

CLIPSHOW 2020



The year through literature and art

Clip Show

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Issue 1, Spring 2021

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Cover art

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Special Thanks

Special thanks to the ENG 3650 class at Ohio University for offering advice and suggestions to make *Clip Show* the best it can be!

This journal contains works of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the authors' imaginations or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or people is entirely coincidental. The opinions expressed by nonfiction essayists do not represent those of Clip Show or the other contributors.

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2020

ISSUE 1

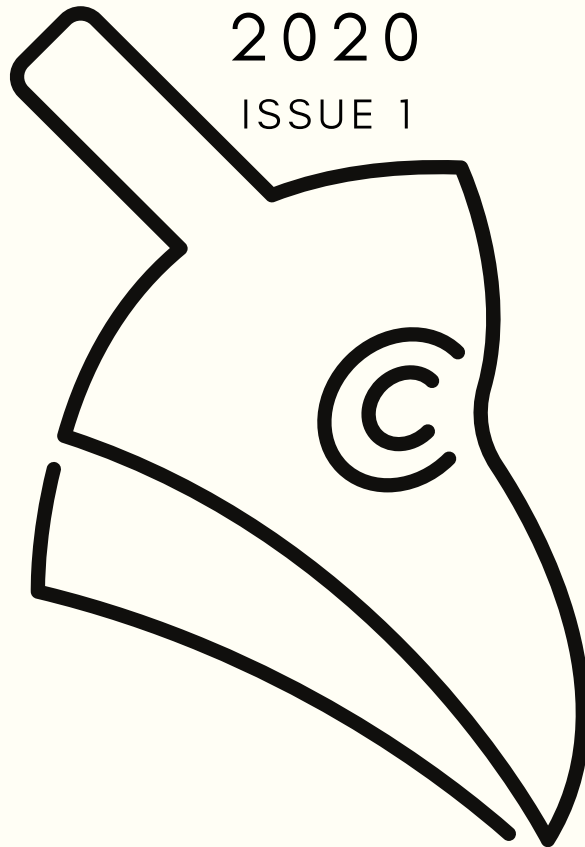


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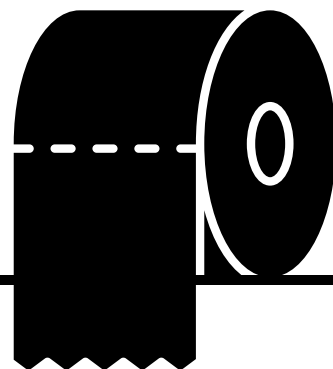
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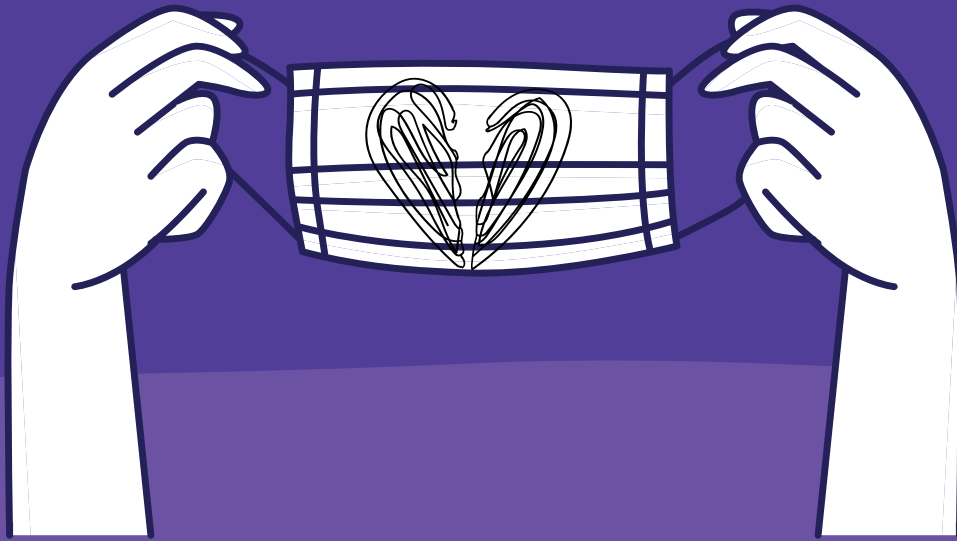
Introduction



Clip Show seeks to explore how events inspire us and our creative work over the course of a year. This first volume covers the chaos and isolation of 2020 and how creatives faced the year through their writing and art. While some faced empty classrooms due to remote learning, others experienced devastating breakups on top of the pandemic. No two 2020 tales are exactly alike, but amidst the heartbreak and confusion, the love for literature and documenting what seemed like the end of the world holds this collection together.



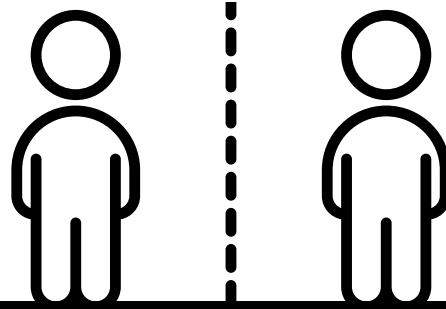
2020 Heartbreak



Our Mistress

written by

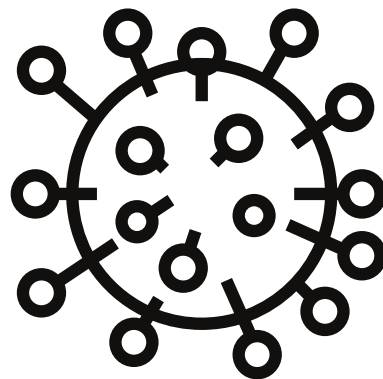
Ellery Pollard



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“Our Mistress” is a flash fiction based on true events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. I was in a long-distance relationship at the time, and we decided to end things because we had to go months without seeing each other due to quarantine. It was incredibly frustrating, but there’s no bad blood between us. Our relationship had simply come to an end.

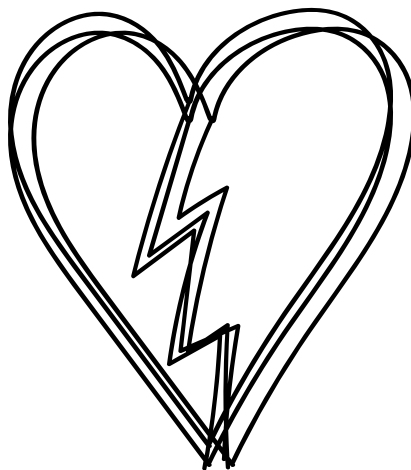
Ellery Pollard is an English creative writing major at Ohio University. She is also minoring in psychology and working on an Italian Studies certificate.



She wasn't someone I expected. I'm not sure how I didn't see it—she was taking the loves of so many other people, so why not mine? I thought that she was satisfied with the amount of relationships she had ended and the families that she had ripped apart. But now here I am, facing the truth. And the truth is that she does not discriminate, and she does not have to dig a grave to have an impact. She can see through any mask; she can touch whomever she pleases (no matter how clean your hands are).

But what I really hadn't expected was for me to fall for her tricks, too. She impacted me more than he could have ever hoped to. But we still refused to acknowledge her to each other. She is the one who caused the distance between us. She is the one who infected our relationship. But when we finally decided to end things, we came up with excuses and we never said her name once.

We couldn't blame the failure of our love on our dear Corona.



Jilted Excerpt

from the memoir written by

Lucie Parfitt

NOTE: The following contains suicidal content. Viewer discretion is advised.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This book began as a healing project. A place where I would document my truth on the life-altering journey that would lead to my recovery in 2020. The year of 2020 was a momentous year for all those who experienced it. What you are about to read is the account of an event that changed every aspect of my life. I delve into my thoughts and feelings on how I dealt with being dumped three days before my wedding, revealing both beautiful and ugly moments. Welcome readers, to the end of my dreams and the start of my new beginning. This book covers everything in detail and therefore features some rather depressing points, but with highlights that I feel are just as important to mention for a full-bodied, authentic retelling of healing after traumatic heartbreak during a worldwide pandemic.

Sometimes, the fates are so feared and dreaded in our daily lives that they are barely spoken of, let alone imagined. So much fear surrounds them and you imagine that hope alone will prevent anything from happening. But then it happens. Sometimes our greatest fears come true. The inevitable is suddenly a very real possibility, despite all the odds we believed to be in our favour.



Lucie Parfitt

My ambition is that this book will help others relate and make you feel better when facing isolation in this bitter existence. In sharing this experience, I hope to help others understand that it's OK to make mistakes and be completely out of control in moments of extreme heartbreak and pain. This is being human. This is being in love.

Lucie Parfitt is a creator based in the centre of England who enjoys writing fantasy novels under her pen name 'Alex Wolf' (with a title to be published later this year in 2021). She also illustrates fantasy-style portraits and draws commissioned pet portraits. Writing and drawing have always been her passion since she was five years old.

When she is not creating, she is either working her day job or reading various genres such as romance, true crime and dark fantasy.

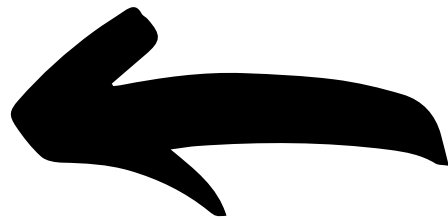
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Facebook - Luciiespirit

Instagram - LuciieSpiritart

Goodreads - Alex Wolf

[Find the full memoir here](#)



EN: *The following story has kept its original British spelling for the sake of authenticity.*



The Jilted Moment

It was 16th December 2019.

Four days before the fated wedding day. A date that had been set two years before and planned meticulously, breaking everything down into bite-sized goals on a monthly basis with only a few breaks in between. It was the biggest project I had ever planned, and something that I considered to be the biggest long-term goal in my life. In four days would be the most memorable date for me, as it also marked our sixth anniversary of being together.

I recall that day as having been stressful at work and then it had taken me over two hours to commute home on the train. The trains in Birmingham at that time of the year were a nightmare: tightly-packed, late, and sometimes cancelled. I was on my way home on a late-running train, having been stuck at a few stations due to trains stopped in front of other trains. By the time I got home, I had had enough for one day, was hungry, and tired. I was not always the easiest to talk to when I got home in such a mood but I remember feeling something was off as soon as I got in. Like in the movies, your gut senses something is wrong. After feeling shitty, I thought, well the day can't be any worse, can it?

Dillon, whom I usually found at his computer or in the kitchen when I got home, was sitting in the lounge (my preferred habitat in the house) and I cautiously approached him. I apologised about being late and explained my horrendous trip home, then I trailed off when I noticed



Dillon looked more distant than usual. I asked him what was wrong. He vaguely replied that he couldn't do it anymore. In that moment, my whole life shifted and changed. I tried to persuade myself that destroying someone's future in a single moment couldn't be this easy, but as he proceeded to explain that he could no longer do any of it– the marriage, us– the reality of his words sank like a stone in my stomach.

I will always congratulate myself on how I reacted in that moment. For someone with anxiety and a panic disorder, I was scarily calm and logical (the emotions would catch up with me later). It was like part of my brain just switched off and I asked him how the heck he came to that conclusion, and why he had not mentioned anything before. I mean, not only had we just bought 100 bottles of wine at the weekend but just the night before, we had been intimate. His explanation was not the reasoning behind his decision as much as how he had come to his decision. He explained that he couldn't write the vows, that he couldn't even imagine how the day would go, that he tried but couldn't even look forward to it. To the happiest day of my life. I am pretty sure I cried then, and asked what we were going to do, what he wanted to do. I had already jumped to the bargaining part of my grief and tried to work out if it was just cold feet, whether it was just the wedding that he wanted to end, just what the hell had happened.

After what seemed like hours of trying to work it out with still no clear reason, I felt I understood. I decided to take a break and left him with his thoughts as I showered. God, it was the most dramatic, depressing shower of my life. As I turned on the water, I felt my emotions



catch up with the insane reality and it hit me like a tsunami of horror. I could barely stand up as I let the truth wash over me: he was abandoning me. He was leaving me and I couldn't stop it. Not all of me believed this but my gut knew. My gut knew the horrendous journey I was about to embark on, but I let my emotions try and deal with it in my own way. Surely, he was just freaking out? Surely after six years together we couldn't just end like that? I searched endlessly through my memories of our arguments, anything that would justify his decision but could not find it. We argued, of course, but nothing so bad that would explain this. After living and being together for so long there were things that would get on our nerves and eventually explode into an argument every now and then. But it would always eventually simmer down.

I broke slowly down in that bathroom; I am pretty sure I took a good hour before I was able to leave the room and face reality again. In that moment I was there for myself, I had to be, as it seemed the love of my life would no longer be for the foreseeable future. When I eventually summoned the courage to leave the room, another blow hit me. He had packed a night bag and said he needed space to think. Again, I calmly agreed, and reasoned that this was a big decision that I didn't think he should take lightly. Yes, it was a threat, but the anger had already started to surface. Being so out of control in that moment, I had no idea what to do except watch him leave. Again, my inner monologue reasoned that it would only be for one night and that giving him this space would help; he would come to realise that this was a mistake and how much he was



putting on the line. Besides, if he had made his decision, why would he still hesitate on it?

Close to begging, I asked him to consider everything we had been through and that, if we needed, I was happy to try couples' counselling, cancel the wedding, anything that would salvage this (my poor self, trying to bargain still, until in the end I had tried everything). He agreed and left. My second breakdown commenced. My gut knew but very empathetically avoided sharing the truth with the rest of myself. I would never share a bed with him again. I would never see him in the same way again.

Where Do I Go from Here?

There are things in life you just have to 'deal' with. What do you do in such a situation? As I said, I broke down but I knew there was something I needed to do. I would not suffer this alone. I began to journal on what had happened, my mind still trying to make sense of it all, and reason with potential outcomes. As I began to navigate the maze of confusion on the possibilities before me, realising how truly out of control I was on this, I resorted to my 'emergency plan'. From experience, there were a few people I could rely on during these crazy times. Granted, there had been very few times when I had been through such levels of loneliness and panic. I subconsciously chose the one person who had been jilted herself, the person I trusted to guide me through



the hellish hours of that first evening and into the next day-- My stepmum.

We shared a conversation that night over the phone that purely focused on the present and being supportive of myself in that moment. Whenever thoughts of worry or panic started to rise, we would try to come back to the present, dealing with being by myself after what had just happened (whatever that meant, as I still had no answers for myself). What could I do? What could I control? Looking back, I could tell I was on the verge of kidding myself that things were going to be different in the morning; that Dillon would come back and realise what a horrible mistake he had made. Surely his friends would help him see that? Surely our first night apart in a while would help him realise his mistake?

Despite my amazing stepmother helping me calm myself, as expected I barely slept at all that night. The bed felt empty and uncomfortable. Every noise shifted me into thinking he had returned. When the painful stretch of morning began, I called in sick from work. My manager at the time was understanding. My sudden request was something so out of the ordinary that she wished me luck and hoped I would be well. I responded that I hoped so too.

I was baffled by how each day can have the same amount of time. Compared to the day before which was busy and rushed, full of commuting, working, meetings, calls and then finally returning home, that day was frozen and stunted. I barely remembered what I did as I waited for Dillon to return home. Unbelievably, he had gone to work himself, leaving me to agonise at home as he decided our future.



I probably watched movies – classic escapism as I was in mental and emotional limbo. What I do recall is my parents and stepparents actively checking in on me. When they discovered that by midday I had not heard anything, they decided to all come down to be with me: my mum and stepdad from Rugby and dad and stepmum from Nottingham.

Journal excerpt, 17th December 2019:

I still cannot swallow the reality that I am drowning in.

Dillon doesn't want the wedding.

Any further complications are unclear and since last night I have been stuck in this torturous purgatory.

Waves of panic, sadness, anxiety, and utter despair are rolling through me constantly. This pain is unbearable and I cannot see the outcome. It feels as though, for once, I do not know how the days ahead will unfold. This disaster, this chaos...how will I recover from this horror? Surely our relationship will not.

This is beyond any nightmare I could have comprehended.

It is 1pm and mum has left work to see me. Everyone is worried as I am on my own. I walked the dogs all morning not knowing if it would be the last time I saw them. For the first time in my life, I am facing the real possibility of ending my life. For that is how it feels. To have everything I have worked for come to nothing.

The humiliation, the horror, and misery.



Family

Within the hour, all four of my parents were at my house with me. Having been around my step-parents since I was around six years old, they pretty much knew my whole life. I knew all four to be my support circle and to just have them all together during that time was overwhelming in itself due to the rarity of what was occurring. Calmly, we discussed again what had happened and they shared with me that a number of them had spoken to Dillon since. From their conversations with Dillon, the reality was heading toward the worst result; the result my gut knew and feared. By 3pm, my dad had rang him and asked Dillon to come home and confront me in person with his decision; to face the consequences of his choice and begin the grim proceedings of unravelling everything I had planned and built over the past two years.

A small, empathetic part of me did feel for him as he returned to what was once his home to face all four of my parents, as well as me, to confirm his decision. As he entered, my parents decided to give us space, as they already knew what he had to tell me. Time slowed down once more as we sat down and he proceeded to tell me that not only did he not want to marry me (despite proposing just two years before) but that he also no longer wanted to be in a relationship. Again, I congratulate myself on my reaction or lack of it, and can only narrow it down to the basic fact that my body was in shock. In less than twenty-four hours, my entire future had been taken from me.

Swiftly, I moved the conversation onto cancelling the wedding that

was supposed to happen in three days' time and we began to break down the finances and how to contact the hundred some guests we needed to inform. Even just the thought of that blew my mind. My dad (my hero, looking back) had convinced Dillon that it was his sole responsibility to inform all the suppliers and contacts that we were cancelling, leaving very little for me to do. My dad knew I would want to do it all despite this being completely out of my hands. After begrudgingly reeling off all the contacts Dillon needed to ring and inform (yeah, as in he didn't know, because he wasn't involved in the planning – more on that later) I sighed and asked how he felt. Big mistake.

He smiled and sighed, saying, "Well I feel better now."

He. Felt. Better. I guess it was the first 'real' moment for me, where it simultaneously clashed with the reality of what had happened and my god Lucie, you need to sort your life out and be gone with this loser. I believe my reaction was to casually scoff and then I moved away, worried that I would physically hurt him in that moment. God, I certainly felt like it. In the hours that followed, Dillon moved into the kitchen with the list of contacts while I sat solemnly with my family in the lounge. I felt uncomfortable and itched to go out and help him with it. Not because I actually wanted to help him, but I suddenly had the urge to tell them that it wasn't me. This wasn't my fault. I kept hearing him say "we broke up" and inside I was screaming "YOU DUMPED ME!" In order to avoid my emotions causing a wreck, I felt my logical side take over and even though I was sad and crying at times, I was focusing hard on the immediate issue at hand. In those hours, I slowly watched as the last two

years of wedding planning began unravelling before my eyes. My mum eventually took the guest list from me and together my parents split the list to tell people what had happened. At least with them I knew it would be more accurate, though I visualised the heartbreaking image of all the people that would have been so happy for us, finding out the sad news. Again, slices of anger kept coming through at the thought of Dillon in the next room, sighing with relief.

By that evening it became clear that I could no longer stay in the house. I decided to go home with my mum. Yet after I had made the decision, I suddenly began worrying about Dillon. The anger had gone and I was back to bargaining with the reality of what had happened. At that point he was mindlessly playing again on his computer and just watching him made me panic. What if he was suffering from some huge depressive episode or something? What if this was some mental breakdown? I thought that through the entire day and experience I had my support circle around me and there he was on his own. I didn't even know if his parents knew yet. As I went in to tell him I was leaving I remember panicking that this was a suicidal move on his part – making me leave the house so he could do it. That's how far my mind was going to avoid that what had actually happened was real. As I hastily packed a few nights' stay in a suitcase, I couldn't process how to understand why, in the last 24 hours my six-year relationship, the love of my life had ended it all with no sign of any major cracks. He was yet to give me a reason for his decision. I can still remember the awkwardness as I said goodbye to him and realising that a kiss or a hug was out of the

question. We both didn't know what to do or how to act, so I just left.

Now, of course, I see that in those moments I was incredibly blessed to have my family and loved ones whom I was able to reach out to. Truly it would have been a very different experience, despite it still being disastrous, without them. For anyone out there who has had to go through anything relatively similar to this without the support I had, I applaud you. I know my limits and I cannot imagine how you could do it. I have always been resourceful and, growing up in a big family, one of the advantages is there is always someone to talk to. This was another thing that concerned me about Dillon. He wasn't close to his family and even though I had limited knowledge as to how his family were involved in those days of the break up, I knew that when I left to stay with my mum, surrounded by my family, he was left alone in our three-bedroom house. Although many would believe he deserved that, perhaps it was hard for me to accept that this was what he wanted for himself.

Marrying Me

The days that followed involved me wallowing in a miserable blur, despite being with my mum who shared my pain almost as immensely as I did. Being with her was in itself a very healing experience. It had opened up old wounds, including my mum's separation from my dad



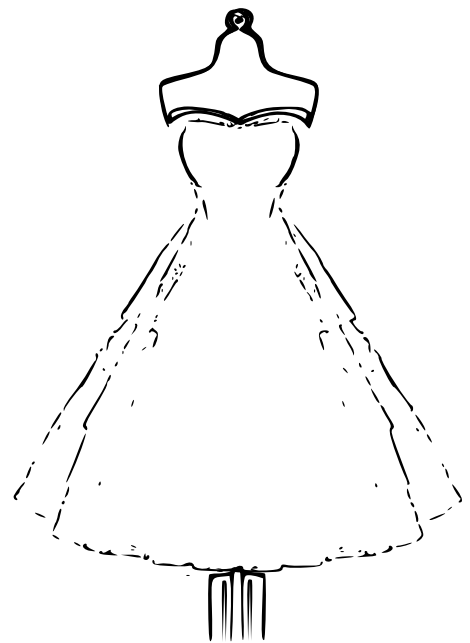
and the loss of her parents, which happened around the same time. Talking through this pain with her, as well as talking to my dad, was very cathartic. After all, difficult times are what make you grow in life and seeing how far they have all come since I was young gave me hope.

Moments like these are what gives your life a turning point at defining who you are, and what you truly want. A wake-up call that I didn't necessarily want, but there we go. I felt over those days that there were still decisions that needed to be made, for example my wedding dress needed to be picked up, I had to deal with the honeymoon, which was non-refundable and would run over Christmas and New Year. Large decisions I never anticipated making; although my parents were sensitive, the decisions still had to be made and in my weakened state, they felt overwhelming to make on my own. Apart from trying to process everything during that time, I still can't quite recall what I did alongside making those decisions; it was all a blur. I believe we went clothes shopping at some point and went to visit my grandparents. I journaled a lot as it is my way of processing and boy did I have a lot to process! The dreaded wedding date was approaching. It was ingrained as 'the happiest day of my life' and I suddenly had a new focus in mind. I felt my stubbornness rear its head. After all, I had anticipated this day for two years. Just because the bozo had decided to ruin it for everyone at the last minute, I would no longer stand it. A stubborn part of me refused to let the day go without some sort of commemoration, and my family agreed. I wanted to reinvent the day and using my planning and resourcefulness (also my family and friends) I began to come up with

ideas of what to do on that fateful day.

For those who don't know me, this would seem like a crazy decision, but this seemed the easiest choice for me to make. I am a huge Disney fan, specifically toward Frozen 2, which had just been released a few weeks before. I had already seen it twice and the image of Elsa finding herself in a white dress spoke to me in my moments of grief. That was when the idea came to me.

I still had my wedding dress. A gorgeous dress; I never knew I even liked dresses until I chose it. I still had to go to the store and pick it up. Despite the anxiety and pain it would cause, I was insistent on still doing it. I had to. The dress felt like a part of me that I refused to let go. The romantic, dreamer side of myself that I initially thought had died a horrible death after being dumped but had simply gone into hiding. And on the day that I was meant to get married, I felt determined to wear the dress. Give myself the dream I had worked so hard for. So what if he wasn't in the picture? I knew my family would be there and that we would be together. Now all I had to do was suggest the idea to my family without looking like a crazed Miss Havisham which would only send me further into a depressive oblivion. Or a psych ward.



As the idea formed, it almost felt like it was falling into place. A cinema was hired out to hold the event, my family and close friends had

booked the day off anyway, and we planned a little ceremony to mark the occasion with me in my dress looking like the princess that I still was (hey, I was allowed to be vain in that moment, I was in pain, OK?). Luckily, it made sense to my family, and with the help of my dad, my sisters, and my friends, the event was quickly put together. They even planned a party at my dad's house afterwards where we celebrated starting anew. So, after all Dillon did, 20th December 2019 was still an awesome day. Not at all like I planned, but with my personal strength, and my fantastic family and friends, I was able to make that day memorable for an entirely better reason than it was to be originally. I got to walk down a red carpet wearing my dress with my dad in his suit. I got flowers from the staff. I had children gasping and calling me a princess. It was magical and it was one of the best decisions I made in 2019. At least for one day in that miserable month, I was able to live in a magical moment that I had promised myself, with those closest to me. So, a pat on the back there. It would still be a bumpy ride going forwards, but I had started it well.

Journal excerpt, 19th December 2019:

It's the day before...well it's just surreal. I knew on some level it would be surreal but this?! Yeah, never would have guessed in a million years. So much can change in a moment, which has forced me to really just focus on each day as it comes...

I feel a little surprised at how 'well' I am coping. I haven't cried today and although I feel sad, the tears for now are saved...

I have no idea how I am going to feel tomorrow but I have planned something good, so I hope it helps... All I am focusing on is myself. Which can be hard sometimes but after investing so much energy and time into something that I thought was 'us', it's nice to just have 'me' in a way. The burden is gone. I took it all on for him, for us, and of course I am sad and angry about it but at least I can still make tomorrow my own. Six years has gone but I will take what I can from it moving forward...

Christmas on the Beach

Another hard decision I faced was working out what to do with the honeymoon. It had been funded by my family and despite them constantly saying there was no pressure for me to go, I obviously still felt it. After all, it was a holiday I had been looking forward to for almost a year! It was a cruise, which was one of my favourite types of holidays, too. Unfortunately, as it was over Christmas and New Year, no friends or family could go. And going on my own didn't feel like a great idea.

So, I let it go. After such a great day on 20th December, this decision seemed to blow everything into a depressed reality that was my life. It also meant I had to choose where to spend Christmas. I couldn't go to my house as Dillon was there and so I continued staying with my mum. Conveniently, she has booked a cottage down in Croyde as her own little treat for Christmas. Once I got over the guilt of intruding on her and my stepdad's little Christmas getaway, it definitely felt like a good decision as



I was with my family, including my step aunt, whom I hadn't been around much. Turns out spending Christmas with them was the best choice. We even went to the beach on Christmas Day. I recall taking my dog Freddie and watching him play with my mum's dog on the beach and realising that things were going to be ok. I was alive, I had survived, and watching my dog on the beach was the simple pleasure that I found that day.

Sharing that time with my mum is something I will always be thankful for and she was surprisingly upbeat despite the circumstances of me being there. The distance helped, I think, but once I returned, I sadly knew my problems would still be waiting for me.

Life Goes on and You're...Still Stuck

Despite the Christmas break giving me some kind of reprieve, I had to change scenery again. It almost felt like I had returned to my childhood, where I would spend Christmas at one parents and New Year at the others. That year I did the same. I knew my dad was anxious to see how I was doing and after his heroic work (and my amazing stepmum for supporting me) I felt like it was time to see him too. A change of scenery and perspective is what I needed. Plus, there was a New Year's Eve party and family get-together I could look forward to. I felt like, after mending my raw wounds over Christmas, I was reasonably OK to see others outside the close family again.

Just like Christmas, the time spent with my dad was heart-warming and I think that, for the first time in a while, I spent my time purely

focusing on the present. It's all I could face, and every day held a new challenge. I recall being at the New Year's Eve party. Despite having social anxiety and being conscious of my mental state, I was around my family and their friends and knew that it was better than being alone. As talk of the future began and I shared my experience, I felt the emotion bubbling up (alongside the alcohol slowly increasing in my system). People were complaining or moaning about their year and saying what they finally wanted to achieve in 2020. The conversations brought my reality crashing forward. My life as I knew it was over. There was no going back to how it was before. I had no idea what I would be doing in 2020.



The idea alone overwhelmed me. Many people who heard my story sympathised (I could tell from their expressions) kindly shared their condolences and sadness with me. And for those that didn't, I bravely shared my story with the emotion lumped in my throat. I felt so embarrassed– I still had my fake nails and hair extensions in for the wedding. I believed it was on

that night that the aesthetic things that I once loved suddenly felt like a physical burden. Everything reminded me of what hadn't happened. My family proudly recalled the story of what we did instead on the day and described my 'party' but by then, to me, it felt like a joke. A joke that I had to do that for myself and my family because some bozo chickened out.

The anger and loss of control overwhelmed me and I remember that, as the countdown began for New Year, all I could do was cry. Cry for



my loss, cry for myself, and cry for what a shit-fest I had survived. It was finally 2020 and for the first time in my meticulously-planned life, I had no fucking clue what I was going to do.

On a more positive note, there was karaoke and, with classic Dutch courage (or in my case spiced rum and coke), I decided to sing a song that would make me promise to myself that things would be different next year. Now I had the control and I would be responsible for my own happiness. I sang loudly (and probably terribly) It's My Life by Jon Bon Jovi.

Support System

The dreaded time had come. I was meant to go home and, bless my kind heart, I truly believed we should try and live together. After all, that was the logical and what felt like the 'adult' thing to do as we owned the house together. That was, until we sold the house that we now had to sell; it felt like the right decision at the time. What I hadn't factored in was the mix of raw trauma caused by the bozo I had to share the space with, as well as my own mental health issues which meant this option was just not feasible. I avoided the fact that I knew he had had a New Year's Eve party at our house without me, with our close friends and probably some people I didn't know. This idea alone gave me huge anxiety. I mean, who likes the idea of loads of people walking around your house (mostly drunk) without you there? Was it like walking through a broken hearts museum? Did they laugh and scoff at our couple photos still hung up?



The day I returned was a grim affair. Dillon was awkward and didn't know how to act, so he acted friendly which only infuriated me even more. It was as if over Christmas and New Year I had had this breath of fresh air and new perspective, but the strength of my support circle around me collapsed once he appeared. I remember lugging in my suitcase (full of over two weeks' worth of clothes) and trying to unpack with him watching me awkwardly.

"Is everything ok?" he asked. It was an innocent question, but almost made me explode. I quickly reigned it in, though, and kindly asked him for space. It seemed even boundaries would be an issue now. My sensitivity and anxiety were at an all-time high and I had to explain every single thing to him. Luckily, he tried to be out of the house most nights and, with me starting work again, I was relieved to have the distraction. He had moved into our second bedroom and just seeing half of my bedroom contents gone was a strange feeling. Also, I had bought new bedsheets which I believed eased my mental shift.

I believe it took a few days before what shitstorm I was currently in really sunk in. I was physically now at a distance from my parents (though they checked on me regularly) and living under the same roof as the douchebag who had dumped me three days before my wedding and now wanted to be friends with me. I want to make a point here that there was a difference between being civil with each other and him trying to push us into being friends despite my clear reluctance. It also brought up a lot of feelings from our relationship where I had been gaslighted before. He was making me feel like I was crazy and

overreacting for what had happened. That's how ridiculous it was. Just his simple questions of "Why are you angry at me?" or "Why are you sad?" being asked on a daily basis was driving me nuts. My only solace was that I had already booked in to have counselling on Thursdays before I returned home. I knew I wanted professional help to manage this shitstorm and with him exacerbating things every day, it was my only saving grace, something that I could console myself with.

Journal excerpt, 9th January 2020:

It's 1am. A lot has happened. Every time I go to write the situation twists and changes. When I went back to the house, I was sad and unpacked in a solemn silence. The house felt familiar yet alien to me. He wasn't home so I tried to simmer down my feelings until he got back. His small talk frustrated me. I asked for space until I was done. I had to ask. That's how much it boiled my blood. When I felt ready, we met in the lounge to discuss the house.

It was awkward and hard to do. I remember him asking if I wanted a hug (something he rarely did anyway) and I replied "no thanks".



Regret

written by

Ally Pepiot



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This poem was inspired by a rough breakup I went through in 2020.

Hello, my name is Ally Pepiot and I am 19 years old. I am an assistant GM at Lee's Famous Recipe Chicken.



As I look up at the sunset,
Orange mixed with slivers of blue,
I see a cloud that reminds me of you.
I picked up the phone at 2 am,
I knew it was you.
I guess you are back to telling me the same stupid things that you always
did,
Your Hatred,
The Yelling,
The Screaming,
Throbbing pain.
I remember the fights,
Long nights,
The pained headaches,
Some things that you go through you just can't let go of,
But Knowing you is one thing that I will never forget,
Cause you were something special to me,
But you decided to leave me like everyone else I had ever loved.



Coping the Best We Can

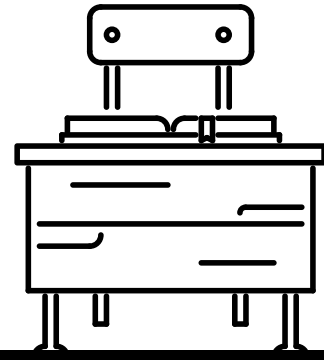


art by @Vvarx
see pg. 94 for bio

When Will It Be Time

written by

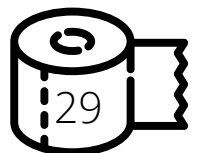
Cristen Faulkenberry



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

At the time of writing this poem, school had been shut down for a month. Since I'm a high school teacher, the impact of a shortened year was suddenly overwhelming. The uncertainties of how to handle the situation, the worry of whether or not students were doing okay, and simply missing doing the job I love. We were still expected to provide and grade assignments and teachers in my district were required to come in twice per week. Although we did not have to do any virtual classes in Spring 2020, it still felt wrong to work so many hours in an empty classroom.

Cristen Faulkenberry is a high school English teacher in northwest Missouri who enjoys reading a wide variety of literature with a side of writing on her own. Aside from writing, her hobbies include spending time with family, playing piano, and completing one-thousand piece plus puzzles. She obtained her Bachelor's of Science in Education for 5-12 English from Missouri Western State University and a Masters of Arts in English from the University of Missouri-Kansas City.



Cristen Faulkenberry

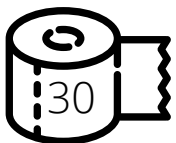
WHEN WILL IT BE TIME

The desks are empty,
Folded on top of one another,
No markings upon them,
No "sit in your chair."
When will it be time,
For their chairs to be warm again?

The classrooms are so quiet,
You can hear the walls whispering,
Wondering what's happened,
Why does it all feel so bare?
When will it be time,
For the walls to listen once again?

The teachers are all trying,
Trying to keep teaching,
Trying to keep grading,
Trying to keep reading,
Trying to keep learning,
When will it be time,
For them to feel like teachers again?

The students are all somewhere,
Stuck at home,
Gone to work far away,



Cristen Faulkenberry

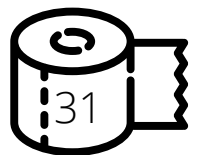
WHEN WILL IT BE TIME

Wondering if they get to stay,
Looking for their meal for the day,
Asking us when will it be time for them to return.
When will it be time,
For us to take care of our students again?

The staff is all hopeful,
That soon this will end.
But then a voice wonders,
Will August bring the mend?
When will it be time,
For us to be teachers once again?

Ding, Ding, Click, Click,
Oh no, what now?
Haven't I changed my teaching enough?
Am I not still trying to reach kids?
Oh, there's some new article,
It'll tell when it is time....but...
When will it be time,
For messages to not spike our anxiety?

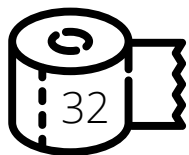
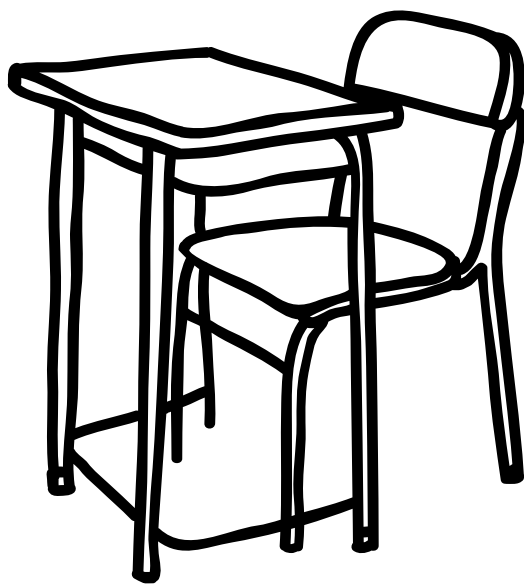
Flip, flip, the pages of the book,
Click, click, grading another essay,
Ding, ding, another e-mail to read,



Cristen Faulkenberry

WHEN WILL IT BE TIME

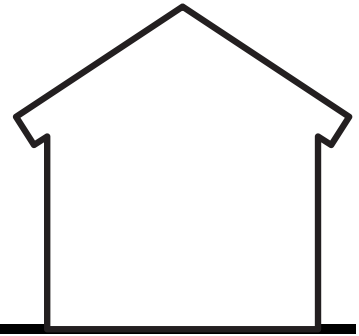
Click, click,
When will it be time,
To bring us back again?



Quarantine Animation

illustrated by

Charlene Pepiot

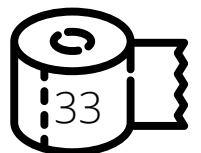
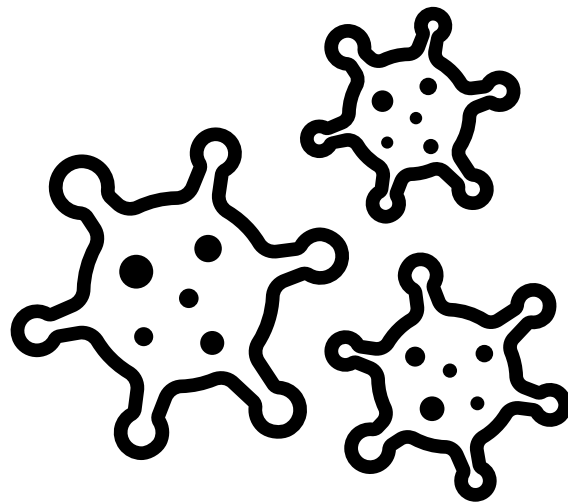


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This short animatic demonstrates the blurring of time and gradual loss of sanity as the months in isolation pass by. Sunlight? What's that?

Charlene Pepiot is an undergrad at Ohio University majoring in Creative Writing. Her work has been published in the literary magazines "Polaris" and "Havik" as well as the newspaper "The Post." She enjoys biking in her nonexistent free time.

ED: check out cp872117.wixsite.com/website to see the full video!





COVID-19 Diary Excerpt

written by

DreamyDemon (Discord User)



NOTE: The following piece contains sexual harassment. Viewer discretion is advised.

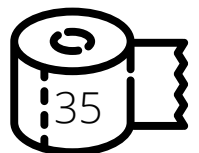
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I have a long standing interest in science fiction and have always been curious by epidemiology to the point that when I worked in security at a mental health unit, I'd read the trust procedures about how to cope in a pandemic. When COVID struck, it piqued my interest. I never new it would get to the point it did but I found the situation interesting.

I came across an article by a historian who suggested keeping a diary because we are at present living through key moments in history and I was inclined to agree. It was like living in a science fiction and I just wanted to document how it affected me.

DreamyDemon is currently studying mental health nursing at Teesside University in Britain. In the past they studied anthropology and religious studies at Lampeter University and have worked in a variety of healthcare environments. They love writing, music and hope one day to be a research nurse.

EN: The following story has kept its original British spelling for the sake of authenticity.



21st March 2020

Checked online and there is one confirmed case in Middlesbrough.

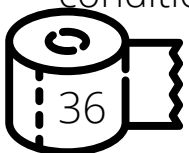
Of course, I was concerned, but I had shopping to do. I tried to go to the centre of town hoping smaller shops would be better stocked but most of the vegetables in Heron Foods were sold out and I couldn't get vegan pizza. I was able to get two bags of frozen cabbage and pizza garlic bread that turned out to be vegan so it wasn't a total loss.

I tried to adhere to social distancing but it's difficult when other people don't. When walking through M&S, I saw an elderly couple walking towards me and tried to move away from them-- as they're vulnerable. They made no attempt to move! Then another elderly guy coughed without covering his mouth. To be honest, I found it irrationally irritating given the posts on social media claiming young people were not listening to advice. I'm starting to wonder where they're learning it from.

I spent most of the day working on an essay about schizophrenia from a global, national and local perspective. It's an interesting topic, but 3,000 words is nowhere near enough to cover everything. You could write an entire book on all these perspectives. I think it's too descriptive but I don't know where I'm going to have the space to add analysis (which is basically trash-talking your sources).

Still, I have an extension so it's not due until 1st May, but my birthday's 29th April and I am not going to spend it rushing to get an essay finished.

I noticed there was advice to self-isolate if you have an underlying condition, so I emailed my head and asked her for her advice. She



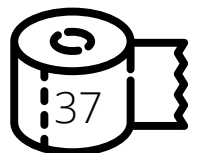
replied that they had to follow government advice, so I have to isolate and take time out of placement. Not going to lie, I am utterly devastated. I called my dad, thinking I could calmly explain the situation to him and get some reassurance. Instead, I completely broke down.

If everyone was in this situation I wouldn't mind so much, but it's not purely the isolation that upset me. I mentioned that I moved here from Southampton. The reason I was there was to study mental health nursing at the university. During this time, I had so many issues to do with housing problems, bullying, bereavements and received no support from the university. It accumulated in them trialling me under fitness to practice because of my health, but I feel it would have never got to that stage if they had offered me more help. They treated me like a failure even though I passed all my placement and worked hard to get high grades.

Having to take time out of placement brought the same feelings of anxiety, of not feeling good enough and I must admit that the thought of dropping out went through my head. It was almost like a sign that I shouldn't be a nurse, but my grades say otherwise, the patients said otherwise and their views matter the most (or at least they should).

My dad reminded me that I wasn't in Southampton now and that I am not the only one in this situation. I don't know how it's going to affect this course but other people will be in the same boat. This is a fresh start and I need to try and see it as a chance to get some study down. I've got a whole stack of nursing books that will be fun to read.

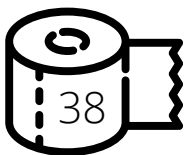
This evening I got sent the same voice clip from three different



people of a woman claiming to be a doctor with news that drinking hot drinks and water cures coronavirus. There was no public information released about this by reputable organisations such as WHO or PHE, so I don't think it's real. My friend told me that it's been recommended for patients on her ward, but to be honest, a sore throat is a sign of coronavirus and water, especially warm water, is soothing for a sore throat. It doesn't mean it will cure the virus.

It's not harmful advice, but might convince people that COVID-19 isn't harmful if it can be cured by drinking water. I said earlier that the biggest issue we face is ignorance and in a way I was right. Fake news abounds on social media and there's a strong risk it could prevent people from practicing accredited advice. Some people think that they can do what they like because it will only affect them, but that's not how pandemics work. All it takes is for a small group of people to meet up in a pub and they could become infected and pass it on to their families. A family member could be a key worker who has to continue working on the front lines and they may end up infecting other people because someone couldn't have a virtual pint with their mate.

On the bright side, I got a message from a girl I used to go to school with. She was concerned about me after seeing my Facebook Status on self-isolation. We got talking and it turns out she likes horror and musicals too so that was nice.



22nd March 2020

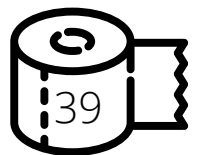
Over the development of the virus, I've begun checking the news every damn five minutes. It's very distracting. People have warned that such behavior can make anxiety worse, and being a very anxious person, you'd think that following that advice would be a good idea, however, I'm not anxious this time. It's just out of curiosity. I find it interesting. I also understand that it's a privileged point of view to have. Let's not underestimate how devastating this is for some people.

Homeless people cannot self-isolate and due to poor nutrition and lack of GP access, their health is usually suboptimal and makes them more likely to catch the virus and die from it. People with autoimmune diseases and long-term conditions are frequently treated as cannon fodder. Every time we hear of another death a common comment is 'yes, but you'll only die if you have a long-term condition.' As someone with moderate asthma, that doesn't make me feel better and it would be worse if I had a low immune system.

I understand that other people are worse off but getting a cold or hayfever has been enough to stop me from shopping, so I dread to think what COVID-19 can do. I sincerely hope I don't get it.

*

I read an article on Facebook about how people are decorating their houses for Christmas as part of self-isolation. Some people won't like it but I think it's quite a charming idea so I draped some tinsel around these beams I have on my wall.





23rd March 2020

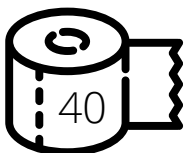
Today was meant to be my first day of placement but I'd already received the news that it was cancelled. The trust emailed our e-learning assignment that was meant to take the whole day but only took around half an hour. I had covered its contents in my last job and last course, it doesn't change much.

After finishing early,
I went to Aldi to do some shopping.

I'm meant to be in self-isolation but all the supermarket delivery slots were taken so it wasn't an option. I ended up bringing a small suitcase, partly because my asthma's been playing up and it's easier to pull it along than carrying a large shopping bag.

After finishing early, I went to Aldi to do some shopping. I'm meant to be in self-isolation but all the supermarket delivery slots were taken so it wasn't an option. I ended up bringing a small suitcase, partly because my asthma's been playing up and it's easier to pull it along than carrying a large shopping bag.

The only problem was juggling my suitcase and two baskets when one wasn't enough. I would have used a trolley but I didn't have a spare



£1 coin. It didn't help my asthma, I can tell you that much. I had to resort to pulling the suitcase in one hand, basket in the other and kicking the other basket on the floor like a child with a stone. I was focused on my shopping (and the complete indignation of the store running out of vegan pizzas) that I didn't notice the reactions of other shoppers but I imagine I received some very strange looks.

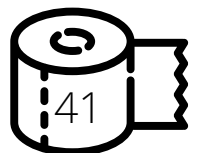
*

On the way back, I passed two men sitting on a wall and made eye contact with them. They asked me what I was doing with the suitcase so I explained the situation. I know people say you shouldn't talk to strangers, even as an adult, but it was nice to have that little bit of socialisation with people standing right in front of me. Even video chat is no match for it. We had a short discussion and it was nice. When I was almost home, I came across some teenagers who said 'hi' randomly. They probably shouldn't have been out but it was nice of them. Despite the panic buying, I have sensed that people seem more ready to have a conversation, there's a level of concern for people. I wonder if the virus will make people think more about how to treat others?

*

Finally finished the first draft of the essay! I haven't added a dedicated ethics section but I'm hoping to slot in the ethics sources into the other sections.

I checked my university email and the library is now closing. It shouldn't make too much of a difference to me, as I've been in self-isolation and can't even remember when I went last. Had I known it was



the last time, I would have bought a coffee to mark the occasion and taken out a load of books to read. I just hope they waive the fines.

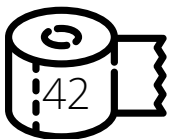
Also, Adam from my course has made a pie with the infection logo on it. What a legend.

*

I've been trying to watch live broadcasts online and ended up missing one. I found out through Facebook that we are in lockdown starting tomorrow.

The good news is it's not as restrictive as I thought it would be. We are still allowed to leave for essential food shopping, medical care (I assume that includes prescriptions), and exercise once a day. The trouble is, the reason we went into lockdown was because over the weekend, people flooded national parks and beaches and spread the virus further. Someone in a Facebook group I'm in was complaining that her child has a temperature after being out at the beach all weekend. I know the symptoms don't show that quickly but if she's being that careless after all the public health information, I dread to think what she was like before.

The responses I've seen online are appalling. So many people are complaining about the restrictions. Usually, I can't stand state control, in fact, I still can't stand it. I hate being cooped up in my room without the freedom to leave but it's a necessary evil. There are people threatening to protest who will no doubt claim we're turning into a police state when they get arrested despite the fact they can still share their protests online. Bars and pubs are meant to be closed but many remain open so



people are still entering and spreading COVID-19 to others.

The government has handled this crisis terribly but they're finally on the right track and people with no understanding are putting all of us in jeopardy.

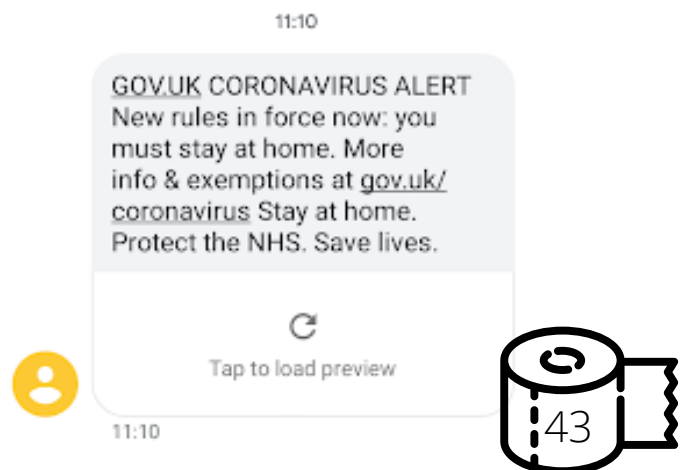
Just checked and now there are three cases in Middlesbrough. There were only two this morning.

24th March 2020

I was supposed to get up early to start placement today, but I woke up later than I intended and felt as though someone was sitting on my chest. I feel tired even after a good night's sleep but I am trying to be productive. I've put some laundry on and had breakfast. I've also discovered some virtual walking trails on YouTube that I might watch. They're meant for treadmill but I can march in one spot and leave the window open so I get fresh air.

*

I received a text message from the government. Apparently, they intended to set up this alert system a few years ago but they never got round to it. I suppose this is as good a time as any to start.



This reminds me of an apocalyptic sci-fi story. I kind of expect the police to start driving through the streets with a large speaker to tell us that we must stay inside or be arrested. I find it slightly amusing but it's not far from reality. I saw a video from Benidorm the other day where the police were doing just that.

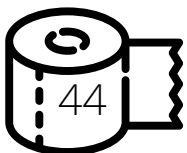
✱

No one official has used the term 'lockdown' yet but that's pretty much our situation. We're not allowed to go out unless it's for exercise once a day and we're only allowed to shop for essentials. Gatherings of more than two people (discounting those you're living with) are banned and the police have the authority to disperse them. People can be fined and arrested for breaking these laws.

Understandably, people are not happy about the restrictions on their lives, they say we are living in a fascist state. I understand the feeling but it's not the same. Over the past few weeks there has been a plethora of articles and remarks on social media criticizing governments and their approaches. If we genuinely were in a police state, the authors would have been arrested, imprisoned or conveniently disappeared but that hasn't happened. No one wants this. I dislike being cooped up but it's a necessary evil. We need to stop the virus from spreading, we need to reduce the deaths.

✱

The advice regarding isolation is confusing. Asthma UK says that if you're on a seretide inhaler (as I am), you are in a vulnerable group and should not leave but the government has services to deliver shopping



and medication. I tried applying, but since I don't have severe asthma I don't qualify. If my asthma keeps on the way it is, I may struggle to do the shopping anyway.

Went through my essay and made a few small changes with more reference to ethics. I'm going to take a break from it for a couple of days so I can come back with fresh eyes.

✱

Just tried a virtual hike on YouTube. At first it felt wrong because I was just marching on the spot but as I went on, I focused more on the screen and tried to walk in time with the person filming it. Strangely enough, it was more strenuous than an actual hike but I think that's because in real life you'd stop more to admire the views and the balmy air would invigorate you. Opening the window isn't the same.



I suspect the heating has broken. According to the thermostat, it's on but my radiator is cold. I'm not sure what to do. Normally, I'd contact my landlady, but it feels petty under the circumstances despite how it will affect my asthma. I'll continue to monitor.

*

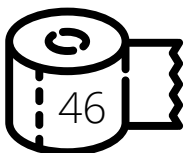
Ordered Indian takeaway for dinner while watching a horror movie. The plot centres around a haunted camera and if you take someone's picture, a few hours later they're attacked by this entity which wheezes like an asthmatic without an inhaler. None of the characters seem concerned for this creature's health which would be selfish if he wasn't trying to kill them.

Anyway, all I could think about was how useful it could be. You'd be a master assassin and no one would be able to trace it back to you. I also wondered if it would work if you took a picture of a picture, so if you wanted to kill a politician (I'm not advocating killing anyone), you could photograph a picture of them from your laptop. In the film, it seemed that you could get it to leave you alone by taking a picture of someone else so I wondered if you could take a picture of a dead person like Hitler?

Sadly, none of the characters felt like that. I'd understand if they didn't want to use it, but no one seemed to acknowledge that they had a powerful weapon on their hands.

Partway through the movie, I got a call from him (whom I shall refer to as M).

*

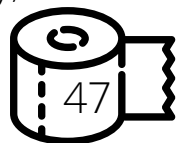


Bit of background: I met M a few weeks ago and we got talking. He seemed really cool so we exchanged numbers. I spoke to him and his wife on WhatsApp video chat and they seemed nice so a few days later I came round and we had dinner and a few drinks. This happened again and both times M walked me home. The third time we watched a movie and M kept encouraging me to drink strong alcohol, I tried to reach for the cider at one point because it's weaker but he said we should finish the stronger stuff first.

We sat on the sofa and his arm was around my shoulder. I remember reading a book and making FaceBook posts about the misogyny of the main character at the time. Then, I felt him brush against my breast.

At first, I thought it was a mistake, then he did it again. I pushed his hand away and told him I didn't want him to touch me there. Later on, we were watching the movie and it happened again. I glanced over to his wife because I didn't want her to know, I don't even know why looking back. His hand circled to the inside of my thigh and up to my crotch so I changed position so he couldn't touch me. I was pretty drunk at this time.

When it was time to go he walked me home as usual. I remember the world spinning and feeling as though I wasn't in control of my body. I needed something to ground me. On the way back, he asked me if he could sleep in my bed. Of course, I said no and reminded him that he was married, but he just asked again. I was worried he would force his way in especially as I wasn't in the position to fight back. Fortunately, he

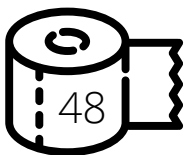


didn't and I was able to get home safely.

I later reported it to the police because he displayed grooming behaviours and I didn't want him to do it to some impressionable teenager. At the moment, they're dealing with it, there was talk of bringing him in for questioning or arresting him. I'm not sure what's happening. That's why I was worried about this call.

I rang the police and quoted the incident number. There must be some confusion as they said they didn't know who he is even though I told them where he lives, works and what his name is. That was probably a lie and I don't know where his wife fits into the picture. She has disabilities and she could be classed as vulnerable so maybe she's a victim.

The police said they'd email the officer dealing with my case and she'd contact me in the morning.



Seeping Into Fiction

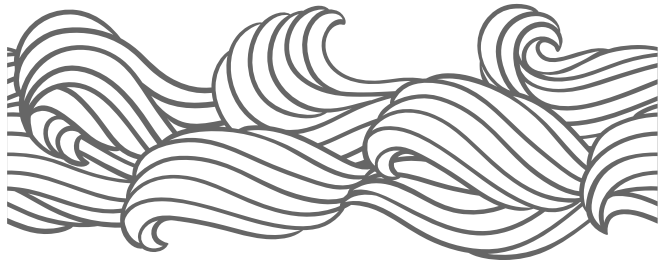


art by @Psycho Manchester
see pg. 94 for bio

River's Bend

written by

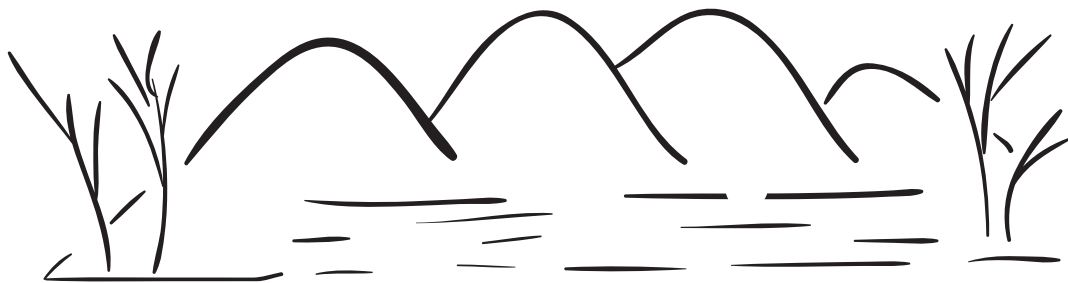
Mirakel Kolbeck



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

"River's Bend" was written as a therapeutic tool to escape the reality of being trapped inside during 2020's COVID Quarantine. It addresses the feelings of losing one's mind and identity, exaggerates how we demonize strangers, while also operating within a different world where there was no virus.

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Maeryn of Riverbend was always told that she spends too much time on her feet. Yagalin, the wandering spirit, her husband called her. A reincarnated creature of the wind and sky, who emerged from deep within the ground whenever the weather was fresh and clear.

Her gold and silver hair flutters in the wind as Maeryn gazes at the beautiful sky, basking in the first sunny day of the season. There was still snow squashing down the flowers and crunching beneath her feet, but the aged woman did not seem to mind, as she skips over the still-frozen ground.

Her cloak billows behind her as the roar of the river nears. Following the path, she could already feel the mist of the water that hangs in the air, a product of the violent current striking the rock. Maeryn could barely hear anything when surrounded by the tranquil chaos of the river. A cold numbness takes over the closer she gets, beginning in her toes and fingertips, and working its way up so even her eyelids lose feeling. It helped to block out the tightening in her stomach.

Standing at the edge of the river, Maeryn stares at its majesty. None of the villagers who lived in the valley understood, or even bothered to try to understand, how beautiful the river is. Not like Maeryn did.

To them, the river provided nothing but noise. Too wide to think of crossing, and the churning current washed the fish too quickly for any decent fishing to be done. The benefits of the river don't appear until the edge of the valley, when it opens up to the sea, so to them, there was no point in looking at such a useless section of it.

But to Maeryn that made it even more special.

When she was growing up, the kids of her village would dare each other to get close to the edge. Some were even stupid enough to stick their feet in, a few even wade up to their knees, with the hope that the surrounding rocks would keep them from being swept away. The gods of the river seemed to find it amusing, letting some get away with such a taunt, while sweeping away others.

Standing at the edge of the river now, rubbing her chest, Maeryn hears the echo of her sister's frightened scream, before it is once more sucked away by the roar of rushing water.

Further upriver, a girl lays draped over a rock. Her pale arms cling to the stone, turned white from the cold and tension. Her lower body is still completely submerged, as the river gods pull at her ankles trying to drag her away.

Kicking at them, in a mix of determined fury and fear, she pulls herself inch by inch from the water. The thin piece of cloth, that could once be considered a dress or large tunic, hangs in tatters against her decrepit body. Tearing further as it scrapes against the harsh stone. As her hands grasp to pull herself another inch, another fingernail flicks off, and drops into the river, followed by a small stream of blood. This seems to appease the river gods into taking pity on the child, as for a moment, the water around her calms enough for her to crawl, gasping, onto the river's bank.

The girl's shaking body is a tapestry of violence as every inch of revealed skin displays a patchwork of bruises and scratches. Her eyes

flash with a wildness of a cornered animal, as she catches her breath and stares down at her hands, as if she had never seen them before.



She brings these foreign appendages to her arms, chest, and neck, running her fingers along her face. Her eyes glow with wild confusion. Then the girl's hands reach the top of her head, where instead of hair, she feels the jagged remains of a crude cut, shorn close to her skull in uneven

patches. Some sections appear as though they were ripped out, leaving behind soggy scabs and shiny skin.

A small whining sound, one that mimics that of an injured creature, escapes from her throat, as the girl feels all over her head in a frantic desperation to replace what has been lost. Nimble fingers reach the base of her skull where red, puckered, and angry skin freezes her panic. There, where her head meets her neck, a symbol had been burned into her skin. Three circles interwoven and knotted together, encased in a larger circle. The girl traces the brand over and over, flinching in pain with every pass.

"Blessed Hollows," Maeryn gasps, catching sight of the hunched-over girl at the edge of the river. She stands frozen, covering her mouth and her heart, watching the shaking movements of the child as she rocks herself back and forth, feeling the back of her head.

Maeryn's nostrils flare, and her eyes begin to glow with renewed

energy, as the woman becomes a rush of movement, hurrying over to the child. "Poor thing. What are you doing out here all on your own? Don't you know how dangerous the river is?"

The girl looks up, as Maeryn gets closer. Her delicate brow puckers as her eyebrows draw together and her mouth presses into a firm line. The words being called to her float through her mind, refusing to stick to anything.

"Where are your parents? They must be worried sick." Bending down, Maeryn grabs the girl's arm and helps her to her feet. "Look at you," she chides, "you're shivering so much your teeth may break." The girl seems to understand that phrase, her hands reaching for her face to check the endangered items hiding behind blue lips.

Yanking off her cloak, Maeryn wraps it around the girl, and begins to rub warmth back into her frail body. Her fingers dig into the girl's arm as she does so, as though to force the blood moving one vein at a time. The girl seems struck dumb by the action, doing nothing but prod her chattering teeth and stare wide-eyed at Maeryn.

"Young thing like you, all alone," Maeryn mutters to herself, looking around for someone to claim the child. "It's not right. Don't they know that it's not safe?" The woman huffs out a laugh. "Hollows take me. Listen to me rambling on while you stand there half dead. Come with me, little one. I'll get you warmed up in no time." Wrapping an arm around her, Maeryn leads the girl away from the river, huffing out muttered insults about faceless men and women.

The girl stumbles along next to her, her eyes stretched wide to take

in everything. To her, the world is a frustrating mix of familiar and fog. When her foot jams into an obstacle, she knows it to be a rock, yet it is not until the pain is soaring along her foot that the knowledge of its name is there. Rather it was sitting on the tip of her tongue waiting for her to take a bite yet avoiding her teeth. Making its presence known, but not announcing itself.

Her brain begins to pound the deeper she digs, scratching at the emptiness of knowledge. She feels the wall within her mind, behind which she knows lies the answers; she could rest her head against it, bang against it, but she couldn't figure out how to get through it. Another rock makes itself known as the girl stumbles along through the pain.

"No shoes," Maeryn gripes, continuing to insult the shadow people. "May the Hollows turn them to dust and feast on their souls."

The pair enter Maeryn's village at a brisk pace. One with a firm grip on the other and dragging her along. The girl barely has time to look around, not that there was much to see. All the buildings were lined up like uniformed soldiers; two rows to protect the thin path they walk on.

The entire place is as silent as the dead.

The girl stumbles over the uneven path, nearly dropping to her knees, her free hand reaching out to cushion the descent, but the manacle hand stops the fall prematurely with one solid jerk. Like a doll trailing behind an infant, the girl jumps and skips to keep up with Maeryn's determined path, while Maeryn, oblivious to the girl's struggle,

is muttering to herself.

The homes with their gaping mouths and shattered eyes watch as Maeryn and the soaked girl pass them. Their occupants remain in their slumped positions, unbothered by the movement outside.

At the edge of the village sits Maeryn's home. A small cottage of stone and wood, with frozen spring flowers growing up the side, threatening to consume the structure. The inside was just as simple, consisting of only two modestly sized rooms. The first is a simple room that holds a fireplace, two stuffed chairs, a cabinet with a washing bowl, and a small table big enough for two. The other, a bedroom.

Not taking the time to look at the state of her home's exterior, Maeryn shuffles the girl inside and locks the door behind her. Bypassing the bedroom in favor of the fire that was casting a warm glow onto the room, she plops the girl into a chair closest to the fire, muttering to herself about coldness and death.

The girl sits quietly, a healthy color had returned to her cheeks from the brisk walk.

Within the bedroom, Maeryn stares at the items she once thought were so important. The wardrobe is full of useless clothes that look the exact same but in different colors. The tub she had insisted she needed and couldn't live without. The bed she had shared with her husband. The same one that he crafted before their wedding, with its special carvings on the posts. Ones for protection, to ward off evil, fertility, happiness. A collection of useless symbols, bastard imitations of the runes that only a

few are allowed to learn, were scattered across the wooden frame, as it holds up the sagging mattress.

Laying in the worn-down dip in the mattress's middle, in the same position she had left him, lies said husband.

"You'll wither away to nothing if you don't start moving, Tyston," Maeryn whispers to the silent room, rubbing her chest in frustration.

Tyston remains still, his hand laying across his bloated stomach bears the black wrapping lines of their marriage on the soft skin, ones that were burned into them both when the sacred ribbon tied them together in matrimony.

"We have company. A nice little girl. The river gave her to me, isn't that nice?" Maeryn tells the quiet man on the bed. Digging through the drawers. "We'll be eating good tonight. That way she'll never leave me."

In her mind, a scream echoes. Maeryn spins around looking for the source. Through the silence, she could hear the scream bouncing off the rocks at the river. "No, no, no," she tells the room, rubbing her chest as if to ward off the sound. "River was already fed."

Turning back to the wardrobe, she pulls out a dress. Something she hasn't worn in a long while. Smiling, she pets the fabric.

"Pretty dress," she hums. "Poor girl. Her people were supposed to look after her. Give her pretty things. Keep her from falling in rivers." She lays it across her husband's feet. "I should let the hollows eat them, shouldn't I, Tyston? I already said the curses, maybe they will hear them. Wouldn't it be nice, Tyston? If the Hollows came up and swallowed the world?" Turning back to the wardrobe, she shifts through the heavy

clothing. "Or maybe not the world, bu' the naughty people who don't take care of their own. That would be very nice, in my mind, if they were all swallowed up."

Her voice trails off as her hands claw at the abandoned clothing in front of her.

"Where is it? Did you hide it from me, Tyston?" She clicks her tongue in frustration. Spinning around, she glares at her husband. "That's not nice. You need to be nice to me. The river is my friend, remember? He washes away people who are mean."

The husband lays still, his wide eyes staring at his wife silently. Maeryn's face spreads into a dreamy smile. "Down, down, the river's bend... down, down, never to be seen again." She sings softly to herself, holding a hand to her chest as she sways. The song is an artifact from her youth, one she would hum as she skipped back from her trips to the river. "Bu' you're not mean, Tyston. I know you're not."

With a decided nod at her husband, Maeryn spins back around and continues her search for the lost item.

Holding her still aching hands to the fire, the girl listens to the woman who had taken to banging around in the next room while she looks around in wonder. Touching the chair she was sitting in, she repeats the word in her mind over and over again, then lets her mouth form the word.

Chair, fire, table, cabinet, mirror.

The last object catches and holds her attention.

Pushing to her feet, she stumbles over to the small-looking glass hanging above the cabinet holding a washbowl. Lifting a hand to it, and seeing the person within do the same, she concludes that this is her image staring back at her with an unfamiliar face.

Her cheekbones are sticking out sharply, and her nose has a small bump at its center that pushes up and out the rest of the feature. She traces the shapes they make with her finger, getting to know herself. Her lips are cracked and thinned from the cold. And her eyes, the only thing about her that look alive, are a dull color that almost matches the bruise that spans the left side of her face.

Then she looks at her hair.

Seeing the image of what her fingers had felt, makes her chest tighten, as she takes in the shape of her head. Tufts of hair were sprouting up in different places, while the rest was gone. Cut so close to her scalp that she is lucky only a few sections were scabbed over. She feels her eyes begin to sting and forces herself to look away from the stranger staring back.

Running her finger over the top of the cabinet, an inch of dust clings to her skin. Rubbing her fingers together to clear it away, the girl looks around with her new eyes.

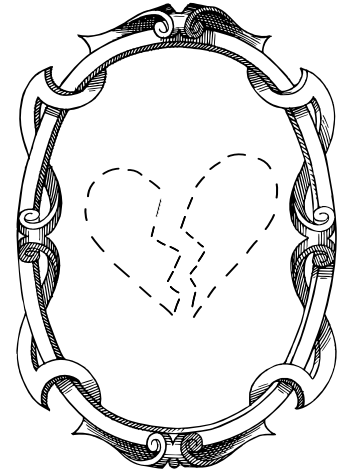
The room's shadows stretch and condense with the movement of the dying fire getting smaller and smaller with every moment it is left unfed. Through the dust that hangs like a fine mist around the room, she can see a table where flies swarm around a bowl of decaying fruit.

Turning back to the water bowl, she notices the oils swirling at the top.

"There is a nice change of clothes waiting for you," Maeryn says. Her voice, no longer the rushed collection of syllables it used to be, now contains a hissing quality to it.

Looking up into the mirror, the girl sees what was once hidden. Maeryn of Riverbend was no more.

Gone was the beautiful woman with hair like sunlight and moonbeams. In her place was a creature of scars and violence. What hair it still has on its head hangs loose, clumped together by dirt, oil, and blood. Its skin appears like leather armor, pulled tight to reveal the shape of the bones beneath, its grey color glowing in the light of the dying fire. But the thing that drew the girl's attention was the gaping hole at the center of its chest. Vacant of a vital organ.



The next, is the large, curved knife it holds loosely in its taloned hands.

The creature that was once Maeryn smiles at the girl, its teeth black and bared like a starved animal.

"What is wrong, dear one?" Its voices layer over one another in a chilling hiss.

Whirling around to face the creature head-on, the girl finds the original image of Maeryn returned. Blinking slowly, the two images flicker across her vision.

"I never did get your name. Seems rude not to before eating," it cackles, waving the knife through the air.

The girl backs up, bumping into the cabinet, rattling the washbowl. The creature keeps its broken smile stretched too wide on its face. With a blink, the lie returns.

"Take a deep breath now. Better for you to be nice and calm before eating. Wouldn't want to ruin the meal, now would we? How about a nice cup of tea to calm you down?"

"Paxen," the girl mouths. The word springing to her head, repeating itself over and over.

"What was that, sweet heart?" The creature asks cheerily.

The girl blinks again, revealing the monster.

"Paxen," she repeats, her voice getting louder as hysteria bubbles in her stomach and rises in her throat. "You're a paxen."

The creature stares frozen, then clicks its tongue in annoyance.

"What a clever one you are." A sigh escapes from its still smiling mouth.

"Shame, now your heart will be spoiled." Its head sways as its body tilts to one side, eyes widening as its pupils' contract. Black drool collects and spills from between its bared teeth. "Better a rotten heart, than no heart at all," it hisses.

Its body springs toward the girl as the fire dies, cloaking the cottage in darkness.

When Demons Dream

written by

Maximus S.M.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This story was made before the Covid-19 pandemic came to the United States, but I only wrote it in my journal and not typed it on a computer. This story is a reflection of not only the fear that can chain people down making it their own prison but the manipulation through the fear that can misguide and or terrify people. Fear is a powerful emotion at the center of every man and woman. The Strongest strand of fear is the unknown. Howard Philips Lovecraft stated it best when it came to fear.

Now faced with uncertainty and seeds of misinformation being planted, it is hard to ever see a time where humanity can come forth in peace. That's why I write horror stories more than just this one piece. I want to make weird horror stories to warn people of possibilities that people will try to achieve. With all that has happened throughout 2020 the United States are divided due to the illegitimate responsibility from the people we selected to guide us. However, I do hope that people will stop judging and start learning and start taking in the consideration of the idea that people should be in each other's business, but instead live in an environment of harmony, unity, solitude and peace.



Maximus S.M.

"The most merciful thing in this world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents." - Howard Phillips Lovecraft

"Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal should dare dream." - Edgar Allan Poe

"Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win." - Stephen King

There are countless quotes I can use that gave me inspiration for writing and creating my endless abundance of monsters and supernatural forces, or for my different planets and 'realms'. It definitely comes from reading. However, I also get ideas whenever I read some news articles or see some random video on my socials. Looking at nature is another source. Either reading about a carnivorous plant like the pitcher plants, the Australian Sundew, or the infamous Venus fly trap. Paintings would also give inspiration such as work from the artist H.R. Giger or Francisco Goya with his famous piece "Saturn Devours His Son". Humans and how they think and operate has always made me wonder what they would do, feel or think when they come face to face with the unknown. They gave me inspiration to make more than just hybrid things that stumble, growl, drive people insane and kill. They helped me create my cults, lunatics, drugs and diseases. Throughout my life I was always the 'weird kid' in school so I remained by myself for

Maximus S.M.

sometime throughout the remainder of school. Also, when I got my first job at sixteen. My work associates were not that great either. It was only a summer job so I did not have to stay working there. Human history around the world is built on blood and secrets. I always felt like an outsider every place I went to. I would challenge myself of course to try to change. However, I do not believe it ever worked for me like that. People are strange, and I would not be surprised if I found out I was an alien.



Kace had finished writing in his papers and set them in an old, used brown box. The darkness of his cell swallowed any color that was not dressed in the cloak of the abyss. He read his words back to himself in silence. His only light source being a device that would project a hologram of the overseers in his cell. A pastel blue would usually light the room around Kace, but on this day no projection came out. He looked through the bars of his cell door and examined the hall connected to his cell and the rest of his cellmates. He assumed his cellmates were all asleep. He couldn't ask for the time, for the android assigned to be the guard was not on. No eyes flickered on the silicon face of the android. Not even any whispers from the rest of the cellblock. The quiet was broken by a faint yell from a guard down the opposite side of the hall. He knew the sound of that voice, it was Nathan. Nathan was one of the human guards that had looked out for him in this place. Nathan believed that he was a genuine good person. They even shared moments of sitting together on the benches or anywhere and the two would talk about their past lives on Earth.

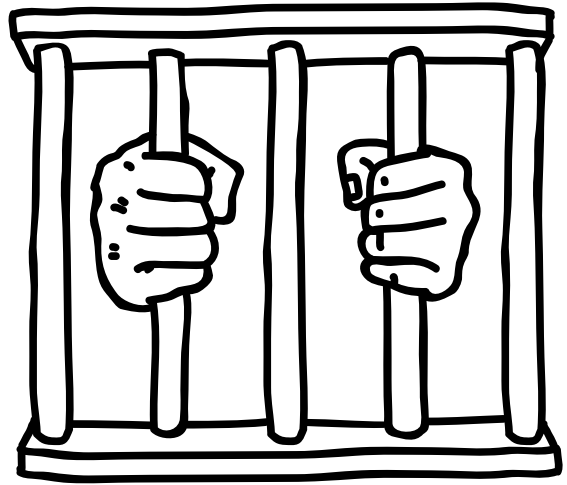
"Help! Get the hell away from me, Paul!" Nathan's footsteps were getting closer to his cell. He heard him trip and fall to the ground. All Kace could do was watch the silhouette of Nathan facing someone by the name of Paul.

"Paul, one of the droid docs can help ya! Stay back, I don't want to hurt you!" Nathan reached for something in his side pocket.

Something appearing to be a snake or a tentacle grabbed his arm and like the heads of Hydra, more came out grabbing Nathan's arms and

throat. Kace could hear him gagging and being smothered. 'Paul' did not speak during the ordeal.

Nathan soon lay lifeless on the ground and the shadow of the thing that took his life stood up on its legs and released a deep bellowing howl. Kace covered his ears. The sound that followed was a high-pitched shriek, and the thing limped away faster than a



human could do on a broken leg. After the crescendo of horror faded, Kace sat on his knees reminiscing on a thought that had plagued him throughout his life.

He remembered his best friend Hunter. The sun's rays danced in its dazzling aura in the valley of steel, iron and glass. The labyrinth filth of the city never looked so good in the golden glow. Hunter needed to recharge his electric-driven car and the two stopped by a station that was more than willing to help them. Hunter and Kace entered the establishment. Hunter went to the desk to order a charge while Kace went to relieve himself. After using the washroom, he found two armed people dressed in black had entered the store. One of them aimed a revolver at the clerk and the other focused his attention on Hunter.

"You think when people play heroes around us they get a reward? Oh. they get something alright, they get this." Without hesitation the masked stranger pulled out a pistol and shot Hunter between the eyes. Hunter fell on his back with his head toward Kace. He hid in the back

part of the station crouched behind the colorful cases of cheap alcohol. The men took what money was in the register and fled to their two-door black car and sped off leaving fumes and death in their tracks. Kace did nothing for Hunter like he did nothing for Nathan. He placed the blame on himself and carried it with him throughout his life like a prisoner in chains. Kace didn't tell anyone what had happened that day. His only claim to official reports was that he was busy releasing himself while the chaos ensued.

Kace shook himself out of the memory and he was back in his cold and dark reality. He needed to leave this place. Many questions made Kace's brain feel like it was expanding like a soaking sponge in his skull. His head sank down, he stared at his cell mat pondering and puzzling himself on this quest to escape.

"Hey. You. K4-C3." A muffled voice called from the darkness.

Kace lifted his head up and stood up on his feet looking out into the hall again.

"Hello? Who goes there? Can you help me? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, keep it down. Those damn things will hear you if you get any louder." The voice said in its whisper nature.

"My name is Doctor Ryan and I'm here to get you out of this place but I need your help in return. Where you are right now is the only place where these things aren't exploring, but you can't stay there. They'll be here at any point," Ryan stated as he unlocked Kace's cell door, presumably from a control room. Kace was hesitant to walk out of his

cell but he knew that there was no time to waste. He stepped out looking to his left to see nothing but darkness.

To his right, he saw the body of Nathan in the light of a fallen flashlight that projected the entire tribulation upon the wall.

"Now pick up the communicator on his shoulder. You're going to need it while making your way through this place," Ryan stated through the device hooked onto Nathan's belt. Kace picked it up and connected the earpiece to his left ear and hooked the device on his jumpsuit's chest pocket.

"Good. Can you hear me now?"

"Yeah, but what do you need me to do for you now?" Kace asked while adjusting the earpiece.

"I need you to come to where I am so we can get off this accursed rock. But, in order for you to find me and know your way around this place you're going to need a map and I know where you can get one."

"Where am I going to get a map?" Kace asked Ryan.

"It's called a D.R.A. (Diagrammatic Representational Area) you're going to have to cuff it like shackles on either of your wrists. You'll find this device on the other side of the cell block. But you are going to need a light source. Find a torch or a flashlight and make your way through the opposite side of the cell block."

"Alright. I'll let you know when I get the D.R.A." Glancing to the body of Nathan, Kace noticed a handle of something. He reached for it, pulling it out of Nathan's pocket. It was an odd-looking pistol. Nothing like what he knew on Earth. The shape of the gun was similar to a flintlock,

however with two barrels side by side horizontally. He pushed the button on the hand grip of the gun and the cartridge slid out. Not a single round shot from it. He fed the gun the cartridge and picked up the flashlight, placing the pistol in his side pocket. He walked down the hall with caution and aimed his flashlight into the cell next to him. However, before he could look into the cell he was caught off guard by a powerful stench of burning sulfur. He covered his nose and took a deep breath. He compelled himself to see if anyone was in these cells. Kace took a glimpse into the cell of his neighbor Ricardo and found nothing except a pile of mangled smoldering remains. He gagged and looked away. Assuming that this was the remains of a person he once knew. He would sit by him at lunch from time to time and they talked about their experiences on Earth. Ricardo was once a man who was just surviving on the streets of Los Angeles. He had killed a man who was robbing him of his money.

Then 'they' showed up, offering him a chance to travel beyond the blue sky and stars. To become a better person for a better tomorrow. Kace and Ricardo came to this place for the same reason as every other person in this institution. Kace peered into the cell next to Ricardo's, and the same incident had happened to the next person. Kace asked himself a series of questions that he might never truly know. Kace pushed forward with his gun ready to be drawn.

Entering the room with caution, Kace aimed the flashlight into every corner of darkness in the room. He was in the laundry room, but something had happened to the washing machines. Kace glanced into

one of the machines and through the back of it was a long tunnel that looked similar to flesh or mold saturated in the hue of healing scars. The smell was a new foul stench that Kace had never smelled in his life. It was pungent, sour and sharp. He pulled his head out from the opening of the washing machine, and with his flashlight aimed at the ground he saw a dozen of thin red tubes with pale white heads at the top as if they were in bloom. He followed the red tubing with the light only to find a type of plant growing out from one of the washing machines. Its appearance was much similar to that of a venus flytrap, however, if the maw was replaced with a five-pointed lobe in the shape of an upside-down star.

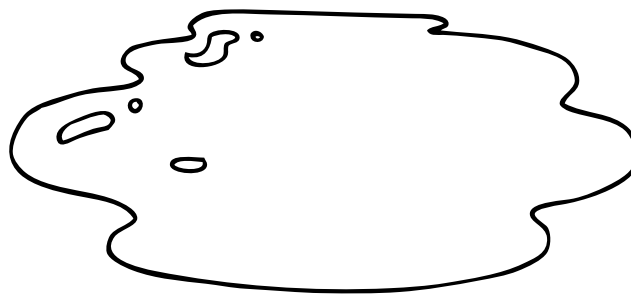
“What the hell? Oh, dear lord walk with me, please if you will.”

Kace stepped away from the nameless fungi-esq abomination and pushed through the doors that he had never dared to go beyond. However, this time he had to. He pushed beyond the iron door. No one had locked it, it opened with a short squeak that startled him a bit. He kept his composure and aimed the light into the pitch-black room. It was an armory of sorts. Guns on the walls locked up with the fitting ammunition to feed these weapons at the bottom of the weapons. However, there was something more to this ‘armory’. Filing cabinets with stacks of papers on top. Shelves with vials and jars filled with colors ranging from poisonous green to blood red. A file was left on the table. “This was someone's room that works for the prison.” He assumed in his head. He walked over to the file. Opening it to the first page.

Date: 12/12/2211

Name Of Subject: "Pus"

It is without a doubt the most dangerous living biofluid on this specific planet. It infiltrates the host in numerous ways to the point where it is impossible to escape this 'thing'. Once it infiltrates the host, it rushes to the host's heart and multiplies itself from within. The host becomes extremely sick at first. High fever at points and sometimes low at others. Muscle aches and twitches follow through, along with harsh coughing to the degree of throat damage causing the host to cough up large amounts of blood. Vomiting follows and causes a severe infection in the throat regions where damage has been caused. Sometimes the host will 'burn,' causing smoke to seep out of their wounds. The team believes that the host burns alive from within but with no flame. More acidic in a sense. The host turns into nothing more than a pile of flesh with smoke seeping out of it. Occasional odd noises seep out of the bubbles when puddles are drawn around the debris of these disgusting flesh piles. Some other hosts, however, show signs of strange progression.



The host talks of being 'Rebuilt in the blind god's image. Born again in the womb of the sunless garden.' The hosts break their arms, and the wounds of where the bone had poked through are now where they are given 'new arms'. Wires that wrap themselves around each other forming the shape of a tentacle. The host also has his or her eyes replaced with the same muscle forming out of the wounds where the arms are located. This project must be stopped but I fear I am the only sane person that will make at least an attempt to put an end to this madness.

-Ryan Finlay Trevino

Kace felt like he had been punched deep in his gut. He wanted to puke but he did not have the energy to. Kace felt drained in a way. He was only just some guinea pig that would have ended up like what took out Nathan. He suddenly heard a scream from the laundry room. He pressed himself against the door. Shutting off his flashlight, he closed his eyes listening in on the person that screamed.

"Get out of my head. My name is Ricardo. I am not your child. You are not my mother."

Ricardo was now screaming in agony, snarling and howling in deep pitches. His voice sounded like it was being spoken out of a broken speaker. Raspy and broken. Kace slammed the door shut and locked it. Ricardo banged against the door with each snarl more vicious than the last. Kace pulled his pistol out and aimed it at the door. He pressed himself into a locker and shut it. Kace stood inside the locker holding onto the pistol and whispered silent prayers to himself. He must not

fear. However, he did not want to bear witness to whatever happened to Ricardo, neither did he want to end up like Nathan. He wondered if anyone was coming. If anyone could see him through any camera. He wondered about what Hunter would do in a situation like this. Would Hunter even be able to handle it compared to how he was? Maybe he was being watched? Little did he know that he in fact was. However, he was not being watched by Hunter like a sort of guardian angel. He was being watched by someone else. Watched by someone who knew who he was.

“Send them in to deal with this one. This time make sure it is dealt with.”

The nameless man stepped away from the screen that was viewing the room where Kace was hiding in. Many screens were watching Kace's every move. He walked toward the window peering out to a deep bowl-sized crater watching ships fly and land upon the building's rooftops that surrounded it. The pale blue sun cast a cold hue upon the planet hovering lifelessly next to an even bigger planet behind the sun. No stars could ever shine where this cruel planet stayed pinned at.

“So he will be faced with his first real challenge.” The stranger said to himself.

The man held his hands together admiring the glacial hell. His dream was to conquer what no mind or womb could ever conceive. To play with sin and morality. He saw this place as his own nirvana. He believed that he was destined to dominate this boreal purgatory.

When demons dream of vistas. They long for a lone world such as this place.

However, he paid no attention to what was happening on screen. He was too far seduced in the presence of his kingdom. Kace was still inside the locker. Kace was praying with his eyes closed and when he opened them and looked above him he found the D.R.A. He cuffed the device to his left wrist and began to call Ryan again.

"Ryan, I found the D.R.A.! I've linked it on my wrist and I can see that I am in this room in the laundry section. There's one of the things bashing itself against the door trying to get to me. I need your help, Ryan!" Kace said holding down the button on the communications device. His rapid heartbeat pounded throughout his chest. Agitation from the lack of communication grew on Kace. He started to worry for a man he had never fully met before. He did not even know the man's face.

"Good. The signal isn't strong in that room. I can barely hear you. I do see one of the things, however. Give me some time, I'm sending something that way that'll help you!"

Ricardo kept bashing at the door. Kace pondered on what happened to Ricardo. Another one of his friends who he could relate to was gone. Now into an abomination that only the soulless corners of darkness could spew out. Ricardo spoke in only broken sentences and words.

"I can smell you, Kace. Your stench reeks. It starves me. Hand over your flesh!"

Kace gripped the pistol. The cold steel pierced his skin like razor

blades. Kace shoved himself out of the locker and aimed at the door, his finger against the trigger itching to fire. Ricardo suddenly screamed in agony and a loud crash followed by animalistic whines and grunts.

“Run Kace! I have him distracted! Get to the elevator and take it down. To the bottom. That floor contains the control room that operates this whole place. Now go!”

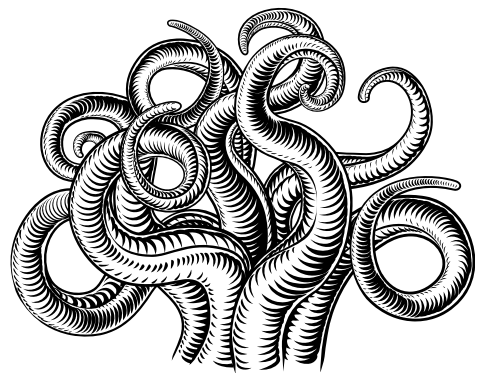
Kace pushed the door out of the way running from the screams and howling. He ran past the cells and saw them. Those shadows that crawled. They screamed their high pitch crescendo of doom making Kace only push forward till his lungs burned.

The elevator doors opened slowly fuelling the anxiety flowing through Kace. He jumped into the elevator and pushed the button to shut the doors. An arm went through the crack in between the two elevator doors. It reached for him and grabbed his shirt-tail as the doors began to shut. A shriek stabbed his eardrums and the doors closed tightly onto the arm. Inky blood spilled upon the pure white tiles of the elevator pooling around his feet.

He had no energy to vomit or had any concerns for the raven cloaked fluid. He activated the D.R.A. on his left wrist. No map came to display.

“Ryan, I got no visual of the map on the D.R.A. I need guidance. Do you hear me?”

Only static repeated on the signal. Ryan did not answer. Kace got that feeling in his gut again. Like a heavy weight in the center of his gut.



He saw the floor level go beyond the first floor. The floor that the elevator stopped on was labeled as "∞". The doors opened slowly again, only for Kace to find darkness on the other side. Kace aimed his flashlight into the dark revealing a narrow bridge suspended over a pit of darkness. He walked out into the shadows of the bowels of this prison. He stood at one part of the steel-constructed bridge. Next to it was a panel full of buttons, switches and a lever for the lights. He pulled it down as instructed with curiosity of what was lurking in the dark. A monolith towered over a sea of curled up people. Kace could not see the people. However, he did see the mountain-mass monolith. It twisted around itself like an old vine. Purple orbs flickered and danced around the monolith. Then Kace heard it.

"Kace. I have waited for you." A voice spoke out from nowhere. Kace looked around him finding no one at his sides.

"Come down and join the legion of your new family. A new life for you."

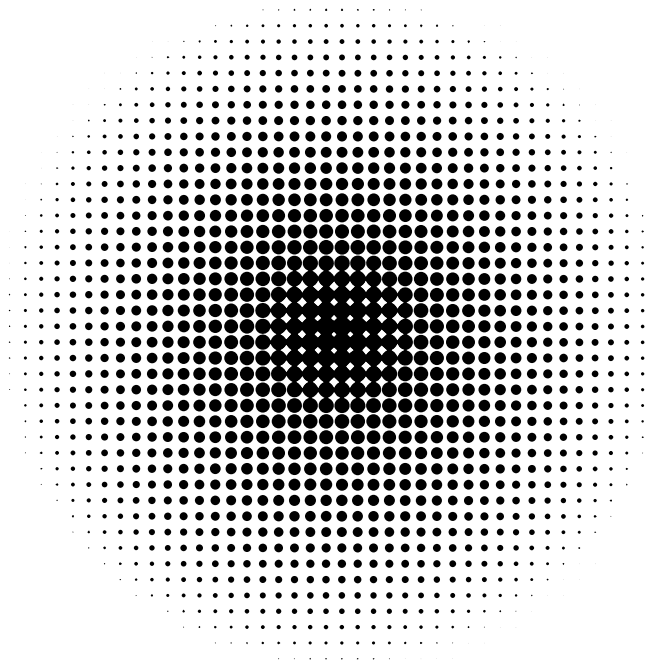
They sounded like two people were speaking in unison. One in a high light pitch and the other being in a low bass range. Kace's heart slowed down to a slow and steady rate.

"Who are you? Get out of my head!"

"We are what the ghost of the void calls 'mother' and 'father'. We are the moon and the sun. The soil and the stars. We are the breath of the abyss, and we are many."

Kace snapped himself out of the beginnings of a trance state. He ran across the bridge making it shake and wobble as his footprints

echoed dimly behind him. Out of nowhere the lights got killed and the bridge shook. Kace fell on his back and before he could slide down, he grabbed onto the railings and looked down to see what had happened to the bridge. Before his helpless sight. He saw a gaping jaw with tentacles from the center latching and grabbing the bridge and making it collapse. It wanted him. He could feel a thousand eyes watching his every move as he climbed to the ledge of the other side. He pulled himself up on his feet and pushed through the door. He slammed his back against the wall and collapsed on the ground. The room around him looked like a locker room of sorts. However, his vision turned to fuzz and everything went black.



The Ice Sheets of Titan

written by

Benjamin Ervin



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When writing "Ice Sheets of Titan" I wanted to create a sci-fi love letter to *The Silent World*. With that in mind, I was only a few hundred pages into the novel, and I had been inspired by diving bell spiders and the prospects of the future. Though the story largely exists in its original form, I made a few tweaks throughout 2020. Specifically, I added in the sensory details of being in a large diving suit shot into the moon, Titan.

When reading *The Silent World* (In my newfound free time due to quarantine) I was surprised by how much of the underwater world is sensory. The sound and feeling lending to a claustrophobic world, wherewater acted as a wall between life and death and technology was our passport into an underwater world.

When putting it into the context of 2020, the sense of isolation was divine serendipity. The sense of isolation in the story was similar isolation I was experiencing moments before COVID swept the US. My friends had graduated, I had no one in my life to share my love, and I often went to a coffee shop on a Friday to pick up a coffee and read a graphic novel or two before going home. Though my isolation was born out of my constant refusal to socialize, it was also a result of growing. My

Benjamin Ervin

friends moved and I was still here.

This sentiment translated to Nguyen's position on Mother Ship, floating high above the moon Titan. Separate contained and desiring. For all you science heads out there, I know it should be called "Ice Sheets of Europa", but I find Europa's constant ice levels to be problematic for the Icelandic countryside of my imagined Titan.

On Mother, I felt Nguyen needed a partner. Someone to bounce information off of as she traveled down into the caldera. When choosing to have a mother being the synthesized consciousness of a massive AI and a college grad was my way of doing something "new." Though it's largely in the wake of Ghost in the Shell, I hope I leave some lasting image in the mind of readers.

When choosing Spanish, I minor in it. I am good at it, calling out the correct answers in class to the surprise of teachers and classmates alike. Though quarantine changed how I learned or engaged with Spanish I hope to learn more and write better dialogue in Spanish. I feel what I've created is a stilted Elementary rendition of Spanish that matches the two children of the story.

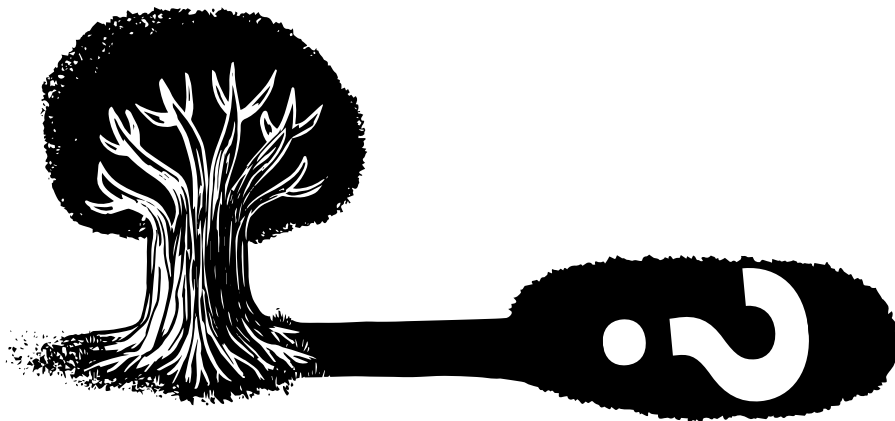
I am told often to not write "children who talk like an adult" but I don't think that's the right way to handle child conversations. Children mimic adults, and adults say a lot around kids that they continue to recycle and repeat. I have said many swears in the wake of my father. So, writing two children in my story, they are characteristically adult in mannerisms, smoking, and chatting.

So, like sci-fi writers of Victorian England, I have predicted events

Benjamin Ervin

and moments before they happened. When I realized we were in quarantine (for the long haul to my surprise) I hadn't realized how well Nguyen captured my feelings, my fears, and my hope as I struggled in quarantine. Though we are not colonizing Titan, I feel the hope of a frontiersman is something we need at the moment. Not the white, nuclear model of Little House novels, but the Black cowboys who civilized the west. I feel the global world of Nguyen's ship is the shadow of a future.

Benjamin Ervin (he/him) is a senior studying English Literature and Writing, with minors in History, Political Science and Spanish. His stories "Slate" and "Crocodile and Owl" appear in Sphere 64 and 65, respectively. He also writes an opinion column called "The Cat's Cradle" where his creative forces take form in irreverent columns on horror, love, and video games. When he is not reading a book by his favorite author, Toni Morrison, he is riding his bike, and watching Classic Films. When he gets older than twenty-four, he wants to be a professional writer. If that doesn't work, he'll be a shut-in.



Nguyen could see the damp surface of Titan coldly staring back at her through six inches of glass. Nguyen reached out and rested her hand against the temperate window, feeling the chill of space that encompassed Mother ship.

Mother ship floated in a null-free-fall around the moon Titan. Antenna scrapped the ice and rock making up the atmosphere of the planetoid. The station's curved hall glided across debris in the fashion of an age-old schooner, cutting the debris field of the atmosphere like the prow of a ship. The station sailed around Titan every hour, the wake of the station was a distant memory on its return as debris gently drifted back its space. From a single porthole, Nguyen watched space, while the unseen dilated pupil of space observed moment without speaking.

Nguyen was stationed on the monitor duty for Tango Base-9973. It was shortly into the shift, when an immediate sub-orbital drop was required. The message was slowly typed out before her eyes in a scrolling text. It filled up Nguyen's hungry eyes and made her mind race with excitement. She'd been on monitor duty for nearly a month, watching space pass by. She was rabid for interaction. She'd taken up frequenting the Station Library, in hopes somebody would say something in passing or ask to hang out. No one would bite. Nguyen was set to drift in the bottle till now. It was lines of information telegraphed up to egg-shaped monitoring module. Nguyen sat in the leather seat, foot raised up watching the information ticker-tape away.

Need Help

Ship down

Lower basin

Caldera too deep

Rescue required

Passengers: 5

Sea temperatures: -10°C

Respond

Respond

Respond

Nguyen pulled her activation key off her lapel, plugged into the monitor, and turned a dial. A keyboard made of nail-hard polymers eased out in a rickety motion, like a roll-up door. She pressed in a few commands and typed:

“First responder Nguyen, alerted and on standby for orbital drop. Mark landing site with fluorescent-paint, over and out.”

She waited as the keyboard reversed its course, recoiling in the shell of the observation chamber, before pulling out her keycard and hopping the vinyl seat in a mad dash for drop. By air lock eight, of the curved hallway running parallel to the main entrance, Nguyen found the stout child of a man she had come to know as Otter doodling in the margins of his tablet. She tapped her card on the surface of his touch screen.

Report: We have a freight ship down in a caldera on Titan. Need to do a drop.



Otter watched the card slowly tap away at his screen, before sliding it out from her fingers. He swiped it through the magnetic reader on the top of the device and handed her the stylist. She gave the proper signatures and air lock eight opened. Otter stood watching as mechanical arms scanned Nguyen for any anomalies. From there, it pushed a needle into the intravenous drip grafted to her right shoulder, pumping anti-coolant into her blood. Her liver and kidneys began to filter the hazardous chemical solution, weeks of genetic therapy had mutated her organs into poison filters. The drip followed her on a train across the rounded edge of the hall, it clicked with the teetering of a bomb as she moved to second stage where she stepped up into a metal suit. Each section shutting with a sudden gasping sound over ball joints, then filled with energy absorption fluid.

The bronze hull of the suit was heavy with metal alloy, woven fabric, and a gel solution. It rubbed the body in a way that detracted from Nguyen's enjoyment as the helmet was fitted and bound with a sealing collar. The faceplate had six sets of eyes set on a rotating disk inlaid in the helmet, moving from infrared, real-time camera, and enhanced lens. Mother ship androgynous voice came across an earpiece, "Raise arms." Nguyen raised them and two tanks were fitted on her back, as well a sub-orbital transmitter, anchor unit and battery. From there, hydraulic pistons and basic rescue equipment were fitted to each limb, encased inside of a second shell onto the suit. "Repeat after me, pilot. Alpha."

"Alpha."

"Bravo."

"Bravo."

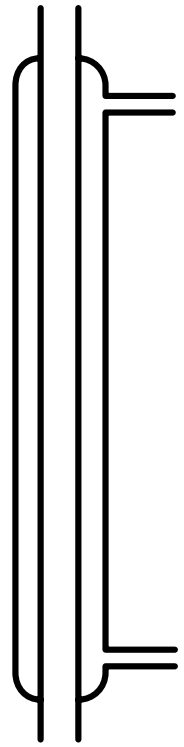
"Charlie."

"Charlie," Nguyen's voice sounded two inches too close as she spoke. The lens hugged the sockets of her skull, the door had an uncanny shape as both eyes struggled to form a singular vision through two separate eye holes.

"You are clear on comms. Proceed to drop point."

The arms let go of Nguyen, and she proceeded to Main ship. The connective hallway shuttered with a solar wind, retaining a certain resilience with the connecting tungsten beam. Nguyen entered the elevator with two minutes to drop. The elevator chamber had a door on every wall that opened like a camera lens. As Nguyen stood waiting for Mother to guide her, the chamber filled with a liquid, similar to the water found on Titan. Once the chamber was filled wall to wall in a sea-blue liquid, a door opened, and pressurized system forced Nguyen along the tubing towards orbital gun. The tube was clear, so Nguyen could watch the blur of passing blue fluids holding onto other suits of armor and massive shipping crates. When she reached another chamber, the door Nguyen came through closed. The fluid drained. Someone was in the room, waiting for the fluid to send them to the next part of the ship. The suit resembled a folk tale clay man or a whittled doll of metal. They turned to look at Nguyen without speaking. Nguyen gave a head bow and left the chamber.

She found herself at south side of command in moments, as the elevator chamber decompressed, draining out to an elephant-wide



catwalk. She walked across, staying flushed left, activating her boot's magnet and eyeing the clock on the monitor. Large spiders stretched hair-thin legs across the interiors of the ship, repairing damaged portions of the ship with spun silk. She couldn't hear them, but she knew the sound they made was like cloth ripping. She preferred the slight din of her own heavy breathing.

At the center of the satellite-ship is the orbital cannon, and above that was Mother, a massive AI controlled by a series of wires filtered connected to a college-grad in a yellow jumpsuit. The large computer formed a massive ganglion of wires and towers up through the center of the satellite. The person pointed to a clear glass chamber with an open door, the chamber is flanked by seven other identical tubes. Nguyen entered, as the grad gave a thumbs up though Nguyen knew they didn't see her. Their head was covered in a flight helmet, with wires and diodes covering their scalp. They installed the visors to mask the pain of bonding with the ship's AI.

Behind they were seeing through Mother. Mother surrounded the vertical chamber at the center of the vessel connected by cables and data towers. The spiders worked around these to keep them stable, while the gun moved and let off exhausts of steam. The air was thin in the chamber and the gravity nonexistent.

The door eased shut, and the slight adjustments were made to the angle of the gun and Nguyen was launched into orbit. Her suit locked, to prevent flailing, so Nguyen shook inside the suit, thinking back on bible stories she heard in her childhood home. Stories like the faith of Daniel

when he was placed in the stove. Nguyen's teeth gritted as the suit burnt on entry.

She crashed into the thin ice sheet of a lake, ten kilometers south of the nearest settlement. The landing jolted her body and sent a towering jet of water and ice onto the shore of the pond. The suit was pushed into the mud, while the impact scared krill into mad patterns around her head. "Dumbasses," she remarked as the suit drained the energy absorption fluid, and she gained enough limb control to walk out of the pond. Her heavy helmet broke the surface with a pop. Squid-like eyes observed the deep blue sky of Titan. To one side children were standing, one had a stick of high-UV paint that had been pushed out with the gentle ringing of a hand. Her face was tattooed in gentle designs.

"Recebes nuestro mensaje?" She said with an accent.

Nguyen slapped the chest speaker with an open palm, her metal gauntlet scraping the surface of device, "You speak English?"

"No."

"Bien. Sí, recibió su mensaje. ¿Es posible que pinte en la tierra?"

"No, no teníamos tiempo. Ayuda." The girl reached for Nguyen's cold metal hand and lead her through rice patty near the pond. Their farmhouse was covered in moss, underneath that moss would be permafrosted blocks of soil, held by wire mesh and rivets. On a slope a cow gently grazed, its hair hanging thick with moss as well.

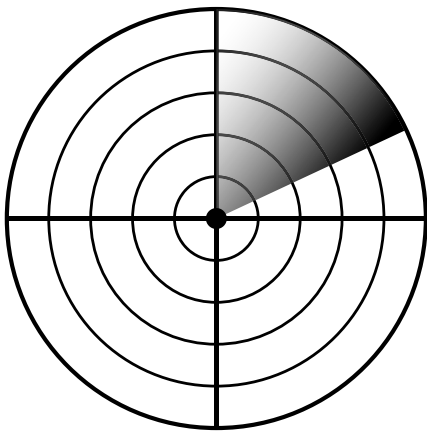
The girl wore a serape of heavy artificial furs and the boy, who Nguyen guessed was a sibling, wore a winter coat two sizes too big, and walked with a stick like he needed it. He was smoking something Nguyen

recognized as a plant that instigated higher core body temperatures.

“¿Qué necesitas?”

“Mis padres y tías. Han estado perdido en el largo.”

Beyond the small farm, they came to the crest of the caldera, in its base was a stagnant lake, one of many found across Titan. Ice sheets danced on its surface. “Por ahí.” She said with a pointed finger. Ice drifting around where the ship should be floating.



Nguyen pressed chest piece to turn off the microphone. “Mother, run a full radar scan on the lake. Give me a graphic, exact measurements and point of entry.” There was a pause, then live footage appeared with a holographic display, all localized in front of Nguyen’s left eye. The ship sat at

the center of the lake. There was no perfect way to approach it. Every slope was steep as the last. “Drop anchor,” Nguyen directed as a heavy metal anchor fell from her back, rooting itself deep into the lake shore.

Nguyen said nothing else as she moved down into the black water of the Caldera, breaking the clean ice surface with her heavy boots. The children watched her like a marionette show, Nguyens movements gentle with the weight of a large animal as their body slowly waded into the water, the water spun in the absence of her head.

“Ello tiene treinta minutos.” The boy said with a quiet composure that his double-breasted coat seemed to radiate. His sister didn’t say anything, nor did she take his small cigarette he attempted to pass off.

Instead, she took a seat on the shore, legs crossed, eyes dark with the reflections of the iced-over lake. They waited.

Ice danced on the surface of the water, reeling with central force, moving about with the invisible dance partner of gravity, their frail bodies catching and diluting light like prismatic filters, casting long smokey spotlights through bio-dense water. Arctic fish weaved about kelp stalks and stone outcroppings in the outer regions of the caldera. Volcanic cracks broke like dried skin and gave off vents of sulphur into the water, enriching and darkening the water. In the distance fish moved in and out of perfect solar light like darts in a room, haphazardly venturing closer to the hull of the downed ship.

Nguyen had a moment of reflection as she looked over the ship. The command deck was dark in absence of power, the bay window was shattered outward into a gaping maw. The engines bubbled with traces of heat, whispering the last of life out of the ship.

“Mother, give me a scan on ship interior.”

From orbit, Mother-command triangulated the crash and produced a single sonar blast that pierced the atmosphere and lake with a ripple that pushed fish and plants with a single thick wave. As sound waves filled the caldera like a one-note rock concert, it quickly faded in the distant edges where the algae was thick. “Scan complete. The crew has relocated to sub-deck reactor. There is a leak in neighboring hulls 1-3. Four remain intact.” Nguyen clicked her teeth, as the schematic popped up in her left periphery. The ship was designed for simple land-to-air maneuvers, the hull was like paper to any impact, and the fact the ship

was resting on a piece of jutting rock wasn't helping.

"Mother, run a time frame on complete puncture of the hills."

"Scanning...scanning...thirty minutes."

"How hot is the reactor now?"

"If you mean how large the explosion could be...most life on base of the caldera would be wiped out."

Nguyen began to pick up the pace, "Plot a course for the far side of the ship. Run through the tools onboard."

As a graphic overlay took up the screen, placing a grid on the caldera, and a route, the computer began to list materials. "Ten-foot by ten-foot sheet metal, rivet gun with eighty rivets, welding torch, anchor—in use—two rescue flotsams, a single flashlight, a bundle of torches, and me."

"I know you're here Mother, you don't have to remind me."

Nguyen found herself struggling across the jagged bits of shale that pushed up like scales, a sign of the seismic activity below the caldera. She found a slight handhold in a piece of black rock that broke under her metal hand and rumbled down the slope. Nguyen felt minutes melting as she spotted the far side of the ship, resting gently on the jagged rock like an impaled whale. The water vibrated with the heat of the reactor.

"Mother, give me my chances of moving the ship off its foundation without disturbing the reactor?"

There was a low hum, as the machine ran through the variables.

"39%."

"Okay, give me a percentage if I weld it to the spot."

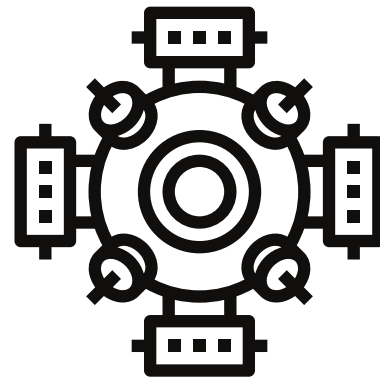
"12%."

"Does that include seismic activity?"

"Yes, as well as your ability."

Nguyen sighed and closed her eyes, feeling her helmet vibrate,

"You're ever the optimist, Mother."



The tear was shallow, and the hull was growing brittle with each moment in the freezing water. Nguyen placed her gloved hands on the outside of the hull, a little towards the main engines, just left of the breached hull when Mother chimed in, "Move your hands five centimeters apart. Perfect."

"Move power to arms, deploy foot mounting hooks." A series of heavy metal claws flicked over the edges of Nguyen's boots, rooting her deep into the shale.

Power re-routed appeared over her left eye, and Nguyen began to push.

From inside of the tin can helmet that served as her window to the outside, Nguyen watched as her gauntlets moved the ship off the jagged stone, while the metal bowed under her gloves. The hull made a scrapping sound like metal grinding to powder. Nguyen hoped that it would stop, but it only grew louder as the ship slid away.

She watched from two eye slots as the hull slid free from the jag enough for it to fall on its side, scraping loudly as it moved deeper into the caldera. Nguyen acted quick and lifted her leg to catch the ship.

The suit tugged, pulling up shale. Nguyen lost her balance and hit the shale with a similar scraping sound.

The ship eased to a halt in the dip of the caldera, tangled in kelp, and disturbing a colony of fish. "Mother, what's estimated time for the cool water to reach the reactor."

There was a second loud sonar blast, and Nguyen's ears began to hurt. She thought of the fish, who moved with the water's motion. "We have approximately 15 minutes. Chemical imbalance in reactor is causing heat levels to escalate. With open hull, the resulting explosion is exponentially growing."

"Disengage foot locks," clunk-clunk came through the thin metal of the suit, and Nguyen was beginning to feel the cold. "Mother, what is the rescue flotsams made out of?"

"Highly interwoven spider-silk. The Dumbbell spider on the ship weaved them, perfect for holding air. If you plan to extract the people, it's not pos—."

Nguyen interrupted, with a grunt as suit slipped on loose shales. "All I need to know, is how pressurized is the gasses inside each flotsam."

"Enough to lift forty kilos, each."

"How much does the ship weigh?"

"Being commercial orbital frigate, around ninety-six kilos going empty."

Nguyen looked back up the shoals at all the debris from the ship, she could make out a single engine ground down on the shore, and wreckage of the former control tower. Nguyen didn't say anything else,

instead, she pulled herself and the suit up with two deft arm moves, climbing onto the side of the hull with the magnetic press of her boots. She and the suit looked over the scarred hull. The water had filled the hull, cooling the layers. Nguyen placed each flotsam inside the hull and with gloved hand pulled the pins.

The charges burst to life inside the hull, pushing out rivets and water alike, till one side of the ship puffed up like a fish. The net weight of the ship began to pull against collective weight of Nguyen and the suit, so she stepped off the hull. With the crunch of shale, the ship began to lift out of the water, rising up into the light. "Core temperature is leveling." Nguyen breathed a sigh of relief when, "Correction core temperature and ship have leveled."

Above the caldera floor, floating between the ice and shale the ship floated, twirling a suspended state. Kelp hung from it like it was an ancient wreckage.

"Can we leave and call it a day, Mother?"

"No, given time the flotsams will burst and we'll find ourselves in the same situation."

"Noted, project an overlay for a lasso toss. Let's hope that summer in the rodeo served me well." Undoing the rope about the spool on her back, Nguyen began to tie the cord into a lasso. The kids were setting outside the cabin as the same bronze suit broke the surface. The boy put his cigarette out on his pant leg, and the girl watched as the heavy suit came up and out of the dark waters, pulling the ship close behind.

Slowly, easily, Nguyen eased the ship out of the shallows, and onto

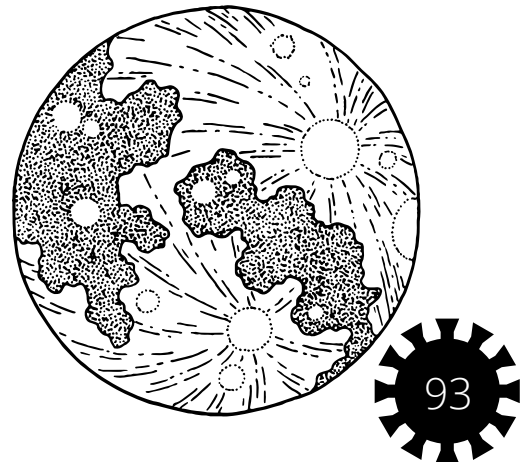
the shore of the lake. The ship eased into itself, and Nguyen moved across the distance to give three knocks on the outer hull with a heavy metal gauntlet. The ship quaked with the knocks, and the hatch opened for several well-bundled people. They tossed down a rope ladder and made their way down to the waiting children.

Nguyen stopped listening as the mother moved to one of the children, scolding them for smoking. Nguyen knew the tone, it was a mother's tone.

The thanks were brief, it was mostly head nods and smiles, as the Government vehicle pulled up to winch Nguyen into the open bed of a truck. As the heavy suit fell down in the back, Nguyen took the moment to unfasten the latch of the helmet and gauntlets. The air was cold, and the sky was like a painting, the subtle sounds of the body became distant memories in the open air of Titan. Nguyen breathed in the fresh air and touched the cold metal.

The girl looked up and waved to Nguyen, who smiled back. The girl ran after the truck yelling her thanks. "Gracias, Gracias, Gracias señora, Gracias." The girl lost pace just short of the farm gates, but Nguyen wasn't watching. Her eyes were fixed beyond the family, the farm, and the caldera itself. Her eyes were locked with the blue expanse of sky that kissed the horizons in a welcoming embrace.

It looked nothing like she remembered.



About the illustrators

Vvarx (page 28)

Hello! I'm Vvarx, a 23 year-old Canadian user interface artist who graduated University during the pandemic of 2020. This self-portrait sketch was done in the vacuum of time and space created between my graduation in April and my employment in July, capturing both my mental and physical deterioration. To the right is a page of warm-up sketches, which were done for an animated video project I released in May of that year - a pandemic project, if you will.

Psycho Manchester (page 49)

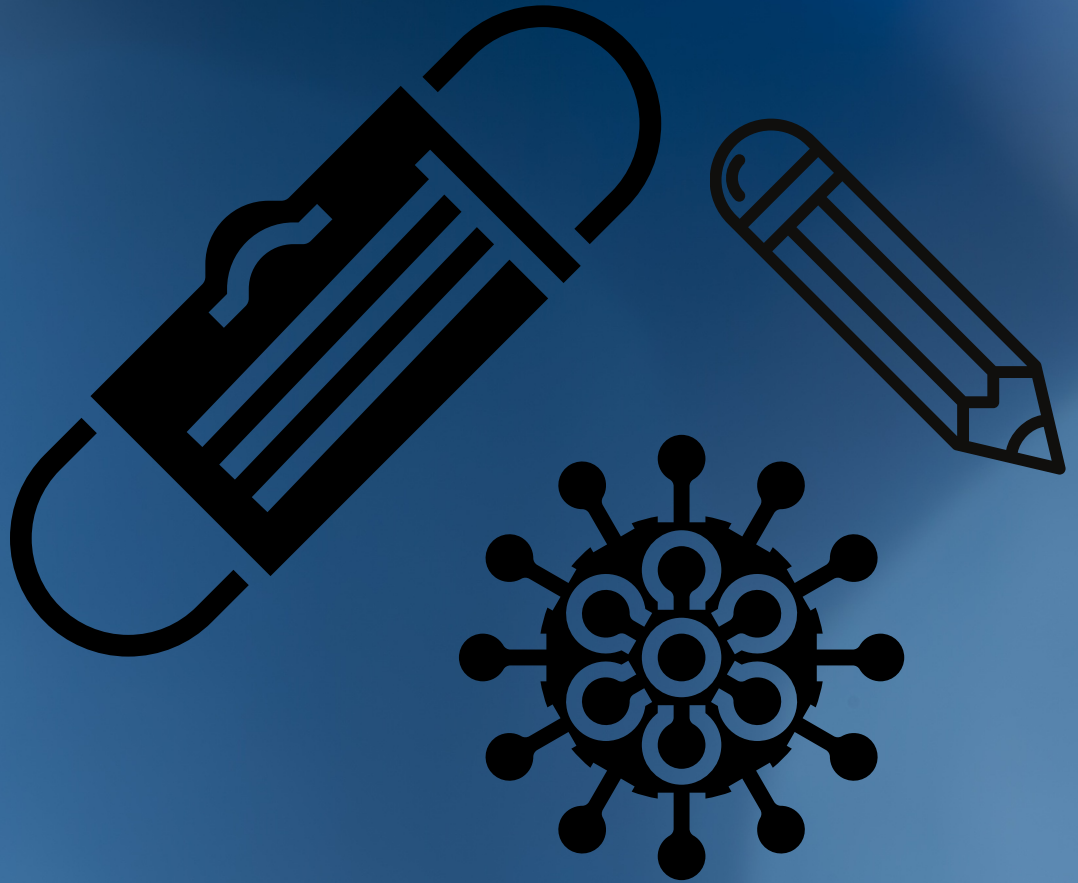
I'm from Le Mans, France, I'm just a teen obsessed by vintage stuff and nature, I love animals and my dream job is to become an animator. I don't have much to say about these drawings, I just kinda drew my characters in quarantine related situations for the fun of it, just to make a joke out of the whole situation.

CLIPSHOW

Issue 1

2020

*The year through
literature and art...*



Featuring the talents of:

Ellery Pollard

Lucie Parfitt

Ally Pepiot

Vvarx

Cristen Faulkenberry

DreamyDemon

Psycho Manchester

Mirakel Kolbeck

Maximus S.M.

Benjamin Ervin