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Oh, Mr. Sandman

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of English

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Connor Keane

May 2020

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my mother and father. You encouraged me when other parents might have just made me major in a STEM field. I would never have gotten this far without the love and support you have provided to both me and my dreams. Without you both, I quite literally would not be where I am today—both as a writer and a human being.

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Abstract

This thesis consists of the first fifty-four pages of a full-length novel. It is intended to function as the first act of a four-act story, and therefore its primary goal is to set up and facilitate conflict and character development in later acts. I have chosen four acts over the traditional three act structure in order to further develop the central mystery and allow for slower, more nuanced character development. This thesis aspires to act as the foundation upon which a multifaceted narrative, containing both a compelling story and a meaningful message, can be told.

The premise of the novel is that a twenty-one-year-old college student secretly drops out of his university and returns to his hometown. He lacks any direction in life, which manifests as a supernatural form of insomnia: he cannot sleep, but there are no medical repercussions. This inability to sleep is tied into a larger theme in the novel, that of “dreams.” The protagonist has no dreams for his future, and therefore is literally incapable of dreaming. The surface level conflict involves the protagonist and supporting characters uncovering the plot of a cult that is summoning an inter-dimensional dream-eating monster in order to harvest the “aspirational energy” of the town’s inhabitants. The underlying conflict taking place in each of the main characters is between their desire to take the first step toward a happy and meaningful life, and the world which falsely asserts that these goals are inextricably tied to finding the perfect career.

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Chapter Zero

On the floor was a star drawn of sand, a robed man in his mid-fifties lying at its center. The room was small and the air heavy with humidity. The hooded figures kneeling around him hummed a low tone with candles in hand—the only illumination in the pitch-black room. From the dark void entered a tall, handsome man in a crimson robe, holding a thick, leathery book. The circle's humming rose as his arms slowly raised the book above his head, reaching their peak before abruptly dropping to his sides. Though the humming ceased the book remained fixed in space. Its pages whipped open.

The man in crimson turned to the rusty phonograph beside him and dropped the needle. After a few moments of crackling, a melody floated out of the ancient device's trombone-esque speaker. The voices of the circle joined in, decidedly female, harmonizing with the music.

Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream

Make him the cutest that I've ever seen

Give him two lips like roses and clover

Then tell him that his lonesome nights are over

The air pulsed with energy. Sand swirled upward into the air, circling before flowing back down into the eyes of the man at the star's former center.

Mr. Sandman, I'm so alone

Don't have nobody to call my own

The unconscious body writhed violently as the sand flooded in. All but one cloaked figure kept their eyes open and set on the erratic movements.

So, please turn on your magic beam

Approaching the crescendo, the music and the singing abruptly ceased as the last grains of sand entered his body. Left in its silent wake was only a crusty residue at the corners of his eyes. The hooded women extinguished their candles as an indescribable coldness descended. The red-cloaked man glowed brightly, taking a deep breath before gesturing upward toward the floating book. The light quickly flowed forth from his fingertips into it. Upon absorbing the last of the light into its dark binding, it snapped shut and fell to the floor. The room plunged into an all-encompassing darkness. A new voice called out into the nothingness, flatly without inflection.

“Oh, Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream.”

Chapter One

It really was a pretty good gig—particularly for someone in Art’s situation, but honestly just in general. Motels are “in between places” where people prepare for what’s to come. No one—or at least, very few people—considers a motel room to be their permanent home. No one grows up in motel rooms; no one raises a family there. When someone’s looking for a new externalization of their own financial success or independence, it’s typically a house, or a condominium, or in some cases even just a quaint studio apartment.

But never a motel room. No one “dreams” of living in a motel room. And that’s not a knock on them or anything, that’s just not what motels are for. They’re for someone who’ll be in town for a weekend and needs a cheap place to shower and get dressed. Or someone looking for a discreet encounter with need for little more than a bed, four walls, and a roof. Or in more exciting stories, someone looking for a place to hide out from the authorities, or maybe even some criminal organization they’ve gotten on the bad side of.

The underlying motive in all these cases is the same: a need for a safe place to sleep, maybe even to cook up a good dream. Sleep is a four-stage process: two stages of “light sleep,” one stage of “deep sleep,” and one stage of “REM sleep.” It’s during this fourth and final stage that dreams occur. It’s interesting to note that people are at their most vulnerable not while dreaming, but during the stage just prior—deep sleep, when a dream is brewing but has not yet manifested.

Maybe people know this. Maybe this is why they seek out a place where they’ll be safe from imaginary and genuine threats alike. The night can be dangerous if you’re in the wrong place. Though in a town like Sheboygan, Maine there were frankly very few

places like that—and Art knew where they were. And anyway, lately he always spent his nights in the same place doing the same thing: sitting safely behind the same ancient wooden desk, which itself stood behind a rickety wooden door that remained locked most of the night. He was as safe as safe could be.

It was behind this desk, behind this door, that Art found himself on this brisk October night—though after around four AM, he was hesitant to call it “night” any longer. The office was technically heated, but the door that lay directly across from him didn’t quite fit its frame, allowing the cold night air to blow in beneath. Though the outdated calendar that hung upon the wall indicated that fall was in full swing, summer seemed hesitant to give up the spotlight. The days were warm enough for a comfortable stroll, but just chilly enough to remind everyone what month it was; and when the sun set, fall wrestled complete control over the weather, dragging the area into a climate befitting an October night.

As the night desk clerk, Art was responsible for any guest needs that arose between the hours of 11 PM and 7 AM. These needs could vary greatly in nature. They could be complaints about a lack of accommodation—toilet paper, soap, or clean towels. Art could help with that. A person might misplace their room key; Art could help with that too. A person might call up the front desk complaining about a noisy neighbor, or in most cases neighbors. Unfortunately, Art typically couldn’t do much about that.

But for the most part, the needs of guests between the hours of 11 and 7 were easy to deal with: in fact, they rarely arose at all. The only problem was finding someone awake to deal with them when they did. And that’s where Art came in, as the absolute perfect person for such a position.

Shivering, Art stood and walked over to the rusty radiator responsible for maintaining a reasonable temperature. He turned the dial all the way up, though he suspected it had only two settings: on or off. Despite these suspicions, he hoped setting it to full blast might pull a tiny bit more heat out of the antique. The grey tabby cat which lay curled up against the unit let out a low grumble as Art moved to turn the knob.

“Momo, you gotta chill,” Art almost unconsciously responded to the cat’s discomfort. As he turned and walked back to his desk, the cat closed its eyes again, relishing in the heat of the radiator.

As he relaxed back into the worn, leather chair, Art let out a long sigh. His thoughts drifted back to his job interview only a few weeks earlier. Though it was probably all in his head, sometimes he could swear the smell of cigarettes was leaking out from beneath the locked office door where it had taken place—he imagined the cramped space to be pressurized like a shaken soda can, just waiting to pop and release a wall of noxious gas. Luckily, since his interview he had not stepped foot within the room, nor had he seen the owner himself.

“So, you’re in school?” the owner had inquired.

“I’m taking a break right now actually,” Art had replied curtly.

“I see. Where did you go?”

“HHU.”

“Oh really?” the man perked up.

“Yeah, did you go there?”

“No, it was my dream school.” He looked back down at Art’s single page application as he continued, “I follow the football team pretty closely. Rough season so far.”

“Yeah I haven’t heard great things about our athletics these days. Where did you end up going then?”

“I didn’t,” he replied as he continued to look over the application. “College wasn’t for me.”

Art nodded sympathetically. He couldn’t say exactly how old the owner was, but the male pattern baldness and leathery skin—presumably a result of many summers of excessive tanning—told him upwards of fifty at least. The owner took a drag from the cigarette he had been hovering above the ashtray. Art did his best not to flinch as he exhaled in his direction. As he looked up, he realized Art’s discomfort.

“Ah geez, sorry about that,” he apologized, smothering the smoking stub against the ash tray.

“It’s no problem. Long time smoker?”

“Yeah but don’t you worry.” He looked up and winked, shuffling the papers into order. “I won a magic ring off a wizard that makes me immune to poisons.”

“Oh. I see.” An awkward silence descended upon the conversation.

“So, listen,” the man started. “This is a pretty simple job. Most nights, you won’t even have to do anything. You can sit on your phone or your laptop or whatever all night. I don’t give a shit. I just need to know that you’ll be awake if something comes up. You’re gonna have to sleep most of the day to stay up, and I know that can be hard for a young person who maybe wants to go out and live a little.”

“I can guarantee that won’t be a problem for me,” Art quickly assured him with a warm, rehearsed smile.

The owner’s eyes narrowed in scrutiny at the credibility of the statement. “Not much of a busy day schedule?”

“No, actually I just haven’t needed to sleep lately. Like, at all. I’m not tired or anything, it’s just a thing.” Art shrugged his shoulders and offered a half-smile of indifference toward the issue. A few seconds passed before the owner responded.

“Hm,” he said flatly. “You should probably get that looked at.”

“Yeah,” Art conceded. “I probably should.”

As the town neared the middle of October and the days grew shorter, Art had hoped the rising sun would be usurped by the owner’s arrival as his cue to leave. Unfortunately, despite the 7:19 AM sunrise, for the third week in a row the owner was a no-show. With a sigh, Art stood and gathered his few possessions. As he lifted his backpack, the clinking of spray paint cans caught the attention of Momo, who had yet to move from his favorite spot beside the radiator.

As Art zipped up his coat—a nondescript blue jacket he had salvaged from his parent’s attic years earlier—the cat stirred with a stretch and a yawn.

“You know,” Art started as he looked out the dirty, office window. “I haven’t seen or heard from him in a week or two now. If I wasn’t still getting paid, I’d worry he might actually be dead or something.”

Momo let out a raspy meow in response, not unlike the cough of Art’s chain-smoking employer. “I guess that wouldn’t make much of a difference to you though,

would it?” Art mused as he shuffled toward the door. Pushing forward into the outside world, he was greeted by an unexpected climate. Though the air itself was cool, the sunlight was strong enough to warm his face within seconds.

“Jesus,” he muttered to himself, zipping open his jacket. The sun had only been up a few minutes, and though the air was still cool the heat emanating from the sun itself was uncomfortably powerful. Art shut the heavy door behind him—making sure to give it the extra budge to close it all the way—and started toward the dirt road which led into town. It was only then, in the early morning sunlight, that Art realized something unusual.

The parking lot was completely empty.

Come to think of it, he thought, *it was weirdly quiet tonight*. Even if no one came to the office with a question or complaint, Art would usually at least hear the slamming of doors, or the sound of cars pulling up. *Come to think of it...* he continued, *it's been pretty quiet the last few days too*.

Though a part of Art was inclined to just ignore the oddity and continue his morning routine, he had to admit to himself he was a bit concerned for the owner. Though their interactions had been limited, Mr. Adams had been kind to Art. He had given him a well-paying job where he basically didn't have to do anything, while providing him a place to spend the nights and charge his cell phone. If the motel went under, the man's life was essentially over.

Turning, Art cautiously approached the door of the owner's permanent room, a regular single bedroom located directly next to the office. It was usually marked by an ancient AMC Gremlin parked out front. Hoping for some sign of life, Art approached the

windows, cupping his hands around his eyes and against the glass to see past the morning glare. But it was no use; the curtains were completely drawn. Upon trying the door, he found what he had already expected: the door was locked tight. Art considered getting the master key from the office but decided against it. He couldn't bring himself to invade the man's privacy over a single quiet night.

With a shrug of defeat, Art turned back toward the path. The walk into town was fairly short, taking only about twenty minutes if he moved at a good pace; but given that he typically didn't have anywhere to be, he often took his time to take in the scenery.

The dark woods that bordered the motel and surrounded a good portion of town came to life in the mornings. The sun shined through the bare spots in the leafy, orange canopy, finding each and every hole autumn had thus far provided. Art let out a relaxing sigh. He was by no means the "outdoorsy" type, but he could appreciate a nice stroll through some beautiful scenery in the morning.

The woods were mostly devoid of human intrusion, with the exception of one building: well, less a "building" and more a "shack," really. Art wasn't especially familiar with the situation, but from what he understood it was the home of some recluse that no one had seen for an impressive amount of years. The occasional pillar of smoke from the poorly laid brick chimney was the only sign of life the place gave off. This was apparently enough to keep people from assuming the occupant was long since dead, but Art had always gotten the impression that no one really wanted to check anyway.

The only other sign of human presence in the forest was the litter leftover from parties thrown by local teenagers, though the area around the shack was noticeably spotless. With Sheboygan being such an uneventful place, teenagers had long since

established the shack's inhabitant as the local "Boo Radley" figure. No one wanted to get anywhere near the place, especially not at night. Art typically walked a bit faster when passing the rundown shack on his way to work. But in the morning sunlight, even the scariest haunted houses are much less ominous. He walked on without giving it a second thought.

As the shack passed into the distance, Art continued his morning routine of sorting out the sounds around him. *A stream, a branch falling, a bird looking to get lucky, a...what is that?* he thought to himself as he came to notice something out of place—a sound which might be familiar to any driver who has suffered from a dead battery. Though distant at first, it was rapidly approaching. He stopped in place, trying to identify the direction it was coming from—behind him, following the same path he had taken from the motel. He quickly felt relief as he turned around to an unexpected but welcome sight: Momo, trotting down the path and screaming bloody murder.

"Jesus Momo, you know—" Art stopped himself before he said anything too mean, taking a moment to exhale and calm his nerves. "You... have such a way with words buddy." As he reached Art's feet, Momo rubbed up against his leg, letting out a purr akin to a muffled pencil sharpener.

"You had me there for a second. Next time don't take so long getting up and you won't have to shout for me to wait up," Art scolded, resuming his pace.

"MeOW," the creature replied as it moved beside him. In the morning sunlight Momo's affliction was significantly more noticeable, his grey body subtly translucent.

"You have got to be by far the liveliest dead cat I have ever met."

Chapter Two

Main Street was the social hub of the small Sheboygan community. It was a short strip of land about a mile long, home to the only notable collection of shops in town. Art had spent most of his high school career loitering on its curbs, just as he now did most mornings—at least until Aldan arrived to open the café. Keeping an eye out for his friend, Art surveyed his surroundings. Despite technically being the “liveliest” area of town, Main Street was not immune to the emptiness that befalls any city street so early in the morning. The only other people Art could see from his curb were two recruitment members from a local self-help group that had recently been growing in popularity.

“Good morning sunshine,” Art cheerfully greeted his sleepy-eyed friend as he stood.

“Piss off with that shit, Art,” Aldan mumbled. “It’s too early.” Today the young, lanky café manager wore an orange and blue flannel, with a pair of acid washed blue jeans. His light hair was neatly combed, a subtle testament to his meticulous morning routine.

“Aw don’t be like that bud. Look around, it’s a beautiful day. Give thanks to our gracious god of global warming for this lovely October morning.”

“Wow, I never knew you were so religious,” Aldan replied as he struggled through his half-shut eyes to fit the key into the door’s lock.

“I’ve had an awakening. I’ve found my true calling in life,” Art asserted, beaming.

“Oh? And what is that?”

“I’m starting a cult,” he proudly declared. “I’m leaning toward the doomsday variety but who knows.”

“Cool, can I join?”

“Of *course*. The First Church of Climate Change is open to any and all who have seen the glorious light of the scorched Earth.”

“Wow, sounds really inclusiv—”

“And can also pay the two hundred dollar membership fee.”

“Nice.”

The chime of the doorbell greeted them as Aldan and Art entered the dark café, with Momo not far behind. Aldan disappeared into the back room as Art began lifting the chairs off the tables and onto the floor. A moment later the lights flickered on, and Aldan returned carrying a large cardboard box. As Art lowered the last chair, he shrugged off his backpack and took a seat.

“You know we have a policy about animals.”

“I know, but do you have a policy about *dead* animals?”

“Yes. I’m pretty sure the health inspector has even stronger feelings about dead animals in the restaurant.”

“Fair. But, counterpoint,” Art began. Aldan looked up from the box of bagels he had been moving into the display cases.

“I love him.”

“Uh huh.”

“I *love him* Ald.”

“I know.”

“He’s my *boy* Ald.”

“Ok, ok, relax. You know I wasn’t serious anyway.”

“Well Momo doesn’t know that, you’ve made him feel unwelcome.”

Aldan sighed, putting down the box. “I’m sorry Momo, you’re a valued loiterer just like Art.” Momo, who had already curled up on a table in direct sunlight, offered a hoarse *purr* in response. “See? He forgives me,” Aldan jeered as Art rose and approached the display case. “You’re still wearing your “uniform” by the way.”

“What?” Art looked down. “Whoops.” He unpinned the thin, plastic name tag from his shirt. “Do you think if I leave this here someone will take it and go to work for me?”

“Identity theft is no joke, Art. How is the job anyway?”

“Still pretty chill. Most nights nothing comes up anyway, so I get to sit around and watch movies on the garbage WI-FI. Haven’t seen Adams in weeks. Can I get an everything with butter?”

“Living the life, huh?” Aldan asked, handing him a misshapen bagel. Art nodded with a hollow smile. “I still don’t get why you came back here, of all places. You could go anywhere man, especially with the weird sleep thing you’ve got goin’ on.”

“Yeah I guess,” Art replied flatly.

“You know, I’ve been considering getting one of those overseas jobs,” Aldan began as he moved over to the coffeemaker.

Art took an impressively large bite out of the lumpy piece of buttered bread. Aldan’s handouts were exclusively reject-bagels, but Art had no complaints. Despite their odd exteriors, they were just as fluffy and delicious as their display case brethren.

“Oh yeah?” Art asked, mouth half full.

“Yeah, like somewhere in Asia. I’ve heard they’ll pay to fly you out and house you and everything. My cousin got a sweet gig like that a few months back and I’m crazy jealous. He’s always posting on social media about it.”

“Oh? What’s he doing, teaching English?”

“Nah, he fights giant monsters in this huge robot.”

“Wow, sounds pretty legit.” Art nodded thoughtfully as he took another massive bite.

“Yeah man. And he only has to work like, once a week. The rest of the time he gets to just hang out with his four coworkers.”

“Now *that’s* living the dream.”

“I know right?” Aldan said, his eyes looking off wistfully. “They’ve got a weird dress code though. He’s only allowed to wear green for some reason.”

“Weird. Maybe it’s a cultural thing?”

“No idea. Maybe when I graduate from Brookdale I’ll visit him and see what’s up.” Aldan flipped a switch and the coffee machine rumbled to life. Yawning, he shuffled over to the sink. Pulling on a rubber glove, he began scooping lumps of boiled cornmeal out of the drain. “They never clean the fucking drain after they pour out the bagel juice,” he mumbled to himself.

“I have no idea what bagel juice is, and I have no desire to ever find out. How are classes treating you?” Art asked before shoving the remaining third of the bagel into his mouth. Aldan paused what he was doing.

“They’re alright,” he began. “Commuting sucks, but it’s only gonna be another year or so and then I’ll have that sweet, sweet associate degree.” Aldan paused in thought before looking over at Art. “Jesus man, chew your food, it’s not a race.”

Art smiled and nodded as he swallowed, ignoring Aldan’s comment. “Honestly man, good for you going for your childhood dream. You’re gonna be a kickass architect.”

Aldan chuckled nervously. “When I’m looking for a job I’ll be sure to include your endorsement on my resume.” The two fell silent for a moment, until the beep of the coffee machine interrupted. Aldan removed the pitcher, pouring a cup and passing it over to Art. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“I know you don’t love talking about it…” Aldan trailed off.

“Talking about what?”

“You know,” he paused dramatically, “the *future*.”

“Well I’ve never been, but I’ve heard it’s real shit.”

“Don’t be such a smartass, you know what I mean.”

Art looked down at his drink. “I don’t know. You *know* I don’t know.”

“Well, yeah,” he admitted as he tied on his apron. “But if you don’t think about it how are you ever gonna figure it out?”

“Ugh. I don’t *want* to think about it. Did *you* ever have to think about it?”

“Well, I guess not. I’ve always been a slut for Legos.”

“Exactly, you just knew what you wanted to do.”

“Be a slut for Legos?”

“No!” Art laughed, before letting out a long sigh. “It just feels like everyone else knows what they want to do with their lives. Like there’s something they’re good at, or passionate about, and they just *know* that’s what they want to do.” He paused, taking a sip from his steaming coffee. “Why don’t I have that?”

“What about painting?”

Art shook his head. “I don’t want to turn fun into work. And honestly, there’s not much commercial work for one-trick abstract art ponies. And I can’t draw people for shit.”

Aldan’s frown deepened as he leaned against the counter, arms crossed in contemplation. “You’ll figure it out, man.”

“Will I though?” Art muttered. A few feet away, Momo let out a sleepy croak of encouragement. “Thanks buddy.”

Art hung around the café for an hour or so, until it filled with patrons. He waved a silent goodbye to Aldan, who was occupied with customers and working harder than his paycheck justified. Aldan had always been an overachiever, making them a somewhat unlikely pair. He liked to think their opposing outlooks balanced each other out.

With Momo by his side, Art shuffled down the sidewalk in the direction of the Community Center: the best and only place for a free shower in town. The streets were a *bit* less desolate than they had been an hour earlier, but foot traffic was still thin. The overly enthusiastic self-help group people were still on the corner, now handing out colorful flyers. Other foot traffic was mostly morning joggers, senior citizens, and dreary-eyed part-time employees. Art made sure to keep an eye out for anyone he didn’t want to

be seen by, but he wasn't particularly worried. People usually didn't notice things they weren't looking for.

By the time they arrived at the Community Center, Art's dark hair had absorbed an uncomfortable amount of the sun's heat. He had chosen to walk on the shady side of the street, but a sharp turn inevitably brought him back beneath the unrelenting sun. A bead of sweat dripped down his temple, landing on the light pavement.

From the outside, the building was unremarkable: a dull grey with a rectangular sign above the entrance that simply read "Community Center." However, Art often noted that the landscaper did an excellent job with the small lawn separating the building from the sidewalk. Some noticeably brown, patchy spots on the lawn indicated the struggle for green grass in October, but its consistent height was a testament to the relentless attempts at keeping it presentable. There was even an excellently maintained garden—especially surprising considering the cold nights.

"Sorry buddy," Art said, crouching down to pet his companion. "I don't have any sweet hookups here. You're gonna have to wait outside."

"MeoW."

As Art stood, Momo trotted past the garden and onto the lawn. He gracefully plopped down upon a patch of grass beneath a tree that still held onto a thin canopy of leaves.

Each time Art entered the building he was immediately enveloped by the sharp smell of chlorine, something that made him oddly nostalgic. It was probably the childhood family trips to the community pool in the summertime, though he didn't recall

the memory especially fondly. He knew how to swim well enough, but bodies of water larger than bathtubs gave him anxiety regardless of whether or not he was in them.

The layout of the lobby was minimal. Behind the thick glass doors to his right was the pool area. To his left was a perpetually empty help desk, next to which was an empty, wheeled laundry cart. A pile of folded towels was laid out with a small dry erase sign that read, "*Take one, please return to bin.*" Art grabbed a towel before continuing directly ahead down a hallway which led to several facilities, most notably the locker rooms.

Art preferred his showers as early in the morning as possible. This was not because he enjoyed early morning showers themselves; rather, privacy was very important to him. The fewer people who saw him the better. Or maybe it was just his personal preference for not being greeted by a locker room full of naked old men with no concern for covering up their unsightly shriveled areas. It was hard to say which took priority. In either case, Art happily found the locker room to be entirely empty.

Refreshed, dressed, and still drying his hair, Art half-blindly approached the laundry cart beside the counter. Tossing the moist towel into the bin, his eyes moved toward the exit before abruptly widening. He froze in his tracks. Through the glass doors he spotted the tall, imposing figure approaching from off the sidewalk, flanked by a shorter less intimidating figure. The pair was rapidly approaching the entrance.

He'd thought he would be safe here. That this was the last place they would ever come.

His mind entered a state of emergency. His eyes darted from side to side like a trapped coyote preparing to gnaw off its own limb. They landed on the nearest structure,

the help desk. With the seconds ticking down and no safer alternative in sight, Art dove behind the counter as if it were a fallout shelter.

The desk was a semi-circle connected to the wall. Squeezing himself as far up against the interior wall of the desk as possible, Art held his breath. A second passed, then two. The door chimed. The pair entered, their conversation echoing through the seemingly empty entrance area.

“...and so, *I* said,” an older man’s voice continued with an air of frustration. “If his weird self-help group wants to remodel the whole downtown area, that’s all well and good.” Art cringed behind the counter as the familiar voice grew nearer. “But Rome wasn’t built in a day, you know? And this damn sprawling pyramid of theirs’ is going to take a hell of a lot longer than a few weeks.” The man let out a sigh of frustration.

“It’s a cult honey, you can call it a cult,” a feminine voice responded. “I’ve heard they’re really filling their little place on the edge of town to the brim. It’s no wonder they’re so desperate for you to finish.”

“Yeah, I know, but that doesn’t give them the right to harass me at all hours of the day. It doesn’t matter how much money they have or how many members of the city council are fast tracking their permits. My guys are working as fast as they can, it’ll be done when it’s done, you know?”

Art continued to hold his breath as the faceless voices grew further away.

“Well just forget about all that for now, dear. There’s a hot tub with our names on it right behind this door.” As a door opened and closed, the voices faded away entirely.

Art let out a deep breath of relief. In the month he had been home, he had never had such

a close call. He sighed and rubbed his eyes, as if the act alone could do away with the stress that still lingered in his mind and bones.

“Hey uh,” a voice behind him said.

Art jumped at the voice. “*Jesus—*” He had been so focused on remaining undetected, that he’d failed to notice that there was someone else behind the desk as well: a girl with shoulder length hair, wearing discount Khaki’s and a community center t-shirt.

“Sorry but um, can...can I help you?” she asked wearily.

“Oh,” he began. “No, I uh...” He wasn’t sure how to explain without sounding embarrassingly juvenile. “How... how long have you been there?”

“I guess I got here around seven-ish,” she said matter-of-factly. “Not to be too pushy but seriously, what the hell? Were you hiding from those people?” Her words were inquisitive, but her tone and expression read as entirely disinterested.

“Yeah, I... guess so.” As his nerves calmed, his eyes finally began taking in his surroundings. Beside the girl was a backpack, out of which poured a cornucopia of junk foods and beverages. She sat cross-legged upon a pile of towels, her laptop sitting open on her lap. “Sorry, I honestly didn’t know anyone worked here. There’s never anyone at this desk when I come by in the morning.”

“Well of *course* someone works here,” she started, irritated. “Who do you think folds the towels? Who do you think rolls them to the laundry? Who do you think—uh well, that’s...” she stopped abruptly mid-rant. “That’s actually kind of it,” she admitted, looking off in self-reflection. Art was at a loss for words. He hadn’t been prepared for any kind of social interaction, much less one under such unusual circumstances. “Who were those people? Are you some wanted criminal or something?” she asked in a half

serious tone, looking him up and down with evident disbelief. “Are you going to kill me now? Because if so I kind of had plans for tonight and—”

“What?” Art’s eyes narrowed as he interrupted her. “No what are you even—” he interrupted himself. “Those were my... parents.”

A few moments passed in silence, before the girl burst out in laughter.

“Oh god no, not your *parents*,” she snorted. “What are you, twelve?”

“No!” Art shouted, louder than he meant to. “No!” he repeated, in a hushed tone. “I’m not supposed to be here.”

“What, at the Community Center? Do your parents have a vendetta against physical fitness and smoothies?”

“I’m supposed to be at school.” His eyes shifted shamefully.

“Oh,” she said. “Wait, how old *are* you?”

“*College*. I’m supposed to be at *college* and I’m not and if they see me here they’re going to be like,” Art mustered his best impression of the man who had just walked by. “‘Art, what are you doing here? You should be at school learning how to count and be a big boy.’ And then my mom will give me that *look* and say she’s disappointed in me and I just can’t deal with that right now, ok man?” Art concluded frantically.

Another moment of silence passed between the two, as Art continued to avoid eye contact. “Jeez, that’s a lot of baggage.” The girl shifted a bit uncomfortably. “Well that makes sense. I kind of wish I hadn’t hit the panic button now.”

“*What?*”

“*Kidding!*” she laughed. Art finally met her eyes, to find her smiling and squinting at him with a tinge of recognition. “You went to Mid-Regional right?”

“Yeah, I think we were there at the same time.”

“Sorry, I try my best to block out as much of high school as possible. What’s your name again?”

“Art,” he said, slowly warming up to the conversation.

“Oh my god, you were in art nerd club, right?”

“What?” he began. “No I—it wasn’t—” He paused for a moment of retrospective contemplation. “Ok, I guess it was kind of art nerd club. Yeah that was me.”

“Your name is Art and you were in *Art Club*?” She shot him a skeptical look.

“I’ve definitely never heard that one before,” he said dryly.

“Yeah ok, I remember you now. You were one of those kids who had something in the art show every year weren’t you?”

“Yep.” He was a bit embarrassed at the thought of anyone remembering his mediocre high school art. His obsession at the time had been impressionistic recreations of interesting wide shots from his favorite films and TV shows. “That was me.”

She laughed at his sullen response. “Don’t be embarrassed man. Hey, I was in marching band, we all have our cringey high school experiences.”

“Oh god, you were?”

“Yeah, it was basically a cult.”

“That was definitely the impression I got as an outsider.”

Her eyes looked toward the ceiling, her head nodding as she thought back. “We were actually pretty good though, we made it to nationals my junior year.”

“Oh yeah? And how was that?”

“Well, everyone else was way better than us and we lost in the first round. But we got to go to the Moon which was pretty cool.”

“Man, that sounds awesome. I’ve always wanted to go.”

“Honestly, it was kind of lame. The theme park was fun though,” she concluded with sincerity. “I’m Kate, by the way.”

“Art,” he extended his hand for a shake. She exhaled and smiled as she took it.

“Oh, right,” he continued, realizing his mistake.

“Normally I’d thank you for saying it again because I’m so bad with names, but it’s kind of hard to forget ‘Art from Art Club.’” Art’s embarrassment fell away as they laughed together. “Is it short for something?”

“Yeah, Artholomeu,” he joked as he pulled out his phone to check the time: 9:28 AM. “I should probably get going,” he said, stealing a glance over the counter and checking for any signs of life.

“I wouldn’t worry about your parents,” Kate offered, noticing his anxious expression. “I’m pretty sure I recognized their voices, and it’s usually an hour or so before I hear them leave.”

“They come here that often?” Art thought aloud in surprise. His parents were very well off, it was very unlike them to be seen using public facilities.

“Like once or twice a month. It’s really crazy you haven’t run into them before if you’re really here every morning.”

“Well that makes sense, I’ve only been back in town for about a month. I guess I’ll just have to be *extra* careful if I’m going to keep up with my morning showers.”

“Wow, who do you have to impress?”

“Well there’s this café down Main I like to hang out at, and even though the manager’s my friend I don’t think he’d let me chill if I smelled like the typical homeless person.”

“Wait,” her eyes widened in confusion “Don’t your parents liv—” Quickly realizing her mistake, she cut herself off. “Oh, right. Sorry.” Art offered a shrug of indifference in response. “Dude, that’s rough.”

“It could be worse. I mean, it’d be nice not having to loiter all day, but I save a lot of money on rent. And I don’t need to sleep, so I work a night gig at the motel on the edge of town.”

“Dang,” she said, crossing her arms and shifting her eyes downward in thought. “Maybe I should try being homeless.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it unless you’re also suffering from inexplicable supernatural insomnia.” He stood up and pulled his backpack on.

“Have you always been like that?” she asked, rising from her seated position.

“No, it’s a recent development.”

Kate paused in thought for a moment. “Sounds pretty fuckin’ neat if you ask me.”

Art smiled grimly. “I’m still on the fence about it.”

He waved goodbye to his new friend as he exited through the glass doors. Momo was still laying near the tree, now in a patch of sunlight. “Come on buddy, time to go.” The cat didn’t stir. Walking across the grass over to him, Art ran a hand through his white fur. The ghost cat rolled over onto its other side, showing no intention of getting up anytime soon. “Fair enough. I’ll catch you later.” Though Momo often followed Art into

town, it was rare that he ever spent a whole day with him. Art was unsure how old the cat spirit actually was, but he seemed extensively familiar with the layout of the town. So, Art wasn't concerned about the creature finding its way home.

Art thought back to Kate's envy of his situation. Though he appreciated the positivity, he really wouldn't wish his situation on anyone—spontaneous magical insomnia or not. He missed having a place to call his own where he could kick off his shoes, shut out the rest of the world, and recharge his social batteries. Constantly being in public, even in “private” public spaces like the Community Center's shower, could really take a mental toll on a person.

It was typically the mind-numbing pain of boredom that kept him moving from place to place throughout the day. After leaving the Community Center, he continued to his next daily stop for some reading and Internet access: the public library. He always made a point to say hello to the head librarian, a woman in her mid-forties whose personality, unlike her exclusively beige wardrobe, was quite colorful. Art usually left for lunch around noon, making the long trek back to Main Street to eat and say hello to Aldan. He often hoped his friend would want to do something after he closed up shop at 2, but rigorous class and work schedules left him little time for socialization.

“Sorry, Art,” Aldan said as he leaned against the back counter, letting out a heavy breath that seemed like it had been held for hours. “I've got calculus homework I need to get done before class at four. And I've got to get up extra early tomorrow to make the bagels, so it's straight to bed when I get home.”

Art was disappointed, but he understood. Aldan had big dreams, and he wasn't going to reach them without sacrificing some social time. “Well at least I'll see you

sometime this weekend, right?” Art prompted hopefully as he swallowed the last bit of his club sandwich.

“Yeah I think so! If I don’t get out of the house for some fun this weekend I think I might just blow my brains out.” Their shared dark sense of humor was one of the things Art loved about their friendship. “I actually heard about this party on Friday out in the woods. There’s supposed to be free drinks, and a bonfire I think.” Drinking had changed a lot for Art recently. With no way to sleep off a hangover, he had to be extra careful about how much he drank. Still, he was young and good at keeping hydrated, so he usually managed to have a good time anyway.

“Free drinks are always nice,” Art said, his eyes lighting up before narrowing in suspicion. “What’s the catch?”

Aldan looked away, rubbing his neck nervously. “Well, there are probably going to be a lot of people from our high school there.”

Art’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Oh what? No. Dude, we can’t drink with *teenagers*.”

“No, no,” Aldan shook his head. “Like, people we *went* to high school with.”

Art’s face turned from shock to horror, before exclaiming in his most dramatic inside voice, “*That’s even worse.*”

“Oh, come on, don’t use your dramatic voice,” Aldan pleaded quietly, not wanting to draw attention from the few customers seated. “It won’t be *that* bad.”

“You know I hate talking to people from high school.” Art matched his low voice.

“I’m from high school, aren’t I?”

Art rolled his eyes. “You *know* that’s different.”

Aldan crossed his arms and shot Art a skeptical look. “Well if you didn’t want to run into people from high school *maybe* you should have run away from college to literally *anywhere on Earth other than your hometown*, don’t you think?”

“Alright, alright,” Art let out an exasperated breath and looked away. “I don’t know man. I guess I just didn’t know where else to go.” As he turned back, he realized Aldan had become preoccupied with a malfunctioning coffee machine.

“Sorry,” he began as he looked back to Art. “What were you saying?” Before Art could repeat himself, the door chime rang. “It’s free drinks Art! Just give it some thought, OK?” Aldan turned his attention to the person approaching the counter.

“Fine,” Art begrudgingly agreed as he trudged toward the door. Just as he reached his hand out, Aldan called out to him—but at the same moment, the other café employee started up the blender, drowning him out. Art turned to see Aldan frustrated with the timing, but still trying to speak over the machine. Art mouthed that he couldn’t hear him, before waving goodbye. Whatever it was, if it was that important he could text him when he got off work in an hour.

Chapter Three

Art leaned against the wall outside the café and pulled out his phone to check the time: a bit past one o'clock. He considered his options. He'd recently been spending his early afternoons at the arcade, sipping soft drinks on a worn couch and making his way through their impressively large catalogue of console games. It wasn't too far from the café, just a block down the road on the opposite side of the street. At a reasonable \$8.50 per hour it was a popular hangout for high schoolers, but because it opened at noon it was often entirely empty until schools let out around three.

The *Starcades* sign seemed ordinary enough in the daylight, but Art knew how visually intoxicating the multicolored neon would become with nightfall. Its glow would plunge the rest of the world into darkness. Nearby lampposts stood no chance of matching its iridescence. Teenaged memories of loitering beneath the sign on humid summer nights were forever burned into Art's brain.

Despite its unchanging exterior, as he walked through the door Art considered just how much the local spot *had* changed over the years. Originally a standard 'pay-per-play' arcade, the owner—Danielle Hepburn—had decided to revamp the place a few years back. Two impressively sized HD TVs were mounted on the walls, accompanied by equally large, curved couches. The crown jewel was Hepburn's vast personal collection of consoles and games spanning the past few decades. People still came to play the classic arcade cabinets, but the extensive console game library was without doubt the big draw.

Art had liked the place well enough when it was a traditional arcade, but frankly he'd never liked the retro arcade games very much himself, nor was he very good at

them. He just didn't enjoy the endless nature of the old arcade games. "Play 'til you die" is a pretty depressing sentiment when you stop and think about it. This wasn't to say that he was especially good at console games either. He just preferred games with clear objectives, overarching goals, and definitive endings. Unlike their retro counterparts, console games were designed to be beaten.

A middle-aged woman was comfortably seated behind the counter when he entered, her attention devoted to a thin, soft cover book. "A regular hourly please, and *Dungeon Demons* on PS2." Her hair was frizzy, brown, and speckled grey, and her t-shirt flaunted an embarrassingly old Internet meme of a cat in dire need of a "cheezburger." Putting down the book she had been reading, she moved over toward the register. "And a drink pass too, please," he added. He tried to make out the title of the book from the awkward angle. It seemed to read *The Infinite Void & You*, with a subtitle he couldn't make out.

"Three bucks," she said with a healthy amount of apathy. The nature of the business meant that customers didn't pay until they were ready to leave, at which point their time spent inside would be added up and their bill calculated. Drinks on the other hand, required immediate payment.

Art reached into his pocket, pulling out a lump of wrinkled bills—he was paid in cash for his motel job. He pulled out a crumpled five-dollar bill. Handing it to the woman, he received a swipeable card and a cup. She chuckled as Art tossed his fifteen cents of change into the tip jar on the counter. "Thanks Art, hope the lines aren't too long for you today." He briefly looked around to confirm his assumption that the arcade was

empty as usual. “There’s someone way in the back. He’s been here since I opened,” she said as she leaned back into her chair, returning to her book.

“Gotcha. Thanks for the heads-up Dani.” The woman didn’t look up, responding only with a silent thumbs-up. The console games were in the back, so odds were the stranger was using one. Given there was only one of each, Art hoped it wasn’t the PS2. He filled his cup with cherry soda and started toward the back.

The arcade consisted of two rooms, the main hall filled with classic cabinets, and the smaller back room devoted to the home consoles. He took in the overlapping eight-bit melodies as he moved through the rows. The sounds of dozens of arcade cabinets beeping away from every direction could be overwhelming to some, but Art found the white noise soothing.

He always felt a bit more at ease inside *Starcades*. Its multicolored 90s style interior was charming, if a bit hard on the eyes. When crowded, the place reeked of what could politely be referred to as “teen spirit.” But Dani did an impressive job keeping the place clean, so when less busy the only detectable odor was usually a faint one of copper and ozone. Art had read once that smell was the sense most strongly linked to memory, and sure enough it was the out of place smell that tipped him off: too old to be “teen spirit.” Maybe “zero-aspiration twenty-something spirit” would be appropriate? Art considered turning back as he realized who it was, but knew it was too late. The stocky figure paused his game and turned to face Art.

“Hey,” he pleasantly greeted, a grin spread across his face.

“Riley,” Art groaned. It was his younger brother by two years. “Shouldn’t you be at work?”

“Shouldn’t you be in New Hampshire?”

“Shut up. What do you want?” At this point in their lives together, Art had little patience for his sibling. He was a walking hurricane, bringing chaos wherever he went and enjoying every minute of it.

“Well, it’s a funny story really,” his brother smiled wider as he spoke, like a campfire storyteller excitedly preparing to regale those around him. “I was taking an extended lunch break the other day,”

“Skipping work, got it.”

“And I could have *sworn* I saw someone who looked just like you walk in here. I would’ve followed them in to check, but I wasn’t gonna’ drop \$8.50 just to take a selfie with your doppelgänger. Of course, I mentioned this to Mom and Dad,” Art’s jaw clenched. “But naturally we all laughed it off as an oddity. ‘Wow, what a funny coincidence’ Mom said. ‘Can’t wait to tell him next time we catch him on the phone.’” It was clear his brother was savoring every moment of this.

“Okay, you got me. What do you want?”

“I didn’t think much of it for a few days, but I just couldn’t get it out of my head,” his brother continued, ignoring Art’s question. “So, knowing that if you *were* in town you wouldn’t be able to resist saying hey to your buddy Aldan, I popped on over and asked if he’d seen you. Of course, he said he hadn’t, but...” Art rubbed his eyes as he came to understand what his friend had been trying to warn him about.

“Ald can’t lie for shit,” Art responded with a frown.

“Well, I just thought there seemed to be some discrepancies in his tone is all. So, I figured I’d spend an hour or two in here before it got busy, just to be sure my brother

hadn't secretly returned to town without telling any of his beloved family." As he said this, the knowing smile returned to his face. "That would be *very* suspicious after all, if it were the case." His brother lay back on the couch, his story seemingly complete. "So tell me, are you a doppelgänger or a college dropout?"

"Cut the shit."

"College dropout it is."

"Just tell me what you want, please. This is so absurdly Shakespearean."

"Okay, okay," his brother finally relented. "Honestly, I'm just really curious what happened and why you're leading a secret double life or whatever."

Art recounted the past few weeks to his brother: his senior year anxiety, the five-hour bus ride home, his unusual new condition, his exciting new career in motel management—everything. Riley's grin had weakened to a frown by the time Art's story had reached the present. He crossed his arms silently.

"Not what you were hoping for?" Art asked, expecting his brother to have a few snarky comments prepared by then. Instead, his brother just shook his head.

"Honestly, I was kind of hoping you were on the run from some criminal organization or something. That would've been much more exciting than *this*." Art had to let out a laugh. The response was much more candid than he was used to. "I mean, seriously, the most exciting thing that's happened since you got home was nearly running into our parents? Not a very thrilling adventure."

"Well it's not like your life is anything exciting either. What do you do? Work for Dad, slack off, and play video games? I think comparatively my last few weeks have been pretty interesting."

“Well of course *my* life isn’t interesting. *Sheboygan* isn’t interesting. I was hoping you would have brought something interesting back with you. Something more useful than a glorified sleeping disorder—”

“So sorry I didn’t come back with laser eyes or something,” Art interrupted. He shook his head, before moving around the couch to join his brother. He placed down his bag and drink, rummaging around in the former for a moment before pulling out a small, flat, plastic rectangle: a memory card. Powering on the corresponding console, he switched the TV input to AV and popped in the card and the *Dungeon Demons* disc. As the familiar sounds of the launch screen played, Art offered his brother a controller, who shrugged ambiguously before accepting. As the archaic CG intro animation began, Art prepared to skip it. But as his finger hovered over the button, Riley began to speak.

“I think there’s something... weird going on in town.”

“*In ancient times, a powerful sorcerer released a great evil upon the land,*” a bellowing voiceover announced.

“I thought you were just saying how much you *wish* something weird would happen around here?” Art scoffed, his eyes still glued to the screen.

“*With the evil by its side, the sorcerer wreaked havoc until a group of unlikely warriors rose up to conquer and seal the creature away.*”

“Ok yes, I did. But not *this* kind of weird. I meant a fun weird, a Saturday morning cartoon kind of weird...” he trailed off.

“*But a new, unknown evil has awoken the creature from its slumber once again.*”

“No one believes me,” Riley continued

“The people live their lives in denial, willfully ignorant of the threat at hand as flames lick at their heels.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“And as the creature’s power grows, so does its master’s.”

“Okay, fine. So, what makes this different? Why’s this weird not a fun weird?”

Art finally turned to look at his brother, startled to see his gravely serious expression.

“If not stopped, the world will soon be consumed.”

Art was shaken by his brother’s silence. He turned his attention back to the television, pressing start and ending the intro animation.

“Okay. Shoot.”

—

“I don’t know, it sounds a bit contrived to me.”

“I knew you’d say that,” Riley shot back. The pair was making their way steadily through the first level with no difficulty. The landscape of *Dungeon Demons* Forest of Reckoning was seared into each of the brothers’ brains from the hours they spent trying to get past it as children. “I know what it sounds like.”

“What it *sounds* like,” Art began, as his rogue slashed at a nearby zombie, “is at best the plot of a B-movie from 1951. At worst, something a person stuck in the dreary town they grew up in with no real aspirations would come up with to make their life a little more interesting.” He was doing his best to take his brother seriously given how genuine he seemed only a few minutes earlier, but Riley had a history with conspiracy theories and Art had his limits.

“Ouch,” Riley feigned. “You know I do have *some* aspirations in life.”

“Oh yeah?” Art rolled his eyes. His brother was the only child Art had ever heard of who never went through a career phase. Absolutely directionless. He had never wanted to be a fireman, or a police officer, or the captain of an intergalactic starship. When asked what he wanted to be when he grew up Riley had always responded with the same simple answer.

“Yeah, to be happy.”

Art sighed. “I think you’re misunderstanding the question.”

“I think we’ve got different opinions on what the question should be.” His barbarian cleaved the head off a particularly large zombie.

“Whatever, ok.” Art paused the game. “Just, run through it for me one more time. But less all over the place.”

“People have been disappearing.”

“They’re not disappearing if we know where they are.”

“But they *were* disappeared. They’ll be disappeared for a few days and then pop back up again at that compound down the road suddenly with nothing on their mind except whatever self-improvement spiel that guy on the fliers is spouting. It’s like they’re completely different people Art. People I’ve known my whole life, people who had things they wanted to *do*.” This caught Art’s attention, though he didn’t let it on.

“Ok, so if this isn’t just a standard weird cult running around, what makes you think there’s anything we can even do about it? Just look at that cult out in California, the one with the turnips? The FBI knows all about what they’re up to, but they can’t bust

them because none of the people there will admit to being kept there against their wills.” Riley had no quick-witted response to this.

“Art they’re super evil I can just tell.”

Art snorted. “You said the same thing about the middle school science teacher.”

Riley’s eyes narrowed as his voice lowered. “You *know* there’s something shady going on with that guy and if the guidance counselor hadn’t stopped my investigation I would’ve—”

Art stopped him. “Look Riley, I’m just saying this isn’t your first conspiracy theory. Growing up you had a new one every week. What makes this any different? Why should I care about this?”

Riley stiffened a bit, suddenly looking a bit more mature than Art remembered. “Because I’m asking you to.” He stood. “Look, I’ve got to get back to work or Dad might seriously fire me. I’ve got more evidence back in the clubhouse if you’re interested. If not, I’ll just figure this out on my own.” He turned and began toward the exit at the front of the arcade. “Don’t worry about me telling Mom and Dad about you, by the way. I wouldn’t rat you out,” he called back. The door chimed, and Art was left alone with his thoughts. He suddenly no longer felt much like playing *Dungeon Demons*.

Probably could’ve handled that a bit better.

—

Art emerged from the arcade a little over an hour later. He always tried to head out before school let out and the gremlins showed up, though he was glad the old place

was getting business. He had done his best to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach left from his conversation with Riley, but it still lingered. He scolded himself for getting hung up on what was no doubt just the latest in Riley's long line of bogus conspiracy theories. Though he couldn't help but dwell on the conviction he'd seen in his brother's eyes.

Shrugging off the thoughts for now, he headed toward the park for his usual afternoon people watching. This was without doubt the least exciting part of his day, but he found some enjoyment in it. From a wooden bench he would count the leaves as they fell, a hypnotic activity that always made him feel as if he were just on the verge of sleep. He'd listen in on the conversations of those walking by—the teenagers were always the most fun to listen to. Around four o'clock the little league team would start practicing, and though Art had resented the sport growing up he found a nostalgic pleasure in spectating the mediocrity.

That day he was lucky—the self-help group recruiters didn't approach him. Normally he paid them no mind if they didn't bother him, but after his conversation with Riley he eyed them with a nuance of suspicion as they handed out their colorful flyers. Art didn't particularly care for groups like that, but he'd never sensed anything malicious about them—at least no more malicious than any other semi-predatory pyramid scheme. He watched as a few teenagers accepted a flyer only to drop it a few feet later. The recruiters didn't seem to mind, they had already turned their attention to the approaching group of joggers.

Art didn't feel particularly passionate about many of the issues plaguing modern society, but he did feel some personal investment in the continued existence of the planet.

So it was a quick and easy decision to walk over to where the paper lay and take it to the nearest recycling bin. His curiosity finally getting the better of him, he briefly looked down at the flyer as he approached the recycling bin. With a swirling background of warm colors, the flyer read in bold letters:

CARPE DIEM

Feeling lost? Aimless? Like your dreams are out of your reach?

Come to one of our info sessions to learn about

how you can make your dreams into

REALITY!

The capitalized words popped off the page in a brilliant glowing font. Further down read the address of their small compound on the edge of time, followed by their name: The United Dreamers Association. In the bottom corner was a headshot of a handsome middle-aged man with the name Richard E. Michaels beneath it, along with a list of qualifications: a psychology degree from here, a certification from there, author of this, benefactor of that. It was a genuinely impressive resume, if it was legit.

A hoarse “MeOW ” suddenly pulled Art’s attention away from the flyer. He looked down to see Momo at his side, rubbing up against his leg.

“Hey buddy, nice to see you again.”

He was unsure how long he had been staring down at the flyer, transfixed by its swirling colors. Shaking off the feeling, he crumpled the page up and tossed it. Cult or not, they had nothing to offer him. He had no dream to make reality.

Chapter Four

After the park Art grabbed dinner at his favorite local diner—admittedly, the only one in town. It was a seedy place, just a few trailers linked up and soldered together. But it had heart; it had warmth to it. Art fondly recalled many late nights spent around the tables with coffee and friends. More importantly however, it wasn't a place his parents were likely to pop up. And it was nice that they didn't mind Momo.

Finished eating, he sipped his tea and waited for nightfall. With the cover of darkness came Art's favorite past time. His foot tapped impatiently as his eyes glanced back and forth between the diner TV and the streetlamp outside. The moment it flickered to life he slammed a twenty down on the table, threw his backpack over a shoulder, and was out the door.

Art had been extra careful about getting caught since returning to town. In high school the penalty had just been a slap on the wrist and a phone call to his parents. He had always made a point to only "vandalize" archaic and dilapidated public spaces, so no one really minded. The penalty was more of a formality. In a small town like his this likely wouldn't have changed, but he couldn't risk his parents being alerted to his presence in town. Not yet.

By the time he arrived, the night had smothered the last rays of sunlight. There was a bite to the air that hadn't been there only thirty minutes earlier. This was true October weather, Art thought. He felt a familiar childlike excitement beginning to claw its way to the surface.

Since high school, Art had been focusing his efforts on adding some color to the unfinished train station at the outskirts of the town. It was long, roofed, and built into the side of a hill. Years ago, a politician had convinced the nearby city to expand the reaches of its train system to the small suburb, arguing that it would boost tourist attraction both ways. Because it had been intended to service the entire population of the town, and would be the first thing tourists would lay their eyes on, the plans for the station were grandiose. Even in its dilapidated state, anyone could see what a beautiful piece of architecture it was intended to be.

Typically, once the true expenses of the plan came to light the project lost most of its support. When the politician left office it was altogether abandoned and forgotten. The only evidence that the plan had ever existed was a bundle of paperwork in the county clerk's office and the rapidly deteriorating station.

None of this had stopped Art from making it his personal mission to liven the place up. Several years earlier, he had identified a few large stretches of concrete wall that hadn't been overgrown with ivy and started his work there. The walls of the station were a walk through of his evolution as an artist. His murals had begun as simple flourishes of colors and shapes, but had become increasingly detailed and elaborate as Art honed his craft. He was currently working on what may have been, unbeknownst to him, his magnum opus: *Untitled 17*. He struggled with titles.

Though incomplete, the mural was sprawling and intricate—it was beautiful in the most disturbing ways imaginable. Though it was only perhaps twenty feet long and ten feet tall, its mesmerizing design was such that it could only be perceived in sections at a time. If it were ever seen by someone who knew what it represented, that person would

surely be brought to their knees by the sheer, unfiltered truth it conveyed. It was the closest anyone had ever come to visually depicting an actual living soul. It was an abstract representation of Art's entire psyche.

Art, however, did not know any of this. It's meaning was buried deep within his unconscious mind, well beyond the reach of the most renowned psychiatrists, psychics, and sangrias. He just thought it looked nice. As he approached his work in progress, he identified where he had left off, slipped off his backpack, and kneeled to rummage through its contents. From it he pulled out a powerful electric camping lantern, a bandana, and a can of spray paint.

"Is it a razzmatazz kind of thing?" he asked himself, examining the can. "No, no," he continued, "Maybe xanadu?" While he continued muttering to himself, Momo stretched out and rolled over onto the dusty concrete floor. "No, it's got to be incarnadine, right?" He turned to the increasingly transparent and lightly glowing cat. "What do you think, incarnadine or periwinkle?"

"**MEOW.**" The cat licked itself, looked up at Art, and pawed at the bag. A can rolled out.

"Oh?" He examined it. "Oh, yes. Now *that* is a bold move. Momo, you're a mad genius. Chartreuse it is." The creature responded with a low rumble. Art glanced at his wristwatch: 7 o'clock. He had a good few hours before he had to be in for work, but it was a long walk to the other side of town. He had been a half hour late the night before after getting overly engrossed in a series of swirling cubes.

Art approached the center of the mural, the only blank spot left. He liked to work from the outside in. He pulled his bandana up over his mouth, raised his paint can, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. He could feel the torrent of creativity swelling up within him.

“Hey! Hey, you!” a stern, unfamiliar voice called from behind him, snapping Art out of his trance. “What do you think you’re doing over there?” A powerful light cast his shadow on the wall.

“Ah, shit.”

Art typically wasn’t one to run from the law. He prided himself on taking responsibility for his actions, especially when those actions were cool and would get him high fives at school the next day. But he wasn’t in school anymore, and he wasn’t ready for his parents to know that.

Scrambling for his things, he fled deeper into the station. He would lure the cop in and then quietly loop back around. The darkness enveloped him as he extinguished the lantern, but Art knew the terrain well. He would soon come to a wall, his cue to turn and leap down onto the tracks out of sight. As he did so, he paused to listen. He had to know which side of the trench wall to hide up against. The officer’s rapid footsteps echoed through the decrepit space, but he couldn’t tell from which direction they approached—left or right. It took him a few seconds to realize why. It was the two beams of light that tipped him off—each approaching from an opposite side.

Fuck.

He frantically searched for something to hide under, but the rail trench was just dusty and overgrown. Cornered and with his pursuers nearly upon him, he backed up against the wall behind him. But he was met only by air. Confused, he turned to find that unlike the other tracks, this continued into a tunnel. Awe struck by this stroke of luck, he sprinted in. He was sure it wouldn't take his pursuers long to work out where he'd gone, but with some luck he might not be worth the trouble to them.

Momo had been keeping pace with Art, but as soon as they had crossed the threshold into the tunnel, he had begun letting loose a constant stream of disapproving noises. Art was shocked, having never seen him so distressed before.

"I'm sorry, buddy," he whispered. "I can't walk through walls; this is my best shot."

The cat snorted like a lawnmower revving up, but ceased his noises and continued further into the tunnel. The cat's mild glow was Art's only guiding light. The lantern would have been a dead giveaway. As the pair ventured further into the tunnel the sounds of the officers quickly faded away. Ten minutes into their escape, Art finally had to stop. Panting heavily from the unexpected exertion, Art turned to find Momo looking up at him.

"Don't look at me like that, you don't have to breathe. Being alive is hard work."

The entrance to the tunnel was now far out of sight. The air was dry and stagnant. Art hadn't noticed in their sprint, but at some point the rails had ended. The floor was dirt, the walls made of cobblestone that looked far older than they should have. He didn't

understand how or why, but it was clear the tunnel was much older than the train station it led to.

“Have you ever been down here?” he asked his companion. The cat looked up at him, and Art noticed how the creature’s hair stood on end. Momo slowly nodded once in affirmation. He began walking back the way they had come, before stopping and turning to look back at Art.

“We can’t go back that way buddy—or at least I can’t. Those cops might be waiting for me. You can go though; I can light the way myself.” He tried to turn on the lantern to no effect. “Odd, it was working just fine before.” The cat trotted back over to Art, who offered a few affectionate pets for his troubles. It was clearly itching to get out of there as soon as possible, which made Art uneasy. “Come on, let’s find another way out. It’s clear this tunnel is older than the station. I’d bet there’s another entrance somewhere from before the station uncovered the one we came in through.” The two traveled deeper into the tunnel, until coming across a sleek wooden door with a gold name plate on it. The door was completely free of dust and grime, very out of place in the ancient tunnel that continued further out of sight.

“What the hell?” Art thought aloud quietly as he read the nameplate. “Mr. Penndel?” He looked down at Momo whose neutral expression offered no opinion on the situation. Art reached for the metal door handle and pushed down to find it unlocked. Slowly cracking it open, his eyes widened as he processed what they were seeing. A corner office, the kind one would find at the top floor of a skyscraper. “What...” Art trailed off as his eyes wandered over the room. The wall to his side was adorned with countless prestigious looking framed awards. Two full walls of windows looked out over

a city that couldn't be there. But it was the person seated behind the luxurious looking desk reading a book that really had Art reeling.

“Aldan?” Art cried out in astonishment. The person behind the desk looked up.

“Oh hey, Art. Do you have an appointment?”

“No, I don't have an—” Art started frantically before cutting himself off. He entered further into the room, the door quietly clicking shut behind him. “What the hell is going on here?” Aldan seemed puzzled by this question.

“What do you mean?”

“What do I *mean*?” Art repeated. “What I *mean* is what are you doing in a random room in this god forsaken tunnel dressed up like a CEO. And what the hell is all of this?” he asked, gesturing at their surroundings.

“This is my office,” Aldan replied matter-of-factly. “I work here.” Art's eyes narrowed.

“What do you mean you *work* here? You work at the cafe. Is this some kind of elaborate prank? Are you fucking with me right now?” He turned to look at Momo. “Are you in on this somehow?” But Momo offered no response, and instead began licking himself. He seemed much more at ease since they had entered the room.

“Are you feeling ok? You should take a seat.” Taking the offer, Art fell back into a chair exhaustedly. He looked down at the chair, blinking.

“Was this chair here a minute ago?” Before Aldan could answer, suddenly a third voice joined the conversation.

“We’re so *proud* of you Aldan, dear.” The source was two figures a few feet away from Art, who flinched at the spontaneous appearance where he was certain there had been no one just a second ago.

“Thanks, Mom,” Aldan said proudly, closing his eyes and nodding his head. “I know.”

At this point Art was reaching his limit. His brow furrowed in confusion and distress, his eyes darted back and forth between Aldan and the figures across from him. His eyes came to rest on the book Aldan had placed down on his desk. He walked over to pick it up, not taking his eyes off the pair for a second. It was entirely blank: the cover, the pages, everything. Art looked back to Momo, who was now scratching at the door—an odd thing to do for a creature that can walk through walls.

“Okay well,” he started backing out toward the door hesitantly. “I’m gonna... go now. I’ll... see you later.”

“Okay!” Aldan cheerily replied. “Thanks for stopping by!”

Eyes wide, Art quickly paced back the way he came with no concern for what waited for him at the tunnel entrance—whatever it was, it was better than whatever he had just walked into.

“Maybe the insomnia is finally getting to me,” he thought aloud, his eyes fixed forward. Momo kept up with him but offered no response. “Maybe I really *should* see a doctor or something.” The mouth of the tunnel, illuminated by moonlight, came into view faster than Art had expected. He was certain he had been walking for at least twenty minutes, but it had taken him only about five minutes of speed walking to reach it. He

slowed as he approached, listening for any sign of the officers he had fled from. But the station was quiet, and there were no flashlights in sight. After a few more moments of listening and waiting, he finally emerged. Momo trotted through the air back up onto the platform as if he were simply ascending a curved set of steps. He waited patiently as Art dragged himself out of the trench, pulling at weeds and kicking around for footholds. He hadn't attempted a pull up since high school, something he hadn't anticipated regretting anytime soon.

Finally back on familiar ground, Art let out a deep breath that he hadn't realized he was holding. He had seen plenty of strange things in his brief time at college, but the most unnerving about what he had just witnessed was the way his own friend had felt like a stranger. He shivered and looked up at the sky. Art's face turned puzzled. The moon was much further across the sky than it should have been. He looked down at his wristwatch, listening to make sure it was still ticking: 7:32, and still going strong. On a whim he pulled out his cell phone, which now worked fine and read the same time—until it got a signal. As the bars in the top corner appeared, the time blinked to 11:15.

“What...” Art trailed off, as he squinted at the new time, “the hell?”

Chapter Five

It was about a quarter to midnight by the time Art arrived at the motel, panting and out of breath. But the front door wouldn't budge. No light filtered out from beneath. He turned and looked down at Momo, who was politely waiting behind him.

“He wouldn't close things down just because I was late, would he?” Momo blinked his wide yellow eyes for a moment, before turning to the door and walking right through it. A moment later Art heard the lock click.

It was as cold inside as it had been outside. Momo was making a fuss over by the steam radiator, pawing at it and looking to Art. Understanding, he turned it on. Flipping on the lights offered no insight into the situation—they didn't work. Yet, based on Momo's contentment, it was clear the radiator did. Hot water, but no electricity. It wouldn't have been the first time the circuit breaker had tripped, but that wouldn't explain the locked door.

Art was still deep in thought when the sound of an approaching vehicle pulled him back to reality. Unsure of what to do, he waited in silence. He listened as the car door opened, though the engine was still running. A car's blinding headlights flooded into the room as a silhouetted figure swung open the door. Art squinted and covered his eyes with his hands to ease the pain.

“How the hell did you get in here?” a familiar gruff voice called out as the door closed. It took Art's eyes a few moments to readjust to the darkness, but he knew it was the motel owner—Mr. Adams.

“Momo let me in.”

“Figures,” Adams snorted as he approached his private office door. “I never liked that cat growing up. Always lazing around. Asked my parents once if we could get it exorcised or something, but they wouldn’t have it. Been here longer than they have, they said. Got no right to kick ‘em out.” He continued to ramble as he unlocked his private office door. “Not like it mattered, priest couldn’t do a damn thing anyway.” Momo continued to lay on his side near the radiator, unperturbed by the owner’s grumbling.

“What’s going on Mr. Adams?” Art did his best to shift the subject in a more constructive direction. “Why was the door locked? And where are the guests? And why is the electricity off?”

“So many questions,” Adams laughed to himself as he entered his office. “I’ll tell you what’s going on—I’m finally free of this god forsaken family business. Someone finally bought the land off me.”

“Under new management?” Art asked incredulously.

“No new management. No more motel,” Adams replied dismissively as he collected a few things from around his office into a cardboard box: an ashtray, a radio, a few desk knick-knacks.

“But what about *me*?”

The owner turned to Art this time. “What about you?” he asked, before turning back to his task. “No motel, no job. What more is there to it?”

“Don’t you have to give me notice or something?” As the reality of the situation dawned on him, he was becoming increasingly frustrated with the pace of the conversation. Adams just chuckled.

“Notice? Yeah, sure ok. Here’s your notice: we’re closed.”

“Mr. Adams, I need this job,” Art pleaded, finally following the man into the office. It smelled just as much of smoke as he remembered.

“Look kid,” he turned to face Art again with a softer expression this time. He placed a hand on Art’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, I really am. But this offer came out of nowhere and I can’t pass up the chance. They want the land ASAP, and I think I’ve finally found a place where I can be happy—find the best version of myself, you know?”

Art solemnly looked down.

Who am I to stand in the way of this guy and his dreams?

“I understand.” Art’s face turned to a gentle smile, and Adams followed suit.

“Hey, you know, maybe there’s a place for you there too. Things are a bit crowded right now, but once they build the new facilities it’s gonna be great!” Art responded with a puzzled look. “Here,” he pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his inner coat pocket. “Check them out if you get the chance. What have you got to lose?” Adams moved past Art, his arms full with his box of miscellaneous office items. Art followed him to his car, where he placed the box in his back seat.

He looked down at the paper Adams had given him, which he could now make out in the car’s headlights. He looked up. “Carpe diem?”

Adams grinned as he got into the driver's seat. "Carpe diem, baby."

Before Art had a chance to reply, the car was already pulling away. He stood stunned in the empty parking lot for a few minutes before Momo came out to sit beside him. He slowly pulled out his phone, dialed it, and held it up to his ear. Aldan's voice sleepily groaned on the other end.

"Why am I talking to you instead of sleeping, Art?"

"Can you come pick me up? I think my boss just fired me and joined a cult."