

## The Man that Shimmers

The storm outside was starting to blow harder, whipping the leaves from the trees, and setting them upon the ground. After an hour or so of this, the leaves now carpeted the ground, covering the concrete walkways and lawns with yellows, browns, and reds. With the wind came rain that started to drip from the sky, coming down and tapping on the window of her dorm room. She did not notice. She was too busy scratching her head with her right hand and chewing the cuticles on her left. The essay taunted her. She was convinced that what she had written so far was complete shit. She hated this assignment. She hated all her assignments.

*Stupid piece of shit can't even write this paper.*

*Fuck.*

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“Cynthia?”

The therapist’s voice seems to bring Cynthia back to herself for a moment. She was staring at the branch that was tapping the living room window. The wind was moving it. A breeze flutters around Cynthia’s ankles, chilling her a bit. The clock above the fireplace reads 3:20; which means there was only forty more minutes of this hell. Cynthia feels anxious, and the need for a smoke is pulling at her.

She does not know why, but she whispers: “Sorry.”

“It’s alright, Cynthia. I just want to make sure you’re okay, you’ve been even quieter than usual. I was asking if there was anything that was on your mind specifically today. You seem distracted.” Cynthia does not say anything. The fireplace crackles merrily, but another cold breeze strikes her ankles. This time it seems stronger, as if it really needs her attention.

The therapist adjusts herself in the high back chair across from Cynthia and pushes up her glasses with a bony hand. Cynthia thinks she's nice but does not believe her time here will help her at all, she's fucking crazy. Last week was proof of that. Still, Margaret continues to try.

Her eyes, a dark brown that could basically be black, look over Cynthia with empathy. Margaret shifts again and flips back a page on her large yellow note pad. She clears her throat and Cynthia feels a jump in anxiety. Here comes the question.

“What about last week? Could we talk about that again—.”

“I need a smoke,” Cynthia says as she jumps up suddenly, pushing back the small leather chair she was sitting in. She walks out of the office into the hallway and along the shag-carpeted floor to the front door. She pulls it open as her hands shake and the hinges squeak in protest. As she steps out onto the porch, the wind whistles loudly. The front deck is covered in leaves, and one of Margaret's blue outdoor chairs has blown over, its cushions sprawled out around it.

Smoking does little to decrease her anxiety. She looks out at the lawn decorations. Skulls, pumpkins, ghosts are arranged in spirit for the kids who will be coming up, asking for candy, and then having to be reminded to say thank you by their parents. *Bet Margaret is the type that gives full candy bars*, she thinks and smiles a bit at that. A decorative skeleton stands sideways by the path leading up to the front door, his arms hanging limp by his sides. The wind and rain batter him. As the storm picks up, he droops more, till he has almost completely fallen over. He looks sad, and empty.

She wants to trust this therapist. She's kind, and obviously cares about her. But she knows Margaret doesn't believe her.

*How could she?*

*You sound fucking insane. That's why no one will believe you.* She takes out another cigarette and suddenly the wind stops completely. She looks up. The skeleton stands upright and facing Cynthia. The rain stops now too. Despite its earlier onslaught, the skeleton looks as if it is dry. Its arms dangle at its sides. Cynthia could've sworn he had a smile when she walked up from the street earlier. Now though, he looks sad, his open mouth pointed downward, black against his white head. Single raindrops drip from the corner of each of his eyes as he looks directly at Cynthia. One of his arms begins to lift slowly. The hand is covered in a red, viscous liquid that drips and pools in the grass at his feet. When his hand is at head level, he waves at her and some drops of the red stuff fleck upon his face and rib bones. Her throat seizes up.

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*Stupid fucking essay.*

Four beers in and it felt less stupid to her though. She could have cared less. Now she sat smoking a joint and blowing it out the open window into the stormy evening. Her thoughts cycle from self-loathing, indifference, anxiety, and then back to self-loathing. Eventually, as she continued to smoke, all thoughts begin to melt away. The poster of David Bowie above her desk, his masked face looking down at her as he shreds the guitar, seemed hilarious to her and she giggled.

*What the fuck are you doing? You're high on a Thursday.* She grimaced and took out another joint. *You have an essay to finish.* She took a long drag of the joint. *Seriously, this is a bad idea.* Another pull.

This was basically how her days went. The white walls of her dorm are covered in posters and lights that cry for her attention. She went from giggling at Bowie, to staring at the

twinkling Halloween lights that run around her room. She did this for what felt like hours, as she smoked her second joint down to the filter.

After some time, she stood up, wobbling on shaky legs. She walked over to the mirror by her dresser and stared at her reflection. The puffy, red skin around her green eyes looked irritated. Deep bags drooped below her eyelids. Her cheeks had sunken in over the last few weeks too, and the brown strands of her hair were matted together in a couple places. It was greasy from not showering for the last couple days. She tried to fix her hair, grabbing a brush, and running it through over and over. She gave up after a few minutes, annoyed.

The thoughts swirled back into her head. They reminded her of the essay, her guilt, and so she got up to look for the harder stuff she knew she had stored somewhere. *Where the fuck were those shrooms? Shoe drawer?* She tore out her blue, beat-up Chuck Taylors and threw them aside. They are followed by flip-flops, Vans, and some running shoes. *Nope. Maybe in this shirt drawer.*

Cynthia went through each drawer under her bed then turned to the wardrobe that stood at its head. She searched the pockets of her jackets and checked the shelf that sat above them. She pushed past a sweater from high school (“GO STAGS!”) and finally found them. They were hidden in a Ziploc. She opened them eagerly and took out a couple stems.

An hour later, at around 4:00 pm, the walls looked whiter than before. The orange jack-o-lanterns from the string of Halloween lights seemed to pop off and grin at Cynthia. Her arms and legs felt like they were floating around her, as she spun in her desk chair. The whirl of colors around her made her giggle. She did not feel her feet.

This is how Sara found her. Spinning round and round, Sara's red windbreaker adding to the stream of color. The slam of the door made Cynthia stop. She steadies herself and a tiny thrill of anxiety shot through her, though the drugs stunted the worst.

"What are you doing," Sara had said. She sets down her backpack and takes off her coat, shaking off the rain before hanging it up. She continues to watch Cynthia.

"Are you high? Again?"

Sara is not mean; she said it with a lot of care. She pushed back her brown hair and looked at Cynthia with concern. Earlier in the semester, when Cynthia got high during the week, Sara would laugh and remark at how crazy she was, or how she was "such an addict." It was not until last week, when Cynthia was laying in the dorm's common room drunk on a Tuesday at 2 am did Sara begin to ask Cynthia about it more. *She means well, but I don't really care. She wouldn't understand. Miss. Fucking Perfect.* The mean comment flew into her head without her even thinking.

The emptiness in her stomach is rampant as Cynthia stood and attempted to steady herself. Cynthia mumbled that she was fine to Sara and grabbed her Chucks. She began on the task of untying the laces.

"Cyn, it's Thursday. You were high yesterday, and Monday--"

"So?" Sara's face was framed by a melting wall behind her. Her freckles popped off her face and the overhead light added an intense brightness to her cheeks. With the laces finally undone, Cynthia shoved her feet into her shoes and tied them tightly. She turned and filled her backpack with a couple beers from the fridge.

Sara was talking "...you have the essay and... Where are you going?"

"Just out for a walk."

“With beer, and let me guess, another joint? Why do you keep doing this?”

The question had stung, but Cynthia tried to shrug it off. Not because it was a bad question, but because she had no answer. She just must. Otherwise, she would have had to sit there with that fucking essay. She stands and grabs her black windbreaker, zipping it up.

“You shouldn’t go anyway; it’s raining super hard. Why don’t you just stay.”

“I’m good Sara, really.” Cynthia shouldered her pack and took a couple steps towards the door.

“No, you’re not good. I can tell you’re not good. Every weekend you party super hard. Last weekend I barely saw you at all. You don’t talk to me anymore; all you do is smoke, or drink, and it’s really...Why are you laughing?”

Cynthia tried to control her giggling but cannot. She burst out in laughter. Sara’s hair was pulled behind her left ear, and it had looked all too large to be any kind of normal ear. The big bulbous earlobes and stupid...top part? Cynthia cannot think of what it’s called, and she laughs again.

“What?” Sara said.

Stifling her giggles, Cynthia explained. Or at least she tried to the best of her ability. The ears were just too big for the head. It seemed scientific to her.

Sara looked blankly for a moment, which caused Cynthia to giggle again. Sara took in a breath, grabbed her coat and backpack, and turned towards Cynthia.

“Fuck you.”

Sara opened the door, stepped through, and slammed it behind her.

Over the next hour, Cynthia did nothing but watch the rain outside. The drops drip down the window following a path towards the bottom. This is amazing, so she just stared. The fight faded slowly to the back of her mind. Outside the wind blew harder than before and it was bringing down branches. The oak nearest Cynthia's room had its branches bent towards her window, and they began to tap the top of the building. The sound filled her room. She began to feel uneasy. As she gazed out the window there was a loud slam that made her jump backwards, crying out. In the middle of the window at the exact point where she was staring, a handprint had appeared. The palm was huge, with four long fingers and a thick thumb that stretched out from its center. It faded as the raindrops began to snake through it before there was another slam that rattled the window. It was a left handprint.

Cynthia grabbed her backpack and darted out the door.

She walked and weaved between people with her head bent down to protect her face from the rain that was now coming down sideways from the unrelenting wind. Her socks and shoes were soaked but she barely noticed. She was hardly aware when she bumped into somebody, causing her to stumble and almost faceplant into the sidewalk.

Sometimes she swore she heard footsteps behind her, like someone was following her. Every time she turned around; she saw nothing. Even though the wind was blowing hard into her face, she occasionally felt a gust from behind that swept into her through her sleeves and collar. It chilled her to the bone.

Another hour passed, and Cynthia was in the quad near the student center. The glass doors and windows were plastered with poster advertisements. Please to join chess club, debate,

or intramurals were vying for Cynthia's attention. People were coming and going from dinner and whenever the door opened, she could hear the chatter of students and clattering of dishes and trays. It smelt like pizza. Or maybe it was burgers. Cynthia scoffed and continued looking at the posters, as the rain poured down upon her. Someone walked by her as she did this. She did not notice them watching her as she laughed at the intramural poster. Volleyball is something she will never do again. *They look so stupid out there.* Cynthia laughed even more. The laughter shook her body. Eventually she was heaving and shaking, doubled over by the window. Another group walked by and made sure to give her a wide berth.

At the English building, she began to calm down, wiping tears from her face. She sat down on a bench and smoked. The rain put it out.

For an unknown amount of time, Cynthia obsessed over the conversation with Sara. She could not get the picture of Sara's hurt face out of her mind.

*I'm such a shit friend; getting drunk and high on a Thursday. What the fuck is wrong with you?*

*You're just a piece of shit.*

A tear streaks down her cheek.

*Fuck everyone, fuck Sara. I don't give a shit.* She cried hard as she trudged through the puddles on the campus walkway. The sobs racked her body and she felt like she was losing the ability to breathe.



*I want to stop; doesn't Sara know that? Sorry I'm not fucking perfect, or smart or whatever.*

She needed more. She took off one strap of her backpack and rummaged through its smallest pocket for the bag of shrooms. She took out four more stems and threw them into her mouth. Their earthy taste lingered on her tongue as she swallowed them half-chewed. She sighed and waited for the high.

Cynthia wandered till she was at the edge of campus, at the large forest park that borders its western side. Here there was a winding path along the tree line that separates the massive grass lawn from the shrubs, bushes, and pines of the forest. The trees towered above her and dropped needles and leaves that whipped around and landed on the ground. She watched as a particularly strong gust blew a whole group of brown and yellow leaves off one of the tall oaks. They tumble down and are followed by a branch. It crashed onto the pathway about twenty feet from Cynthia. She does not react, only looks at the branch solemnly. Shit, that was kind of close.

The clouds had darkened over the last hour, moving from light grey to almost black. Suddenly there was a flash of light followed by a few seconds of nothing before the whole sky rumbled with thunder. For that moment, the entire forest opened, and she could see into its depths. Bushes and trees waved in the wind on the outside, but deeper in they stood completely still. The wind did not reach them. Cynthia looked around and it seemed the rain had stopped, and the wind was but a breeze. Her ears were filled with the sound of the thunder and she felt enraptured by it. She waited, and a few moments later there was another strike of lightening. The entire lawn is lit up. She could see the mathematics building across the lawn, standing red, and brown with a large front door in a high stone arch. Its windows reflected the light with an

intensity that made her squint. The walking paths coiled along from the entrance like snakes, leading to other parts of campus. The light poles, the only sources of constant light, stand guard along these paths. The poles are adorned with school banners. She remembers wondering whether those banners were there in case people forgot where they were.

Soaked to the bone, she laid down on the ground and let the rain fall upon her face. The mushy grass felt like the softest bed in the world and she laughed. Before, there were a few people that were out and walking hurriedly to get back to their dorm before the storm hit, but now there was no one. The grass soaked through her jacket into her shirt, making her back cold. She feels the individual drops fall upon her face. They land on her nose, and eyebrows and lips, falling slowly down to her cheeks and neck. They fall into her eyes. The drops trace along her chest, down her sides to her back. She felt the wind whip her hair, but it felt freeing as it moved across her face.

Lightning struck again and lit up the falling drops. They gleamed against the dark clouds in the instant brightness. Cynthia completely forgot Sara and found solace in the quiet bliss of her high. The drops were twinkling like thousands of shooting stars falling to the earth. They sparkled with a gorgeous, awe-inspiring light. She does not feel, and it is amazing

Footsteps were approaching in the grass. No foot created them, only a shimmering outline of one. The outline moved towards Cynthia as she lay gazing at the sky. When it reached her, it kicked her backpack away and stood over her. The shimmering outline of a head and shoulders came into view, glowing against the black sky. As it leaned over her, the drops stopped falling on her face.

Something grabbed her leg and began dragging her towards the trees.

She did nothing for a second as her body was dragged through the grass. She slid easily on her back. The grip on her ankle was like a vice. She looked down to her feet and in another flash of lightening she saw him. He was not shimmering anymore, but glowing. His outlines accented his large broad shoulders and a thick arm that connected to the hand wrapped around her ankle. Each one of his steps squelched into the grass and left a footprint that was about a foot long. The raindrops bounce off him, and shine from his radiance. His head was turned forward as he marched. As soon as the light appeared, it was gone, and she was left staring at the low shimmer grasping her ankle.

This is when she screamed

She kicked at him with her free leg, while reaching at the grass and tearing out blades and dirt. She grasped at the ground. She kicked again but he barely hesitated at her sudden outburst. She stopped kicking aimlessly, this time choosing a target. She reared back her leg and swung, connecting foot to elbow. His grip slackened just enough for her to tear her leg from his hand and try to stand. He turned around, trying to grab at her leg but she had already turned and taken a step away. He then reached out, his movements inhumanly quick, and caught her jacket sleeve. He yanked her towards him and grabbed her hood too. She could feel his chest against her back. She cried out and could feel tears of terror sting her eyes. Her fingers fumbled with the zipper of her jacket, managing to unzip it. She slipped from the jacket and took off at a run.

She sprinted across the grass in slow motion through a tunnel of rain and wind. Her hair whipped behind her and the ground felt like nothing below her. She slipped and stumbled but stood up immediately and continued running. A lightning strike illuminates the lawn again and she saw him standing twenty yards ahead of her. She stopped and slid a bit. Her feet were cold and wet, floating in about an inch of water in her shoes.

They watched each other. She took a step forward, and he stepped with the opposite leg.

Tears really started to pour down her face. She was trembling. Gooseflesh crawled over her as cold rainwater traced its way down her body, so cold that she felt like she was being cut. Her brown hair was caked to her face like the mud to her nails. The high was starting to be replaced by anxious tremors. Her knees felt like they were about to buckle.

The light that shimmered around him was glowing brighter now.

“Get the fuck away from me,” she yelled. Her voice came out sounding hollow.

The raindrops started to get thick and soupy. They hit her face and felt sticky. The drops fell and encased the shimmering man, slowly covering his head, then shoulders and so on. They darkened his glow. When Cynthia wiped some of it off her face, a metallic smell rushed her nostrils. It dripped into her mouth and the taste made her stomach churn.

The blood had now completely encased the man, and he started to walk towards her. Each step left a dark footprint in the ground. She was covered now too. The blood had drenched her down to the skin and stuck to her like wax. The terror paralyzed her body, and she could not scream.

*I am going to die.*

Covered in blood, he was ten yards away now. Cynthia took a step backward. The grass had become thick and syrupy. She wiped more blood out of eyes.

*I have to run.*

So she did.

She took off at an angle to her right and only made it a few steps before the man substitutes his slow approach with a full charge towards her. She barely glanced at him and kept sprinting. The blood on the ground stuck to her Chucks and she drug her sleeve across her face.

again to get it out of her eyes. She could see the math building ahead. The lights from the lamp poles dully illuminated the blood that was pouring down the bricks. It clumped and pooled on the sidewalks, reflecting the lamp light back into the night.

He made it right near her and reached out to grab her again. She sidestepped, feeling his hand passing inches from her sleeve, and barreled full on towards the sanctuary of the building. She turned and saw him only a few yards behind, so she kicked her legs faster. She remembers the sound of his feet pounding the ground. She was still forty yards out when the man caught up to her. With one swing he hit her, and she fell sprawled out into the grass.

The wind left her lungs and she tried to suck in air. Drops of blood fall into her heaving mouth and throat, covering them. She coughed and choked, flecks of blood flying out from her mouth. Sputtering, she got to her knees and began to crawl towards the building instead. The side of her head felt warm as her own blood added to what was already coated upon her. The man kicked her in the stomach. She fell onto her side, rolling onto her back and heaving in a few breaths. She could not move. Her arms and legs felt weak. Her vision started to tunnel.

She looked to her right, at a light pole in the distance and watched as it went out. One by one, the lights on the sidewalks went out until the entire world was plunged into darkness. The falling drops started to slow and the wind stopped. It was quiet. Cynthia turned back and stared at the man. His glow was so dim, she could barely make him out.

*This is fucking it.*

She remembers that she stopped caring. It surprised her at first, but she figured what was the point? She accepted when he steps towards her. She did not struggle when he forced his foot down onto her chest, pushing hard into her sternum. Her breathing felt like a chore and it became

labored. Her brain was starting to be cut off from air. She felt a strange feeling, something almost like relief.

*Finally.*

A brilliant light burst forth from the sky and landed twenty yards away from Cynthia and the man, to their left. The ground was split, and the pressure suddenly left her chest. The world went dark and a tremendous boom shook the earth. All at once, the rain began to fall again. She no longer felt the sticky blood that covered her before. The man was gone.

She lay there, for what felt like hours staring up at the sky. The ground where the lightning struck simmered and the small fires that started had fizzed out from the rain. A black scorch mark scarred the dirt, and the grass was completely gone in a five-foot radius from where it had hit. As the rain continued to come down, her high depleted.

She began to sob.

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Margaret wishes Cynthia well and closes the door. She lets out a deep sigh. Cynthia was tough to reach. Ever since they found her in that field, sobbing and crying out into the darkness last week, she had come back to see Margaret three times.

*I feel no closer to reaching her than I did when I first met her.*

She figures she just needs to give it time, sighs, and turns from the door. She notices a dark red footprint on her shag-carpet in the hallway. It's a right foot, exactly the size of Cynthia's. The toes face towards her, and she wonders if Cynthia must have had something on her shoe. She steps towards it.

The substance looks mostly dried with the middle bubbling up and popping, as if it were sizzling. She bends down to it and touches it. It feels hot and thick and some of it sticks to her finger. Disgusted, she frantically wipes it onto her pants.

*It must be Cynthia's...but there's no other footprints anywhere.* She looks around, scanning the floor, when there is a sharp rap on the front door that makes her jump.

The wind picks up outside.