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Biting Time: Stories Reflecting a Changing Horror Genre

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors
Studies in English

By

Landon J. McKay

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English

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Eagerly Awaited

My name is Leonard Seduco, and I have Persecutory Delusional Disorder. I'm hesitant to put these words to paper, but my therapist, Dr. Foster, suggests it might be a good idea for me to look back on the event that got me here to "better my potential for progression." She thinks me facing my reality in the most intense way could help me deal with it.

I like to think of myself as a decent writer, but I've never gone out of my way to make it a hobby. Plus, it's not that I haven't recovered at all; I'm not the man I was before I got here. I'm just weeks into the program, but I feel much brighter. Of course, these spells are common – one day, I'll make great progress, and for the next three, I'm sure the nurse leading me to the cafeteria has a knife in her pocket. Granted, before being institutionalized, there was a time I would have tackled her before I could find out.

I've been a resident at Edgar Tale's Institution for nearly three months now, gulping medicine, sitting through group sessions, and discussing my problems with Dr. Foster. It wasn't difficult to accept the institutionalization. After realizing the damage my world around me had dealt, I wanted nothing more than to move away from my falsities. When my actions got me arrested, it didn't take much for Dr. Foster to convince me to come here rather than face the charges that would have been pressed against me.

The group sessions are probably my least favorite activity at Edgar's solely because I don't think other residents have had the same experiences as me. Not that I think of myself as particularly special, but I don't think any of us can relate to each other how the professionals think we can. We're all so different, even if psychosis links our struggles.

Dr. Foster advised that I recount the events of the days leading up to my arrival at Edgar's. I do hope that my story is believable, for I am confident in what really happened. But

Dr. Foster wants me to tell the story through my eyes before the revelation of my psychosis. At the time, I could not have distinguished a nightmare from a typical morning. Now, it has all cleared up. When I say I have a few off-days here, my worst days are far better here than my best days in the outside world. However, Dr. Foster tells me if I ever want to get out of here, I'll have to stop making comparisons like that. The thing is, I'm not sure if I want to leave this place.

When I graduated college, my plan was to get away. I didn't know how, and I especially didn't know why. I had the best group of friends I could have made in college, I earned a degree with a double major, and I'd been off of anti-depressants for more than a year. I started taking medicine in high school because my doctor decided that my anxiety and depression might lead to self-harm. I never fell into any serious mind-altering states, but I was willing to take the pills to make it easier to get out of bed in the mornings. Sometimes, I felt like my prescription didn't even work. When I got the go-ahead from my doctor to start weaning off of it during my junior year of college, I experienced no side-effects or withdrawal. If I had known that depression was the least of my worries, perhaps I'd have continued suppressing the sadness.

After graduation, I decided to move to a big city, accepting the fact that I'd be living paycheck to paycheck. Perhaps I was bored with what I'd learned in school, because I moved without the intention of finding a job related to my field of study. I thought I'd be fine getting by with a blue-collar 9-5, and I was, for the time being. I picked up a construction gig mostly consisting of building outdoor decking and furniture, and work was hardly ever boring. Truth be told, I suppose I strayed from my "calling" because four years' worth of learning about it bored me to death. I liked the idea of going against the grain and challenging myself to survive in an entirely new environment flourishing with life. Rather than finding an upscale, overpriced apartment downtown, I came across a small, abandoned train station on the outskirts of the city

that happened to be listed. It wasn't in the middle of nowhere, but the woods between surrounding houses would provide as much seclusion as I'd like, should I ever wish to get away from the skyscrapers only miles away. The train station had had a bit of remodeling, but the rent I paid well exceeded what it was worth. Still, it was a cheaper option than sleeping in the middle of millions of people in the city.

After a few weeks, I'd met Will at a bar. He'd struck up a conversation about how his girlfriend had kicked him out of their apartment. He then talked about his job as a photographer. He took pictures, mostly at night, of scenes in nature. I offered to let him take over half the rent and move in with me. There was only one bedroom, but the remodeled office would fit a bed just fine. Plus, it cut my biggest financial burden in half. If I'd have known what my experience would do to Will, I'd have never offered him the spot.

I was in awe of how different the city was from my home. The suburban community I grew up in was nothing compared to the buildings towering above me or the huge freighters coming in and out of the harbor. For the first few months of my new life, I'd never felt better. That was, of course, until my paranoia strung me for quite a loop.

Perhaps I was not embracing the social butterfly status that I had planned to cultivate when I got to the city, because I never found myself wanting to go out. Every time I did, I might have met a few people, but rarely saw them again. I hung out with Will at the house plenty, but he worked most nights, and my day job kept us apart much of the time. When I did go out, I'd give a fake phone number or refuse to call the ones given to me. I had convinced myself that people who had been in the city longer than I were just too different from me. Eventually, my thoughts turned more cautiously. I'd act out against acquaintances that I'd only known for an hour. I once even tried fighting a gentleman twice my size and half my drunkenness. I claimed

that he looked at me oddly. Over time, I completely stopped going out. I saved my travels for going to and from work, grabbing groceries, and occasional runs through the trails around my house.

The trails around my house: from what I now know, the source of my landing at Edgar's. To mix up my runs, I decided to stray from the paths one cloudy evening and enjoy a stroll through nature. I'd never really paid too much attention to the eerie environment around me. The sky resembled a dark greyish green from clouds weighted with water. I descended the steps of my train station house as the sun was on its way to sleep. I kept to the trails for about a mile, later noticing that a fork in the road was split by old train tracks I'd never actually seen around my house. I decided to follow the tracks for a bit. The surrounding trees prevented any light except from glimpses of the city far off through minute gaps in the leaves. Oddly, the green sky remained as the sun set, so I could still see quite well around me. I began feeling suspicious, like someone was watching me through the trees, but I continued my walk, trying to keep my mind off of it.

The first thing I noticed was the smell. The pleasant aroma of wet leaves around me progressively thickened, bringing back an old memory I'd forgotten I had of building cabins out of twigs in my backyard as a child. For a moment, I could have sworn I saw little groups of twigs bunched together only a few yards off the path. In the blink of an eye, the vision had disappeared. Immediately, the stench grew stronger, one nostril taking in the dark, dripping mud and the other filling up with the splintery reminder of rotting wood. My spine shook as the new setting overtook me. I tried to calm myself, but my confusion ramped up. My vision became hazy. I felt that it was real; that I was having some type of episode, but at the time, I had no idea of my present psychosis.

All of a sudden, a sensation circled, both within me and rustling through the trees. I craned my neck to the right, and my curiosity morphed into fear. I saw something standing among the trees. It couldn't have been more than ten feet away, but I sensed an odd distance. It took the shape of a human, but its body was a void, much too dark to resemble an animate being. The color was not black; it just seemed empty. My head began ringing, so the noise I heard was muffled.

“Lenny,” a menacing voice spoke from the shadow.

Terrified and frozen, I could do nothing but return the gaze of the orange eyes that opened and fixed on me. The stare was almost enticing, beckoning me to maintain contact. I eventually found the strength to turn away and continued as fast as I could, walking down the tracks like I hadn't seen anything. Before then, I hadn't experienced the feeling that someone – or something – was following me.

I quickened my pace, and after a few minutes, came to a narrow clearing in the woods. The path couldn't have been more than three feet wide, and the trees above it hunched over so that when my legs turned to the left, I had to bend forward and lower my head to continue on. The ground below me was soaked with rainwater. I could hardly see my shoes. Every step I took resulted in more mud flowing into my socks. I marched through the sludge, slowly feeling a hypnotic buzz permeate my body. It was calming yet terrifying. I felt high on laughing gas, like I was about to have my tooth pulled. My mind was clear, but my body was independent from myself.

The state of my body preoccupied me so heavily that I didn't notice the figure reappear. My eyes focused back in front of me, revealing the shadow I had seen before. This time, I wasn't

startled. I was ready to defeat the shadow. I lunged at it, but the mud kept one leg sucked into the earth.

“What the hell are you doing, Lenny?” a voice spoke from the shadow.

Will flicked on his flashlight and illuminated his own face.

“It’s only me, buddy. Just trying to get a few pictures outside with my new night-vision filter. Geez, I figured you were at a bar or something. Why are you so far away from the house, and at this late at night? It’s nearly midnight!”

When I snapped out of it, my head was groggy. I hadn’t realized that Will was the one speaking to me. He’d trailed behind me as I quickly crept away from him the first time. What’s more, I had no clue how I’d been strolling the woods for so long.

Will spoke again, “You okay, buddy? You drunk?”

“No, no,” I said, “I’m just a bit out of it. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize how late it was, and you spooked me back there.”

“Well, alright,” Will said. “Wanna head back?”

“Uh, yeah,” I responded, still a bit out of sorts.

When we got back home, Will poured a glass of whiskey and motioned towards me.

“Nah, I’m alright,” I said, “but thank you.”

“Here,” Will said, handing me a stack of pictures, “check these out. I finally got them printed. These are the ones I’m submitting to the contest.”

I took hold of the photos, looking through the series of trees lit by the moonlight. When I reached one of the last ones, Will stopped me.

“That one’s my favorite,” he said. “Saw that fella while I was out and asked him to pose for the picture. He did it real nice, don’t you think? Gave me a real good angle, like he was one of the trees.”

I observed the picture closer. The man stood as twisted as any of the branches in the photo. Suddenly, the feeling from the woods came over me again. My body went numb as the man’s body began twitching. The trees around him remained motionless, but he wouldn’t sit still. In the photograph, only the man’s profile could be seen. A downward pointing nose, wisps of gray facial hair, and a brown fedora. My eyes focused on the trembling body. And then, the face turned towards me, smiling malevolently. I threw the picture like a frisbee onto the floor.

“Woah! Lenny?” asked Will, “I need to keep these in good condition or I can’t use them for the contest! What was that for?”

There was a tightness in my body, my muscles paralyzed, and all I could do was stare blankly while Will awaited my answer.

Will examined the picture to make sure it was alright.

“Well? Are you gonna –” Will stopped abruptly as he noticed my frozen body. He grabbed my arms and shook me back and forth.

“Lenny? What’s the matter? Can you hear me?”

I could hear him, but I couldn’t *do* anything about it. My body remained as stiff as a post and a soft, rattling hum rose in the front of my head. The same buzzing from the woods came over me. For a moment, I thought I heard a faint whisper emanating from the humming in my ears. Whatever was causing this made me think something was still wrong. I convinced myself that Will was doing something to me.

“Lenny, should I call a doctor? Can you hear me? I’ll call a doctor.”

The wave swept over me, and I jumped to my feet.

“No!” I screamed, “What are you doing to me?”

I grabbed Will by the neck and slammed him against the wall.

“What are you doing to me? Why were you following me in the woods? Tell me!”

“Lenny!” Will quaked with fear, “Lenny, let me go. I’m not doing anything to you. You froze. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. Please, Lenny. Please let me go.”

I stood staring at my enclosed hand choking Will. I didn’t have a fraction of an idea about what was going on, and trying to convince Will that I did would be useless. I released my grip from his neck, walked over to the couch, and sunk into the cushions.

Will kept his ground.

“What the hell is going on, Lenny?”

I wasn’t sure if I should be completely honest with him.

“I have no idea. One moment, I’m in complete control. The next, my mind’s telling me you’re coming for me. I really don’t understand it. I’m freaking out. Since this evening, I’ve been having these visions... or hallucinations, or... I don’t know, Will. I can’t explain it.”

Will observed me, still appearing too scared to come closer.

“Well,” he said, “try to. I don’t know, maybe it’ll help calm you down.”

I understood he was trying to help, but I felt he wouldn’t trust what I would say. Nonetheless, word vomit spewed from my mouth.

“I guess... It’s like... I’m having these thoughts that convince me people and things are out to get me. For the past few weeks, it hasn’t been anything serious, but it’s the main reason I stopped going out. Every time I met someone new, something in my head told me I needed to stop them from some plan they had for me. But it’s more complicated than that. I’ve known you

for long enough to believe you'd never hurt me, but tonight, I felt vicious. I wanted to attack you. I wanted to stop you from whatever my head told me you were going to do to me. And I'm not sure why, but I liked it. I liked the idea of getting my anger out."

Will nodded encouragingly as I spoke, but my last revelation drained the blood from his face.

"Look," I said, "I'm fine right now. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not sure what starts making my head spin, but I think as long as I stay mellowed out and relax the rest of the night, I should be fine."

Will didn't look convinced and refused to answer.

"Tell you what. How about I just go in my room and lock the door? That way we're split from each other for the night."

"Your door locks from the inside, Lenny," Will said in a monotone lull.

"You could push a chair against it from the outside."

"Lenny, I think you need a doctor."

My stomach turned at the realization that Will wanted nothing to do with me. I thought it best to keep him as reassured as possible.

"Okay, I'll go to the doctor tomorrow. I promise. But I can't go there right now; it's too late. If you don't want to be here, maybe you could go to a hotel for the night. I'll pay for it."

"I'm working tonight, Lenny."

"Listen, Will, I don't know what else to say. I know you're uncomfortable, but I'm just as confused as you."

Will proceeded to accept the offer of securing my door from the outside. I fell asleep nearly instantly.

“And you said you’ve been feeling this way for a few weeks now?” the doctor asked the next morning.

“Yes,” I said, “but last night was the first time something so severe has happened.”

I was so scared at that point that I hardly even remember what the doctor looked like. He asked me a series of questions, telling me he thought I had some sort of psychosis and that he’d like to run some tests. I felt like a monster. In all my life, nothing had flustered me so much as myself in that state. I feared that I’d hurt myself. More importantly, I was terrified at the idea of hurting Will. My head was not in the right place during the entire examination; the physical test, the screenings, and the psychiatric exam all flew by as my thoughts raced in my mind. I wondered what was wrong with me, assuming the worst. Will had probably already begun packing his things back at the house. Surely he’d want nothing more to do with me. What if I lashed out at work? There were definitely much safer areas for me to have an episode than around a bunch of construction equipment.

“Leonard? Can you hear me?” the doctor asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry, you were saying?”

“It’s called Persecutory Delusional Disorder. The results from your tests make it highly likely you’re experiencing developed stages of the psychosis. For now, I can write you a prescription, set an appointment schedule for every two weeks, and advise you to consider a therapist.”

“So, what, I can still live my life regularly?”

“Well, in a sense, yes, but things will be different. The medication can spike or crash your energy levels and mood, but if you don’t take it, there’s a much higher chance of you

slipping into routine delusions. See, Leonard, it's likely that some type of stress is disrupting the neurobiology of the brain. There's this stuff called grey matter that –"

That was all I remembered from the appointment. I stopped by the pharmacy on the way home, picked up two pill bottles, and, taking one capsule from the first and two from the second, swallowed them without a liquid to supplement the clot of medicine. On my drive home, I worried whether the medication would work or not. I began feeling nauseous as I neared my house. Seeing Will's car parked in front of the train station eased my tensions a bit.

It was probably nearly two in the afternoon, and Will had just woken up. He sat at the kitchen table looking at his pictures with a cup of coffee in his hand. When I walked in, he placed the cup perfectly onto the brown ring on the table. He didn't look at me. He continued observing the photographs.

"How'd it go?"

Instead of finding the words to explain to him the possibility of my hallucinatory vengeance against him, I handed him the papers explaining my condition that the doctor had given me.

"Listen, Will, if you want to move out, I'm more than happy to help you. I can –"

"Lenny, it's alright. At least now there's a reason for why you're acting this way. Maybe me being around could be good for you. I could help keep you grounded."

I didn't very much appreciate Will blowing off last night's events as if they were harmless. What's more was his insistence on not moving out. I wondered what caused him to act so calmly. Just the night before, he stared at me with the eyes of a cloudy sky. Now, it seemed like he wanted to be around me. Before my thoughts could take me any further, he had stood up and placed his arm on my shoulder. I winced slightly but met his eyes.

“Lenny, you’re no different to me. You’ve just got to make sure you’re taking your medicine. From what those papers say, that’s essential. I’ll be just fine. I promise.”

I continued questioning his siding with me so quickly. What was it that he might know that I may not? Perhaps he was planning something. As soon as such outlandish thoughts appeared in my head, I remembered what the doctor had told me. I must try my best to ignore the idea that people were out to get me. I remained calm and went to my room to shower.

After settling into the mood swings brought on by my medicine and having quite cordial meetings with my doctor and new therapist, the next few weeks were nothing out of the ordinary. Work was as grueling as usual, but it provided a great outlet for me to release any stress and anxiety that might have kept me up some nights.

One night, I had gotten home from work a bit later than usual, and I hadn’t yet taken my second round of medication for the day. Coincidentally, Will had yet to venture into the outskirts of the city to take his pictures. He sat on the couch with a bowl of cereal, stirring it slowly.

“How was work?” he asked, without looking up.

“Decent. How come you haven’t started?”

“Trying to mix together some ideas.”

Why hadn’t he just told me his ideas? I had grown used to blocking out feelings that people – especially Will – were plotting against me, but something didn’t seem right. He wouldn’t look at me.

“You alright?” I asked.

He looked up, still stirring his cereal.

“Yeah, fine. Why?”

“Dunno... just seem quiet.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just the work stuff. You know my pictures didn’t win the contest. Now I’m struggling to find more magazines and buyers. I’ve been going insane trying to find different options.”

That was all it took for the accusations to boil. Will never struggled to find buyers. His work was great. My suspicion grew. I told myself that I knew what he was getting at. He made up an excuse for having no inspiration. He thought he’d be able to convince me to volunteer to pose outside in some of his pictures. He’d been acting so weird lately, and I felt that he’d been formulating a plan for some time. He’d used people as the central image before; there was no doubt he wanted his freak-of-nature roommate to mock as he snapped photographs for his portfolio. His photos were always eerie. He wanted a living horror to illuminate the darkness surrounding his nighttime portraits. I could feel a pang of anger rising in my stomach.

Trying to suppress the emotions in my head, I left the room without saying anything else. I went to my bedroom, locked the door, and buried my head under a pillow. I wanted to scream. I wanted to attack Will. I was tired of holding myself back. I wondered why I had been trying so hard to prevent myself from giving attention to my gut feelings. Sure, a doctor had told me my thoughts could deceive me, but he had no idea what it felt like. Me forcing myself to hold back my instincts was like an itch I couldn’t scratch. I’d spend hours glued to a chair, not allowing myself to even think about forming a plot against who I’d convinced myself was the enemy. Will avoided me. He didn’t have to work nights; he chose to. It was probably a way for him to do whatever it is he did behind my back.

I uncovered my head from the pillow, turned, and stared at my door. If I just stood up and turned that handle, perhaps I could end this madness. The golden knob glistened from the

moonlight shooting through my window. Its finely finished edges seduced me to come towards it. With one twist, I could face Will. I could catch him off guard, and he'd have no shot trying to stop me. I lifted myself from the bed, walked across my room, and grazed the surface of the knob. Its cold touch sent goosebumps through my wrist, only heightening the numbness in my body. Perhaps following my instincts was only natural. I felt that I deserved the sweet release of the pressure holding me back. The medicine was only keeping me from being myself. If I was a monster, so be it. But would I be able to free myself at Will's expense? The question haunted me.

I tightened my grip on the knob, turning it as gently as I could. Peeking through the crack in the doorway, I saw that Will had remained on the couch. He was toying with his camera, probably making sure it was ready to go before he ventured into the night. It wouldn't matter. I wouldn't let him go out tonight. I couldn't. I was sure I was the only thing on his mind. He might have even been pretending to work on his camera, knowing I was watching from afar. When I'd look away, he'd continue his plot against me.

I acted fast. I ran out of my room and lunged over the back of the couch, tackling Will to the floor. It was his time to pay, not mine. The camera smashed on impact, sending bits and pieces flying across the room.

"Lenny! What are you doi –"

I punched him in the face before he could get a sentence out. And then, I continued hitting him; any free opening I could find. I bashed my fists against his ribcage; I ripped a hole in his sweatpants; I clawed at his struggling figure as he lay under the weight of my body, helpless. With one more hit to the side of his head, he whimpered.

I thought about how else I could get my revenge. Helping myself up, I ran to the office that he had made his bedroom. I grabbed every picture I could find – pinned to the walls, spread on the bed, stacked in neat piles – and tore them into the smallest pieces I was able. He wouldn't have any evidence against me now. He'd never be able to continue his plan.

I ventured back to the living room as Will tried lifting himself up.

“Let me show you what I've done!” I said. “You've been keeping things from me, Will. That much I know. Come, look what I've done!”

I grabbed his arm and dragged him into his room, letting go and allowing him to fall to his knees.

“Look! You can't hurt me now! Ha-ha! I've won! I've actually won!”

Will took in the sight around him. Hundreds of pictures, a decade's worth of work, all gone down the drain. His eyes widened in horror. He cried; he wept. He probably would have screamed to the heavens had he had the strength.

“What have you done? Leonard? Lenny? What... What have you done? I – Lenny?”

Still on his knees, Will's watery eyes stared into my soul. The numbness in my body remained. I glared back, fixing my mouth into a smile.

“I've won.”

I went to the kitchen and poured a glass of water. I felt better than I ever had before. No medication could give me the comfort I felt in that moment. I took Will's previous seat on the couch. He peeked out from his room.

“Clean your room, Will! There's a fucking mess all over it! Ha-ha!”

Will shut his door gently.

I remained seated on the couch, basking in the glorious feeling of accomplishment. It couldn't have been more than ten minutes before I heard a pounding on the door.

“This is the police! Open the door!”

The numbness left my body. I stood up as fast as I could, ran to the door, and turned the knob.

“Get on the ground!”

The yells from the officers drowned out my apologies. What had I done? I'd ruined Will's career. I'd ruined Will. I'd let the feeling overcome me. And what was in store for me? I couldn't decide if the temporary bliss was worth the daggers of pain I felt in my stomach.

The officers lifted me up, escorting me out of the house and into the back of their car.

“Will!” I pleaded, “Will, I'm sorry! I didn't know! I didn't have control! Will, please!”

I had no idea I wouldn't see Will again. I had no idea my twisting my bedroom knob would lead to him closing his on me forever.

“Eagerly Awaited” Reflection

In “Eagerly Awaited,” I aimed to write a story that reflects aspects of “Tell Tale Heart” but in a more modern depiction. Although Edgar Allen Poe may not be labelled as the creator of the horror genre, he is certainly credited with some of the most early popular work of the genre. Since his writing is so well-known, I thought it fitting to use tropes from his writing as the first rough time-period for my stories.

I did include noticeable changes from the inspiration for “Eagerly Awaited,” however. For instance, much of my revision with Professor Viswanathan involved the question of whether Leonard should be read as reliable or unreliable. In changing the story to have Leonard retelling the events leading to his landing at Edgar Tale’s Institution, I tried giving Leonard more legitimacy than I had previously done. As with much of the writing in all of my stories, another main focus revolved around the logic within. I wrote more clearly, taking out unnecessary details and simplifying my language. I believe that one of my biggest improvements in writing has been learning to get the point across rather than relying on ambiguity that only makes a story confusing.

It was also interesting to include research in my writing. Learning about Persecutory Delusional Disorder and utilizing it in my writing felt more valuable than simply stating that Leonard had an unconfirmed disorder. Drawing from my own minor struggles with mental health, I wanted to portray the reality of related issues. Admittedly, having not experienced Persecutory Delusional Disorder challenged me to include it without seeming unsympathetic, but I decided it was better to do research and add a realistic disorder than to avoid facing the decision by refraining from labelling it.

The Inescapable

Handcuffed in orange garb with the other prisoners, Simon was fearful of where he was being taken. In most cases, relocation was either very good or very bad. He could have been going to meet a potential parole officer, but he knew better than that. There were rumors that the bus was headed to the east coast for its next shipment of Cosmo Prison inmates.

The malignance running through Cosmo earned it a spot in the States' most dangerous prisons list. Its reputation ran rampant through just about every cell in the country. Inmates joked about their eventual landing on the island, while others told of the stories they'd heard. Someone's brother tried escaping, but water monsters tore his boat to shreds. Others' friends died of fear before making it to the prison. Simon had even heard a story of the guards not even knowing their own names.

The government had nothing to do with the prison. It was listed as an independent nation, which was evidence enough that such an island housed a powerful leader. Separated from civility on all sides, it was its own world. Another difference between Cosmo and other places was that no one knew who ran the place. Sure, there was a Warden, but who held the true power? All those employed by Cosmo Prison apparently served not a human, but an essence. Whether someone believed in a higher power or not didn't matter when they faced the entity that was Cosmo Prison. Of course, why else would it be named as such? The place had the notoriety of an established universal power, albeit centralized to a mere island. Prisoners jokingly gave Cosmo its own slogan: It is what it is because that's the way it is.

Simon looked around the bus and observed the new faces. Some took a moment to introduce themselves on the ride. A man called Tank sat towards the front, attempting to make conversation with the officer driving the bus. Tank, ironically, stood about five feet flat with

bones for limbs. A few rows back was Denny, an inner-city kid just as scrawny as Tank. Next to Denny was Sal, a real rough-and-tumble kind of guy, from the looks of it.

And then there was Felix. Simon's ex-confidante sat right in front of him, staring at the trees passing by, stuck in his own world. Simon admired Felix. That's why he'd gone to lengths to work with him. They got on nicely, and their days of robbing banks eventually turned to much more. Caught in the middle of one of the most vicious heists to date in history, there'd been enough bloodshed among the two of them that neither could be the least bit surprised about their landing at Cosmo Prison. Cosmo housed prisoners labeled too violent even for the federal government. Judging by the fact that Simon and Felix's robbing, money laundering, and getting rid of anyone in their way created the largest mob in the city, they were the epitome of Cosmo inmates.

Simon was muscular, with bronzed skin and jet-black hair. Felix was scrawny and pale with dirty blonde locks hanging past his shoulders. Their looks were not the only factor that made them polar opposites. Simon believed Felix's temper and lust for violence is what led to their being found out by the FBI, while Felix argued that Simon's perfectionism landed them in their first jail cell. In any case, the two criminals found themselves with a one-way ticket to what would likely be their last home.

Simon did truly appreciate the time he'd spent with Felix, but he'd never tell Felix how much he missed even their short talks throughout the day. He couldn't. If Cosmo held true to its reputation, both Simon and Felix would have to uphold the status they'd earned. Although, all Cosmo inmates were the best of the best in their respective ventures; it's not that Simon and Felix would be praised, but signs of their friendship could cause problems in any prison.

Felix seemed to have noticed Simon's gazing at his profile, because he shot a glance through the crack between the chair and the window. Simon playfully thrust his knee into the back of Felix's chair.

"How you holding up?" Simon whispered.

"I'm alright, Si. You?"

"Hanging in there."

"You think they're taking us to Cosmo, Si?"

"I don't know, but I'm not sure where else we'd be going."

"Say, I wonder what it's like over there."

Simon didn't want to think about what it was like over there.

"Yeah, I'm not sure, Felix."

"Lord knows what kind of trouble the Cosmo guys have gotten into. Couldn't be much worse than us, right? Wait till I step foot through those doors," Felix joked.

"Hey," Simon said, "you remember what we talked about? May not be the best idea to team up right away."

"I hear you. I agree. Say, what do you think it's like in there?"

Simon look towards the front of the bus and said, "I think we're about to find out."

The bus pulled to a screeching halt in front of an abandoned yacht club. The sign at the entrance to the parking lot hung by one nail and read "COSMO PRISON PORT". Weeds hugging the fence suggested a lack of a groundskeeper, and the miles of highway stretching either way confirmed the absence of any other local residents. The bus revved up and pulled into the parking lot. As the front end swung right, Simon glanced through the windshield. From his seat on the bus, he could make out a hulking shadow through the fog. It couldn't have been more

than a mile away, but at the same time, Simon had no idea how big the prison was. It could've been one hundred miles away and he would have believed it. It appeared mountainous.

“Gee, you see that across the water, Si?”

“Yeah, looks pretty scary. Hey, Felix, when we get out there, don't talk. I'm sure the guards are a bit moodier than the ones back home.”

“You think so? Well, we'll see about that.”

“Felix, I'm serious. No bullshit.”

The largest fault in Simon and Felix's relationship was Felix's attitude. Be it talking back to guards from behind his cell to disagreeing about a hideout spot, Felix loved instigation. Simon thought so far as to say Felix couldn't live without the drama he caused. He was afraid Felix's typical behavior would be ill-received at Cosmo Prison.

While much of Felix's emotions supposedly resulted in botched plans during his and Simon's crime-committing days, that part of his personality was one of the things that Simon enjoyed most about Felix. Their differing opinions and the separate dynamics that each functioned with allowed them to step outside of themselves from time to time. Whether it involved approaching heists a different way or simply spending hours together talking about basic life aspects, Simon and Felix had grown a strong bond. Simon felt comfort knowing that, although he might be on his way to Cosmo Prison, at least Felix would be by his side. They might not be able to maintain the connection they once had, but knowing he was near was reassurance enough.

As the bus neared a dock leading to the covered marina, two hooded guards with rifles stood at either end of the dock's walkway, motioning for the bus to pull forward. After another stop, the guards approached the bus, opened the doors, and waited for the armed men who rode

with the prisoners to step off. Once all was clear, the front man hopped up the steps and into the bus. The high-pitched voice was muffled from the cloak stretching over his face.

“All of you, in a line! If I hear so much as a goddamn cough from any of you, you can bet your ass there’ll be hell to pay. You! You hear me?”

Simon couldn’t hide his smile as the pig squealed. He immediately lost the grin, straightened up, and gazed into face of the guard. The hood prevented him from seeing fully, but the guard’s nose protruded, casting a shadow above his stubble-ridden mouth.

“I’m not gonna deal with a single troublemaker. You hear me? Get your ass in line before I get it there for you! Move!”

Simon was quick to jump into line, less out of fear of the guard and more to avoid breathing in any more of the smell. The man’s odor was one that Simon was all too familiar with. It was musky; sweat, coffee, cigarettes, or a mix of the three. The dampness that had filled his nostrils when being yelled at by the guard sent fear through him. Simon couldn’t quite put his finger on why the smell struck him so dramatically, but his stomach turned a bit as the guard stepped away.

Simon was moving forward but froze when Felix spoke in front of him.

“Gee, you must not like your job if you won’t show your face, sir. How about giving us a peek?”

The only acknowledgement from the guard was his elbow crushing Felix in the nose. Felix flailed, falling into the seat closest to him.

“Goddamn, you’ve got some fire in you!” Felix rallied back.

Now, the guard’s attention was called further. He towered over Felix’s body and whispered so Simon could just barely hear what he said.

“I can’t wait to see you dissolve, boy.”

He pulled Felix to his feet and shoved him back in line.

As they emptied out of the bus and walked along the wooden dock, Simon could feel the hairs on the back of his neck raise up as goosebumps lined his shoulders and arms. Every brush from the prison suit sent more shivers across his skin. It was the afternoon, and clouds covered the sky, but the sun penetrated from behind. Sweat streams singed his hair as he tried to shake off the chills spiraling from his neck to his buttocks.

“Psst. Simon!” Felix turned, his nose already swelling.

“Shut up, Felix. These guys mean business.”

“I’m serious, Simon,” said Felix, keeping his mouth pointed downward as if that would make the guards unable to hear them.

“I was just gonna say, if this is the last we see of each other, it really was something else, huh? We had quite a time together. Good luck in there.”

“Now’s not the time, Felix. We’ll still see each other inside.”

“Well damn, Simon. A little ‘good luck’ doesn’t hurt. C’mon pal, we’ve had quite the run. Won’t you miss me?”

Simon didn’t want to imagine the pain of being reprimanded by a guard.

“Cut it out, Felix.”

Simon wanted to stop in his tracks, embrace Felix, and tell him how mutual the feeling really was, but that’s not what prisoners do. Plus, he had other things on his mind. He had no idea what the hell Cosmo Prison was like. The guards really seemed to be into the whole mystery gig. Other than the one commanding them how to move, the others – who apparently emerged from the foggy marina – stood silent with the guns pointed interchangeably at the prisoners’

heads. Simon had also begun feeling the result of his shoes having holes worn in them. The wooden dock they trudged along was splintered with broken pieces waiting to lodge themselves into the soft foot of whoever they could find. And it was not just unpleasant; there were blisters forming on Simon's feet.

As long as Felix stopped shooting words into his head, Simon might be able to bask in his last few moments of freedom. Even at the old prison, they had a decent amount of free time. It struck him forcefully: knowing he would not be able to feel the heat of concrete tomorrow, wishing he could continue spending time with Felix, using his last bit of energy to strain his eyes in order to take in every possible detail he could.

“Pick it up, boys! We don't got all day, ya hear? We don't get there by sunset, all of you are gonna be hurtin' before you can realize it.”

This voice came from a different guard than the first. Simon was towards the back of the line, so he couldn't clearly pick out who was speaking. The front of the line was rounding the corner of the entrance to the marina.

“Look like a buncha nobodies. Poor excuses for citizens if I've ever seen any.”

Simon couldn't understand why they all covered their faces. It was quite odd. He assumed there'd be a fair share of aspects he wouldn't understand about the infamous Cosmo Prison.

“Get yourselves moving! C'mon!”

Another entirely new voice. They had entered the marina, and a selection of military-grade, open-roofed boats lined the dock's perpendicular wooden beams. With the roof over their head, it was not bright enough to see how many guards were around. Felix seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“Geez, how many officers y’all got in here?” Felix whispered, but his voice echoed through the tin sheets.

“That’s a fuckin’-nuff, Felix,” Simon barked under his breath. “Don’t make a scene.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ve said your piece, Si. Piss off already.”

In an attempt to explain his stance on talking, Simon skipped forward and dug his heel into the back of Felix’s knee. The officers were talking amongst themselves and so did not hear the hopeless screech that shot out of Felix’s mouth.

Sounding like tears were about to spring from his eyes, Felix said, “You’re just as worthless as me and all the other fellas in this line, Si.”

After a few feet, Simon collided with Felix’s back. The procession of prisoners was now at a standstill. In the water to their right sat a boat covered in steel, which resembled one of the Higgins boats that tore through the water near the beaches of Normandy.

“Into the boat! Hurry up! The castle’s waiting for its guests of honor,” an officer jeered at the boarding inmates.

The back ramp had been lowered and set on the dock, allowing for a wobbling path into the boat. When it was Simon’s turn to hop in, he looked down, examining the grated silver path that would lead him to his next cell. The streaks in the metal reminded him of how he used to draw on the walls of his previous cells. That had been his only way to stay occupied. He wondered what Cosmo had in store for him.

“Hey, dummy!” a voice yelled in Simon’s ear, “Unless you’d rather swim to the island, quit lookin’ at the daggum ground! Move your ass!”

Simon could hardly pick out each word that sent wet air yet again into his ear drum. It had started raining, and even the sprinkled drops hitting the tin roof made it difficult to hear. He

stepped into the steel encasement, and as the last of the prisoners packed the boat like sardines, he was squished in the center.

One guard stepped in at the end of the line, switched the lever to close the ramp, and shouted towards the front, “All in! Commence instructions!”

Now, another new voice. This guard was dressed a bit differently than the others. His hood was red, along with a red sash from his shoulder to the opposite hip.

“Alright boys, heads to the front! I’m The Warden. If you haven’t guessed by now, you gentlemen will be spending the rest of your days on that island over there. Now, with this rain starting up, the water is going to be rough. It’s four miles to the boat slip at the prison. It’s not going to be a straight shot. Keep your head low, and God save you if any of you try disrupting this journey. Myself, the guard to my right, and the one behind you are all armed and ready to subdue any said disruptions. We can shoot and we will shoot.”

He spun in his seat, started the boat’s engine, and over the chugging of gas and the bullets of rain, yelled back, “Fall out!”

The boat roared to life. As it proceeded, Simon watched the tin roof shorten. After just a few feet, he was already drenched. He looked at the other prisoners. They stood unmoving, with heads down.

Simon saw that Felix’s head was bobbing unusually. The elbow must have knocked him hard. The rain seemed to engulf him; not merely passing over his skin but seeping into his pores.

The rain was not especially cold, and he found it quite unusual. Even with the overcast, the weather had been particularly mild during the walk to the boat. He imagined himself showering in his old home; keeping the water mildly hot to stay comfortable, even after having

come inside from a blistering day. He was reminded of days spent at hideouts with Felix, hunting their dinner in the woods and keeping their fires from drawing attention.

The thought escaped him when the thud of a prisoner falling to his knees echoed over the rain.

“Heads forward, gentlemen! Ought not to be worried about the man next to you!” the guard in the back bellowed through the rain and the roaring of the boat motor.

Before The Warden took his turn to shout, Simon could have sworn he noticed flesh-colored drops falling from the lowered inmate’s face.

“See, here at Cosmo Prison!” reading The Warden’s lips through the rain was impossible, so Simon honed his ears intently. “– we’ve got a reputation to uphold! The long and the short of it is that some of you boys just may not have what it takes! If you’re not Cosmo-worthy, we’ll know before too long!

“Take this man, for instance! In, well, I’d say here in about sixty seconds, you’ll get what I mean! He doesn’t meet the standards of Cosmo Prison! No need to worry, though; we’ll put him to good use!”

The Warden glanced towards the prisoner who had keeled over. He jumped down from the front of the boat, retrieved a bottle from his coat pocket, and held it under the prisoner so that drops from his skin fell into the bottle. The Warden fastened the lid on the bottle and tossed it into the water. Simon couldn’t see clearly, but he could have sworn something came to the surface and grabbed the bottle.

Simon and the other prisoners looked at each other in utter confusion. The moment was disrupted by the screech coming from the melting pile of a prisoner. The man’s knees had turned into a puddle, and he was waist-deep in himself. The screams ran through the boat. Simon saw

that the floor of the boat underneath the disintegrating prisoner was green. It wasn't paint that made it this way; it resembled emerald flames from a campfire. The bottom of the boat was melting him.

The Warden's next words haunted Simon.

"You're not within United States' jurisdiction, boys! Cosmo decides your fate!"

"What's going on?" Tank yelled through the storm of noises.

"Keep to yourself, gentleman!" a guard insisted, "No point in trying to save others! Eyes forward!"

The prisoners ignored the command, frantic with despair. Simon noticed Felix's frame beginning to collapse. His feet had begun spreading over the boat, which had begun taking on the same color around Felix as the prisoner before. Simon realized it may not have been the cause of the melting; it looked like it marked certain prisoners. Green circles began appearing underneath a few more victims.

Simon lunged forward to hold Felix up. Some prisoners tried climbing the walls of the boat, but most stood in place, yelling, crying; praying to survive the hell they had gotten themselves into. Felix's ribcage seeped through Simon's fingers as Felix let out a few whimpers. He didn't scream like the others. It was as if he was trying to fight through it.

Simon put his mouth to Felix's ear.

"You gotta stay with me, Felix. Come on, snap out of it. Don't let it happen. Please, Felix. Please. Come on, now."

"It's okay, Si," muttered Felix.

Tears streamed down Simon's face. He was losing his partner. He was terrified of this place. Felix was more than Simon's co-criminal: more than any brother or best friend. Felix was all Simon had left.

"You still with us there, goofy? You hear me? You gettin' seasick? We've got another one!" a guard jeered in Felix's direction.

"What the fuck is wrong with you all?" Simon yelled back.

"Not us!" answered The Warden, "Cosmo!"

"Felix! No!" Simon struggled with facing the reality that Felix was slipping from his grasp. Felix's body sunk closer to the boat's floor, his blonde locks liquifying against his pale skin and melted orange jumpsuit until the downpour spread him across the floor.

One of the guards shouldered Simon out of the way, gathering a sample from the puddle of Felix with another bottle.

Simon faced the guard and grabbed his arm. He reached for the bottle in the guard's hand. The two wrestled for control of Felix's remains.

"Get the fuck off me, scum!" yelled the guard, reaching for a handgun on his waist.

He squirmed out of Simon's grip, stood up, and aimed the barrel at Simon's eyes.

"You don't go against the Cosmo."

As the guard cocked the gun, two prisoners fighting for a chance to jump over the boat knocked him to the side. The gun fell to the floor, lost under the scrambling feet.

Simon hoisted himself up, took the bottle from the guard, and threw the guard to the ground. Now that he had it, he had not a clue what he'd do with it. Before he could make the decision, a blue, scaly hand reach over the outside of the boat. It grabbed the edge of the wall,

hoisting up the most breathtaking yet menacing head. The creature's sky-blue, shiny, serpent-like face was laden with gold embroidery.

Simon was awestruck. The sea monster stretched and fastened its grip around Simon's wrist. With its other hand, it stole the bottle of Felix. It stared at Simon intently before diving into the water. Simon looked around, but the only other person who seemed to have noticed was the guard, who wasn't even slightly surprised.

The guard got to his feet, and brushing past Simon, said again, "You don't go against the Cosmo."

The guard grabbed another bottle out of his pocket and rushed away.

Both steaming tears and raindrops coated Simon's face as he glanced one more time at Felix's puddle. The rain had washed most of him away. Simon's anger turned to mourning. He knew surviving Cosmo Prison would be tough enough, but without Felix – he didn't want to imagine the prison without Felix. He looked to the sky and prayed that whatever power reigned over the island would take him next.

The screams of two more victims mixed with the heavy rain beating the stainless steel were drowned out in Simon's thoughts. Whatever this place was, there was no telling what life would be like in Cosmo Prison. He'd lost all hope that he could keep himself together. He wondered why they would be collecting the remains of those that had dissolved. The Warden had said something about the weaker links having another purpose.

The boat continued along, piercing cries and all. Simon couldn't fathom what power decided these men's fates. What spirit of these waters chose who was worthy of Cosmo Prison? Was it based off of the crimes they had done? The good they had slipped in every once and a while? Who or what was in control of this mysticism? Why would Felix be chosen unworthy?

What had Simon done correctly – or incorrectly – to make himself any better or worse than Felix? And then, he remembered the slogan labelled by those who had heard of Cosmo Prison. It is what it is because that's the way it is.

He'd heard stories of Cosmo before, but he hadn't believed them. He didn't know how to respond to the flashes of his recent experience twisting through his head. He turned his attention to the prisoners around him. There was not an orange body in the boat that wasn't shaking with fear.

There was not much else to take in concerning the scenery around him. With the amount of water pouring from the sky, there was no telling how near or far the island was. Simon found it too difficult to focus on finding a way out of this mess. Raindrops filled the atmosphere. The water below covered any clear path to follow. The boat prevented escape. Simon felt hopeless; that all of his life had led to this moment was not something he could face. Surely there was a way out of his predicament. But how could he not succumb to the power of Cosmo Prison?

Just then, a fifth prisoner melted to the bottom of the boat. Just over half of the inmates were left. All of the confusion rushed through Simon's body.

He now yelled as frantically as the rest of the inmates. The storm continued thrashing the boat through the water. The prisoners who hadn't melted out of the boat looked like they all wished they had. Some were slipping down the walls after losing their grips on the edge of the boat, others laid huddled on the floor, praying for the end of the journey. The island was now quickly approaching; almost too quickly. The shadow increased in size as the boat tore through waves and pierced falling raindrops.

As the dock came into view, the boat jerked to a stop, sending the standing prisoners on top of the balled bodies beneath.

“Everybody, up and out!” yelled The Warden.

The two guards grabbed the inmates and forced them to their feet. They stepped off the boat, and Simon locked faces with the hooded guard he had fought. Simon saw him dabbing at blood pooling from his nose. Four new officers walked down the short path from the prison, holding shackles. The prisoners’ ankles were locked together, and the procession to their future began.

Simon scanned the horizon of the prison wall and the dirt ground connected to it. He and the prisoners were led into the entrance. After going through a stone foyer, they were taken into a front room. To the left, he saw a dim torch on the wall. Below the torch was a staircase.

At that moment, Simon’s confusion peaked. He squinted to ensure he knew what he was seeing. Another guard swept up the stairs. The long blonde hair was odd enough, but as the guard slipped his hood on, the torch illuminated Felix’s face.

“Felix!” Simon yelled.

“Eyes forward!”

A guard walking alongside the inmates gave Simon a shove.

Simon tried stopping, but the chains dragging him lessened his abilities. He looked back to see Felix following them into the next room.

They were taken into an enormous front room resembling a mess hall. Guards sat at tables, all facing the newcomers. The brown tables lining the hall sat drilled into an uneven, rock floor. The surrounding walls were smoothed, glistening limestone.

The Warden made his way to the front of the room and began speaking, but Simon did not listen. The guard who had pushed Simon was next to him, and Felix was just on the other

side. Simon tried getting the attention of the hooded figure whom he had just watched melt into a boat.

He craned his head behind the guard next to him and whispered, “Felix!”

The nearer guard turned to Simon, saying, “You wanna be taken downstairs? Keep talking and you’ll find out just how little you matter here.”

Simon figured he had nothing to lose. Now, he shouted.

“I don’t give a rats ass what you’ll do to me!” then pointing to Felix, “What have you done to him?”

“Can it, scum! The Warden is speaking!”

Actually, The Warden had stopped speaking. Everyone in the room was listening to Simon’s argument with the guard.

Simon thrust his hands toward the guard in an attempt to get past him to Felix. His movement jerked prisoners back and forth as the connected chains prevented him from escape. Simon had had enough. He glared into the hood of the guard.

“I will kill you!”

The guard answered, “You’re going to die in this prison, boy.”

“What have you done to Felix?”

“He’s not Felix.”

“Fuck you! All of you! What is this place?”

Whether he succumbed to Simon’s shouts or wanted to prove his point, the guard shuffled aside and said, “Fine. You want a word with him? Be my guest!”

The hood that Felix wore turned to Simon, and Felix moved closer.

“Felix? What happened? What have they done?”

A few strands of Felix's blonde hair hung out of the hood. The dim light of the room cast a shadow, but Simon was sure he could make out Felix's features. He was staring into the eyes of his other half: the person he had seen disappear was still here. Felix placed his hands on Simon's shoulders, and Simon tried moving closer. As he leaned forward, Felix's grip tightened. He forced Simon to turn towards the front, aligned with the rest of the prisoners.

Felix grabbed Simon by the neck and said, "Face forward, scum."

“The Inescapable” Reflection

Writing “The Inescapable” gave me a chance to explore, in part, my minor in Anthropology while learning about a genre I had not previously studied in depth.

My biggest interest in Anthropology is learning to understand societies completely different from mine. After beginning “The Inescapable,” I found that I could incorporate that idea – although I would dramatize certain aspects – in my fiction. I sought to create a separate society from the one I am familiar with.

In learning how Lovecraftian writing deals with a fear of the cosmos, it was an interesting experience combining the two ideas. So, by building a world based around the unknown and working with Professor Viswanathan to figure out what “the cosmos” means to me, I created Cosmo Prison’s slogan: “It is what it is because that’s the way it is.” To me, the cosmos is a collection of factors that decides why the world functions a certain way. Cosmo Prison is its own world governed by a mysterious power. Those in charge and those who work at the prison hint that they are aware of the governing body, but even they may not be able to fully explain it.

I chose the Lovecraftian era after learning about evidence that H.P. Lovecraft gathered much of his inspiration from Edgar Allen Poe. As it fit my goal to cover different time periods, I made it the focus of my 20th century-style story. In reading H.P. Lovecraft’s “Dagon” and “The Call of Cthulhu,” I liked the idea even more: centering the story around a setting separate from Simon’s known world while he must also face the emotions in his personal life. I also studied portions of HBO’s *Lovecraft Country*, which helped me to gain a sense of another setting focused both on the idea of the cosmos and individuals’ struggles with their personal lives.

Brother

There was no sun to set in Jackson County, Arkansas on April 10th of 1929. Perhaps if there had been, there'd have never been a place for the evil to find its way from underneath. The green sky shot through thick clouds, beckoning the Sneed Tornado. As it struck the grounds of Pleasant Valley in the afternoon, earth's splits, broken trees, and decimated homes only just began to paint the canvas on which much more severe consequences would sign their names. 23 lives lost; 59 others harmed; countless more changed forever. Two children would suffer the extent of The Legend of the Two Devils. Fable or not, there is no denying the torture the two children underwent; and what would come after was no less horrifying.

As the story goes, Father Devil was slowly dying; not in the way that humans die, of course, but his immortality could only keep him so strong. Father Devil's younglings, Brother and Sister, were due for a demonstration of their abilities. Until then, Brother and Sister had been equally malicious, but one would have to outlast the other. Father Devil would decide who was more worthy of taking over control underneath when his power gave way under pressure of time. He decided that at the next chance, his children would go to the earth and each possess a child. Whoever did a better job would be fit to replace him. As the underworld covered the entirety of the earth, they searched far and wide for an opportunity. The Sneed Tornado placed the devil-children in a most convenient position. It struck the ground 70 miles from Central Arkansas, splitting the earth just enough for the two devils to squeeze through amid the bursting winds. Once the tornado spun away from Sneed, the devils began trying to prove themselves to their father. Much of the destruction had decimated the area, so the devils moved on in search of denser population. They found it in Little Rock. Proving themselves might actually be more difficult with so many people around, they realized, and they crept along the outskirts of the city.

The lumber industry had led to scattered houses throughout West Little Rock. The siblings found one of these cottages resting atop a hill, covered by the shadows of Shinall Mountain, smoke issuing from the chimney. They killed the wet nurse then possessed the bodies of the twin children.

When the parents got home from a dinner party, the terror from their facing the wet nurse's torn body was heightened by seeing their children on all fours with their necks twisted so that they stared at their parents upside down. They immediately called the doctor, who had no explanation. After reaching out to St. Andrews Cathedral, a priest stood at their front door. It was possession, he said, and he must perform an exorcism immediately.

It lasted several days. Whether a cause of the devils' presences or not, Little Rock stormed with seemingly no end. Crushing lightning and bellowing thunder only added to the horror inside the cottage. The devils fought with all of their might to show their father who should win his approval of power. On the final morning of the possessions, their abilities were still too close to judge; that is, until the priest tried just one last time to send the demons out of the children. Whether it was a slip-up on Brother's part or the will of God himself, Brother found himself watching the exorcism as a spectator in the room. He had been driven out of the twin boy. Brother then watched as the girl twin's body sunk off of the bed and to the floor. Sister had succeeded. She had proven her strength to her father. She would take over underneath.

The siblings raced back to Sneed and into the entrance to the underworld. Brother was enraged, but there was nothing he could do. Sister began her rule immediately, as Father Devil proudly watched from aside. Brother spent his time taking care of the boringly wretched parts underneath and hating his family. He could only wait to exact his revenge on Father Devil. Brother had lost, and he was sure Sister won fairly, but knowing he'd never reign underneath

burned his soul. He thought perhaps he could try proving himself again, showing Father Devil the mistake he'd made in assigning such a trivial competition to decide a ruler. Whether he'd manifested it, or such a happening was simply by chance, the opportunity to return to Little Rock presented itself in 1999. He'd not likely take over underneath, even with success; Sister had done it the first time. Brother decided the trip would be solely for his benefit. He had nothing to lose. Angering Father Devil would simply be a bonus to his conquest.

The Legend of the Two Devils caused panic throughout Little Rock. Parents kept more careful watch over their children, and police officers and ghost hunters alike kept their eyes peeled for signs of the supposed monsters. Eventually, the reality of the incident seemed to fade away, but The Legend of the Two Devils remained as a staple ghost story to tell around the campfire for years to come.

Minus the tragic plane crash at Adams Field on June 1, the summer had been as typical as ever. Of course, the ten families affected most by the crash had the right to mourn their losses, but throughout town, it took no more than a few weeks for civilians to forget American Airlines Flight 1420. Soon, the kids would be back at school, and the parents would continue working their jobs to pay for next summer's vacation. Everything was just the way it should have been. That is, of course, until dropping temperatures towards the end of the year brought a bit more with them than a crisp, face-reddening breeze.

When Thomas arrived at Shinall Mountain, three of his buddies had already lowered one of their tailgates and cracked open some beers. Their spot was through deep woods on a cliff's edge of a hill that overlooked Chenal Parkway.

Pangs of anger funneled through Thomas's blood as he recounted the argument he'd just had with his parents. After he'd skipped almost every period of his first week's classes, his parents warned that he'd lose his football scholarship. Instead of bringing his keys to his father as he descended the stairs, he lowered his shoulder to shove through the barrier his parents made at the bottom and ran to his truck. He was in with the engine started as his father followed his mom outside, and his rear wheels bounced off the driveway before either of them could reach for the door handle.

Thomas pulled his truck around the old rock fireplace. He hopped out and headed over to the cooler.

From behind the trees, a towering shadow watched. Brother had made his way back to town when the crashing of Flight 1420 had burst a hole in the earth's crust, creating only the smallest crevice for him to squeeze through. It wasn't long before he'd realize he was not close to the area where his face-off with Sister took place. Not one for tracking, it took him weeks to wind his way through the fifteen-mile journey without being seen. He wanted to begin his hunt at the spot right where he'd left. For the last few days, Brother watched as cars drove by, waiting to see if anyone would stop in the woods. That evening, he'd noticed the remains of a rock chimney on a hill. Shortly after, he was excited to realize that he was in the exact spot of his last visit to Little Rock.

"What's up, hotshot?" one of Thomas's friends said, blowing cigarette smoke in Thomas's direction as he leaned into the cooler.

"In need of a beer. My parents are doin' the same shit they always do," said Thomas.

"Starting quarterback is too cool for his parents?" mocked his friend. "Who woulda thought?"

“Fuck off, Parker,” said Thomas.

Parker had nearly 100 pounds on Thomas. His huge build, black hair, and snake-like eyes were much different from Thomas’s narrow shoulders, blazing red hair, and freckled face.

“Relax. Just tryin’ to lift the situation, bud. Come on, crack one open and get up here,” said Parker.

Thomas joined Parker at the deep end of the truck, sitting on the bed’s ridge. His other two friends rotated their butts to face them. They shot the shit for a while, talking about their new classes, having to deal with teachers that don’t want to be there just as much as their students, and how the only thing keeping them motivated for the next few weeks would be the lights flashing as they ran onto the field for the first game in September.

Now that Thomas had had a chance to come off the angry high from arguing with his parents, he was happier.

“I just can’t stand my parents right now, man. I don’t know; maybe I do need to get my shit together.”

The weather was pleasantly cool for a mid-August night. Even with his jacket on, he had to resist the urge to shiver when a crisp wind passed through their miniature campsite. He looked down on the orange-lit highway.

As he thought silently, the sudden urge to relieve himself of the six or seven beers he’d drank ran through him, almost letting itself out before Thomas could stop it.

“Gotta take a leak,” Thomas mumbled to the others, who had already jumped down from the trailer and were leaning against the truck, gazing up at the stars.

Thomas scooted between his friends and the bushes, already unbuckling his jeans. He continued down a small path. The chill of the night paired with the rising alcohol buzz sent Thomas swaying back and forth as he did his business.

Brother crouched atop tree limbs nearby. He was so close that he could smell the alcohol particles drifting through the air from the boy's breath. The child was alone. This was the perfect opportunity to begin his vengeful course. He jumped down from the trunk and crept forward.

As he zipped his pants up and fixed his belt, Thomas felt the temperature drop rapidly. The snap of a twig sent a chill down his spine faster than the cool wind could have. He twisted his head, noticing a shadow breeze by him a few feet away. The trees and bushes surrounding him engulfed the shadow as it scampered off. Thomas was not very easily frightened, and he assumed one of his friends was lurking, waiting to jump out at him when he continued back on the trail.

“Very funny, Parker. Jalen, Jace, y'all can come out now.”

Hearing no response, Thomas snuck to the left, away from the trail, planning to playfully tackle one of his buddies from behind. When he peeked through the trees to find the assailant, he froze. The gap in the tree trunks was just wide enough for Thomas to feel the hot breath coming from the two red eyes staring inches from his face. The creature let out a low, threatening snarl. Thomas tried to move. The eyes looking back at him were penetrative. The light cast from the street below began creating the shape of the monster's face. The pointed chin moved up and down as its mouth, full of razor sharp, yellow teeth took in and blew out the deepest of breaths. Its dragon-like skin protruded from the diamond-shaped cheek bones. Above the brows sat stringy wisps of black hair. Further up to its forehead, the skin was dry and cracked. When

looking closer, Thomas noticed two curling horns that seemed to have been shoved into the monster's head.

The beast's lips curved into a smile: "Perfect," he said in a rattling voice.

"What the fuck?"

Thomas's quivering response barely rung his vocal chords. He took a step back and began standing straight. The monster mirrored his movements. As it straightened its legs, its clawed toes dug into the earth. The blood-red, bone-thin legs crunched as the knees became unbent. Its fiery chest stuck out as the monster leaned back and bellowed an agonizing scream. With its head bent and torso turned ever so slightly, Thomas noticed a set of torn, grey wings sticking out like driven stakes from its upper back.

He booked it, turning and running opposite of his friends as fast as he could, branches and thorns cutting his body as he escaped for his life.

"Jalen! Parker!" He thought he might have heard responses from a distance, but it was too late to go back to them.

"Jace! Help!" He kept running. He had not known how deep the woods went because he and his friends had always stuck to the edge of the cliff.

Branch after branch tore through his clothes, and the sunken brush below slowed him by grabbing at his ankles. Thomas heard the beast bounding a few yards behind him.

"Help!" he screamed while he blindly followed the caving trunks of the forest, "Somebody! Help!"

Just as he considered ducking behind the next tree he saw and hoping it would run past him, his right leg caught a tangle of bush on the ground. The pain he felt as his weight twisted his kneecap sideways was unbearable.

Realizing that its prey had stopped, Brother's red shadow slowed its pace. He approached the boy just as he broke the last bits of twig in his entrapment.

The beast's approaching growl pooled from its throat. Thomas's nostrils burned as the scent of hot smoke slipped into his lungs. It lowered itself on all fours, its eyes locked on Thomas. Thomas slid back violently.

It lunged upward, landing on a tree branch at least twenty feet up. It snaked its body around the trunk, and Thomas saw its tail for the first time. As if the teeth weren't deadly enough, the steel rope that swung through the air ended with a daggering point. Thomas's eyes met the red holes, and the creature smiled at him with a wicked malice.

“Welcome to Hell.”

It inched its way down the tree trunk like a panther, continuing to antagonize Thomas's crippled figure. When its front claws met the forest's floor, its menacing grunts became louder. It crawled closer, bowing its neck so that its eyes were level with Thomas's. Just as the beast reached for Thomas's throat, two headlights shone onto the predator. It shrieked and bounded into the forest.

Brother sat in a tree for the rest of the night, berating himself for his poor performance. He had not known why he'd fled. Surely he hadn't been scared. They were children. He was reminded of his failure to take over the twin years ago. Father Devil and Sister were likely scoffing at him from below. If no one underneath would acknowledge his power, his only option was to prove it to the humans above.

The boys tried explaining the snarls and other noises they heard as supernatural, but the police brushed it off. Their accounts of the incident sparked a resurgence of the Legend of the

Two Devils. Conspiracy theorists ran rampant in hopes of finding the beast that the boys talked about. They even landed a few interviews on the local news, but authorities refused to address the situation more seriously. One thing was for sure, however; something might very well have found its way back to Little Rock.

Damien lived in Ferndale, a rural area just outside the suburban life of West Little Rock. He was similar to many of the other children in his 1st grade class: a bright ball of sunshine, full of energy, and, inevitably, obsessed with dinosaurs. Damien and Imani had just gotten home from the Elementary Fall Musical – in which he played the lead – on the night of September 27.

Walking through the front door with the toy from his Happy Meal, Damien turned to his mother.

“Mommy, can I stay up later since I sang so good?” Damien asked, hoping to milk his reward.

“Now, baby,” Imani said, “you promised you’d head up and get ready for bed if we stopped at McDonald’s, remember?”

“Please?” he asked, his brown eyes swimming with forced tears.

“No, Damien. You have to keep your promises. Just because it’s only September doesn’t mean Santa isn’t watching you,” Imani said.

“Okay, I’m going,” Damien moped. He crawled up the stairs on all fours. Imani smiled up at him. Passing the dining room, a cool breeze brushed her face. She turned and noticed that the window on the other side of the dining room table was wide open.

“That damned lock. Why won’t it stay shut?” After closing the window and pouring a glass of wine, she headed over to the couch to turn on the late-night news. Before sitting down, however, she thought it best to make sure Damien was settling down.

High-pitched roars were coming from his bedroom. Imani walked up the stairs and followed the hall to Damien’s room. She slowly pushed the door open.

She found him sitting on his knees in the corner of his room, dressed in his dinosaur pajamas, with a Tyrannosaurus Rex in one hand and a Pterodactyl in the other. Damien jumped when she chimed in.

“Who’s winning?” she asked.

“Well,” said Damien, “The T-Rex is a lot stronger, but he can’t reach the Pterodactyl since it flies.”

“Have you washed your face?”

“Yep.”

“Gone potty?”

“Yes.”

“Brushed your teeth?”

Hesitation.

“Damien,” Imani said, “go brush your teeth, and get in bed.”

“Alright,” said Damien, “Will you wait for me and help me finish the fight?”

“Fine, sweetheart,” she said, “But it’s gotta be quick. You need to get to sleep.”

Damien brushed his teeth for all of fifteen seconds and hustled back to his room. Imani had already picked up the T-Rex because she knew the Pterodactyl was his favorite. After a short

while of deciding who should win, the Pterodactyl swooped down and defeated the T-Rex with an air strike.

“He wins again!” Damien shouted happily.

“Alright, honey,” said Imani, “into bed.”

She put the Pterodactyl next to his head on the pillow, tucked the covers up tight, kissed him on the forehead, and walked to the door. Damien had already closed his eyes. Whether this was out of deceit or true exhaustion, she didn’t know. Nevertheless, she chuckled, flipped the switch, and went downstairs.

Brother watched the window from underneath a car in the street as the adult woman leaned down to kiss her son goodnight. He’d found his way much farther west than the initial killing spot. It was easier since there were miles of woods to hide in. He’d gotten plenty of entertainment from killing animals in the forest, but he was ready for the taste of his revenge.

After making sure the coast was clear, Damien grabbed a dinosaur from under his bed, along with his reading light that was only to be used when he was allowed fifteen minutes of a book every other night. This time, it was a Velociraptor and, of course, his Pterodactyl. They fought for only a moment. Before the Pterodactyl could make its final attack, Damien drifted to sleep.

Brother snuck to the house, thinking of a way to get in. The few mystic abilities he had underneath were of no use on earth, so he’d have to manage with his physical strength. Just as he was about to climb to the boy’s window, he noticed an even larger, open one on the bottom floor. He crept to it. He tilted the window open and jumped in. To the left were the stairs. Across the room, a sink was running from a door around the corner. Brother swiftly ascended the stairs.

When Damien woke up, his room was pitch black. The reading light had a self-timer on it to turn off after thirty minutes. He didn't know how long he'd been out, but he flipped the light back on to finish the brawl. When the light shone on the Pterodactyl lying next to him, he noticed something peculiar. The Pterodactyl was standing upright because of the furled comforter supporting it. What puzzled Damien was how the reading light shone on the Pterodactyl in such a way that the shadow cast on the wall from the figurine stood all the way up to the ceiling. The wings expanded across the entire wall, and the shadow's head towered over Damien. At first, he was intrigued. But then, the shadow twitched, and Damien saw two red dots where the eyes would have been.

“Mom! Mom!” Damien yelled. The toy Pterodactyl stayed in place, but the shadow grew larger, coming towards Damien.

“Mom! Mom! MOOOMM!” Damien called again.

Brother heard footsteps coming up the stairs and hid behind the door. When the mother opened it, he slipped out faster than lightning.

Imani flipped on the light to see Damien staring at the wall, frozen in fear. Neither noticed the brush of wind move into the hallway.

“Damien? Damien! What is the matter? Honey, are you alright?” She held Damien in her arms.

“Mom, there was – I – I saw... There was a Pterodactyl in my room. A real one. It came towards me and disappeared when you opened the door,” Damien said.

“Oh, Damien, you were just having a bad dream, baby,” said Imani, “Come on, now, put the toys away. It's okay, baby. You're okay.”

Damien stared in disbelief as his mom kissed his head, turned the lights off, and closed the door. He flipped the reading light back on and scanned the room. No sign of the Pterodactyl.

Imani poured one more glass of wine, grabbed the throw blanket off of the back of the couch, adjusted the TV's volume, and flipped the lamp off.

After waiting for what felt like hours, Brother emerged from the guest bedroom in the hallway. He'd wanted to make sure the mother had gone to sleep. His slithering body inched toward the stairs to peek down and see if she was there.

Around three in the morning, Imani awoke at the sound of the ceiling squeaking from footsteps upstairs. The glare from the commercial on the television gave enough light for her to set her glasses aside, get out from underneath the blanket, and stretch before heading to her bedroom. Just as she began hoisting herself up off the couch, the footsteps came closer to the stairs.

"Damien? Are you awake, honey?" she called.

When she heard deep, hollow breathing, she thought maybe Damien was sleepwalking. He'd had bouts before, so she thought it best to let it take its course. She nestled back into the cushions.

She knew that Damien was close when the creaking of the fifth stair sounded. Thinking she saw movement, she rubbed her eyes to try getting a better look. When her vision cleared up again, she noticed what should have been Damien's small foot. Instead, her eyes widened as the leg walking down the stairs pulsed. She was looking at a blood-red ankle attached to a hairy, clawed, mud-ridden foot. She covered her mouth before her squeal of terror could escape her lips. The beast continued down the stairs, and Imani reached over and switched on the lamp. The

beast, apparently startled by the illumination, jumped, and, losing his footing, tumbled down the rest of the stairs.

It looked at Imani once it regained its composure. Imani stared into two scorching pits of Hell as the creature's eyes locked onto her. For a moment, Imani was terrified. Then, she realized the monster look just as confused as her. It stared blankly at her as if it forgot what to do next.

The beast shook its head and suddenly spun and bounded up the stairs, letting loose an excruciating roar and shaking the entire house. Its tail lagged behind it, the steel beam whipping to the right and stabbing through the wall as it moved with the creature like a dog on a leash.

"Damien!" she screamed.

She took step after step to get to her child's room. Terror seized her muscles when she noticed Damien's bedroom door wide open. She crept towards the entry. When she got to the doorway, the monster was standing over Damien, who was looking right back at it. Damien turned to his mother shakily.

"I told you there was a Pterodactyl in my room, Mommy," he said.

"Damien," she said, quaking, "don't move."

"Mommy," said Damien, "I'm scared. I don't think I like real Pterodactyls."

"Quiet," she responded, "Don't move a muscle."

The monster's throat purred with intensity. Then, the small chirps turned into growls. Imani dove towards Damien's bed as quickly as she could. Before she took two steps, the beast thrust its waist around, swinging its club of an arm and landing a blow to her stomach..

Imani's head pounded against a stud in the wall, but she was up in a moment. She turned the light on and lunged at the monster, knocking him off balance just as he was reaching for

Damien. Damien, wishing the nightmare would disappear, picked up his Pterodactyl and threw it into the face of the beast.

Brother was shocked at the reactions from the humans. He didn't know what was going wrong. Why had they not covered in fear? He saw that the mother had picked up the lamp and raised it over her head. Before she could execute the move, Brother jumped over the bed and crashed through the upstairs window.

After the second attack, the police began to take the matter more seriously. With two similar descriptions of the same creature arising twice in only a few weeks, Little Rock townspeople became wary of what was going on. Imani swore that she saw the devil that night. Signs around town, from billboards to stapled papers, urged the entertaining search for the beast, reading, "BEWARE: THE LEGEND LIVES." Even churches took advantage of the events to influence their parishioners as welcome boards changed from "Have you found God?" to "Will the devil find you before you find God?"

Brother attacked for the third time on the night of Halloween.

The houses lining the streets were set with skeleton bones and jack-o-lanterns in preparation for the evening's trick-or-treaters. Jude had just finished her homework and was about to start getting ready for the Halloween party. She lived in the Heights, just beyond Midtown Little Rock. Her parents traveled often, and she was fortunate that their jobs had taken both of them away for the weekend.

As she sat at her vanity, streaks of sun behind the gray sky beamed into her second-story window. The sound of the thin twigs scraping against the brick house distracted her from her

task of applying her first layer of makeup, so she turned on her radio. The Halloween station was already queued. Oingo Boingo's "Flesh n' Blood" played as Jude applied the white mascara for her vampiress costume.

Jude finished up the last of her makeup and turned to her closet for her costume. She almost jumped out of her fresh face paint when she noticed the dull shadow standing on her balcony.

"Miles! Cut it out," she said, as her boyfriend undid the latch to the balcony door and hopped inside.

"My God," said Miles, "you look terrifying."

Miles was dressed in skinny jeans and a white button-down shirt with none of the buttons fastened. He wore a spiked collar, had dyed his blonde hair black, and surrounded his eyes with eyeshadow.

"Like my costume?" he asked, bringing Jude in for a hug.

"First of all," said Jude, "I've only done the makeup for my outfit. Don't be rude. Also, what the hell is this? It's not Anne Rice's vampire and Mary Shelley's goth high schooler. How is *this* Frankenstein's monster?"

"Relax, Juju," Miles said, "We're not freshmen anymore. We don't have to look nice for our parents. Tonight will be fun."

"I know it'll be fun," said Jude, "*I'm* putting on the party. Just let me get ready and we can have the group over before everyone else shows up."

"Oooookaayyyyy mmmmaaaassterrrr," he replied in an attempt at a spooky voice.

As the time came for the early arrivals to show up, Jude and Miles poured themselves the first cups of the spiked punch and sat at the kitchen bar. Friends eventually filtered in wearing

their best attempts at clever or scandalous costumes. More people showed up, and the group divvied out into a welcoming spread to allocate partygoers into different spaces. The party went on as any other typical high school event, with some kids getting too drunk and spending the remainder of the night behind the bushes, others getting friendly enough to get any interested party upstairs into a supposed guest bedroom, and the rest awkwardly drinking to keep up the high of ruthless conformity.

Brother had backtracked his path eastward. Jumping from tree to tree along his search, he eyed a house appearing to be full of children. Brother would have a field day with these little ones.

There was one attendant in particular that pulled perhaps a bit too much attention toward himself. Marty was not the most popular kid in school, but he took every chance he saw to catch the attention of as many people as possible. He walked through the front door dressed as Big Bird from Sesame Street. There's no doubt that he chose the costume as a conversation piece, but no one even acknowledged his arrival.

Throughout the night, Marty tried his best to tie himself into any conversation that he could. He walked through the party, refilling his Halloween punch rather quickly, causing his louder side to come out. When a boy finally confronted Marty and hinted that he should calm it down, Marty's face reddened as he walked to the backyard.

Marty's absence went unnoticed. As he gazed into the backyards of the surrounding houses by Jude's party, Marty saw slipping shadows in the distance. He pulled off the Big Bird head to get a better look, but his bobbing head mixed with the hazy fog circling his brain prevented him from reacting to what was coming towards him. The shadow tip-toed on a fence

and continued along towards Jude's backyard. When it reached her fence it jumped down, landed in the grass, and met Marty's eyes in one fell swoop.

"Boy," said Marty, "that's one stellar costume."

"Quiet," the beast whispered.

It only took a moment for Marty to realize what he was looking at. He broke the staring contest, turned around, and lunged for the door, but the beast's claws were around his neck before he could scream for help.

Brother had made his first kill. He could only improve from there. He needed to wreak as much havoc as he could with all of the kids inside.

If someone noticed the splattered blood on the outside of the glass door, they probably would have thought it was part of the holiday decorations.

Jude had not seen Miles most of the night. She had no interest in sticking around the dirty jokes and beer-chugging of his friends. When she saw him talking to a group of people on the couch, she waltzed over to join the conversation.

After finishing with his first victim, Brother found his way to the front of the house. Another upstairs window gave room for potential. The swinging doors of a balcony allowed the curtains inside to flow with the wind. Brother could infiltrate the kid-ridden house without a problem.

"It's not just the blood that gets them going," Jude heard as she drew nearer, "they love the theatrics of it: forming a connection and finding the perfect moment to sink their teeth into their 'one true love's' neck." Everyone in the front room chuckled as the boy motioned to the girl next to him and pretended to bite her neck.

“Jude,” the same boy said, “you’re the one dressed as a vampire. When are you planning on drinking Miles’s blood?”

“All right, all right,” Miles cut in, “Take it easy on the vampiress of the house,” he looked at Jude and winked.

“More punch, Jude?” Miles asked, grabbing her waist and leading her out of the room. They walked through the party and arrived at the bottom of the stairs.

“Miles!” Jude said in a whispered shout. “The party is still packed. They’ll all see us walk up there.”

“Vampiress, I only want you to fix my eyeshadow. Follllloowww meeee,” said Miles, swaying up the stairs with his arms outstretched like Frankenstein’s monster.

When they got to Jude’s room, Miles hopped on the bed, staring at Jude with his deep, blue eyes.

“Hang on. I think my makeup is running too,” Jude said.

Jude walked into the bathroom connected to her bedroom and shut the door. She looked at herself in the mirror, fixing her costume and checking her makeup. She heard a clambering outside the door and prayed that there would not be a broken vase when she walked downstairs. She entered her bedroom, but Miles had disappeared. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed something that made her stop. The shadow standing on the left side of her balcony was the perfect outline of Frankenstein’s monster. Towering, arms wide open, and low grumbles pushing themselves into the room.

“Very funny, Miles,” said Jude, “C’mon, let’s just go back downstairs.” The shadow didn’t move.

“Miles, let’s go. I’m not gonna wait on you forever.” Still, no budge.

Jude took a step towards the balcony to drag Miles back to the party but quickly found that that wasn't going to be the case. Miles was hunched on the ground, not able to make a noise. His breath had been knocked out of him. Jude glanced back to the shadow. It attempted to push her balcony door open, but it simply collided head first into a glass panel. The scuffle between the beast and Miles had knocked a chair into the door's path. The monster almost looked embarrassed to have walked into a closed door, but it regained its composure and stepped inside.

"Help!" Jude screamed, but the music below may have been too loud for others to hear. "Somebody! Help! Oh, Miles, no. Oh my god, Miles."

The cool blue of the fall night had darkened to a blood shade as the demon's shoulders engulfed the doorway. Before Jude could think about running out of her bedroom, the beast sprung past her and blocked her escape.

"Help!" Jude howled hopelessly.

The creature's scream sounded like the only thing in the world. When it let loose its roar, Jude could not even hear the ringing of her ears.

Jude's back slid down the wall like ice on granite, and she buried her head between her knees. Trying to snap out of it, she stood back up and looked at the demon in an attempt to face her fear. Her mind was changed when the beast shoved its sharp fist into her abdomen. She fell back to the floor, writhing in pain.

Brother had weakened both of the kids enough to finish them and leave, but his sudden success made him feel more powerful. He heard a group of footsteps running up the stairs and figured he could take a few more with him. The door swung open, and a handful of partygoers stood in front of him. Brother counted five, though there could have been more in the hallway. He again wondered why they faced him with such courage. Were they not aware of his power?

Suddenly, a sickness surged through Brother. The humans staring back at him held their ground with confidence. What had Brother done wrong that had prevented him from instilling fear into those he met? He couldn't even possess a small child successfully; how would he triumph over stronger, seemingly fearless kids? The children stood menacingly in their costumes. Brother was reminded of the times Father Devil and Sister had looked down on him for his failure. He thought of the kids as just another version of his family. They could not be frightened by his efforts. Before the kids could take another step towards the devil from the legend, Brother lunged for the balcony, slithered down the side of the house, and disappeared into the night.

He ran until he couldn't see any houses. He wanted to get as far away from humans as possible. Perhaps Father Devil had been right. Perhaps Sister had earned her position of power because the power was already within her. Brother felt foolish to think he could prove himself by going against the rules of his family. He decided it might be best to return to them underneath and accept any punishment they might force upon him. His biggest concern now was that, because of his lack of tracking expertise, he didn't know if he'd be able to find his way back to the opening. He considered how long it had taken him to get this far. If he couldn't find his way back to the airfield, it'd only be a matter of time before he'd have to face more humans.

“Brother” Reflection

“Brother” is one of the stories that changed most from my original thesis proposal. With this premise, I sought to utilize the trope of monsters that took hold in the 1900s: *Frankenstein*, *IT*, and a personal favorite, *The Exorcist* are influences that pushed me to write “Brother.”

In writing, I recognized how the horror genre in cinema – like *Halloween* – brought horrifying characters to life. The idea of a monster in chase of a person or family influenced “Brother.” This story also gave me the opportunity to lean into bits of comedic relief seen so often in horror cinema. In my research with Professor Viswanathan, we discussed how one of the biggest aspects missing from earlier drafts of “Brother” was motivation. By adding Brother’s backstory and making him the protagonist, I set the scene while also learning how better to shape my writing as a whole.

Equally important to drawing on horror tropes from the late 20th and early 21st centuries in this story is the historical accuracy. I chose to use Little Rock, my hometown, to experiment with a realistic aspect. I chose the Sneed Tornado of 1929 and the American Airlines Flight 1420 crash of 1999 to build on. I wanted to make sure my story was as historically accurate as possible. I contacted the William J. Clinton Presidential Library for help. They listed a number of sources to turn to, of whom archivist at The Butler Center for Arkansas Studies Steve Teske, state historian and Director of Arkansas State Archives Dr. David Ware, and processing archivist at the Center for Arkansas History and Culture Emily Summers were able to provide me with wonderful resources and explanations that helped me critique my story for accuracy.

This was an exciting story to write because of my interest in portraying the terrors of an other-worldly being. Throughout this process, one of the key takeaways has been learning how to expand on my writing.

Late-Night Television

“This doesn’t actually work, does it?”

“Niko, for the last time, it will. It’s like a Ouija board. Just do what it says.”

“Well, what if I don’t wanna?”

“So, you’re scared now? C’mon, don’t back out now.”

“I’m not scared, Lewis. Hand it over.”

Niko, oblivious to the manipulative being that had overtaken Lewis, stubbornly accepted the case in which Lewis had placed the silver item. It resembled an enlarged laser pointer: a smooth sphere connecting two cone-shaped ends.

“Whatever you say. Just use it as soon as you can and give it to someone else.” The color in Lewis’s eyes twitched ever so slightly as he spoke, “Use it, then pass it on.”

“What happened when you used it?”

“I’m not supposed to tell. Look, Niko, it’s different for everybody. You don’t know what it tells me, and I don’t know what it tells you. The secret is all part of the fun. See you tomorrow, okay?”

“Yeah. Bye Lewis.”

Niko slipped the case into his backpack and ran up Lewis’s basement stairs. Sifting through the maze of leaves along the sidewalk, Niko made a game of avoiding the crunch of brown foliage beneath him.

A bell rang in Niko’s left ear as the paperboy sped past him on the sidewalk.

“Morning, Niko!” the shrill voice yelled.

Niko zipped his windbreaker up to his neck and chased after the cyclist. He never did beat the paperboy home when he spent the night with Lewis, but he loved the challenge. Niko had looked up to the paperboy since the first time he met him.

“I’m in seventh grade,” the boy had told Niko.

“I’m only in fourth. What’s your name?” Niko asked.

“Only seventh graders know my name.” Since then, Niko had been determined to catch the paperboy and ask him his name again.

“Not this time, Niko!” he yelled. “See you next week!” the voice mushroomed as the bike continued into the distance. Niko thought that after he used the pointer, he could befriend the paperboy by giving it to him.

He continued the walk, passing corner shops, patches of yellow and red trees, and the train tracks where Mr. Nick lived. Lewis told Niko that before he came to town, Mr. Nick would dress up as Santa Claus every year and take pictures with the kids at the shopping mall. That was, until last year. Mr. Nick grew senile and angry. Rumor had it that he thought the trees around his house were talking to him. Now, he stayed inside, and the only way people knew he was still alive was because his bedroom light turned off every night at 10 o’clock.

Once he saw and confirmed that there was no train nearing, Niko skipped along, making sure to avoid any footholds between the metal beams of the tracks. As he rounded the corner, he spotted his father getting out of a car in his driveway.

“Dad!” he yelled, and quickened his pace from a skip to a sprint.

His father turned with a grin. His white shirt was wrinkled on the side that he held his pilot’s hat against himself with his elbow, and the black tie led to a clean-shaven, sharp jaw. Niko’s midnight, bowl-cut hair looked just like his father’s.

“Lookin’ sharp, champ,” his dad said as Niko reached the edge of the driveway. Niko ran to him and almost jumped through his father’s torso.

Squirring out of his dad’s hug, he asked, “How was it this time? Where’d you go? Korea? Mexico? Oh, I bet it was Mexico!”

“Not this time, buddy,” said his dad, “Just a short weekend. How about you, though? Mom tells me you scored nicely in the archery competition.”

“Almost perfect in all three categories!” said Niko.

“There you go, kid,” answered his dad, “C’mon, let’s go see what she’s up to.”

When they went inside, Niko’s mother stared unblinking at her computer screen.

“Um, Anna, honey,” said Niko’s dad, “Is extra steam one of the ingredients for whatever is on the stove?”

Anna looked up as if she only noticed their arrival from her husband’s voice.

“Oh, goodness. Jin, could you turn the heat down and stir it?”

She watched as Jin took over dinner preparation, then turned her face back to the screen.

“What are you looking at, Mommy?” Niko asked.

“Nothing, sweetheart. Go on and wash up for dinner.”

Niko planned to set his backpack on the couch on his way to the bathroom, fearing that leaving it in the kitchen might result in his parents’ finding the pointer. Although, he thought, his parents never checked his backpack, so it might have been more suspicious to put it elsewhere. He dismissed both ideas and kept it to his back up the stairs.

Jin had had a long day at the airfield, but it was not so draining that he didn’t realize something serious was up when he walked in and saw Anna. He’d kept his cool, knowing that

Niko's curiosity should not be fueled. When he heard the bathroom door click shut, he stopped stirring the pot, walked over to the dining room table, and leaned over Anna's shoulder.

"What's up?"

"It looks like that game has gone international." Anna's voice turned into hollow breaths as Jin's hand met her shoulder. "What kind of person would create these things? How could you put this into the world?"

"Honey," Jin replied, "It's just like any other 'evil' game. It's a shtick. These brands make up products and put them out there as a placebo. It's all a scheme to make more money."

"I don't know, Jin. I don't even know if calling it a game is doing it justice. Some of these accounts show people actually believing they don't have control of themselves. The articles I've read say the tubes used are cursed, like relics used in a Black Mass. I really think these things could be harmful. There's talk of aliens spreading the pointers around the world to possess people for what they say is 'A mission for the greater good.' What if Niko were to get his hands on one of these?"

"Aliens? Anna, the boy is ten. I doubt he and his friends even know about the pointers. Plus, it's all theories. This game is new. Even if it is serious, the media's gonna blow it all out of proportion."

"But how can we be sure? How do we know Niko hasn't already heard of it? What if he's already done it?"

"We can sit him down and talk about it. Anyways, I still think it's all a load of baloney. I mean, seriously? You shine a red light on the wall and the lights create an image that's supposed to mean something. Do you really think that's something worth worrying about?"

Jin was surprised that Anna's facial expression had not changed.

“Jin, I know it seems out of the ordinary, but people are going missing. This... this game... this ritual... Whatever it is has convinced people to do things I couldn't imagine. It wouldn't hurt to keep an eye on Niko. He spent the entire weekend with the Wilders. Lewis is a troublemaker. I don't want him giving Niko any ideas.”

Upstairs, Niko stared at his hand holding the oversized pointer in the mirror. Lewis's brother had given it to Lewis and made a point of ensuring Lewis would pass it on.

Lewis told Niko, “Shine it on your bedroom wall. Twist it back and forth and wait for a response. After a while, it'll start forming words or pictures or whatever it feels like. When it does that, do whatever it tells you.”

Niko observed the laser pointer. It was oddly shaped. Both sides looked like the tip of a cone-shaped missile.

For now, Niko thought it best not to try anything, even if it did end up being a fluke. He stowed the pointer back into the box Lewis gave him, hid it in his closet, and headed to the kitchen for dinner.

Niko quickly noticed that his parents had at least seemed to have forgotten about whatever they were discussing earlier. When his dad placed the steaming pot on the dining room table, his mother slowly closed her computer screen and set it on the chair next to her.

“What'd you make, Mom?”

“It's new, honey. Try it.” Then turning to Jin, “When's your next flight out?”

“I've got until Tuesday afternoon. I was thinking of taking Niko to Dansen Square tomorrow.”

Eyes peeking from his brow then lifting his chin to prevent his mouthful from dribbling out, Niko smiled.

Jin continued: “What time will you be off? Can you meet us there?”

“I’ve gotta stay a few hours later than usual,” said Anna. “The other pharmacist is leaving early, so I’m closing. I can be there around 5:30. Can you guys wait until then?”

“Well, that’s up to Niko here. What say you?”

“I guess so,” Niko teased, his mother responding with a playful tickle to his side.

By the end of the meal, Niko had forgotten about his parents’ weird behavior. He’d even let the pointer out of his mind for the majority of the evening, only to notice the box when he opened his closet while grabbing his pajamas. He knew it was too late to test it out. It would have to wait until after school tomorrow.

Niko didn’t usually have trouble sleeping, but that night, he woke up three different times to the sound of clanging. Like metal tapping a countertop, the noise rang through his bedroom. The first two times, he fell right back to sleep. After the third time, he wondered if it was part of a dream. Reaching over to turn a light on, the ringing continued. When he pulled the string on his lamp, the noise ceased. It had not been loud enough to mark where exactly it was coming from. Niko assumed it might have been a windchime in the distance, though the thought was forced in an attempt to convince himself it wasn’t in his room. If he had seen the red light sifting through his closet doors just before he switched his lamp back off, he might have thought otherwise.

“So, how’d it go?” Lewis asked at lunch the next day.

“What? Oh, I haven’t done it yet.” Niko cut Lewis off before he could lash back. “I’ll use it today. I promise. Then I’ll give it to whoever else.”

“No, Niko. You don’t just give it to anyone. They have to be ready.”

“What?”

Lewis was growing agitated. “Just use it and choose carefully who you give it to. I chose you. Choose someone better.”

The school was nestled between Niko’s and Lewis’s houses, so Niko’s walk home was even shorter than the day before. When he wasn’t looking around for birds, his legs pulled him faster towards the object in his closet.

After looking both ways and approaching the tracks, Niko noticed something peculiar. Mr. Nick’s front room curtains were open, and there was a shadow dancing in the window. Niko froze in the middle of the tracks, staring at the figure. The shadow’s hands twitched back and forth as the fingers opened and bent away from Niko, gesturing him to come closer. Niko stared for what felt like minutes. The shadow’s movements willed Niko nearer. Just as he was about to take a step towards the house, a train horn screeched through his ears. He turned to see the train nearing only a few hundred feet away. He bolted to the other side of the tracks and kept running until he rounded the corner to his home. He made it to his driveway at the exact moment that his father opened the garage.

“Why are you out of breath, champ?” Jin asked his son.

“Running –” a deep breath, “across the tracks.”

“Niko, you know you’re supposed to be careful over there. If you don’t watch yourself, you’ll have to start taking the long way home.”

“I know,” Niko heaved in answer, “I’ll be more careful. I promise.”

“Good. Well, now that you’re home, I thought we might be able to sneak in a visit to the airport to watch the planes land. We’ll have plenty of time to get ice cream afterwards and meet your mother at the park.”

“Okay!”

“You don’t have a lot of homework, do you?”

“No, no, let’s go right now!” Niko spoke before thinking about the more important task at hand. He had to use the laser pointer.

“Wait, dad!” he said, “I need to go put my backpack in my room.”

“Don’t worry about that, son, I’ll make sure the car stays locked,” Jin said with a wink.

Niko thought quickly. He needed to get the laser pointer.

“Can I just run in really quick to grab my binoculars?”

“Okay, Niko, but hurry. We don’t wanna miss the action!”

Niko rushed into the house and flew up the stairs. He reached under his bed, felt for metal, then shoved the binoculars into his backpack. He walked over to the closet and slid the door open. He wrapped the pointer in a dirty shirt on his floor, dropped it in his backpack, and bounded down the stairs.

When they arrived at the airport, Jin and Niko began the trek to the landing strip. It was chilly out, but Niko’s blue zip-up jacket prevented the wind from ravaging his skin. It had sprinkled on their way to the airport, and the fence surrounding the landing strip dripped with rust-infused beads. Worms swam from the dirt on their own journey along the fence line. Workers on the airfield beckoned at an approaching plane.

“Hey, pal,” Jin said as they neared their regular spot, “Mr. Frederick is gonna watch with you while I run inside to grab some paperwork. I’ll be in and out, I promise.”

“Okay.” The second syllable trailed off as Niko watched the first plane of the day screeching down on the landing strip. Mr. Frederick approached from a distance. He liked Mr. Frederick. Their shared affinity for birds made their meetings more exciting. They’d take turns

spotting birds and planes, and if they were lucky, they'd be able to compare the speed of both at the same time.

“Alright. Well, you keep an eye on Mr. Frederick, will you?” Jin joked.

Niko chuckled but kept his focus, making sure to not miss any comings or goings of planes. Mr. Frederick walked past Jin with a pat on the back and approached the fence next to Niko.

“How's it goin', Niko?”

The mustard-yellow cap covered his balding head, fooling anyone who didn't know him into thinking the silver sides led to anything else. His green rain jacket stayed sealed from a scarf of a slightly darker color. If Niko had looked into his eyes, he'd have noticed the same twitching from Lewis.

“Hey Mr. Frederick. I'm good. Seen any close calls today?”

“No, no. They've all been some pretty nice lands. No trouble yet. Say, you gotcha some binoculars? The private jets have been comin' in and out on the far side. See? Right over there. I spotted some hawks on the horizon, but nothing getting close to the planes.”

Niko squinted in an attempt to spot the jets across the field. He bent down and grabbed his binoculars. One of the lenses got caught on the opened flap and turned his backpack upside down. He quickly offered the binoculars to Mr. Frederick, hoping he'd not seen the pointer.

“Whatcha got there?” Mr. Frederick's eyes widened at the sight of the silver beam. “Say, that isn't one of them old pointers, is it, Niko?”

Niko panicked. If Mr. Frederick told his dad about the pointer, Niko could get into trouble.

“Oh,” said Niko, “it's just a toy I'm borrowing from a friend.”

“It looks an awful lot like those things in the news. What kinda toy is it?”

“A... uh... It’s a spaceship from a movie.”

“Oh yeah? What movie?”

Besides his parents, Mr. Frederick was probably the one he trusted the most. Still, Lewis had scared Niko into keeping to himself.

“It’s a new movie. I bet you haven’t heard of it.”

Mr. Frederick’s demeanor changed. He turned to face Niko.

“Niko, use it. You’ve got to pass it on.”

“Wait,” said Niko, “You know about these?”

“Sure. Old people can have fun too, you know,” laughed Mr. Frederick. “A couple airport employees passed one around. I used it a few days ago and gave it to my niece. She’s got all of her friends playing the game, too.”

A sense of excitement lifted Niko’s confusion.

“Gee, I didn’t realize so many people were playing the game. What should I do?”

“Use it,” said Mr. Frederick, “but take it away from here. You have to keep the secret yourself. I’ve already got mine,” Mr. Frederick winked.

Niko picked up the pointer and ran to a gap between a line of forest a few yards from the fence. Mr. Frederick eyed him as Niko ventured off. He squatted, looked at the silver baton, and twisted it on both sides in opposite directions. The orb in the middle split open, shooting red streaks of light. With Niko holding the pointer in front of him from either side, the laser shone onto dead, wet leaves in front of his feet. He scanned the laser across the tree line, waiting for a response. The stretched lasers pixelated into a square. Within the square were individual, fuzzy red squares. The inside slowly began melting away as the emptiness outlined words onto the

ground: *Welcome, Niko. I wish you had come sooner. We seek those who will pass the pointer on quickly. You should have listened to Lewis.*

“Niko!” Jin yelled, a few hundred feet away. “Niko!” Niko saw that his father was not yet close enough, ignored the calls, and looked back to the ground.

The square was riddled with small font to fit the words. *Flip to channel 203 tonight and await my arrival. We will meet, and you will understand.* The red light disappeared, the pointer shifted shut, and crunching leaves came closer. Niko picked up the laser pointer, hid it in his waistband, and turned to Jin.

“Niko. Why didn’t you answer me?”

“Sorry. Mr. Frederick had to leave, and I started tracking a hawk that flew into the trees.”

“Well,” said Jin, “come on. Let’s go meet Mom at the park.”

“Hey, Niko,” Jin said, after a few laps around the square, “how about we squeeze in an ice cream trip before going home.”

“Oh, Jin,” said Anna, “it’s much too chilly for ice cream.”

“Funnel cakes?”

Niko’s smile fired to the sides of his face at Jin’s proposition.

There was no line for funnel cakes at the corner of the park, so they were on their walk home with powdered fingers and lips in no time. When they crossed over the train tracks, Niko again noticed Mr. Nick’s house. Niko could see the silhouette in the same window as earlier. It also looked like a television was illuminating the shadowed room. Red light flashed in unison behind the silhouette. *Just like the red light from the pointer,* Niko thought.

Before bed, Niko worried about what he'd gotten himself into. On one hand, even Mr. Frederick had played the game. Then again, Niko himself had at least heard of the stories in the news. Maybe that was what his parents were whispering about earlier. He knew his mom was a suspicious person, and if she found out he had a pointer, he'd feel worse for having kept it from her. His racing thoughts came to a halt as sleep took over.

He awoke to an iron puddle of blood sitting in his throat. His chapped lips felt like the icy burn from a jump in the pool after soaking in the hot tub. It was not until he sat up to check his alarm clock that he noticed the rest of his body was coated in sweat. It was 3:39 a.m. *Flip to channel 203 tonight and await my arrival*, he remembered the pointer writing. Soon enough, his child instincts got the best of him. There was no way he'd be able to fall back asleep before seeing that TV.

His feet were feathers as he crept past his parents' bedroom. The television was in the living room, just to the left of the front door. Both the kitchen and his parents' office separated the bedrooms from the rest of the house, so as long as he kept the volume low, he would be able to get it over with.

In the darkness, he grabbed the remote and crossed his legs in front of the TV. When the TV blazed to life and the theme song of a soap opera flooded into the living room, Niko's finger moved like lightning to turn the volume down. He pressed the "Guide" button on the remote and scrolled down to channel 203. He watched a horizontal red line move vertically downwards. After it escaped to the bottom of the screen, another line started at the top. When this one reached the middle of the screen, another began. The lines continued splitting others' solo moments in half and speeding up as more followed. Eventually the screen was fully engulfed in dark red.

A black dot appeared front and center. It grew. Niko noticed that it had grown arms and legs as it neared. Just before the head and legs reached the tips of the television, the zoom-in stopped. The faceless figure stood unmoving as Niko watched, frozen. The figure darted left and disappeared from the screen. At the same time, the bushes outside of the window behind the TV flowed sideways. Then, there was a light rapping at the door. Niko slid under the coffee table.

The golden deadbolt turned, and the house welcomed the creaking of the door's slow, steady glide. No one entered; at least, not from what Niko could see. He remained breathless as a statue.

Something whispered near the entryway. Niko couldn't identify the voice or what it had said, but it frightened him.

Niko.

Niko, he thought. It's saying my name. Just like the pointer knew my name.

Niko. Come out. Your time has arrived.

Niko remembered his encounters with those who'd played the game. Everyone had nothing but positive things to say about it. Maybe he had nothing to be afraid of. He slid out from underneath the table.

"H – Hello?"

Not there. Here.

Niko stared before himself but into space. There was no one in the room with him.

"Who are you?"

I'm here to help you, Niko. You've got a responsibility much bigger than your life here.

"What do you mean? I don't need help."

Yes, Niko, you all need help. Our master knows how to give everyone help. The rest of his subjects and I are weak. We need your help to make us stronger.

“Why me? What are you even talking about?”

We need hosts to allow us to carry out our duty. Our master is leading us on a journey towards populating other earths. He has the power to take over the masses. In due time, we will have enough hosts to begin our reformation.

“That can’t be true. Why would you tell me about it?”

As Niko finished asking the question, a gust ran through his nostrils. This was not like any other swift wind, however. The air was thick, with a steaming temperature. It burned his sinuses.

Because you can’t stop it.

Niko was frozen again, but not to remain hidden; he couldn’t move. Something had possessed him. Something was talking in his head, and it wasn’t him. His muscles tensed.

“No! Get out of me!” Niko yelled. He unwillingly bit his tongue at the outburst.

Quiet, boy. You’ll wake your parents. If they find out what’s happening, I’ll kill you immediately. That’s a promise.

Niko tried squirming away, but there was no escaping the power that controlled him from within. He tried closing his eyes, but the lids stayed open. His eyes rolled backwards, feeling like they were being pushed aside. When they fixated themselves back into position, Niko’s vision was entirely new. The refracting light from the television made the entire room red, but when his body moved towards the light switch and illuminated the living room, everything was still red. Orange-red television screen. Bright red couches. Blood-red wooden floors.

“Niko?” Jin asked from the kitchen. Niko’s yell was successful in waking his parents. They stood staring at Niko with eyes wide open. Anna examined from behind Jin.

Speak to them, Niko. But remember, don’t say anything about me.

Niko senses dissipated, as if the being had left him. He observed his surroundings, realizing that his parents were awaiting an answer. He couldn’t tell them what happened. The being said it would kill Niko.

“I – I’m sorry,” Niko quickly managed. “I guess I was sleepwalking. I woke up from my scream.”

“Niko” Anna asked, “are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, mom. I promise.” Niko’s voice quivered.

“Hey champ,” Jin cut in, “how come the television was on?” Both parents had discussed the whole pointer situation that night before going to bed, and it was evident that they were not convinced of what Niko was telling them.

“I don’t know, Daddy. I guess I turned it on in my sleep.”

“Well, who were you talking to?” Jin responded.

“Dad, I don’t know. I just woke up right before you guys came in.”

If Anna and Jin had known about the television, there’d be no doubt that they’d find Niko’s pointer. He was terrified. Since his fear influenced such a convincing alibi, they only spoke with him for a moment longer before sending him back to bed.

Very good, Niko, the voice said as Niko’s body walked upstairs. Tomorrow, we’ll have our fun. I sure could use some sleep.

Whatever was inside Niko wasn’t lying. When he shut his bedroom door behind him, he was asleep on the floor before he could even think about making it to his bed.

Niko awoke in a daze, hardly remembering what had happened a few hours before. He pushed himself up from the floor and walked into the bathroom to start getting ready for school. He peed, brushed his teeth, and upon wiping the eye crust away with balled fists, was horrified to see the mirror. His eyelids twitched while the irises switched from natural brown to jet black.

Have a nice sleep, Niko?

Everything from the early morning flashed through Niko's head. What would his parents say when he walked downstairs? The irises quit flashing and stayed black.

Remember, Niko, you can't say anything to your parents, or you'll die. Their time will come soon enough. You must pass the pointer on to the next subject.

Niko tried responding to whatever was inside him, but his eyes had returned to normal, and the being seemed to have disappeared again. He left the bathroom to get dressed and head downstairs. He arrived at the kitchen table to his mother's face in her laptop again and his father's the same on the kitchen television. Anna was reading more articles about the pointers, while Jin watched the latest news report on them. Jin looked up first.

"Hey, buddy, how are you doing?" Not a 'good morning.' Niko had expected his parents to be acting cautiously.

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Anna joined in. "Do you remember anything from last night?"

"No, Mom, I was sleepwalking. I woke up right before you both walked out of your room; I already told you."

Jin was hesitant to hammer his son with questions.

"Well, maybe you ought to stay home today. You could be sick."

“I promise, I’m fine,” said Niko. “I’ve sleepwalked before. Why is now any different?”

Anna stood up. “Niko, honey, I’m sure you’ve heard of those pointers going around. You’d tell us if something was wrong, wouldn’t you?”

Niko remembered what the being inside him had said.

“I know about them, but that’s it. Why would sleepwalking mean anything about the pointer?” Feeling the pointer pressed against his lower back from the bottom of his backpack, Niko wondered why he didn’t try changing the subject.

“What do you know about them?” asked Anna.

“Why are you asking me so much? What does it even matter?”

Jin walked to Niko from the TV.

“Niko, no need to get defensive. We just want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine!” Niko turned to storm out the door for his walk to school. As he rounded the island in the middle of the kitchen, his backpack swayed to one side, and upon readjusting, the metal pointer brushed the island. Both Anna and Jin walked toward Niko.

“Niko,” said Jin, “what’s in your backpack?” He reached for the bag attached to Niko.

“Dad, help! It’s got me! It’s –” Niko started, but the being took hold and cut in. Niko’s voice changed from the fourth-grade boy to a growl.

“No! Stay back! He stays with me. Stay back,” the voice spoke. Niko tried pushing past the forces binding him, but whatever it was was much too powerful.

Anna yelped from behind Jin, who tried to stay calm.

“Niko, if you’re in there, listen. It’s me, Dad. You’re gonna be alright. If you can hear me, try your best to relax and see if you can say something.” Niko’s shadowed eyes glared at his father.

“Can you wrap him up or something?” Anna asked, “I think we should –”

Niko’s body leaped towards Jin. He collided with his father, sending them both to the kitchen tile. His attempts at stopping the force within him were hopeless. Whatever was inside him was strong: mentally and physically. Niko hoisted himself up, arms raised above his head. Anna and Jin tried grabbing his arms to subdue him. He swung a fist into Anna’s stomach, took two steps back, and stretched at Jin. His palm landed on Jin’s cheek bone.

“Jin, we’ve got to stop him!” Anna yelled.

Niko took steps towards the front door. The parents scrambled to beat him to it. His back curved as he went down on all fours and sped away. Jin and Anna sprinted after him. Once they saw he was headed for the main road, Anna ran back for the car, while Jin pursued Niko.

It didn’t have to come to this, Niko. You should have already left for school.

Niko’s body moved much quicker than Jin, and when Niko got to the main road, his legs darted across the street, jumped into the cover of a bushel, and waited for Jin to run past on the other side. Niko then continued in the opposite direction of the school.

Anna eventually picked up Jin along the road, and they continued searching for Niko.

About fifty feet away, the paperboy approached.

Him, Niko. You’d better give the pointer to him.

“What do you mean, ‘it has a mission for me?’” the paperboy asked after reluctantly stopping his route for Niko.

“Trust me, you’ll be glad you got your hands on this.”

“This isn’t one of those alien things from the news, is it?” the paperboy countered.

Niko had quickly thought up his defense. He said, “You really think I’d carry one of those around? This is a replica. Sure, there might be real ones out there, but this one is fun. You twist the ends, and a secret message pops up. It’s kinda like a Ouija board.”

“I’m not a little kid like you, Niko. Why would I want to play a board game?”

“If you’re afraid to do it, I can just give it to someone else. Don’t blame me when you’re the only one who hasn’t played it.”

The paperboy couldn’t let Niko win this one.

“Hand it over,” he said, as he snatched it from Niko’s grip.

Niko added, “Just make sure that after you use it, you pass it on.”

“What?” asked the paperboy.

“You can’t keep it forever. The main point of the game is to pass it around to see how many people get the same secret message. You’re supposed to team up with them once you find them.”

“Whatever.”

Though something had taken over his body, Niko’s adolescent curiosity remained: “Since I gave you the pointer, will you tell me your name?”

The paperboy disengaged his kickstand. He turned to Niko, smiling.

“Yeah, right,” he said, leaving Niko alone once more.

Niko continued walking away from the school, but the being came back. *Turn around, Niko. We’re meeting up with a friend.*

The force in Niko carried him to the train tracks. He was staring at Mr. Nick’s house. *See him, Niko? In the window. He’s been chosen, too. He’s been waiting for me for days. He didn’t*

even mean to find a pointer, but when he hid it in his office, it was only a matter of time before my friend took him over.

Niko tried responding to the voice in his head, but it was no use.

It's time we go see my friend. He's very eager to meet you.

Niko's legs approached Mr. Nick's house. Wet wood covered the outside. Green shingles on the windows hung by single screws.

Fear was not strong enough for Niko to prevent his body from climbing up the porch steps. Each stair seemed to inhale as the weight of a body crept upwards. The wooden front door had a thin piece of glass to look into the house, but most of it was blocked by a stringy curtain hanging from the inside.

It's time, Niko.

Niko's hand raised and knocked three times on the door.

"Who's there?" a voice yelled from inside. Niko realized that this voice was more human than the one that had been speaking through himself. The thing inside him said Mr. Nick was possessed as well. Suddenly, Niko realized he had regained control of his body. Was the force gone?

Talk to him. I'll be back. You sure have put me through a lot today. I need to rest. Do not leave this house until I am ready, or you will die.

That was enough for Niko to take advantage of what he assumed would be a short time of freedom.

"Mr. Nick? Can you hear me?"

"Go away!"

“Mr. Nick, please. I think the same thing that happened to you is happening to me. Maybe we can help each other.”

“Don’t need help! Go away!”

“Mr. Nick, do you know anything about the pointers?”

Silence. Then footsteps. A turning of locks. Mr. Nick would have been six and a half feet tall if his age had not bent him forward. Long, thick wisps of grey hair covered much of his face. Behind the vines was sunken skin. He wore a cream cardigan, buttons unfastened, blue-striped pajama pants, and leather slippers.

“What do *you* know about the pointers?” Mr. Nick’s eyes searched the area outside then fixed on Niko.

“I just know that something has been controlling me, and this may be the last time I can talk without it. But I think it’s still in me.”

“Come in. You’ll catch a cold.”

Niko hesitated.

“Niko!” a voice yelled from near the train tracks.

Anna and Jin had turned around to see if they might be able to find Niko along the tree line of the woods behind the city homes and buildings. Upon crossing the tracks, Anna yelled for Jin to stop the car. She saw Niko standing on Mr. Nick’s front porch.

“Mr. Nick,” Niko said, “those are my parents. I don’t think we should let them in. I think the things inside of us may hurt them.”

Niko stepped into the mouth of the rotting house. As Anna and Jin ran to the house from their car, Mr. Nick locked the door.

Mr. Nick walked into a room with one couch and dozens of newspapers. Niko followed. His parents' banging on the door sent him even further into a state of worry.

"Don't mind them," said Mr. Nick, noticing Niko's weary face. "This house may look worn out, but there's no way they're getting through that door.

"There's been stories in the paper about this stuff for weeks. It's all over the world. Some kids thought it'd be funny to bang on my door and leave the pointer for me to throw out. You weren't one of those boys, were you?"

"No sir."

"Anyways, I hid it away in my office. I'd read those stories of some type of pointer taking people out, one by one. I didn't want anything to do with it. Soon enough, it wanted much to do with me. I couldn't beat it. It's been nagging at me for days. It won't let me call for help."

"Why did it bring me here, Mr. Nick?"

"I suppose whatever is inside of each of us knows each other; like they were two of the same group sent to Northton to help take over. Just before you knocked, it told me I have to let you in. When I heard you, it felt as though it had left me. Then, I heard it say, 'Listen to the boy.'"

"Why did it want us to talk? I mean, why does mine stop controlling my body every now and again?"

"Well, mine's done that, too. These things... these beings are weaker than they might seem sometimes. I think that's why they need us. They're not just in Northton. People all over the world are getting possessed by them."

"So, what do we do? Call a priest or something?"

"I've got a feeling that wouldn't do. How long has the possession been inside you?"

“Since this morning.”

“I’ve been taken over for about two weeks now. Listen, kid, we shouldn’t ramble on. I don’t know how long we’ve got. I... I think we might have to do what they say.”

“Why?”

“It may be the only way to get them to leave. I’ve been watching while mine’s been living. It seems to communicate with other beings of the same species. It writes in its language with the laser pointer, twists the pointer, and waits for a response.”

“Really? Mine already made me pass my pointer on.”

“Huh. Maybe mine’s one of the ones that reports to their higher-ups. It’s also been digging a hole in my basement. One section leads to the side of my house, and the other – it just keeps digging deeper and deeper. Anyway, when the pointer vibrates, it shows a new message upon twisting. I figure the only way to have a chance of taking back control is by learning the language, but I’m sure I’ve seen over a hundred different symbols already. The way I see it, they’ve got a mission. They need us to take care of that mission. It might be wishful thinking to assume they’ll let us go when they’re through, but it’s the only sliver of hope we have.”

“Uh, Mr. Nick, mine told me they’re using us to start a new world or something. I don’t think they plan on letting us go.” Tears puddled in Niko’s eyes. “I’m scared.”

Mr. Nick stared in hopelessness at Niko’s response. “Hey, now, I know you’re scared. We have to stay strong. Mine never said anything to me about that. Are you sure that’s what yours said?”

“Yes. He said their master has a plan for all of us.”

“Now, you just hold on. How do I know I’m talking to you and not whatever is inside of you? Or maybe it’s lying to you.”

“I’m not lying! Maybe we should get my parents. They could help!”

“Let’s stay calm, son. I just don’t know if it’s fair to jump to conclusions based on the revelation of a child.”

“Well, then, what do we do? Wait for them to come back to us?”

“There must be something else.”

Niko’s panicked responses made the matter all the more frightening, and his emotions seemed to be rubbing off on Mr. Nick. They both wanted to rid themselves of the beings.

“Let me think for a moment,” Mr. Nick responded. “I don’t suppose we have much time for a plan, but I might have an idea.”

“What is it?”

“Just give me a moment!”

“Niko!” Jin and Anna had moved to the window of the room in which Mr. Nick and Niko talked. The parents were able to pry it open and make a small slit through which they could talk to the two.

“Mr. Nick,” said Anna, “something is going on. We need you to give us Niko. He needs help. He’s not safe.”

Mr. Nick kept his composure: “If you two come into this house, it will be much less safe for all four of us. You’ve got to trust me.” Mr. Nick’s eyes twitched like Niko’s had earlier. His voice changed just slightly.

“Your son and I have to work this out on our own before these pointers go any further. It’s best if you leave it alone. It will only make matters worse.”

“Mom! Daddy!” Niko cut in, “I’m sorry! I should have told you what was going on. Help me!”

When Mr. Nick spoke his next words, his voice had changed dramatically. What had once been an old man was now the voice of a deranged creature; someone risking the pain of breathing just to get some words out.

“Quiet, boy. You’ve had your time. You should have talked quicker!”

Now, again, Niko watched the world from behind his eyes without choosing how to move his body.

“No! Niko!” Jin and Anna watched as the two inside the house were taken over again.

“Anna,” said Jin, “maybe we should each take one side of the house. I don’t know if we can stop both of them, but if you see Niko, yell for me, and I’ll do the same. We’ve got to help him.”

Anna dashed around the house, while Jin took a few steps back to make sure he could see all of the windows.

“We’ve got to meet with the others,” Nick’s mouth said.

Niko’s controller responded, “Yes, yes. An old reunion! Who’s nearest? Aren’t there a few one town over?”

“Yes; we’ve found a lot of success in this region. We’ll head that way and see where we’re setting up shop to wait for the rest. Last message said 300,000 others have successfully found a host since last night. That makes over 1 million total. When we double that, we’ll learn to create hosts back home and drop them here directly. Soon, this wretched place will be crawling with our kind!”

“We’ll have them wiped out in no time. Did you hear the elder human’s plan? He thinks we’re releasing him after completion!”

“What fools, humans!”

The two bodies crawled down Mr. Nick's basement stairs. They came to a door which revealed the hole that Mr. Nick's being had been digging. Both fought to be the first out. They squeezed through, snarling, growling, and basking in the warmth of the morning sun. Taking to the woods, they headed to meet the others.

“Late-Night Television” Reflection

When I first began writing “Late-Night Television,” I had a clear idea in mind for how I could relate horror aspects of a certain time period. I found myself straying away from horror tropes that I was familiar with in “Late-Night Television.”

I did utilize literary elements that I have learned. For example, one key point I wanted to experiment with in this story involved suspense. Two books I have read since starting my thesis include Stephen King’s *The Running Man* and Darcy Coates’s *Voices in the Snow*. While both of these stories are quite different, something that drew me in so strongly while reading was the suspense surrounding the prose of these writers. I considered how I could incorporate a related feeling into “Late-Night Television,” and I aimed to do so with the protagonist, Niko.

Initially, I did not quite know how I wanted to add suspense to the story. However, in working through revisions with Professor Viswanathan, she encouraged me to lean more into Niko’s innocence. In doing so, I found that I could add that suspense I had been looking for. By emphasizing his innocence as such a young boy, I was able to develop a more dramatic tragedy. Through Niko’s struggles with lying to his parents and believing all those around him who influenced him to use the pointer, I tried to capitalize on pushing the reader to fear – or question – what would happen next.

As with “The Inescapable,” one of the biggest things “Late-Night Television” and Professor Viswanathan’s guidance taught me was how to better form the logic in the story. I realized that just because something makes sense to me does not mean the reader will understand it. I learned to better detail the story with clarity rather than add unnecessary ambiguity that I otherwise thought was beneficial to the story.