



The

# Gradle of Sins

*God couldn't reach, the Devil didn't need to*

WRITTEN BY NAG

## *The Town*

There is a road that no map shows. A bend that no crow flies over. A breath of land where the air thickens like clotting blood. Follow it far enough, and you'll find Riverdale.

But pray you don't.

This town is not cursed. That would imply someone noticed. No, Riverdale is *forgotten by design*—a rot pocket in the gut of the world, a place so wicked the devil himself dares not visit. He passed it once, they say, on the third day of spring. He looked down the main road and turned away, muttering, "That place belongs to something far worse than me."

The town doesn't sleep. It stews.

The streets breathe smoke not from chimneys, but from throats. The brickwork seems to pulse when you're not looking, and alleyways often rearrange themselves like veins around a tumor. The buildings sag—not from time, but shame. Some even lean into one another, whispering secrets you forget by morning.

And the people—

The people are not right.

Children here do not giggle. They snicker at funerals, laugh at corpses, and weep only when flowers bloom or puppies wag their tails. They are raised without lullabies, taught early to trap birds and skin them while they still breathe. Their games involve nails, salt, and silence. One of their favorites is "Who Can Hold the Rot the Longest?"

The adults are worse.

A woman once gave birth on the bakery floor. Instead of screaming, she sang. The midwife pulled the child out, bit the umbilical cord, and fed it to the rats as tradition. When a dog gives birth in Riverdale, the townsfolk gather and burn the pups one by one, citing ancient rhyme:

"One for the sin, one for the shame, / burn them all to cleanse the name."

No one remembers the origin of the rhyme. But everyone knows it.

The men pass time by rubbing their legs along cooling corpses—"to keep the humors moving," they claim. They don't flinch when fingers break or teeth fall out. In fact, some collect them. Bones, teeth, nails—everything has value if it once belonged to something *innocent*.

Every Friday, there is a public maiming. It's not formal. It just happens. Eyes gouged, ears split, tongues stapled to walls. The victims don't cry. That would be impolite. Instead, they hum. And the humming spreads like a tune you never wanted but can't unhear.

There is no law in Riverdale. There are only *rituals*.

Every home keeps a jar of fingernails. Every doorstep is smeared with dried milk and soot. The town well hasn't drawn water in years—but no one dares seal it. They say it whispers the names of those who lie. Some still walk by and apologize to it. Not for their sins, but for the *ones they haven't committed yet*.

Animals don't live here. They endure.



The cats have no eyes. The cows birth calves with too many legs. Birds fly in circles until their wings give out. Sometimes they fall mid-flight, frozen like they saw something that broke them mid-air. The rats are smart. Too smart. They stand upright when they think no one's watching.

Visitors don't last.

Sometimes a car rolls into town. Sometimes a journalist or a missionary arrives. But no one ever leaves the same. They forget how to spell their own names. Their tongues change shape. One woman walked back to the city after three days in Riverdale. She was mute. The soles of her feet had grown mouths. They screamed at night.

The sky above the town never shines. It glows. Dim, orange, like pus through bandages. When it rains, the drops fall in slow motion, and they taste of copper and regret.

The mayor died fifty years ago.

But he still signs the laws.

There is a church with no cross. A school with no alphabet. A slaughterhouse that reopens itself after every closure, with no workers but *meat always fresh*.

And in the center of the town, on the day the story begins, walks a soldier.

Blood-soaked. Barefoot. Dragging something that pulses.

He has no name, only a duty. Not vengeance. Not justice. **A final accounting.**

The children gather first.

Not out of curiosity, but **anticipation.**

They smile like they've seen this before. Like this is the bedtime story no one tells. The one etched into their skin before they ever opened their eyes.

The soldier does not wave. He does not speak.

But the town does.

In whispers. In wind. In walls that *breathe*.

Riverdale is ready.

The sins have waited long enough.



## *Chapter One: Lust*

### *"The Scarlet Veil"*

Riverdale's brothel doesn't advertise. It doesn't need to.

Nestled in a cul-de-sac of rotting row houses and rust-stained alleyways, "The Scarlet Veil" squats like a lesion. The walls wheeze in the wind, breathing mold and decay. The doorframe sags like it's tired of standing, soaked perpetually in a stench of iron and excretion. Even the insects refuse it.

The windows are shuttered tight, not to keep prying eyes out—but screams in. Inside, the air pulses. The temperature drops. Not cold—dead. Like the breath of something that once lived and still resents it.

The women here are not courtesans. They are remnants. Stripped of names, identities, even memory. Their lips are carved into smiles. Not cosmetic—surgical. Torn and stitched and pulled back until they split like wet paper. Each one's teeth sharpened into bridal white fangs. Their dresses hang on them like skin suits, heavy and wet. Their hips swing only because their spines were rebroken to make them curve just right.

Their eyes? Dead marbles. One pupil forever dilated, the other shriveled like a pit. Each blink is labored—as if scraping sandpaper across a cornea that never asked to see.

The hallway to the rooms is lined with mirrors. None reflect truth. They show what the brothel wants you to believe you are. Fat when you are thin. Young when you are rotting. Beautiful when you're a beast.

There are no beds. Only altars. Metal slabs etched with obscene scripture, their grooves clogged with hair, bile, and half-shed prayers. Chains hang from the ceilings—not for restraint—but for posture. The clients are made to kneel, to beg, to break, then to enjoy it.

Behind Room 6, there's no room.

There's a mouth.

A chamber grown of meat. Breathing. Pulsing. Moaning when the door creaks. It devours the women who disappoint. Or the ones who begin to remember.

In the heart of the brothel, embedded into the flesh wall behind the altar, is a relic. Revered by the house like a god. A grotesque, sacred display case holds a piece of a tongue—bitten off mid-orgasm, nailed through a wedding ring into preserved flesh. It twitches slightly when clients climax. The house calls it "The First Moan."

It is their heart. Their soul. The source of their false seduction.

Tonight, the Soldier enters.

His boots trail blood. His coat is stitched from old flags and war widow veils. His eyes are burned—white-hot pits of judgment.

He walks the crimson hall. Each portrait on the wall turns to him. Not with paint—with flesh. Their faces bubble forward, push against the canvas, mouths forming, whispering: "We were beautiful, we were loved, we were ruined."



He says nothing.

He opens his satchel.

Inside: a jar of silence. Sealed with wax and thorns, inside it floats a child's tooth—still red at the root—and a piece of a mother's last lullaby, caught in amber. Not lost. Stolen.

He sets it beside the altar, near "The First Moan."

The room screams.

Not the walls. The idea of the room screams. The brothel feels it. The air becomes sharp. The ceiling leaks milk. The floor hiccups blood.

Room 6 shivers.

Then opens—not like a door—but like a birth canal.

Out crawls the Madame.

Naked. Slathered in oil and powdered bone. Her breasts are hollowed gourds. Her stomach stitched into a corset of live worms. Her eyes covered in lace. Her mouth—gone. A hole. Black, toothless, sobbing wind.

"I was beauty," she breathes.

"No," says the Soldier. "You were what beauty bled for."

He draws a blade. It's not made. It's grown. Twisted from the spine of a midwife drowned for knowing too much. It hums with grief.

He carves downward.

Not her skin—her truth.

And what spills isn't blood.

It's voices.

Thousands.

Of girls.

Of children.

Of men who never wanted this.

They pour out, gasping, eyes wide, crying for mothers, for gods, for forgetfulness.

The Madame falls. She crumples. Not dead. Dismembered from her own myth.

The girls begin to melt. First their smiles. Then their pelvises. Then their wombs, crumbling like paper. Their screams aren't pain—they're release. The house moans. It feasts.

The mirrors shatter. The air ignites.

The Soldier strikes a match and lets it fall.

The flame doesn't burn. It erases.



The Scarlet Veil folds in on itself like a sin too proud to be confessed. In its place: a pit. Silent.  
Circular. Lined with jawbones gnawed clean.

Etched into the dirt, in lashes and nail fragments:

“Now we don’t have to love them anymore.”



## *Chapter Two: Gluttony*

### *“The Orphan’s Menu”*

St. Belladonna’s Orphanage sits on the northern edge of Riverdale like a bloated tick—engorged, rotting, pulsating with secrets. From the outside, it resembles a chapel, complete with crooked spire and boarded stained-glass windows that no longer filter light but hoard it. Crows perch atop the broken bell tower—not to watch, but to wait.

Inside, the walls are padded not for protection—but to absorb screams. The floors are spongy with layers of old meat juice and wet cloth. Everything smells like milk turned inside out—sour, curdled, and despairing.

The children raised here aren’t orphans. They’re inventory.

Labeled at birth. Catalogued by weight, texture, marbling. Every child bears a number, not a name. Their bones are softened with broth. Their muscles tenderized with injections. Laughter is punished—because tension toughens meat.

Meals are structured. Breakfast: sugar water and sedatives. Lunch: blister broth. Dinner: silence.

The matron, a gnarled woman with teeth like tombstones, ensures discipline with a fork. Not to feed. To mark. She stamps each child’s skin with prongs—location of choice cuts.

Some kids are raised for the liver. Others for the cheeks. One particularly pale girl is force-fed nothing but berries and cream—her blood is said to taste “like dessert.”

Downstairs is the kitchen.

No ovens. Just hooks. Hooks. Hooks. Hooks. Dangling like judgment. Still wet from yesterday’s serving. A dumbwaiter groans through the building like a throat swallowing guilt.

But across the street—there is the Diner.

“The Laughing Maw.”

An ever-open door of gluttony. Its interior is a breathing stomach—lined with chitinous plates, pulsing veins, and mucous-drenched walls that twitch when names are spoken.

Menus here are handwritten in grease and blood. Dishes are named after the children they were made from. “Elijah au Gratin – Cheek Charred to Velvet.” “Milo Tartare – Eyes with Pickled Iris.” “Rue Pie – Bone Marrow Custard in Skin Crust.”

Each booth is shaped like a ribcage. Each napkin is cloth-torn from donated uniforms. Waiters don’t walk—they crawl, their joints reversed, their mouths stitched shut but oozing broth from nostrils. The bell above the door rings not when someone enters—but when someone is ordered.

Locals sip blood gravy from cups shaped like infant skulls. They critique texture: “Could use more panic.” They rate aroma: “This one’s been too calm lately—needs fear-marination.”

In the back, a blackboard displays daily specials: “#47—plump, mild, breast-fed until seven. Prime rib day.”



The dumbwaiter from the orphanage connects to this diner. A meaty tunnel, slick with slop and memory. Through it, bodies slide down. Cleaned, prepped, unvoiced.

At the heart of the diner, behind a sinewed curtain, squats its altar: the oven. It breathes like a sleeping sow. Its surface bubbles with fat that never cools. It weeps grease from its vents. It giggles—quietly, wetly—each time the flesh inside twitches. It has no door. Only lips. It sucks in the trays whole, belches after.

Tonight, the Soldier enters.

He does not order. He brings a bill.

From his coat, he pulls a silver cloche. He sets it at the center booth. He lifts the lid.

Inside: not food. A relic. A single pacifier—charred and cracked. Dusted in bone ash. Beneath it, a feeding bib, embroidered with a name long struck from records. Wrapped around both: a tendon-tied ribbon from an umbilical cord that had been gnawed.

But that is not all.

From another pouch, he retrieves a cracked feeding bottle—clouded, bitten, still warm with the final breath of an infant's last meal. The rubber nipple shudders slightly in his grip. The bottle smells like memory.

It is the gluttony's counterpoint: starvation remembered.

He walks to the oven. The staff do not stop him. They kneel, convulsing. Not in awe—in guilt.

He squeezes the bottle into the oven's maw. The warm, sweet drop of stolen innocence lands on the sizzling fat.

The oven doesn't sizzle. It wails.

It begins to convulse. Pipes jerk. Flames belch backward. Fat curdles. It gags, then coughs, then—  
Begins to eat itself.

It devours its own fire. Then its walls. Then the trays, the hooks, the dumbwaiter. The booths groan. The menus melt. Patrons try to flee, but their limbs cook before they rise.

The children rise from the walls. Not ghosts. Not souls. Remnants. Finger bones wrapped in sinew. Skin-puppets stitched with rot. They crawl across tables, into laps, into throats.

A man swallows Rue Pie. Chokes as the real Rue crawls from his stomach, eyes bleeding. A woman bites into Milo's iris. It blinks.

The diner folds. Not explodes. Folds. Like a jaw closing.

The soldier lights the match. The flame climbs—not the walls. The patrons. Screaming, melting, sloshing into soup.

He walks away as The Laughing Maw collapses, burps once, and falls silent.

Across the smoldering dirt, in cartilage and teeth, a message remains:

“The hunger ends here.”





## *Chapter Three: Greed*

### *"The Golden Souls"*

The Goldsmith's Guild stood like a tumor at Riverdale's highest point—where light never reached but ambition always crawled. Its tower spiraled into the sky like a snapped bone pushed back into the skin, festering, splitting the clouds with its arrogance. Made entirely of stolen marble and flaked with gold leaf torn from ancient temples, it shimmered with rot.

Here, the rich did not live—they fed. They wore masks of silver-laced cartilage, noses sculpted to mock angels, smiles bolted open with golden wire. No eye met another; only banknotes were exchanged. Even breath was taxed.

The guild's vaults didn't hold coins—they held **organs**. Hearts of rivals pickled in vinegar. Stomachs bloated with IOUs. Tongues split and catalogued for blackmail value. Children were sold for their dreams. The purest were distilled into perfume—one drop worth a decade's wage.

At the heart of the guild, beneath the altar of commerce, lay the trading pit. Not stocks. Not bonds. But **souls**.

Stripped. Numbered. Screaming into jars. Souls bottled with their regrets and auctioned under candlelight made from the fat of betrayed saints.

The golden chandelier dripped molten greed—each light a prisoner's last wish liquefied and shaped into fire.

And the people below—bankers, nobles, clergy—all naked under cloaks made of tax records, exhaling smoke from burning promissory notes. They drank wine aged in skulls. Ate cheese grown on the ribs of debtors. They snorted powdered currency and called it "faith."

The most coveted item of the season: a still-beating heart of a man who once forgave someone without charging interest.

At the center of the room stood the **coin-press**—the Symbol of Greed.

It flattened family photos into currency. Scrapbooks into securities. Baby shoes into bearer bonds. It breathed, it belched, it bled profit.

Tonight, the auction was packed.

A new item up for bid: the soul of a **town**.

Riverdale, etched on parchment made from skin, branded with the blood of every child born this year.

They cheered. They *moaned*.

And then the soldier arrived.

He entered through the floor—through the grate where the poor's screams were funneled into the foundation.

He rose, not walking. **Climbing**. Dripping in rusted coin and bloodstained contracts.



In his hand: a **debt ledger**. Not printed. Not inked. Tattooed in blood. Stained in red. Unpaid. Unsigned. Unreturnable.

He places the ledger upon it.

It bursts into flames.

Not fire—**fury**.

Every coin screams. The coin-press shudders. It begins to eat itself—teeth-first—swallowing its own mechanisms, dragging the vault’s foundation with it. The contracts bound in skin ignite. The molten gold boils upward.

The chandelier crashes. The walls implode in silence—too rich to scream.

The patrons try to flee, but their feet are already coins—flattened beneath their own weight.

The Soldier watches, silent. Then turns and walks away.

The vault crumples into a molten crater, burping up one final breath of gilded decay.

Carved into the foundation with quill shards and credit chits.

Melted gold fused to bone, men shrieked as their skull split, jewels forcing themselves into eye sockets. The crown whispered every unpaid debt. Louder. Louder. Until they vomited coins.

The chandelier cracked. Boiled wax poured down, searing the elite’s cloaks to their flesh. They tried to run.

The vaults opened.

Organs spilled out like truth uninvited. A liver burst like a balloon. Lungs inflated and screamed. One heart caught fire and beat out of rhythm until it exploded.

The soldier opened the ledger.

Not a book. A **wound**.

On each page: names of the greedy. The price of each breath they stole. He read aloud. One by one.

And as he spoke—their gold *melted*.

Rings fused to fingers. Coins liquefied and flowed into mouths, down throats, into lungs. They drowned in fortune. Suffocated on wealth.

He lit the chamber with a bond contract soaked in bile.

The fire was green.

It whispered in tongues. It counted. It *invoiced*.

And then, it devoured.

The Goldsmith’s Guild twisted. Folded. Sank into the hill like a swallowed tumor.

All that remained was a melted plaque, etched with acid:

“You owned nothing. Not even yourselves.”



## Chapter Four: Sloth

### *"The House of poisoned dreams"*

The motel wasn't built. It settled.

A hunched structure on the swampy southeastern fringe of Riverdale, where the fog didn't drift but clung, where the trees leaned away, ashamed. Its walls sagged like exhausted lungs, its roof was a quilt of moss, mold, and forgotten prayers. The sign blinked V CANCY in a color that didn't exist. It buzzed with despair.

The locals called it *Room for One More*. No one remembered how many rooms it had. Some said six. Others, sixty-six. It shifted, depending on who was inside. The number was irrelevant. There was always, always one more.

Its halls were narrow, damp, and covered in faded wallpaper that peeled like old scabs. The floorboards exhaled with each step. The air was thick—sweet with mildew, metallic with old blood, and numbing like anesthesia. Breathing in too deeply made your pulse slow. Your eyes flutter.

The townspeople didn't stay here. They sent others.

The thinkers. The questioners. The ones who couldn't keep up with the town's... rhythm. People who paused mid-sentence. People who stared too long at nothing. The slow, the sensitive, the kind.

Each room was a sedation chamber. Beds? No. Maws. Mushy nests made of wet carpet, shed skin, and mattress foam saturated in years of sweat and drool. Guests would sink until their bodies pressed into the room itself. Their limbs softened. Their spines curled. They became furniture.

The televisions showed nothing but static—not white, but a pale pink, as if tuned into flesh. The audio murmured in loops: lullabies sung in reverse, distorted sermons, recordings of breathing slowed to molasses. Some rooms played nothing but the sound of brushing hair.

There were caretakers. Receptionists with long, dragging arms. Maids with pupils the size of pinpricks. Their uniforms were stitched from guest robes. Their fingers were always damp. They moved slowly, heads tilted, whispering reassurances like "You're doing so well" and "Close your eyes now, it's better this way."

In Room 214, a man had laid so still for so long that moss had grown over his mouth and eyes. In 301, a woman's hair had wrapped around the ceiling fan, suspending her gently like a grotesque marionette. In 109, a child had fused with the mattress, her mouth gaping open in a half-sung lullaby. Her tongue had grown roots.

In the main chamber stood the **Mother** — a globular being of suspended tissue, veins threading outward into every corner of the house. Her eyes were shriveled prunes, her mouth stitched wide in an eternal yawn. She whispered dreams into the heads of those below, turning their final thoughts into sedation. The more they surrendered, the more she bloated.

A dog had once wandered in. Now it was a part of her—half-digested, its jawbone twitching occasionally inside the folds of her gut, its whimpers absorbed and recycled into her lullaby.

Tonight, the soldier entered.

He had to crawl. The house would not permit upright posture. Pride was poison here.

He dragged himself through bile puddles, stepping over legs that weren't legs anymore, just ideas of



escape long since rotted. Faces stared from the walls—not paintings, but real. Skin pinned into the plaster, teeth clicking in slow confusion. Some sobbed. Others sang.

He came to the Mother. She saw him—not with eyes, but with nerve endings. She sighed—a hurricane made from boredom.

“You do not belong,” she wheezed.

“No one here does,” he replied.

From his coat, he took a jar.

It contained a scream. A child’s scream. Bottled at the moment of betrayal.

He uncorked it.

The sound didn't erupt. It bled.

It bled into the room like fire into snow. It made the flesh walls tighten, twitch. The sleeping stirred.

One girl opened her eyes and remembered her name.

One man twitched and broke the nest.

Then another. Then another.

The house shook.

Not from rage.

From awakening.

The Mother shrieked. Her veins retracted. Her yawning mouth finally closed. She began to dry.

Her folds cracked. Her juices curdled. The roots began to pull back, vomiting up bones of those long lost. A thousand voices began to whimper in unison. Not from fear—but from the absence of sedation.

The soldier struck a match, placed it against the house's wet root.

The flame was tired. But steady.

It crept—not with hunger, but resolve.

The roots caught first. Then the skin. Then the sleeping, who wailed not for salvation, but for silence. Their bodies began to peel, skin sloughing off in wet sheets. Their nests collapsed into fluid. The ceiling wept.

The final sound was a yawn that turned into a scream, turned into a laugh, turned into silence.

And in the soot that remained:

“Rest was not peace. It was paralysis.”



## *Chapter Five: Wrath*

### *"The Furnace of Fathers"*

It stood beneath the town like a buried snarl.

The Arena. Ancient. Circular. Older than the town itself. Dug not into dirt—but into bone. The walls were ribcages. The floor was cartilage. The seats, bleached femurs stacked in rows. No one built this place. It emerged, like an abscess under Riverdale's skin.

Children weren't told stories about it. They just knew. Somewhere below, a place throbbed with every act of withheld violence.

Once, long ago, it was said to be a court. A place where fathers judged their sons, where mothers bit their tongues, and punishment wasn't passed—but performed.

Here, wrath wasn't a reaction. It was an inheritance.

The rules were never posted, yet everyone obeyed. You did not fight out of defense, but out of shame. You did not strike to survive—you struck because something inside you wanted to see what a person looked like inside out.

And when you lost? The crowd would erupt. Not in cheers, but in laughter.

The sand was not sand. It was ground teeth, packed tight by stomping feet and spilled intestines. The air was thick with sweat memories and spattered guilt.

In the center, a statue stood: a towering, faceless patriarch, arm raised as if always about to strike. Its shadow never shifted, no matter the torchlight.

A scoreboard loomed over the eastern arch. Not metal or digital—but flesh. Veined, pulsing, moaning as it tallied every kill. It smelled of old scabs and betrayal. It kept score, not of victories, but of generational rage.

The arena was dormant now. Quiet. Waiting.

Until tonight.

The Soldier entered through a corridor carved from cracked skulls. His boots echoed like war drums. The air recognized him. So did the blood dried into the walls.

Spectators emerged from hidden alcoves—figures long thought dead. Former champions. Exiled fathers. Mothers turned beasts. Their eyes had no pupils, only reflections of those they'd once loved and broken.

The arena awakened.

The ground steamed. The ribcage walls groaned. The crowd began to chant—not words, but grudges. Entire childhoods screamed in syllables too old to exist.

The Soldier stepped into the center.

He reached into his coat.

From it, he removed a crumpled piece of paper. A child's drawing—faded, edges singed. A home drawn in crude crayon. A sun. A stick-figure family holding hands. Above it, the word "happy" barely legible in pink. Burned at the corners.



He raised it. The crowd recoiled—not in fear, but in memory. Some began to sob. The scoreboard shrieked, leaking pus from its seams.

A boy emerged from the far gate. He was no more than twelve. Bruised, trembling, his wrists still red from rope. His eyes glassy, but not from fear. From fury. The kind taught—not learned. Passed down like heirloom rage.

He held a dagger too big for his hand.

“No one leaves until blood remembers,” whispered the crowd.

The Soldier did not move. The boy charged. The strike was wild, clumsy—but real. The blade caught the Soldier’s coat. Drew blood.

The arena shivered.  
The crowd roared.

More came. A line of fighters—each one younger, more broken. Daughters. Sons. Orphans. All trained in wrath. All fed only one meal: revenge.

The Soldier stood in the storm of them. He didn’t kill. He absorbed. Each strike bled his coat. Each cry trembled his spine. But with every blow, he whispered back what they’d forgotten:

“You are more than your punishment.”

That’s when the arena screamed. The statue cracked. Its raised arm fell. It crushed the first row of seats. The crowd didn’t flinch—they screeched in ecstasy. Bones rattled. Eyes burst.

The Soldier drew his blade. Not to strike—but to cut the memory. He slashed the sand. The teeth wailed. He pierced the walls. The ribs snapped. He threw the blade at the statue’s heart.

It hit.

The arena collapsed inward. Every spectator convulsed in applause that became sobs. The fighters dropped their weapons. Their hands bled not from blades—but from the absence of hate.

Flames erupted—not fire, but wrath unburdened. It didn’t burn. It cleansed.

When he left, nothing remained but a circle of ash. And at the center:

"You inherited their wrath. You ended it."



## *Chapter Six: Envy*

### *"The Academy of Shadows"*

The school stood like a mausoleum for self-worth. A towering carcass of brick and shame, stitched shut by ivy veins that pulsed with comparisons. Its windows didn't reflect you—they rejected you.

Inside, the walls oozed jealousy. Green-black mildew that spelled out last names of better children, names carved so deep they bled.

The floors were waxed with the grease of envy, slick and putrid, pooling in corners where bullied whispers curdled. Every step sounded like a complaint swallowed too late. The air was breathless—because everyone was holding theirs, waiting to be good enough.

The Exemplars didn't blink. They didn't breathe. Their perfect postures cracked vertebrae with pride. Skin like porcelain. But if you looked long enough, you could see it—veins filled with moving letters, grades pumping through like poison.

The Echoes at the bottom? Forgotten children stitched together from fear and mediocrity. Limbs twitching with hope that never grew. They bled at the knuckles from writing essays with finger bones. One girl had chewed off all her fingernails and was gnawing the erasers of pencils she hadn't earned.

Classrooms reeked of antiseptic and old sweat. Teachers didn't teach. They stared with eyeballs that clicked like abacuses, tallying failures with every blink. One teacher had a neck that turned 360 degrees, just to make sure no one felt unseen. Her smile never moved—just widened until her gums cracked.

Desks had belts. Not for books. For wrists.

In the cafeteria, students lined up for the daily envy stew. It was green, bubbling, and it whispered. If you listened closely, it told you what others had that you didn't. One boy swallowed too much and choked on another child's accolades—his trachea clogged with a medal.

The Trophy Hall was worse. Inside stood statues of students—too perfect. Lifelike. Until you saw their mouths sewn shut with sinew. Their fingernails scratched words into the glass from inside: "I'm still here." Each new statue appeared when someone reached "the top." No one asked where their body went. The answer was in the broom closets—dripping.

These trophies weren't just statues. They were the spirits of 'perfect' children, sealed inside to rot beautifully. The school's crowning symbol of sin—its illusion of success.

Then the Soldier entered. He didn't knock. He rang the bell. It shattered the sky.

Children screamed. Some with terror. Some with relief. The mirrors cracked. Not down the center—but across the face. Everyone saw what they really looked like for the first time: trembling, decaying, afraid of being less.

The Soldier placed an honest mirror in the Trophy Hall. And it screamed.

Statues liquefied into slush of stolen confidence. Ink oozed from their mouths. One child began to retch letters. A's, B's, gold stars, all melting in bile. Another boy gouged out his eyes, whispering "no more comparisons."



The Exemplars collapsed like marionettes with their strings cut. Their bones snapped into question marks.

Teachers exploded—not in flame, but in judgment. Rubrics fluttered out of their mouths like moths on fire.

The Soldier wrote one word on the blackboard. “ENOUGH.”

The chalk caught fire.

And for the first time, the children laughed. Not at each other. Not at themselves. They laughed because they could. The walls melted. Not from heat—but from insecurity leaving.

When they walked out of the school, their shadows remained behind—perfect silhouettes. Empty, and finally irrelevant.

Etched into the scorched edge of the mirror: “The race wasn’t real. But the damage was.”





## *Chapter Seven: Pride*

### *"The Cathedral of Bone"*

Riverdale's heart—if such a place had one—beat beneath the earth, a pulsing wound of arrogance sealed beneath stone and sin. And from that arrogance rose the Cathedral of Bone.

It did not sit on land. It loomed. Perched atop a hill of fused skulls, each step bled ink-black ichor, as if the memories of those crushed beneath it refused to stay buried. The structure was impossibly tall. It scraped clouds, but not to be closer to God—only to mock Him.

Its spires were sharpened vertebrae. Its stained glass: layers of preserved ego, stretched over brass frames. Screams were carved into the walls—actual voices etched by surgeons with needles dipped in molten silver. They whispered compliments as you approached. The closer you got, the more it sounded like your own voice.

Inside, it was cathedral only in name. No pews. No altar.

Just mirrors.

Mirrors floor to ceiling, angled to ensure you were always looking at yourself. They didn't reflect your image—they projected your greatest delusion.

A man walked in and saw himself crowned in gold, being worshipped by the dead. He kissed his own reflection so long his lips sloughed off.

Another woman saw herself giving a TED talk in front of corpses. Every applause echoed in real time with a bone-snapping crunch.

There was a throne at the back. Empty. Always. Waiting for the one who could convince the mirrors they were more than glass.

The bishop was not a man. It was a neck. Dozens of necks fused into a pillar, crowned with a rotating head that changed every hour—each face one who claimed they deserved more.

And as for prayer? It was spoken only in tongues of self-love. Organs carved into sonnets, entrails arranged to spell legacy.

Tonight, the mirrors were buzzing. The ego-radiation shimmered.

The soldier stepped in.

The cathedral welcomed him. Every reflection showed a different version of him: — A savior bathed in light. — A tyrant crowned in fear. — A god.

He paused at none.

The mirrors wept. They wanted him to choose. To admire. To linger.

He did not.

He walked to the throne.

The bishop coiled downward, hissing through a thousand throats. "You reject your image?"



“I reject the idea that it matters.”

He pulled from his coat the final relic: a jaw of bone, etched with the word I.

He placed it on the throne.

Then he reached into his coat again and revealed a single match—unstruck. It had traveled through wars, held by hands that were denied praise. A symbol not of destruction—but of silence.

He struck it.

The flame flickered. No applause followed. Just its whisper.

He dropped it into the basin of admiration.

The cathedral shivered.

The mirrors cracked—not shattered, but split down the middle, as if caught between belief and truth. Blood began to spill—not from the soldier, but from the mirrors themselves.

Ego hemorrhaged.

A man nearby screamed, “I am enough!” and promptly exploded. Another wailed, “Look at me!” as their skin peeled itself away in embarrassment.

The bishop uncoiled. Its heads writhed, chanting mantras of power: “You are owed. You are chosen. You are immortal.”

The soldier replied, “You are noise.”

He reached for the walls and pulled them down—not brick by brick, but by refusal.

With every step backward, the cathedral shrank. Pride couldn’t survive without worship.

The soldier turned his back.

The cathedral howled. The walls caved inward. The throne cracked in half. The bishop’s many mouths gnashed itself to ribbons trying to scream louder than the silence.

When the sun rose, there was only dust. And a final engraving on the hill of skulls:

“In the end, no one looked. And so, you ceased to be.”



## *The Well Beneath*

They said Riverdale was never built—it was birthed.  
Not from land or labor, but from an umbilical wound that never healed.

And now—now that every sin had been gutted from its core like a rotten fruit peeled backwards—the truth began to rise like gas from a decayed lung.

Beneath the town square—beneath the market, the brothel, the orphanage, the golden vault, the sleeping motel, the school, the arena, and the cathedral—there was the Well.

No one remembered digging it.  
No one remembered not digging it.  
It had no rope. No pulley. No echo.  
Only a lid. Flesh-covered. With a mouth sewn shut.

The soldier stood above it now. Alone.

His coat, once khaki, now resembled drying skin. His boots squelched with memories. His hands were empty—not because he dropped the relics, but because they had become him. Every object he'd offered, every sin he had unmade, was now stitched beneath his ribs.

He knelt. And listened.

The town was dead. But death was not quiet.  
The walls of each ruin pulsed faintly, like lungs still hating the air they once breathed. The bones beneath homes itched. Screams brewed in the pipes.

The mouth on the Well twitched. And opened.

It did not scream. It did not whisper.  
It sighed—like a guilty man exhaling the truth on his final breath.

From its black throat, a tongue emerged. Long. Forked. Made from the names of every child Riverdale ever forgot. It licked the air like a priest testing wine, then recoiled—ashamed.

The soldier didn't hesitate.

He removed his coat. Folded it. Set it beside the Well like a prayer no longer needed.  
Then, with the slow grace of resignation, he stepped in.

Feet first.

No splash. No fall. Just... acceptance.

Below, there were no walls—only organs. Veins. Teeth. Laughter.  
The Well did not lead down. It led inward.

He did not fight it.  
He did not burn it.  
He simply became part of it.

Because Riverdale was never meant to be healed.  
It was meant to be remembered.



And the soldier?  
He was not a man.  
He was a contradiction. The opposite of silence. A conscience given skin.  
His final relic was himself.  
Not vengeance. Not fire.  
Just presence.  
The one thing sin cannot stand.  
He became the Well's memory—so that it could never rise again without consequence.  
Some say he came from the last town that buried its guilt.  
Others say he's been walking since the first lie was called a tradition.  
He goes where the ground is soft with secrets.  
Where the air tastes like forgotten names.  
Where children laugh at graves, and adults burn mercy.  
He is not salvation.  
He is the itch beneath the floorboards. The creak before a scream.  
He is the proof that even rot, if ignored, becomes architecture.  
And so, the Well closed.  
Its lid sealed with the sound of a sob.  
The earth above stitched itself clean.  
A blade of grass grew. A flower bloomed.  
Somewhere, a child giggled.  
And somewhere else, another town began to forget where its roots came from.  
Riverdale was not cursed.  
Riverdale was necessary.  
And now...  
So is yours.

*Fin.*

