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The Little Devil

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THE LITTLE DEVIL

A Thesis

by

STEFAN PENA

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

August 2021

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THE LITTLE DEVIL

A Thesis
by
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August 2021

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ABSTRACT

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The Little Devil is a series of moments in the life of a character named Boy. The story follows a loose plot that jumps around different time periods and states of mind of the protagonist in an imaginary town that has elements of both a small midwestern town and a semi-arid desert.

Mr. Crow, a local entrepreneur, and Irene who owns the local diner are both heavily involved in the lives of other citizens and use secrets as a form of currency. However, Mr. Crow uses his knowledge for personal reasons while Irene simply wants to know truth.

Although it is a coming-of-age story of sorts, the story is organized to convey the idea that time is not linear in a person's development. The past, present, and future as well as the many different influences of other characters shape Boy's mentality as well as his memory.

DEDICATION

To my family both chosen and biological who have shown me how to love and forgive.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank the chair and committee members for teaching me new creative techniques in writing. Thank you for introducing me to literary works and poetic forms I would not have chosen to explore. As well, the feedback and patience have been invaluable in developing my artistic senses.

Second, I would like to thank my fellow MFA Creative Writing students that have workshopped most of the work presented here. Their perspectives and experiences have helped refine and solidify the vision I had for this work.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Having lived much of my childhood on the southern border and another significant portion in Indiana, I wanted to combine the two settings within the imaginary town. Some landmarks, like the shrine in the chapter “The Shrine of Fire”, are based on actual structures that are significant to the town in which my family has lived in since its inception.

There are other small nuances I recalled from childhood that helped bring the town to life, I think. For example, the panadería in my hometown was known to have roaches crawling in the cases where the pan dulce was kept. No one seemed to mind though; and it is still open to this day. Little bits of reality like that I think help breathe life into this conceptual world. However, at the heart of the story are the relationships and memories of relationships that form the mythos of the town.

Much of the belief system of the story comes from Boy’s own perception of reality, though occasionally the narrator or another character will pull the point of view. The characters that play an important part in influencing Boy are usually named after birds although do not necessarily personify the behavior of their namesake. This was done to mask, in a sense, the true name or nature of each individual alluding to their character as it mixes with Boy’s own. For example, Raven Lady’s real

name is never said by Irene or any of the towns people. Boy names her this because of her observed behavior, the feathers always attached to her, and the type of birds that seem to follow her.

The concept of masking a true name is used to convey or acknowledge that there are unseen facets of each character's life that either the narrator does not divulge, or Boy does not know. As well, there is a significant amount of cultural symbolism and preconceptions that come with traditional naming. Just naming character's English names of birds and animals already causes the audience to place them in a specific cultural context. The name "Boy" was also chosen to describe the protagonists lack of self-identity outside the confines of the town and those around him.

Vital to Boy discovering his identity, there exists the shadow self which Boy must constantly wrestle. Eventually he comes to understand it as a part of his deeper desires. This is referential to the Jungian concept of the self and how it can be examined. However, in this story the shadow self is separate from Boy and acts as both guide, guardian, and at times the proverbial devil on his shoulder. This being is only present in Boy's mind as well as several other figures that relate to psychological phenomena such as the scarlet haired woman that exists in his visions. Together, Boy, the shadow, and the mysterious woman form a single identity.

In many Western mythological traditions, there are a series of three divinities or spiritual beings that either act independently or make up a single concept. In Greek myth there are the three brothers: Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades as well as their Roman counterparts. In ancient Celtic traditions and modern paganism there exist triple goddesses representing the mother, maiden, and crone or past, present, and future. Even in Christian sects and other monotheistic religions the idea of a holy trinity is prevalent. The idea of three is central to the mythology of the story because of the third culture, or idea, Boy assumes to embody which is his persona forming from character interactions and his

environments meshing. Boy straddles between both the artificial and natural world as well as the mundane and fantastic.

There are also some popular superstitions that are incorporated into the story. The presence of a black cat has meant many things to different cultures. Some see it as an omen, others as a guide or protector. In the story, the appearance of the cat usually means a reality shift and change in perspective from the protagonist's view. As well, and perhaps not fully flushed out in this version, is the dog as a symbol of death or transition to other worlds. These two animals act as binaries and symbols for entrances and exits, push and pull, guide and guardian, as well as initiation and mastery.

The diner also teeters on the edge of realism and fantasy. It is central to the town because it has become a social and political hub. It also sits on the border of the wilderness and more industrialized world. In much of early American literature, the forest and wild in general were viewed with suspicion. In the puritan mindset, these places were viewed as homes of devils and devil worshipers. Many early sermons from notable literary figures like Cotton Mathers and other religious figures used language that denoted the wild needed to be tamed or that God delivered the wild to early settlers. These natural areas were and still are considered sacred in many indigenous cultures. In this way, the diner stands counterpoint to the wilderness as the artificial temple created by industry, human intervention, and modern social practices.

There are allusions to Western and Eastern mythology as well as folklore from Mexican-American culture. The essence of what is trying to be captured is the in-between space. The concepts of "nepantlism" as defined by Gloria Anzaldua as being, "an Aztec word meaning torn between ways" (100 Anzaldua), is central to Boy's moral development especially as family secrets and secrets of those around him are revealed. This creates a mixture of ideologies and spiritual values that are hopefully captured in the story. Spirituality found in the South Texas region and Northern Mexico,

modern paganism, traditional curanderismo, and Catholicism or Christianity in general intermingle to create new spiritual perspectives like that of Santeria. Many of these are also influenced by worldwide indigenous spiritual traditions as well as larger religious traditions. Anzaldua coined the term “la mestiza” meaning a woman of both native and Spanish descent or, “a product of the transfer of cultural and spiritual values of one group to another.” (100, Anzaldua).

In this story, the concept of nepantilism is employed to create a character, albeit a gay male, going through the process of “constant mental nepantilism” to the affect that this transfer of values from other characters create the mestiza-ism within Boy. In several ways, Boy is in between several cultures, the culture of business with Mr. Crow and faith and spirituality with Irene. As well, these two prominent characters share very different values when it comes to the use of secrets. As previously stated, Irene barter secrets to simply gain knowledge and eventually become closer to a grand, in this case mythological and not philosophical, truth. Mr. Crow, on the other hand, exchanges secrets for power and prestige either for himself or his family. Boy must choose, at some point, on how he will use his knowledge and the secrets he encounters for either self-interest or to protect or empower others.

Secret and information management can create an elaborate and costly system as described by Mark Harrison in his article “Accounting for Secrets”. He provides an overview of the system used by Soviet Russia and the KGB to manage secret documents. This included classification, distribution, storage, and accountability. He also provides a comparison with US intelligence agencies such as the FBI who at times simply did not see a need to document or report their activities (1023-1025, Harrison). The costs of the secret state were high especially without contemporary computing and electronic file management software. This idea can be applied to the theoretical component of this story to describe how laborious it is to use secrets effectively. They must be cared for as well as

properly classified and secured so others will not find them. Management of secrets in this way also extends to memory and thought processes.

Like the use of secrets on a macro level, such as found in Soviet Russia and US intelligence agencies, Carol Smart, a researching sociologist, explores the dynamics of secrets and memory within family units. She explains that the significance of family secrets has at least three aspects. These include power, or retention of power from outside forces or weaker members of the family; family configuration (or roles) based on a social institution; and the idealized family (540-541, Smart). Reproductive secrets and sexuality especially have a profound effect on the family as they question the legitimacy of kinship or cause disruption in expectations and roles. There can also be considerable legal consequences depending on location and time that these families exist. These secrets can also be kept alive in family memory and almost mythologized to either promote the moral values and power of one part of the family while labeling another as lesser, according to Smart. Applied to this story, the narrator allows the reader to see actions or secrets of some characters before Boy does. These secrets, such as those kept by Irene and Mr. Crow, tend to limit Boy's understanding of the world and his relationship with it.

From an anthropological perspective, Gilbert Herdt anthologizes several studies in an essay on secret societies or rather collectives found in Oceanian cultures such as those found in Papua New Guinea. He also compares similarities to Western secret collectives and describes several cultural theories and the purpose and effects of secrets within society.

The secret world emerges from traditions in which persons are forced into conflicts with other individuals, the funnel through which temporal, spatial, and sociopolitical forces are sealed and implemented in their ontologies. The power of the secret is to charm its purveyors into feeling that its existent is immortal; that is conception of

human nature and society are immutable even when outside of this reality change and mortality are so close at hand (377, Herdt).

Applied to this work, several characters are aware of the other worldliness and power that secrets provide. However, they must continuously collect and seek out new material as their own realities change on an interpersonal level and in the external world.

When speaking of genre, and the best mode to convey the power dynamics and ability of secrets to change reality, many elements of low fantasy are used. Greer Watson differentiates low fantasy from the fantastic and magical realism by stating,

In fantasy with an apparently primary-world setting (low fantasy), the rational primary-world world view is shared initially by the protagonist and the other characters in the story, but not by the third-person narrator, who is omniscient and knows better. The protagonist is soon enlightened, but most people are not. Unlike magical realism, therefore, low fantasy maintains the primary-world rules of reality, even when the protagonist no longer believes in them, because there are other people in the story who still do. (171, Watson)

The narrator is aware of reality even though they are centered around Boy's perspective. The protagonist enters alternative realities and slowly begins to develop the narrator's awareness as well. This is done to give the effect that memory and time are fluid within the life of an individual. Instead of a linear structure, the narrative attempts to arc from important periods in Boy's life that have shaped his perspective and ultimately changed the world around him. Several other characters, mainly those belonging to the secondary world, know of the existence of different worlds or the supernatural that exists tangentially with the primary world.

Much of the folklore and allusions to folk magic or curanderismo come from *Bless me Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya. The scene where Ultima cures the protagonist of “el susto”, which can be translated to fear, especially had an impact and influence on the chapter “The Shadow” as Irene cleanses or battles with a shadow that has invaded Boy’s room as a child. The relationship between Ultima and Antonio can also be related to that of Irene and Boy, though the power dynamic is explored a little more as Boy grows older through the story.

There is also a strangeness to Ultima that breaks conventional wisdom, at least in the region that the setting of this novel is trying to imagine. To elaborate, Ultima’s familiar, or spirit guide, is an owl which is linked to her and is possibly her in shapeshifted form. “And with Ultima came the owl. . . I knew it was her owl because the other owls of the llano did not come that near the house (13, Anaya). In the folklore of South Texas, Northern Mexico, and many other traditions, the owl is almost always associated with black magic and witchcraft. However, Ultima is only portrayed as a practitioner of healing arts and a force of good. This decolonizes indigenous spiritual practices that had been demonized by the Eurocentric perspective. That viewpoint is made known in Anaya’s story with Ultima’s confrontations with Tenorio who sees her as evil because of her non-Judeo-Christian practices and beliefs.

“He crossed his fingers and held the sign of the cross in front of Utlima’s face. She did not budge. Tenorio gasped and drew back, and his three cronies pushed their chairs to the floor and backed away. They knew that the sign of the cross would work against any bruja, but it had not worked against Ultima” (93, Anaya).

The use of spiritual guides or associations with animals is also used in *The Little Devil* as Irene is constantly paired with goose imagery. This is directly influenced by Ultima’s characters. However,

the owl was not used to show that Irene's background is more migratory just like the Canadian geese found in much of the American Midwest.

Another big influence has been Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza* because of the combination of two major geographical influences on the story's setting: the Midwest and the Texas Rio Grande Valley (which is itself situated on the border between Mexico and the US). Anzaldua's concept of "la mestiza", or the creation of a new identity when two cultures interact, is central to the protagonist's character. She states in her book, "*Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions..." (103, Anzaldua). Throughout her book, she uses similarly poetic language that is elemental and spiritual in nature which the language of *The Little Devil* tries to imitate. If nothing else, the traditional ideas of good and evil or dark and light are challenged.

As well, the structure of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* is influential as there are many flashbacks and theories of time embedded in the novel. There are also many scenes that seem to blend and become difficult to decipher because of the unreliable memory of the narrator and Billy Pilgrim. The audience can see the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder when Billy returns from war. However, through the point of view of the story, Billy truly believes the fantastic things that happen to him, such as being abducted by aliens, are really happening. The key line in *Slaughterhouse Five* is located at the beginning, "All this happened, more or less." Likewise, the different parts of *The Little Devil* are somewhat piecemeal with many smaller episodes placed together, or out of a linear telling, which lends to the idea that memory, imagination, and time play a key role in creating individual realities.

The Little Devil has been a passion project for many years and will hopefully continue to evolve just as the protagonist's journey and knowledge of the town and those around him continue to grow. At the start, I came to the project wanted to juxtapose the artificial and natural worlds and examine how those two forces could develop a character. However, as I continued to write, I realized the spiritual side of both worlds couldn't be separated.

Both human creation and the wilderness have created separate ideals and mythologies that religious and spiritual traditions have either romanticized, demonized, or colonized. This story tries to pit many opposing forces against each other to create the psyche and perception of the main character. As well, it acknowledges that the inner world sometimes is riddled with glitches, inconsistencies, and blank spaces that need to be filled in.

CHAPTER II

THE DINER

A large crash was heard outside the diner. Irene grabbed her towel from on top of the counter, sighed, and walked to the screen door in the kitchen. “Now what is going on out here?” she said. The boy straightened up sharply. His eyes were wide open and darting back and forth from the old sound to the new. “It was her fault Neenee!”, he said pointing towards the dumpster. “Boy, get in here! Didn’t I tell you not to play in the alleys! I’m telling your parents for sure this time. As for you missy” she said as she walked up to the dumpster’s edge”, I’m calling the cops the next time you get close to my property! I don’t care if it is trash. I already told you to keep to your side!”

The woman in the dumpster blinked a few times as if waking up from a long nap and tried to climb out. She was covered in black grease, most likely from burned food left in old oil. The sticky mess had caused chicken feathers to cling to her. She looked as if she was desperately trying to fly away but stuck, flopping, and falling until exhausted.

“Ugh, here, let me help you. Can never do anything for yourself, can you.” Irene grabbed onto the woman’s arm and tried to pull but her hands slid right off. “Okay, I guess you’re getting me dirty too!” She wrapped both her arms around the oily woman’s upper torso and lifted her up and out of the dumpster. At the last moment, the woman shifted, trying to catch one of the feathers that was floating about, and the two fell to the ground. “Ooooh, I should have you

arrested! I don't know what I was thinking!" Irene grabbed an empty hollowed out cardboard tube that was leaning against the dumpster and started hitting the woman over the head. "You good for nothing, lazy, ugly woman! Get back over there!" The woman didn't seem to notice Irene or the continuous thumps to her head. She picked up a few more feathers and walked down the alley towards a gate that led to a house next to the diner.

"That's enough of that", said Irene, " Boy, go in and get me a bucket and some soap."

"Yes, ma'am"

"Thank you, now go and play. And stay away from that house, okay?"

The boy went into the diner and grabbed a few red and white mint candies. He went through the front door and to the side of the building where the alley ended in a large fence knowing Irene couldn't see him and continued to the front of the peculiar woman's house. The yard was full and green with grass that went up to the boy's waist. There were a few trees; but only one was blooming in beautiful perfectly white flowers with tiny barely visible yellow dots in the center. The fence was newer with metal chains interlinking this way and that, still shiny and gleaming in the sun. The actual gate was rusted. There had been a lock of some sort, something that wasn't made anymore, that hung from the chain links. The grass was shorter around the gate and on the path toward the house. He pushed on the gate. It resisted as any old undermaintained mechanism would but swung open with only a few squeaks.

The house had blue vinyl siding with white trim on the foundation. The paint chipped here and there but, overall, it was not in too much disrepair. He grabbed a candy from his pocket and put it in his mouth. He could see the woman's figure behind the curtains of large arching window eerily motionless like a shadow cast without light.

The boy had been in a wooded area that was nearby the diner across from where he lived. His house was at the edge of where the town began and where the wildness around it started. That is where he first met the strange woman face to face. His father had given him a pellet gun for his birthday. He wanted to try it out on some rabbits he had spotted in the woods. This was quite some time ago, but he knew where they liked to burrow. He stuffed his pants into his shoes, tucked his long sleeve into his pants, and headed out on the common trail. A way down, he would turn right into the brambles until he reached a pair of towering old trees that had begun to fuse together at the trunks. Further in was a clearing where blueberry bushes grew along the edges. He'd been there many times; but this particular time he decided to climb one of the smaller trees and wait for any interesting animals to appear that were small enough to shoot at with a pellet gun. He waited half an hour until he got bored and climbed down the tree. A noise came from behind him, barely noticeable, like the sound a bird makes when it lands. He turned around, his heart beating intensely, his pellet gun glued to his hand, his trigger finger stiff like plywood. It was the strange woman covered in burnt oil and feathers as always. He lowered his gun and stared at her. It wasn't the first time he had seen her in the forest. She usually came to gather wildflowers and plants or dig holes for no apparent reason. He had followed her several times without her knowing, or at least he thought she hadn't noticed him. But this was the first time she had taken an interest in what the boy was doing. He opened his mouth to speak but the woman covered her mouth with one finger and shook her head. A different sound was heard somewhere in the bushes near the two. It was coming from only a few feet away. The boy raised his gun again, pointing it towards the audible bush. It was the rabbit he had been waiting for, coming out to forage. Its little nose and mouth wobbled and wiggled as it dumbly looked in the

direction of the boy and adult woman. He looked at the strange woman's face, her eyes wide open with a big toothy smile. She pointed at the rabbit and her smile disappeared. The animal turned its back and made a single hop. At that moment, the woman raised her finger once more to her lips, "shhh!" The small creature lackadaisically jumped into the bushes with a distinctively horrible yelp and crunching of bones heard. The boy lowered his gun and rushed over to where the rabbit had been, scouring through the wild growth to find its body. There it was limp with eyes open. He ogled the carcass for a while, his fingers rubbing the handle of his mostly plastic firearm. He put his other hand to his chest and started to hyperventilate. The woman walked quietly over to him; he forgot that she was still around. She put her hand on his shoulder and he began to breathe normally. He looked at her and back at the dead rabbit picking it up by its foot and handing it to her. The neck was limp, the head pendulous. She grabbed the rabbit, patted it on the head, and walked deeper into the forest. He sat down on the ground and looked around him. "Caw!" He looked up at where he had been waiting in a nearby tree. There in his place were three ravens huge and contrasting with the greenery that was around them. They sat there cawing and pecking at each other until finally flying away through the scattered trees in the woman's direction. From that day on, in his head, he called the strange woman Raven Lady.

Irene had come from someplace the boy couldn't pronounce. She had worked as a waitress at the diner for about a year until Mr. Crow, a local land baron, bought the diner and the surrounding properties. Overnight, perhaps miraculously, Irene became the new manager. She saved up enough money to buy out Mr. Crow after a few years. This was all before she even came to know the boy and happened many years before his parents moved to town. At least, that's what he heard from the local elders. His parents had both moved here when they were kids

and old enough to still imagine and believe that new things existed out there in the wilderness and its shadow. Their parents were from similar areas of the world and had moved here to find work at a local toy factory that shutdown maybe a decade ago. The boy's grandma, his mother's mother, had moved with her now ex-husband. The divorce naturally came as no surprise and yet shocked the entire community when it was finalized. Of course, it was something you didn't do back then. Everyone just blamed the outside world for the newcomers' "bad habits and unsound thinking" as the longtime residents' mantra was phrased. That was a long time ago. With all the new plazas, mini malls, and highways being built, it was hard to find a familiar face in town. That is unless you went to Irene's diner. Anyway, the boy's grandparents met one day at the diner and everything after that seemed to fall into place or fall apart rather in the case of his grandmother's previous marriage. Irene had seen it all, had served every waffle stack with strawberries that those two had ordered. On the boy's father's side those grandparents had never gone to the diner. Not much is known about them, other than the few rumors that get reinvented now and again. One day, his father just showed up. His motorcycle broke down in front of the diner and that was that. He had just enough for coffee, a meal, and a phone call home which he never made. He just sat there with Irene's waffles until she was about to leave for the night. She, somehow knowingly, let him stay in a spare backroom for the night and gave him more waffles with strawberries on the house. The boy's mother had been working there as a waitress at the time, just out of high school. Both were young and enjoying the chaos of looking for themselves and themselves in other people.

Irene knew everyone's love story. She brought most of them together as the rumors go. Back in the day, some said you wouldn't have a good marriage unless Irene let you know you could.

Over the years, the diner has slowed down and fallen into disrepair. Not much love comes out of it anymore or is put in the food. It's rumored that Irene took out a large loan from Mr. Crow during especially hard times to buy the property next door to the diner now the residence of Raven Lady. Mr. Crow owned more than half of the town. Though the Mr. Crow that had bought the diner and sold it to Irene was Mr. Crow Senior. The Mr. Crow we see around town now is the third Crow to be running things. The original Mr. Crow has been locked up in the family's old manor for close to a decade now. Mr. Crow, the third, or really the new Mr. Crow is different somehow. They say something terrible happened to his wife close to the time his father and grandfather fell ill. She died shortly after that. It was a strange disease in which doctors couldn't diagnose let alone treat. Mr. Crow had specialists flown in from all over the place. They could afford it, of course. Despite all that money, the whole family still suffered. Some say the reason why his wife got sick was because the two of them never had Irene's blessing, the waffle stack with strawberries that Irene so famously saved for prospective couples. Mr. Crow, unlike his father, and his father's father, walks around like he is too good for the town and its traditions. The townspeople call it the green disease. It happens when someone gets too rich or too full of themselves and stops listening to what their elders tell them. But that seems like what every previous generation says. Right? Others say it was because of the old coal mines he reopened just a mile or so away from the town outskirts. Every now and again the sky goes pitch black from the processing plant they have up there. That's the more rational explanation for his wife's illness especially because several other people came down with something similar.

Still, enough people hold on to the myth of Irene and her waffle stack with strawberries. People would visit the diner from all over just to order her famous waffles, hoping to find love. You could tell how much pride Irene took in this. There was a small section of wall that had

nothing but pictures, postcards, and letters of former patrons each thanking her for the waffles that changed their lives. At one point, the belief was so strong that the local pastor came by and started sprinkling holy water all around the diner while chanting the Lord 's Prayer and making signs of the cross with his hands. Irene just smiled to herself and started singing hymns cheering on the pastor as he went on. She knew the pastor didn't like her. Every other sermon was a warning against idols, witches, and outsiders which he would unabashedly allude to Irene being all three. But she found whatever he was doing humorous at the time. It wasn't until the night the pastor and two other men came around the diner with kerosene, rope, and knives that Irene stopped singing and pulled out her shotgun. Not all men of faith in town were bad though. The priest mostly kept to himself in his little stone and glass fortress on the east side of town keeping the perceived darkness and people outside. And the reverend was put on this earth for a good time and better BBQ it seemed.

But anyway, Irene keeps to the diner for the most part. When she wants time to herself, she goes to the back and locks herself in a large closet which no one has the key to but her. Occasionally, she takes a stroll through the forest trails and visits the lake to have a quick swim. She says that the plants and animals were different where she grew up, and she doesn't feel much at home among the unfamiliar sounds and smells of the town outside the diner. Even though she has lived here for the better part of a century, she has never learned the names or smells or taste of the plant life native to the area.

Only the oldest members of the town can remember when Raven Lady and Irene first came to town. They had been roommates, or sorts, back then, and moved into the apartment above the diner. They also had three dogs, all black, each with long hair and a barking problem. The neighbors didn't appreciate the extra noise. But Raven Lady was different back then. She

was, I guess still is, incredibly beautiful, if you can get past the oil and feathers. Back then she always knew what to say and when someone needed cheering up. They had been living in town for some months when the boy's grandma and husband moved into the house across from the diner. His grandmother was a frequent guest of the two roomies. When her and her husband finally divorced, the two outsiders took her in.

No one knows when Raven Lady exactly came to be who she is now. Irene rarely talks about her unless it's to complain. She had moved out and disappeared for a little bit when Raven Lady's change first became noticeable. When she finally came back, she bought the house next door, moved Raven Lady in, and only interacts with her when she gets too close to the diner's dumpster. But every now and again, Raven Lady's house is suddenly renovated, or a landscaper comes by to spruce up the place. Some say Irene does it, that she still cares but doesn't want anyone to know. But others say Mr. Crow, the second Crow and Raven Lady had an affair in which she ended up pregnant maybe even with the current Mr. Crow himself. But no one has figured out the truth yet; and neither the Crows nor Irene or Raven Lady give out their secrets without a cost.

CHAPTER III

THE SHADOW

And silent it stalks, creeps, and moans...

It was darker than usual in the boy's room. The room was spacious though maybe cluttered with too much furniture. A twin bed, multiple desks, a dresser, nightstands, storage boxes, a TV stand, and boxes of mementos and trinkets were piled on top of each other. Anything unwanted but with sentimental value ended up there. He didn't mind though since it was the only room in the house with a secret compartment that he used to store his most treasured possessions: mummified locusts, toads dried up and put in jars, old pieces of wood, and so on and so on.

He walked to his bed and turned on the small copper nightlight with animal cut outs so the figures projected in a soft light that hit the adjoining walls. He went to the door to turn off the ceiling fan light and got into bed. There was a small book on the nightstand with pictures of wildlife and unique facts about them that he usually read before finally going to sleep. This time his eyes were so heavy that he immediately closed them and started to dream.

Brilliant lights began to swirl behind his eyelids as he travelled from one part of his imagination to the next with little to no connection between scenes and frames that he was forced into. There he was in the middle of huge city with skyscrapers all around him as tall as the sun is high. Cars passed by buzzing and honking until eventually every car vanished and left him alone

on a dark gray street. He walked along the sidewalk where old red brick houses lined the front of each skyscraper. Each was the same industrial architecture with iron wrought fences and stone carved pillars for posts. On each fence on either side of the gate were identical flower boxes with dark and sickly, pale yellow flowers that seemed to claw at the sky rather than gently greet it. He walked for a block or two until coming to the only unique building, a light blue painted house made of wood with its gate wide open. An old man was on the porch steps. He appeared blind with small barely noticeable black pupils and glossy milky eyes which looked like two poached eggs floating in a pot of boiling liquid. His hair was long, white, and stringy with a few bald spots that showed his flakey pink scalp. He looked at the boy, standing about half his height, and stood up with confusion in his eyes or what seemed like confusion. A scream came from inside the house. The boy noticed stains on the windows, splatter marks like buckets of paint thrown haphazardly against the walls. It was a dark satin color. "I killed them all. All along this block", the old man said as a matter of fact.

The boy stood motionless at the gates. The old man smiled for a second but was visibly shaking for some reason as he nervously lifted a knife in his hand. The smile wiped from his face. The boy pointed at him remembering the exhilaration he felt when Raven Lady lifted her finger and yelled loudly, "Get out! You don't belong here!". The old man's arm dropped as did the knife as if he were suddenly startled. He hid his face with his hands and ran inside the house. He smiled widely and continued toward the house. Alarmingly, the boy heard a honking sound next to him was quickly being tugged away. When he looked down to his right a goose, white and ornery, was staring at him while pulling on his shirt sleeve with its bill. He blinked and was back in his room.

The animal lights appeared first, faintly, and brighter, in the boy's vision. Paralyzed, the boy fully opened his eyes to see above him a visible dark outline of a man hovering close to his face with runny white eyes and a faintly visible worried smile. It watched him for a moment and slowly melted back into the shadowy corners of the room.

The boy's vision cleared as he finally woke up and became aware that he was completely naked and drenched in sweat. He was unable to move. He mouthed the word "help" repeatedly, but nothing was audible. A small beam of light that passed through the blinds every morning was slowing travelling towards him down the adjacent powder blue wall nearest to his bed. He could hear his parent's getting up and shuffling to the kitchen for their first cup of coffee. The boy continued to slowly mouth the word's over and over, "Mom, Dad, help. Help. Help". But he was still unable to vocalize anything. Slowly, he could feel a tingling sensation starting from his feet and up to his head as the solitary light intersected with his body.

In a daze, he lifted himself out of the bed and searched for his clothes. The room was hazy as if a sudden fog had rolled in. He could make out the bulky items just enough to navigate towards the door. The metal handle was cold to the point of stinging his hand. He opened it anyway and made for the kitchen, too afraid to stay in the room alone. There his parents sat on barstools sipping from mugs in a picturesque scene of normalcy. His father usually used a white and plain cup and his mother favored another with pink with yellow flowers painted on the outside. He heard a mug shatter to pieces but could only make out his parent's silhouettes and pixelated versions of each shard spread across the floor moving closer and closer to his feet until they surrounded him.

"Call Irene," he heard his mother's voice say. His father's blurry figure immediately dashed out of sight. The boy stood there motionless for a time, unable to see clearly enough to

know what was going on. He called out to his mother, but she kept her distance. He could see her blur extend and bend as if she was occupying the entire kitchen and only one spot simultaneously. “Everything’s okay, sweetie. Irene is on her way. We’ll get you feeling better soon, okay?” He nodded his head and tried to walk towards what looked like the couch. “Sweetie! No, just stay where you are, okay?”

What seemed like an instant passed. The boy knew Irene had arrived. Her car screeched and groaned as she tried to shift from one gear to another. It shouldn’t have started at all let alone drive down the road. It was a faded gray color with bits of metallic white showing in patches here and there. She parked the car and stopped the engine which made a popping, hissing sound. Irene grabbed her bag, a small plastic bucket filled with cleaning supplies, and put on her yellow vinyl gloves. She headed to the gate. The grass had yellowed around the house, but the surrounding neighbor’s lawns were as green as any other this late into Spring. “Irene, thank God you are here!” said the boy’s mother.

“I told you this would happen! Didn’t I?”, said Irene.

“Not now!”

“Well, you better make time for this later. I’m not always going to be around. Where is he?” The boy’s mother motioned Irene to follow her into the small living room which the front door led to. The boy looked up at Irene smelling her rose scented perfume. With the altered state of his eyes her appearance was different. She wasn’t a blur like his mom or dad or the rest of the room around him. A soft glow of light emanated from her body like light reflecting off water, the deep wrinkles on her face had disappeared, and her neck looked elongated and curved. She stared at him for a while. He was reminded of the goose in his dream.

“Well don’t just stand there boy. We’ve got work.” And in an instant, the milky white swirls from his eyes cleared. He could see the rich shades of green and blue on Irene’s patchy house gown, the pink and red tones from her blush, and the brightness he saw before absorb back into her dark brown skin. “Here are your gloves,” she said. “You two should help move the furniture while we scrub.”

They continued for an hour or so, in an empty room, scrubbing the splintering wood floor with cleaning product so potent that the boy’s eyes and nose burned intensely. He started coughing and had to leave the room standing just outside the door. He watched Irene scrub the same spot in her yellow house gown and shoes repeatedly until his stomach started to rumble. “Irene... I’m getting hungry” he finally said.

“Hold on now. It’s about time we finished anyway.” Irene instructed his parents to leave the house with some protest from the boy’s father who eventually let up and walked outside with a huff. “Time?” said Irene

“What’s that?”

“The time boy!”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Good, then let’s start.”

Irene gathered the cleaning supplies, put them back in her bucket, and opened her bag. She pulled some pieces of cloth and set them on the floor, a bottle of water, some candles, and a few indistinct animal bones. The powder blue walls around them seemed to darken. A howling

wind picked up outside causing the tree by the window to scrape against the glass though the weather had been serene until now.

“Hold this”, Irene commanded handing him a simple dove-grey feather. It almost brought a smile to the boy’s face to see Irene be so bossy, not that it was out of character. She was a short woman with a prominent belly and short permed hair, not at all what you would consider an authority figure. She lit the candles and arranged the rest of the items in a circular pattern. “Now come sit,” she said. The boy did as he was told and sat trying not to burn himself on the flames that now encircled him.

She went to draw the curtains. A sudden storm had appeared while they had been cleaning. Irene paused. There on one of the tree branches, squatted a shadowed figure, its eyes white and focused on the room. It remained there staring straight and unblinking at the boy. “Go on now, if you know what’s good for you!” yelled Irene to the creature. The boy sat tensely watching Irene yell and try to shoo away whatever it was on the tree. In an instant, the shadow leaped and appeared in front of the boy just outside the circle of lit candles.

Irene raised her hands as if to swat away a mosquito. But the creature just looked at the boy with a profound blankness. The shadow bent over till its eyes were leveled with the boy’s. Irene lowered her hands and eyed the two curiously. They sat like this for a moment until the boy stood up. As if by instinct, the boy reached out to give the small grey feather to the shadow. He raised his cupped hands slowly to the shadow’s eyes. It stared at the feather for ages until finally reaching out and accepting the gift. It held the feather and looked at the boy, a liquid light seemed to emanate from the being’s hands around the feather as if it were breaking out in a rash until finally the light began to fall and stream out of the shadow’s eyes. The boy, not displaying any emotion, touched the creature on its arm as if to comfort it. An agonizing cry came from the

dark shape as it tilted its head backward. A flash erupted from somewhere within it and beams danced around the room. Irene and the boy were stunned and blinded. And when they came to, only the feather was left in place of where the creature sat.

“Well, that’s that I guess”, said Irene, “Let’s go get your parents. Maybe we can go out and get some pie”. The boy looked around the room, grabbed the dull gray memento, and followed Irene. The sky, still cloudy, looked like it would rain at any minute; but the wind had died down, and the sun’s rays peaked through the billows in patches. He turned around to see the house as they all got into the family car, Irene included. It seemed dull as well like the feather in his hands.

They eventually stopped at Irene’s diner. It was early enough that only the few dedicated locals and in-the-know truckers were sitting around either starting their day or finishing it. The boy hugged his mother and father and took a seat at a booth near the front. Irene brought him a book, something about apples, and retreated to a closed room in the back of the diner with his parents. The boy knew this room, even though he’d never been inside it. But he kept tabs of who was allowed to go in and who they were. It was always someone who looked troubled or worried. He never saw anyone with a smile ask to see the room. It was another one of Irene’s secrets the boy wasn’t old enough for. He finished reading a few pages and looked around the diner hearing a honking sound he couldn’t place.

CHAPTER IV

THE LAKE AND TREE

Mystery...

It was misty out. There was no way of seeing beyond the length of the boy's arm. He had gotten lost while trying to hunt for the small squirrels that ran in and out of the forest around his house. He didn't mean to leave the trail, but the wind from the night before had scattered leaves every which way covering it and making it hard to see. He walked for what seemed like hours until he heard a familiar sound of ducks playing nearby. Finally abandoning the trail altogether, he headed for the sound. He emerged from the woods to a lake he had never seen before. He'd been through this forest hundreds of times if not more and never encountered anything but small creeks or the occasional pond. He ran up to the edge in excitement and startled the ducks who quickly flew away at his sudden appearance.

On the shore, there was a small beach with sand as fine as granulated sugar. It beige and uninteresting except for maybe a few pieces of colored glass and what looked like tiny shellfish of some sort who'd peek out from their holes every so often. Close by, there was a pier which had been freshly painted a light blue color, or so he assumed based on the fumes he could still smell. The structure seemed out of place against wild growth surrounding it. Only a small doorless shack nearby showed any signs of human interaction with the surrounding land. Even that was in ruins. The boy moved toward the pier. The water smelled sweet like fresh rainfall and was dark blue. Even on the edge of the lake, the boy could not see the bottom. He stepped onto

the small wooden structure and walked to the end. There was no boat in sight or any way to get across.

The sun was descending, and a cool breeze touched the water before caressing the boy as he tossed his light brown hair slightly in disarray. In the distance, once the mist started clearing up, he could see a smaller island in the middle of the lake with an dense thicket of assorted plants and trees clustered tightly together. And on the other side, on the small island, was a pier identical to the one he was standing on. He closed his eyes and rubbed his eyelids. When he opened them again, he had been turned around on the pier, or so he thought. But here, he could see the trees had moved closer, or rather, he was no longer on the shore. He looked around. His eyes moving quickly to scan the area taking in the scenery without moving his head or body. He took a step forward then back and tried spinning around and closing his eyes again at the end of the pier while facing toward the shore away from the small island where he now stood. But there he stayed with the swaying trees, their branches dense with foliage of thick white, pink, and yellow flowers in full blossom. The reflection of the remaining sunlight off such a background dazzled the boy. It reminded him of the festivals the townies would put together every winter, flashing lights hanging everywhere from rooftops to street corners. But here, it was Spring; and the color pattern disturbed him. It didn't bring the same sense of joy that the festival would.

There were just enough trees clumped together that he couldn't see what was directly inside of the grove. It seemed strange to have so many trees knotted together on such a small piece of land. He circled around the area until he came to a circular gate made of stone just tall enough for him to enter. In the middle of the small area was a pond shaped in a perfect circle as if it had been man made. The trees encircling him were also aligned along the perimeter in a way that suggested someone had deliberately planted them.

He grabbed a six-pointed star shaped flower that had fallen to the ground and walked to the pond's edge. He peaked his head over the side to see his reflection. But in his place was a vision of a pale woman with his same wild light brown hair almost blonde but longer with his same dark green eyes. She smiled at him baring all her teeth, with some missing, and ran out of sight. The boy tested this again several times, retracting his body and peering over the edge of the pond, but the girl never returned. It was only his reflection that stared up at him. He dropped the flower on the ground near the edge and it fell into the pond. He expected ripples to form; instead, the water stayed motionless and clear; the flower floated without movement as well. It was as if time stopped in this small space and no matter how many times he turned, his sight remained in the same general direction. A second later, the flower disappeared into the water without so much as a plop. He rubbed his eyes again to see if he was seeing things. He reached out his hand to touch the water but was startled by a panicked yell. "Don't touch that!" said a strange voice. It was the girl from before whose face he saw in the pool. "You're not allowed yet", she said.

"Allowed? What do you mean?"

"It's not time yet!" she said pouting.

"But... what is it? What happened to the flower?"

"What do you mean? You mean you don't know?" she looked at him more carefully, moving closer to him and circling around and around him studying. "You aren't...? But you were sent by Irene, yes? I've been waiting... unless you're someone else. What's your name?"

"My name is..."

The trees around them began to sway and groan from movement that seemed unnatural. They moved back and forth in waves. The suddenness startled the boy. “You shouldn’t... No!” The boy had stepped on a small rock and lost his balance and fell backwards into the pool of water. He felt suspended in the air somehow as he hadn’t yet touched the ground. He looked at the girl. She was frozen too. Her arm stretched out with her mouth open with small teeth exposed.

He saw a bright light hover above. The blue sky turned into a white ceiling with faces covered in green surgical masks. He heard a mumble from someone around him but couldn’t make out any meaning. His eyes grew heavy; and as sudden as the bright light appeared, it vanished. He woke up sore from head to toe, unsure of where he was. The bed he was on was stiff and plastic. Even through there was a thin sheet that separated his skin from the bed, he could feel how cheaply it was made. There was a thicker more noticeably plastic veil around the bed that blocked his sight from the rest of the room. He sat there patiently until he noticed how big his hands were now. They had at least doubled in size from when he last noticed them. He checked his feet and the rest of his body. Everything had changed and grown to at least double the usual size. He tried to stand, but a shooting pain from his foot to his head caused him to sit back down. He grimaced and noticed a crutch beside the bed. With this, he stood up and pulled back the curtain becoming aware that he alone in a small, overly bright room.

He noticed a mirror in the adjoining restroom and hobbled over to it. His face had changed too. His eyes and hair remained the same; but his face had changed somehow. It was bigger and leaner than before with a few patches of unshaved hair. He was thin, maybe too thin. And he had new freckles on his face and elsewhere. “Excuse me sir. I don’t mean to interrupt,

but you need to take your medication,” said a voice. He turned around to see someone in medical scrubs. “What?” he said.

“Your meds, sir. I brought you food as well, soup and a Jell-O cup.”

“Oh, but I... I’m not sure where I am or who... Who are you?”

“It’s okay, you suffered a pretty bad head injury. It’s okay if you don’t remember. All you need to know is that you’re in a hospital and I’m here to make sure you get better. Now come on. I’ll help you to bed.” The boy, perhaps the man now, held on to the crutch and moved toward the bed. “There you go. Up we are. Here is your soup, your Jell-O, meds, and I even brought you a working remote. What are you into? You strike me as the old western movie type.”

“No, I don’t really...”

“Okay, news it is then. I’ll be back in thirty minutes to check you’ve eaten everything. Alright?”

“Yeah, okay. Thank you,” the boy said. He had watched the local news with his parents before, but this was different. He didn’t recognize any of the newscasters. The captions and logos all read as “Channel 7 News”. The date was the same. The places they covered on the news were the same. But everyone he saw was either slightly or dramatically different. Even this building was anomalous to him since the town didn’t have a hospital. It only had Dr. Farah’s clinic which was technically in the neighboring town.

The nurse came back with a handful of magazines and a pillow. “Here you go, I decided to be nice and grabbed you an extra. Plus, it’s kind of a boring day. So don’t think I’m doing you

any favors, okay?”, the stranger said with a smile. The boy noticed the nurse’s well-defined biceps and nicely squared jaw which caused a tingling sensation in his stomach and crotch. The thin fabric draped around him allowed for a visible erection. “Oh! Uh... well, I don’t think that’s the medicine talking. Maybe I should get the doctor...” The nurse smiled awkwardly and gave the boy two thumbs up before dashing out of the room, “Doctor! Doctor Farah!”

The boy looked down in shame but was more confused as to why his body was reacting this way. He coved himself with the extra pillow. “Hello, how are you feeling? No need for introductions, right? How is your mom? I know it’s hard without your dad. When I lost my father, I thought it would be the end of the world. But we have to stay strong, right? Now, the nurse says you have been having an adverse reaction to the medicine. Is that correct?” said Dr. Farah.

“My dad? I’m... I’m... I’m”

“Ah, well, stuttering is a usual symptom of this kind of injury. But I would have hoped for more progress at this point. So, what’s under the pillow? OH! Wait, don’t tell me. I got it. My nurse gets nervous with this kind of stuff. Nothing to be ashamed of though! I tell him it’s a new era, you know? Plus, it comes with the job, you know? If I ran away every time a penis got stiff around me, I’d be out on the streets, right? I mean, not to flatter myself or anything. Maybe I should stop talking... But that nurse, he’s cute though right? Have give credit to HR on that one. Yowzah! Anyway, nothing to worry about. Just get some rest and plenty of water. You know the spiel. I’ll talk to your nurse and get him back to work.”

“No, that’s okay. I’d be more comfortable if he didn’t.”

“Ah, I see...? Well maybe y’all already have something in common! Well, as you wish. And look! You’re speaking perfectly now! Say hi to your mom for me. I’m sure she’ll be here soon. Bye for now.”

“Bye...”

Dr. Farah closed the door. She looked identical to the Dr. Farah he knew back home. Or if he was home, everything had changed somehow. This wasn’t her usual clinic. And the only hospital around was two hours away by car. Though she did seem different to him. The doctor he knew was much more morose. This one was bubbly and talkative maybe to a fault. He moved the pillow, changed the channel, and fell asleep with the TV on.

“Hi honey. How are you feeling?”

“Mom? Hi, uh...”

“Oh, you don’t have to say anything. Just give me a hug. Okay?”

“Ma, do you know what I’m doing here? Why do I feel... so different?”

“Oh, the doctor told me you’d probably forget things. You hit your head pretty hard. That or it’s just a teenage thing. I can never tell anymore. It was such a long time for me. I can’t remember either!”

“Yes, but where did I hit my head? How’d they find me? There was a girl! That’s all I remember”

“What? Sweetie, what girl? It’s always a girl with you boys, ain’t it? You were at home in the swimming pool, silly. I wasn’t there but the neighbor said you hit your head trying to dive off the diving board. I knew I should have had that removed! You never did have a good sense of

balance. Most likely you got that from your father's side. I'm just glad someone was watching out for you. Speaking of! I asked Auntie Irene to come visit. I know how close y'all have always been. Isn't that great, honey? Though you know I don't condone what she does for a living, but that's her business."

"Uh, yeah. Thanks mom. So, where is dad?"

"Now that's not funny. I thought we went over that already. He's in a better place. Okay? I mean really, we had this talk ages ago..."

"What? What do you mean? Where is he?"

"Okay, okay, that's enough of that. You don't want to give your mom another panic attack. Do you?" said a woman as she trotted into the room on white six-inch-high heels. She had on a red dress with a lacey back and a white boa with matching clutch. "Hello, boy. How are you feeling?"

"Oh! Hello Irene," said the boy's mother, "Hope things are well. That certainly is a quite the dress, I guess." Irene rolled her eyes and pulled out a stick of gum from her clutch. "Sweetie, I'll be outside if you need anything. Just yell for me."

The boy's mother slowly walked out of the room. "Finally, I thought she'd try to work things out with me again. I don't how she's your mom," said Irene.

"I'm sorry, but who are you?" asked the boy.

"What? What do you mean? Who are you?" Irene pulled out a magnifying glass and began to examine the boy from top to bottom. "You look alright. But's there's something

different about you around the eyes; or maybe it's the nose... your eyes... your nose...
you're...? It can't be. I thought we had an agreement!"

"What are you talking about?"

"You're from the other side. Aren't you?"

"The other side?"

"Yes! And I bet that damned old leathery Irene sent you. I knew I couldn't trust myself!"

"What? You know my Irene?"

"Short, fat, with a big old perm? Oh, yeah, we know each other. We know each other real
good!"

CHAPTER V

THE TWINS

Boy walked through town, meandering, and staring at the sky like he usually did on his way to the diner. Irene had been kind enough to give him extra hours during the busy lunch shift.

He had walked down the road of the business district thousands of times. It was the only fully paved road in town accompanied by sidewalks on each side. He stopped suddenly at a curio shop he had never seen. The sign at the top read “Ocular Oddities” in bright red surrounded by giant lightbulbs like the ostentatious signs seen at a circus. The words “and more!” were seemingly hand painted on the side.

The sight was curious among the dilapidated and generic looking buildings surrounding the store. The ancient bakery next to it was a mustard color without a sign, a single window, and a broken old bench below the square and fogged up window. Boy had frequented that shop, buying sugary breads from cases with dead roaches laying just outside. It was a town institution despite the health code violations. So how did this new shop get constructed so fast? There had been an empty lot maybe a quarter of an acre large that had housed a trash heap and generations of rats for as long as Boy could remember.

He entered the shop through a brightly green colored door with an etching of a tree sculpted in the wood. The interior was darker than expected with only a few overhead lights and glowing objects on shelves here and there. Boy walked up and down the miniature aisles of large

glass cases that cluttered the middle of the space. The size was like a small convenience store rather than a traditional retail space. He eventually came to a wall covered in small objects, some hidden in velvet bags with price tags and descriptions on them, others unmarked and seemingly out of place. There in the middle, he stopped at a pair of dried, webbed duck feet tied together with twine painted white and green. His eyes dilated and widened as he tried to focus on the tag in the low lights which read “DUCK”.

Boy reached out to touch the pair of unattached duck feet when suddenly he became aware of a presence behind him. He turned around to multiple eyes staring at him identical in every way, a pair of twin girls, possibly young, possibly old, it was hard to tell. They eyed him cautiously without blinking, without smiling, merely studying him. They both had long, graying blonde, wavy hair with deep green blue eyes. One wore a long navy-blue sequence dress while the other wore a shorter, more revealing, green dress. Each shimmered despite the low lights which caused their movement to blur like a camera set up for stills and not action shots. “Are you sure you want those?”, the twin in green finally asked.

“I’m not sure. What are they for?”, he asked. He noticed their faces were oval shaped each with strange freckles on the opposite side of each other’s face as if combining them would finish a puzzle. “Those are new actually. We bought them from a local woman who said...”

“...that they’re only decorative, of course”, said the twin in the blue dress. She moved in front of her sister and grabbed the feet from the wall.

CHAPTER VI

THE SHRINE OF FIRE

On top of the hill was an old, shriveled tree about the height of a two-story building set apart from the rest of the forest. The cliff that jutted out of the hill like a wart on a toad was dry and grey from a millennia of sun exposure and rain. It looked especially grim in the dark as storm clouds gathered above the city in a land of fire.

Boy had walked through the brush and miles of caliche to come to the hill where his ancestors had first climbed and surveyed the land. Here, among a small outcropping of now desiccated trees, they built their shrine to the divine, planted their native tree, asked for rain, and climbed back down the hill to begin their work. After generations, their offspring had returned.

The shrine had been hastily made from clay and sand and any other materials that were on hand. It stood about the height of the boy, six feet give or take, and matched the color of the earth around it. After years of neglect, deep cracks had formed around it and had been filled in with different stones, wildflowers, and adobe giving it a distinct appearance.

The hollowed area had been overtaken by vines and other plants that appreciated the shade. They wrapped around the large statue which mirrored the appearance of a man or a woman. It was impossible to tell what the original artist has intended as the figure had long been worn down by the elements. It held a twig from the native tree in one hand, and a flower with three large petals, in the other.

Beyond the statue, a flash of fire enveloped the city. The boy could feel his eyes shutting as the heat and smoke reached him. There in the dark, he could feel the warmth of the soil and hear the distant roaring of flames. He could feel the soot and ash fall gently on him like the flyaway feathers of birds. A voice, slow and deliberate, called out to him nearby.

He opened his eyes with some resistance and saw the blazing red hair of a woman flowing in the wind. She was upside down, hung by the ankle with thick rope on an unfamiliar tree. It was black, even darker than the artificial night around them. The tree was only made visible in comparison to the bright red tendrils that sprouted from the woman's head. "Listen and speak. In darkness and flames is life everlasting," she repeated. He could not speak back but only stood frozen at the sight of his hometown drowned in the light of fire. The hill was the same he had climbed before; but the trees were denser and wilder with knots and branches that didn't belong on young trees.

He turned his attention to the shrine again. The fire's shadow convulsed on the stone and drew his attention. Next to it, another strange figure appeared. A tall hooded human form with a crow's mask emerged from the trees encircling the monolith. It held a small box in both hands and raised it to Boy's face as it approached him. It was a simple wooden box with etchings of stars and mountains. The masked figure simply stared at Boy giving no instructions or attempts at speech. He reached over to open the container, but it was sealed tight. The deliverer of the box let out an audible sigh and pointed at the shrine. The stone woman appeared to be crying as water trickled out of its eyes at a steady pace. The masked being gestured for Boy to come closer and directed his attention to the small puddle of water that had formed at the statue's feet and threw the box in to the water. It instantly disappeared without a splash. Boy peered his head over the

edge of the pool but only his reflection looked up at him. The figure beside him pointed at the water while staring.

Boy took one foot and placed it in the water to gauge the depth. He heard a crash behind him and turned around. There, in front of him, was the red-haired woman, the branch she had been hanging from snapped at shattered as it reached the ground. He could see his reflection clearer in her emerald, green eyes than in the water he was now knee-deep in. She repeated her mantra, only eyeing the statue, and suddenly, and swiftly, pushed him into the growing pool. He flailed his arms around in the inexplicably deep water until finally the fire light around him was extinguished and the far-reaching darkness took his vision altogether.

“That’s a strange place for a nap. Boy, is that you? Boy!” He opened his eyes to the dry leafy branches of mesquite that clawed up to the sky like children catching butterflies. He felt a throbbing pain on his side and realized that someone was hitting him. A familiar face, the woman that lived next to his aunt’s diner was violently beating him with a collection of twigs like one might have done to a get dirt off a rug. “What are you doing! Stop!”, he yelled.

“Oh, boo, you are alive.”

“Of course I’m alive!”

“Well, you’ve been laying there for days”

“Days? Where am I?”

“This is where we live!”, she said with a large smile.

“But... what am I doing here?”

“Yes, I don’t know. After day three I finally decided to come poke you with a stick. Got carried away, I guess! Here. Let’s get you to Irene. She is clean! She is clean! Mean old Irene...”

The woman helped him off the ground and allowed him to lean on her shoulder. She was wearing an unseasonably large and thick black coat which was covered in black feathers; that had been bound to the fabric by old eggs judging from the bits of shell stuck in her hair and the rancid odor.

Boy had known this woman since he was a child. But he had never known her to be this articulate. For one, the sentences she produced made sense. She had not helped him up before but remained a wild selfish creature in all those years they had encountered each other. Her appearance remained the same which gave way to his nickname for her, “Raven Lady”. There weren’t any true ravens in the area; but she was neither small nor dull in plumage like crows or shimmering black like the local grackles. In his book of birds, there was only the Raven that seemed to fit her for a name especially since no one seemed to care to call her by her real one.

They walked through the dried woods in the semi-arid landscape, careful to avoid the many spined and thorny plants about. Raven Lady’s bald head shined brightly as the sun’s rays relentlessly assaulted the world around them. The cracked lens on her dull brown framed glasses matches the cracked of the droughted earth underneath. Boy had trouble concentrating and could feel pain throughout his body as it yearned for water. He tasted metal as his tongue and lips bled.

They came to a point that was recognizable, an old hiking trail covered by tall evergreen trees seemingly out of place. He had walked the area many times in his youth and sometimes in the quiet company of Raven Lady. She seemed to be the only thing that changed in any noticeable way. Eventually the rest of the town became predictable, day after day going to work,

coming home from work, watching the game on Monday, barbequing on Sunday, and so on. But Raven Lady had consistently baffled people with her behavior and actions; and maybe that is what made her predictable as well.

The diner became visible as they approached the outskirts of town. Raven Lady carried him as far as the service door where Irene was watching them amble towards her smoking a cigarette on the steps. Her bright pink sweater, out of place for the season, contrasted the confused and stern look on her face. “I found your thing,” Raven Lady said throwing Boy off her shoulder and on the ground. She smiled, waved, and bowed towards Irene and walked off towards a small shack next to the diner.

“Boy! Where have you been?” Irene said. She slammed the palm of her hand on the red door next to her a few times. Its metallic finish dazzled in the sunlight. A man in an apron and hairnet walked out and looked at her gesturing with his hands to ask what she needed. Irene pointed at Boy. “Well, you see the man. Get some water already,” she said. The man sighed, went inside, and returned with a pitcher and cup. Grunting, Irene lifted herself from the steps and made her way to Boy. She poured out a glass and begged him to sit up to drink. He complied and greedily drank. “You know your folks have been worried sick about you. I kept telling them you’d turn up. But I didn’t expect you to be with that one again... No good ever comes from it!”

“Irene, not now please. Just pass the pitcher.”

“So, what happened to you now?”

“I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Well, you need to start talking. At least tell a lie. People are starting to talk, and your parents are hearing it.”

“Can’t you do anything?”

“Like what? You expect me to just wave my hand, say a few words, and make it all go away? It doesn’t work like that.”

“You’ve done it before.”

“No, I didn’t do anything. Things just happened to fix themselves thankfully”

“Before the fire?”

“That’s something else entirely. Come on then, no sense it letting you bake out here anymore than you already have. Pretty soon I’ll have to serve you up with toast the way you’re cooking.” Irene grabbed him by the arm and picked him up. Her acrylic nails came dangerously close to stabbing his sides. Boy could smell the faint scent of jasmine now, a familiar and comforting smell in his adolescence, now a reminder, a warning. Her eyes squinted behind her thick lenses as she studied Boy. “At least nothing is bleeding this time,” she said as she walked him into the diner.

She sat him down at a small table near the employee’s entrance which entered a narrow hallway. “You wait here. I have to finish something up,” she said. There it was in front of him, the old wooden door that hid Irene’s other business. He looked at it for a while until it swung open. An old woman exited with Irene. “Still up to the same old tricks huh?” asked Boy. “Mama still has a mortgage to pay. And you’ve tasted the food...” Irene replied as she took a seat next to him.

“I’ve called your parents.” They’re gonna be happy to see you.”

“Yeah, I guess I could use a break.”

“I bet you could. All the wild things I hear you’re getting yourself into. How’d you even end up back here?”

“Honestly, I can’t remember much. I woke up in the woods and the rest is a blur... other than her.”

“Listen, you’ve got to let that go already. People will start thinking you’ve lost your mind. Just like that crazy woman that brought you over here. That... whatever she is”

“Maybe. But you know it can’t be helped.”

“Oh yes it can! And I’ve got just the thing for it. Let me just...”

“Irene. Not this time, alright. You can’t make this one go away. It’s not like the others.”

Boy looked down at his hands holding each other tightly almost in prayer. The table with a floral planter, the wicker chair, the bright turquoise of the walls, all dulled in his eyes until he could only see the lines in his hands as they began to tremble. Irene placed her hand on his, and it calmed him. “Come on. I think they’re here,” she whispered.

As he entered his childhood house, he could see the rooms shifting in his mind as each flickered in his mind as they changed over the years. The kitchen was the entrance at first and was again made the entrance later. It was a full circle from his earliest memories to adulthood. The flecks of yellow and green wallpaper still textured the painted walls and bled their colors through. It was a small house with two bedrooms, a living area, and kitchen with a few auxiliary rooms for storage, laundry, and what not.

Boy gasped and sprang out of bed throughout the night as his body and mind fought to recognize his old room even in sleep. He decidedly gave up and walked outside towards the unchanged backyard always bordered with tough purple sage bush and the old ebony tree at the edge of the property. It was a hot night, like most nights now. He walked over to the tree examining the carving of a snake he made as a kid. He leaned on it and eventually slumped over and looked up at the dark sky blurred and interrupted by the sliver of moonlight and blurred starlight.

“Didn’t think I’d see you around here again.” Boy snapped up to his feet and focused his eyes on the alley. Sweat fell freely from his face as he turned pale and eyes widened. “Relax, Boy, it’s just me. It hasn’t been that long. Has it?” came the voice again. The neighbor girl, red haired and baby faced stepped into the only light on the alley a few feet away from the tree. “Oh... Robin, you just scared me is all,” said Boy.

“Well, look at you Boy. Where have you been that has you so jumpy in your own backyard?”

“Just the usual places.”

“Always with the details...”

“Sorry, I’m just a little tired. Haven’t been able to sleep.”

“I guess that’s why I’m out here talking to you too. Something strange is in the air.”

“You feel it too huh? Should have known you would.” Her white silk nightgown turned yellow in the old, halogen light. She walked closer to Boy through the loose dirt of the alleyway between her house and his parents’. Her feet were covered in dirt already. The trim of her dress

had turned brown as the earth as well. She took a seat beside him and drew her legs towards her chest and wrapped her arms around them looking up at the sky to where the constellations seemed brighter in the reflection of her eyes.

“You know I haven’t told a soul still,” said Robin smiling widely.

“About what?”

“You know. The thing between you and that guy.”

“Like I care about that right now.”

“Oh, so that’s not what has you moping about out here? I figured I’d be in the same state if it happened to me.”

“Well, it didn’t happen to you.”

“I knew it! You are upset!” Robin’s eyes brightened and glimmered, and she continually poked Boy on the shoulder. “Just admit it. You like someone and they don’t like you back. Serves you right for all those years of tormenting me.” She sat with her back against the tree next to Boy. Her smile had disappeared, but her eyes were still bright with pleasure.

“No, it’s not about any guy this time. This time it’s about a girl. She keeps appearing in my dreams. Or at least I think they’re dreams.”

“What else would they be?”

“I’m not sure. Irene keeps filling my head with nonsense. But sometimes, when the dreams feel real, they start appearing when I’m awake. Does that make sense?”

“I’m not sure I’ve had a dream like that or at least not for a while.” Robin said as she played with her bare toes.

“I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s true. Nothing happens in my life. Even when I moved to the big city, I still felt the same. That numbness like when you first jump into freezing cold water. It doesn’t go away for me.” The brightness in her eyes diminished betraying the crimson and fiery mop that that was just above them. Boy sighed and put his arm around Robin. “We’ll get through it together. Like we always have.”

“You mean until you leave again.”

“Or you leave.”

“Take me with you this time! I’m no good on my own.” She grabbed on to his arm with an immense strength that caused Boy to wince. “Maybe.”

CHAPTER VII

THE FJORD

After leaving the small book shop, Boy decided to take a walk in the nearby park. He made his way down the small hill on cracked concrete with snowbanks flanking either side. The bushes that surrounded the walkway still had some green foliage as the snowstorm from earlier struck as suddenly as it flitted away like a bee looking for nectar.

He came to his favorite spot by a wide manmade pond and sat on a nearby bench, brushing away powdered snow and making sure it wasn't too wet. Only a few animals were left in the pond after the storm, the migratory geese, brown winged with dark black heads, several swans, and the ever-present crows.

A statue, chipped and decayed by time, sat in front of the bench past the walkway and at the edge of the pond. It replicated a man in a bowler's hat in a suit standing on top of a large gray triangular platform. He smiled happily as if grateful to be cast in stone bound to stare at the pond and the life it housed for as long as rock could weather the elements which had already claimed the statue's nose and ears. Boy enjoyed staring at the statue. At this time the sun bounced light off the surrounding water and onto the statue's hat. Perhaps it was made of different material, but it had an eerie blue glow that was different than the stagnant grey that made up the rest of the monument.

When he sat on this bench, there was a clarity than beamed through him. The cold and snow around him were his canvas as he focused on the lone statue of the man. He noticed himself as part of the scenery when the rich greens and browns of the park were covered and there was only a single mass.

The only thing that broke his concentration during this time was the daily walk of another person. They seemed to cross each other's path consistently, though Boy often ventured into the park on a whim. At times, this stranger would wear hospital scrubs, but now was wearing jeans, boots, and a jacket over a solid-colored button up shirt. He smiled at Boy and sat on the opposite side of the bench. Boy flinched at his abrupt action.

The man didn't cover his head or wear gloves despite the cold weather but instead occasionally blew into his hands letting the warmth inside him escape and expand his presence in the park. He looked at Boy staring at him and smiled again before extending his hand. "Hi, I'm Fjord."

"Boy, nice to meet you", he said shaking the stranger's hand.

"Boy? Well, that's creative." Boy glared at him. "No, I don't mean to be rude or anything. I just meant its cool and chic. Crap, I honestly didn't mean..."

"Its okay," Boy laughed," it is a lame name."

"Not at all! I really think it's cool, like Blondie or Bjork. One name to rule them all."

"Well, at least you're trying to make it cool," Boy said smiling back." Fjord put his hands in his pocket and was now visibly red. He drew his warmth back into his body and made himself small again. The two stared in the same direction for some time studying each other through their

peripheral vision as each one looked in a different direction. “Do you know who it is? The statue I mean,” asked Fjord.

“No idea. The inscription has been scratched out.”

“Scratched out? Already?”

“Already?”

“Well yeah, it’s a new park. Well, newer, I guess. My dad worked with the construction crew that dug out the lake. The guys said once it was filled in with water that statue just appeared. It wasn’t in the original plans or donated either. Everything was closed off.”

“So, do you know who it is? What the statue says?”

“I helped out my dad on a few projects after and his crew was always telling ghost stories about it. They’d try to get me to come out here and spend the night on Halloween. You know, initiate the new guy and all.”

“And what do you think happened? Stone sculptures like that don’t just appear without anyone noticing.”

“Well, you see how he looks out of time? The park was built less than a decade ago, but his clothing is at least fifty years out of fashion. It sounds silly, but I think it’s a ghost. Do you believe in ghosts?” Boy snorted at this trying to contain his laughter. “Well, not the ones that turn themselves into stone.”

“Hey don’t laugh! I did my research! Before this was, well this, it was a huge estate for some millionaire. They tore down the house and everything once the city got ownership. I think that guy right there used to be the owner.

“That or your dad’s crew didn’t see the statue until after the fact,” Boy said sighing.

“Oh, so you’re the cynical type? Well tell me why it’s the only thing not covered in snow right now?”

“Aerodynamics,” Boy said rolling his eyes.

“Come on! I’ll show you,” Fjord said shooting up from the bench and waving toward the statue while he ran. He stopped midway and bounced while waving his arms beckoning Boy to follow. Boy sluggishly stood up and walked to the statue where Fjord was already climbing the base. “See, what do you feel?” Boy took off his gloves and placed them on the bare stone almost. There was a dull heat that tingled across his hands, but it didn’t feel hot enough to melt snow. Fjord let out a boyish laugh as Boy’s face crinkled up in confusion. “It feels warm but not warm like heat from a flashlight and...” said Boy.

“...vibration!” finished Fjord as he joyously threw up his arm and fell back off the stone base and into a pile of ice and snow. He looked surprised when Boy’s hand instantly appeared in front of him ready to pick him up. “You really want this to be something. Don’t you?” Boy asked.

“Don’t you?” He said brushing snow off his clothes. “Aren’t there enough mysteries in life to consider that this might be one of them?”

“It’s only a mystery if you don’t already understand the science. That type of stone absorbs sunlight and probably retained enough heat to melt snow even as gloomy as it is now.” Boy looked at the statue somewhat unconvinced himself about his answer.

“Come on Boy! You don’t have to be as stoic as that old statue. Leave room for some fun.” Fjord grabbed Boy’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Well, I should probably get back to work. Was nice meeting you. Same time same place? Tomorrow maybe?” Boy blushed at the straightforward invitation, reached out his hand for a handshake and replied with, “sure”.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CROW AND THE FJORD

Mr. Crow, a cane in hand, walked through the park the same snowy evening. He witnessed the attention the two had for each other and noted it in a small notebook. His interest in Boy had always been minimal and largely due to his business with Irene. For some reason, the combination of Fjord and this mysterious statue had piqued his interest.

As the two exited, he made his way to the stone man. He tapped it here and there examining every facet to ascertain its secret. There was nothing special just a molded representation of some unknown person. Crow looked out into the pond where only a few geese sat on the banks. He noticed how cold his cheeks had become and covered his face with his hands and blew puffs of air.

Suddenly, a snapped branch caught his attention. He dove behind the statue unaccustomed to being caught off guard. Walking listlessly was Fjord. There was a confused and dazed look about him; but his footsteps assured there was some singular destination. As Fjord moved closer to the statue, Mr. Crow's cheeks began to redden every more. He noticed Fjord, the configuration of Arab features, maybe his mustache, was incredibly attractive. Fjord's eyes flashed and were emphasized by the light bouncing off white snow. He passed them over the crouched over Mr. Crow but was unphased.

Crow rose to full stature and cleared his throat. He was still somewhat taller than Fjord which eased his bruised ego at being caught. Fjord smiled and waved his hand but continued to walk down his seemingly spellbound path. Mr. Crow, ruddy cheeked, nodded his head and tipped his hat to cover his face. Crow began to follow in a haphazard way perhaps convincing himself that his interest was pure curiosity. He hid himself again as Fjord walked up steps that led out of the park.

The streets were oddly quiet for this time of night and day of the week. A stray car skittered by like a pill bug after being exposed to the sun from underneath a rock. The stone stairs that linked the park with the rest of the city exited to a T in the road with multi-story buildings lining both the right and left. Old red brick buildings told the history of the promised era of enlightenment, industrialism, modernity, or whatever propaganda was en vogue at the time. Each came and went and left giant derelicts like these. The only maintained objects were the streetlights which blazed brightly to expose the disrepair and neglect even in the dead of night.

Mr. Crow walked hesitatingly across the road to where he last saw Fjord. But the young man had disappeared. Crow continued to write fervently in his notebook.

CHAPTER IX

THE CROW AND DOVE

Mr. Crow looked at Dove with curiosity. She looked blankly at him alternating her gaze from him to her new beaded purse. “What?” she asked. Mr. Crow simply nodded and pointed at her closet. “What’s wrong now daddy?” He sighed and shook his head. “Nothing sweetie. Are you ready to go?”

“Almost daddy. I’ll be right down.”

“Alright, I’ll be in the town car.” He closed the door and walked down the stairs to the kitchen. A pitcher of iced lemonade sat on the counter. He poured himself a glass and put it away. He tapped his watch after finishing the glass and walked towards the door.

“I’m ready! Why do you look so grumpy daddy?”

“Oh, no reason, I’m glad you’re ready. Shall we?” He opened the door and let Dove through.

Mr. Crow eyed the boy down. The boy smiled and kept looking straight into his. Mr. Crow looked away. “Well, Irene, you have a spunkier apprentice this time. I hope all is well.”

“It is Mr. Crow. Thanks for asking. Boy, go ahead and play. Here is some money and here is your stuff. Now leave before you upset my customers.”

“Thanks, Renie! She smiled at this, pointed at the door, and walked away to the back room of the diner returning with a check and a small bag.

Mr. Crow walked out of the diner and got into his car. The weather was nice, but he kept his windows rolled up and the AC going. He honestly hadn't expected Irene to pay anything at all this month. He scratched his nose and sighed, smirked, and let out a barely audible laugh. “Now let's see what she got me,” he said to himself. In the bag were two dead birds, a vial of something dark red, and a small box labeled “Mealworms”. Dove joined him in the car a minute later. He quickly hid the contents back into the bag. She looked at the bag in her father's lap and squinted. “What are you up to, huh?”

“Nothing, nothing! Did you have a fun time?”

“This town is so small, dad! Why can't we live somewhere else? Why do we always go to the same places again and again?”

“Now, now, you know why we can't leave.”

“I really don't at this point!”

“Well, when you are old enough you can go wherever you want but until then...”

“It's not fair, other kids already have cars! Why can't I have one?”

“Who has a car?”

“Sara and Javi... Does that matter? They have cars!”

“Of course, it matters.”

“Why?”

“Oh, no reason. Never mind.”

They arrived at the banquet hall early. A valet took their car. Mr. Crow walked to a secluded corner of the building and made a phone call. “Yes, Silverton, look up the parents of every Sara and Javier and see if they owe us anything. You know what to do if they haven’t made payment... Ah, good for them. Alright, I’ll see you tomorrow then.” He hung up the phone.

Dove had walked outside. She motioned with her hands for her father to hurry. “They want you onstage!” He looked around for a clue as to what this event was and walked slowly towards the podium at the far center of the hall. He made a brief speech and received a standing ovation seemingly out of fear or compulsion rather than adulation. He smiled, waved, and walked away. “Can we go home now? Pooples is so exhausted from running around today and I need to do my hair!”

“Yes, sweetie, let’s go. And keep that poodle in its cage this time.”

Their house was somewhat small in comparison to their wealth though still could be described as a manor. It was seated on a large hill that overlooked the rest of the town. The gardener had been instructed to not plant any trees or large shrubs that would block the view of others from seeing the house. It was a nasty cream color like too much milk poured in coffee.

It was the anniversary of the death of Mr. Crow’s wife. She has been dead for eight years now. Mr. Crow didn’t take the loss very well. He had vowed on her deathbed to always be by her side. To this day he has not left town. She was cremated. Her urn was placed on a shelf in his study.

She had been absent from the marriage many years before her death. In fact, had it not been for Mr. Crow blackmailing her family for embezzlement she would not have married him. She was the offering made, by her family, to appease an opportunistic soul, one more so than their own that is. Her life wasn't hers anyway or so her father kept reminding her. There was an old story that her mother would tell her about two crows flying east while the sun was setting. One of the crows looked at her and cawed three times. Her mother took it as a sign that she would be pregnant soon. Eventually, she was with child and a baby girl came into the world. The truth, unknown to the baby girl, was that she belonged to another woman. She had been forced to give her up to pay for the other woman's secrets. Everyone pays for secrets. Rather, once they stop being secrets, you'll have to pay. Sometimes it costs very little. Other times, you'll lose significantly depending on how long it's been kept and who finds out first.

Her mother's biological child was born but died shortly after. No one could figure out why. It simply went to sleep, stopped breathing, and passed on. Had Mr. Crow told the other woman his own secret the whole thing could have been avoided. However, Mr. Crow saw an opportunity he knew wouldn't come twice. For a man like Mr. Crow it isn't unusual to want a partner you could mold and form from the start.

It seems to be a dream come true when he found out about her family's transgressions. What he hadn't anticipated was that, from the beginning, their destiny had been decided and her family knew exactly who would be coming for their daughter.

She was an altogether talented actress. Her opus was one only the dead could appreciate. She hadn't known the truth but nonetheless enacted her revenge on Mr. Crow as if compelled by unseen forces. She loved him like a puppet on strings pulled by invisible hands. In the end, those hands turned out to be fates instead of Mr. Crow. Like any secret, once exposed,

there is a varying price depending on who finds out. What any man like Mr. Crow dreads is when something from the unseen realms comes to his doorstep ready to collect. In many ways, Mr. Crow paid the ultimate price for a man of his world view which was to fall in love with your purchase and have it stolen away.

However, the contract, and perhaps payment, was made long before his wife's death. Perhaps it wasn't Mr. Crow who formed the contract but simply bought it without understanding the exact wording. Nevertheless, he honored it to the end.

He had never been a superstitious man. The idea of a magical world had never crossed his mind until he had met Irene. She, like him, had a knack for finding out secrets. Rather, she had a knack for finding out the truth since secrets cease to be once found out.

Secrets can be hidden, sure. They can be shared even. If they are ever cashed out, like in Mr. Crow's case, a new secret forms and the old one merely becomes a clause in the original contract. Irene did not search for secrets. She searched for truth, something far more elusive and dangerous. It was something Mr. Crow could never grasp as something that existed alone on some ethereal plane. For him it was always a tool or a means to an end. There was no truth that existed simply because truth existed. Truth existed for him and because of him. Irene did not agree but entertained the idea from time to time.

She had grown close to Mr. Crow in a strange way. It was never openly expressed or observable. It was something mutually understood perhaps without either's knowledge. Naturally, their two worlds were inextricably linked. Secrets and truth go hand in hand.

Irene knew, that like secrets, truths are part of a larger contract. Once you add one to another it becomes a collection and you a collector. Unfortunately, like any collector you're

never done collecting. And for those like Mr. Crow it becomes easy enough to manipulate a collector if he has stumbled upon something belonging to their collection. It doesn't matter whether he himself made it up or not.

That was their relationship. Irene had many truths but not all of them. Mr. Crow, not knowing her goal, shared what little truths he could find. In return, she loaned him the tools he needed, in the forms of collected truths so Mr. Crow could reach his own goals.

He had once again made a purchase of some of Irene's truths. In this case, it came in the form of a small black bag holding several objects. He rushed into the house and locked himself in his study, scoured through ancient books, and released himself from the outside world.

CHAPTER X

THE GOOSE AND THE END OF TIME

It looked like a planetarium. As he entered, the door seamlessly disappeared behind him. He searched for a knob, a hinge, anything, but nothing was there. Flaming orbs of different colors and sizes zipped by him in orbit around a circular large golden dais.

Around the center circle were an innumerable number of floating shelves towering over the limit of Boy's eyesight. It seemed like the floors were mirrored as the shelves continued deep below him as far down as they were above. On each shelf were stacked scrolls, books, pieces of parchment, manilla folders, even floppy disks. Anything from anytime that stored information or some form of communication was there.

Boy made his way to the center stage and climbed up the stairs. As he did, several orbs, blazing in fire light, approached him. He could see other stages elsewhere in this strange infinitesimal warehouse. One of the spheres nudged him like a dog wanting to be pet.

He saw within images of people like old home movies. Before he could reach out to touch it, a heavy yowl came from the distance. It was a large black cat that hissed at Boy as it walked closer to the stage. Its eyes glowed in the dim lights of the room as the floating spheres now flittered away from Boy and towards the creature. He couldn't adjust his eyes correctly, but

it seemed like the cat paused and sped up sporadically like a buffering image on a computer screen.

It looked at him and paused, crouched down, and wagged its tail furiously. Just as suddenly as it stopped, the cat pounced on one of the circling orbs and grabbed one between its forepaws. “Hey!”, yelled a voice from the dark, “let that go and get!”. The cat jumped in the air and looked around as it ran to the door which Boy had entered. It sat there for a moment until pawing at the entrance and meowing loudly. Suddenly, the shadow of a person appeared and opened the door for the cat to exit.

“Damn old cat is always trying to get indoors,” said the shadow. It walked closer to the light surrounding the platform. Boy stood with confusion apparent on his face. “Irene, what are you doing here?”

“What do you mean what am I doing here? I own the place, don’t I?”

“I mean, is this still the diner?”

“Well, isn’t that the door you came in from?” Boy nodded yes. “Then we are in the diner”, Irene replied. “I had a feeling you could see the true nature of this room. Most just see an broom closet.”

“So, this is what you’ve been keeping in the back room all this time? What is all this?”

“It’s a little bit of everything. Memories, ideas, secrets, old postcards even, but most interesting are the prophecies, of course. They seem to like you, Boy!” The balls of light swirled around him as they were acknowledged by the old woman.

“These things? They tell the future?”

“Some do. Others have taken on a life of their own, unfortunately. More trouble than they’re worth really. But they keep the cat busy when it gets in and saves me a ton of money on the light bill to be frank.” The biggest of the floating spheres, bright red and orange nudged Boy on his head. “Oh look! This one seems to know you. Any memories?” Irene asked.

“I... I’m not sure how...”

“Give it a rub now. No genie for wishes in them sadly. Then they’d really be valuable.” Boy grabbed it in both hands and gently rubbed. The light dimmed in the orb and images appeared, first a woman hung upside down on a tree by her feet stared back at him and flashed away. A burning city appeared in the dark as ash clouds swirled above. Then the crying statue bound to a stone shrine.

“But this has already happened? Hasn’t it?”

“That’s the problem with prophecies. They are the only secrets that remain in the end. They’re usually so vague or abstract that several events can fit the pattern. Well, at least till the end of everything. Which one was this?” Irene walked over, limping, and leaning on a cane with a goose head handle Boy had never seen. “Did something happen?” Boy asked.

“Oh, just that damn cat again. I tripped over it taking out the trash. It keeps that crazy old neighbor out of the dumpster though. Who knows why she’s afraid of it? But you know her, doesn’t make sense for beans.” Boy smiled as he remembers the strange phrases Irene seemed to think were universal.

Irene grabbed the orb and stared for a while. “Oh, well that seems to be the one I was talking about. I... I didn’t know you...”

“Me what? What is it?”

“Well, that’s the end of everything, Boy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m not sure really. It might be your end. It might be all of ours...” Irene stared out into the distance then snickered. “Well anyway, it’s getting late, isn’t it? We should be getting ready for the dinner rush.” Boy cocked his head in confusion. “Irene...”, he said in an irritated voice.”

“Yes, yes, I know. I’ll fill you in later. Right now, we have hungry mouths to feed! Oh, and will you be so kind to escort me to the door. I’m not used to walked with this cane. But I guess it’s about time considering.”

“Considering what?”

“Oh, you don’t have to flatter me, Boy! I’m older than the sky has been blue! And you’ll get paid just the same as everyone else working this shift. But thanks for trying to cheer me up.”

They two walked slowly to the door. Boy could hear the quiet pawing of the cat on the other side. Of course, like any feline, it wanted to be simultaneously inside and out of any box. Together the three walked down the hallway. The cat was eventually kicked outside to stay on guard duty. Irene began to greet the dinner guests, and Boy joined the other servers.

CHAPTER XI

THE DOG

Boy took out the trash but was startled by an unfamiliar dog. It was large, even for a Labrador, with the blackest fur he'd ever seen. It too was startled by Boy's sudden appearance. Unbothered after sizing Boy up, it continued to dig through the trash bag it managed to retrieve from the huge unit behind the diner.

“Get! Get dog!” yelled Boy waving his arms to shoo the creature away. The dog backed away to the edge of the concrete but sat down as if waiting for the next command. “I know what you're doing. You're waiting till I go back inside, huh? Well, ain't going to happen. Irene is going to have my head if I let trash fly all around her property.” The dog simply laid down and made a grumbling noise.

Boy picked up the trash and grabbed the lock from inside. It was part of the job to lock the dumpster every night. And he rarely forgot to these days as Raven Lady became more and more out of touch and desperate for more trash. He came back to find the dog had disappeared. But in its place, the dumpster-diver stood leaning on her side of the fence with a toothy smile and eyes fixed on Boy.

“You can't trust that one, you know?”, said Raven Lady.

“And who might that be?”

“That creature you were talking to.”

“You mean the dog?”

“If that’s what you say”, she said with a shrug.

“I have to get back to work,” Boy said as he walked back into the diner. “Hey! What’s in the bag anyway? Hey, Boy!” Raven Lady yelled as she began to whistle loudly

CHAPTER XII

THE CAT

Twice now in the same week, at the same time, a familiar song played from the distance. Boy couldn't place where it was coming from. He ran as fast as he could as if from some unseen assailant. He turned around and jumped frightened by the shade cast by the light hitting his face and body. There was no reason for him to be running other than the gut wrenching feeling that he was supposed to be somewhere and shouldn't waste time.

He ran until his ankles became gelatinous and he was afraid he might misstep and twist one. The diner was in sight now. A brown remodeled car drove passed him. The mockingbird from the other day puffed its feathers out and perched on the waxy leaved bush as still as a plaster mold. Boy stared at it until it finally acknowledged his presence. Everything was the same as yesterday. He felt a tickle on his sides like an old friend had snuck behind him to play a trick.

Every leaf drop, every sound, every scent was familiar. He counted in his head the sequence of events. But something was off this time. He heard it first before spotting the black cat. "This is different. Right?" Boy thought. Its orange eyes glared at him as if annoyed by his presence near it.

Boy took his eyes off the cat and realized that the street and sidewalk were empty. No cars were parked on the side of the road. No shop doorbells rang as customers entered and

exited. Even the wind seemed to have stopped. The only movement were three crows on a telephone pole who seemed to be observing the cat as well as Boy. They squawked eagerly until the cat broke it's stare and quickly swiveled it's head towards the birds. The animals silently eyed each other until the cat walked toward Boy and let out a deep but soft mew. He bent down to pet the creature, but it quickly jumped back and began to sniff his hand. It nonchalantly turned its back on Boy and began to walk away periodically looking back to see if he would follow. He took the hint.

They walked past the diner and into the forest just behind. The path was familiar as he knew the lake would eventually appear. The scent of water was heavy as they approached. Small waves and ripples were frozen in place as well. A fish could be seen floating above the water about to catch a juicy flying insect. But nothing moved.

He noticed the paddle boat was still at the dock as he continued to follow the cat. It stopped and pawed at the side and mewed again. Boy knew it wanted him to travel to the island as he did before when he was younger. Where he saw the red headed girl for the first time and fell into that strange water.

As he paddled towards the center of the lake, the ripples behind him started to move again. As they the small waves crested, the world behind him began to animate. Time seemed to race at an unusual speed behind him as trees began to grow and wither and new sprouts followed the same cycle as their ancestors.

The small dock on the other side had rotted. Boy jumped into the water and dragged the small vessel to the shore so it wouldn't float away. The small island remained the same, with an ominous cluster of elder oaks surrounding the inner sanctuary. He remembered the oppressive

feeling this wall of trees had given him as he walked through a small opening hoping that the red headed woman would not be on the other side.

A soft voice carried through the entrance saying, "So it was you after all. Now you are ready."

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