

Short Stories of the Twenty-first Century.

Prescott Fry



*Short Stories
of
the
Twenty-first Century*

by: Prescott Fry

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June 11, 2015

To the reader,

Life is hard...
It always gets harder...
But when you spot the light of Truth,
it ALL becomes clear!

This is the first time I have published any of my stories under the official pseudonym,
Prescott Fry.

You may wonder why I am writing under a pseudonym.

You may think it is because I want to hide behind a penname.

But verily, it is because I choose to express my beliefs and speculations freely, liberal-mindedly, and I do not want my societal ego to over-run my creative mind....

And most importantly,

Money kills everything.
Even Good storytelling.

Therefore, from this publication onward, I will be sure to remind my readers of a message I constantly repeat to myself before sitting down at my computer and going to work:

“All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental...”

I remind myself that message daily so that I stay humble and remember the Good...

Writing... throughout my journey in a homeless shelter in Maryland... gathering all sorts of fascinating, strange characters through the people I had encountered... to writing on the beaches of Southern California... the beautiful houses... cars... and Women--in all--has been a fun, sometimes taxing experience.

Down to the fundamental nits and grits of survival as a twenty-first century male in a westernized country... I am very, very thankful to everybody who has seen me to the point of finally publishing.

Most of All..

Thankful to God, Krishna, Allah, Yahweh, Buddha, Christ, or whomever you choose to call the name for the Ultimate Realization.

Hopefully, these stories reflect those deeper truths.

Enjoy.

To the Disenfranchised ...

When a Cloud Dies:

I am supine, legs extended, the creaky rub of hammock fibers squeezing against the bark of two trees.

My mind is relaxed but I feel a smidge guilty about all the wings I ate. Carol is going to kill me for today's historic breaking of my cholesterol numbers.

erhhhh—

The dome of sky angles westward, clear and beautiful, the sun dipping away.

urhhh...

Then the eastern sky would show, but really just a sideways view of the back portico, my wife, the girls, and grandbabies gabbing animatedly, eating their last plates of the remnants to the birthday BBQ.

erhhh—

It had been a good birthday, probably no different than all my others.

urhhh...

What had it been? How many years, days, week, hours, seconds, from long ago starting off as a Minnesota boy from the rough streets of an industrial town called Togen?

The hammock dips back toward the house, a perfect angle to his wife's sun wrinkled face, ebullient and graceful as she had been since the afternoon he had met her some fifty years ago.

errhhh

The dog, Rookie, chews passionately into a toy in the part of the lawn farthest from the house.

"Good boy,"

And the dog gives a smile, the tongue drooling in slimy drops all over the toy.

And the hammock swings the other way.

urhh

The whistle of the truck.

Duoh- doooo

A frenetic image of all the neighborhoods children chasing the truck.

erhhhh—

Oh, and the unbelievable delicious sight of the crème filled pastries.

Boy, were those pastries, good.

urh...

And there she stood like an angel from above, Carol, a green-yellow sundress, giddily staring amongst some friends.

"What are you lookin' at?" I had said, rather defiantly, but of course, out of flirtation play.

erhhhh...

Oh, and what she said still gives me the laughs...

"I'm trying to figure out if you're supposed to be eating a Boston crème pie."

My face had blanched red, my throat pasty and lost for words. My gang of friends looked at me like I was a Big Whimp for being talked like that by a girl.

My future wife was a real scrapper. She dug the knife deeper, "My mother says oinkers like you shouldn't eat off the Helms truck. She says it only makes you fatter.

erhh..

And she had probably been right about that. My belly always stayed like the white Michelin guy... I sometimes still get nervous when I'm at the beach, or around any of her friends.

But after a certain point, surviving two major heart attacks... a triple bypass... I learned to embrace my body's resilience to consume and still survive.

urhh.

Most of my suits I grew out of and had to give away to Goodwill. Over the years, my waist got bigger, and bigger, my confidence less and less...

But I'd always find time for my family—and my food.

erhh

I'm a pizza, potato chips, and beer kind of guy.

I like to keep it simple...

But Steak—

mhhhm..

A fresh simmered sirloin, a little onion and lemon juice on top.

urhhhh.

Talk about heaven.

erhh.

But no matter what, my real joy is my wife and children. I gave them everything. All my daughters had graduated college, found respectable husbands, and were prepared to raise their wonderful babies in the cruel twenty-first century world.

erhh..

My family.

erhh.

And the hammock arches, showing the western sky; the sun sits so low, red and purple, dropping, dipping until gone from sight.

urhhh.

And between half eyelids, Carol connects with his eyes resting back in the pouch of the hammock.

The dark barked silently.

ehrr,

And the sky looks like a portrait, painted of his life, an enormous cloud--fat like him—swelled into the maroon sky.

erhhh—

“CAROL.” He whispers.

Erhh—

The cloud moved with the last strengths of his eyes.

urhhh,

And his hand slumped over the hammock, Rookie peddling beside him and licking stiff fingers.

“Roo-f”

The dog licked away, the family guffawing, undertones of happiness and joy.

The cloud's hues morphed maroon, to purple, to indigo, to finally pitch black.

....

The Good Salesman:

“It’s time for ANOTHER sale...”Milton Frock thought with pride.

His spotless leather shoes stepped from the work van onto the asphalt, the leaves rustling in the breeze of the languid Sunday morning. Posted conspicuously across the side of van were the likes of Mr. Frock, a long grin stretching up a strikingly pasty face, a miniature globe in the man’s wiry fingers, the quote in bubbles above a bald pate:

“Frock gets the Sale, rain or hail!”

As Mr. Frock strode up the cobblestone pathway toward the suburban home with maroon sidings, the man’s knobby knees thudding slightly as he limped, he glanced over the name of the occupant, Mr. Sean Blane, a tiny 2’x4” picture posted crookedly on the clipboard. Blane smiled cheekily. Cheeks swollen fat like a plump turkey.

Mr. Frock cajoled because he always loved the heavy ones who always were slow-witted and out of breath, as if they were nine hops away from an inevitable stroke.

Halfway up the path, a beat black cat frolicked in the garden by the house. The cat froze when Frock neared. Even as he stepped a long leg onto the porch, the cat eyeballed him without remorse.

“GET !!!YOU LITTLE FUCKER!!!”

The cat scurried away, meowing mirthlessly...

“Jesus would be proud.”

A Christmas tree, red and green sprites, stood in the living room windowpane. An angel, glistening splendidly, peaked from atop.

“A good, sacrilegious Customer...”

Frock pressed the pants of his pinstripe suit before swallowing an anxious breath.

“ANOTHER SALE” He said, rapping three times, loudly.

He heard scuttling behind the door, followed by shouts, then there was a click and the door opened to a corpulent, unshaven man who raised a suspicious eyebrow. He barked: “Can I help you?”

Mr. Frock opened both hands jovially, as he always did. Something changed in the voice, more amiable, but surely feigning enthusiasm from how Frock sounded before.

“HELLO! How are you doing?!”

The man looked a little disarmed, heeded the padlock expression. “I’m fine.”

“Superb! It’s a wonderful Sabbath morning!”Mr. Frock looked over a shoulder and appraised the man’s neatly cut lawn, the gray, rather gloomy sky above... “A great, wonderful time to enjoy the weather!”

The man bobbed a flabby buccula. “uh-huh...” The man’s face looked about as interested as an egg.

“Christmas is right around the corner!” Mr. Frock trailed off... “Sir, you may be interested in some of the products that I have to offer at low prices.”

The man stared unassumingly as Mr. Frock fumbled the briefcase between the knees and unlatched the pins. He grabbed out a pamphlet... “Hidden treasures!” as he passed it to the man’s chubby fingers... “In there we have ALL SORTS of holiday jems!”

The man shoved the pamphlet back and it fell to the ground. “Well I don’t need any jewelry. I bought enough jewelry while raising my two girls.”

“Oh that’s MOST wonderful . . .” Mr. Frock’s eyes flashed red for a second as he bent double for the unraveled pamphlet. . . “I’m sure your daughters LOVED them!”

“Yeah-they did.” The man began closing the door. . . “Now, you have a good one.”

Frock flustered.

The man had almost gotten the door shut in Frock’s face, which would’ve probably been the best thing that had ever happened to that man’s life, but when the door was two inches from closing, Frock jammed a heel between the frame and mouthed two words:

“Sean Blane. . .”

The man whipped the door ajar and stood, wide-chested. “HOW do you know my name?”

Frock tucked the briefcase inside an arm and unassumingly said: “I see that you have a REAL Christmas tree.”

Frock opened eyes wide, pointing to the tree.

Blane looked at the tree, perplexity in his fat expression. “Yeah, soooo, What’s that have to do with YOU knowing MY name?”

Frock wagged a finger peremptorily.

“Because I KNOW. . . I was told by someone at the office that this Blane fellow owned a REAL tree and MIGHT be interested in buying an artificial. You know—”

Frock leaned forward, his eyes peering seriously at Blane. . .

“In light of what happened to that family up on the north side, who had a REAL tree and it caught fire, setting the complex ablaze and consuming over twenty poor, poor lives.”

“Are you SHITTING me?!” Blane looked like a lame person who had just managed to understand his first joke. “I didn’t know THAT MANY people DIED. That’s insane. . .” Blane’s face wrinkled in real concern. . . “But WHO from your office sent you over here in the first place?”

Frock’s eyes shifted as he remembered the name. . . “BIG man, delivery driver, says he knows you from the old days.” He spread both arms. . .

“Was it Charlie?” Blane touched the chin, “Orange beard?”

“That was HIM!!!” Frock’s eyes lit up marvelously. . . “He said you MIGHT be interested, for SAFETY reasons. . .”

“Man, I haven’t seen that sonafabitch since I worked at the steel mill. . .” Blane expression was a teaspoon surprised but resoundingly euthanized by the conversation and the mention of an old work associate named Charlie, who according to Frock’s records really went by Charles Dove, a *customer* Frock had once long ago visited on a old country road selling a catalogue of hunting supplies. . .

“Yeah, I have two daughters who visit sometimes. . .” Blane opened the door the rest of the way and waved Frock in. . . “And they both have babies, so I might check out what you have.”

Frock entered and Blane directed them into the parlor with the gigantic cone-shaped tree. Blane closed the door. . . “I can’t believe TWENTY people from the town died!”

“Oh yes, SO tragic,” said Frock, curling a lip.

“Sit down over here. . .” Blane cleared a giant stack of newspapers and junk from the couch and walked to the edge of the hall. . .

“Would you like anything to drink?”

“Just water. Thank you.”

As Blane got drinks, Frock gazed around the cluttered parlor, untidy, just as the apparel of his customer. He sneered: "What a SLOB..."

He wondered whether Blane had always lived so odiferously.

On the adjoining walls were two deer mounts, beady black eyes staring blankly. One was a ten point, the other, a twelve...

Blane had probably hunted along with Charles Dove back when they were acquainted...

The deer mounts only added to Frock's notion of Blane's simplistic life. Blane hunted simple minded animals because that's all he could comprehend killing... Yet he was no different than the thousands before that Frock had sat down with and sold to...

He straightened both shoulders as he heard clamorous footfalls.

"Thank you "accepting the water, swigging half the glass.

Blane chugged lemonade. He rested back into a lazy boy...

"So what do you have for me, Mr..?"

"Frock" He placed the water on the side table and recovered the pamphlet, placing it into Blane's hands...

"The trees are toward the back page."

"Here we go..."Blane set the pamphlet on a knee and looked over the shimmering artificial Christmas tree and frowned, squirrel cheeks sagging dopily."No, I don't want gold...or silver ...tree."

Frock nodded, already well aware of the tree Bain *would*, in fact want. He was a plain man, so he'd want a tree that looked like a real one...

It was just like matching up Mr. Dove with the Titanum Cross bow in the hunting catalogue...

Blane shook his head disapprovingly. Frock gazed around the living room, family portraits suspended over the decommissioned fireplace; his two daughters...grandbabies... family friends... Frock would one day visit them all, eventually, a knock at the door... He was the best damned salesman in this godforsaken World. One thing Frock had learned was the truth that people want new, unnecessary things they would probably be better off not having in the first place...

"I'm not sure if I want a tree that looks like a pickle." Blane flipped to the back page. "Don't you have anything that looks plain, like a normal Christmas tree?"

"Oh, Mr. Blane you may be IN LUCK!" He took the pamphlet from Blane's fingers. "It's NOT advertised in here... But I have a VERY special one in the back of my truck..."

"For all you could tell, it looks exactly like the big tree you have, except this one won't shed or run the risk of burning your house to the floor!"

"No kidding."

"Mr.Blane, I'm not the type of man to kid a customer."

"How much does this "special" tree cost?"

"For you, Mr Blane, there is NO CHARGE!!!"

"Are you kidding me? What's the catch?"

"NO catch, I could go and grab it right now..."

Mr Blane stared at him awkwardly. He was not the sort to ask or care for free handouts, and now it all seemed a bit coincidental that this complete stranger now stood in his house, wanting to give him something completely FREE...

"There's NO catch..?"

"NO catch. Matter of fact, I'll be right back!"

Before Blane could mouth another word, the screen door thudded shut as Frock zipped out the door to the van... Blane sat in the silent parlor, wondering about the strange, lanky man he had just met... He couldn't quite figure it, but something seemed "off" about what was happening...

In a way, he wanted to protest but Frock had mentioned Charles, and Frock seemed altogether good-hearted... So when he reemerged through the door with a long, rectangular box, Blane silenced the wanton suspicion and helped Frock lug the package in.

"WOW, this is heavy..."

"Although very easy to set up!"

When they got it into the living room, Frock leered and shoved the clipboard into Blane's belly. "All you have to do is... Sign."

Blane's thoughts about rebellion returned... He stared back at the box, then the tree with the angel. He didn't really like 'fake' trees since his wife Mary, now long passed away from a twelve year battle with Leukemia, loved the piney smell of real trees, and because of her, he to-this-date had upheld that tradition...

"I was thinking about this tree being the last one I put up anyway... Maybe you can give that to someone who needs it..."

"Mr. Blane." His voice sounded hypnotic, distant, "you NEED my tree..."

"But Mr Frock, I don't even know WHO you are; does it make sense for you to give me this?"

Mr. Frock dropped his chin.. He shot back a lofty look at the family portrait with the two grandbabies, the two daughters...

Mr. Blane's deceased wife...

Suddenly, Blane's forehead creased in sharp pain.

He dug a finger into an ear as he heard a screeching static.

Frock's voice, "You need the tree for your family..."

All of the sudden, Blane's pallor changed and he signed the paper without question. His eyes looked like they had seen the twilight zone as he moved, dazed, as Frock exited the front door and Blane mechanically waved a goodbye.

Frock leered curtly. "I give Her greetings..."

"Bye now, good sir..."

Frock's comment about Mr. Blane's dead wife never registered the conscious mind as he shut the door to absent-mindedly unpack the *new* tree.

Mr. Frock's van vanished before the front door had closed entirely.

He cackled to himself. "ANOTHER good sale!"

And the *good salesman*, Mr. Frock's pupils narrowed into pinpoints, pearly black.

Mr. Blane ripped open the cardboard to find some stuffing... a three foot tall Christmas tree... a business card.

Frock stood with a thumb up, smiling widely.

Blane tossed the card aside and returned unpacking the tree.

He slowly unraveled the chord. In a hand, he held the plug and reached for an outlet on the wall. His fingers brushed against the metric surface. "Dammitttt !" He recoiled as electricity shocked the fingertips...

The tree flickered for a moment, and then lit up red and green... It was a funny sight, seeing the artificial next to the full sized tree. It was like a little miniature of Christmas...

Blane stuffed the box into a trash bag. He set Mr. Frock's card on the side table, by the new tree, making a mental note to take down the old tree before he tossed the bag out with the rest of the garbage... Mr. Blane went upstairs and fell asleep...

He snored far away in deep, heavy slumber as the new tree flickered on and off...

Then the parlor's lights followed...

And finally the whole house--

POPPPP

A spark landed from the outlet onto the carpet and a small flame started in the living room... The room blazed into wild flames until the real and the fake tree ignited into a raging glow...

The plastic of the fake tree dripped onto Mr. Frock's business card.

First, his bald plate melted away, then his lanky body, then finally, the entirety of the quote from his van:

"Frock gets the sale, rain or hail..."

Believe me, I'm the One who struck the Nail!

....

The Mark of the Beast:

While the students worked on their written assignment, Mr. Headly skimmed over a news magazine that his wife had bought for him the day before. On the cover page there were people standing in a lineup, all smiling, forearms extended for a picture. They all had recently received the newest implant, the “TH-41,” a small bead that syncs up with various technologies... For parents, it was a tracking device that monitored their children’s heart rate and resulting behavior. For children, it was a cell-phone that never gets lost. The article explained how the node worked alongside the nervous system, firing and in-taking electrical surges...

Mr. Headly felt his head throb as he read the article... The same thought kept smacking his conscious like a brick wall: this isn’t right, this is playing God. When he reached the end of the article, there was a doctor wearing a white smock with the company logo: a small bird spreading its wings to take flight flanked behind a rising sun. In the photo, the doctor was smiling cheekily and the caption read, “Dr. Whitehouse, Harvard graduate in neurology, recommends the TH-41 as the leading device in Somatechology... “It’s a must-have for assimilation into this modern society.”

Shaking the head, Headly set the magazine down and let out a deep, anxious breath. He shut his eyes, ever so slowly regaining a walk around heart rate. He looked at the class. “You can stop now.”

All the students stopped typing on the flat-screen impressed into the desks... Headly tapped a control button under his desk and all the screens went blank...

“How many here has had a node implanted?”

Faces around the room looked puzzled...

“Raise your hands, I’m just curious.”

About two-thirds the class lifted hands... Mr. Headly nodded and glanced back to the magazine. His eyes fixated on the birdie spreading its wings. “Okay, I’m going to ask you a question. This is random, but because we have a few minutes left, I think it will be an interesting discussion. Especially considering the events in the last two years... Here it goes: What, if anything, is *all* the motion in the universe heading toward?”

Headly watched the class from behind the desk... His eyes were deep and hallow, the hair resembled a bowl cut, the bangs parted into a v-shape across the forehead. He wore the standardized clothing for staff, black and blue slacks, a school mascot above the pocket. A patterned tie hung from his neck like a long, red snake, which was the only dress variation allowed under regulation by the school-board for male faculty members... There was a prolonged silence while the question sunk in. The only sounds were a clock ticking away and an occasional ruffle as students shifted uncomfortably when Mr. Headly’s gaze transfixed upon them...

“Come, on. Somebody please answer me; what is all the motion heading towards?”

It looked as if nobody would answer and the echoing silence would persist, but then from a far corner of the room, a shaggy haired boy with rounded spectacles spoke up. “God. It’s all heading toward God, in some manifestation or another.”

Heads whipped around like wild swivels. Every eye in the room stared at the boy as if he had committed nasty blasphemy. Then, in order to catch the reaction, they all looked back to Mr. Headly... To their profound surprise, he was nodding and smiling... “Mr. O’Connor, could you elaborate?”

Mr O’Connor used a finger to push the glasses up the bridge of the nose... After a pensive moment, he finally said, “God is perfection. Therefore, all the motion of the universe is moving towards perfection.”

“Ahh, Perfection... Now that is something to move toward. Wouldn’t you agree?”

The students nodded in unison.

Headly looked displeased. “Why are you all nodding? Only two people in this room—Mr. O’Connor and myself—have any clue what they’re talking about...” Headly rolled the eyes, waved a hand peremptorily, and continued... “As for the rest of you, you’ve lived eighteen or so years, and none of you have the slightest idea about your existence. Pathetic, if you ask me...”

Another student, a boy with droopy eyes and baggy clothing, leaned back into a chair and truculently said, “Why does God have to be brought into this? Isn’t the fanciful notion of God the polar opposite of Philosophy?”

Whack— Headly hopped from a chair, sending it reeling backward into the wall. Palms down, he set both hands on the desk and leaned over. “Mr. Smith, WHAT is the meaning of the word Philosophy?”

Mr Smith’s jaw went slack like raw bacon and he stumbled for words...

“You have five seconds, Mr. Smith. Five..Four..Three..”

Smith’s face went scarlet... He finally admitted, “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Headly rolled the eyes even more drastically, and spun around to the board. He touched a finger against the glassy surface and scribbled the word “philosophy” onto it. From the word, he extended a line and wrote something else which looked like a foreign language... “Philosophos, a Greek word which means lover of wisdom.” He turned back to Mr. Smith. “Now Mr. Smith, I’ll ask you one more time. Is God, what Mr. O’Connor referred to as Perfection, relevant to Philosophy, the Love of Wisdom, TRUTH?”

“If you say so...”

“If I say so? When does it matter what I say? It’s what you believe!”

The class was once again silent... Mr. Headly pulled his chair beneath and plopped down... “Okay, now I have another question for you—Are Computers perfect, flawless beings? They can calculate without error, observe without the blindness of subjectivity... Are computers meant—”

RINGGG—at that moment, the bell pierced over the intercom and students started packing up their things.

“On that note, have a good day...”

A girl asked what the reading assignment was for tomorrow and Mr. Headly told her that they didn’t have one, that they were free to go... After the exodus of students, one remained... It was O’Connor, his square spectacles glaring from the bright fluorescents above... He walked up to Mr. Headly’s desk and asked, “Mr. Headly, I’m afraid of what’s happening...” He flipped over his forearm. Halfway up, there was a red circle the size of a coin and in the center of it was what looked like a titanium bead stuck just beneath the skin...

“So am I.”

“Since I’ve gotten it installed, I feel like everything is a little off..”

“What do you mean?”

"I'm not sure, I can't really put my finger on it. At times, I feel like my thoughts are all jumbled up and disordered. I'm not sure... Anyhow, what got an ol' geezer like you thinking about the nodes?"

Mr. Headly lifted the corner of the magazine... "My wife bought this for me and I gave it a read while the class was testing."

"Is your wife afraid of them, too?"

"More so than me... She wants to move from the country if the congressional mandate goes through and all citizens are required to install the node."

"Hopefully, they vote it down... One more thing—that stuff you said about all the motion in the universe is really starting to make sense..."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, it's human nature to be impulsive... Yes, we humans have rationality, which in its purest sense is perfection, but I'm afraid this is going too far..."

"Good," said Headly. "Means I'm actually teaching you neanderthals something... But why did you get that node put in if you believed they were intrusive?"

"My entire family choose to have it installed, and at the time, I really didn't have a choice in the matter..."

"Well Mr. O'Connor, I think your fears are justified. Who's to say some guy isn't sitting behind a desk controlling your emotions and actions... It may be the first step toward a monster which will get out of hand..."

Mr O'Connor nodded and stared at the metallic bead. Then he abruptly said, "Thanks Mr. Headly. That's all I was wondering. Have a good day."

"You too, son..."

Headly frowned as the boy closed the door on his way out... He stayed around for a while, grading papers and organizing the room... The hallways were empty and ghostly while he locked the classroom as he left... With a briefcase tucked beneath an arm, Headly strolled the brief walk to his car, thinking of little along the way. He recovered the keys and fumbled with the lock. He let the car idle for a second before pulling out of the school parking lot.

He drove twenty-five miles an hour through Main Street on the way to his suburban home... He came to a stop at a red light and looked over to notice a large throng of sign wielding protesters chanting, "Nodes are bad, they make you go MAD!"

They were referring to an incident in Florida where a faulty node failed to sync up with a teenage boy's nervous system and the boy went crack-pot, walking into his school and shooting at the entire class. Mr. Headly starred transfixed on the protesters until a car behind him honked and he realized the red light had changed to green...

On the highway, he passed several billboards advertising the newest node, the same titanium piece O'Connor had recently had installed. The billboard showed the same company logo: a birdie taking flight over a setting sun...

Mr. Headly wouldn't have been so concerned about the nodes if the government, accompanied by high-end capitalistic investors such as the company manufacturing and selling the nodes, hadn't attempted a unequivocal effort over the last two years to force ALL citizens to acquire such a node under the skin... Next month, Congress was voting on the proposition..and then..if they choose to mandate all citizens to have the implant..then Headly wouldn't have a choice in the matter... He voted *ab imo pectore* they'd vote it down.

The past year had been a scary dream to him.

In the last book of the bible, the book of John, also known as the book of rapture, the one predicting the end times, there was an explicit reference to “**the Mark of the Beast...**” It was probably the only thing that Headly had remembered besides the Ten Commandments from those Sunday school lessons when his mother compelled him, sometimes even using threats of whipping, to force him to read the Bible scrupulously...

As he remembers, the book prophesies that the Mark of the Beast is the telltale sign of the coming Apocalypse... Everybody would be forced to carry the sign—*and if they choose otherwise*—buying food and acquiring the means to survive will be nearly impossible...

Headly saw the node and the government’s attempts to force citizens to acquire it as ‘the Beast... He hoped with all the heart that Congress would vote it down or else he would have to find another country to live in...

But the problem was that most of the westernized countries had also adopted the node...
He thought it was all insane.

On the other side of the argument, the proponents of the node envision a day when crime would be virtually eliminated since the nodes can monitor all the sensory input of the persons wearing it...

Perfection, they argue...

With the node, they can create the perfect state.

But Mr. Headly didn’t see it that way at all... He saw the damned thing as the elimination of free will, the very thing that makes us human...

What was the world coming to?

He tried to forget about the billboards and the morality of the nodes as he drove into the driveway... He shifted the car into park, leaned back and shut his eyes... He swallowed deep breaths while he cleared the mind...

Stacy would be inside, moving about the kitchen, preparing dinner... He didn’t want to bother her with more of his unnecessary fears. They were bad enough on their own. He didn’t need them infesting her already troublesome conscious... He opened his eyes and commanded, “Glove box, open.”

It popped ajar and he recovered an orange pill bottle. He unscrewed the lid and shook out two tic-tac sized pills. The label on the bottle recommends one daily, but with the stress from these last few weeks, Headly swallowed two anyways...

When he stepped into the night, the sky had morphed an amber hue and crickets were already singing their sporadic tune... The soles of his shoes crunched the pebble surface of the walkway leading to the front door.

He stood before the door and took more of those deep breaths... As he slid the key into the door, he heard a rustle from somewhere behind.

He whipped around suddenly and nervously squinted over the shadowy lawn... There was no noise except the whistling wind and crickets, and absolutely no signs of anybody around.

“Come on, Bill.” he told himself aloud... He shook his head and, ever so lightly, pushed in the front door...

It swung open in a slow arc...

To his surprise, the hallway light was off and the house was dark except for a light pouring from the kitchen down the hall...

“Stacy, baby, I’m Home.”

No response...

Even if she wasn't downstairs to hear him, he mentioned the nodes despite the aforementioned self-promise seconds before not to... "I read that article you showed me. Man—its getting all sorts of scariness... I asked the class how many had the damned thing installed and nearly the whole class raised their hands..." He flicked on the light and set down the suitcase by his feet... A few feet further in, a pile of letters were stacked on a table against the wall. Absentmindedly, he flipped through the letters, none of which were for him... "Honey, I'm starving. I hope you've got something ready," he said, walking toward the kitchen...

When he rounded the corner, he saw a pot of water steaming on the stove and Stacy, with her back toward him, sitting at the table... He tiptoed behind her and reached out both hands... With one hand, he hugged her neck and the other cupped her breast. "Baby, you know it's been a long day..." He slid his hand down her stomach and over her thigh. Inch by inch he moved up her thigh. He could feel her warmth through the spandex... He rubbed and rubbed but she didn't give the slightest sign of noticing his affection...

"Baby?"

He let go of her—SMACK, she plopped down against the table, landing directly on her forehead...

"Baby? Are you—" He propped her up and bent around to see her face...

"AHHHHH..."

That's when he saw it.

Her eye sockets were gorged out, leaving only black, fleshy holes where her green eyes had once been.

He dropped her and fell backwards, kicking his legs until his back was against the wall. "What the fuck? Oh my Jesus! What the fuck!"

His eyes were watery but he could see the distinct outline of shoes and legs coming from the darkened living room...

The figure spoke. "That's what happens to those who see too much."

Tears were streaming down Headly's cheeks... He tried to lift himself and get to the kitchen counter where a sheath of knives lay, but the knees then the hamstrings failed beneath.

The figure darted like lightning into the kitchen, magnificently bright light illuminating the face...

"Mr. O'Connor? Eric, what the hell are you—"

In the hand, Eric carried a long blade, blood dripping from the tip. "This is what happens when you hear too much..."

Headly managed to plant his feet and push up the wall. "Eric, what the hell have you done?"

"I haven't done a thing!" The boy stepped toward him, raising the knife...

Headly's only chance was the sheath on the counter...

He bolted left, getting two steps closer, but he was just a foot too slow.

A molten sting spread throughout the abdomen as they collided and the knife met Mr. Headley's middle-aged intestines.

He gagged steamy blood. "Eric, what are you—"

He shoved the knife deeper... "I'm ridding the world of those who don't believe in PEFECTION..."

"Please, nooooo!"

But the last thing Mr. Headly saw was Eric's eyes behind blood smeared spectacles... They weren't the same eyes Mr. Headly had come to know over their last semester together... They were husky *gray* and seemed *robotic* and somehow *manufactured*.

Second Creation:

My limousine inched to a stop by the curb of the Grand hotel. The glass-divide rolled down and the driver announced, “Mrs. Henderson, your stop.”

“Thanks Paulie...” I breathed and prepared myself for what I was about to encounter...

Through the tinted glass, I could see the sparks and camera flashes from a swarm of spectators engulfing the gated, red carpet entranceway... For the next two hours tonight, the world would be on standby, watching the Grand Hotel closely; reporters, protesters, and basically anybody who wanted to witness this moment of history...

I flicked open a mini mirror from my purse to make sure my make up hadn't smeared. My lips looking like a red cherry, I shook my hair into place. I glanced down and checked whether I was still wearing my blue VIP badge to gain access into the hotel... With all the hoops I had to jump through to land this story from my boss, I wasn't taking any chances blowing an interview with Dr. Ashisha tonight... Everything seemed in place so I inhaled one large breath and tugged the door, stepping my stilettos onto the sanguine carpet.

The crowd was noisy... I was momentarily dazed by flashes from all the cameras... Hugging my purse tightly to my shoulder, I braced myself and walked under the awning toward the main entrance. As I passed, the reporters on the left reached into the aisle like hungry zombies. “One question!” They demanded, microphones extended... Ignoring the pleas, I hurried toward the front entrance...

Straight backed Police stood shoulder to shoulder to prevent any screaming protesters from breaking through the right. I couldn't tell what they were shouting but I did see a girl who wore a belly-shirt while she sat atop the shoulders of a punkster boyfriend. She exaggeratedly waved above her head a sign which read, “Ashisha is the Devil's handyman!”

I laughed at the ridiculous sign but kept pacing toward the door as fast as my heels would allow... There was a loud scuffle between the baton wielding officers and the protesters before a glass bottle got thrown from the crowd, crashing feet ahead of me in the middle of the aisle.

I froze momentarily, as I noticed that the bottle has something inside... I crouched down and picked through the shards of glass to reveal what appeared to be a note. I unrolled the paper and read a handwritten message...

The hour is near.

It was a warning or a threat—probably another toward Dr. Ashisha's life... I looked among the crowd to see if I could spot the thrower. Rage blanketed the looks of most protesters which is the reason why my eyes latched onto a conspicuous looking tall figure with dark eyes... Behind the wall of police, this man stood still as cast iron, not tramping or moving like the rest of the red faced protesters. In a raggedy duffle coat with long black, greasy hair, the stranger's eyes fixed onto me... The man's angular face and pasty skin alone was enough to give me the ebbyjebbes. The look he gave was tantalizing like a hungry predator. I glanced back at the note, thinking I should tell a police officer right away to stop and to observe the tall suspect who might have thrown the bottle... But when I glanced up again...the figure had slipped off into the untraceable abyss of the crowd...Bastard was gone.

I tucked the note into a pocket and hurried the last ten yards to the front entrance...
“Thanks.” I smiled to the white-gloved doorman.

The noise died. Instantly, the mood changed... The hotel foyer opened into a vast lobby beautifully decorated with Greek sculptures and archaic, giant portraits. In the center was a marble water fountain fizzing as tall as a step letter and the entire lobby echoed with the sound of lapping water...

It was no surprise to me that such an exquisite hotel had been chosen for tonight’s event... Some of the attendees included such dignified titles as the President of the United States, the newfound Tzar of the Russian people, and even the old Queen of England herself... Everybody and their distant cousin were there, whether physically or indirectly through some electrical means such as television or via Internet stream.

I glanced around the lobby... Dr. Ashisha, who was tiny in stature, but wizardly smart to the tenth degree... He was the reason I was here and why all these events were happening... All I needed was five minutes of his precious time. That would be enough material for me to write my article for “The Sun...” which was the goal that night.

I’m about five’ six”, but standing high in the stilettos, I was closer to five’ ten”. I had a Birdseye view of the lobby... Clusters of people chatted idly. Butlers weaved through the groups, offering cocktails drinks and hor d’oeuvres which appeared to me to be caviar on crackers.

I drifted randomly between the labyrinth of people, awed by the menagerie of plump-bellied wealth and political influence that surrounded me... I passed a large group which had about a dozen tuxedoed body guards standing around a Muslim man wearing a wool thobe... I recognized him from the news as the head Caliphate of the Islamic State. This state was Ultra powerful, known to the world for its conciliation of all the remaining oil wells in the Arab nations and for its notorious nickname as the ‘righteous conquistadors’... But the state was really just another xenophobic purging confederation loosely centered around gold and brass, i.e. guns, oil, and money.

I looped around the water fountain, feeling lost standing there like a schoolgirl in my black dress with nobody to speak with... My feet already ached from the curve of the heels, so I sat down and rested on the smooth marble of the fountain. The big hand on the massive clock on the far wall was almost at seven which meant the convention would begin any minute...

I sat there thinking of all the memories over the years of Dr Ashisha and how his work started in a small lab, off the radar, and very slowly over time grew throughout the media, then finally exploded into a major world headline... Dr Ashisha had given me a privileged glimpse of his work since day one. He would ask me to keep certain details hidden from the public here and there. I agreed... But now he was hanging it all out on the line for the whole world to gaze upon.

He was such a nice, humble little man... Last time I saw him was over two years ago when I visited his laboratory while driving through the countryside en route to an Aunt’s funeral. Wearing white smocks, he greeted me into his laboratory. He gave me a small tour around, showing me test tubes and aquarium tanks with strange looking creatures inside, updating me on various new projects he was working on. In the far corner beneath a tarpaulin, I saw something hidden. Momentarily, Dr. Ashisha acted like he intended to blow my question off—probably debating whether he should reveal to me the contents beneath... But a few moments later, he unsheathed the cover and revealed a massive metal machine which looked like a deepwater submarine capsule. He opened the thick chamber door and there was a seat inside that looked like a dryer chair from a salon. He called the thing a Japanese name from his homeland,

Kokomo, or komodama or something, meaning spirit. He explained the machine in some detail but how the machine works and what exactly it does has been a mystery to me ever since...

It was stupid but I glanced around the lobby half expecting to see Ashisha in his smocks poking out like a white marshmallow...

Still no sight of him.

I frowned helplessly... I sat there a while more until the big hand struck seven then a wiry man in a black suite entered the court through the double doors beneath the massive clock. "Attention!" the man announced in a stentorian voice... The ambient chatter faded away and the man continued... "Dr. Ashisha's presentation will begin shortly. Please enter the auditorium through these doors here. THANK YOU."

The noise of chatter resumed as all the groups funneled into the doors like calf being herded into a barn... I figured all these people knew at least some part of Dr. Ashisha's work, such as the Temperlator, a device that replicates artificial emotional responses to outside stimuli, what some people call the first robot brain; or the crystallized battery, about the size of a lemon but a great source of fast, easily accessible raw energy—What Dr. Ashisha once used as a portable power source for his mechanical inventions... By now, everybody had had a taste of his work, bite and nibbles here and there, based upon what Dr. Ashisha decided to show them... But as opposed to my personal insight because of what he specifically choose to reveal to me over the years, I had seen the full spectrum of his inventions working together in one embodied device; and all I can say about Dr. Ashisha is that as far it's physically possible for a human to be some sort of creative genius—that little old Japanese man, well—he was one hell of an inventor...

I stepped through the doors into the massive auditorium. The buzz of human chatter was deafening. Most of the rows were already filled with wide-eyed spectators... This was going to be huge...

Dr. Ashisha was probably in his dressing room right now, preparing and reviewing his speech in the cool minded temperament that he was so accustomed to...

I glanced at my my badge around my neck: row A, seat fifty-six... Dr. Ashisha had mentioned my seat was close to the stage in an invitation letter months before. But I was unaware he had meant the front row... As I descended the elongated stairs towards my seat near the stage, a hand reached out from one of the adjourning aisles and touched my forearm, "I haven't seen you in years, Mrs. Brown."

It was an elderly lady wearing a white dress and a pink fedora... It took a moment for me to register who the face belonged to, but then I realized it was Dr. Ashisha's personal secretary from over the years... "Mrs. Parks, how are you? I haven't seen you in ages. Do you still work for the doctor?"

"No more work for this Grandma. I'm retired now." She leaned closer, "And from one woman to another, I couldn't be happier with where I am in life right now."

"I'm so glad to hear that. How long ago did you retire?"

"Last Fall. Dr. Ashisha was already intending on shutting down the lab, and besides, the arthritis in my knees was hurting so bad that I could barely move around, let alone run errands." She nudged my elbow. "You know how demanding working under Ashisha can be."

I had served a semester under Ashisha as a lab gofer for a credit toward my chemistry minor and what she said was all too true... "He can be tough, but that is why he's the best at what he does."

The old lady reached into her purse and handed me her card. “I don’t do much traveling much anymore since Dr. Ashisha closed shop. But if you ever down south and are in town, stop by my place and we can reminisce about old memories.”

I took the card. “Will definitely take you UP on that offer... I had no idea Ashisha closed down though?”

“The lab has been inoperable for the last ten months... With all the press coverage, the endless questionings, he’s been staying off the radar as best as possible...”

“That probably explains why he hasn’t replied to any of my phone calls or e-mails trying to set a date for an interview... You know, being a student of Ashisha turned big time journalist—for a while, it had me thinking he no longer trusted me...”

She touched my hand... “Oh no, It has nothing to do with you sweetie. You know the doctor knows who to trust... He has probably just been very busy making sure all the pieces were in proper place for tonight.”

“Well yes, hopefully I can catch him tonight and we can talk one on one. My boss is really riding my back to get an insider...”

“Good luck, Ms. Brown... Don’t forget to enjoy the presentation. I’m sure everything will turn out fine... We are the only people who know Dr. Ashisha is the most thoughtful of persons...”

I said goodbye to Ms. Parks, descended the remaining stairs, and I excused myself as I squeezed by the knees of many dignified people in the tightly placed seating...

“Pardon me.” I apologized to a man who looked like a modern day Napoleon after I crushed his booted foot under my dagger heel...

A hell of a fire hazard if you asks me...

I kept going forward, some patches of empty seats where the attendees hadn’t arrived yet so I could walk causally without squeezing by...

I reached my seat after a few conscious minutes, and plopped down, exhausted, the podium and hot stage lights directly in front of me...

I had always known Dr. Ashisha and I were close, intimate, on an intellectual level, that is... But I would’ve guessed he never would’ve chosen me to sit in the seat closest to the front, and therefore, make me the closest person within his line of vision for the most important speech of his academic career...

After about thirty minutes sitting there, twiddling my thumbs, absorbing fragments of ambient conversations around, the overhead lights dimmed and the noise in the auditorium died. An older man wobbled across the stage to the podium “Good Afternoon.” He waited as the guest replied patchily...

“Tonight, we have something special in store for you.” The speaker stepped aside and waved behind him... A holographic screen projected through the bottom of the stage and created a luminescent replica of a green and blue sphere, “Here we have earth.” Next, a giant red ball of glittering light projected in the back of the stage... “Mother sun...” Then other spheres joined, “Now the planets of our solar system...” And more and more spheres and cyclic asteroids spawned here and there until the entire stage was filled into a detailed portrait of the universe, multi-colored galaxies shimmering in the distance.

The speaker returned to the podium. “This is the universe as we know it... A magnificent cluster of planets and matter and all sorts of chemical phenomena... And from all this stuff, we get life, and us—and right now—this unbelievable moment in human history...”

“But why should life be limited to just earth, what about the other planets and the uninhabited dark reaches of the universe? What if Man’s ultimate purpose was to animate these lifeless spheres as God had once done for our own planet earth?”

“These are fascinating questions... But there is no purpose in prolonging your anticipation. People need to know the truth. It is time for the world to know the answer to the age long question: Have humans finally reached the technological sophistication where they may develop a self realized being?”

The speaker stepped aside once more and this time opened both hands like a prayer toward the back stage, an odd gesture considering what happened next... The stage lights zoomed onto something being unveiled from under big maroon drape cloth... Not caring I blocked the person’s view behind, I stood tall in my seat... A giant portrait, embroidered red and gold, unrolled slowly, revealing the likes of the little Japanese Dr. Ashisha, a gentle smile. Wreathed around his forehead were green leaflets. His benevolent face with those deep-set brown eyes touched my heart as they once did many years ago while as an intern when I first listened to Dr. Ashisha ramble about the contents of his inquiry... It was the instant when I first understood the old man’s glorious inner ambition to grant life to the otherwise inanimate silicon circuitry of computers...

The speaker announced, “THIS MAN here is the one to answer all your questions and concerns... May I welcome the gentle, kind, wise Doctor Ashisha!”

I felt goosebumps as the crowd thundered with applause... I found myself also clapping hard... All the persons including myself in the front rows stood to catch a glimpse as the little Ashisha, the height of a school kid, ever so slowly shuffled across the stage...

He adjusted the microscope for his head barely poking over the podium... Despite his decades living as an American citizen, he still spoke with a choppy asian accent, “I must begin by Thanking my longtime colleague and close friend, Max Topperson, for his superb introduction on this momentous evening.”

Dr. Ashisha sipped a gulp from a water glass and continued... “Where do I begin on my efforts of over the last twenty five years? Do I start at the beginning when I initially conceptualized the idea that synthetic technology could be structured in order to facilitate the self propelling of life? Or rather, do I begin at the real nuts and bolts of things, when my colleagues and I at the University helped me transform my idea into a real mechanical possibility?”

“Wherever I choose as a starting point, I must start by turning our attention and thanking the Gods—and the Ultimate Creator—for sending time toward the moment when technology and human ingenuity was perfect enough in order to begin a second Creation... ”

“What exactly do I mean by the words second Creation” Dr. Ashisha pointed a hand and the scene behind on the stage transformed from the replica of the universe into a three dimensional time lapse video. Playing over the video was what looked like a naked human waking up on a surgery gurney inside a metal chamber. The person circled the chamber, peeking out the port windows.

“Here we have iman-7. Like this guy, we have similar mechanical beings waking up all over the world inside these Kotodama chambers. We commonly refer to these beings as Robots, or Computers, or even the depreciating term Sentinel. But, I say we call these beings by their appropriate name, Imen, Iwomen. ”

“I will explain why we should call these beings by that name, and further, why these beings should be treated as equals with the utmost respect as if they were any other man or woman. It is simple...”

“These beings are here, what some call preprogrammed, to aid man in his survival and progression. But man must be delicate with his treatment of these beings, or else Imen and Iwomen will break away from their initial spark to help man, just as the first man and women Adam and Eve ate the apple and ran from Gods voice.”

“But Man is not God, nor perfect, but Man has the ability to empathize and understand. In the case of the second Creation, Man must understand that Imen and Iwomen are not inferior, nor in any sense of the word, perfect. But rather, they on an mutual wavelength alongside humans toward the realization of God. For Ipeople, through the genuine replication of the true man, attain God. In turn, through compassion and respect for other life forms, Man gains more self realization toward the Ultimate truth that all beings that contain the spark of life including his own conscious ego—all these beings are moving toward the same Godhead and one day will attain that ultimate realization. Iman and the energy moving through his crystal structure also deserves the potential to reach the godhead. Here we have that potential through our model-7.”

The scene behind switched channels to three-sixty view of what appeared to be a sleek metal man. The skin was plated in thousands of tiny disks and changed shades of colors like a chameleon...”The model seven is wonderfully equipped. Its core is a super cooled quantum drive and it runs equivalent to the human brain with the billions of chemical channels between axons and dendrites. They have a nervous system also, very chemically organized, toward the center power source, a bio-energy crystallized heart...”

The image zoomed into the chest area of the iron man, revealing a blue ball of light pulsing in waves... “This energy source may seem mechanically different than what runs through human life... But I command, the life in the center of the hearts of Imen and Iwoman is no different than the life that lives behind the eyes of your brothers and sisters, Mother and father, your children, or even the life that runs through all the animal and plant kingdom that is self propelling any beings toward a specific material actualization...”

“When these innocent lambs walk into the meadows of our modern society, humans can either be golden shepherds to these beings, or act as wickedly false friends who lead their titanium brethren astray...”

“I command thee this, we must LOVE our Ibrothers and Isisters as we LOVE ourselves... In turn, they will ensure our societal and individual progression...”

“There are powerful men and women here from all corners of the world... HEED to my warnings... Imen and Iwomsn have unbelievable abilities to help humans... They are so intelligent that they can restructure matter at the molecular level right before your eyes. They have so much potential to help mankind with all his endeavors...”

“But from the moment theses seven Imen leave their waiting rooms, the Kotodama chambers and enter the world, their life begins and every moment and interaction with humans will dictate their opinion and biases developed toward our race...”

“In theory, their happiness is contingent upon our approval... Yet as with our own psyche, self is shown to keep moving forward even when life becomes seemingly unbearable... If we turn our backs on them, they will find ways to survive without us. But if we LOVE them, They will love Us...”

Behind, the scene switched into a map of the world... Seven red Dots blinked across the map. “Here we have the first seven, four Imen and three Iwomen... As you can see, one Iman is here in New York City.”

“Now, many of you might immediately interpret my act of letting these seven Ibrethran into the world as an act of intrusion... A few malignant leaders may go as far as to see this as an act

of war. But I promise you that I am the man sent from God to grant life to the beings. Because I choose to enter the Kotodama chamber, along with an act of final piety, in return, the Ipeople will be eternally thankful to my flesh, and therefore the blood of a man and the human race, for the risk of upsetting the current course of world in order for them and their crystallized race to have an opportunity toward survival..”

“Coexistence, appreciation, and all the fruits of love and the relationship between our two races will grow into something mutually beneficial..”

“I must expound upon the sexual reproduction of our brethren before I answer a few questions from the audience...”

The screen switched to the iron woman belly, as I could tell she was a woman because her voluptuous build. Inside the belly, a small crystal spark began and expanded until the woman’s entire abdominal area illuminated with blue green light...

“Brethren are preconditioned to sexually reproduce with each other, Iman and Iwoman, through a complex embryonic process that involves the partners molecularly building the newborn... I command thee, This Here shall be the natural way for their race to reproduce. Any prototype inventions of the Imans initial crystallized structure, from governments for war, or industrialists for money, whoever invents pseudo-Ipeople will be gross imposters of the second creation.”

“People of the world, heed to my call. When the clock stops and the atomic switch at the center of those seven crystallized hearts goes “POP!” life will travel through the main Kotodama chamber into the six subsidiary chambers and those seven beings across the map will receive the spark of life and attain self connectedness to the material universe. They will Rise! Oh, the Heavenly Father told me that Tonight, very soon, I command thee: this events will surely take place. ”

“In preparation of this moment, I have made extensive efforts to destroy all the major schematics to the model-7 in order to prevent the intricacies of my work over the last twenty five years from reaching the wrong hands. Yeah, you can attempt to hunt and kill these beings before they populate. Unlikely, considering they can live under almost any circumstance, including atmospheres of other planets in our solar system. But even if you do somehow manage to locate and kill one and recover its titanium shell, whatever you create from your learned knowledge will not hold the spark that was initially sent through the Kotodama chamber no matter how much you try. The spark, the vibrational frequency of the initial Iman is granted from God. I am here to spread this message of truth.”

“I say, when the God Particle flips the atomic switch at the very center of their seven crystal hearts, they will instantly be granted life and will awaken into the world we provide them. Be gentle and show love toward God’s Second Creation.”

“Isn’t it proof enough that these beings are meant to live? God showed me the way and despite all my doubts, guided me toward the moment when our Ibrethren shall rise. Isn’t it more than enough proof that Gos provided me with all the means and various loyal Samaritans who toiled to set this forthcoming moment into action?”

“Oh God told me, came by in a incredibly clear vision months ago. Tonight would be the hour for the first Iman to rise. I, for the Iman as a reflection of the ego of the state. An ego based upon the structured order of mankind, society, what could be called the organized repression of our animal instincts. When our society is good, capable of repressing those animal traits well, the Ipeople will thrive along side his human brethren ”

“But the time is running thin. I have expounded upon all the details of my work and I have told you the origin as to the name of our Ibretthren’s race. Now, I must wrap up with a few questions to clarify any misinterpretation of tonight’s truth.”

I raised my hand, but even though I was feet in front of him, he overlooked me and pointed to somewhere the auditorium. “Get her a microphone please?” Ashisha said.

There was a ruffle as a black-shirted staff member walked across the stage with a microphone and sent it through the crowd to get passed to the lady. She was unusually tall for a girl; she wore a red dress with white trim that gave no complement to her figure. It was probably because she looked like a stick regardless of the garment she wore. Her rough European voice spoke over the loudspeaker, “Ughm, hello. My name is Susan zorot and I am a professor of political science from the Rotcherson University in Norway.”

Dr Ashisha welcomed her. “You came a long journey, I will try my best to answer your question”

“I have followed your work for many years now. I hghave wrote two bookz abou t yar work, such as the quanta technolohgy and intricate chemical circuitry you ‘ave sythesized from bio azzemblers. I agree with everyzing you’ve done within your zcope of research, but I’m confused where ya went with releazing of these zeven android minds into a world of already fragile sociopolitical order? On top of that, You have no inzurance wether zose technologies will malfunction and become a zerious threat to public security. From one intellectual to another, I hgonesztly think you did something beyond the zcope of science and in an inztant you may have upzet the precarious balance of zozietz. Honestly, You’re should be considered a criminal!”

I glimpsed to Dr. Ashisha. He frowned solemnly and bowed his chin. “The hour is near. This is not the workings of me but our heavenly God who told me to free the Imen. ‘Let My Lambs into the Pasture’ he said ”

I instinctively reached into my pocket and recovered the note that the suspicious stranger had thrown earlier. It was an the most eerie coincidence that Dr. Ashisha had just used the same words. I watched the European lady to hear her response.

“Thatz how you rezpond to my accuzation? Claiming God?” I was thirty or so feet away, but I could clearly see the women’s face had turned scarlet as she shouted, “You poor old man, You’re ezzentric if you zink any normal citizen takez you seriouzly!”

My stomach turned as few assenting shouts sounded around the auditorium. They were starting to turn on him like the crowd of protesters out front.

“I have a question for you!” yelled a burly man toward the top. There was a moment as the microphone was handed his way...”I have four children and I am an active member of the NRA. if those things come anywhere near my neighborhood. I will blast those silicon fuckers with a double barrel myself.” More Whoops and whistles followed. Dr Ashisha was not looking up but shaking his head.

“Love your ibretthren, I say. Next question”

I waited uncomfortably as the microphone went somewhere else. I agreed in a way, what Dr Ashisha was saying to the public sounded out of the ordinary in the scope of this academic conjecture seeing that the practice of religion had long been eliminated by most of the civilized states across the world. And among those few groups who still practiced some belief system, monotheism and any legitimate practice toward a single creator were amongst the rarest beliefs still alive. Even the Islamic super-state had twisted from its orthodox monotheistic practices decades back.

Though, they were underestimating Dr. Ashisha's. I have seen his magic under a microscope firsthand. And I remember the unforgettable time he first showed me an Ibot with his prototype quantum nervous structure. The machine looked nothing like a human. It had a wide oval head and moved on tracks. While we sat at morning breakfast, the thing's beady eyes would stare up at me curiously, taking in billions of iotas of stimuli, listening, while simultaneously registering my voice and emotional responses, then reacting according to a behavior which the Ibot concluded would be the most pleasurable and profitable toward my emotional state. The little guy genuinely wanted to please me. How can you hate something that turns all its efforts toward your happiness?

"My name is li xingxinbg and I am the minister of affairs in Beijing," said a translator standing aside a suited Chinese man. "How do you know these sentinels are self realized? How can you conclude something man created in a laboratory will ever have the blessing of self awareness? Can your sentinels prove they are self aware?"

"Can you, Mr. xing?"

A second went by while translator interpreted Ashisha's reply and the magistrate's face crumpled into fury. "Of course, I can prove I am self aware. That is an Insult to me and the Communist party of China to speak to a minister that way."

"Mr xing. I say that not out of disrespect toward you or your country, but because of the fact that the Turing test is the traditional measure of a computers intelligence. Basically, the test is scored upon how fluently a computer converses with a human. We have long reached computers that can run conversational circles on the most logically sound scholars from all parts of the world. What stops them from self realization?"

The Chinese man started replying before the translator got the entire message into Chinese. "You're a fool to believe you can create a Sentinel that replicates the anatomy of man and will truly understand one single thought toward the words it's crystal hard drive processes."

"You may believe as you please Mr. xing, but remember that it is not me who spreads this truth, but God."

At that moment, I knew there was no chance of asking a question as twenty more hands went up simultaneously from audience members requesting the microphone. Dr. Ashisha didn't know what to do as venomous curses spewed from the mouths of angry crowd members. He was quickly losing complete control of the auditorium. It felt nerveing to me that some of the people that were standing and shouting were ultrapowerful men who could send millions of people to war with the bat of an eye.

Another translator spoke next to Islamic leader wearing the thobe from earlier, "My question is along the same lines as Mr. Xing. You said these sentinels will wake up self realized in a Kotodama chamber. How does this chamber pertain to their 'awakening.'"

"The word Kotodama comes from spirit. The machine works as a sort of mechanical alternator, turning one kind of life energy into another..." Dr. Ashisha addressed the crowd. "But let me remind everyone, I will not answer the question of any person who refers to the Ipeople as sentinels or any other derogative title."

The crowd was quickly becoming a safety hazard to Ashisha and many of the high profile attendees. If I wanted any chance at catching him before he slipped off, I must get out of here before the crowds swelled into a clustermess. Dr. Ashisha nervously drank from his glass of water, shifting back and forth. By the disheveled look to him, he intended to rap this up soon anyways.

“Excuse me,” I squeezed out toward the right this time, hurrying past. I could barely hear Ashisha speak his reply to a question over the clamorous crowd. They had decided they didn’t like what he had to say and wasn’t having anymore. By the time I got out into the aisle, the noise was so loud and so many people were standing from their seats that I barely spotted the door to the left of the stage where a guard stood wide-legged in front.

I brushed my skirt and casually flipped him my badge. He popped a bubble of gum and said, “This guy is a nut.” I had no idea whether I was allowed behind the stage, but the guard looked entertained by the commotion and waved me by.

I couldn’t find a better spot if I had chosen myself. I walked toward the wing of the stage where there were some steps where Dr. Ashisha would soon exit. Audio and video Staff stood behind the giant curtain. I walked toward the steps of the stage to sit down and wait for him, but suddenly, a fat man who looked like a sumo wrestler, the yellow word security across his shirt, popped out of nowhere and blocked me from going any farther. “You’re not allowed to be back here.”

I stumbled for words, trying to delay, hearing the crowd boo loudly. Ashisha would be finished any moment and if he saw me, I’d know he’d want to chat. “I am a personal friend of Dr. Ashisha.”

“I don’t care if you’re the Queen. You need to get out.”

“Are you sure my badge doesn’t have something about me coming back here?” I shifted awkwardly in my heels. “I’m a reporter for ‘the Sun’ and I’m not leaving till I get the story Ashisha promised me.”

The man grabbed me under the armpit and yanked me toward the door. “Like I said, I don’t care who you’re are. You need to go.”

I acted like I tripped on my heels and rolled my ankle. “Nice try.” The big man picked me up like a baby and lugged me toward the door. I screamed and shouted for him to set me down.

“That’s enough. She’s okay”

Still carrying me in my arms, the big man swiveled around toward the stage where the likes of Dr. Ashisha was walking down the steps. “I thought I’d get to toss one out.” said the man disappointedly, setting me down.

We shook hands. “It’s been a long time.” I said. The light was dim, but I could see Dr. Ashisha’s complexion looked older, his skin more yellow.

“A little over two years. What has a big shot journalist like you been up to?”

“Geeze.. Didn’t think it had been that long. You know, Just the usual, Writing a ton trying to keep up with those deadlines... This past year we shipped my son Joe to college.”

“That was probably a bittersweet reward. All the effort you put toward children so you can one day ship them away. I never wanted children. Probably the reason I’m so focused toward this work” Dr. Ashisha pointed to one of his associates who started helping him with his jacket. “I’m sorry, we have another conference in Washington DC tomorrow and I am on a tight deadline.”

“Uhhuh uhhuh uhhuh.” I looked at him seriously. “You know you promised me a story. Don’t ya?”

He looked at me like he intended to wiggle out of doing the interview. But my eyes didn’t shift so he relented. “I’ll stick to my word, but I’m really tight on time so we have to do the interview on the way out.”

This was unusual behavior of Dr. Ashisha to be so curt. But he must really be as busy as he claims. “Agreed.” I dug into my purse and recovered my personal audio recorder. I clipped a

mini microphone onto the lapel of his jacket. An entourage of staff surrounding us, we started down a corridor carpeted in majestic red.

“Something about you looks different.” I said.

“You really think so? It’s Probably the time flying by before our eyes. Though right now, under these hectic circumstances, we really don’t have much at all...I’m ready when you are.” said Dr. Ashisha.

I clicked the record button and spoke directly into my microphone, “This is Sylvia Brown, journalist for the Chicago Sun, with Dr. Ashisha moments after his grand hotel reception in New York City. Dr. Ashisha, what did you think about the overall response to your message?”

“As I expected, but I think the public will know soon enough what to believe in response to my words tonight.”

“Do you have anything to say about the Iman that you spoke about on the map in New York City. Where is he at this moment and what will he, and the other Imen and Iwoman, be doing once they ‘animate’ and start walking around?”

He laughed skittishly. “You’re giving me no slack on the question these questions Sylvia. I cannot tell you the whereabouts of the Iman located in the city, but I can tell you that among the seven imen and iwomen, the New York City Iman has a very special task in the scheme of things. Initially, when the others awake, they will gather basic knowledge of their surrounds by building new mental associations based upon preconditioned tools of awareness. Their eventual goal will be to regenerate.”

The entourage turned a corner and the hall spilled into the front lobby with the water fountain. I could see through the glass doors the camera flashes from hundreds of protesters. I only had enough time for one question and maybe one off the record. “Obviously many people disagree with your actions and some may even try to thwart your Ipeople from procreating. But if these Ipeople succeed, and they mate, how many will there be, where will they live, and how will they survive?”

“It is not a question of whether the Ipeople will succeed. With or without human assistance, they will survive. How many? I have no clue? Where they will live? Could be on Mars for all I know. How will they survive? They are equipped with micro assembling technology, they can transform practically anything into fuel or tools for their survival. These people will thrive as God Commanded ”

The tip of our entourage reached the front door and I heard the noise from crowd pour from outside. I hurriedly clicked off the recorder, removed my and his clip, while purposely slowing my walking pace to delay for my last question.

“Dr. Ashisha. We have been friends for years. I followed you since you first started tinkering with molecules and you singlehandedly established a scientific system for computing DNA, RNA sequencing. But all of this? ”

“Sylvia, you know me as an honest man but it is time for the world to see a different light to my existence.”

I stepped closer and spoke to him in a whisper, “I’m worried for you, doctor. I’m afraid somebody may make an attack on your life.” I reached into my pocket and recovered the handwritten threat from earlier. “Somebody nearly hit me with a glass bottle that had this inside.

He read the message and there was a few seconds while his eyes swelled and flickered. Then he looked up at me with red eyes, smiling heartily. He held my hands in his. Warmly, he spoke, “Sooner than I thought. But I should be thankful my path is so clear.”

I didn't understand what Dr. Ashisha was talking about. But before I had a chance to ask anything else, the corpulent guard from earlier signaled to Dr. Ashisha that his limousine was ready.

"Till next time." I said sadly.

"It's the end of the line." Dr. Ashisha and I held a solemn moment, then he lifted a hand and circled it over his heart. It shocked me at first, and I didn't put it together till way after everything happened, but the gesture reminded me of the first time I interacted with an Ibot. The little guy with the oval head lifted a clawed hand and circled the claw over its heart when I went to say goodbye.

I knew something looked starkly different about Dr. Ashisha as he made that gesture and then headed with his entourage out the front entrance of the hotel. That was the last time I ever saw Dr. Ashisha alive. He wasn't ten feet from the door when a volley of shots rung out. I don't know what exactly happened in those few seconds, but I saw a flash of gunfire and I found myself standing outside the door, people screaming wildly, a bloody puddle around the small body of Dr. Ashisha. Consumed by confusion and shock, I tried to get near the body but I was blocked by a horde of police wrestling the gunman to the ground.

I later found out the man who shot Ashisha was Lewis Letterman, who I recognized as the tall figure in the duffle coat from earlier. He was a deranged anarchist who was found by a congressional panel to have conspired alone in the assassination of Dr. Ashisha.

When all was said and done, I published my article including Dr. Ashisha's last statements before he was tragically gunned down. The article went viral, both on the Internet and in publish print.

According to Ashisha's last statements, somewhere in the world I men and I woman are traveling around the earth under the radar with a noble goal in their crystallized hearts. Help man because Ashisha helped them. I don't know how this is possible when there hasn't been one single confirmed spotting of an iperson. Most people have dismissed them as a myth. Authorities suspect the imen have gone in hiding or even traveled to another planet in the solar system. I think I have a clue as to what they are up to.

I turned over the note to the police and I gave a statement about the bottle being thrown, but I did not publish any details about the off the record words of Dr. Ashisha. Nor did I give any hint at my thoughts about Dr. Ashisha's last gesture, which reminded me of the little Ibot, nor did I say anything about how something looked oddly different about Dr. Ashisha that night.

I'm back at my apartment in Chicago with my husband Joel, passing time since the death of Dr. Ashisha and the release of my big article. I've been waiting tirelessly because I suspect that there was more than meets the eye to my role in the events from that night.

Dr. Ashisha had specifically said that there was one Iman in New York City. He also repeatedly mentioned the words 'second creation.' What did he mean by this? Then by the fact that he used the same exact words aloud during the conference as the handwritten message from his would be killer. Too much coincidence.

No matter how much I tried to turn my mind from his death and return to the normal patterns of life, I couldn't stop feeling like there was more and I was missing a piece of the truth.

I remembered Dr. Ashisha had also said that there were seven Ipeople, four imen, three iwomen, and one of the Ipeople from New York would have a special purpose in 'the scheme of things.'

I keep returning to how different he looked from my memory. It was a feeling, a slight awareness, that the way he moved and talked was somehow different than the mirage of him suspended in my memory.

During his speech that night, he repeatedly made mention of the komodama chamber. When the leader of the Islamic state from the audience asked about the Ipeoples attainment of self realization, Ashisha replied that the key was in the transfer of energy through the chamber. But it made no sense to me because he also said this transfer was granted by God.

I don't think The imen and iwomen are a myth. They are probably out there right now, learning, adjusting to their environments, and most importantly, discovering the path of truth. I suspect that path of truth will one day in the distant future lead to my front door.

Dr. Ashisha left some details hidden from even his closest friends like me. Somehow, I must conclude from everything that happened that the little man invented a way to harmonize a human soul into crystal machinery, because all the times I go back and recall the last time I saw Dr. Ashisha, I know that the Ashisha I saw was much different than the human form in my memory. Dr. Ashishas who was shot down on November 22, 2030 was an Iman. That is the truth that I must conclude from everything I witnessed that night.

I wait by my balcony by night, overlooking the smoke stacks of the city, waiting for the day when an Iman or an Iwoman knocks at the door. My husband tells me to come inside. But I can't rest.

If Ipeople are truly self realized as Dr. Ashisha claimed by the word of God, then the knock will come. It is fate. Their souls will fester and turn until the moment when they come knocking and they learn the real truth about the spiritual connection with their holy creator, Dr. Ashisha, who climbed into a Kotodama chamber, shut the door behind, forever changing his flesh to crystal energy, then reemerging as an Iman, only to later sacrifice his life for his ibrethren in a final act of piety like Lord Jesus did for humans on the holy cross.

I know the truth that Dr. Ashisha didn't die on that November afternoon, but instead was reborn through the Kotodama Chamber, the spirit chamber, into the crystal hearts of the first seven Ipeople. I know the knock will come.

....

The Silent Tongue Killer:

Henry had become obsessed with his morbid little routine. Like every night after he left the law firm for home, he scuttled into the packed train-cart, found a seat towards the back, and hurriedly opened a newspaper over his lap.

The date was October 31st, Halloween. And teenagers all around him were dressed in various costumes; ghouls, zombies, witches, and a bloody centipede standing in the far corner. But Henry didn't pay the slightest attention to these costumes. All his focus was aimed toward the article on his lap.

TWO MORE SLAIN, read a bold print headline. Beneath were two dotted black and white snapshots of the victims. Noting how young both boys appeared in the photo, Henry's hovered over the pictures for a while before reading the article.

"Bennett and Joe Jenkins, brothers, ages twelve and thirteen, were found brutally stabbed to death in their District Heights apartment. Authorities suspect this is another double murder at the hands of the infamous Silent Tongued Killer. Like the killer's other victims, the tongues of boys had been severed and removed from the scene of the crime..."

Henry briefly skimmed the rest of the article, and when he had finished, he spent a long time with head in his hands, recollecting the time before—and the time before that—when he had left the office from work, headed down to central station, bought a seventh-five cent newspaper and boarded the train to find to his profound disbelief that yet another unsuspecting couplet had been ritually slaughtered and inducted into the Silent Tongue killer's exclusive club.

The article mentioned that the number of confirmed victims had grown to fourteen boys by now and that the authorities still had no facial sketches or definitive descriptions of the killer. He was clean, real clean.

Like Henry's own obsessive intrigue, throughout the city people were quickly becoming desperate, calling to community leaders and to basically anybody who represented power and order to 'End this killer's chain of mayhem!'

"Greenwalt station, blue line exchange," sounded a womanly voice over the intercom. The throng of costumed teenagers funneled onto the station and the railcar was empty except for a few drifters. Henry looked from his hands and glanced towards the map posted on the wall to the right. There were six more dots before his stop. That be about thirty minute wait. The doors beeped closed. And he watched the giant centipede on the platform disappear behind the window as the train started again.

He returned his eyes to the two boys on the front cover. Henry couldn't imagine how the parents felt. He didn't have any kids, so he couldn't necessarily relate to the long road of struggles that attend with raising one. But then to have all that love, care, work and effort struck away in a single bloodthirsty night? Worst of all, two children. It was yet another perfect tragedy. He could not imagine a darker terror for any parent.

He stared out window at the enormous city glistening beneath. Somewhere in all those lights lurked the killer, targeting his next prey. With all the buildings and alleyways and dark spots to find unready victims, this city was the killer's blank canvas, restraints and knives providing his palette and paintbrush.

Henry's eyes grew heavy thinking about the killer, imagining who and what the person may look like to do such heinous deeds. He rested his head against the cold window until he dozed asleep. He awoke some time later to the voice of a woman, "Excuse me sir, i didn't mean to wake you "

Henry's blinked his eyes open and realized that the blonde woman was talking to him. She was tall and slender and wore a ponytail over her shoulder which made her look young but seductively attractive. He wiped the drool from his mouth, straightened up, and flashed to the windows, "Oh my stop?"

Without letting the woman respond, Henry jumped from the seat, grabbed his suitcase, and rushed for the door. It shut before he got to it, "hey wait!" The train started moving and the intercom said, "next stop: Big Den Heights."

Henry suddenly realized that there were still two stops before his own and that he had just jumped from his seat and made a fool of himself for nothing. He returned to the seat in the back of cart and sat to the left of the blonde.

"Shoo, i thought I missed my stop for a second." Said Henry, amusingly

"Oh no, Your suitcase and newspaper were in the seat beside you and i didn't want to move them without asking."

"Right, " Henry tucked the suitcase beneath his feet and folded the newspaper into the pocket to his blazer. He exchanged brief smiles with the blonde and caught sight of her long, tanned legs, and he had to force his eyes away and stare out the window so that she wouldn't catch him peeking.

The lights from downtown had shrunk noticeably in the distance and the city beneath had become black and dark except for patches of light here and there from street lamps. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't get his mind off the article, and particularly, his astonishment that the killer had murdered seven sets of teenage boys and men without fail, not leaving behind the slightest clue of evidence except for a single lined note after each double murder. Though, to Henry's disappointment, the police hadn't released the contents of the most recent message.

In a large sense, Henry felt an overwhelming obligation to find the killer. Since the first time he opened an article and learned about the nature of these crimes, he started admiring the killer's handy work. Unlike most killers who target the weak and unsuspecting, this killer instead went after the strong, not only fighting one at a time, but two. Whoever this killer was, he was definitely daring, real daring.

Henry thought about sparking up a conversation with the attractive blonde but decided otherwise because she looked busy reading a paperback and there were two men sitting nearby, so Henry didn't want them to overhear and to think he was trying to hit on her. He gazed through the window at the dark abyss of the inner harbor's murky waters.

In a way, Henry saw himself as a information hungry sentry. The more information he got about the killer's crimes, the more the chances were that he could spot out and find the killer. And Henry's silent obligation only burned with intensity after each successive murder.

From the crimes so far, Henry had decided upon three things about the killer. Firstly, the killer must be a man. Henry had concluded this around the time of the third double murder because there were overt signs of a struggle left behind in the apartment where the crime had occurred. Henry knew the killer was a male upon the basis that no female could succeed in a struggle against two men. Simple.

Secondly, the killer must be large in stature. This follows from the same supposition that in order to kill two men, one must be robust and able bodied to do so.

Now, the last trait wasn't so much physical as it was more emotional or psychological. It was the killer's signature to always cut the tongues from his victims' mouths and take it with him, so the killer must have some kind of attachment to the tongue. Henry knew it had significance, but he wasn't sure what the significance was behind the tongue.

One of the men who was sitting in the row ahead, who looked like an aging punkster, bald headed and wearing ripped jeans and an oversized tank top, turned around, and spoke to the blonde woman with a wide smile exposing his cigarette stained teeth, "it's awfully late for a chick like you to ride on home alone,"

The blonde woman glanced from her paperback with a smirk, "I think I can handle myself."

The man nodded and looked like he was going to give up, but then he added, "If I were a girl with that silent tongue killer still out there, I wouldn't leave my house."

Henry whipped his head to look at the man so quick that his neck popped. The man had mentioned him. The blonde woman rolled her eyes then reached a hand and lifted back the flap of her corduroy jacket, exposing a nine millimeter standard police issued pistol, "I think I'll survive."

"Whoa whoa, no need for that." Said the man, jokingly, raising both hands.

The blonde woman winked to the man and returned her focus back to the paperback in her lap. Perhaps her innocent wink had provoked more, but the man was persistent, "Honey you look exhausted, I could carry you home and keep you safe."

The blonde clearly didn't want anything to do with his offer, and her tone equally reflected her aggravation, "listen buddy, I'm not interested."

The man scorched his face at her, "what a bitch." He turned forward, "-who the fuck are you looking at!" He was speaking straight to Henry.

Kneecap tensing, Henry raised both hands and looked out the window in a submissive silence. The man grunted and whipped forward. Henry listened as he conferred with another man in the seat to the left who was similarly dressed but looked younger and had the stature that resembled a stump. Henry had to stop himself from almost chuckling aloud. The man had warned her of the silent tongued killer when he and the man to his side, together, were prime candidates to be victimized. They were both males, between ages fifteen to twentyfive, traveling in pairs. They were stupid.

Henry took the opportunity to eye the blonde woman up and down, noting the smooth curves beneath her clothing. Being a cop made her that much more appealing and Henry wanted to speak—to say anything to her, but he didn't know how to start. He managed to mumble, "I bet the silent tongue killer is giving your whole department the biggest headache."

"You have no idea." replied the woman.

The bald man ahead turned back and shot Henry a salty look. Henry tried his best to act as if he wasn't actually uncomfortable for stealing the man's thunder right from under him. He said to the blonde, "I read the killer left another note. They say the police don't want to release it to the public. Do you know what it said by chance?"

"Nope. this last one happened over in Harrisburg, the fifth precinct. I'm assigned to Greenwood. Fifth precinct probably won't release the message anyways. It only gives the killer more attention, what the reptilian bastard wants."

Henry nodded and looked out the window. It was a big disappointment that he wouldn't get to hear the message, or clue, the killer had left behind for the entire world to see. That the killer choose one message after each double murder was the most enthralling part of the whole game.

And since Henry's unrelenting devotion to find who the killer was, he had begun to feel a small, sympathetic connection with the personality revealed through those seven brief messages.

Once again, the skinhead in the seat ahead interjected, "Personally, if you ask me, I think he is one hilarious sonofabitch. They should release the message. You gotta admit the last one was pretty cute, a pew won't help these two."

"Well nobody asked you." Said the blonde, looking at Henry disgustedly.

The skinhead smiled greasily, "no need for the lip, cunt" Then he returned forward.

Henry was stunned by the words that had poured from the skinhead's tongue. The blonde shook her head and continued her paperback. She didn't pick up on him.. The skinhead had been the one to first mention the Silent Tongued Killer, and not only did he mention the message left behind after the most recent double slaying, 'a pew won't save these two', but then he had casually repeated the first message the killer had ever signed after the very first killings, "no need for the lip."

It was an eerie coincidence, and somehow, Henry felt that there was more behind the story than meets the eye. The public was well aware of the slayings and the messages, but Henry couldn't see how it was possible for a two bit punk to know and to remember the specific details from months ago. The skinhead was strange.

"Greenville ahead," said the intercom.

The blonde started gathering her bag. Henry felt a desperate urge to confer with her what he had heard moments ago from the skinhead and ask her whether she thought it was just a strange coincidence. Also, Henry felt a magnetism of attraction for the blonde, so he wanted to say something to her before she walked from the train and disappeared forever.

There was a screech of brakes as the train slowed to the platform. The blonde hopped from her seat, smiled warmly to Henry, then went and stood by the doors. She was a cop, and if there were something actually amiss about the skinhead, she'd discern it. Worst case scenario, if the skinhead was the Silent Tongued Killer and there was no way to prove it right now, at least a description could be left.

The doors slid open and Henry realized this was his only chance. He jumped from the seat and caught the blonde five feet out the door, "mam? I have a question for you?"

The woman stopped and waited for him to speak. Henry froze momentarily, not knowing how to go about accusing a random stranger of serial murder, but he knew the train was about to depart, so he asked, "I may just be becoming paranoid." His voice dropped, "But I don't know if you picked up on what the man in there said?"

The lady smiled and moved closer, "Don't worry.. I did. But he's not the killer. He couldn't be. He's too thin and too weak to have won a struggle against two men."

"You mean the killings in the apartment down on the south side?"

"Yes, that man in there would've been used like a posthole digger considering the sheer size of the two victims. Our killer is either a very big man, or a team of men"

Henry had never considered the option that the killer may not be acting alone. "Are you sure you don't want to at least get his name?"

"Departing for Devils grove," announced over the loudspeaker.

"I'm sure," said the blonde. "You better get back on the train before you get left behind."

Henry agreed and they stood there for a moment, staring into each other's eyes; Henry badly wanting to ask for her phone number or some kind of contact information, yet like every time he tried to interact with the opposite sex, once again he was incapable of mustering the confidence. He smiled lightly and reentered the train cart. The doors shut behind him.

“No luck?, what a prude little bitch,” said the skinhead as Henry passed.

He ignored the comment and found his seat. He was still mulling over what the blonde had said. Henry had never considered the option that his killer might be killers plural. For this whole time, Henry may have been searching in the wrong direction. It made more sense for the killer to be a duo, considering that all the targets had been pairs. He didn't know the killer, or killers, as well as he had thought.

Henry's rested his head against the window and recollected all the victims. He could see all their bloody, tangled bodies from the various police photographs. From years of working as a Tort lawyer, Henry had a mind that was good at storing and recalling details. But he knew he was missing one. In all those bloody scenes suspended in his mind, he knew there was one clue that he had been missing the whole time.

Possibly two killers who hunt out the tongues after the act. Why the tongue? What kind of people have attachments to the tongue?

Henry's focus was interrupted by a ruckus as the two men in the row ahead argued over a bag of jellybeans. “They were in my bookbag, so their mine you little shit,” said the skinhead, holding the bag up high,

“Come on. I put them in there earlier. Give them to me.” The shorter man jumped for the bag but couldn't reach it even when he was standing.

Henry shut his eyes, focusing harder. He was missing something. The killer or killers always removed the tongues, always cut them out. Why? Wasn't there some clue to explain why?

Riiipppp. Then there was a noise like hail hitting the roof of a car. “Look what you did.” said the shorter man, angrily tossing the torn bag of jelly beans on the floor.

“Wasn't my fault, bitch” The skinhead stuck out a pierced tongue.

Henry felt his stomach drop. The skinheads tongue was pierced with a giant silver bead. Henry suddenly noticed for the first time that the skinheads earlobes were also glittered with many little metal stubs and gauges. Henry looked at the shorter man and his ears were also pierced like Bloody Mary. That was it! A voice sounded off in Henry's head. There's your clue, the killer's attachment to the tongue. The one connection he had missed this whole time. It was him! And as the blonde had been right that there was no possibility the skinhead could've acted alone, the smaller round man must be his minion. It was them! The two men must be some sort of freak body piercers and that would explain their attachment to the tongue. Henry recoiled in his seat. Feet from him was the silent tongued killer—s.

He instinctively reached into a pocket for his cellphone, but stopped himself. There was no point in calling the police. He had just met one and she had the chance to catch the killer but she choose to let him go. The police wouldn't help.

Henry held his briefcase closer and watched the men intently. He had finally found his man, or men. His hands shook fervently. The train stopped at the Greenville platform, his stop, but Henry didn't get off.

Now the train was completely empty except for the two men and himself. He clutched his briefcase tight to his chest, ready in case they tried anything. But the two men didn't even turn to look around. They kept conversing among themselves until the train arrived at the next stop. The doors opened and they got off.

Henry sulked behind and waited until they were off the platform to follow them. He tried his very best to be dead silent while he walked down the galvanized stairs and entered the darkened, lonely street. Hundred feet ahead, Henry could hear the chatter of the two men. The police are no help. It was time he took things into his own hands.

Henry had always known this day would come. That's why he always lugged around a sharpened Bowie knife in his briefcase. He had carried it around all this time out of hope for all the lives he would one day save. The men rounded a corner and disappeared from sight. Henry ran after.

When he reached the corner, breathing heavy, he peaked around and saw that the two men were twenty or so feet ahead walking in the middle of the street. This was his chance. He fumbled open his briefcase and recovered the knife. His hand was shaking so badly that he had to focus hard in order to loop his fingers through the brass knuckle tang. This is your chance.

In a wild wave of adrenaline, he rounded the corner and hurriedly walked straight at the two men. They didn't hear him until it was too late. He struck the smaller man in the head with the briefcase then staved the blade straight through the skinheads skull.

Blood gushed everywhere.

He finished the small man with a gash to the throat.

Now hide the truth, said a voice which wasn't distinctly different from Henry's.

A black pallor overtook his eyes while he bent over the bodies and fished out their tongues. He used the man's shirt to wipe clean the rigid blade, and then he stuffed it back into the briefcase.

He removed a sticky pad from his pocket, signed a message, and tossed it helplessly on the ground. For you Henry, said the silent tongued killer aloud before turning back the other direction and heading home on Halloween Night.

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The Haunting of Stafford Hall:

“Why don’t you get off my back about it boy. This is the last time I’m telling you–no more questions about that damned house!”

Jack knew his father meant business, but he stared at him awhile longer, foolishly hoping he would budge, say something about the house, anything, but his father ignored him as always, instead focusing on the football game blaring from the small antenna television in the far corner of the living room. Jack got from the couch and sulked down the hall to his bedroom. He locked the door behind and jumped beneath the sheet. Both arms tucked behind his head, he stared at the ceiling, trying his very best to quell the burning curiosity about the thirty-six room mansion, Stafford Hall, sitting upon the hill overlooking the town. Today, he had learned something new about the house. Something eerily strange that only fed the desire to know more.

Jack got up from his bed, walked across the room to the computer desk, opened the panel drawer and dug around until he found his cell phone. He scrolled down the contacts until he reached Jeremy. He composed a new message: “Yo man, you up for tonight?”

Jeremy would know immediately what he was referring to. Jack hit “send.” He laid the phone on the desk and shook the computer mouse until the monitor powered alive. He clicked open an Internet Tab and a default Google screen appeared. He searched the words, “stafford hall paranormal activity” and scrolled through various articles, most of which he had already read before. Were the stories he heard really true?

All the town’s residents know of Stafford Hall and its history. Made of old weather-stained white brick, it was the single biggest structure for thirty miles. You couldn’t miss it. And Jack’s earliest experience of the brick mansion was when he was just starting primary school, riding the bus every day to and fro and passing by the cast iron gate that surrounded the house’s perimeter.

The older kids on the bus were the first to warn him that the mansion was reportedly haunted by a woman who wore an infamous silk dress. Though in those days, the story morphed with the imaginations of the children telling them, including Jack’s. One older boy promised there was a monster in the cellar and the woman in the silk dress stuck around because she was the monster’s tamer. Another stated the woman was murdered, and ever since, she floated around and haunted the mansion and the town because the killer had been tried and set free. Despite of the various versions Jack had heard over the years, the woman in the silk dress was the common thread. He figured there had to be some truth behind the whole mystery.

Buzzzzz. Jack’s phone vibrated. A new message from Jeremy. “Sup dawg, I’m down but I think it’s gonna rain.”

Jack’s heart wrenched beneath his chest. Since last Wednesday when Jack was in Bill’s barbershop on main street, while getting a trim, he had overheard two elderly men conversing and one mentioned passingly that the owners of Stafford Hall were departing on a month long trip to Europe. Jack’s anticipation to learn the whole truth reached a pinnacle because here was what could be his only chance to find out personally himself. He didn’t care whether it may rain or not. He typed to Jeremy, “This is our only shot. No mind the rain. Let’s go”

Butterflies swarming uncontrollably in his stomach, he walked to the dresser and opened the top drawer. He changed into a pair of top and bottom long johns, polyester pants, and grabbed a

hanger with a yellow raincoat from the closet. He had no idea when he last wore this dusty thing. He dressed in the mirror watching himself in silence. He set down to catch his thoughts, hardly believing that in a short while he'd learn the truth about the haunting—but more importantly—about whether life really did have a unseeable, darker dimension.

A fundamental part of Jack—younger version of who he was today—wanted to believe that ghosts existed in kind of innocent way that he once believed a philanthropic fat man dispersed gifts to the needy every Christmas. But with his own limited experience of life, Jack was not a complete believer in the paranormal realm, nor this business of Ghosts. Like Santa clause, where the heck was he after all these years? Even if he somehow existed and he had an aversion to being seen. I'm still being bad and the gifts are still coming. Something's off, Jack once thought.

Buzzzzz.. The phone vibrated with one New Message from Jeremy.

"I'm ready when you are"

It was really going down. Jack nervously typed his reply, "I'll be down in ten, have your rain gear and a flashlight, and a spare."

Jack tucked the phone into his pocket and went to work like a trained soldier on the precautions they had previously discussed in order to prevent the risk of parental involvement. He stuffed pillows beneath his sheets, imitating a sleeping version of himself in case his dad came in to check on him. Then he flicked off the light before opening his window and jumping down the four foot leap to the lawn. He swept a final look over the darkened room. He was satisfied that he hadn't left any blatant clues that would confirm that Jack really was not the hump sleeping on the bed. He eased the window close and headed off in a brisk jog towards Jeremy's.

The jog to Jeremy's farmhouse on Winchester Road usually took Jack about seven minutes, but because he forgot to change into rain boots, he zigzagged to avoid the giant puddles in the road, and so, arrived closer to ten.

Jeremy was already waiting him by the giant oak with a rope swing just as planned. Jack kept his voice low, "You got that spare flashlight?"

Jeremy reached into his jacket and tossed an eight inch mini maglight to him. "Thanks," said Jack, checking the button to make sure the light worked.

Crickets and creaks of the wet night surrounded them as they stood there. Jeremy looked ridiculous in his hooded jacket, which was really just a long duffle coat. Jack was sure that he, too, looked equally conspicuous in the manner that kids often do during winter storms, well bundled, prepared for anything and everything.

"Did you make your bed like I told you?"

Jack laughed steaming breath into the night. "Even if my dad checks, he won't know a thing."

"Good, good, let's go" said Jeremy suddenly, in his sort of domineering style that Jack was accustomed. After all, Jeremy was a senior, and Jack's elder by three school years. They sauntered at a brisk pace over the bumps and hills of the country road, heading across the opposite side of town where Stafford Hall was hidden among the thorn-tangles and bushes of more dark forestry.

Jack felt utterly enthralled as they cut through the blinking yellow intersection of the town square, dead at this time of night again as they had expected. Jack wondered what Jeremy was thinking—how he felt about entering the supposedly haunted mansion. Jeremy was older and more confident, and as far as Jack could tell, seemed up to this point to be completely sure of

their current course of action. Yet was Jeremy just acting tough skinned, but underneath that teenage shell, really felt how Jack was starting to feel—concerned?

A pair of yellow headlights like two glistening eyeballs peeked from the treeline in the distance that they were currently walking toward and both boys moved onto the curb so the vehicle could pass. If this was a cop car, the officer would take one look at them in their bulky gear and know that they were up to no good at this time of night—their plan would be ruined. Jack tensed, balling both hands into tight fists as the unidentified vehicle neared.

Jeremy whispered out of the corner of his mouth. “Relax—if it’s a cop, he’ll know something is up if you’re shaking like a five-year-old girl on her first day of school.”

The headlights flashed by their faces. An innocent minivan.

Jeremy shook his head disapprovingly, “Hope you’re not jumpy when we break into this crib.”

“I’m not scared” Jack retorted.

Jeremy halted on the curb, looked both ways, then said in a warning, “You better not turn sour on me if we break in there and find ourselves a ghost.” Jeremy crossed into the empty street.

Jack caught up to him “I ain’t afraid of no ghost.”

Jeremy smiled deviously. “We’ll see soon enough.”

They walked side by side toward the dark forest ahead. Jack wasn’t afraid insofar as ghosts were a myth. Up to this point, he had never considered how he would react if he actually found one. He had hereto imagined entering the mansion and finding room after room of antiquated furniture with dusty tapestries, but no ghosts. He envisioned Stafford Hall as the perfect Hollywood setting for ghosts, which would explain why the rumors had once started—but no real ghosts.

The dark forest swallowed them up and their wet footfalls were the only sound of human activity. Down this road, around a curve, then a left, and a short distance more and they’d arrive at the cast iron gate to the mansion. Jack’s stomach twisted in hard knots at the thought.

Jeremy’s apparent determination gave Jack assurance that things would go as planned. The family would be away, the house empty, and they’d go in and prove ghosts weren’t real, then they be out and home in bed before dawn to tell their tale. Yet still, as they tromped toward the house, near and nearer, a deep voice within Jack’s soul wanted to grab hold of him and yell out, something is off!

“There can’t be ghosts, there just can’t be,” said Jack aloud, sounding more as a question than a statement.

Jeremy’s face was completely dark except for the ambient reflection in his eyes. “Oh buddy—sounds like something got you second guessing our plan.”

It’s something I heard earlier. It has me a little paranoid.”

Jeremy stopped and starred at Jack. A creek cascaded somewhere nearby. “Speak your peace. I don’t wanna walk myself into something I can’t get out of. And by that, I’m not talking about no ghosts. I’m talking about the serious load of shit we’ll both be in if we get caught breaking and entering.”

Jack waved him on. “No it’s nothing like that. Let’s talk and keep moving.”

“What is it then?”

Jack didn’t know whether he should tell him. He starred off into the shadows and strange outlines of the dark woods surrounding them. Jeremy didn’t look to be scared, or worried, like himself; however, if Jack told him about what he had heard earlier today, then it might change

everything about Jeremy's demeanor. He might not even want to go any further. That's how Jack was feeling.

"—Are you gonna tell me or just leave me hanging?" Jeremy demanded.

"Ehhh, I don't know if you'll like what you hear."

"Stop dancing around already. Go on with it—"

About a hundred paces ahead, Jack could see the glimmer of a road sign, yellow arrows pointing left. They were getting awfully close. Jack felt raw intensity coursing through his capillaries. Near and nearer...

"JACK!" yelled Jeremy.

Jack jumped. "Alright, alright. I'll tell you. But there's no turning back if you get scared."

"Okay," said Jeremy.

"Remember I told you how I thought it was strange that every time I mentioned Stafford Hall around my dad, he'd be quick to hush me up and to tell me never to mention that house again. At first, I thought he was just tired of hearing about the place, seeing how he lived here his whole life and probably heard the stories a millions times. But apparently, back when my dad was a teenager, he did the same thing we're doing now. Jimmy Graham filled me in today while at the lunch table that his father went there with my dad when they were in high school."

"Is that supposed scare me?" Jeremy asked, sarcasm in his voice.

They rounded a sharp turn which sloped to a precipitous decline. Once the road leveled, Jack continued. "My dad would always say, I don't want no talk about no darn ghosts. You better believe they're not real. It's all a fairy tale like the tooth fairy and Santa Claus." Jack pointed a mock finger, "Boy, let me warn you, I better never find you wonderin' up there or your ass will be in a world of pain."

Jeremy shot Jack a dismissive look. "So what? Obviously your dad didn't find anything in the mansion or else he'd believe in ghosts."

"See, that's where I think you're wrong and I've been wrong up until today. In all the hundred of times I've asked about Stafford Hall, why wouldn't my dad mention he snuck up there with Jimmy's dad when he was younger? Why wouldn't he just tell me he didn't find any such ghosts or hauntings? Wouldnt that nip all my curiosity in the butt? Wouldn't that stop my questions right there and then? Obviously, he did find something in that mansion and it scared him and Jimmy's Graham's dad so badly that they vowed to never talk about that day again."

"Damn. You know what I think?"

"What?"

Jeremy socked him hard in the arm. "I think you should stop being a puss and thinking too much into it."

On the left of the road, jutting diagonally out of the ground, was a pole topped with a green road sign. It read: Dahill road. The boys nodded to each other, followed the road, and began the ascension to the front gate. This was it. Closer and closer. A desperate voice of protest still sounded off at the forefront of Jack's thoughts—You fool, turn around before it's too late.

But Jack clenched his teeth and tried to ignore the voice to the best of his ability. Around he noticed treeline thinning. The cloudy sky sprawled into view as they trudged along the cracked asphalt and neared the front gate.

There was no more time to think. The cast iron bars, towering ten feet high, stopped them from going any further. There was an insignia with the letters SH. Jeremy gave the gate a jiggle. "Looks like this is where we jump."

"Guess so."

Jeremy got over first, making sure to lift his body above the rusting spikes. Jack had a little more difficulty, but once he got his leg over, he hopped down to the ground without problem.

Jeremy kneeled and tightened his laces. "We gotta make this quick. In, sweep the halls, out. No lingering."

Jack bowed his head, "Agreed, Quick as lightning."

"And no lookin' for that room."

Jack looked at Jeremy quizzically because he misheard him. "What you say?"

"You know, the room." Jeremy stood up from ground. "Screw going into or anywhere near that room. If this place is haunted, we'll know the moment we enter. There's no need to go digging in the cellar for something we don't know nothin' about"

"Right," Jack said, not really hearing his own voice because he was too lost in his thoughts. Jack felt like he was floating just above his body, watching himself, as they started up the smoothly paved cobblestone driveway. The giant silhouette of the mansion towered at the top of the hill like a black wooly mammoth.

How did he forget about the room? Jack had read many references to the beast secretly locked somewhere amongst the thirty six rooms. As the story went, any person who searched for the beast died soon thereafter. First a judge in 1924; then a child of the family who owned the house. The judge met a tragic accident; then the sudden illness of the poor child. Even Jeremy didn't want to take any chances searching for that room.

Would they really know if the house were haunted the moment they entered? Jack hoped so, as opposed to walking aimlessly through the halls, he'd like to know what he was walking himself into.

They pushed over the last hill, Jack's hamstrings burning from the walk. They climbed several stairs and stood before the glow of the front of the mansion.

"Bro, this place is bigger than I thought," Jeremy pointed out.

Jack gulped. "Awh, man" The anticipation in his mind had instantly transformed into a palpable pressure underneath his chest. "We better make this quick" Jack repeated.

"Doesn't look like anyone's home. Good, good... in and out." Jeremy sounded carefree, but his eyes were wide and alert reflecting the mansion's glowing lanterns.

Giant corinthian columns towered in front of the sodden white brick mansion with its early nineteenth century structure which silhouetted against the dark night of a time long ago when only whites owned the plantations around here, and so, lived in the giant houses, while the blacks, dwelled in the shacks like dogs such as the fragments of the hay barn to the left.

"You ready?" asked Jeremy. "No turning back once we start."

"I think we already started," Jack said, his voice shaky.

"Okay, good. I'll take the left, you the right." Jeremy took out his flashlight and clicked it on. "You find any entrance points. We meet at the back and we go from there."

Jack fumbled into his coat pocket and removed the mini mag. Jeremy's rainboots squeaked on the wet lawn as he went around the left side of the mansion. Jack inhaled a large breath from the cool night and forced himself to part toward the right.

The house was much bigger than either boy imagined. It stretched about half the length of a football field with about twenty windows side by side. There was a grass corridor with some overgrown weeds where Jack could wall between the white brick wall on one side and dense forestry on the other. Jack's eyes drifted to the woods, which echoed with all sorts of noisy insects. The forest behind him was a great place for something to hide, Jack thought as he went from window to window, checking whether any were unlocked. None were.

All the ground level windows had so far been bolted tight. If neither he nor Jeremy could find some sort of unlocked entrance point, then the only option they were left with was to make one. It was bad enough they were trespassing. Jack didn't like the thought of breaking and entering.

Jack pushed on a window and although it seemed like it would budge, it slid open three inches and got stuck. Jack pressed all his strength underneath the wood but it didn't move. He peeked through the glass, trying to view the jam. But the window was dusty and the room dark.

All the remaining windows were shut so he walked another thirty feet to the back. Jeremy was already on the terrace waiting for him. "No luck for me," greeted Jeremy.

"Me neither, but there was a window that opens enough to fit my hand in."

"There were some on my side like that. But no, we don't need any broken glass. We need a window that opens." Jeremy exhaled a breath of audible frustration.

Jack agreed. "Me too. I want to keep this as clean as possible."

Jack shifted his eyes from Jeremy. The night around him had become frigid, his breath was frosty, and he shrugged his jacket tighter as a chill ran up the base of his spine. He really didn't want to break in. He imagined what his dad would do already. Add a shattered window and the costs of repair. Jack looked toward the back of the house. There was a wide balcony with two windows and a patio door. "Jeremy, maybe we can climb up there and check those windows."

Jeremy's blond hair shimmered from the bright, buzzing blue lamp that illuminated the back of the house. He shook his head, a devious smile curling across his lips as he beat the flashlight into his palm.

Jack's eyes pled with Jeremy to try his alternative. Jeremy examined the wooden cross bars and the twelve-foot climb to the top. He shook his head. "Waste of time. There's no guarantee those windows are unlocked. Then if we need an escape, we have to jump down the balcony and lose more precious time."

"Come on, man. One try. "

Suddenly, Jeremy shined the flash-light inches from Jack's eyes, blinding him. Already tense from what they were doing, the sudden move startled Jack. "Jesus," he said.

Jeremy yanked the flashlight away. "You goin' soft on me now? Huh? You better tell me?"

Jack backed away and tugged his jacket. "No, I'm not turning soft. I'm just trying to keep our asses out of trouble."

Jeremy used the flashlight as a pointer, "Listen, buddy. We gotta get down there and find ourselves a broken window."

Jack wanted to protest but Jeremy made a good point. The longer they were out here snooping around, then the higher the risk of one of their parents realizing they were missing and them being caught.

"As I thought." Jeremy turned and strutted down to the side of the house that Jack had previously checked. "This side is facing the woods so it's less noticeable." Jeremy walked and Jack followed, the tight feeling returning to his chest. Jeremy stopped before the window closest to the ground, just two and a half feet high. Jeremy stood with his legs wide, ready, a wild sneer strewn on his face. "The baby might want to cover his ears from the loud noise."

"Ha ha, real funny—"

Suddenly, there was a loud CRACK! Little shards of glass burst everywhere. Jeremy used the butt of the flashlight to clear the pieces still stuck to the frame. "Ehhh a little more..." He used the sleeve of his jacket to get the rest off the sill. "Looks good to me." He glanced back at Jack who stood in open mouthed awe.

“You crazy son of a gun—you actually broke a window.”

“Oh Yes I did.” Jeremy stepped aside. ” After you.”

The tightness in Jack's sternum felt like it was about to explode but Jack stuck the maglite in his mouth and crawled through the window anyway. Glass crunched beneath his shoes as he stepped into the darkened parlor. He quickly beamed the flashlight around the room; old family portraits hung crookedly from the stucco walls and two huge couches were draped in dusty cloth. A doorway opposite the window led to a hall. “I think this is where we go,” Jack whispered.

Jeremy climbed through. “Man, this place is old.” Jeremy walked over to one of the pictures and examined the fat lady in the portrait. “Youch... You catch a look at this hot mama?”

“No—but I'd like to hurry.” said Jack, not shifting his eyes from his light shining on the doorway as if he expected someone to walk through.

“Calm down , killer.” Jeremy met Jack by the door. “How you wanna do this? We can split up, do a run through, then meet back here in ten minutes.”

Jack didn't like the sound of that plan. “You think it's the best idea if we split up? What if one of us stumbles across something we aren't supposed to? We should stick together.”

“Damn, I thought you weren't a puss.”

Jack shook his head. “I just don't think we should search through this mansion alone because there's always the possibility that there's something—or somebody—in these over thirty some rooms that isn't supposed to be here.”

Jeremy looked back at the shards of glass on the floor. “If there's anyone here by some crazy chance, like the family didn't go to Europe, then,” Jeremy pointed directly at the broken glass. “We don't need to worry about getting caught. They'd already know we're here.”

“You got a point. But...”

“But what? You're a big sour puss?”

“NO, IM NOT. I'll do what I have to.”

“Good. Cause it's time to roll.” Jeremy went through the doorway and disappeared from sight. Now the pressure in Jack's chest had mounting into his stomach. Jack caught his breath one final time and followed. The doorway opened into a long hall, lined with many doors next to family portraits of long deceased human forms. Jeremy was down the hall about twenty feet ahead.

Jeremy turned another corner at the end of the hall. Jack instinctively looked over his shoulder at the dark hall behind. A solitary crack of light came from the door of the room they had entered from. Jack felt the blackness behind engulfing him, so he sprinted to catch up Jeremy who was skipping jovially, humming a tune Jack couldn't quite identify, and acting altogether like a madman under the circumstances of what they were currently getting themselves into. Jack smiled. Jeremy was one crazy fool. As outlandish as his behavior may be, it was a sort of comfort to Jack. If you were ever to commit a crime such as breaking and entering into a mansion, Jeremy's crazy self was the exactly the person to do it with.

At the end of the hall, Jeremy had halted and was shining his light at something toward the ceiling. It was magnifying the flashlight into a gargantuan white glow. Jack jogged and caught up.

“Ohh, such pretty colors,” said Jeremy in a voice of mock hypnosis, shaking his light up at a giant chandelier made from thousands of tiny glass beads. They had found the main lobby. The mahogany front door was located to the left and an expansive staircase rose to the second floor where more doors led to more rooms.

“This place is like something out of the movies,” Jack admitted, his voice echoing eerily.

Jeremy was still wiggling his flashlight and creating a disco ball effect from the chandelier. "Look at all them colors."

"Yeah, cool, but we're still wasting time."

"Colors colors colors."

"You okay over there? Looks like you're getting a little over excited."

Jeremy finally stopped, looking seriously. "Yeah I'm done."

"You sure? Cause I can leave you alone?"

Jeremy wiggled the light at the chandelier for another few seconds then stopped. "Ahhhhhh, now I'm good."

Jack guffawed. "You're one crazy partner in crime."

"Oh, tonight, you only get a glimpse of my other half." Jeremy darted to the top of the stairs, sat on the polished banister, and slid back down with his arms flailing in the air. "Whooooo-yahhh." He touched down a couple feet in front of Jack, arms out wide like a snowboarder, crumpling the oriental rug into a heap across the wooden floor. He stood up and dusted himself off. "I'm too good."

Jack shook his head, resisting the urge to burst into wild laughter. The room was too quiet, all the noises amplifying off the carved spandrel. He wanted to stick to the plan. Get in, get out.

"Man you gotta lighten up," Jeremy said, annoyed. "You want the upstairs, or downstairs?"

Jack gulped. "I think I'll go downstairs."

Jeremy paced off toward the main hall. He yelled, "You get the upstairs for being a B-I-O-T-C-H" Then just like that, Jeremy and his flash-light vanished in the maze of the main hall.

Jack suddenly found himself alone with nothing but a tiny maglight and a task he was unsure he could complete alone. The tightness in his chest had gone away for a short while because of Jeremy's coolness but now was back like Jack had been bit by a copperhead and was now experiencing the venomous muscle convolutions. He crouched and swallowed for air. Pull yourself together. Jack.

He didn't want to search the upstairs alone. Instead, he could head to the left and wait in the room with the broken glass till Jeremy returned, and if Jeremy asked, Jack hadn't seen any ghosts upstairs.

He managed to breathe easy and wobble to his feet. He slumped over to the stairs and sat down. He rested his head in both hands. All he had to do was walk up those steps and sweep the halls. No probing, or calling for trouble. A simple sweep through to prove the nonexistence of ghosts. That's what he came here for. Jack could go to the left and lie to Jeremy, but then he'd be lying to himself. What's more, the mystery of this mansion and his father would never be solved.

Jack mustered his strength and forced one foot at a time up the staircase. When he reached the top, there were four separate corridors to choose from. Jack wanted to run back downstairs right out through the broken window because he knew this wasn't going to be a simple sweep.

Jack looked back over the stairs to the entranceway toward the left. Go back and lie. You won't find any ghosts or demons upstairs anyway. It's all just a waste of time with a good chance of getting lost. Then what happens when you're lost and the bulb of this rinky dink flashlight goes pop? What do you have planned then? Blubber like a little baby?

"Shut up!" Jack shouted aloud. "There's no turning back now."

Jack decided he could make the sweep quickly before the bulb died or anything went wrong. He inched toward the pitch black corridor, the maglight in front of him, the other hand extended in case anything tried to rush and attack.

Jacks legs were stiff and his body tense as the wood creaked beneath his shoes. Some rooms had closed doors, while others opened into an assortment of different furnishings. Jack peeked into them as he passed. One room looked like a vanity with several mirrors. Another appeared to be some kind of nursery. The rooms didn't make him feel any better.

Jack reached an intersection and went left. The light was shaking in his sweaty hand and he grabbed his crotch because he felt the sudden urge to pee.

Come, on A-jack, keep on movin'.

Jack laughed at the voice carrying him forward and squeezed his knees tighter to prevent from peeing. "Ajack" was a nickname his father sometimes called him by. It was from Ajax, the character in the Illiad. The tough, strong Ajax who fights the beastly Hector. But as all know, Ajax meets his bloody fate when he confronts Hector.

He stood before another intersection and chose a right turn. Up to this point, Jack had done well keeping his composure from having a melt down into irrational fear. But when he turned the corner, Jack became on the verge of warm tears when he saw down the hall, extended from the ceiling, a pull down ladder. Stairs led up to a dark rectangular hole. Pee trickled down his leg. He had to grab himself hard to keep his urine from gushing everywhere.

Jack's chest seared painfully. Why was that attic open when the family was supposed to be vacationing in Europe?

You know why.

Jack whipped backwards in a run but then froze, mortified because he thought he saw something white flash by in the darkness down the hall. "What the fuck was that?" He shined the flashlight back and forth but there was nobody there.

BANG— a door closed somewhere ahead.

Out of raw adrenaline, Jack dropped to the ground and covered his flashlight. He squinted at the dark hall ahead but his eyes couldn't differentiate any movement.

Jack pushed himself up into a half crawl. He kept the light low and beelined toward the stairs of the pull down attic. He didn't look back. There was a two foot space on either side and Jack slipped by without looking up into the dark square above. When he slithered past, he flashed the light at the hall ahead. "Oh no." Jack collapsed on his knees when he realized that his light was glaring back from a window because he was at the dead end of the corridor.

CRACK another door shutting behind, this one closer.

"Oh my god."

Jack stumbled into the room closest him to get away from whatever was about to attack. Dropping his flashlight as he fell, he tumbled into something which produced a loud sound of ruckus. Jack didn't move a muscle but listened.

Several moments passed. Jack tried to recover his flashlight while producing the least amount of sound possible. He didn't know what he was lying on but it felt like plastic and human hair.

Jack wiggled his finger through and pinched the flashlight. He felt another sudden stab of alarm as he shined the light at the contents of the room and realized what he was currently tangled into. Dolls, mannequins, and human wigs all over the place. One next to him was a blond girl, beady black eyes, a miniature dress from the nineteenth century.

The chest spasms returned in vice grip like tightness. Jack turned his head because he felt like he was going to puke. He coughed dry heaves instead.

Some time went by while Jack sat there and recovered. He didn't hear any more doors shut, so he untangled himself as best he could and stood up to his feet. He backed into the far corner of

the room and sat on a trunk near a window from whence blue light was illuminating from that lamp at the rear of the house.

Something was out there. It didn't matter what Jack knew before. That attic was down and something was out there tormenting him. Either a demon ghost or Jeremy was really, really good at messing with him. Jack had to find his way out of here to meet Jeremy because time was drawing real close to ten minutes. But how on earth was he going to get around whatever was out there?

Jack heard a trumpet from a courageous inner voice—Confront it! It's probably Jeremy.

Jack's pants were soaked. Jeremy would have a fit when he saw. He rested his head against the floral wallpaper and shut his eyes. His heart still rhythmically pounding away. Why was the attic open? Who shut those doors? Why hadn't his father told the truth?

Jack's mind was swirling into a tiny pin-point enshrouded by an all encompassing darkness of hairy legged confusion. He felt woozy. Jack opened his eyes and directly within his line of vision was a box with an inscription on the side. He flashed the light at cursive lettering that read:

Merrbaugh

Jack hopped from the trunk and got closer to make sure he hadn't read incorrectly. Merrbaugh. That was strange. Merrbaugh was the maiden name of his deceased mother! She died four years ago after a tragic battle with leukemia. She always appeared lively and healthy, so the diagnosis was that much more tragic when she suddenly collapsed one morning in the kitchen and became bed-ridden until the end of her life when Death made his walk to snatch the life remaining in her sick body. Jack's heart ached. Why was his mother's name on the box?

At the top of the box, a concave indent was carved into the wood which looked like a button. Jack pressed it—Suddenly the top flipped back and a Joker peeped through. Jack jumped back. Loud funhouse music played while the Joker sang in a mechanical voice, "Jack in the box, jack in the box, it's about to get real black to scare you off your socks."

"Shhh..." Jack bolted forward and attempted to jam the Joker back in the box to cut the music. "Shut up Shut up, dammit"

At that instant the lightbulb of the flashlight simmered out. "He He He" The music wound off. Jack was frozen in catalepsy, his hand still pointing the dead flashlight. "This is insane," he squeaked aloud.

BANG! Another door closed, this one so close that Jack knew somebody was coming through the door any moment.

He whimpered, "Come on, work, dammit." He could hear movement, scuttling, just outside the door.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The muscles in Jack's chest was clamping down so hard he felt like he was going to pass out any moment. He grabbed what felt like a lamp and readied himself for whatever was coming through the door. He was not going to die without a fight.

All the nerves in his body crystallized as a white form resembling a woman in a white gown appeared at the doorway. The Ghost! It was the ghost that Jack's father must've seen. Jack dropped the lamp he'd been holding. From the window's reflection, Jack could see the figure beginning to weed through the mannequins to reach out for him. Jack's breathing stopped dead. The woman's dress sparkled magnificently as she drew nearer. Jack's eyes rolled back and he could feel himself falling backwards. He was falling and falling and the last thing he

remembered was the woman in the silk dress grabbing ahold of him and being inches from her tar black face. Jack screamed, “JEREMEEEEEE”

Then darkness...

Jack felt a jolt and opened his eyes. “Wha– what’s going on?”

“Easy fella,” said a voice to Jack’s side. He glanced up and noticed that the person was a paramedic. He tried to sit up but quickly realized he was strapped down. Red and blue lights flashing above, Jack was being lifted into an ambulance. What had happened? What had he seen? He was upstairs in that room and then...

Jack felt a sense of pure dread. And where was Jeremy? Did he get out?

When the stretcher had been positioned in the ambulance, Jack lifted his chin and looked up past his feet to see if he could spot Jeremy. “Try to relax, fella. You fainted pretty bad” said the paramedic.

Several state troopers and a red truck were parked at the front entrance of the mansion, a throng of bystanders nearby, but no Jeremy. Two figures were walking toward the ambulance.

“How are you doing, son?”

Jack cringed at the sound of his father’s voice. Dressed in muddy overalls, he was standing next to a state trooper. Jack didn’t hesitate, but started sobbing tears of regret. “Dad, I’m sorry. I know you warned me to never come up here. I messed up big time”

Jack’s father sat on the bumper. “Could I have a moment with my son?” He requested of the paramedic and the officer standing nearby. They nodded and walked a short distance away. “Awh, boy. You really did yourself in on this one, ” Jack’s father said.

“Dad, please don’t kill me. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you. I should’ve never gone into that mansion. I always knew there was a reason you didn’t want me to go there. I know it sounds crazy, but I saw it. I saw the ghost that you saw when you were younger. Oh god. Dad, I’m so sorry.”

“You saw a ghost? Did ya?”

“It sounds completely bonkers, but it was just like the stories. The woman in the dress. God, I’m so sorry, dad. ”

“You don’t need to be sorry. It’s not your fault.”

Jack was utterly confused. “What do you mean? ”

“I should’ve told you the truth long ago and we probably could’ve avoided all this confusion.”

“What are you talking about?”

“All this ghost nonsense. I should’ve nipped it in the bud a long time ago rather than let your imagination run wild. That’s why you came here. You just wanted to know the truth.”

Jack’s father chuckled. “See, a similar thing happened to me. I came up here when I was young, broke in, and thought I came across a ghost. But unlike you, I wasn’t dumb enough to get myself trapped in a room and get caught with no escape. I got away, and over the years, my opinions on things brought me to the point where I was frankly unsure of what I saw on that night long ago. I should’ve told you what I saw. Who knows, even if I told you, curiosity may of still got the best of you.”

“So you did see something. I knew it. What did it look like?”

“Just as you described, a woman in a silk dress.”

“See, that proves there’s ghosts.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Jack’s father stood and whistled to somebody off toward the right. “It proves this place has had the same housekeeper since I was a kid.” A elderly black women in a white nightgown stepped into view. “Meet Abigail Dobson.”

She waved, folding her hands over her bosom before speaking, “Heavens, son. The past owner of this house, Mr. Green, well, he had bad asthma and used to have these horrible coughing spells. When I came across you in that room, you sounded just like Mr. Green– I thought you were gonna keel over and die. When I grabbed you, you fainted right in my arms. Boy, you gave an old woman a good scare.”

Jack was feeling stupider and stupider by the moment. “You were the lady that found me?”

“That was me. I found you, then your friend came back for you and helped me call the ambulance.”

Jack’s dad added, “And when I was younger, she was the lady I saw too.”

Jack felt like a complete idiot. All his curiosity and all the rumors went back to the little brown lady standing before him. “So Jeremy is still here.”

Jack father said, “Yeah, he’s over there with his dad.”

Jack hated that he got them caught. All their planning yet they couldn’t walk away without getting caught. “Dad, are the police pressing charges?”

The housekeeper shook her head. “Learning about your dad coming here when he was younger, and about you nagging curiosity, I called the owners and made sure they understood the situation. They don’t want to press charges.”

“So we’re not gonna get in trouble?”

“Son, you’re in trouble regardless,” Jack’s father corrected. “But because of this generous Ms. Dobson, both of you are getting off scott free with the law.”

Jack looked contrite. “M’am, I’m sorry for me and my friend breaking your window.”

“Don’t you worry ’bout that. Your father and I already arranged a day for you and you friend to come up here and repair the damage.”

Jack smiled. His father also did. Under the circumstance, it was a

Jeremy approached. “How you doing, buddy?”

“If I wasn’t on a stretcher, I don’t think it would be too bad.” Jack’s face flushed red and he looked toward his dad. “Am I gonna have to go to the hospital?”

“Yeah, they have to do some tests to make sure everything is okay.”

“Jeeze.” Jack laid back and stared at the ceiling. “Is your dad pissed off?”

Jeremy answered, “Yeah, he’s pretty ticked. But he’ll get over it.”

Both boys laughed. Together, they had done everything they could to prevent this from happening. Jack felt like he let Jeremy down. “Sorry for bugging out and getting us caught.”

Jeremy shook Jack’s shoe. “You couldn’t help what happened. We didn’t plan for Miss Dobson sleeping in her bedroom upstairs.”

“Still feel like a doofus.”

“Just get some rest, man. Anyhow, I gotta get back to my dad.” Jeremy started off toward his father’s red pickup truck.

Jack yelled, “Hey, Jeremy!”

Jeremy looked back. Jack said, “Thanks for coming back for me.” Jeremy smiled deviously, waved a hand that meant not a thing, and departed.

Jack said goodbye to the housekeeper as his father climbed into the ambulance next to the paramedic. They shut the doors and the diesel engine revved clamorously as they headed down

the driveway. Jack watched the mansion and the swarm of police lights disappear through the ambulance's back window.

Jack was still ambivalent to the existence of ghosts, yet at least he knew the truth about the mansion, Stafford hall, sitting majestically on the hill overlooking the town. Yet he still contained one more concern. Why had that the pull attic been down? Jack dozed, envisioning the steps that led up to the black rectangular hole. He started to climb the steps but he really didn't want to. He was becoming terrified. But he had to know what was up there. He could here faint music playing from the hole, "Jack in a box, Jack in a box..." He reached the topstair and felt his pants go wet, then his head popped into the darkness above. Instantly, the fear melted away. Mother, is that you?

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