. But it's difficult to put things into a contextual form that you will see what I see.

For instance, I once tried to write a story about a race across the USA, but because of the route I chose, it had a lot of unnamed roads which leads to very hard writing. Seriously, Arizona, get your roads named. You can only take that so many times before it can be anywhere in the world.

Then there's another problem I have sometimes. I'll start off strong, but quickly lose inspiration or realize it's devolving into a completely different story I've written and then it becomes a pain to deal

with. I love writing, but I can be really difficult sometimes. Ask any form of artist, a word I loosely use with myself, and you might find similar answers from them. I am not a perfectionist, I just wish I could portray things easier for you.

I don't know why it's so difficult at times when other stories, ones I *hate* writing, come so easily, such as the one I wrote about coming to terms with the monster inside yourself. I can't write horror, my two attempts at it have completely failed, but I was at least able to finish those stories.

I am currently one update behind on my schedule, having promised a new story every day, but it's fine. I will go an extra day if I have to. I promised thirty new short stories, and I will hold myself to that. This story is a perfect example of another issue I have with my own writing. I see myself starting with a full paragraph, full of everything I want in it, then halfway on the same page, I have a super tiny paragraph. I know it happens, but it looks like I'm starting to slack off towards the center.

I struggle to deal with my writing insecurities. I worry that people don't even look at my stories, even though I know they do. I love writing anyway, and will probably be writing until I die, but still, I struggle with it. At times it feels so routine that I get antsy and want to go do anything else at all, but I'm always coming up with new ideas, whole worlds I want to bring to the public. I'm not well known, but even so, if someone finds something I wrote and likes it, then I would be happy.

# The Duel

“Let’s do this.”

John jumped from foot to foot, excited. He had been looking forward to this day for years. Today was the first international RoboTourney. He had been practicing for years, honing his skills on the local circuits.

He pulled out his eyepiece, putting it on. Instantly the field came into view, a cockpit before him. He tested the controls, making sure everything responded correctly. *Left. Right. Left. Right. Kick. Jump.* Everything checked out. John put his ready signal into the ref.

Everything went quiet. The crowd that was pulsing around him waited with baited breath, wondering who would strike first. Sure, the game was virtual, but that didn’t mean it didn’t have it’s stakes. John looked around the play field, expertly hiding within the shrubbery and trees.

*SNITHP!* The sound of a rope pulled taut snapped John’s senses into overdrive. He swung around, barely missing his opponent. He eyed the area, careful of traps. A bell rung in the distance, as John carefully moved forward.

*INCOMING ARTILLERY!* His computer went off. John tried jumping to the side, but took a shot to one of his legs. It wasn’t enough to take out his robot’s mobility, but it did slow him down. John swore, glaring in the direction the gunfire came from. His opponent was fast, that was for sure, but were they good?

As if to answer John's thoughts, he immediately was slammed to the ground from behind. He rolled his robot over as quick as he could, seeing the opponent clearly for the first time. They went to stomp on him, and John took the opportunity to kick his leg out, tripping them.

Rolling on top of them, blade aimed their cockpit, John called out. "Do you surrender, or do I strike the final blow?"

A voice crackled from the other robot. "I-I SURRENDER MISTER! PLEASE DON'T HURT ME!"

The field faded away, and John swore again. A kid? They had John take on a kid? Who did they take him for? He stormed out of the arena, deaf to the cheers in his name. In the break room, he walked up to the receptionist.

"What was that?"

"What do you mean?"

"A KID?"

"Sir, please calm down."

John glared at her. She looked over the papers, and frowned. She looked back up at him, smiling nervously. She let out a nervous laugh.

"Sir, there seems to have been a mistake."

"I know there was a mistake. Now tell me WHY it was made."

"Dual entry."

"What?"

"That wasn't supposed to be your opponent. There is someone in the children's league that shares your name."

"Wait, so that means..."

John turned to the monitors, turning pale. There was his name, but it wasn't him. He watched the kid, wondering how this mess was going to get fixed. He swallowed, turning back to the receptionist.

"We have to fix this."

"Sir, there isn't anything we can do. Both of you have to drop out now. I'm sorry, but the rules are clear. Compete in the proper league."

"WHAT?"

"Sorry, sir."

John slammed his hands down on the table, scattering the papers. He glared at her, wanting more than anything to take her papers and shred them. A cheer came from the arena, and John turned to see the kid standing over a destroyed robot. He at least had to admit, the kid had some skill.

The receptionist put in a call to the referees. A silence filled the stadium as people became aware something was wrong. A referee stepped forward, calling attention to himself.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we apologize for the delay in today's events. A mistake has been made, and we are working out how to best deal with it. We have two John Thomas's competing today, and somehow, they got mixed up. Will both of you return to the arena please?"

John returned to the arena, and was surprised to see it fully lit, letting him see young John on the other side. He turned to the referee, arms crossed. Younger John continued to stare at him.

"Gentleman, the rules normally dictate that you must forfeit for competing in the wrong league, however! Master John here managed to defeat an adult opponent, showing that he is capable. As this is an unprecedented mistake, we have come to the following conclusion. Both of you will face each other. Winner gets to continue in their proper league."

John smirked, stretching his arms. Another kid. Did they really think he couldn't handle him? He accepted the terms, turning to young John who already was sliding his eyepiece on. John followed

suit, applauding the kid for not running away. The stadium lights dimmed again, allowing their eyepieces to properly project the new battle site.

A barren plain spread out in front of John. Wind blew dust along, setting an Old West feel to the battle. He saw young John's machine across from him. A small arena, perfect. He tested his controls again before sending the ready signal.

*DING!* The fight bell rang and John immediately pulled out a gun and fired. The kid dodged, rolling to one side and coming up firing. John moved to the side, slamming his robot into a run. The kid tracked him, firing as he stood up and ran opposite.

John quickly dropped into a crouch and sprang forward, drawing his blade. The kid was quick to react and shot the blade out of John's hand. John caught himself with both hands, spring the robot into the air, turning as he did so, firing a single shot. It connected with the kid's gun, knocking it out of his hand.

The kid charged forward, catching John before he made it to the ground and slammed him down over the robot's shoulder. John swore as multiple critical lights came on his HUD. He set off his thrusters, creating a smoke screen while moving away from the kid. While it wouldn't hide the noise of his robot, it would keep the kid blind.

He ran in circles, dodging back and forth, trying to get close to the kid while keeping him confused as to where he was coming from. John got up close to the kid's robot, raising his fist, ready to slam it in the cockpit. He froze unable to finish the action. The kid was looking right at him, a gun pointing at his robot. He pulled the trigger, finishing off John.

John tore off his eyepiece as the lights came on in the stadium. The kid was good. He went over to congratulate him, and shook his hand. He wished the kid good luck, and left. He needed to train more for next year.

# The Flies

The itchy, burning feeling of a bite rushed through her forearm, though she dared not move and disturb the swarm. No, she had learned after they crawled in her mouth how dangerous an idea that was. They crawled over her, not an inch of her body was free of the pests.

She could feel the millions of legs on her, scratching at her. She dared not to open her eyes for fear of feeling them crawl over her corneas. One crawled up her nose and she sneezed. Her eyes flew open and she quickly covered her face as they swarmed the air over her. She wanted to get up and run, but any attempted movement of her legs made her nearly pass out.

They settled down on her again, spreading out slowly over her. She didn't know why they were attracted to her so, she wasn't dead. She felt sticky in parts, but she didn't know why. Some were crawling up her leg, making her muscles twitch. She bit back a scream as pain shot through her.

She had no idea how long she had been stuck there, only that it seemed to never end. She felt like a corpse, slowly being devoured. It was as though her whole body had become a mass of swarming pests, no longer hers.

She was trying not to cry, she didn't want her tears to attract them to her more. One was squirming in her navel, seemingly stuck. She was in hell, and there was no saving her. The pests buzzed in her ears, crawled on every exposed bit of flesh, and bit her in every spot they could.

When she thought she couldn't bear it anymore, a buzzer sounded. She sat up and took the hands helping pull her out of the tank. She had just won herself one million dollars.

# Wine, Women, and Song

A laugh echoed through the room, followed by a loud cheer. Jazz could be heard below the noise while patrons danced and gambled. John Aldric grinned as he proudly shook the dice. He threw them down the table and rolled another seven. Everyone around the table cheered again.

“So, John, what now?”

“Eric, my friend... DRINKS ARE ON ME!”

They headed over to the bar and ordered. Soon they were drinking heavily and cheerily, their cups filled to the brim. Through the crowd came the piercing sound of a single sax, barreling through their noise like a bull in Spain. Everyone quieted down as the rest of the band joined in, a smooth tone filling the room.

John and Eric tipped back their hats and tapped their fingers on the bar as they listened, their drinks forgotten. The song swelled and vibrated through everyone, not a single breath was heard. Then, just as strong as it started, it abruptly ended.

John paid the tab and hurried backstage excitedly. He ran up to the saxophone player and asked him to wait a minute. He turned and looked at John before cracking a grin.

“JOHNNY!”

“CHARLES!”

The two embraced laughing. Eric caught up and stood there awkwardly. John turned and introduced the two to each other, happier than ever.

“Man, I was lucky on the tables and then my old school buddy shows up blowing everyone away on his sax. What a night, I tell ya!”

“Johnny, I ain’t seen ya since our old job.”

“Well how would you like to work with me again?”

“I don’t really need a stay in job, I get plenty o’ work on my sax.”

“Well how’s Elize doin’?”

“She’s just great, really likes our place downtown.”

“She still do that thing? The one that shows off them legs?”

“Sure does, but only for me now.”

“You lucky dog.”

“Sure, sure, but I ain’t the high roller like you.”

“Nothin’ to worry about Charlie, nothin’ at all.”

Eric stood by completely confused as to what was going on, but the other two seemed to understand each other just fine. John said goodbye to Charles and they left. On their way out, Eric asked John what all that was about, but John merely shrugged.

**--INCOMPLETE--**

# Harold and Hitler (Paintings III)

Harold had spent several months book hopping. He didn't feel comfortable doing it, but he needed to see if any of the people had their real world memories in their biographies. He went through several biographies and books about every person except one, only to find that none had their real memories.

His fingers drummed on the cover of the last book to try, worried. The man was a psychopath but he had to know. The book was actually written by the person in question, so it may have some of his real memories. Harold had to know about his ability. He no longer suspected he was the only one in the world with it.

With a sigh, Harold opened the book. He looked over the title once again, his heart pounding. *Mein Kampf*. Harold swallowed, took a deep breath and jumped.

He looked around confused. Harold could have sworn he jumped into *Mein Kampf*, but instead found himself in a classroom. Not just any classroom, but the one he had attended in middle school. He looked to the front and saw Mr. Williamson, his old English teacher.

"Hey, Lardo. What's wrong with the sentence on the board?"

Harold felt himself turning red. He wouldn't ever forget how his teacher had treated him. Instead of answering, Harold felt himself rise up and move toward his teacher. The Mr. Williamson yelled at him to sit down. Harold fought against his body but before he realized what was happening, his balled up fist made contact with Mr. Williamson, knocking him to the ground.

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

Harold turned toward the voice, alien to him. There stood a young man, both familiar and unknown to Harold. The young man chuckled, stepping toward Harold. He kept his hands clasped behind his back as a dark grin spread across his face.

“It feels good, taking out those who oppress others, doesn’t it? Those who are the underside of society. Ja, we must all feel the struggle. Mein own will, nein, mein divine right drove me to help free us of those who drag us down.”

It was him, Harold realized. His eyes were like saucers as Adolf went on, talking about freeing society from the scourge of the Jew. He tried to open his mouth to speak, but found he could not. Adolf smiled, aging before Harold’s eyes into the recognized form they showed every little kid to scare them straight.

“How... How did you use *my* memory?”

“Harold, it is *Mein Kampf*, my struggle. By entering here you saw your own struggle. Ah, ja, I know why you are here. I can answer your questions, but...”

Harold felt himself getting angry again. He was usually good about keeping his composure, but here in this presence, in this world, his emotions were swinging wildly. He could see Hitler’s life flying before him, from his fatherless childhood to his arrest. He saw that this version of Adolf had also had a few other visitors like Harold, two of which seemed like they came from his time.

“You want me to free you don’t you?”

Adolf nodded. He stood there smirking, feeling confident in the idea that his freedom was guaranteed. Harold inquired if he had asked the others the same deal.

“Not at first, no. First I needed information. What changed in the world outside? As time passed, the world moved on and my views for the future seemed less and less possible. Then I had a very special visitor, told me of a new leader in the West, one who’s views are similar to mein own, another orator of persuasion. This is why I ask now.”

Harold steamed, clenching his fists as he stared at one of the greatest visages of evil. The man before him was trying to break free of the book, but what confused Harold more is how he knew of the world outside. The characters in every other book he had jumped into had been static, never changing. Then it slowly dawned on him.

“You switched places, didn’t you? You forced out the young you in this book when you found you were losing, and doing so trapped yourself in here.”

Hitler took a step back, the scene in the back fading into the underground bunker his body had been found in. Skeptics were right, Harold thought; it wasn’t really Hitler’s body. Harold watched the confused younger Hitler looking around before spotting a dead woman on the ground. He watched as the boy seized up, collapsing to the ground dead.

“You didn’t just switch places. You poisoned him when you pushed him out. You... you...”

Like that, Harold was back in the library, and looked around to make sure Adolf hadn’t come with him. He tucked the book back on the shelf and walked out. He needed to find the others that were in this time, alive now. He knew what they looked like from the memories shared by Hitler. Everything was just beginning.

# The Globe Cleaner

When I was a boy, the world was going through a revivalist period, so to speak. Everyone was talking about how we need to stop pollution, clean our oceans and forests, switch away from fossil fuels. The Earth was slowly getting cleaner.

Then, all of a sudden, it stopped. People started saying it was all fake. We can't be the problem, it has to be natural. Things started getting worse. The USA elected a president who wanted to move away from green fuels, promoting poisons like coal. The world was getting warmer, and even anecdotal evidence supported it, but people continued to deny it.

I decided that I would do every thing I can to see the day the Earth is fixed, or the last day of human civilization. I worked out, ate the best I could, and managed to prolong my life. New studies brought controversial life extension treatments, which I readily volunteered for.

When I was around 65, several countries united into conglomerates to fight the issues of the various forms of pollution. I volunteered, and headed out for the clean up crews. We were a rag tag group, divided into about forty teams of one hundred people each. I was on land pollution, namely around rural roads and forests. Our team was a mix of volunteers and employees, all wanting to fix the world.

It took us ten years before a difference was really noticeable. We had reduced pollution in our assigned areas by over seventy percent, and the few engineering teams had erected various forms of energy harvesters, from water to solar and air. The smog levels in the cities had dropped significantly as well due to efforts to replace cars with cleaner transportation, from electric buses to bicycles.

The leaders behind the effort to clean up won a joint Nobel Peace prize for improving the communities and helping to improve the situation for everyone around the globe. I watched the award ceremony, hoping they'd thank some specific team members, but we just got a generic thanks for our efforts as well. The news was everywhere, and while we knew it would be years before we could finish fixing our atmosphere, several more countries started their own clean up efforts.

Northern Africa started a desert renewal program, strategically digging rivers to plant trees and other plants along, while doing their best to avoid what happened with the Salton Sea. North America shut down all of its coal plants, replacing them with nuclear or solar. Central America formed clean up teams like the conglomerates of Europe and Asia.

I was getting on in years, and felt the need to retire. I wanted to do my best to see the results of our experiment. I retired to a small house in my childhood town, and took care of a small garden. I went for walks every morning, and runs in the evening. I even volunteered at the schools, sharing my stories of my clean up efforts.

I met a wonderful woman at one of those schools. In less than two months we were married. We were too old to have children of our own, so we chose to adopt one. It took us a few years, but we finally adopted a little girl named Penelope. We raised her like she was our own, though we were old enough to be her grandparents.

She grew into a fine woman, and became a teacher like her mother. I was confined to my bed now, and knew my time was almost up. I watched the news every day, hearing the good news. Asthma was down, as well as multiple cancers. It brought tears to my eyes, knowing the world was finally on the right path.

The doctors were surprised at my longevity. Since I had taken an early treatment for life extension, I was incompatible with the improved version. I had actually lasted longer than anyone else on the treatment. I always said that watching the world come to life filled me with life.

My daughter came home with a man on her arm. She thanked me for everything, and introduced him. He was the lead engineer on the nations geothermal energy harvesting project. He told me how my daughter had told him all about me, and he couldn't feel prouder to be in my company. I raised my hand, stopping him. I responded that it wasn't about me, it was about the world. I had wanted everything to be put to right, and that I had to do my part, too, just as he was doing. He shook my hand, his face beaming. Two weeks later, he was my son-in-law.

Six days ago, a countdown began all over the world. It was estimated that we were up to 98% clean, and everyone was excited. The estimated 99% was in less than 24 hours. We knew we wouldn't hit 100%, so we were satisfied with what we could do. The Earth was on track to start cooling off to it's normal temperatures, the air was breathable world wide, and smog was almost nonexistent now. The timer got down to one hour left. I asked my son-in-law to help me outside.

He carefully lifted me into a wheel chair, and pushed me outside. The timer was down to ten minutes as I watched the sun drift toward the horizon. Tears welled up in my eyes as I smiled. It was beautiful, and I managed to see it. My final vision of the world was beautiful, and I was glad I pushed myself to my body's limits to see it. As the world looked it's brightest, it all went dark. I found my peace.

# The Siege of New York

The wind blew into our ranks, bringing with it the scent of a thousand unwashed men, horses and gunpowder. They had come directly to us, only halting to rest. That gave us an advantage as we were well rested, but they were better trained and battle hardened. I coughed slightly as I got down with the rest of my line.

I aimed carefully, the few seconds seeming like minutes turned to hours. My finger brushed against the trigger, pushing the gun into my shoulder, the whole line reporting as smoke filled the air. Something whizzed past my ear as I dropped back, letting the line behind us fire while we reloaded. I heard a thud followed by a scream. I shook as I jammed the cleaning rod down the nozzle of my rifle, nearly dropping it as I pulled it back out. The man in front of me fired his gun and I looked up, panicking as I rushed to finish reloading.

I finished just as he ducked down and took aim again, firing off into the British line. I dared not look to see if I hit a mark, but hurriedly ducked back as the third line moved up to the front. There was a thud next to me and dirt sprayed the air. A shot barely missed and I prayed to heaven that it would again. I reloaded my rifle faster than before and waited for a chance to fire.

It came sooner than I had expected, as the British cavalry charged in, their swords at the ready. I fired and hit one of the horses, causing it to fall and crush its rider. I quickly drew my my sword and ran forward with the rest of my line. All around me were the sounds of gun fire and blades ringing against each other, screams of men and horses falling, and explosions of cannon fire hitting the ground.

The smell of blood quickly filled the area as we fought against the tyranny of King George. Some of us were old enough to remember the Revolution, the rest of us only knew of the stories.

We were being pushed back, but we weren't ready to give up. We fell back, firing into their lines as we returned to the city. It was late afternoon, but it didn't matter. The British stopped firing on us when we were within New York City itself. We watched them warily, not sure of what they were planning.

Night came and went as various watches kept an eye on the British. When a day passed with no movement, we called to dispatch a messenger by ship to Washington. Before it even left harbor, a ship sailed over the horizon and blasted it to smithereens. We were under siege. Now we knew that they never intended to fight us, but force us into unconditional surrender.

The world seemed so much smaller now, after a week had passed and none of us had word from outside. On the upside, rations weren't running low, but we were struggling to keep morale up. A few men were talking about rushing them, but they spoke out of fear. We didn't know how long we could last before hitting a breaking point. Food wise, we were set for a few months, but what would we do when it ran out?

There was a boom outside, making us look up. Someone fired a canon into the British ranks without being commanded to. Out of fear, we all took up arms and stepped out. We marched back onto the battlefield, meeting little resistance. We were surprised to find only a few soldiers outside. They had kept us distracted while moving on. In a fury we charged and slaughtered what remained of the British troops outside New York City.

# The Trees

## Day 0

“Is everything prepped?”

“Yes sir, we are good for launch.”

Everyone focused on their monitors, eyeing the video closely as a loud humming surrounded them. There was a brief flash, and every one sat there quietly. None dared uttered a word, fearing the worst.

## Day -1533

Greg paced in his office, nibbling at his lip. He had spent the last few days working hard at his job, studying the full development pattern of trees. He had noticed patterns between several different species, but that was nothing new. Nature liked patterns.

Something tickled the back of his brain, though. He felt there was more to these patterns than previously thought. He had been taking laser level scans of various growth rings as well as examining sections of DNA from various trees. There was more here, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

The computer beeped, signifying that it's task was done. Greg shuffled over and looked at the display, reading the output. He smacked his desk, cursing.

## Day -1460

Randall looked over the data, rubbing his chin. Greg kept looking excitedly at him, hoping he'd realize what he was looking at. Randall furrowed his brow, and reread it. He opened his mouth and closed it. He wanted to choose his wording carefully. Finally, he turned and looked at Greg.

"Before I say what I think, I need to know. How did you find this?"

Greg nodded and started speaking excitedly. "I was comparing DNA of multiple species of conifers, trying to figure out what some of these patterns meant. Yeah, a few were already figured out, like needle length, or cone shape, but still, there were more patterns. One day, it hit me while I was analyzing growth rings. I ran various analyses on both, and found some patterns seemed to appear on both, though not exactly how you might believe. Do you know what a record was? It was an old piece of audio tech where things were recorded in a spiral groove going towards the center of the record. I noticed that when you compressed some of the patterns with your new compression method you developed at MIT, their numerical patterns appeared on the rings in different points! After that, I started scanning growth rings with samples of DNA and tried setting up a script to compress and find these patterns."

Randall paused, his brain turning over what Greg said. "You're absolutely positive that there are no other methods that match these so called patterns? You do realize that if you went public with this, it would backfire heavily. No, no, more research must be done."

Greg lit up. "So you..."

Randall merely pursed his lips before responding. "I'm not sure, but it'd be smarter to have more than one person analyzing this, making sure hat it isn't wrong." He nibbled on his thumb a bit, thinking. He pointed at Greg. "I may be able to acquire a team, but on the condition that you do not go

public until I give the say so. I want to be absolutely sure that there isn't anything strange going on here. We don't want to measure once and cut wrong."

## **Day -1428**

Luna adjusted her glasses, reading the latest printout. Progress had been made surprisingly fast. Once the algorithm had been found for the ring compression, they worked to figure out exactly what information was being crunched down. It seemed strange, the information they found was acting like a computer kept track of it. They managed to pull a few phrases out of it, in a variety of dialects and languages. For instance, one phrase they managed to find was "Digrif gan bob aderyn ei lais ei hun" which roughly translated to "Each bird loves their own song".

The process so far was imperfect, as the algorithm they found didn't decode everything. However, they were shocked at the complexity of what they had found so far. Laura's main task was testing other compression algorithms to see if any were able to "unpack" more information. When she joined the project, she had briefly entertained the thought of running a disassembler, but it was quickly dismissed as she didn't know how to apply it to the project.

A few colleagues were discussing the data they found so far and its implications. Some were saying it was proof of God, showing that the book of Genesis was correct in the idea of trees storing information. Others were wondering about how the trees came to store it, and if other plants or animals do as well. Luna shrugged and thought that the answer should be in the data, and only time would tell how it happened. She signed off her terminal and went to put her papers on Greg's desk.

## **Day -1400**

Luna and Greg sat in the diner, not sure how to react. The information decoded today had huge implications, and it was frankly terrifying. A video had been found, and showed a hunter in furs tracking a red deer with a crude bow. Greg looked out the window, confused and frustrated.

“Sir, how can we...”

“Luna, we discussed this already. No talk of the project in public.”

“Greg...”

He turned and glared at her. Luna looked sheepishly at her grilled cheese sandwich. Her eyes roved over her plate as she searched for the right words. She finally slammed her hands down on the table, standing up, her face red.

“You can’t do this anymore! Yes, you made the first discovery, but if it weren’t for Randall, you wouldn’t be where we are today. You need to stop acting like you’re the only one involved! Yes, we signed an NDA, but that doesn’t give you the right to be a pompous asshole about everything!”

Greg looked at her, appalled, turning pale. He stared hard at her, not sure what to say or do. After a moment, he pulled out his wallet and put some money on the table before leaving. On his way out he paused and turned to Luna.

“Don’t bother coming in tomorrow.”

## **Day -1399**

Greg sat behind his desk, tapping his pen on it. His thoughts traced back to the night before and he grimaced. He swore and started toward his door. He looked out at the lab, seeing everyone at work, and sighed. He opened his door and immediately stopped in his tracks. There was Luna, right at her

station as always. He wanted to make his way to her, he wanted to apologize. He just didn't know what he could say. He turned back to his desk and shut the door. Everyone had work to do, including him.

## Day -1146

Luna looked over the crowded hall as she poised herself at the podium. The press was silent as she adjusted her notes. She cleared her throat, picked up a remote and turned on a video projector. The screen behind her came to life with a video of a smoky horizon. The view changed drastically to a lower level closer to the source of the smoke. Luna started speaking as a much smaller version of the White House came into view, burning.

“We have gathered you here to witness what may be one of the most important discoveries in history. While we are still working on the details, we have found that certain species of trees have somehow been recording human history since about 25,000 B.C.E. I see that many of you are unexpectedly skeptical, but we are fully willing to submit this video as well as the other bits of data we’ve decoded to you for scrutiny.”

“Now, you may be asking yourselves how we made such an important discovery. Part of it was thanks to Dr. Randall Elyounoussi with his revolutionary new compression algorithm.” She paused as a few members of the audience applauded. “While it had only been published a month before, Dr Greg Egli was comparing patterns in tree DNA and samples when he happened upon the compression algorithm. After some testing, he found that some of the formulas applied to some of the patterns he had found. He contacted Dr. Elyounoussi and together they formed a small team of about 8 people, myself included. It took us about three weeks after forming to decode the first bit of data, which simply held a common phrase ‘Veni, vidi, vici’.”

The crowd was murmuring among themselves now, growing in pitch. Luna suppressed a smile before continuing.

“While we are still working out exactly how the trees are doing this, the implications are clear. Someone or something put them here to observe us and record us. Trees live long and spread quickly.

In just a few hundred years, you can have a forest out of a few seedlings. They make for an excellent recovery method for whoever put them here. Today we announce that we will find out who put them here and how, and tomorrow, our real work begins.”

## Day -599

Greg and Randall gathered around a computer and looked over the latest data decoded. It was filled with formulas never before seen, showing their hypothesis that these species of trees had been engineered to be more likely. Randall copied them down and ran over to his desk and started working.

Greg tapped away at the keyboard, looking for more clues, trying to figure out what exactly the formulas were for. He chewed at his lip as he flipped through them, looking for anything familiar. He paused suddenly and turned to Randall. He got excited as he pointed at the screen, barely keeping himself from bouncing like a child about to get candy.

$$dt = \gamma d\tau, \gamma \equiv \frac{1}{\sqrt{1 - \frac{v^2}{c^2}}}$$

Randall looked at Greg and back at the screen. He jumped over to his copy and resisted the urge to smack himself in the face for not noticing it. He hurried back to his station and pored over the other equations, comparing them to others related to the one pointed out and struggling to keep calm. Whole breakthroughs in mathematics and science were right at his fingertips and he needed to see how he could help solve it. Everything so far pointed to someone or something having done so already. When he had that thought, his pen dropped to the floor as it hit him all at once.

## Day -180

The rest of the data had already been decoded. Human history was now essentially complete, ignoring individual lives overall. Everyone was preparing for the major event, as the little technology they needed built arrived and was assembled in the lab.

Randall had gone through all the formulas and with the rest of the data having been decoded, he had found that the first of the bio-engineered trees, as they had been discovered to be, had been sent back in time to record human history. Later documents uncovered had shown humans, like themselves, creating the plants and using a machine to send them back, which of course meant that everyone was stuck in a paradox loop.

In a few days, notable historians throughout the world would be getting sent the data, as well as textbook publishers. It was felt that since most of human history happened well before the current copyright period, and some of the sampled trees had been alive before it as well, that all the contained information would be released in the public domain. The decision on this was almost unanimous among the team, with Luna being the most outspoken on it.

The group was gathering soon for a celebration. While a test of the equipment wouldn't be possible, they already knew it should work, as they already had evidence to support. Luna was the first to arrive, something she had hoped would happen. She went in and mulled over everything. About half an hour later, the last of the team arrived, and Luna took the stage.

"Everyone, thank you. I may not have started this massive project, but like all of you, I am proud to have been here for this major moment in human history. Never before has such a discovery been made, nor will it ever again, I think. It was made possible by every single one of you, and we all should be credited in the future for it. However, I think that we should give credit to the Alphas more."

“I know a lot of you feel that we did all the work recovering their data, but the Alphas were the ones who figured everything out without it. They found a way to build the biological computers that could store information in DNA. They found a way to send them back to the prepaleolithic era so that we could see our ancestors in motion. So, today I would like to thank them by name. These names will not be publicly revealed, but to them we owe our thanks. Dr. Anya Neumann, Dr. Niao-ka Williams, Dr. Lewis Partridge, Dr. Jose Bello, and Dr Luna Egli.”

There was a loud rumbling from the team at the last name in the list. A few people jumped up, challenging her over it, saying that she was trying to put herself in history over the rest of the group. Randall hopped on the stage and called for silence.

“I understand you all want equal credit, but she isn’t putting herself in the list to make herself seem more valuable. Dr. Egli and I were just as shocked when we found the Alpha’s data with their names. I have no idea their relationship in the primary timeline, but the facts point to Dr Luna Grace being one of the staffers on the Alphas’ team, having at some point been married to Dr. Greg Egli, though whether they were married at the point we have in our data is unclear. Rest assured, this is why we aren’t releasing the Alpha’s names to the public. Now, are we here to argue, or are we here to celebrate?”

## **Day 0**

Everyone breathed in, the whole room having held their breath without realizing it. Greg and Randall turned to each other and hugged. Luna sat at her desk, relief painted on her face. Everything they had worked towards was coming to an end.

“But, sir, how do we even know it worked?”

Greg grinned at the team member before responding. “If it didn’t work, then wouldn’t that mean we failed to send the seedlings back to the Alphas?”

<sup>1</sup>Proper Time in relation to Coordinate time, pulled from

<http://cse.ssl.berkeley.edu/bmendez/html/time.html>

# The Wedding

“I do.”

He kissed the bride, and everyone clapped. They walked out of the cathedral, and got into their rented limousine. It pulled off down the street to the reception hall.

“I’m so happy.”

“Yeah.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, just... tired.”

“Oh.”

He smiled feebly at her. He wasn’t lying, either. Events like this one always wore him out, and now he was at the center of attention. She knew that of course, but he had seemed off lately. She figured it was just stress from the wedding that had been nearing. She laid her head on his shoulder, intertwining her fingers with his.

The limousine came to a stop at a light, and she looked deep in his eyes. She really did love him; any idiot could tell you that. She sighed contentedly, as the limo lurched forward.

They continued down the road and he looked down at her, a soft smile on his face. If he could stay in this moment forever, he would. That was the last thought that passed through his mind as a semi careened into the side of the limo, flipping it. Neither of them survived.

*Now here’s where things get interesting. The universe is full of possibilities, and sometimes the same action doesn’t always yield the same results. Let’s rewind a bit.*

“I’m so happy.”

“Yeah.”

“Wore you down, huh?”

He smiled and kissed her, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. She knew him better than anyone, and he was happy to have her. Nothing could make him happier than being with her right now, knowing she was his and he was hers.

She rested her head on his shoulder as the limousine came to a stop at a light. She intertwined her fingers with his, feeling his ring on her skin, and shivered with glee. She hoped they both would have a long happy life. A horn from the car behind them made them jump, but before they could turn to see what was going on, a semi barreled through the intersection, slamming into traffic on the other side of the road.

The reception was delayed as they waited on the police to arrive. He stood there for a few minutes telling the cops what happened. The spell of the day had been broken, and when they finally got to the reception, neither was saying much.

Years passed, and the events of the day resonated with them, putting a wedge between them. She came home one day, not sure if she should even walk inside. She took a deep breath, stepped inside, and packed some things. She left shortly after. He received divorce papers a week later, and didn’t fight it.

*Interesting. Just a small change shifted their lives that much. At least they were alive this time. Let’s go back again, and see what other shifts could occur.*

The limo turned, with the driver letting them know that traffic was backed up ahead. He thanked the driver for letting them know and sent a message to the reception members letting them know they may be late. He turned to his new bride and smiled, kissing her. She took his hand, intertwining her fingers with his. They both wanted today to last forever, their happiness to never end.

They arrived at the reception and got out of the limo. His mother ran over to them, and hugged both. She was freaking out and he was confused. She showed them the news. On the route they were originally taking, a semi had careened through the intersection causing a massive pileup. They were cleaning up and no one was sure how many would make it.

He turned to his bride and hugged her close, glad that neither of them had ended up in the accident. He picked her up and carried her into the reception hall to cheers from their friends and family. His best friend stood up and called for silence.

“We are here today to celebrate the newest happiest married couple this side of Cloud 9. Let’s wish them a long life, happiness, and have a great time on your honeymoon!”

He turned red, knowing what everyone expected on their honeymoon, though they had decided they weren’t going anywhere. They wanted to go all out on the wedding itself and skip the honeymoon, as this was the only time either of them planned on getting married.

His friend, however, had different plans. He handed the groom a pair of tickets to Indonesia. He refused to take them back, saying everyone chipped in a little, because they knew what the couple had decided, and it felt wrong. Indonesia was a good choice, because they always wanted to go there, and the groom would always do anything he could to make his bride happy. His friend knew this and helped in what way he could.

A few years later, he was rushing into the hospital. His wife was about to give birth and he wasn’t going to miss it. The doctor asked him to wait outside, as they were going to have to perform a caesarian. He obliged, and paced in the lobby for a few hours.

The doctor came back out after awhile and asked him to follow. He followed the doctor through the weaving hallways of the hospital to the nursery. The doctor showed him his daughter being placed in it, and tears filled his eyes. He was really proud, and asked to see his wife. The doctor led him to her room, where he found her asleep. He sat down next to her, and put his hand over hers.

*See how sometimes a single change can affect the whole lives of people? Sure, these are just some generalizations, but in this world, we all want to be like this couple. Happy, striving forward, and doing our best to stick it out in a careless universe. So stay true and happy. Don't ever stop striving forward, and don't give up on something because it seems hopeless.*

# Today

I'll have a bad day today, I just know it. I woke up bright eyed and cheery, ready to take on the day and now I can barely move. It's like my muscles don't know how to respond to my commands. I stretch and feel better for a few seconds, but that's all it is, a few seconds.

The clock tells me I have two hours until I have to leave for work, but it might as well be five minutes. It's not enough time for me to do anything worthwhile, and yet I attempt to do other work anyway. I look at the clock again and it hasn't changed, but I act like time is passing at an improbable rate, hurtling me closer to the time I have to leave.

I look outside, at the gray dismal light stretching between my house and the next. I can hear, but not see, cars passing by on the road, driving off to their own destinations. They're more than likely to reach them, too, but sometimes I hear the sirens passing by and can't help but wonder if it's for one of the regular cars.

I turn back and lay down, staring at my ceiling. It stretches away from me and I groan closing my eyes. I don't feel sick in any sense, but my brain and my body don't always agree on how I feel anyway. It's not that I'm tired, I slept plenty and am wide awake, but it's more of my *body* is tired, unwilling to move on to the tasks of the day.

I hear a mouse scurry and roll my eyes. I've been trying to get rid of the pests for awhile now, but with little success. Perhaps I should call an exterminator, but that requires funds I do not have. My dog has caught a couple and I always give him a treat when he does.

I get up and look over my bookshelves, trying to find the next book to read. I chose a rather irregular sorting system and have to remember more details about the books than most people to find them, but it also makes me retain the information a bit better. My fingers run through the R's looking for Riverside Press, but I can't find it. I know it's there, I just keep overlooking it. This happens a lot.

I sigh and go to the kitchen to make some breakfast for myself. A bowl of cereal and a tortilla should suffice for now. I look out in the yard and bemoan that I still haven't done the last cut of the year. Spring is going to be a pain if I don't get out and finish soon, but I can't work up the motivation to mow.

I go back to my room with my breakfast and sit down, looking at my computer. I check all my accounts for new messages, and take a bite. I look again, and again, and again. I have refrigerator syndrome for my online accounts. Sometimes there is an update, but it's going nowhere if I keep looking. Yet, I continue. I switch windows, tabs, and websites, constantly checking again as I eat my breakfast.

I look at the time again and sigh. I need to shower before work; I feel disgusting. I stand up and look around before sitting down again. I turn on some music as I sit there and tune out the world. I don't really listen right now, this exists entirely to help me zone out, ignore everything.

Snapping back to reality, I open up a new document on my computer, and sit there looking at the blank screen. I've been trying to write more, but I've been struggling more than ever. Some days I can barely get a sentence out, let alone a paragraph, a page, a story. I start typing at random to get some sort of flow going, all the while still thinking about how I need to shower.

My thoughts turn to my medicine, something I haven't had in a few years now. I wonder if I need to go back to the doctor and get a new prescription, but then I remember that it will be paid fully by me because my deductible is a couple grand. I put the medicine idea to the side again and continue writing.

Sooner than I thought, I have a full page written and it feels like it's flowing pretty consistently today, but I wonder if anyone would enjoy reading this. I am ready to just forget about the whole thing, but then I would have wasted my own time. My hand starts falling asleep, something that's happened more often than usual lately, and I pull away from the keyboard.

I stretch again, feeling both tendons and bones making that distinctive pop, and look at the wall. I notice the difference in shading in the paint at different levels, showing where I generally lean against it or where nothing touches it at all. This house has too many memories of me, and I'm sick of it. I need to leave and find somewhere new, but I panic when I think about money.

I'm not exactly poor, but I'm not rich. I don't think I'm middle class either. If I were more fiscally minded, I'd have plenty of money, but I do have the problem of spending money when I find stuff I like, which ends up causing me to live paycheck to paycheck. Money isn't really a problem, I am.

I turn back to the computer and continue writing, not sure of where I'm going. The world keeps spinning, hurtling me along with it like I'm a flea on a dog, and I can't do anything about that. When I was younger, I wanted to go to space, but currently I am not qualified in the remotest sense. I still have a longing to escape this rock, and I wonder sometimes if that means I have a bad life or if I just want to see what is out there. I think it's a little of both.

I am running out of things to say at this point, and so I stop writing again. I get up and stretch again, nearly falling over as every joint in my legs and feet pops, relaxing the muscles almost too much. I go to the bathroom and turn on the water, then grab a towel and some clothes. Today might not be so bad, but it won't be that good either.

# The Gospel of Jebus

After Jebus was born in Ein Karem in Jerusalem, where his older brother John had been born during the time of Jesus's ministry, he was visited by an angel of the Lord. The angel praised Elizabeth on her newborn and said, "He will be of great help to his uncle when he is older, so the Lord in his wisdom is bestowing upon him the Holy Spirit as well. He will not be as the Christ, in that the Christ is the one son of the Lord, but he will do great things."

Elizabeth praised the Lord and in doing so dropped Jebus, who immediately stopped breathing. She cried for help and her son John came to her. He prayed to the Lord who, upon hearing his prayer, took pity on John and Elizabeth. Jebus started crying and Elizabeth held him tight to her, thanking the Lord many times.

Many years passed and Jebus grew into a very special child. While the Lord had allowed him to return to the living, he didn't restore the child's mind. The lack of oxygen during his brief death affected him heavily. When his tenth year came, it was as though it had only been his fourth. He should have taken up apprenticeship in his father's shop but could barely put together a full sentence. Elizabeth often wondered how he was supposed to help his uncle's ministry, when he could barely walk on his own.

One day as he was playing in his room, Jebus saw a spider which caused him to start screaming and run to a corner of the room. His mother was at the well, fetching the day's water. When the spider came close to Jebus, he smacked his hand down on it, crushing it. He turned his hand over to look at the remains of the spider, only to watch it be restored to life. Horrified, he started screaming again as

he smacked it against the wall. Much to his horror, it kept coming back no matter how many times he tried.

Elizabeth returned to him screaming, his hand bleeding from smacking the wall, and saw the spider resurrect upon his palm. She muttered a quick prayer to the Lord for patience before taking the spider from her son, throwing it outside. She then ran Jebus's hand under water, but before she could wrap it, it had already started healing up. She sighed then went to prepare the evening meal.

When Zacharias returned home from work, Elizabeth recounted what had occurred with their son that day. Zacharias turned pale and told her not to tell any of the village about what had occurred. They couldn't let the village think their child was possessed and he, as Elizabeth before, prayed for patience from the Lord.

"By the way, Joseph came by today."

"Oh?"

"Jesus is coming home to visit his family."

"That will be nice. Mary was sad she had to return home and stop seeing his sermons. She really does dote on the boy."

Jebus smacked his hand on the table and started chanting his name, thinking they were talking about him. Elizabeth chastised him, reminding him he was ten years old and said he needed to start acting like it. It was already bad enough that he was kicked out of the local school for being well behind the other children. Zacharias was already disappointed his son wouldn't be able to become a man, nor would he be able to be trained in the family trade.

A few days later, they were at Joseph's to see Jesus. Jesus took his cousin in his lap and smiled. He couldn't fix him because it was the Lord who put him here this way. He told Jebus that his Father had great plans for him. Jebus pointed at Zacharias.

"Da?"

Jesus chuckled, “No, not him. *Our* Father. Everyone here. He has given you a great blessing, and one day you will be able to use it to help spread His word.”

Jebus didn't hear the end as he had already jumped off Jesus's lap and ran over to his father, hugging him. Zacharias looked softly at his son, smiling. It was obvious he loved him despite the child's shortcomings. He thanked Jesus for seeing the family, and led him home for the day.

# Unknown Giant Creatures

The sirens screamed, tearing the night in half. Everywhere I turned, men and women were mobilizing. I hurried to my post, ready.

“Commander!”

“What’s the situation?”

“Another beast has appeared.”

I looked at the main screen and saw the strange creature as it moved through our city. I called to mobilize the tank squads and the air legion. As my orders were carried out, I once again wondered where these things were coming from. I barked out more commands, looking to my troops to make sure that everyone was doing as they were told.

I turned to the main screen as the first air legion planes arrived and opened fire on the beast. This one was smaller than the last, with our planes able to hit it in the arms. It let out a deafening wail, falling onto it’s backside. The tanks then arrived and opened fired. The creature screamed louder, and suddenly the view was obscured in a cloud of dust and rubble. The tanks and planes lost radio contact.

I hurried to have the next wave sent in. The losses were expected, as they always occur. We could see the creatures face clearly on the monitors now, contorted into strange shapes as it continued it’s flailing, destroying everything around it. The second phase was to begin soon.

As if it read my mind, the creature began releasing it’s torrent on the world below as it stood up, stomping. Huge drops of water and slime crashed around it, forcing our troops back. I called for the snipers to take position.

Suddenly, it felt like the earth was being torn asunder. This was new, nothing like this ever happened with the previous creatures. A new one appeared, more than twice the size of the one we were trying to fend off. It reached down, and cleaned off the other creatures face before picking it up and carrying it away. I quickly called a cease fire and looked on in awe.

This only raised new questions about these creatures. The one that appeared suddenly was obviously a Mother. But where would such creatures reside? They were too massive to reside anywhere we knew of, taller than our tallest mountains. For that matter, what did they consume? Or were they able to absorb energy from the sun?

As I grappled with these questions, I called our troops back and sent out a clean up crew. I turned and left, heading for the War Room. Swiping my clearance badge, I stepped inside and put in a call to various members of our defense committee. Each member arrived quickly, murmuring excitedly amongst each other. Once all of the seats were filled, I called everyone to order.

“Everyone, as you are all aware, today we attempted to fend off UGC 23. We are all aware as to the importance of this job. To keep our beautiful city safe, and our citizens happy and productive. Then something strange happened.” I pulled up the video feed. “At approximately 17:23, a second UGC appeared, much more massive than any we have ever taken on. The thing then reacted to the first creature’s actions, cleaning its face off and carrying it away. If we take these creatures to be like us, we must assume the second creature to be the first one’s mother.”

The table started talking at once, everyone excited and fearful over this development. No one was sure about what this meant. I smacked a book on the table a few times, getting them to quiet down.

“Order please! I know we are all worried about what this means, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. For now, let us work on rebuilding the destroyed part of the city and moving our citizens to safety. If we’re lucky, the Mother creature may keep the others away from us.”

A few of the scientist started talking amongst themselves excitedly. A few had suspected the previous UGC's to be children, but couldn't imagine what an adult would be like. They turned to leave, and I spoke a moment longer with the rest of the defense staff before leaving myself.

Three weeks passed, and there had been no sign of any UGC's. I should consider myself lucky, but it instead tensed me up. I paced back and forth in the control room, eyeing our radar, trying to watch for any incoming attacks. I slammed my fist down on the table, frustrated.

"Where are they?"

"Perhaps you were right, the mother creature won't let them return."

"I was projecting. These things have shown no ability to think for themselves before, why start now? If they can think, then they can plan. If they can plan, then we don't stand a chance. A well organized attack would destroy us."

"Commander, I understand your frustration, but please calm down."

"Calm? CALM? Soldier, I didn't rise up to my post to be ordered around by a grunt. You don't know what these things are capable of. You weren't there for the horror. I only wish I wasn't either."

*I remember that day well. We didn't have the defense center then. It was a beautiful day, overhead was clear as far as we could see. I was out with my high school sweetheart. We were laughing, having a wonderful time.*

*I can still smell her perfume. I think I always will. We decided to go out to the forest, and even brought a picnic. I helped her set everything up, and we sat on our blanket, laughing and smiling. I was nervous. I had just purchased a ring. I was gonna ask her to marry me. Then it happened.*

*The earth shook wildly. We didn't know what was going on. Overhead grew dark as the air picked up. A huge storm was coming our way. I took her hand and we ran back to the city, but we*

*weren't fast enough. It appeared then. UGC 1. It looked nothing like the ones that attack us now. It was hairy and had four legs.*

*It opened it's mouth and a thundering roll erupted. I thought it was going to somehow spit lightning. I tried running to the city, pulling on my sweetheart, when she tripped and slipped out of my hand. I barely was able to turn around before the beast swallowed her up. Strange though, I never thought about how the others haven't eaten any of us. You remember hearing about the flood? The beast caused it. I hear some parts of the city are still cleaning the stench out.*

Before I could continue, an alarm went off. I looked at the radar and saw something coming. I called the troops to mobilize, and watched the main screen. I froze. The room went deathly silent; not even a breath was uttered. On the screen, a wall of yellow moved toward us, a giant wave of dirt riding in front of it.

# Universal Tour

The world spun, as it always has. It orbited it's star as it had since it's formation. The same cycles always continuing, nothing changing. The universe didn't care, it couldn't. It was alive, but it wasn't. Billions of worlds teeming with life, most too far apart to ever meet.

Take the galaxy located approximately twenty thousand GLY away from Earth. It consists of 400 million planets, 20 million of which are inhabited. 10 million have space faring civilizations, all unique in their own right. 4 million have civilizations which have interstellar travel. Yet they are all so far apart, it's possible for one to die out before another one is found.

Let's zoom in further. Near the center of this galaxy is the super cluster of stars. Inside this super cluster, a planet known to locals as Unic is bathed in perpetual daylight. To you, this may seem bad, as it would heat us up drastically. Unic is located at just the right distance from the stars around it to stay cool, however. It's populated entirely by a race of anthropomorphic plants. They live in harmony with their environment, and use various solar equipment to power their world. They never dived into pollution spewing devices because they were already adapted to using the surrounding stars for energy and built technology around the same principle.

The Unicians are one of the planets with interstellar travel developed. They've managed to reach another planet that once had life. This planet was once called Tri, and had held canid-like creatures. What information the Unicians had been able to find about the previous inhabitants made them seem barbaric and counter intuitive to anything the Unicians knew. The Trians worshiped their moon as a God, but to the Unicians, a moon couldn't be a god. It couldn't give life friendly energy.

Unicians generally avoided most planets they came across outside the super cluster. The dark frightened them. The knew that it could kill them. So they stuck to the inner circles of their galaxy, where light was plentiful.

Let's jump to another planet. This one also had life, but it didn't develop star travel. It was terrified of space. Space was their version of hell. Unsited for life, pressing down on their slowly thinning atmosphere. Their priests constantly worked to release what trapped gases they could from their planet to "thicken" the atmosphere against impending doom.

Now if you were to look up at their night sky, you would see another planet. They were part of a binary planet system. The sister planet was barely beginning to be inhabited. Some of the newly evolved intelligent beings looked upon the planet in the sky and thought it was the eye of God looking down upon them. They worried about the day the eye would close, neglecting them. This day was only a few months away for their meager civilization, as their planet's astral plane would soon line up with the star, eclipsing the sister world.

There are so many worlds in this universe. So many possibilities. Let's look at one of my favorites. Here, we have a familiar looking spiral galaxy. In one of it's arms is a familiar blue ball, orbiting a small yellow star. This planet is mostly covered in water, and has tectonic movements. It is populated by hominids, many of which look familiar. If you didn't know better, you might think you were home. There were differences, though.

Take this hominid here. He looks like a famous author back on your world. Here, though, he's a fry cook. He still lives in Maine, and has horrible thoughts running through his head about awful creatures attacking people in the night, but he takes medication to help combat it. Not seeing a huge difference? That's because it's only subtle.

A multiverse doesn't need to exist for there to be more than one version of your world in the universe. The universe is huge. In a nearly infinite universe, your home might exist a near infinite times

due to pure luck. You might live on the only planet with that configuration. The chances are higher for that than for you to live on one of many planets with that configuration. But in the end, you may never know. Your counterpart might, and they can live contentedly on Earth-U, where the weather is always a brisk 70 degrees, and scarcity doesn't exist.

# Peaceful Winter Day

Softly, I felt the blades scraping against my wrists and pressing into my hands as I laid there on the hill. The sky stretched wide over me with the sun warming me. It was a chilly winter day and I couldn't have felt more relaxed.

The wind swept over me, biting my skin, contrasting with the warm light gently pressing down on my body. I closed my eyes and listened to the wind as it rustled the trees around me. Occasionally I could hear a car passing on the highway below. Even the world seems to be on pause to just enjoy itself.

I let out a soft sigh right as I heard crunching behind me. I opened my eyes and saw you standing over me with your hands in your pockets and big grin on your face. I rolled over and pushed myself to my feet before brushing my clothes off. I stepped forward and you reached out helping me readjust to climbing uphill again. We walked to the top and sat down, looking over the town stretching out before us.

Here and there, movement can be spotted. A car traveling down a distant road, a bike on Main Street, the town still pulsed with life. I reached over taking your hand in mine as we watched the wind brush the trees below while biting at us for daring be out in winter. My heart slowed down, each thud heaving in my chest as I felt a flush of heat flow through me. I scooted closer to you.

You leaned over, resting your head on my shoulder. I squeezed your hand as we sat there enjoying each other's company. The world seemed to slow down, letting us have this moment for a long time.

# Emotions

When I was a child, I would observe the faces of others. I saw them being used to hide aspects while reinforcing others. Over time, the masks would build up.

My father was a construction worker. We lived in a relatively warm part of the world, allowing him to work year round. I always knew him as a stern man, but when he was at work, he became so jovial as even Santa couldn't hold a candle to him.

One day, while he was working, he saw me coming up the path to the site. It was on my way home from school, and I had wanted to see him laughing and happy.

I saw it, while he didn't. There was a loud crash as the cement mixer swerved to avoid him and slammed into a stack of pipes. My father was caught by the tail end, getting knocked back on the ground, winded. He was rushed to a hospital, and at first he seemed fine. The x-rays showed couple of cracked ribs with a few splinters floating around, but the doctor said he'd be okay.

As the sun descended outside his room, my father began coughing. We sat there and waited for it to subside. Then he started to spasm as blood poured out his mouth. I looked on in abject horror as I watched my father dying in front of me. It was after an autopsy that it was found that one of his ribs was damaged deeper than had been thought and broke off when he started coughing, shredding his lungs in the process.

We had him cremated, and it was then that my own mask began to form.

Thoughts swirled in my head. I couldn't see the world as I had before. It had been my fault he died, and people kept insisting that it wasn't. My grandmother said that God has a plan for everyone,

but what kind of God would pull a son from his mother, and a father from his son? We sold our house and moved.

I saw a lot of my family during the first few months after his passing. I watched some of their masks start to crack and crumble. Some of them left and never came back, others kept pushing until they couldn't do anything else.

I still remember the night I came home and found a new face. My mother said he was just a friend, but I saw the shadow pass over his face as she said it. I felt as though several spikes were pushed through me. I went numb. I sat there quietly as we ate dinner and after washing my plate, I went to my room.

We eventually moved in with him, and my mother soon found herself pregnant. This house was much smaller than where we had lived before, and we didn't have room for a new child. That's when they started fighting. It's also when I left.

I stayed out in a tent I had packed away, living off in the woods of the nearby national park. It was cold and hard, but I couldn't bring myself to go back. I learned how to build a fire and made some simple tools from the rocks and sticks around me.

One day, I heard the sound of a child laughing nearby. I looked out and saw a family hiking through the woods. I swore before running off, making sure they wouldn't see me.

I crashed into someone. I hadn't seen them. They had been sitting there for a few hours, camouflaged, hunting deer. He started yelling at me for ruining his position, telling me I need to go back home. I clenched my fists, trying to control my rage. I felt my face harden, the emotion draining from it. My own mask was now finished. I looked at him and let out four simple words.

"I have no home."

# Ramblings

I died today. I laid there feeling the world drift away... but the noise kept going. No matter how hard I willed it, the world refused to let me go. The passing traffic became deafening.

I took a sharp breath and came to. Reality snapped back into place, bright, harsh, unrelenting. I sat up and looked round my room. It hadn't been long, only about a minute or two, yet everything seemed to be new. It wasn't different, my single poster still adorned the far wall, obscured by my armoire. No, I just knew it wasn't my time yet.

Did you ever realize that nothing will change when you're gone? Your stuff will be handed off to others to either be cherished or forgotten, but it'll last awhile yet. Your name may be forgotten, but the world will continue to spin. Does a world ever truly die? Everything that makes it will eventually make up something else. The universe will eventually stop combining elements into compounds and no new worlds will be born, but despite that we are here.

I cannot fathom the universe as "empty." All the lights will eventually go out, but absolute darkness seems so impossible. Maybe that's why I am still here. I can't see the universe ending, so I can't let myself vanish. Has the instinct to survive always been a part of life? Who knows how many creatures died because they had no concept of danger. I am scared of everything around me. My family, my job, my past, my future, my own kind. Then again, maybe I'm not human. Maybe I was born just different enough and that's why I'm scared. Sure, I look, sound, and act human, but I might be part of the chain for a new species. Then gain, I might not be. I have no desire to procreate, only create. I love seeing things in my head come to life. I start with a single stroke and watch as a page fills. No one else can see what I see, yet there are no original ideas.

I need to go. It's just one step, then another as I work to survive in a world bent on destroying me. I don't know where I'm going, I just know one thing: I died today, yet I'm still here.

# Castaways

“Why did you look?”

“So I could hear, so I could understand.”

He took a long drag on his cigarette as he contemplated his comrade’s words. He looked over at them then at the ground, still wet from a recent rain. He dropped the stub of the cigarette and stepped on it.

“Well, do you?”

“No, but who am I to say I ever will?”

He paused before responding. “I think you will. Of the two of us, you’re the one with a head for such things. In this world, many have come along and tried to explain things, tried to tell us the working order, but most have failed to get even a footnote in history. What you’ve done though, it is beyond anything I have ever seen, anything I will ever know.”

They looked at him, water shaking off their hat. A shadow of a smile flashed on their face, gone before a casual observer could have seen it, but he noticed. He let out a light chuckle as he patted them on their back. A car passed by, its headlights briefly blinding the both of them as the car lit the world around them.

“Do you really believe that if I went back, I’d be able to figure it out?”

“If not you, it won’t be for lack of trying. No, no my friend. If you go back and still don’t understand, then that’s no fault of yours. It’ll be this damned world’s. It lacks the resources to help you, yet you’ve pulled off some crazy things with less.”

They coughed and drew their coat about them tighter. The cold air chilled them, and they marveled that it hadn't started snowing. The plip of a water droplet hitting a puddle was the only other nearby sound. They looked up at the sky, searching for a break in the clouds.

"What if I do? What if it comes to me and let's me in on its secrets? Will I be driven to madness, forever rocking myself in a padded room? Will I become a figurehead of the future? Or will I feel nothing and in that nothingness find only a small sense of self awareness, looking down on myself as though I had done nothing special and that it was inevitable? If I do not know how I'll be, how can I know that which I currently do not understand?"

"You worry too much. If you go mad, I'll still visit you. We could have some interesting chess matches. If you become a figurehead, then I shall be next to you, celebrating the accomplishments of my friend until my last breath! Ah, but if you feel nothing, there is the kicker. If you feel nothing, does that not show that understanding only made it seem minuscule compared to everything it means? If you feel nothing, it is no fault of your own, it only means that you are ready to move on to the next mystery. Friend, did no one tell you? None of us know how we'll be, only that as we grow, we learn to understand."

Another car passed by, slowing down as it passed, the driver checking the two standing next to an abandoned building. A red light arced from the window, bouncing off his chest. He stepped forward, his fist clenched, but the car had already sped off.

"People like them? They will never understand. They will continue to be another brick in the street, working tirelessly to support the systems that hold their tiny world together and spitting on any who don't conform to their idea of normalcy. All the while, the world turns and traffic wears down the street, eventually replacing it with some new material. They're safe for the moment, but they'll eventually be torn up and castaway like the rest of us."

They nodded in agreement before looked down from the sky not finding any solace in the dark clouds illuminated by the city below. The darkness of the street pressed on them, and they felt it was time to get going. They stepped out from the building and waved farewell to him. He waved in return and searched for his pack of cigarettes. He found them, shook one out and lit it, taking a drag.

“I know why I do not look, friend. I do not look because I am scared, that is the difference between us. You voice your fears and charge forward. I assuage them while hiding in the shadows. You will understand, and I, I will stay another brick in the street until it is my turn as well to be castaway.”

# People

Once upon a time, it was a dark and stormy night; not a pleasant storm, but rather a nasty storm, the kind that makes you huddle under a blanket, wanting the walls to stop shaking with each thunderous boom. The rain came down heavy, smashing into the pavement below, while each arc of lightning lit the sky as though the sun were peaking below the clouds to check on everyone.

Only a fool would be out on a night like this, and yet the world refused to come to a halt. The streets were filled with traffic, pedestrians crowded the sidewalks and the city was filled with mirth. No one could throw a stone without risking hitting someone, yet no one felt such a compulsion anyway. Even the cellar-dwellers were out in the crowds laughing and having fun. Tonight, even as the storm pressed down on them, everyone was in a joyous mood.

It had been eight years since everything turned awful. The world had come to a screeching halt, people falling over each other everywhere, tearing into each other, turning into absolute beasts. Panic had set in, and all because of something that no one had seen coming. Invisible to the naked eye, a new virus appeared and it was one of the deadliest ever encountered. At first it was no worse than previous flu pandemics, but as they sought to fight it, it changed rapidly. The virus went from about only one hundred fifty thousand deaths in six months to one million by the end of the first year.

Things looked bleak and every time it seemed to calm down, governments would lessen restrictions on travel and it would surge again. Most people were able to survive catching it, but many were forced to deal with permanent damage to their bodies, from damaged lungs to weakened hearts. Scientists worked tirelessly to try to find a cure or a stopper for the disease before it was too late. Eventually governments around the world gave up on the idea of freedom and enforced permanent house arrests on their citizens to help slow the spread of the disease. This had massive backlash, and

many minority communities were hardest hit until the government stepped in again and moved them into various empty buildings throughout cities that had extremely high rent. Landlords protested, but the government ignored them, giving them payments deemed appropriate by city appraisers.

The disease calmed down, but refused to go away. Farmers were on the very short list of people with freedom of movement, after all, society needed food still. They became the symbols of hope, with daily ads praising them, replacing the ads once held by the military attempting to recruit people. The citizens demanded more and several thousand farmers agreed to drone surveillance of their properties for inspirational footage to their fellow people. Military bases around the world were converted to agriculture, and the former soldiers became state farmers, delivering fresh produce to the communities around them to keep the public alive.

Everything eventually stagnated. The people were content, but wanted to be able to walk around. Even those who stayed inside all day before the pandemic wanted to go out and smell the air, see the animals, and talk to someone face to face. Social need became strong and the state agreed that something needed to be done. Several conferences were held with leaders around the world joining together to speak to each other, either through the phone or in virtual space. Even the poorest countries were invited to the conference, with the richer countries covering any costs needed to let them be heard. After months of deliberation, a decision was reached, one that would change everything in a shift as big as the agricultural shift of their hunter-gatherer ancestors.

Every nation pooled their resources together. Once enemies looked at each other as comrades, and they saw the humanity in each other. Their citizens watched in awe as every leader in the world was on display in their living rooms, talking as one voice. For the first time in all of history, the people were united. There was still a lot to work out, but with this monumental step, they all published their research on the disease together. Seven years after the world came to a stop, it started to turn again.

Within six months the cure had been found. With none of the governments competing to save only themselves, the scientists had been able to find it with help from their compatriots around the world. It took time to distribute, but no one resisted. Everyone was tired, but hope had rekindled a spark in them they hadn't felt in years. When the last person was inoculated, they all stood by their doors waiting, hoping for the day they could finally step past it. Random tests were given around the world and the infection count was rapidly dropping. After years of fear, isolation, and political shifts unheard of, it was finally over. When no one was found with the disease anymore, it was declared dead.

The world took a deep breath as they heard the electronic locks on their doors whir to life. Neighbors stepped out and hugged each other, happy to see someone again, glad they survived. Memorial services were held for the 1.6 billion who fell to the disease. The first public conference was held with all the world leaders on stage, all of them crying as they talked to the world, happy to have survived. The military was gone, food was available for everyone, and the world finally was united. It was unanimous, they had entered a new era. A grand celebration was held the world over. Things would be better from here on; the world would keep turning.

# Good Boy

*Click.* I looked over at the wall and saw it slide open noiselessly. You learn to pick up when the lock is being turned. I was sitting in the opposite corner from the door, and watched the orderly shuffle in. Something was wrong today, though. I could see it in his face.

“C’mon, time for your walk.”

I scrambled to my feet, pushing off the cold wall. He grabbed my arm to help steady me and we walked out into the bright corridor outside. I had an inner room with no windows, they said it was so I could stay calmer, something about flashing lights. I didn’t always understand what they were talking about.

We walked down the corridor as the light steadily increased, my eyes adjusting easily to the brighter levels. When we reached the doors at the end, they were already open. This was unusual and I felt something in me freeze. The orderly gently nudged me forward after nodding at the nurse sitting at the table. I swallowed and stepped forward, eyeing the room carefully. It was much brighter out here than in my room. I really wanted to go back. It didn’t feel safe out here.

A strange man approached us slowly. I tried hiding behind the orderly, but he pushed me back out in front of him and gripped my shoulders. The man paused briefly and then continued his approach.

“Hello, Anthony.”

“Who.. are you?” I asked.

“I’m... a friend of your mother’s.”

I flinched when he mentioned mama. Mama yelled a lot, always telling me how much trouble I was. I miss her sometimes though, she smelled good, like cinnamon.

“Anthony, I need you to listen okay? Ou-Your mother is gone. She won’t be coming back. I came to see if you want to say goodbye.”

I clutched the orderly’s shirt tightly. I looked at the man angrily, not believing him. He’s a liar, he’s just here to hurt me again, like the others.

“You’re a liar. Mama wouldn’t just go. Mama would tell me. Mama.. Mama is waiting for me!” I pulled on the orderly’s shirt. “C’mon, I need to finish my walk. Mister, don’t talk to me again. I don’t like you.”

The orderly and I went outside to the garden. I sat down at one of the tables and kicked my legs. The sun felt good today, the heat washing over me like a warm blanket fresh out of the dryer. The orderly went back to the entrance to keep an eye on me. My feet were dragging on the ground and I looked around.

“Oh, must be that hour again,” I mumbled to myself. I pushed myself up from the table and saw my brother leaving. Something stabbed at my brain, but I couldn’t figure out what it was. I waved him over.

“Hey Richie! What are you doing here?”

He feebly waved before heading over to me. “Anthony, mom is..”

There it was again, the stabbing in my head. I couldn’t make out his words, I could only see his mouth move as tears rushed down his face. He handed me a card. *McKinley’s Funeral Home*. I ran my thumb over the words as I felt Richie’s voice echo in me. The world became hazy. I shoved the card back at Richie as I heard a thunderous boom escape my lips. The orderly ran over as my brother collapsed to the ground. I looked at him, fear seizing me, turned and ran.

*They were laughing. Their eyes all delighting in the pain they were inflicting on me. Balloons danced in the air over their heads. My pants were hot and wet and my face was stained with tears.*

“Hey, Mister.”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“You okay? You kinda spaced out there.”

I pat his knee. “Yeah, I’m fine Joey, thanks for asking.”

We had been traveling for a full day now, heading towards McKinley. I couldn’t remember why, but I had to go there. Something important. I needed a suit, I knew that. I looked in my wallet, at the money I had collected over the years, doing some math. The bus ticket was twenty dollars, leaving me with about three hundred. ~~Mon~~ Mom told me to be careful with my allowance. There was that pain again, echoing inside my head. Was three hundred dollars enough for a suit?

The bus lurched to a stop. “Alright, you got an hour everyone. Get food, stretch, whatever.” The bus driver shambled out, waddling like a duck to the station. I stood up and stretched. Joey stood up with me. I looked over at the seat next to him and puzzled. Something was... I shook my head and headed to the door. I need a suit.

I stopped in the first store I saw and asked. The lady behind the counter told me that there was a used suit store a block away and they should be able to help me. I thanked her and left for the other store, Joey in tow.

“What do ya need the suit for, mister?”

“Something important, Joey. I... It’s important okay?”

“Sure thing, but what’s so important?”

“It’s in McKinley.” I said matter of fact.

“Oh.”

We came to the suit store. The gentleman inside frowned as he looked at us. I chuckled, thinking how odd the two of us must look together. I asked him about a suit in black, saying it was important that I get one, less than three hundred dollars please.

“Well, y’dress funny, but you seem okay enough. What’re your measurements?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well c’mon back, we’ll check.”

He deftly measured me and found a suit. It was a size too large, but it would have to do. He rang us up.

“So who’s payin’?”

“Oh I am, Joey doesn’t have that kind of money.”

The clerk looked at me funny and to my side with a puzzled look on his face. He shrugged and took the money from me, sixty-eight dollars and forty-two cents. I thanked him and left.

We hurried back to the bus after grabbing a sandwich and barely made it on. The bus driver told us to hurry up and sit down. With a loud noise, the bus started moving again.

*I wanted to go home. I wasn’t having any fun. The others were avoiding me after the accident. Henry’s mom told me I could borrow a pair of his pants, but I was too embarrassed to accept. She told me my mother would be here soon. I wanted to hide. I wanted to forget today. I looked up and saw Henry laughing. I couldn’t take any more. I went over to the table where the cake was sitting and grabbed the knife...*

Night fell over us as we pulled into McKinley. Tomorrow was the important thing. I couldn’t remember what it was, but I knew I had to be there. Clouds rolled overhead, blocking out the moon. The world vibrated as electricity filled the air. I hurried inside the hotel.

“Do you have a room for one?”

“It’s 50 bucks.”

I fingered the cash in my wallet. I had about a hundred and twenty left. I almost told him no and left. I didn’t want to make ~~her~~ angry, I had to be good. But then I heard a loud boom and hurriedly

handed him the cash. He gave me a key and I went to my room with my suit. I laid the suit out on the chair, looking over it. It will do, I thought. It has to. I'm...

*The screams filled the air. Henry was under me, hands clutching his throat as blood poured out. I felt separated, distant. I was roughly pulled off him, but put up no resistance. His mom was crying over by the fence. My mother was screaming at me as some police men put me in the back of a car. I hurt all over. I did something bad. I was a bad boy... I was bad.. I broke down crying.*

It was raining when I arrived. People were heading to their cars, and I was soaked to the bone. I looked around, trying to find someone, anyone. I walked to the building, my heart racing as my brain cleared. That's right, I'm here because Richie told me to. I ran inside and saw him standing over a box. There was Anna next to him. I walked up to them, swallowing.

"Oh thank god you're okay!"

I turned to the voice and saw someone I didn't know. The voice sounded familiar to me, but the face... It was haggard, filled with lines. Age had not been kind to this man.

"Dad who—Anthony!" Richie had turned when he heard the old man say something to me.

"Anthony, thank god you're here. We were worried sick. Where were you?"

"I... I had to come. You told me. I had to..."

Then I remembered seeing Richie collapse. The rest started coming back to me and I began crying. Richie hugged me.

"It's okay Anthony."

"No it's not, I hurt you! I was bad! I promised mom I wouldn't be a bad boy anymore. I was bad! Bad Anthony!"

"Anthony, I'm fine. I promise."

"Bad! Bad! Bad!"

The old man patted my back. “It’s okay Anthony. I promise. Mom would say the same thing. Come on, son. Let’s go say goodbye.”

“No! I was a bad boy. I’ll be a good boy, I promise. Don’t make me... I’ll be good, I’ll be good!”

I was crying hard, my voice was fading to a whisper. Richie took my arm and led me into the chapel up to the box. I looked down at the face that still haunted me. The cinnamon was gone. The anger was gone. All that was left... she looked happy. I started crying again.

“I did my best mom. I was a good boy. I hope you can forgive me. I’ll go back now. Like I promised. I won’t hurt anyone anymore. I’m sorry mom.”

# The Triad

In mid-ocean she proceeded to have not one baby, but three! Thus the Triad had been born. They swam with the sharks, spoke with the whales, and dove with the octopi. They quickly grew into handsome creatures.

When they felt they had learned all they could from the Sea, they turned to land. Land was unkind, land was unwelcome. The Three looked upon it in sorrow, for their mother had spoken of the beauty of land, but all they saw was hatred. They were quick to learn the hatred themselves... The Three felt the first glimmers of hate when the first stones struck.

Why would these creatures glare at them so? Why do they strike at them, shouting gibberish, treating them like plankton? One of them suggested they return to the Sea, for they felt that Land could not teach. Another instead spoke of moving off of land. They spoke of the flying creatures, the birds. Perhaps they had great wisdom to bestow upon the Triad. Only one stood firm in their resolve.

Each day another stone was flung. Each day the rocks fell to the ground, but not a sound was uttered by the Three. They merely glared back, their own wills pressing upon those around them like the waves of the Sea. It all crashed down one day. The rocks stopped, there was no more gibberish. The Three stood there as a single creature barred them from walking forward. The creature stared at them, anger and fear coursing through them. One of the Three stepped forward. A loud scream filled the air as birds flew from their roosts. The Three's expressions went from anger to fear. The creature had struck a blow against one of them, had drawn blood. Their broken lip hurt, a pain they hadn't before experienced. The creature was standing there smirking. It looked around at the other Land creatures and made a noise of confirmation, of pride. When it turned back, the Three had vanished, as though they had never been there. Gasps erupted around the area. No one had seen them move, but no one saw any signs of them.

Minutes turned to hours, hours turned to days. Soon the creatures moved on, forgetting the Three had even been there. Harvest season came around. The growing season had been dry and hot. The yield was looking thin, but the creatures harvested every bit they could. It didn't look enough to survive the cold season, and some started looking for traders to increase their supply.

*Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.* Not a movement could be seen, except for a single cloaked figure walking through the snow, a sack filled with fruits slung over their shoulder. The creatures had fallen ill from starvation and cold. One stepped out and started making noises at the traveler, even pulling out a small bag filled with coins. The traveler accepted the bag, and gave the creature their satchel. A week later, another Traveler was walking through the snow. The creatures had recovered slightly thanks to the bounty they received before. Again, the creature stepped out and offered a bag of coins for the Traveler's satchel. The Traveler obliged, and handed it over.

Weeks went by. Not a single outsider visited the creatures. They were running low on their food supply again, but had been careful with rations. Every day, the creature with money would step out and wait, but nothing appeared. Desperation soon set in. The creatures ran out of food. Not a single crumb

could be found. Soon they erupted in noise, clamoring for anything to come by and help them, but no one came. They were too weak to travel for help and soon were quieter than they had been before the discord.

The snow had melted. A soft drizzle poured over the creature's homes. The creature with coins sat there, a bag of bones and flesh. The rain washed over the creature's frail body, but it paid it no heed. A guttural noise was heard. The creature looked up and saw the two Travelers who had helped before. It gasped with joy, running over to them before falling into the mud. One of the Travelers helped the creature up. It tilted its head towards the path they came from. The creature looked in the direction and there stood a third Traveler in matching garb to the first two. The Traveler stepped towards the creature, and dropped three satchels in front of it, each filled to the top with food. The creature cried in joy as it looked at the feast. It let out a shout and soon all the creatures that could gathered around the Travelers, dancing and clapping. The clouds slowly parted, letting the sun illuminate the space. One of the creatures let out a gasp. The Traveler before them had removed their hat, revealing their full face. A handsome creature with a permanently split lip stood before the creatures. It picked up one of the pieces of food and handed it to the creature. It was almost time for the growing season and everyone needed their strength.