

Ouachita Baptist University

Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita

Honors Theses

Carl Goodson Honors Program

Spring 2020

Our Stories

Paige Wright

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Fiction Commons](#)

SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“Our Stories”

written by

Paige Wright

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Professor Jennifer Burkett Pittman, thesis director

Dr. Benjamin Utter, second reader

Dr. Doug Reed, third reader

Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

May 6, 2020

Our Stories

Horror and How We Got Here

My first memory of feeling absolute and utter horror stems from my father. You have to understand, my father is a large man who, in the right light, is terrifying to a small child. This first memory is from a few days before Halloween. My parents had just bought some of those colored, spooky bulbs (they may have been purple or orange or red, in truth, I cannot remember) and were trying them out in the living room. I simply remember coming down the hallway—I may have been four or five, we definitely still had the dark, 70s style paneling in our house, so I was young—turning the corner, and seeing my dad standing there underneath this eerie bulb, in full Michael Meyers character: the white William Shatner mask, the navy jumpsuit, the motionless stance and stare. I freaked out at the sight of that, and I ran to one of the two bedrooms in the house and hid in the closet behind all of the clothes. Any time after that, if I saw my dad in a Halloween costume or saw a scary movie, I would flee and hide in a closet or hide behind the couch, depending on how intensely I felt about the object of my terror.

But my fears were selective. For instance, fireworks were terrifying for the first eight to ten years of my life, so my parents would stay home with me on the Fourth of July, and we would watch any one of the *Jaws* movies—and every time, I would cry when the shark was blown up. I even slept with a stuffed shark for years—as well as a stuffed version of the Bride of Frankenstein and the Wolfman.

As I got older, I began to appreciate horror movies, yet after the first few attempts of trying to get through a haunted house, I gave up. I haven't been through one since my junior year of high school. I once read a story about how a man at a Halloween party many, many years ago chained the doors of the venue shut and slaughtered everyone there. My brain began associating

that story with haunted houses.¹ Ever since then, I fear any enclosed Halloween space that isn't the store Spirit Halloween or my own Halloween parties. One might think that it is the control aspect of being afraid, and one would be right. I am a self-diagnosed control freak. I hate being scared, but I love to be the scarer; more than once, my husband has been the victim of one of my attempts to terrify him.

Horror, for me—and for many others—satisfies a deep desire that is rather difficult to explain. It almost seems to free me of the stresses and anxieties of everyday life. Reading it, watching it, writing it, and immersing myself in it is an experience that I indulge in as a form of macabre self-care, as it is for a lot of people. There are articles, books, and podcasts about the psychology and the allure of being afraid, of existing in a story of horror. As Dr. Rebekah McKendry states in *Fangoria's* podcast, *Nightmare University*, “Horror is cathartic...it's therapeutic...it's an emotional purge” (“Treatise on Torture”). McKendry goes on to say that most horror fans will admit that horror makes them feel better, that there is something about going through or watching a traumatic or deeply disturbing scene and coming out on the other side that gives people a sense of accomplishment or release (“Treatise on Torture”). However, past that, fear is an ultimately primal reaction; every *normal* human experiences it. As Stephen King puts it in his essay “Why We Crave Horror Movies,” “We also go to re-establish our feelings of essential normality; the horror movie is innately conservative, even reactionary” (517). The horror genre subverts the normal and mundane, making them abnormal, icky, scary—thus reminding us just how lucky we are that this perversion is fictitious and exists only

¹ I also had my leg grabbed in one particularly frightening haunted house, which solidified that story in my mind, but that's just an add-on to my fear of dying in a haunted house.

in our most unnatural and unholy nightmares. In a sense, that is true for me as well. I gain some sort of pleasure from being reminded that the situation I am going through could be worse.²

Past the cathartic qualities of horror, the genre provides an outlet for the stress and anxiety I feel in my everyday life. When I write horror, I can leave this “mortal coil” and become something different, something almost inhuman. I can vent my frustrations through a character who lacks the moral code or spiritual beliefs that I have and thus can do what I could never dare to even attempt. Not that I would ever want to lash out violently as some of my characters do, but we all have had those moments where we want to get mad and say the first unsavory thing that comes to our head or maybe cut off that person who is misbehaving in traffic. We all have that little devil on our shoulders that says, “Why not? Why not react the way you want to?” And writing horror has, in a small way, provided a way for me to give in to that shoulder devil.

Writing horror has also allowed me to explore those things that scare me the most from an objective or even antagonistic perspective, rather than from the position of the victim. I went through a traumatic experience in my early college years, and while trying to deal with that through therapy and the court system, I started exploring the way that I was feeling by writing darker, thriller-styled pieces. It gave me control in a situation that I felt I had lost all control over. I could inhabit my trauma and voice exactly how I was feeling without it being an emotional and terrifying experience. In essence, I could disassociate from my own emotions and observe them in an objective and logical way. This alternative perspective gave me back that sense of control over a scary situation. That is why horror is my medium of choice. Horror acts as an outlet, a

² This may also explain why I enjoy the pop culture phenomenon, “pimple popping.” It reminds me that, yes, I may have spots and blemishes, but at least I don’t have THAT on my face. There’s a sort of reassurance that I am doing okay and that, again, it could always be worse.

mask, and a way to explore troubling issues and situations or emotional turmoil while still maintaining my own sanity and mental well-being.

Horror and Its Influence on My Writing

I have found that the most influential type of horror in my own creative process is slow-paced, unnerving, or psychological in nature rather than gory visuals and jump scares. I loved Shirley Jackson's *The House on Haunted Hill*, not because it made me nervous to sleep with the lights off or feel like something was going to come crawling out from under my bed, but it left me feeling *dirty*. I spent the next few hours upon completing the book feeling as if my body was covered in a film of grime that I just couldn't shake.

My experience with Jackson's work left me inspired. I knew that I wanted to incorporate a similar level of readerly discomfort in my own stories. For instance, in many of them I take a single narrator who speaks directly to someone off the page, much in the same way Edgar Allen Poe does in several of his stories.³ In this way, I want my readers to feel like they are the ones being addressed by this deranged person. In a way, it's like a close encounter with evil. From the comfort of your bedroom, your living room, or your study, you are able to have a conversation with someone that you would normally only see being interviewed in the documentaries that

³ Edgar Allen Poe used the style of "unreliable narrator" when creating his characters. In this way, his readers are drawn into the delusion themselves, and there is always some sad reason for Poe's narrator for going mad. In his poem, "Annabel Lee," for instance, the narrator's fiancée has died. In the "The Raven," the lost Lenore has also passed away. However, in short stories such as "The Cask of Amontillado," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Black Cat," there is a difference in tone, as the narrators in these stories tell of some injustice suffered or some present danger that they cannot pinpoint. These particular narrators thus relate to the audience and attempt to connect with them in this way as many humans at one point or another have experienced some perceived injustice or danger for unexplainable reasons. The problem is, these narrators are in fact mad and act out on their irrational fears, while most humans ignore this fight or flight response and swallow their discomfort.

Netflix releases religiously or in true crime T.V. shows and books.⁴ These criminals explain why they did what they did or didn't do, and they are completely candid. They're just people, having a conversation with another person, like you and I would. But are they? Are they actually being honest? Are they really human? These questions and thoughts are common when consuming this type of media; as the viewer or reader, you know that there is something amiss with this thing that is on the page or screen in front of you. And it leaves you feeling unnerved. That's what Jackson's iconic novel did for me.

But I think that, in reality, it is not just one book or one genre that has influenced my writing style or even what I consume. I mean, if it were true that only *House on Haunted Hill* inspired me, there wouldn't be nods to my other inspirations in my own stories. For example, in the story "Delusional," I send my character on a journey of discovery, one where she systematically goes through the different times and genres of horror, trying to find something that makes her feel scared. This journey mirrors that of the one I have taken in my own personal and educational career.

Let's go back to the beginning of my own journey. I hated Frankenstein's monster because of that evening when I saw my dad dressed as Universal's interpretation of Mary Shelley's scientific experiment. This hatred led me to fear the whole lineup of Universal monsters—Wolfman, Dracula, the Mummy.⁵ It wasn't until reading Stoker's *Dracula* and

⁴ Kate Tuttle explores a particular phenomenon surrounding the genre of true crime in her *New York Times* essay, "Why Do Women Love True Crime?" Tuttle explains that, while men are more likely to commit violent crimes, women are more likely to be victims of violent crime. Because of this statistic, many women try to research and learn more about what they view as legitimate potential dangers to their life and limb. By studying what other victims did right or wrong in these situations, women feel more prepared to deal with the possibility of a violent attack.

Shelley's *Frankenstein* that I developed a deep love for the monsters—they weren't evil, they were just different.

The one monster that I had an unwavering love and affection for was Bruce the shark from the *Jaws* franchise. It was the only kind of horror I could stomach, but it was enough to spark an interest in the genre that would develop as I got older. The next horror movie that I was subjected to that I can recall was the 1980s, made-for-T.V. miniseries version of Stephen King's *It*. I was twelve when I accidentally walked into the room as my two younger sisters were watching it—that movie left me scarred for life. I have always feared the thing I couldn't identify—clowns and costumes, specifically masks or anything that obscures the face, have always left me feeling anxious. Even as an adult, I cannot be near anyone in a mask or heavily painted face, unless I know exactly who it is. I have to know who—or what—is under there. This initial introduction to Stephen King left me with a bad taste in my mouth when it came to his works. I would not watch any of his other movies—*Pet Sematary*, *Cujo*, or *Carrie*; anytime one of these movies was put on, I would either leave the room or tune out what was going on in front of me. In college, I finally took the time to read a few Stephen King novels, and now I am hooked and enjoy many of his works. I even went to see the new adaptations of *It* in theaters, simply because I couldn't wait to see how closely they followed the book and if it matched the feeling it had given me.⁶

My interest in all things dark began to grow as I got older. At the age of fourteen, I began to work backwards through the eras of horror. I started with the 1990s and the *Scream*

⁶ I enjoyed the new adaptations, but I still find the book and Tim Curry's portrayal of Pennywise the Dancing Clown much more terrifying. I guess some things that we experience in childhood just stick.

franchise. Then I watched the *Scary Movie* spoofs based on Wes Craven's original trilogy. The meta and systematic breakdown of the horror genre explored in this franchise gave me a new, almost academic appreciation for it. All of a sudden, I wanted to know why this formula had been picked, how it had been established why the rules were what they were.⁷ So, I went back a decade into the 1980s. I watched a good deal of the classic slashers: *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

It was in these slashers that the pattern or formula for horror movies became much more clearly established in my mind. I could see what Randy had been talking about. However, despite Randy's three *rules* of horror, I find that the explanation of the *roles* of horror as defined in yet another meta movie directed by Drew Goddard in 2011, *Cabin in the Woods*, to be far more helpful when discussing tropes and patterns that occur in the genre. In a basic *American* horror line-up, the writer creates five archetypes: The Athlete, the Whore, the Scholar, the Fool, and the Virgin (*Cabin in the Woods*). However, there are yet more guidelines presented in this movie that a horror flick or book must follow if we are to believe these meta films. The Whore must die first—she's the most "tainted" one. Typically, the Fool goes second, though it is not mandatory, then perhaps the Athlete. The Scholar cannot die until the Virgin has been at least sexually tempted. The final victim, the Virgin, can then either live or die, as long as she dies last. Thus, we have this idea of a virginal heroine.⁸

⁷ Here are the rules of horror movies, as stated by Randy, the movie nerd, in *Scream*: "You can never have sex, you can never drink or do drugs, and never (ever, under any circumstances) say, 'I'll be right back'" (*Scream*).

⁸ This line up is not, however, unique to only American horror. We can trace the virginal heroine back to at least Mina Harker in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. We can also assign each man that is involved with the vampire hunters to the other roles: Johnathan Harker is our fool, Arthur Holmwood and Quincy Morris as our Athletes, Lucy Westenra as the Whore—through no fault of her own—, and John Seward and Abraham Van Helsing as our scholars.

This is just a small sampling of my journey into an obsession with horror, but as you read my own stories and watch my own process, it becomes quite clear that there was not just one influence that led me to my particular choices and style. My whole life I have been storing up things that I liked, things that interested me, and things that terrified me, and I have pulled from most genres of horror (even subfields of it that I absolutely abhor, such as torture porn⁹, albeit subtly) to craft my own pieces. Of course, some influences are stronger than others, but I think that most writers in any genre can tell you that they are influenced by several different styles that exist in their specific genre—it's more of a blending of style in new and interesting ways that defines my own writing.

Horror and My Own Academic Career

As you can see, the more I researched and then watched horror, the more fascinated I became with it. So much so that, in my sophomore year of college, I became obsessed with the horror niche in academia. For my American Literature I class, I wrote my final essay on how the different adaptations of Washington Irving's short story, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," were influenced by what people were scared of at that particular time in history. My research on this topic demonstrated that there was a direct correlation between historical events and what the American people feared at any given point in time. Because of the constant changing of fear, filmmakers and writers often adapted classic horror stories to reflect that particular fear. For example, when the 1960s and 1970s saw a decrease in spirituality and an increase in secular belief systems and activities, there was a spike in Christian horror films being made, such as

⁹ Defined by Dictionary.com as "a genre of horror films in which sadistic violence or torture is a central aspect of the plot." The most common examples of torture porn films are the *Saw* and *Hostel* franchises.

Rosemary's Baby (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973), and *The Omen* (1976). These films were punctuated in the 1980s and 1990s when the Satanic Panic began sweeping over the nation and saw an increase in accusations of witchcraft and devil worship.^{10 11}

I followed this horror adaptations paper up with a literary criticism paper that focused on *Dracula* and the archetypes that occur in that novel that we still use in today's horror. While this essay was more a look at critical theory rather than the horror genre, it still dealt with the genre in an academic and scholarly way, further cementing my desire to research this particular field of academia. While horror will not be the main focus of my future career in law, it will undoubtedly still be a subject that I research and write about for years to come.

Horror and “Our Stories”

So, why did I write these particular stories in this particular style? What am I trying to accomplish here? Well, obviously the first answer to this question is to entertain, delight, and horrify my readers. I enjoy consuming horror, and I am directing my work towards those who also relish in the icky, nervous emotions that horror tends to inspire in humans as a whole. But I also think that there is a kind of social commentary that has been laced through several of these stories. For example, “Bea” focuses on students and how the intense nature of higher education sometimes forces them into unhealthy states of mind and causes them to react in dangerous ways.¹² Along that same theme of mental health, “Delusional” looks at how parents can overlook

¹⁰ For a look at how Americans and religious liberties have been affected in recent years, please see the Hulu documentary *Hail Satan?*

¹² In my high school AP Language and Composition class, my teacher had us read an article about Chinese “cram schools,” where students go to study for the government-sanctioned test that will determine whether they will get to go to college or be relegated to a career in manual labor. According to the article, every year after the test is administered, students feel such stress and anxiety after they have taken the test that, before they even get the results back,

a child's disorders or needs because it is too difficult to deal with them or their problems, and they would rather focus on pretending to be a normal, happy family. This delusion or fantasy of normalcy can force that child into a box of suffering and confusion, until one day their mental health takes a dive and has a catastrophic impact on those around them. Another story that deals with childhood trauma, "Created," looks at broken families and the broken child care system in the United States and how it fails children every day. With a similar theme but in a little bit of a different style, "Midnight Showing" demonstrates how years of systematic emotional and mental abuse can create an inescapable cycle that causes destruction and mayhem across generations. The final story, "Beanpole," takes a different turn from the others by not using the victim or perpetrator as the narrator, but rather focuses more on the bystander effect through an outside narrator and how, in an effort to stay comfortable and not get involved, a lack of action as an individual or society can have devastating results for a fellow human being.

For all of my stories, I chose a first-person narrator. I want my readers to feel like they are sitting down across from this person, having a personal interaction with them, whether it be as an interviewer or a family member or an inanimate object that is just receiving bits of information. I want it to feel real; I want my readers to believe that there is a person out there who told this story to someone or wrote it down, and I am simply transcribing it into a collection of stories or a news article. Almost like a found footage piece—it's the idea that the more it seems that this event could have happened in real life, the more terrifying it is.

My goal overall with this collection was not only to explore my own trauma and express myself creatively, but to show other students and creators and Christians that it's okay to be

they throw themselves from their dorm windows. Now, I don't know if that is still a practice utilized in Chinese education, but that article has been burned into my mind ever since I read it.

curious about subversive or alternative themes, that it doesn't make you evil if you like reading about this kind of topic. Some of the scariest things were written by Christians, like the *Malleus Maleficarum* (a book written on the identification and practices of demons and witches), for the purpose of educating or exploring the spiritual world that they believe is tangible and real. A part of me believes that, if I can put my fears and worries and anxieties on paper, I can exorcise those demons that are lurking in the deepest recesses of my mind and in turn allow good, pure things to take over those areas. Horror is cathartic; it helps you to feel better and release those things that are stressing you out or giving you a sense of fear and danger. Sometimes, it's okay to give in to the dark side...it might even be healthy.

Notes

I have streamlined my notes by including any tangential information or additional research that was not directly relevant to the research included in this introduction, but I felt was still important, here as endnotes.

⁵. But not the Bride of Frankenstein. Now this may be an indication of my early fascination with the idea of a female villain or monster, but it also points to something that Dr. Rebekah McKendry calls “hagsploitation” in episode 5 of *Nightmare University* “Bad Granny.” For example, I wasn’t scared of the Bride—in my eyes, she was actually quite pretty; she had a traditionally beautiful face and her hair was just the right amount of spooky, but not scary. We see this kind of gothic beauty emphasized in the character of Lily Munster, who had the signature dress, pale skin, and shocking black hair with white streaks. But I was absolutely terrified of the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz* movie—so much so that I refused to watch it as a child. The green skin, the hooked nose, the flat, washed-out face, was terrifying. However, as I grew older, I found that I was drawn to the aesthetic of the female villains and monsters in Disney films: Maleficent was tall and commanding, with a fun outfit and a pet crow; Ursula was part octopus, but she did her makeup and had what I thought was a more unique sounding singing voice, and hey, she kept her part of the deal (this also led to a slight obsession with deals with devils and monsters, and how contracts worked and how to find loopholes); Cruella de Ville was fashion-forward. When I attended Arkansas Governor’s School in the summer of 2015, I attended a seminar where a student was presenting his work on “ice queens” and how the film industry had, through classic fairytales, perpetuated the idea that a strong and independent woman was meant to be feared and ostracized, while meek and submissive girls were meant to be praised. This further solidified my love for villainesses, as it validated something

that I had felt myself as a young, emo/gothic junior high girl that it was okay to be dark and non-traditional looking; and it was okay that I often felt conflicted about my feminist views and whether they fit with my Christian values because ambitious girls were not quiet and meek, they were bossy and bad. As I have explored this idea of the female villain in my writing and in my studies, I have found that, contrary to popular belief, having goals as a woman is not wrong—and neither is being strong and independent. That is why I feature several alternative or feminine narrators and characters in my works, I want others to see that there is strength in all people—but also danger.

¹¹. The full scope of this paper, “The Headless Horseman: Supernatural Demon or a Man in a Mask?” focused solely on the adaptations of Washington Irving’s classic short story, with heavy emphasis on how religion and culture have affected horror and adaptations of stories and films. It begins with a look at the original short story written in 1819 when political rivalries and religious superstitions were still prevalent in the newer American nation—including, even then, a strong division along political party lines. It also discusses Yellow Fever and how it had ravaged Irving’s hometown, which may have left him fearing sickness and disease, which then permeated into his writings. This idea of fear in conjecture with outbreaks and diseases has become much more prevalent in our current time period (2020), as the world is in the middle of a pandemic. Dr. Rebekah McKendry discusses in her *Nightmare University* Office Hours segment “How the Coronavirus will Affect Horror” this same notion that, as different circumstances change the things we as a society fear most, the horror genre will reflect those changing fears—in this instance, we are likely to see a large number of movies and books that center around outbreaks, pandemics, and infection.

After the discussion on the original short story, the paper then explores how the horror genre adapted during the mid-20th century and the Cold War. I state:

Horror movies at the time depicted alien invaders, nuclear exposure and explosions, and plagues, not unlike Yellow Fever. People possessed what is known as “nuclear anxiety” in those days and it stemmed from fear of war; specifically, war with Russia, who at the time possessed as many nuclear weapons as the United States did. Although adults were watching these movies with true fear (at this time, it was a widely accepted belief that alien life¹³ was very real and either the United States or Russia would soon encounter it during their Space Race), they were also trying to educate and distract their children. (Smith 6)

Though there were no adaptations of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” aside from a Disney adaptation, this information is relevant to this thesis as it again demonstrates how fear and horror as a genre have changed in tandem with whatever political and societal environment is occurring at any given time.

The final paragraphs of this paper dive into modern horror and the introduction of found footage and political horror, as well as a return to religious horror. This is also a time when more scholars begin to focus on the academic side of horror and how it can be used for social commentary by addressing most of society’s fears. While there are obviously more trends that

¹³ Space was another unknown that people feared. There is actually a religion based on an alien entity (Xenu) and is a religion that has gotten a lot of press lately for its abusive behavior: Scientology. Actress Leah Remini now has a television show that claims to expose the crimes of Scientology (including stealing the money from their bank accounts) and shows interviews of people who have either been forced out or have left the church.

occur within the genre (i.e. independent filmmakers are often overlooked in most genres, but they are often the trend setters in the film industry), this paper mostly focuses on this modern era horror and how it has been affected by our current society and their fears.

Works Cited

- Cabin in the Woods*. Directed by Drew Goddard, performances by Kristen Connolly, Chris Hemsworth, and Anna Hutchinson, Lionsgate, 2011.
- Hail Satan?* Directed by Penny Lane, Hard Working Movies, 2019.
- King, Stephen. "Why We Crave Horror Movies." *Scribd*,
www.scribd.com/doc/87844780/Stephen-King-Why-We-Crave-Horror-Movies#scribd.
Accessed 6 May 2020.
- McKendry, Rebekah. "Bad Granny! Exploring Hagsploitation." *Nightmare University* from *Fangoria*, 27 June 2019, audioboom.com/posts/7300692-nightmare-university-bad-granny-exploring-hagsploitation. Accessed 6 May 2020.
- . "Office Hours-How Coronavirus Will Affect Horror." *Nightmare University* from *Fangoria*, 9 April 2020, audioboom.com/posts/7552711-office-hours-how-the-coronavirus-will-affect-horror. Accessed 6 May 2020.
- . "Treatise on Torture." *Nightmare University* from *Fangoria*, 13 June 2019, audioboom.com/posts/7287109-nightmare-university-a-treatise-on-torture. Accessed 6 May 2020.
- Scream*. Directed by Wes Craven, performances by Neve Campbell, Courtney Cox, and David Arquette, Woods Entertainment, 1996.
- Smith, Paige. "The Headless Horseman: Supernatural Demon or a Man in a Mask?" 2017. Ouachita Baptist University, Arkansas. Unpublished paper.
- "Torture Porn." *Dictionary.com*, www.dictionary.com/browse/torture-porn. Accessed 4 May 2020.
- Tuttle, Kate. "Why Do Women Love True Crime?" *The New York Times*, 16 July 2019.

Bea

I had always been a good student. Hard-working, straight As, the whole nine. But college is different. My first semester I failed three out of my five classes. I almost lost my scholarship. I knew I needed to do better. But, no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't seem to get it right. I felt drained, sluggish, completely unmotivated. By Spring midterm, I had hit rock bottom. That was when I met Jake...and Adderall. For the first time since moving to university, I felt alive. I felt present. I felt focused. I could do anything and everything. Jake continued to help me and support me, getting me what I needed. I began acing everything again. My other friends were worried. They thought I needed a therapist...that I had been sinking into a depression and needed to stop self-medicating and seek actual help. But they couldn't see...I wasn't self-medicating. I was being a good student. And Jake was helping me.

I had never really thought about how school can affect your sanity. I thought that school was just another stint of time in the never-ending trudge of life. Or perhaps it was a brief interlude between childhood and adulthood. A time where you aren't necessarily responsible for survival, but you are considered responsible enough to go to class, turn in assignments, and be overly involved with everyone's lives around you. That is, I never really thought about it until I met Bea. Bea seemed lost, wandering through life like she wasn't really sure where she fit in. I wanted to help because, well, I didn't have a lot of friends either, and she was like one of those old dogs at the pound that they're about to euthanize: you just wanted to adopt her. So, I did. As she started to open up, I realized she was more than just a sad person. This girl was seriously depressed—about school, about everything. Apparently, she was some sort of whiz kid in her hometown who had gone off to college thinking she would be at the front of the pack. Instead, she was just your average, run-of-the-mill filler kid. Decent grades, but because it didn't come easily, she had just given up. So, I got in touch with an older buddy of mine, I think he was a

junior at the time, who sort of ran the underground drug ring on campus. He was who you went to if you were stressed out about a test or your parents, if you had had a little fling and needed to solve a problem, but your parents had access to your bank account, and those were just my reasons for using him. I knew he'd have prescription drugs to help with focus and staying up late, and Bea's depression was really just keeping her down. Her friends hated me because they knew I was supplying her with so-called illegal substances, but they prescribe it to other kids who seem to be just fine, so why couldn't she use it? Plus, it was keeping her happy, so I felt like it wasn't hurting her. The only side effect was the crash. But I told her, "Don't take too much and don't immediately stop, and you'll be fine." There were a few nights after she had pulled an all-nighter where you could tell she was really feeling it, but she seemed alright. Her other friends eventually ignored her because they felt like she was becoming a junkie, as if Adderall was some sort of hard drug. They were raised to think all chemicals were bad, real religious types, you know? But that was okay, because Bea seemed happier without them. She started doing well in school, and she made it to sophomore year without another hitch.

Late that summer, we moved off campus together and rented an apartment for the next year. She had no friends to room with, and I saw an opportunity to make up for the lousy brother I had been to my younger sister. It worked for us. She studied all the time, and I wasn't a huge partier, so our apartment was relatively quiet. However, it got to the point where I rarely saw her. She was absorbed with her classes. She was still taking the pills, but less frequently than she had the previous semester. When she decided to take a mythology class, "for fun," that Spring, I decided to sign up with her so that we could spend more time together, and so that I could make sure she wasn't taking school too seriously. I was starting to get worried. You see, any time I did happen to see her, she had huge bags under her eyes and her lips were always pressed tightly

together as if she were upset or worried. This class was supposed to give her a bit of a break. And it did. For a while, anyway. But then we were assigned our final paper. It was a short research paper, only about five pages, and we were allowed to pick any topic, religion included. After the paper was assigned, Bea started to become even more reclusive.

I was so happy going into sophomore year. I was doing well in school, I was living with my best friend, and I was finally feeling like my old self again...but then Jake started acting suspicious right before winter break. Like he thought I was up to something. He was always asking me where I was going, what I was doing, why was I always studying. That annoyed me. He wasn't my parent or my older brother; what right did he have to stick his nose in my business? I got over it eventually because I knew he was just concerned and wanted to make sure I was doing okay, mentally, so I started doing my homework in the living room. I wanted him to know that I wasn't trying to ignore him or hide my deep darkies...that's what we used to call my depressive states when we first met. The deep darkies. Anyway, that seemed to satisfy him, and when we both came back from the break, we were perfectly normal again. I was determined to put myself back out into the world and signed up to take an elective that I wouldn't normally have been interested...Mythology 101. I was over the moon when Jake decided to take it with me. I was determined that it was going to be my favorite class. And it was. I loved it, the professor, my coursework, Jake...it was all going so well. When the professor assigned the final paper though, I struggled to come up with a topic. I wasn't really into the whole Greek/Roman mythos, and I didn't want to write about other cultures either. I wanted to write something that fit into my major: psychology. When the professor said we could write about religion, it clicked; I could write about the darker side of Christianity—you know, demons, spirits, possessions—and talk about how it had negatively affected the mental health community for years. I guess I began

studying and researching a lot in my room because Jake started to get upset again. But I don't think it's because I wasn't hanging out with him...you see, Jake still didn't know what to write his paper about, or at least I don't think he did, because he was always asking me what mine was about. Well, I refused to tell him because I didn't want him stealing my idea since it was such a good one. So, the more he asked about it, the more annoyed I became, until finally I told him he would just have to figure out a topic for himself and that was that. He finally did find a topic—something about different Arthurian legends and how they impact video games or something, I don't know; he claimed that he had been working on his for two weeks already, but I didn't believe him. However, I went ahead and moved all of my research into the living room, and we resumed life as normal. But then the Adderall stopped working and I felt so sluggish and heavy again, and the deep darkies started coming back...I had to find something to stop them; I had to finish out the term with high grades again, I just had to.

Once I had finally convinced her that I wasn't going to steal her topic, Bea agreed to stop hiding in her room. But after a few days I started to wish I hadn't asked her to. As soon as she started working in our living room again, our coffee table was piled high with books about goddesses, witches, devils, black magic, everything you could think of. Often times I found her sitting on the floor, copying symbols out of books into her notebook and then writing English translations beside them, humming along to what she liked to call “stoner jams.” One day I stopped to listen out of curiosity. It sounded like Pink Floyd's “Another Brick in the Wall Part I,” but the longer I listened, the more I realized it didn't sound quite right. After ten minutes, it finally hit me: she was singing in a different language.

Everything was fine, until about two weeks before that paper was due. Bea became obsessed. The bags under her eyes kept growing and darkening, and she seemed to be in one of

her depressive states—her deep darkies. I would often find her up at all hours of the night, sitting on our couch, wrapped in a blanket and huddled over her laptop, typing furiously. The flickering lights from the T.V.'s glow bounced off the walls as some late-night cartoon played in the background. Every now and then, I would wake up to her banging things around in the kitchen at three or four in the morning, but there were never any dirty dishes in the sink when I got up the next day, nor did she seem to have eaten anything. Bea had become very thin; her arms and collar bones were skeletal and made her head appear almost bulbous in comparison. Again, I chocked it up to a depressive state. I asked her if she had been taking more Adderall than she was supposed to. The look of disgust she gave me told me that either I had just hit the nail on the head or she had converted to her previous friends' "just say no" attitude about the Adderall. Either way, I didn't bring it up again. I could tell she wasn't sleeping, and she wasn't eating. Hell, she wasn't even going to class anymore. All it seemed she could do was read those damn occult books and murmur quietly to herself as she typed. Eventually, I just stopped being in the living room altogether. I would come home and lock myself in my bedroom. I couldn't take it. I know it seems extreme, like I was overreacting, but nothing I said in our many confrontations ever got through to her. I even stopped getting her the Adderall. I couldn't watch her devolve into that husk of a human anymore. So, I just ignored it. Pretended that I was busy. It got weirder and weirder in our apartment. Instead of murmuring, sometimes she would giggle. But not her normal, Bea-like giggle, it was higher pitched, almost like those hiccupping sobs you hear when someone has cried so hard and for so long that they can't cry any longer. Other times, I could hear her talking loudly, as if to someone else, but she would always refer to herself in third person when she did this, so I just assumed she was talking to herself, trying to get her ideas out on paper. Except for this one time when I heard her say, "Bea doesn't want us anymore. Should

we leave?” Then she let out a quick cackle and resume typing furiously. I thought it was weird, but like I said, I couldn’t take it anymore. I couldn’t watch her destroy herself. She was in a deep darkie, but she refused to go talk to anyone about it. They wouldn’t help, she had insisted one day. “No one can help me,” she had said. “The only way I am going to get better is if I finish this paper...”

There was no way I could finish this paper. I was running out of time, and the Adderall wasn't working anymore. I didn't know what to do. That's when I came across this one book, I can't remember the title now...to be honest, I don't think it had one. I don't even remember picking it up in the library...I must've gotten it in that funny little bookstore I visited down on Maine St., the one with all the creepy dragons and masks in the window? My professor recommended it to me when I first told him what my topic was. He told me that the books they had in that store would completely change my perspective on the whole topic...give me a new insight. Well, that book in particular must have come from that store because it had the same cold, old, musty smell that had been near the back of that shop. Anyway, it detailed all of the different ways you could make a pact with devils and what they would do for you in return. There were the usual ways, such as sacrificing a virgin, promising your first-born child, selling your soul, all of those stereotypical things. But there were other ways, too—like completing a task for them or letting them possess you for small periods of time so that they could do “human” things like eating and drinking. And they could do almost anything—give you wealth beyond your wildest imagination...make you a successful magician or singer...help you conceive a child...make you smarter than everyone else in your graduating class. I know, it sounds crazy, but I swear it's the truth, it said right there in dark ink that I could be the smartest person to graduate in my year, if I only agreed to let something possess me for thirty minutes a day and eat

anything it wanted. So, I followed the instructions precisely. I drew up a contract, performed the ritual, and made a deal with a devil. The next thing I knew, I didn't need the pills anymore. I was flying through my classes, acing everything...it was the best high I had ever felt. I never wanted it to end...

I knew something was seriously wrong when she had that nervous breakdown in class. The professor had asked us all how our papers were going. I looked over at Bea when he asked that question to see if she had shown any interest in it. She had her head down, resting it on her tiny arms, as if she couldn't bring herself to hold it up anymore. When the professor said her name, she lifted her head. All she did was—smile. I watched as the skin around her mouth began to tighten oddly, turning down almost as if she were about to cry, before turning up into a sad imitation of what used to be her big, toothy grin. There was something cold, ominous, about the way that tightness slowly spread across her teeth, dragging as if pulled by some unseen force. Instead of crinkling at the corners like they do when a human smiles, Bea's eyes remained large and round. I noticed that the tired dilation of her pupils that I had seen earlier had somehow gotten—wider. The green irises were now just narrow trim around a black pool of nothingness. Not even a hint of the stress I knew she had been feeling over the last month appeared in those hollows. I looked around at my classmates to see if they were witnessing the same thing, if they noticed how off it was. They were all staring at her, confused by what was happening, but I saw looks of outright terror on several faces. They knew something bad was happening, but they couldn't look away. I looked at our professor. He acted as if this was something he was used to—something he saw all the time. I didn't have time to dwell on that though, because those weird, hiccupping laughs I had grown used to were starting to come from Bea's parted maw, as if she were trying to make her smile appear more natural by laughing out of it. These giggles

grew into a louder cackle, before finally culminating into high-pitched screams. Tears were pouring down Bea's face as she continued to laugh through that terrifying smile. Before we knew it, two other professors and the school nurse burst into the classroom, and soon Bea was guided away to the nurse's office two buildings over. As her roommate, I was called and told that Bea had simply experienced a nervous breakdown due to tremendous stress. They told me that they had sedated her and, if I was fine with it, they would have her escorted to our apartment where I could put her to bed until the drugs wore off; she had a therapy appointment the next morning.

Of course I was fine with it. Bea was practically my sister. I even went and picked her up from the nurse's office and drove her home myself. I put her to bed around five in the afternoon. Then I went to bed around nine.

I woke up to a familiar flickering light in the living room. I thought maybe Bea had gotten up and was hungry, so I decided to get up and check on her. As I walked down the hallway, a noise made me stop. Bea was giggling. But not that creepy, hiccupping giggle from class—it was the low-pitched giggle that Bea made when she was excited or happy and trying to hold it in. She was okay. I kept walking down the hall and called out to her. “Are you okay?”

“I'm okay,” and then, “I just finished my work. Come see.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. She was okay. It was all going to be okay. But before I could get to the doorway, a face popped out from the bottom of the door frame, like it was crouched low on the other side of the wall. It was the same face I had seen in class that day. Mouth pulled back into a toothy shark's grin. The eyes black with wild excitement. The skin pale as if all of the life had been sucked out of it. It wasn't Bea. But it was. She let out another normal laugh, then slowly backed out of view. Then, just as suddenly as she had popped into view, I heard an ungodly, hideous roar. I felt hot and cold all over, as if my body had just been pushed into an icy

lake. It was every creature that had ever cried out, in reality, in fantasy, on film, screaming in cold, uncontained excitement, terror, and pain all at once. I heard a clattering across the floor and before I knew what had happened, the thing that looked like Bea popped into view again and rushed down the hall, crawling on her hands and feet like a deranged crab, her mouth hanging open, that scream erupting from the gaping black hole. And just as quickly as she had rushed me, she stopped right in front of me. Her breathing came heavy and quick, labored. Then those quiet, growling words came just as they had before. "Get. Out."

I don't know what happened that day. One minute I was sitting in class, the next I was at home and Jake was gone. I guess I just lost track of the time...I am always doing that, you know; half the time I forget to eat until after midnight and then I'm starving. I guess part of it was the deal I had made, but I had talked to loads of people in that store, and they swore up and down that they had all, in some form or fashion, made a similar deal and it hadn't affected them at all. But I don't know what happened to Jake. I haven't talked to him since that day in class; it's been three days, and I'm starting to get really worried; that's why I called the police. That's why I'm here now.

Like I said, I haven't seen or heard from him in three days. Have you? Please tell me if you have, I'm so worried...what do you mean, "What did I do?" I just told you, I lost track of time; I don't remember...I want to go home. Where's Jake?

Beanpole

I had just pulled into the parking lot behind Target. Ya know, over on 6th street, the one right by those woods and that river...oh, what's the name? Anywhosies, that's where I had to park cause that's where I work. I always show up thirty minutes early, to sit and watch the river and drink my coffee, and I noticed that that little girl, the new one, I think her name is Michelle, was in the wrong parking lot. I'm very observant, ya know, always the first one to notice when something's out of place.

Well, just as I was 'bout to get out my car and explain to her that that's NOT where workers parked, WE parked in the back, I noticed a squirrel carryin' a piece of trash. Well, I wanted to help the poor thing out, so I says to myself, I says, "Gladys, just cause you ain't had a rabies shot don't mean you cain't try to wrangle that piece of nasty trash away from that there squirrel so that he can find hisself a nice nut to eat instead." So, I go to get out of my car, but the squirrel just run off, fast as you ever saw, into them woods, and I decided that if God wanted to save that squirrel, He'd send an angel or somethin' to wrestle that junk away from him.

Then I went back to drinkin' my coffee and watchin' the river and I 'member thinkin' that it was just such a pretty day and it couldn't get no better than this...it was such an awfully pretty today, dontcha think? I almost had myself a nap right there in my car, but, you know how it is when ya start agin' the body just cain't get comfortable like it used to. Gotta have all these Temp-purr-pedics and what not to support ya bad hips and knees and backs. Plus, it had been about fifteen minutes, so I figured I had better go ahead and go clock in.

Now let me tell ya, I been workin' retail for twenny-five years, and I know what a full moon does to folks 'round here. They start actin' like wild baboons, I tell ya. No wonder there are so many weird and creepy things 'sociated with full moons, like werewolves, 'cuz people lose all sense of human decency when one comes around. And I read my farmers' almanac this

morning, so I knew that today was the night for a full moon, so I had prepared myself for the worst. Now you may be thinkin', "Well, Gladys, you work the day shift, what does it matter if there's a full moon at night?" but let me tell you, when you're one of the few places to get cheap booze and it comes a full moon night—God forbid a weeken'—people gear up for the craziness. I tell ya, it was awful. These folks were comin' in with their little'ns, lettin' 'em run wild through that toy section and knockin' clothes off the shelves. That was the longest eight hours of my life that I can member, and I been livin' a long time, been through some long days and nights. Today beat 'em all.

Well, after that shift, I was just about ready to crawl out to my car, could barely feel my feet as it were, and wouldn't ya know it, I swear to God above—and my mama, too—that I saw that same gosh darn squirrel with anudder piece of trash sittin' by my car. Well, I just swung my purse in his direction, and he skedaddled his happy butt off back into them woods. I got into my car, cut it on, then stopped to watch the sunset. Oooh, it was such a pretty sunset, all purple and pink and orange. "People just don't appreciate the little things no more," I says to nobody in particular. Well, it was right then that I saw a little girl go runnin' off into them woods and I thought to myself, I says, "Now, Gladys, that li'l girl's parents are probably gonna be mad as all get out when they see she got them nice high heels and that pretty pink sweater all muddy." They looked mighty expensive and she couldn't be more than eighteen years ol'. Well, right after that, there went this big, tall guy followin' her, walkin' real fast, like he was on a mission. And so, I put two-in-two together and I says out loud, "Gladys, them children are doin' things their parents would be mighty ashamed of, you oughta go snatch 'em both by the ears and drag 'em home to their folds." But I din't do that, cause I ain't one to interfere in other people's biness.

Well, I just drove myself home, had a nice, hot bath, then sat down with one of them teevee dinners, ya know, the ones ya microwave up and eat without havin' to cook? Well, me and my honey, his name's Bill, we sat down with them teevee dinners and we turned on the news. They was showin' a picture of this little girl named Brandy Evans, nineteen years old, who had been missin' for three whole days. They said that the search for her was over; some Target employees on a smoke break had found her body in that river by the parkin' lot. They were sayin' she had obviously been held prisner cause her wrists were all bruised and cut up, and her face had been hit and broke in several places. Then they said...they said her neck had been snapped in half...that she'd only been dead about two hours before they found her...they was askin' if anyone knew anythin', to come down to the police station and give a testimony.

So, I says to Bill, I says, "Bill, I think I done saw that girl. Yes, I know I did, cause I recognize that there sweater, and I saw that hair. I think I oughta go down to the station and report what I saw." So now, here I am.

Can I identify her by a picture? Well, I reckon I could.

Oh dear...I...I wasn't expectin' her eyes to be open...that poor li'l girl...Hm? Oh, yes, that's her. That's the girl I saw runnin' through the parkin' lot. Why didn't she yell for help, there were so many people there? My God...her tongue?

The boy? Oh no, I didn't get a good look at him. The sky was getting real gray by that time, ya know, sunsets don't last too long. He was tall though, taller than some of them professional basketball players. Real skinny, too, a regular ol' beanpole. White.

Hm? Oh yes, I'll let ya know right away if I 'member anythin' else. That poor lil girl. Looks like a chicken with her neck snapped like that. Her poor parents. You just cain't trust no one nowadays. Damn full moon. Have a good night, officers.

Created

You might be wondering, “How did we get here?” I think everyone has some kind of moment like that where they either thank their lucky stars that their life turned out the way it did, or they curse whatever god, deity, or sentient being they believe put them in their current situation. My moment came on a Friday, December 21, 2002. I was sitting at home, watching the fire crackle and slowly liquifying my brain with whatever concoction I had decided was “the best damned thing I’d ever had” that month. Nothing stayed the same in my life. I couldn’t keep a job, a boyfriend, a whiskey or wine, a drug, or even an apartment without getting too bored and needing the next new and exciting thing. Maybe it’s because when I was a kid, I had nothing. No parents, no siblings, no house. I had been left on my own, at three years old, to find a new life, a new family, a new home. Technically, the orphanage was supposed to do that. Technically, the nuns were supposed to do that. But they didn’t...or maybe they couldn’t. Either way, it doesn’t really matter. All that mattered was that I had had to create something from nothing.

“Well, why don’t you just get married,” you ask? If I were anyone else, I would tell you that you’re too young to understand these things, but I think that that is a valid question, and it’s one I have often asked myself. A lot of children who grow up feeling unloved or in an unstable environment often seek out love in a sexual partner or perhaps even in having a child themselves. I had seen lots of girls try that, with varying levels of success. But I was always different. I didn’t really like the boys—oh, I liked them well enough, not in that way. I wanted to be one of the boys. Of course, I had my little trysts, we’re all human, we all get bored and desire human touch, but it never felt right...not like a family would have. I never could fill that void with a partner, so I knew that I could never replace my original family by creating my own biological one. No, I was not born to be a parent—responsible, loving, nurturing. I was born to be a child. To be loved and cared for by someone older and wiser. To depend on someone for everything and be

responsible for nothing. Once I realized this ultimate truth about myself, well, I had to find another way to get what I so desperately wanted. What I had needed my entire life.

So, I started trying to figure out how to create a family. As I have just told you, I couldn't biologically create one with my own DNA, it just didn't make sense, logistically. So, I started reading books, magazines, Facebook, whatever I could, searching for some kind of science that dealt with adoption, children—family created outside of the womb. An obvious first read was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but that seemed a little too on the nose. Besides, I didn't want zombies for parents, I'd have to take care of them, feed them, keep them contained. No, that just wouldn't do; I was not born to fulfill the role of responsible adult but dependent child. Well, I moved on to reports about test tube babies, but, again, I didn't want a baby or a child of my own—too much work. I had pretty much given up after a few months...it turns out, not very many aged-out kids find ready-made families to join up with. Loads of them did interviews about how they had “finally realized what true love and family was when they met their best friends or spouses or church groups.” But that wasn't me. I wasn't supposed to forge a family that way. But that all changed that one evening, remember the one I mentioned? I ran across a very interesting read that night. It was an article about Jeffrey Dahmer on December 21, 2002. You know, the guy who ate people? He had been developing a way to create loving partners who would never abandon him. He had come pretty close too...but they killed him before he could perfect his method. Well, that sounded like just the thing I was trying to do. I spent hours upon hours researching him, taking notes, watching documentaries, anything I could do to figure out what he had used, how he had used it, what had gone wrong, and what had gone right.

My first attempt to create a family had been sloppy...but I didn't beat myself up about it because I was learning, I told myself. I hadn't figured out the right ratio of chemicals. The

sedatives were too strong, too much chloroform had gotten into their systems, and it was a complete mess. My new sister had died first. When I wrote about it later on in my journal, I suggested that perhaps it had been her size that had caused her end to come about so violently and quickly. I can't remember how old she was, but she was a tiny thing—kind of like your, I mean our, brother over there. I remember thinking how very small she was as I watched her lying there. Her eyes had bulged, terrified, as the foam had begun to drip from her mouth. Her body had convulsed a few times, then lay still. My new mom cried then. I rushed to comfort her, but she had shrunk away from my hand, and...well, and I got angry (I could never get angry at you, don't look so worried, silly). What I did next I'm not proud of, but you have to understand, a mother rejecting her son so coldly, just because I had an accident? It hurt. I got up and grabbed one of my extra syringes and ran to the kitchen. I was sure she kept her cleaning supplies in the double cabinet underneath the sink...every mom did, according to all those family sitcoms I had watched when I was feeling especially lonely and depressed. I had grabbed the bleach which was front and center, filled the syringe, and ran back to the living room. I plunged the needle into her chest. I didn't want her to suffer, I tried to get close to the heart...but I guess I missed. You could see the chemical burns sort of rising through her arteries, reddening the skin above. She took the longest to die. My father and brother had already gone through their own medically, yet accidentally, induced deaths by the time mom had finally stopped retching and bleeding and lay still, motionless, in her chair that she had tipped over. I had stayed in the house that night, sobbing over my poor families' bodies. I left the next morning.

Oh, I was very sorry for what I had done. I even called the police from the phone in the hotel I had been staying at...well, more of a hostel than a hotel, but it was all I could afford back then. I felt especially guilty over my mother...she was why I picked that family you know. She

was a stay-at-home mom, just like the ones on T.V., and she always had snacks for the kids after school and kept the house clean and never cried or got angry. She was loving, strong—a perfect mother. I had met her in a grocery store. She had a pot roast in her cart; I had frozen dinners in mine. She had my sister with her at the time, I guess my brother was in school. I remember watching the way she interacted with the little one and the cashier. She even stopped a little old lady, who was in line in front of her, to tell her that she had dropped a five-dollar bill as she had put her wallet away. That's when I thought she was supposed to be my mother. She was so kind and thoughtful. After she had paid for her groceries, I quickly paid for mine and followed her. Some deity that cares for orphans was smiling on me that day, because I was just able to get her license plate as she was driving away. I looked her up, found her address, and decided I would need to research my family so that I could be a good son and contribute to it—I think that's probably why my first family got rid of me. I wasn't a good fit for that particular family; they knew I was destined to belong to another. I didn't want to be one of those sullen teens that you see who doesn't appreciate their family. I wanted them (my new family, this family...our family) to know I loved them. It took two whole months before I finally got the courage to meet them and finally complete our family. Well, you can see how well that went. I guess I had been wrong about fitting in with them...but everybody makes mistakes, and I continued my search because I knew my family was out there somewhere, waiting for me to come home. Every person I met, I made sure to listen to my gut, to see if I felt a deep bond with them...

That's how I found you, you know. But it wasn't mom this time. It was you. You were hanging out with your friends, Brittany and Jessica, in that McDonald's over on 1st and Pine. You seemed so happy. And that's when it hit me...I knew that I was supposed to have an older sister then, that was the part of the family dynamic that had been off the entire time. That's why

all of my previous families hadn't worked, don't you see? At first, I tried to form a bond with my mother. The first few times, my mother and my father were easy to persuade to let me in. My father was always smaller, more submissive. But then my luck ran out. My fourth mother was married to a football coach. I barely got away that night. I came back a few weeks later and killed the cat because my family had rejected me again, had abandoned me because I wasn't the son that they wanted. I know it wasn't very nice, but I struggle with impulse control sometimes, according to the therapist the nuns had made me see. So, I tried to pick better fathers. But then I ran into the trouble of older brothers, and by family six or seven, I knew that I was missing something, that something was wrong. So, I gave up for a while. I went about my life, alone and abandoned all over again. But then I saw you...and it all made sense. Of course those other families hadn't worked before. I needed to find my sister. My confidante. My supporter. It's hard being lost in your identity, you know? But if reality T.V. is to be believed, older sisters always help their younger, confused siblings. So, I followed you. Oh, I was so scared those first two weeks. What if you saw me, what if you recognized me, what if you didn't like me, what if you didn't want me as a brother? But then you let me know that you did. You saw me. You looked right at me on the street one day—and then you had smiled and nodded at me. And that's when I knew that it was time, that I had finally found the right family, that you were inviting me home.

I've finally gotten it right this time. My ratios, my methods, my family. It all feels perfect this time. Please, don't scream. You see, I'm not some simpleton like Jeffrey Dahmer. He drilled holes in young men's heads and filled their brains with acid because he never wanted to be alone in bed. It was sexual in nature, that's why it was all screwed up...it's why it never worked. It was impure, unnatural. But, you see, I don't want that. All I want is a family, and that's perfectly good and natural, everyone should have a family And, this time, by God, this time, it's going to

work. Can't you feel it? Aren't you excited? Our family will finally be complete. You can go first, since you were the one who found me. Now, please, hold still, it'll only take a moment and then you'll see...we'll all be one big, happy family.

Delusional

They say we are incapable of human emotion. That we fear no thing, no man, no devil. They are probably right. I have never felt love for another human, not even my own mother. I have never experienced the joy my peers seem to feel when they meet a cute dog or baby. I have never been overwhelmed by grief or sadness; not even when my sister died. But none of this ever seemed to bother me. I guess I had never realized that I was supposed to feel those things. Not until I went to my first scary movie at sixteen with a group I called my friends, anyway. As I watched scenes of tension, anxiety, and horror wash over the screen, it didn't register that I was supposed to feel something, that I was missing out on something. It was the people around me who clued me in to my particular oddity—they were all screaming, jumping, their eyes bulging in terror when the blonde girl on the screen's throat was sliced open, a thin ribbon of blood blossoming across her neck; their bodies tensed as the man in the mask stood motionless, wordless, outside of a window behind the tall football player before shattering the glass and gouging him with a hook, ripping him from groin to sternum. I, too, remained motionless through each of these scenes. No, I didn't grin like the movies suggest those like me would, fascinated and thrilled—excited by the carnage. Instead, I felt the first emotion I had felt since I was five when I first experienced the pain of a skinned knee after falling off of my bike. What I had felt that day was something my mom had explained to me as “frustration.” I felt it again, sitting in that theater seat...like there was some sort of wall in front of me and if I just tried hard enough, I would be able to feel what they felt. That was the day I decided I was going to scare myself into normalcy.

I started first with the classic movies. *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *The Mummy*, all promised terror. None delivered. They were all too grainy or too forced or too dull to really get into past the iconic characters. I then advanced into the sixties, and their obsession with alien invasions.

Rather than creating a sense of dread, I felt a sense of understanding. Maybe, just maybe, I was an alien, too. That would explain my fascination with human emotions and why I, a supposed human, was incapable of experiencing them. But no, I had seen the birth certificate after stumbling across a box of old keepsakes in the attic one day while searching for a long-forgotten relic of my sister—she had died in an accident a few years before I graduated high school. Along with the certificate was a VHS tape on which my birth had been recorded...even that stirred nothing within me. I felt no repulsion at the sight of me, red, wet, and wrinkled, as I exited my mother's stretched and contorted body. I felt no sympathy as she screamed in agony as the doctor's realized too late that I would not make it all the way without some extra room, so, without any medication, they proceeded to cut my mother open wider to allow for my bulbous head. I felt no horror at the sight of her, bleeding out upon the hospital bed, as the doctors began CPR before shocking her awake. With such a violent beginning, it made sense that I had grown up desensitized to the world around me. Maybe I'd been this way since birth...maybe my birth had made me what I was. It might have also explained my affinity for violent video games which, contrary to popular belief, did not make me violent in turn. As you can guess, they didn't affect me at all.

The eighties slashers were next in my journey through scary movies, but they only resembled the same movie that I had seen the day that I had realized I wanted to feel the fear that seemed to come so naturally to every other human around me. I kept watching though, hoping to wake up something that I believed had to be there. I was human, I had proof of that, so I must HAVE emotions. It was only a matter of uncovering them, digging them out of their grave. They were there, just hidden. That's what I believed.

Next were the torture movies. With this category, I felt the slightest twinge of something. I spent the rest of the day re-watching the one particular scene that had caused the sensation until I could finally put a word to it...revulsion. I was ever so slightly repulsed by the cruel, weird, grotesque ways that this character had created to kill people...or, as he had put it, teach them a lesson. It wasn't the gore that seemed to stir my feeling; rather, it was the fact that this person was trying to insist that they were doing good for the sake of humanity, that they were going to instill a moral into someone through violence. I knew this was wrong. I had been taught this since I was very young. Violence is always wrong...violence is not a teacher, and teachers are not violent.

But I reveled in that pinched nerve. Finally, I had felt SOMETHING. And not just something—it was the closest I had gotten to connecting with my humanity, with others' humanity. I wanted to hold on to it, to never let it leave my grasp. So, I watched that scene every day; it was on a loop in my head, just as visible and real as it was on my DVD player. I held on to that disgusting, icky feeling until I finally tricked myself into believing that I was feeling the full capacity of revulsion. In truth, it was just a smidge of real revulsion layered over my typically static psyche.

Four years I held on to that delusion. I had convinced myself that I needed to feel, that I wanted to feel. But, and without even realizing it, that hint of emotion had faded back into the recesses of what one person had angrily coined my “dead, unfeeling, black soul.” I had just stared at them, accepting their rage as I had my father's, my mother's, and my sister's. They were right. I knew that. If they weren't right about me, my lack of feeling, then their words would have stung and I would have—could have—cried, raged back, screamed, pleaded—I knew that's how a girl was supposed to react to this rejection; I had read enough books, watched

enough movies, searched enough beds trying to find something in the void that was my own soul to know what I should have felt. Instead, I sat there, stood there, laid there, slowly blinking in the glare that was the natural human response to someone, something like me—fear. Confusion, anger, frustration, sadness, yes, but mostly fear. And I relished, too, in this moment, these moments. It was as if I was able to feel vicariously through the people who so desperately wanted me to. But only for a moment...then it would be gone.

Humans intrinsically know to fear the solitary, the unfeeling, the lone-wolf predator. At first, I had been confused by this immediate reaction to my presence. Why would someone fear me—I had never grown much past twelve, I always seemed sickly and weak, a “bad immune system” according to our family doctor. I was incapable of opening heavy doors by myself, much less hunting, or harming, another human. It wasn’t until I began reading classic political scientists my senior year of high school for a civics class that I truly understood this fear. Many studied human behavior and found that, naturally, psychologically perhaps even biologically, we are singular, selfish beings. The only reason we have become pack animals and developed these extraverted personalities is out of fear of each other...we have a need for the protection of society. As predators, we seek the biggest, the best, the tastiest morsels. We are competitive. We want to win. And if there are winners...there are losers. The defeated. The hurt. The eaten. So, humans joined together, seeking to win as a group or to at least prevent one individual from becoming the biggest winner, thereby shrinking their own chances of losing. But I was a predator that had not developed those fears. Nothing could eat me. And I did not want to eat anything. I simply existed, a shell of an animal that could, without warning, develop a taste for winning.

But as inhuman as I was, I tried. To fit in. To be normal. I clung to my revulsion and perfected the façade that I had created when I was eleven. Up until then, my mother had

convinced me, and herself, that once I hit puberty, once my hormones went wild, I would be a normal girl that had a favorite color, a favorite food, that could look at her and say, “I love you,” or, “I hate you,” or who could get excited about good things, sorrowful about the bad. When I experienced my first period, I went to tell her and she cried, “Finally, my baby girl is going to be okay.” Her tears, anyone’s really, have always signaled to me that I should be feeling something, so I put on a smile and said, “I am so happy, Mother.” And since then, I have lied. My favorite color? I chose yellow, for the dress that I wore when the homeless man a block away from our house had leered at me until he realized that it didn’t scare me like the other kids—now he avoided my gaze. My favorite food? Carrots, because it is the one food my sister refused to eat so someone has to. I have attempted fights with my parents, but they are just another part of my mundane existence.

But sometimes, that façade cracks. Once, when I was fourteen, my sister, who was six at the time, fell out of a tree and broke her arm. Instead of rushing to her or to my mother for help, for anything, I sat and continued to read the book I was reading. I could hear her crying, screaming in pain, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t experience it, so it wasn’t real. My mother finally heard her and came running. My father screamed at me, “Why didn’t you do something?” I just looked at him and said, “I must’ve not noticed. I am sorry.” His eyes darkened as he realized that there was no change in me...but he didn’t say anything to my mother. Maybe he wanted to believe that if she didn’t know, if he shielded me, I would be grateful—but that’s not how people like me work. Deep down, I think he knew that. I think that’s why, when I was twenty-one, he hung himself from the railing in my childhood home. But that wouldn’t happen until I had gone to college—for seven years, my father spent any alone time he had with me drinking. Deep

down, I think my mother blamed me for his death. I think that's why she did what she did. I suppose that's fair. I probably was to blame.

But before my father's death, I experienced the second inkling of an emotion I have ever had my freshman year of college. I had decided to take a general biology course. I still wasn't sure just what I wanted to major in, so instead of taking CLEP tests to avoid the first-year courses most people try to get out, I decided to take all of them to get a taste of everything. The class was at nine in the morning, so most people still had sleep in their eyes and that dazed, hungover look most freshmen have, even if they weren't out partying until four a.m. You know the one. You've seen it in your barista, your cashier, your high school teacher. The look that says, "I want to be anywhere but here, be anyone but me." That glazed, half-dead look that seems to creep into young mothers' eyes as their babies begin to cry again after keeping them up all night. It was on one such bleary-eyed morning that our professor, Dr. Cox, decided that we would be dissecting pigs' hearts. I remember perking up a bit, thinking that maybe my revulsion would kick in, that I would again feel something. I wasn't wrong. But it wasn't revulsion this time. Instead, as I watched the students around me slice into the sterile, smelly organs in front of them, watched the faces of some contort in fascination, disgust, horror...I smiled. I didn't know what this feeling was, but it was crashing, pouring, washing over me as if someone had just released a valve in my cold, dead soul. I began to laugh when one girl across from me shuddered as she reached her forceps in to extract or poke around some artery that we were supposed to be identifying. Quietly, at first, then a bubbling, gleeful noise just began to break out of me. If I am being quite honest, I think I even snorted a little bit. That's when the rest of the class turned around to look at me, but I didn't care. I finally felt SOMETHING.

But, just as quickly as it came on, it had passed. I went back to work without a second thought. However, later that night, I played the scene again, over and over. I texted my mother. “I laughed today. It felt good.” I expected her to be thrilled, ecstatic. Her baby girl had felt something. The sickly, weird, emotionless thing that had clawed its way out of her eighteen years ago had finally been mended. She never texted back.

After that first class, I went immediately to my advisor. I had decided to become a biology major. Maybe I would go into nursing. Maybe I would work in a lab. All I knew was that I needed to be there for every intimate, gory little part of it; to watch the emotions play out on my peers’ faces as I volunteered to examine the frogs, the cats, the cadavers first. And I was good. Turns out, human emotions get in the way of working with dead things, human or otherwise. Without those to inhibit me, I soon rose to the top of my class. However, I still couldn’t connect to my classmates or professors the way I knew I should. Because of this, I was still passed over for opportunities to work in labs. I was still avoided. Who could ever trust the giggling thing that enjoyed cutting up bodies—more importantly, the one who watched with wolf-like intensity when someone else was doing the cutting, an odd, predatory grimace that didn’t quite reach her eyes spreading across her face with each slice? But that was okay. I was feeling. And that’s all that mattered.

Three years later, my father died. I went to the funeral. I wore black. I stood with my mother dutifully receiving condolences from family members who couldn’t quite meet my gaze. I was used to that—making others uncomfortable. My mother cried. As soon as I could, I excused myself to the restroom. Everyone wanted to believe it was because I was so overcome with emotion that I couldn’t stand the thought of being in the room with my father’s corpse anymore and simply had to get away to cry on my own. Still, most thought it was because I

didn't care. No one could guess the real reason I had for fleeing the scene. It's true, I couldn't stand being next to my father's body anymore, but not because I was so overcome with grief...no, it was because, the night before at the viewing, I had been seized with the obsessive desire to examine the cadaver. I wanted to dissect it and put parts of my father under a microscope, see what made up part of me. To cut it open. I hadn't been able to shake that desire since I had first seen him lying there in the coffin, this body preserved, ready for dissecting and viewing. I knew it would be just like the bodies I had examined before...but this time, it was different. It was like I was possessed, I just had to see what was going on in there. See what made it tick, move, be...and maybe figure out just why I was the way I was. But, I couldn't. Soon, the body would be buried, and I would go back to school, destined to perform my desires on another body, another set of organs, another nervous system. One that wasn't connected to me. It was more than I could stand.

I went back after the funeral had ended. There had been no graveside service, so the body had remained in the funeral home. I stood there in the room where it was being kept, just staring down at the body for a few moments. It wasn't fair that the one thing that made me feel, made me tick, couldn't be shared with my father. He would never get to experience my newfound emotion. Instead, someone else had taken my place. Someone else had gotten to experience the joy of draining the body's fluids, cutting into its flesh, removing its organs. It just wasn't fair. I was its offspring. Didn't I deserve that experience, that moment? I decided I just had to see it. The workmanship of the person who had taken away my birthright.

It took a lot of patience and a little luck, but I finally got the body smuggled past the security cameras—I had previously asked the attendants and one lone janitor for some extra time to mourn my father, so they had all retreated into rooms away from ours—and transported the

body back to my apartment four hours away. I still don't really remember how I did it. I guess I just disassociated. The time flew though, as the thought of finally sharing this moment with the body, finally getting to experience any moment with it, bounced around my mind. I was ecstatic.

I had just begun the procedure when I got the call. "We know," my mother had said. "Don't fight them." Five men in white suits had shown up then, and they quietly led me away, leaving the body on my dingy floor on the tarp I had carried it home in. I whispered a goodbye, and they brought me here.

Now that you've heard my story, you understand. I am not a danger. I am not crazy. All of those things you read out over the intercom simply could not have been me. I understand why you are staying behind the mirror. I would too, if I thought that I had done all of those horrible things. But now you know. I simply wanted to experience an emotional moment with the body...my father. It's what every little girl wants. You see, I never felt anything at all, never wanted anything at all up until three years ago, why would I, a child who desired nothing, hurt those animals? It was probably the neighborhood cat. You know, they are the serial killers of the animal kingdom. And why would I have been involved in robbing all of those graves? You know that I am a biology major at the local university, I have access to as many bodies as I could ever need, this was just a one-time thing. I'm not crazy. I'm not. How can somebody who feels nothing be crazy? How can something that feels nothing be anything?

Midnight Showing

Sometimes, he takes us to midnight showings. Those are the best. I really like the ones that are in black and white. He calls them who-done-its, but all I know is that there's always a good guy and a bad guy. When one of these is on the big screen, I try to sit right beside him on the blanket and when I do, he asks, "Okay, son, who's the good guy and who's the bad guy?" Sometimes, I get it right, but most of the time I'm wrong. It seems like the good guy always loses in these movies, but he says that that's how it is in the real world...people who are good and do the right thing and try to help usually lose. That didn't make sense to me when he first said it, but he just laughed and said that when I was older I would understand.

Another reason why I like the black and white movies is that there's always a really pretty, nice-looking lady who tries to help. She reminds me of mother. I never get to see mother anymore, he says that the sons are supposed to learn from the head of the household, which is him, so when we reach Walking Age, we get to move to the big boy playroom. I liked the playroom with mother in it, but I love my new one! There are more friends to play with, and it's got blue and green walls with a biiiig window and lots of toys. The big dinosaurs are my favorite. Sometimes he comes to visit and he plays with us. He makes the best dinosaur noises. But that's only when we've been really good. Sometimes we are really bad, like when Tommy broke the big vase over in the corner of the playroom when he threw a ball on accident. He came in sooo mad, we all got really scared and tried to hide, but Nurse told us to line up against the wall instead. Then he asked us one by one who had broken the vase. He told us that, if we told the truth, we could go to a midnight showing. We told him it was Tommy. He offered his hand to Tommy and Tommy took it and they walked out of the playroom together. We didn't see Tommy again for a week. That made me sad because I liked to play dinosaurs with Tommy; he was a little bigger than me, so he could make almost as good of dinosaur noises as him. When Tommy finally came back, he

just sat in the corner for a few days. He seemed sad. I tried to cheer him up by giving him a dinosaur, but he yelled at me. That made me cry. But I forgive Tommy, he's a nice friend; he was just upset about breaking the vase and being put in time out, that's all.

He came to visit us a few days ago. He said we were all getting so big that pretty soon we would have to move to the Young Man room and start playing in The Yard. That made me really excited but also really scared. I didn't know what there was to play with in The Yard, but every night at evening meal, I saw the young men come in and they always seemed really sad and bored, like they weren't having any fun, and I didn't want to not have fun. But I knew that it was going to happen because I was reaching the Sinful Age. I had learned all about the Sinful Age from Nurse when she was giving us our daily lessons in the playroom. We spent all our time in the playroom, unless we were at a meal or having night time. I don't like night time, because it was the only time of day where it gets reeeal dark, and I'm scared of the dark. When I was with mother, she used to hold me any time I would be scared during night time, but then one night he came in and yelled at her for doing that. Then he sent me back to the night time room. I don't know what happened after that, but I think I heard mother crying. But that was normal. Mother always cried around him. She said it was because she loved him so much. One time, before I moved to the big boy playroom, I asked her why he didn't come see us every day. She told me it was because he had to go visit all of the other mothers and their little ones. I didn't understand that at the time, but after I moved to the playroom, I understood that there were lots of little boys that had mothers that came from the Infant Rooms. I liked the big boy playroom, but I didn't want to move again. I was scared of The Yard and the big boys. They looked mean. But he said

that we must, so we will be moving up soon. He said it was a good thing, and I trust him, so I will try to be a good boy and be happy.

We are going to another midnight showing tomorrow. Now that I have been working in The Yard for many days, I have started to wonder why I ever stayed in the playroom. In the Yard, we get to do things like chop wood and paint fences, which is really fun because we get to get dirty and be outside, and we don't get in trouble for it. The only time I or any of the other brothers, as we were now called, had ever been outside before The Yard were at the midnight showings, when we would sit on a blanket on the grass for two hours. I had never been in the sun before, and that made me sad, because it was a very pleasant warm feeling that I really liked. I hated the rain though. It was cold and after a day out in it, a lot of us would feel really bad and our Watcher would tell us we had a "cold," and then we wouldn't be allowed outside for three days.

But I am excited about this midnight showing. He told us that, since we were all well into our young man years, it was time to meet girls. I didn't know what that was, since I had never heard the word before, but he told us that that was what our mothers and Nurse had been. He said we would find them very interesting, especially since we were in our Sinful Age. He said that he had picked a showing where there would be lots of girls. He said there was only one rule: we weren't allowed to talk to anyone, including the girls, while we were there, unless they approached us, and we were absolutely forbidden from talking about him or The Group. At night time, most of the brothers were whispering about meeting girls. Secretly I hoped that no one tried to talk to me so that I could focus on the showing. Even in my young man years, I held on to the black and

white showings that I had so loved in my big boy years. I still played the guessing game with him, too.

We met the girls. I even talked to one. She was really nice, and so different from what mother or Nurse had been like. She seemed like she was in her own young man stage; she did not have lines like mother or Nurse, and she did not have the same smell that they had had. It was a good smell, not harsh. It was like a sunny day. She sat by me during the showing and, while I wished that she hadn't so that I could sit by him and play our game, it had been nice to be so close to that warm, outside smell. He had nodded at me in approval when she had sat down next to me, which made it much easier to get over the disappointment of not getting to play the game.

We have moved to the Big Yard now. My brothers and I have entered into the Growing Age. He says that the work we are doing in the Big Yard is helping to support the family. We have been growing all sorts of things in the Big Yard, and we work day and night to make sure that all of the crops are kept healthy and harvested on time. A few of us are sent to what he calls the Farmers' Market every seventh day to sell what we have grown. It doesn't seem like much money, but he says that it helps the family live and prosper, so we do it anyway. We aren't allowed to talk to anyone but buyers while we are there. He says it's to keep the family safe. I trust him because he has taken care of us for many what he calls years now. He has been teaching us words like this in the Big Yard, to help us learn while we work. He says that it is good and right to be exhausted both mentally and physically at the end of every day, so he teaches us while we plant and harvest to work our minds, too.

My brothers and I had a conversation at noon meal today. One pointed out that we hadn't seen any of the older boys in a while. When we first moved to The Yard, they had all moved to the Big Yard. But he hadn't told us what came after the Big Yard yet. We had no clue where they were. I thought that was kind of weird, but when I asked him, he put me in time out and cancelled our next midnight showing. I was ashamed. I should never have questioned him, and I knew that I deserved to be punished. After that last time out, I never asked another question.

He told us that we would be going to our last midnight showing ever tomorrow. He said that this would be the most important midnight showing we had ever gone to. It would be at this showing that we would each pick a Bride. He said that finding a Bride was important to help the family continue to grow and survive. He didn't tell us what a Bride was, just that we were to pick one girl that we liked and point her out to him. He said that the Brides would then be put to a test; if they succeeded, the young man and Bride would be rewarded—if the Bride failed, then the two would be subject to a time out in the Chamber. None of us knew what was in the Chamber, but we knew that you didn't want to end up in the Chamber. Sometimes, brothers who went into the Chamber never came out. Sometimes, they came out, but they seemed different. They were also sent to work in the Kitchen and not back out into the Big Yard. He told us to be careful and choose wisely—and we all tried. No one wanted to go to the Chamber.

At the last midnight showing, the Brides were picked, but they didn't come back to the Home with us. After we made our selections, we were told to sit and watch the showing while he did some work. He took out this really strange object and began pointing it at each Bride. When we

asked what he was doing, he told us it was called “reconnaissance.” We didn’t ask any more questions after that.

After the showing, Brides began showing up at the Home one at a time over the course of a few weeks, but they were kept in a different building to the East of the Big Yard. He said that they were undergoing their tests. When someone asked what the test was, he simply said that they were being looked over by another Nurse to make sure that they were capable Brides. No one knew what that meant, and I guess he could tell, because he told us that the tests would ensure that the Brides would be able to become mothers, like the ones that we had had.

After all the Brides had arrived and were being tested, he took us into what looked like an indoor midnight showing in another building that was about a mile away from the Home. We had never been there before. There, he showed us a movie that showed a young man and a Bride together. He asked us if we understood. We said yes. And somehow, that was true.

After two months, we got to meet the Brides. A few hadn’t passed the test—the young men who had picked them were led to the Chamber to their time outs. It wasn’t until a few weeks later that we realized that they had never come back. Each pair got their own room after that. It was hard at first...some of the Brides hated being at the Home. They spent their days screaming and crying, hitting and kicking and biting us if we got too close to them. He took these Brides to time out a lot. But after several months, they had all calmed down and grown to love the Home. Soon, many Brides were swelling up around the middle. We were all confused at first, but he told us that soon we would have a new crop of infants. Some of the Brides panicked. We found one that

had fallen out of a window in the Home. He and her young man took her body out to the Big Yard. We never saw the young man again. He said that he had been sent to time out in the Chamber for not watching his Bride more carefully. We put bars on the windows of the Home the next day instead of working in the Big Yard so that the rest of our Brides would be safe while we were away during the day.

The first infant was born yesterday. The brother's Bride had doubled up in pain at the morning meal. He had rushed over to her and her young man, bent down to look at the floor under her skirt, and then announced that the first infant of the season was on its way. A Nurse was called for, and the Bride was rushed off to the building near the Big Yard. The young man was allowed to skip work in the Big Yard to be with her. We heard her screaming all morning. We hoped that our infants didn't come for a long time after that. None of us wanted to hear our own Brides in that much pain...we loved them. A few hours after noon meal, he came out holding something wrapped in a blue blanket. He held it up in the air for us to see, and we all cheered. Then a few brothers noticed the Nurse exit the back door of the building with a similar looking bundle but wrapped in pink. She had her head down like she was crying...but we just assumed these were happy tears and looked back to him and the blue bundle. We had a huge evening meal that night in celebration.

My Bride woke up in the middle of the night tonight crying. She told me she was scared to have our infant. She said that if it was a girl like her, it would be taken away like the first Bride's. I told her that there was nothing to worry about, that we could trust him. I don't think she believed me, but she'll see, there's nothing to fear from him.

We haven't seen the brother whose Bride had her infant first since that evening meal. We asked him about it, and he said that he had been given Father's Leave, something we would all receive once our infants were born. That excited us, because we all wanted a break from working in the Big Yard. We hadn't been to a midnight showing since the Brides had been picked, and those had been our only treats we had ever gotten since leaving the playroom. Every day had been the same. We knew the big boys after us had still been getting to go, as they hadn't been moved up to the Big Yard with us yet, nor had they picked their Brides, so we knew that he hadn't stopped going to see. We all wished we could get to go one more time, but he told us that as men and fathers, we were the providers and not allowed any entertainment. That was our duty to the family, just as it had been the men before us when we were but big boys and young men. So, we all looked forward to our Father's Leave and would work hard until then.

My Bride went into labor this afternoon. I was in the Big Yard when it happened. He came to get me, told me I had to be there for the birth of my infant, and that my Father's Leave would start now. I was excited, but I was also afraid. I asked him why that could be, and he said that it is always nerve-wracking to become a father, but not to worry, that he would help me. But that didn't make me any less afraid. I walked beside him, worried.

I had never been in the building by the Big Yard. I had never really wanted to. As we got closer to the door, I could hear my Bride crying out in pain. It hurt me to hear her. We walked through the door and into a very white room. There were no windows, only white, cinderblock walls. My Bride was laying on a metal bed, surrounded by two Nurses dressed in white and a man I had

never seen before, also dressed in white. He was seated in front of my Bride's legs, as if he were waiting to pull something out of her. He was. After a few more sharp screams from my Bride, the infant slipped out of her and the man handed it to one of the Nurses. Suddenly, the Nurse started crying. I couldn't understand why, but I had an overwhelming desire to take the infant, my infant, away from her and leave the building. Instead, I watched as she cleaned the small, quivering mass of pink and goo and then present it to him, who had been patiently waiting in a chair in the corner of the room. He took my infant from the Nurse, looked at it for a minute, and then told her to take it and get rid of it. My Bride began screaming again as the Nurse turned around and exited through the back door.

My vision went just as white as the room, so white that it blurred. My ears seemed to stop working too, and I watched as he said something to the other man and then turn to leave. The man took a sharp instrument from a metal table beside the metal bed and inserted it into my Bride's neck. She stopped screaming and her eyes seemed to droop. He stopped at the door and told me that, due to the failure of the infant, my Bride and I would have to be taken to the Chamber. I just nodded and looked at my Bride again. A tear trickled down her cheek, and she took a shuddering breath. I sat beside her and told her that I was sorry. He told us that the Doctor would escort us to the Chamber at midnight. Before he walked through the door though, he turned around and told us, "Not to worry. Lots of couples have failed, yet the Family survives. I'm taking a group of young men to a midnight showing tonight. Hopefully they'll find adequate Brides, and soon we will have more infants. Don't worry. You did your best. Good-bye."