

A Fish Story

A Novel in Progress

They Must Die of Looking in the Glass: Lovecraft, Body Horror, and Uncanny Procreation

Literature Project

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Table of Contents

A Fish Story.....1

They Must Die of Looking in the Glass.....78

New Routine

It's morning now, but not for much longer. Clouds are creeping across the sky from the east. The light has grown pale and thin. It's unnaturally warm for January. All over Brooklyn, people are debating whether or not to run home and get their umbrellas, and the people who are safe inside are scanning the horizon for lightning.

Janice Porter looks out the bedroom window of her girlfriend's apartment. She hooks her long fingers between the slats of the blinds and aligns first one eye, and then the other, with the narrow opening. She can't see in daylight as well as she used to, but the shape of a cloudbank scudding toward the city is unmistakable.

Janice is always careful to only let the tips of her fingers show. The translucent lavender webbing that links her digits stops at the last joint, thank goodness. If someone were standing on the fire escape looking in, they wouldn't see enough to jump to any conclusions: just the mottled, iridescent skin of her cheeks, the unnatural roundness of her unblinking eyes, and the starkness of the apartment beyond. She might just be wearing odd makeup, or a mask of some kind.

Unsure what to make of the weather patterns, she lets the blinds snap back into place and retreats into her dark bedroom. Stripped of all of its furnishings save for a vinyl mattress, a laptop, and a dresser holding a number of XXL t-shirts, the room still seems smaller than it was before she moved in, shortly before the changes began.

On the west wall of the room is dark rectangle where a large, gilt-framed mirror once hung. According to the previous tenant, it had hung in that room for thirty odd years. The glass had been dark and warped, but the frame was so intricately carved with flowers, suns, and baroque scrollwork that it made a gorgeous addition to an otherwise

dull room. Back when they were still on speaking terms, Sophie would often remark on what a beautiful piece it was.

Catching unexpected glimpses of herself is frightening—even in the murky, indistinct reflections presented by a purely decorative mirror—so it’s gone now. She needs time to mentally prepare herself for seeing her reflection. Janice doesn’t know if Sophie threw it out or if it hangs in some other room now.

She scratches at a particularly dry patch of scales on her leg, shuddering at the cloying warmth of her room. Janice is always a little too warm now. Her body strains toward the cold embrace of the ocean, but she resists. She’s not sure how much longer she can stand being hot and dry all the time. More and more, she’s not sure why she resists the pull at all.

There’s a knock at the bedroom door. Janice knows there’s only one person it could be, but she still tenses.

“The bathroom’s all yours,” says Sophie.

Sophie getting the bathroom first is part of their weekend routine. This one moment—the knock on the door, Sophie’s brief announcement—also constitutes the whole of their interaction during any given week. On weekdays Janice just waits until Sophie goes off to her job before taking over the bathtub for hours. When Janice isn’t in the bathroom she holes up in her room with her laptop and tries not to make too much noise.

This is how things have been the last couple months. Sophie hasn’t broken up with Janice for her infidelity, or for lying about being terminally ill back when that was still a threat. She hasn’t even asked her to leave. All Sophie’s done is insist that Janice

avoid her as much as possible and not talk to her unless Sophie initiates a conversation. Given the circumstances, Janice thinks this is very generous, though it's really only a matter of time until Sophie asks her to move out. Until then, it's like living with a very polite ghost.

Janice waits until she hears Sophie walk down the hall and shut the door of her own bedroom. When she's sure her girlfriend won't suddenly reappear, Janice steps into the hall as lightly as she can and plods to the dark bathroom, her gaze fixed on the green tile floor. She takes a few deep breaths, the gills on her neck flaring in anticipation. Her knees are quaking a little. Some days she can't stand to look at herself at all, so this is an improvement. Today is a good day. Sort of.

Fighting against the urge to stare at the floor forever, she looks up and takes in her reflection, banishing the small part of her that still expects to see a five and a half foot tall black woman with high cheekbones and delicate shoulders.

In dim light, her skin still looks the same dark brown as before. If she holds perfectly still and looks at the bathroom mirror at just the right angle, she can trick herself into thinking she looks almost the same. From the neck up, at least. If she gets her breathing under control, her gills shut up like venetian blinds. Only the permanent downward curve of her mouth and the absence of any hair on her head betray the truth of the situation. Even those could be explained away by illness.

But she can only hold still for so long, and that's what really brings out the changes in her. When she moves, her brown eyes flash green in the dark. Her body lurches through even the simplest movements as if she hasn't spent twenty-nine years walking on dry land. If she manages to look at her backside in the mirror, she'll see

dorsal ridges running parallel to her spine like little mountain ranges. Everything about her is coarse and bulky: uncharted territory. When she flicks on the bathroom light and shucks off the oversized shirt, her scales throw the light back in green and purple sparkles.

Before she can prepare the tub for her daily soak, Sophie appears in the doorway.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” says Janice. “I’m about to—”

“Yeah I know,” says Sophie, “I just wanted to talk to you. If that’s okay.”

“Oh.”

Before Janice made the catastrophic series of mistakes that led to her transformation, they used to touch all the time: hands in each other’s back pockets, fingers threaded together on the walk to the laundry room. They never sat anywhere in private without cuddling. It’s been two months since all that came to an end, and now here’s Sophie with her hand on Janice’s shoulder like it’s been no time at all.

“Is that okay?”

“Yeah, sure. I mean...yeah, it’s fine.”

“I can leave if it’s not fine.”

“No, don’t leave,” Janice whispers.

She brushes the tips of her fingers over Sophie’s hand and pulls back, suddenly unsure. What remains of her stomach is doing flip-flops. They used to be well matched in size. Janice has gained seven inches in height and at least two hundred pounds in weight; Sophie is waif-like in comparison.

The much smaller woman steps all the way into the bathroom and wraps her arm around Janice's waist, her palm coming to rest on Janice's outer thigh. Janice can barely feel it. They look at themselves in the mirror: Sophie thoughtful, Janice goggle-eyed and blank.

"You're smoother than I expected," Sophie says. "I was worried you'd have like, shark skin or something, but this is nice."

"I'm, uh, glad you think so."

The silence that follows could politely be called fraught. Sophie looks down at the floor.

This is it, thinks Janice. This is the end. She can probably tell that I'm ready to take to the ocean so there's no reason for me to stay. She's going to tell me to leave and I'm not going to have any reasonable way of convincing her not to throw me out.

"I'm sorry I haven't been here for you," Sophie says.

Her voice is soft. This is not what Janice expects her to say, or how Janice expects her to say it.

"I felt—I mean, I guess I still feel this way, to be honest—really betrayed by you. And I don't think forgiveness is really on the table. Don't get the wrong idea. It's just...this is a real shitty thing that's happened to you, and you don't deserve it."

The light in the bathroom is too bright. Janice wants to shut her eyes but it's been a few weeks since she woke up from troubling dreams and found that her eyelids had gone translucent, like a salamander's. Shutting her eyes doesn't mean the same thing it once did, but she does it anyway out of habit. Her lids slide shut with a tiny wet noise, and all the shiny surfaces go blurry. "I thought you were gonna ask me to move out or

something.” Sophie tilts her head to look at Janice, and Janice stares at the showerhead.

“I’m almost all the way changed, obviously, and I thought...you’d wanna be rid of me.

Now that I’m probably able to just go into the ocean and not come back.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” Sophie says. “I miss you,” she adds, pressing her face against the soft, pale surface of Janice’s chest, her breath tickling.

Janice’s mouth sags open. Her gills are flaring so wide that she can see the red flesh within, even through the vaselined-lens cover of her eyelids. “I miss me, too,” she croaks.

Sophie wraps both her arms around Janice, lightly fingering the rough dorsal ridges. A moment’s hesitation, and Janice returns the favor, resting one hand at the small of her girlfriend’s back and using the other to cradle her head. The webbing between her fingers prevents her from playing with Sophie’s hair the way she wants to. “You’re still you,” Sophie whispers, “you just...look different. That’s all. You’re still the same person.”

“Am I really, though? I don’t think we have any useful frame of reference for what’s happening to me,” says Janice.

Her voice is thick and muddy, repellant to her own ears. “I am *purple*. I have *gills*. I was murdered and brought back as this *thing*. You know that riddle about the axe? How, if you replace the blade, and replace the handle, is it still the same axe? Well, how could it be?”

Sophie says nothing, keeps fiddling with the pattern of bumps on her girlfriend’s scaly back.

“What does that make me?” Janice asks. “Huh? New body. New life. What am I? I can’t even move my face anymore!”

“Other than ‘my girlfriend,’ I honestly don’t know,” Sophie replies, her voice muffled by Janice’s bulk. “You’re not doing so good, are you?”

“Nope. Not good. Really not good.”

“Anything besides the obvious? You can tell me now. I want to talk to you.”

Janice removes her hand from Sophie’s head and looks down. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” says Sophie.

“You have to admit this is a little weird. Not me, I mean...well of course I’m weird, I just mean going so quickly from not talking at all to talking about everything. Is this ok?”

“Well, you said we don’t have a useful frame of reference for what’s happening. I have literally no idea what the protocol is for the situation ‘my girlfriend cheated on me with her evil ex in a moment of panic and then came back to me as a fish person.’ So I’m really just making this up as I go. If you want to talk, I’m ready to listen.”

Janice disentangles herself and motions for Sophie to take a seat on the edge of the tub. Janice sits herself down on the floor and takes a shuddering breath.

“Every night I have this dream. I see myself walk into the ocean, and after I’ve walked a great distance I kick off from the bottom and swim. It feels so...right. The water supports me so much it’s almost like flying. I know I’m doing exactly what I’m supposed to do, and I have this feeling like mistakes are impossible. Like I can do no wrong. It’s pitch dark but I can see well enough. And then I reach the city. It’s...well, it’s beautiful. Coral palaces and shining pillars. The people that greet me are all blank faced monsters

like—” She pauses to take a deep breath. “Like me. Except I don’t think they’re monsters in the dream. They’re my family. My new family. And they’re all so glad to have me there.”

“Then what happens?” Sophie asks.

“Then I wake up. And I’m horrified at how not horrified I am. The ocean wants me, Sophie. More than you do. Which isn’t a comment on you, it’s just...well, it’s God. God wants me down there, in the dark, with all the other people like me.”

“Is that what you want?”

Janice shifts uneasily, her mouth hanging open a little wider. “Yes and no. When I’m asleep, it’s all I want, and sometimes right when I wake up and I’m not quite awake it’s like that dream of the ocean is the only good thing in the whole world. But if you don’t mind me staying here...well. That’s different. I want us to be friends again.”

“You’d pass up some wild undersea palace just to stay with me?”

“Well uh...better the devil you know, I guess. I guess?”

Sophie smiles. Janice thinks it’s the best thing she’s ever seen. “You definitely still talk the same.”

Janice tries to smile with her eyes, considers saying something about it, then decides against it. Her girlfriend bites her lip in a mischievous way. “Can I tell you kind of a strange thing?” Sophie asks.

“Go for it,” says Janice.

“When I was a little kid I had this glittery purple and green Ninja Turtle lunchbox. Your skin kind of reminds me of it. You know what, it isn’t just the lunchbox. You’re kind of shaped like a Ninja Turtle now, minus the shell.”

Janice tilts her head in lieu of raising her eyebrows that no longer exist.

“Like a Ninja Turtle?”

“Yeah, you know? ‘They’re the world’s most fearsome fighting team’?”

“No, I know who the Ninja Turtles are, I just I never had Ninja Turtles growing up.”

“Oh,” says Sophie. “Did I know that? Have we had this conversation?”

“I think we probably did...before. You know.”

“Sounds right. I can never keep track of our separate childhood touchstones.”

They lapse into a comfortable silence. Sophie slides off the tub edge onto the floor, aligning her knees with Janice’s.

“So...is it a good thing that I look like a Ninja Turtle?”

“Duh,” says Sophie, “Ninja Turtles are the best. When I was little all I wanted was a Ninja Turtle boyfriend. Five-year-old me would be so happy.”

“That’s funny. Good funny, I mean.” Janice laughs a little. It’s a strange, rumbling sound, but still recognizable as a laugh. She wonders if laughter will leave her the way her hair and eyelids have: if there will come a day when this simple expression of mirth is as foreign to her as a forgotten childhood toy. As she’s wondering, Sophie leans forward and kisses one corner of her mouth, a hopeful look in her small, human eyes.

Janice’s lips are neither soft nor flexible, and she does not know how to respond. She wants to kiss her back. Her mouth is no longer capable of obeying this impulse. She still loves Sophie.

Maybe Sylvie would be able to help her now. Janice turns the two names over in her mind: Sylvie and Sophie. They'll never meet. They don't look or sound or act anything alike. They've both changed her. She wonders if Sylvie would be able to give her advice about how to love a human being. How could Sylvie's husband have loved her, knowing what she was destined to bring about?

Outside, thunder rolls. Inside, the bathroom light flickers and goes out. Janice tenses up, reaching instinctively to shelter her girlfriend from...something. She knows that the storm crashing upon the city isn't *the* storm, but someday soon a consuming rain will fall and everything will change.

They sit there in the dark, waiting.

The Message

On a bright morning when the horizon was silvered with mist, the people of Nekton Heights awoke and knew that Sylvie Aaron was pregnant at last. She had rooted the knowledge in their minds while they slept, arranged it like so many flowers, but not in a way that had disturbed them. Sylvie was a considerate like that.

Right at dawn, Annie Williamson trundled down the block still in her nightgown and slippers and pounded on her nephew's door.

"You know?" she hissed, when Evan's bleary face appeared at the screen.

"Aunt Annie, I still would have known at ten, goddammit" he replied.

He shut the door before his aunt could say anything else. As she was only willing to bother a blood relative at sunrise, Annie went home instead of knocking on any more doors. She got dressed without even turning on the lights and then hurried out to open up the bar. Usually Braintree's didn't open until noon, but this was a special occasion. Everybody went to Braintree's to talk whenever there was news, and this was the biggest news of all. It was her duty as the sole owner and proprietor of Nekton Heights's only bar to be accommodating to her friends and neighbors.

Even so, it was a couple hours before anyone dropped by, and then it was only her friend Varun coming to check in. They had little in common—he a scholar of ancient literature, she a high school dropout—but every Thursday night Annie let her meathead nephew man the bar so that she and Varun could play cards in the backroom.

"Hey Annie! You know?" he said, pushing his way through the jingling front door.

“Of course,” she said, “Everyone knows. You want a drink? I shouldn’t sell anything to you before noon, but given the circumstances, I think it might be appropriate to celebrate.”

Varun shook his head and replied, “It’s still too early in the day. Even for that.”

Annie set down the glass she was polishing and pulled out the bottle of whiskey her own father had distilled for just this occasion. She tilted it so Varun could see how the golden brown liquid caught the light.

“You sure?” she asked. “I wanted to give you the first shot.”

“Perhaps in the evening,” he said, smiling.

“Well, I don’t know if I’ll be able to wait that long,” said Annie, sliding the bottle back under the bar. “Might have to take that first shot myself.”

Varun was just about to tell her she deserved it when the Baker family walked in with their children in tow, and flush-faced Mrs. Baker said, “It happened. What do we do now?”

Mrs. Baker was well into her change, but she still had the rosy Irish complexion of her human lineage. Gill flaps had formed on her neck and her eyes didn’t shut right anymore. It was too soon to tell if all of her children would change as well, but her eldest regarded the world with a stare that grew glassier by the day.

The arrival of the Baker family was the end of the calm. Before long three other families and a number of solitary people had arrived, seeking something they couldn’t quite put a name to. Annie busied herself with pouring soda and ice water and giving out little bags of chips. Discussion murmured all around, ebbing and flowing like low tide. Sylvie Aaron’s pregnancy was no secret and it was never supposed to be a secret, but

people talked about it like it was. It had been foretold long before Sylvie's own birth—before the settling of Nekton Heights, before the terrible slaughter in Massachusetts, before, before the stars had unaligned and thrown the Earth into strange darkness—and still it was making people jump and stutter like frightened animals.

After opening the bar so early, Annie also closed it early, shoos out stragglers and sending disappointed groups home. But Annie didn't go home. Not right away. Instead, she followed the rustling sound of waves to the beach path. She had never come this way in darkness before, but she found that she knew where every rock and furrow would be before she could trip. Someone was looking out for her. Maybe that meant her presence was wanted.

Voices carried on the wind. Annie could see a few small boats on the water, lit up like floating lanterns. There was singing out in Gray Harbor, human and inhuman voices mingling in joyous exultations that were partly Christian hymns and partly sea shanties. Usually there was only singing on Sundays, but today was nothing if not a day for song and celebration.

After an easy walk, Annie reached the front porch of Sylvie Aaron's renovated Victorian house. Rather than looking ominous in the dark, the place seemed as if it should only be seen in darkness. As if naked sunlight would do it a disservice.

There was a light burning in the front window, and shadows writhing on the inside wall. Annie took the bronze goat's head knocker in one hand and tapped it against the door. Sylvie had known Annie would come by before Annie herself did, but knocking was still the polite thing to do. It was entirely possible Sylvie already knew exactly what Annie had to say, but it still needed to be said.

Once inside, Annie found the mother-to-be seated in front of a roaring fire, one arm around her husband. Wayne turned his head and nodded at the visitor, but otherwise his attention was riveted on his wife. He gazed at Sylvie like she was a star made flesh, like her bones were diamond, like she was the culmination of everything good stored up in the world. Annie had never seen a man so in love. She wondered what it was like to be so taken with someone. She wondered, a little bitterly, what it was like to be so loved, not just by your husband, but by everyone, by a whole town.

“I don’t want to intrude,” Annie murmured.

It might have seemed like no one was paying attention, but she knew Sylvie was listening to her. Sylvie was always listening, always concerned with how best to help her community and keep it safe. It was part of what made her so loved.

“Sylvie,” Annie said, “I think it’s about time your sister was coming home.”

Wayne pressed his face into his wife’s belly. The twisting shadows danced on the wall. Ever courteous, Sylvie turned her head as if to look at Annie, even though she had no eyes to look with and no visible mouth to smile an agreement with. The perfectly spherical, razor toothed maw with which she ate her meals was on the very top of her head. Even when Sylvie sat it was impossible to see, surrounded as it was by an elegant Medusa’s crown of tentacles and feelers. They coiled and spiraled this way and that, and the shadows danced in tandem.

“She’s had her time outside in the world, and now we need her back. You need her. And she’ll want to be here, now that things are going to change,” Annie continued

Really, Amanda Aaron never should have left in the first place, but Annie wouldn’t have said that out loud. Disentangling herself from her husband, the expectant

mother got to her feet and faced the visitor. Annie was neither a short nor a skinny woman, but Sylvie dwarfed her completely, marvelous and pale as a marble statue in the flickering light. Sylvie laid a gentle hand on her friend's cheek.

I WILL SUMMON HER TOMORROW.

Annie smiled, resisting the urge to lean into the cool flesh of Nekton Heights' most beloved citizen. Her business done, she thanked Sylvie for her time and left, heading for home in the velvet darkness.

The Mistake

Janice had known that Tuesday was going to be a bad day. Doctor's appointments were universally awful; follow up appointments for mysterious back pain that would in all likelihood be very expensive to treat could only be worse. The fact that a follow up visit was even necessary was a bad sign. As if that wasn't enough, her doctor had scheduled the appointment not at the regular office but at Sloan Kettering, and with a specialist of some kind, which raised so many red flags that Janice was too afraid to ask any questions about the change of venue and practitioner.

How bad could the news really be, though? Janice had never been seriously ill in her life. She probably just needed a chiropractor for her weirdly achy back. The appointment could be for anything. There were probably loads of doctors at Sloan Kettering who treated things that weren't cancer. Besides, it wasn't as if her doctor would send her off to a specialist without explaining what was up, especially if it was something life threatening. By the time of her appointment, she was sure that she had psyched herself up so much that she was ready for whatever the worst-case scenario might be.

She wasn't.

When the doctor had finished speaking and left the room to give her some time alone, she felt as if she had been stripped, layer by layer, until nothing remained of her but a brain, a haphazard cluster of organs, and something ugly growing at her core. Her only thought in that moment was that taking the whole day off work had turned out to be a really good plan in retrospect. Going anywhere but home would have been unthinkable, given the circumstances.

She sat on the F train back to Brooklyn for a thousand years, thinking, staring at the gouges in the subway floor, sandwiched between a teenager in rainbow cargo pants and a frail old man muttering about the Eye of Providence.

In elementary school, a little boy a year older than Janice had died of leukemia. Everyone got the day off of school to go to his funeral. She had felt deeply uncomfortable being asked to mourn a boy she had barely even met, and at the time she hadn't fully understood what had happened. No one in her family on either side had ever had cancer.

In college, Janice had befriended a girl with a lung tumor. Not the same—she had eventually beaten the cancer and never even missed much class time in the end—but similar enough. They had kissed once at a party but nothing ever came of it. What Janice really remembered was how exhausted she had been all the time, and how she could never get away from people asking, “How *are* you?” and putting sympathetic but unwanted hands on her shoulders.

No one even knows yet and I'm already exhausted. I'm going to be the “cancer patient” for the rest of my life.

She stiffened at that, garnering no reaction at all from her seatmates.

For the rest of my life.

Even in the best case scenario the doctor had outlined, she would never see thirty-five. She might not even see thirty. She would never get to have a midlife crisis. It was all gone. Perhaps more than most people, Janice had often wondered how she was going to die. Now she knew, and having a clear view of Death taking aim at her did not make it any easier.

• • •

That evening, prickling rain was falling, and Janice was safe in her apartment on Clinton Street, heating up a pot of chunky canned soup on the stove. She didn't have the energy to make anything more complex for dinner, and it was the first thing she'd pulled out of the cupboard. Sophie must have bought it. Sophie wasn't very picky about her food, and Janice couldn't remember ever looking at off brand soup in the grocery store and thinking, *Yes, this will be a suitable meal.*

There were seven tabs of Google searches open on her laptop on the kitchen table: "pancreatic cancer survival rate," "how to write a will," "how to keep cancer a secret," "why not to keep cancer a secret," "how to tell someone you have cancer," "how to tell if you are in shock," and "best way to prepare canned soup."

She had learned a lot about pancreatic cancer in the last twenty minutes or so: that it could strike without warning, that sometimes it didn't matter how well you took care of yourself. This was the kind of cancer that, if you displayed any symptoms at all, it was probably already too late. Sometimes you just had no luck at all. She had been losing weight for about a month, but she had also been exercising. She had been trying to lose weight and was delighted when the pounds started to slough off so easily. A lot of people lost weight quickly when they started a new exercise regime. A lot of people had back pain after weightlifting.

What if I had ignored it? Janice wondered. What if I had just assumed it was something normal and let it go for another week or two?

Everything she had read so far encouraged her to tell someone, even if it was just one person. It was a crushing thing to bear alone, she read in between stirs. Her family

and friends would surely rise to the occasion and form a supportive network, the sources insisted. She wouldn't want to deny them a chance to offer love and support.

Janice remembered being fifteen. Her parents found her LiveJournal—specifically the entry where she wrote about what a relief it was to learn that there were other teen lesbians on the site, and that she wasn't all alone—and didn't speak to her for three weeks. When they broke the silence they assured her that they loved her, but if she ever brought a girl home, they would throw her out. She was too young to know what she really wanted anyway. They were protecting her from making a life-ruining mistake. They weren't homophobes, they insisted. They just didn't want that in the house.

Janice figured they wouldn't want this situation in the house either. They had never known about her weird breakup with Amanda. They didn't even know she was in a relationship right now. There was no way she was bringing this to them.

If no one else, she had to tell Sophie. Didn't she? She couldn't not tell Sophie. Sophie would even understand why she couldn't tell her parents. Sophie's own parents had not been happy when their child came out as bisexual, but they never threatened abandonment until Sophie told them that she didn't want to live as a boy anymore. The threats never quite materialized, but her parents did refuse to let her come home after college. Sophie was never invited to Christmas at home with her brothers, but they had at least stopped addressing their cards to "Samuel." It could have been a lot worse, all things considered.

Janice and Sophie talked so much about not keeping secrets from each other, but this was something else again. This was an entirely different ballgame than "I feel unappreciated when you don't call me back" and "some part of me expects you to up and

leave without warning just like Amanda did.” It wasn’t even Sophie’s problem yet.

Technically, it was Janice’s problem and no one else’s.

What if this is it? The final thing that drives her away from me? She stayed through the trust issues and the nightmares but this is...bigger.

Janice knew intellectually that Sophie was a good, kind person and that this news would not change that. Sophie would understand. But she couldn’t help worrying about it. Sophie was supposed to be the one person she could tell anything to, but Janice still struggled with being open and honest in the best of circumstances. Some of it was because of the incredible and baffling failure of her last relationship. Most of it, however, was just a relic of growing up with the knowledge that being open and honest about how she felt would be an easy way to get murdered.

She turned off the burner and set the pot on a trivet on the linoleum counter. She was about to grab a bowl when she realized that no one could stop her from eating straight out of the pot. Sophie was busy with parent-teacher conferences tonight, so she would never know.

Janice set the pot on the kitchen table in front of her laptop. The soup tasted like burnt scabs, but at least it was hot. She shifted around in her chair, unable to ignore the pain in her back that she knew was only going to get worse. First thing tomorrow, before work, she would have to go to her pharmacy and pick up those painkillers the doctor had prescribed.

I can’t tell Sophie. This’ll just kill her. As if it isn’t killing me. Literally killing me. Holy shit, I am literally dying. I expected to have a moment in my life where I thought, “I am dying,” but I didn’t expect it to be this.

She hadn't cried yet, but she knew it was only a matter of time until she broke down into a squall. That was what should happen. That would be the normal response. She rested her chin in her hand and stared out at the drizzling rain, willing herself to cry and get it over with.

Cry, goddamn you, she thought. Be normal for once and cry.

Janice gave up on her meal less than halfway through the pot. At least now she could say that her ex-girlfriend dumping her out of nowhere and vanishing off the face of the earth after three years of a close and loving relationship was no longer the worst thing that had ever happened to her.

She had just emptied the rest of the soup into the garbage when it occurred to her that there *was* someone she could tell: someone who would accept the news without judgment or acknowledgement, who had remained resolutely silent for years. Already she felt a twinge of guilt for even thinking of emailing her ex, but this wasn't like all the other times. This really was something she couldn't tell anyone else. She could tell Amanda because telling Amanda amounted to writing a diary entry. It would count as sharing the burden, and it would have no fallout.

Feeling very much like an alcoholic sneaking a can of beer, Janice opened up her email and began to type.

Hey Amanda,
Been a while, I know. Haven't had reason to write because life has actually been pretty good for the most part. I got a pay raise at work. Sophie is as kind and loving as ever and a much better roommate than you ever were. Guess who doesn't steal my expensive shampoo? SHE DOESN'T. No, I have not forgotten.

The reason I'm writing is I just got back from the doctor. They found something really bad in me. Three-months-to-live-bad. I can't stand telling anyone about it so I'm telling you because you never write back anyway. Did you miss my emails? I was

doing really well until today, you know. I have cancer and I'm going to die. It's in my pancreas. I know what you're thinking: no, I didn't even smoke. Drank a lot when you left but not enough for this. I never did anything bad enough but tell that to the disease. Just one of those freak things, you know? If you have any symptoms at all it's already too late. I don't know what to do. I might not even have time enough to stop caring about you. Would you do something for me? Tell me why. Please. Tell me the truth before I die so I don't go to my grave still hung up on you. I don't deserve that. Help me. PLEASE HELP ME. No one can help me but you. I'm going to die but you can still give me some peace of mind.

On the other side of the table, her cell phone was buzzing. Sophie was calling. Janice missed it entirely.

• • •

Two nights later, Janice was in her pajamas and just about to go to bed when she decided to check her personal email one last time. If Sloan Kettering had any important messages for her she wanted to at least mentally prepare herself for dealing with them later. She hadn't told Sophie yet. She hadn't found the words.

The red icon over her mailbox told her that she had one new message. Janice reared back in her seat when she saw what it was. Spots danced in her field of vision, and she had a feeling in her gut that usually preceded vomiting.

It wasn't from a doctor. It wasn't from her family. It wasn't even spam. It was a one-line response to the email she had sent on a whim two nights ago.

Do you still have the same phone number?

The pain in her back stirred like a sleeping animal. Janice broke out in a sweat. Amanda had written back. Three years without a word, and now that one sentence. Janice felt herself coming loose from her body, floating up toward the ceiling. She saw her fingers type out a single word and click "send."

yes

The air in the room settled thick as smoke when she breathed it in. There was no sound from anywhere in her apartment. Even the street outside had fallen dead quiet. Janice's out of body feeling ended when the silence was broken and she flinched violently at the new sound.

Her phone was ringing.

• • •

The next day, after she had hurriedly packed a duffle bag, Janice called the school where Sophie worked when she knew Sophie was on her lunch break.

"Hey, uh...Sophie? I kinda...need to talk to you about something."

"..."

"It's pretty important, yeah."

"..."

"I kinda...I need to go away for a few days."

"..."

"Yeah, my back. They say I have to go see a specialist in Maine."

"..."

"No, I don't know why it's so far away. You'd think they wouldn't make me travel with a muscle strain, but I guess that's just how it is."

"..."

"No, it's...I'd rather go alone. I'll be gone before you get home."

"..."

"No, no, it's just...I mean don't you want a little time to yourself?"

“ ... ”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“ ... ”

“Look, we don’t have to talk about this right now, do we?”

“ ... ”

“I’ll call you when I get back. I promise.”

“ ... ”

“...you know I do. I just...I have trouble, you know. I wish I could—I can’t—I feel it, but I can’t...say it, I want to say it but it’s like the words get stuck. I’m sorry. You deserve so much better than me.”

“ ... ”

“Yes, you do. I’m not selling myself short.”

“ ... ”

“I guess we can talk about that too. But not now.”

The Promise

On a cold November morning, so early in the day that the sun had yet to rise and Nekton Heights was still gripped in the iron chill of night, Amanda Aaron threw on her brother in law's winter coat, pulled a pair of sneakers over her sleep socks, and sprinted out of her sister's house without shutting the front door. Her breath misted thick as steam as she ran, her straggly blond hair flying out behind her. Even though she was out of shape and she tripped once on the beach path she did not stop to rest.

With no job and no real obligations—at least none that her sister couldn't excuse for her—she had become nocturnal. Every night at dinner Amanda would insist that she would be in bed by two and asleep by two thirty. This time for sure, she would get herself back on track. In actuality, she got her second wind at about three and didn't get to lying down until about five. On bad nights she was awake until well after sunrise. It would have been one thing if she spent this time drawing or painting, like she had in previous years, but instead she just screwed around.

On good nights, all she did besides watching movies was to click the random article button on Wikipedia and read until her vision started to blur. On bad nights, she would open up the email that she was supposed to have deleted three years ago and read Janice's messages. On the very worst nights, there would be a new message from Janice. Then she would cry until she started dry-heaving. She used to scratch her fingernails up and down her underarms from wrist to elbow, but not anymore. Every time she opened that mailbox it hurt like dull knives, and she awoke the next day feeling hungover. It was a good hurt: reliable, predictable, and entirely within her control.

Knowing self-harm when she saw it, her sister Sylvie had frequently tried to intervene. But Amanda was not interested in getting well. It was penance, she insisted. She deserved it a thousand times over: for not cutting short her relationship when she had the chance, for not finding a better way to end it when the time came, for getting involved with Janice in the first place when she knew it could never last. For being weak. For being selfish. Finally, for letting herself be so consumed with regret.

Tonight had been a bad night. She had almost closed her laptop without looking at her old email.

What if I hadn't looked? she wondered, taking longer and longer strides as she rocketed toward her destination. *What if I had let it alone like I was supposed to? Done the healthy thing and finally put it in the past? If I had moved on then she could have died.*

She slowed to a halt at Evan Forsberg's front door and knocked five times. She had called his cell before leaving but he hadn't picked up. Amanda knew his phone was never off and never on silent. Pausing for only a moment, she knocked again. The clapboard house remained dark. All was still, and even the crashing waves on the shore were too distant here to be heard. Amanda pulled her phone out and called him again.

This time, a light went on in the top right window. A minute or so later Evan opened the door and stood aside to let her in, moving with all the grace of a golem. Even though it was practically winter he was clad only in an oversized Metallica shirt and a pair of paisley boxers.

“Goddammit. Wakin me up this early, you better be fuckin dying Amanda, I swear to god and everyone else, this had better be goddamn good,” he muttered, his eyes falling shut as he stood.

“It’s worse than that, Evan,” she said, her normally musical voice dry and scratchy. “It’s Janice. She has cancer.”

Evan’s brain took several more rotations than usual to cycle this information into the appropriate places. First he had to remember that Janice was Amanda’s One True Love, the woman from whom she would never move on, no matter how much time passed or how hard anyone tried to set her up with Kulsum Rosewood, the cute grocer. Then he had to remember that Amanda had ostensibly cut contact with Janice three years ago, as everyone was required to nix personal attachments if said person was not also living in Nekton Heights. Then he had to consider the implications of such a person having a terminal illness, and ultimately, why that news might send Amanda knocking on his door at fuck o’ clock in the morning.

Evan let out a creaking groan and staggered over to his formica kitchen table. He pulled out one of the wooden chairs, sat down, and buried his face in his hands.

“Goddammit. Oh, goddammit. Why?” he asked. “Why do you do this? Why me?”

She sat down in the chair next to him, unsure of what to say.

Evan said, “So you’ve been in touch with her this whole time.”

“No,” said Amanda. “Not really. I haven’t spoken to her since I left New York. But...”

“But?”

“Well, sometimes, when she gets really sad or angry or she’s having a tough time wi-with...with her new girlfriend, she sends me an email. Venting, you know. Confessional stuff. Used to be genuine messages but now she writes like she doesn’t expect anyone to ever read it.”

“An email?” Evan said, looking up at her. “Ah Jesus, you still have your old email address. You were supposed to delete that. Whatever happened to basic security measures?”

“Evan, you’ve never been in love.”

He rolled his eyes at her. She wasn’t wrong, but that wouldn’t stop him being indignant.

“I’ve seen movies,” he said.

“No, you don’t understand what it’s like. I could never let her go. Not completely. I hurt her too badly to let go.”

Evan rubbed his temples. “You know you’ve put a lot of people in danger by staying in any kind of contact with an outsider.”

“I know,” she said.

Evan stared at her.

“Ugh,” he groaned. “Oh, goddammit. I think I can guess the rest of this, but go ahead and tell me anyway. Maybe I’m wrong.”

Amanda leaned forward in her chair. The harsh fluorescent light of the kitchen showed off every single imperfection in her face. Depending on how she tilted her head, the dark circles under her eyes looked alternately like smudges of purple ink and like the hollows of an eyeless mask. She had been beautiful once. She wasn’t beautiful anymore.

“We can help her, Evan. You know we can. What’s happening to her...she doesn’t deserve that. She doesn’t deserve to die like this. If I know her at all, she’ll be keeping this as secret as she can and no one should bear that burden alone.”

“If you think she’s keeping it a secret, why did she tell you?”

Amanda looked down at the table, tracing a network of cracks in the surface with one finger.

“She doesn’t expect anyone to write back, the way she writes to me. I don’t think I count anymore.”

“But you still want to help her.”

“It’s not that I want to, Evan, it’s that I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t do something when I had the power to. Especially not after how badly I hurt her. I owe her this much.”

Evan started to stand up, then reconsidered and slumped back down in his chair.

“What still puzzles me is why you had to wake me up so early about it.”

“Well, I only just read the message twenty minutes ago and I kinda panicked. Sorry. But we need to start planning straightaway because sh-she doesn’t have long,” said Amanda, her voice breaking.

“And you want me to help because I have a driver’s license.”

Having spent all of her time in New York City when she wasn’t living in Nekton Heights, Amanda had never had a driver’s license and had no easy way to get one.

Driving was Evan’s trade, and he liked it. He was one of the minority of Nekton Heights’ citizens who could pass undetected in the outside world, and this had landed him with

certain obligations. It was his responsibility to make periodic trips onto the mainland to pick up anything they couldn't manufacture on the island or get from a ship.

The Forsbergs had both taken to the water when Evan was still only a teenager, and they were proud of how he stepped up to help the community. It was their not very secret shame, however, that their son continued to show no signs of changing, and that he had no interest in fathering children. It was one thing that their only child had no inclination for romance of any kind; it was quite another to know that they would outlive him, and that he would never be able to join them in the shining, storied depths of their forebears.

Sometimes he considered driving away and leaving his parents' disappointment behind, but Nekton Heights was all he'd ever known, and he couldn't really stand the thought of abandoning his only family.

"That's the idea, yeah," said Amanda. "I invite her up to Portland, we reconcile, you and I take her back here, perform the ritual, and then everything's fixed. No cancer, no dying. She gets a whole new body and she'll never get sick again."

Evan rubbed his right temple as if trying to massage away the headache that was growing there.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, you know that isn't some kind of miracle cure-all. And you really think she would agree to something like this? This-this person that you hurt so terribly and who hates you?"

"I have to do something," said Amanda. "I cannot let this happen. I cannot let her suffer like this. And I...we can spare her that suffering. We can stop it all before it even happens."

Amanda was leaning so far over the table at him that Evan could see himself reflected in her pupils. In his sleep deprived state, he felt his emotions—chiefly frustration, anger, and now fear—somewhat separate from the rest of him. He briefly remembered swimming in the ocean during a storm: feeling the whole cold world shift around him, looking up and seeing the waves roiling with a violence detached from the gentler currents of the deep.

“If you’re suggesting what I think you’re suggesting, then that’s gonna be on you. I want nothing to do with that last part.”

“You promised me, Evan. When we were kids. You promised that you would help me someday. Or have you forgotten?”

“Pretty hard for me to forget something like that, don’t you think?” he said quietly.

Neither of them said anything for a little while. At a warmer time of year, the birds would have begun their morning songs by then. As it was there was nothing to disturb the silence except the humming of Evan’s refrigerator and the buzz of the overhead lights.

“You know,” he said, “even if she agrees to this there’s no guarantee she’ll forgive you for disappearing on her.”

“I know.”

“What are you gonna do if she says no to this?”

“She’s not gonna say no.”

“But what if she does? You know most people aren’t exactly okay with the whole resurrection deal.”

“She won’t say no, Evan. Trust me.”

The dark was just barely starting to recede from blackness to grayness. Just outside the kitchen window, the bare branches and twigs of a young oak tree lay silhouetted against the fading sky.

“What is your sister going to say about all this?”

Amanda gave him a long, measured look, then turned to the window.

“Well, she’ll probably agree that if her husband were the one dying, she wouldn’t let ritual guidelines stand between her and his restoration.”

Evan thought about saying something about how at least Sylvie and Wayne were on speaking terms, but decided not to. He heaved the longest sigh of his entire life and stood up to leave, muttering a series of “goddammit” under his breath.

“I’ll be making a run to Portland on Sunday night and coming back Tuesday morning. Let me know ASAP if you want to do it then. I’m going back to bed. You know the way out.”

Amanda stood up and motioned as if to hug him, but fell back when he turned right around and lumbered to the staircase.

“I owe you big time, cousin,” she said. “You ever need a favor, just tell me. You don’t have to ask.”

Halfway up the steps, he halted, and gave her a withering look. They weren’t really cousins, but she insisted on calling him that despite his protests.

“Believe me,” he said, “I ever need a favor from you, I’ll be sure to keep it to my fucking self.”

• • •

Amanda walked back to her sister's house alone and met no one on the way. The sun was not visible through the thick clouds that covered the sky. All of Nekton Heights was painted in ashy, gauzy shades that were never visible at any other time of day.

The ocean moved as if in slow motion. White-capped waves reared up, curled, and collapsed into formless currents on the shore. Amanda wondered what the ocean would have to say about all this, if the ocean had opinions on the affairs of humans. The ocean might speak someday. Maybe soon. As it was, the ocean only said what it always said, the unending cycle of tides and the *shuh-shuh shuh-shuh* of waves on sand.

Sylvie Aaron's dissolute sister slept until five in the afternoon that day, then spent two hours debating how best to respond to her beloved's message, writing and deleting and rewriting thousands of words in that time. By the time she had decided on what to say she had missed dinner. Wayne brought her a plate of pasta, and she thanked him, but she ate very little of it. Instead she paced the room, periodically clicking "refresh" on her mailbox.

The pasta was stone cold when Sylvie summoned Amanda to the living room. Amanda hurried downstairs without hesitation. Sylvie was seated on a thick blue rug in front of the fireplace, which held only a few dying embers. She patted the empty spot next to her. For a moment, it struck Amanda just how odd it was that she was sitting down for a friendly chat with the person who was going to bring about the apocalypse.

Sylvie had a variety of epithets attached to her name. Mother of Storms. Scion of Dagon. The Unchanging Queen. The Great Cailleach, according to a Scottish family. Her online friends in World of Warcraft knew her as DagonGrrl81, where she played as an

elf paladin with a special penchant for exploration. That was how she had met her husband. They still played together every Thursday night.

Amanda had never been intimidated by or frightened of her sister, unlike many people, but she did feel a sense of foreboding now that she never had when the two of them were growing up. It made sense. Pregnancy had changed her sister. Sylvie's skin was still fishbelly-white, but it had gone translucent and soft. Dark clouds gathered in her flesh. Lightning flashed soundlessly in her gut, arcing and crackling through her body in veiny patterns as bright as beaten silver.

NOT SO MUCH LONGER NOW, Sylvie told her. MAYBE ONLY A YEAR OR TWO.

"I'm glad, sis."

Sylvie rested one of her hands palm-side up on the carpet. Amanda rested her own hand on her sister's, the tips of her fingers barely reaching the edges of Sylvie's palm.

YOU KNOW THAT I WANT YOU TO BE HAPPY.

"I know," said Amanda.

I DON'T THINK THIS IDEA OF YOURS IS A GOOD ONE.

"You could stop me if you wanted to. You're the only one who could."

I WON'T. THE END IS COMING SOON ENOUGH. IT MAY NOT MATTER MUCH IF YOUR SELFISH IMPULSES PUT US AT RISK OF DISCOVERY.

Amanda said nothing to that.

SOMETIMES, Sylvie told her, I DO WONDER WHAT MY LIFE WOULD HAVE BEEN, IF I HAD COME BACK LIKE EVERYONE ELSE AND GROWN UP AND TAKEN TO THE WATER. I WONDER WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF OUR

MOTHER AND FATHER HAD NOT LOVED THEIR BABY SO MUCH AS TO RESURRECT HER.

Amanda fidgeted, wondering whether it would be rude to tell her sister to cool it with the pensive statements. Sylvie was great to talk to but she did tend to go off on philosophical tangents.

I WONDER. HOW COULD I NOT? BUT THAT IS NOT WHAT HAPPENED. I WAS BORN FOR GREAT THINGS, AND WHETHER I WANT THOSE THINGS OR NOT IS BESIDE THE POINT. THIS IS THE LIFE THAT I HAVE. IT CANNOT BE CHANGED OR UNDONE. YOU ARE MY SISTER, AND WAYNE IS MY HUSBAND, AND THE FUTURE WILL PART US ALL. I HAVE NO POWER TO CHANGE ANY OF THIS.

“And the world shall drown,” Amanda muttered.

AND THE ELDEST AND GREATEST GOD WILL COVER THE EARTH IN HER LOVE. BUT...NOT NOW. NOT YET. YOU SHOULD BE HAPPY IN THE TIME YOU HAVE LEFT, SISTER. I ONLY WISH YOU COULD FIND THAT HAPPINESS HERE AND LEAVE THE OUTSIDE WORLD BEHIND.

“It’s too late for me to be happy. You can’t change that either. All I can hope for is to make a difference in someone else’s life.”

Sylvie’s thoughts thrummed with sadness.

YOU'RE SOUNDING A LOT LIKE OUR MOTHER JUST NOW, says Sylvie.

Amanda felt the wave of fury building up inside her and bit her tongue. It was not worth it to lose her temper right then.

SHE DID LOVE ME, YOU KNOW. SHE THOUGHT I WOULD HAVE BEEN
HAPPIER DEAD. SHE WAS WRONG. PARENTS OFTEN ARE.

Amanda ignored this. She reminded herself that Sylvie was not technically human. Surely this was the only reason that she had such uncomplicated feelings about their mother, who had been a wretched and evil person unworthy of forgiveness.

“I won’t ask you to help me break the rules, Sis,” Amanda said. “Just please don’t tell on me. I’ll face whatever consequences this brings about when it’s all done and Janice isn’t dying of cancer.”

IS SHE REALLY WORTH ALL THIS SADNESS?

Amanda shut her eyes, remembering.

“Yes. Yes, a thousand times.”

Sylvie wrapped one arm around her sister. Amanda pressed her ear to Sylvie’s belly, the faint rumbles of gestating thunderclouds echoing through her skull.

A Great, Unstable Mass of Blood and Foam

By late November, winter had already struck Portland, leaving snowdrifts and bleached salt streaks on every sidewalk. Hooded figures trundled along clutching steaming cups of coffee and tea in their mittened hands, their faces shielded from the deadly wind. Compared to New York, Portland was like the play-set version of a city: quaint in every aspect, the people on the street like toy pieces in a diorama.

The Holiday Inn nearest to Portland International Jetport was incongruously grungy for the area. The lobby smelled faintly of old magazines and deodorant, and a light was out in the second floor hallway. The walls were painted a shade of taupe that would have been tasteful and modern about forty years ago. Anyone walking through kicked up a faint odor of tobacco and something sweeter from the long hall rug.

Behind the door of room 212 was a dull little chamber with walls painted hospital green. The smell of tobacco was a bit stronger than in the hall, but not so strong that it was repulsive. Mostly it just made the room seem lived in. There was an attached “kitchen” that was about the size of a postage stamp, and a bathroom that was actually larger. An inexplicable painting of a desert landscape hung over the bed, which was made up with a soft blue duvet. Next to the bed was a rectangular rolling bag that looked big enough for an adult human to fit inside it.

In the bed lay two women, one chubby and one scarecrow-thin. The bony woman angled herself diagonally across the bed to make up the distance between them. The chubby woman threaded her fingers through her partner’s greasy hair, but she was so intent on the ceiling that she hardly even noticed the other woman was there. The pain in

her back was temporarily smothered by a liberal dose of painkillers, so she didn't have that as a distraction.

I've made a huge mistake, thought Janice.

She counted cracks in the plaster, trying very hard to ignore the breath that was ghosting across her sternum. She had not come to Maine with the intent of being unfaithful. She had not locked eyes with her ex across the crowded baggage claim and had some revelation about undying love or some such nonsense. In fact, her first coherent thought had been that Amanda looked like shit. Her gray eyes were as piercing as ever, but her yellow hair was unwashed, and her skin had the pallor of illness. Even the brightness of her eyes was feverish. She wasn't quite in animated corpse territory, but she was very near to that. Janice had recognized the shirt she was wearing and noted how loosely it hung on her frame. Amanda had always been tall, but she had never been this thin.

Seeing her ex like this had taken the wind right out of Janice's sails. She had imagined many possible climactic meetings: having a big fight right there in the airport, turning around and leaving before Amanda could even speak, slapping her. But Amanda just looked so sad. She couldn't lose her temper at someone who looked like that. So, after a brief exchange, they had gone out to the curb, and a man Amanda introduced as her cousin had driven them to the hotel in a shiny silver van. He seemed very much like he didn't want to be there. Janice couldn't decide if he looked more like Mark Wahlberg or like Steve Buscemi.

Janice had not followed Amanda to the Holiday Inn planning on this. They were just going to talk. Finally get some closure after the unmitigated disaster of their breakup.

The second the door was shut behind them, however, Amanda had burst into tears and pulled Janice into a smothering hug, sobbing about how horribly, painfully sorry she was for everything she had ever done and how she didn't want Janice to die.

Somehow, Janice had found herself comforting Amanda, just to get her to stop being so hysterical, and then it had just sort of...happened. Amanda had buried her nose in Janice's hair, and then she was sobbing against Janice's forehead. When Janice tilted her head back, Amanda kissed her, and Janice didn't pull away.

Oh shit, thought Janice. *I'd better do something to stop this.*

But she didn't.

It wasn't as good as Janice remembered. Amanda had forgotten that Janice hated having her neck bitten and that almost terminated the proceedings right then and there. They didn't know how to touch each other anymore. This was not the reunion of star-crossed lovers. It was awkward, and it continued to be awkward post coitus.

Janice had never cheated on anyone before, but she didn't feel very bad about it. It was disconcerting how bad she didn't feel about it. It wasn't as if she was dissatisfied with Sophie. Not at all. She had always assumed that, if presented with the chance to cheat, her natural instinct would be to recoil. But she hadn't. She had just gone along with it. Maybe it was something about being wanted so badly. Maybe the knowledge of her impending death had warped her morals. In any case, Janice couldn't come up with a satisfying excuse for not stopping Amanda.

All my life I've been the better person, she thought. *Why not fuck up? I'm allowed to make mistakes. I'm allowed this one thing, aren't I? Maybe you get one free pass. You can cheat once without it being your 'thing.'*

Whatever had caused this, it wasn't love. It wasn't as if she felt nothing for Amanda. Quite the opposite. She just didn't feel anywhere close to the way she had three years ago. The worst of the hatred had dissipated when she saw Amanda's hangdog face in the airport. Now Janice felt little besides a vague disgust, both for her ex and for herself. She didn't even like Amanda anymore. Janice hadn't thought of herself as someone who could sleep with someone she didn't at least like. But it had happened.

Amanda mumbled something into Janice's chest.

"Huh?"

Amanda looked up, tears glistening in her eyes, and repeated, "I love you."

"Oh," said Janice.

Oh, I've really fucked up now, she thought.

"Then why did you leave?" she asked.

Amanda averted her eyes and muttered something about it being a long story.

"The only reason I came to Maine was to find out why you screwed me over the way you did. Talk."

Amanda pushed herself up languidly. "Really? That's the only only reason?"

"The most important reason."

"Sophie doesn't know you're here, does she?"

Janice hesitated. "No, she does not," she admitted.

"And you haven't told her about the cancer."

"Not yet, but—"

"But you're still gonna go back to her."

Janice stared, incredulous.

“I kinda hoped...I don’t even know what I hoped. I’m sorry,” whispered Amanda.

“Jesus, Amanda, you couldn’t have thought that anything was going to happen between us after three years and no explanation.”

Amanda sat up completely, her jaw hanging lower and lower in shock.

“Something *did* just happen between us.”

Janice rubbed her temples. “You were crying all over me, what did you...fuck, it doesn’t matter. Look, you can’t expect me to just up and leave my girlfriend for you. Not even after this.”

Amanda looked away and scooted to the other side of the bed. “I never wanted to hurt you, you know.”

Janice rolled her eyes so hard it actually hurt. “Well, you did. And here we are. I always wondered what it would be like if we ever saw each other again. Somehow I never thought it would involve a smoking room in a Holiday Inn in Maine.”

“Neither did I. I thought I’d never see you again.” Amanda sounded so genuinely sad when she said this that it roused Janice’s pity. “I wish you weren’t dying,” whispered Amanda.

“I might not be,” said Janice. “It’s just a...really strong possibility.”

“Jan...if you could just skip the cancer, would you? Like, if you had to choose between going through chemo and so on or just dying peacefully next week, which would you choose?”

Janice wrinkled her nose at being called “Jan.” Amanda was the only one who had ever called her that. Hearing it again just sounded wrong.

“Amanda, I am not interested in playing ‘would you rather’ with you. I just wanna know what happened three years ago.”

“I don’t honestly know if I can tell you that yet, Jan. I’m limited in what I can tell you.”

“Why?”

“Well, I’m a member of a very special community, and I have certain responsibilities to maintain its safety. There’s only so much I can tell you about it at the moment.”

“...Why?”

“Members of the community have to take a number of oaths, and I would be violating at least one of those oaths if I were to—”

“Good lord, are you in a cult?” Janice wore a look of mingled confusion and suspicion.

“No. No, it is not a cult, no...well, yes, it kind of is,” Amanda admitted, “but it’s not what you’re thinking.”

“You’re in a cult.”

“It’s not a *cult* cult. It’s not like that. Look, I can tell you a lot more really soon, I promise, just not right this second. Can we get clean first? I could really use a shower.”

Janice sighed. “Fine. But I’m taking the bathroom first. We’re not gonna share.”

She could feel Amanda’s gaze on her, but she refused to make eye contact. This whole thing was such a mess. It was all her fault for not pulling away when she had the chance. She slid her legs out from under the duvet and walked around the bed to the tiny bathroom next to the kitchenette.

Janice looked at herself in the mirror, rubbing her face and wondering how her life had come to this. Amanda had left a small but unmistakable hickey on Janice's shoulder. She shuddered to think of how she was going to conceal it from Sophie. Poor Sophie. Well, hadn't she insisted on multiple occasions that Sophie deserved better than her? If it wasn't true before, it definitely was now.

Her eyes were bloodshot, and the bags underneath were dark purple. Her chemically straightened hair hung in dry tangles around her face. She supposed it was hypocritical of her to think that her ex was the one who looked like a zombie when she had all this going on. Behind her, she could hear Amanda rummaging through the big bag.

"I love you," said Amanda.

Janice exhaled a long breath and shut her eyes. Not this. Not now. Oh, why did she ever get on the plane?

"I know you don't believe me, but that's how it is," Amanda continued, stepping into the bathroom and standing behind Janice.

"I don't love you," said Janice, locking eyes with her ex in the mirror. "I did once. I don't anymore. I'm sorry if that's harsh, but I don't know what else to tell you. All I want from you is an explanation and I'm starting to think that maybe I should just leave."

I miss the memories so much more than you, she thought.

"I'll tell you why I left," Amanda said. "I promise. Everything will make sense soon."

"What's that in your hand?" Janice asked.

As she turned around to get a better look, Amanda grabbed Janice's hair with her left hand and pressed a chloroform-soaked t-shirt against Janice's face with her right hand. Janice struggled to get away, but Amanda kicked one of her legs out from under her and Janice fell heavily on the floor. She managed to avoid cracking her skull on the tiles, but it was a split second before Amanda straddled her and shoved the t-shirt back against her face.

The very last thing she noticed before her vision failed was that Amanda didn't look sad anymore. Instead, she wore a distinctly triumphant expression.

Ok no. Now. Now I have officially fucked up, thought Janice, as the blackness swallowed her and strange shapes rushed past her in snake-like motions, combining and dissolving into an infinity of discordant fractals.

Imaginary Things

After an eternity in a frozen void, Janice opened her eyes. An endless light gray expanse stretched in all directions overhead. It was the sky. She was outside for some reason, lying on the ground. The ground was soft. It wasn't a tile floor, and that was good. Her back didn't hurt at all, and that was also good. She couldn't remember why either of those things was good. Everything was perfectly silent. She twitched one finger, and found that she was lying on a bed of sand almost as fine as dust. It was very pleasant under her bare skin.

Janice didn't have time to enjoy that, because that was also when she realized that she was naked. A trill of alarm rang through her. She was outside and she wasn't wearing any clothes. Why? What had happened? She racked her brain but couldn't remember anything. She knew that she was Janice Porter and that she lived in New York. She had just recently gotten some bad news from a doctor. Beyond that? Nothing.

She darted her eyes left and right but couldn't see anything but the sides of the shallow depression she was lying in. Tensing every muscle in her body with the effort, Janice tried to raise her head to look around more. The air was heavier than she had ever felt it. Still air wasn't supposed to drag like this. It made her sinuses ache.

No air came when she opened her mouth to take a breath. The alarm she felt when she realized she was naked returned a hundredfold. There was no air at all. She was underwater.

She tried to heave herself upright, but her muscles weren't obeying. Alarm turned to panic. She jerked and flailed, trying to push herself up past the surface of the water. All

at once a white man with black hair loomed over her. He reached into the pool, grabbed her right hand, and pulled her out of the water in one quick motion.

She stumbled on her rubbery legs and fell against him. He steadied her with his hands on her shoulders, but recoiled when she vomited mucus and salt water all over his front. Janice crashed to the ground on her hands and knees. The sand darkened under her as she hacked up all the water that had been in her lungs. Now she could hear things again. They were on a beach, and small waves were crashing *shuh-shuh shuh-shuh* on the sand not far away. A gull cried, the sound so piercing and discordant it almost hurt.

“Oh shit!” said the man. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to drop you. I just wasn’t expecting that. Shit.”

Janice coughed out the last of the water and took several rasping breaths. She looked around slowly and saw only the ocean, the beach, a few straggly trees, and long swaths of dune grass. Far off inland was a town of some kind. Far off to the left of this lonely spot was a string of beach houses on stilts. Her vision was surprisingly clear considering what had just happened. How long had she been lying in that pool of water for? For that matter, why had she been there?

A light wind rustled the dune grass. Janice tried to organize her thoughts but she was stuck on the mystery of where she was and why.

“Here,” said the man. “Put this on, please.”

She looked over her shoulder and saw that he was holding a light blue bathrobe in his outstretched hand. He was covering his eyes with his other hands and grimacing.

“Please,” he repeated. “I can’t look at you if you’re naked. It makes me uncomfortable.”

She reached up from her crouching position and grabbed the robe. Unsure of her ability to stand, she slipped her arms into the sleeves and did her best to wrap the rest of it around her.

“Where am I?” she asked. “What’s going on?”

He uncovered his eyes, and looked at her with a wary expression.

“You’re in Maine,” said the man, “in a town called Nekton Heights. I’m probably not the best person to answer that second question.”

Maine. She had taken a flight to Maine. Of course. She remembered an old man telling her about an eye in a triangle, but that wasn’t as recent. Meeting someone at baggage claim and being sad. Sick eyes and ugly carpet patterns. A slurry of memories fell into place like Tetris blocks. She had lied to Sophie about needing to meet someone far away. But why? Sophie was so good. She didn’t deserve that. She had come to Maine for bad reasons, but what those reasons were she couldn’t yet say.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“My name is Evan,” he said. “We’ve met before, but you might not remember that right now. It’ll come back to you.”

“Did you do this to me? What happened?”

“No, I didn’t do anything to you. You’ve...you’ve been asleep.”

Something else came back to her just then: the cancer. Suddenly she felt more awake than she had ever been in her life.

“Am I dying?” she asked. Her own voice sounded much too clear and calm for current circumstances.

“No, no, you’re not dying. Not anymore. Actually, let me make a phone call and I can get hold of someone who can explain this all better than me.”

Janice put two fingers up to her throat to feel for her pulse. It was there, but it was very slow. “Evan, I think I need to see a doctor. I’m not well. If I’ve been unconscious for any length of time then I’ll need to see someone as soon as possible.”

Evan nodded and pulled out his phone.

“Absolutely,” he said. “I’m going to call someone who can help you, and then we’ll see about getting you to a doctor.”

Janice was only marginally warmer with the bathrobe on, but it was better than nothing. Her throat ached from vomiting and her lungs were still burning a little. Other than that, however, she felt no pain of any kind. Strange, given the circumstances. So, she probably hadn’t hit her head. Nothing yet explained why she couldn’t fill in the gaps between coming to Maine and waking up naked in a tide pool.

Evan spoke two words into his phone—“She’s awake”—then sat down on the sand a few feet away from her. “I know you must be very confused and probably terrified, but everything’s going to be ok,” he told her.

He still wasn’t looking at her, choosing instead to focus on the ground.

“I don’t remember coming here,” said Janice. “I don’t even remember falling asleep.”

“Well, that will all be explained very soon, I’m sure.”

Janice wiped one hand on the robe and reached up to her scalp. Her hair was shorter than she remembered it being. More importantly, it was soft and kinky, as it

hadn't been in many years. A hot lump of fear burned in her gut. It didn't make sense. It would have taken such a long time for it to grow back like this.

"How long was I unconscious?" she asked, dreading the answer.

Evan turned, startled. "Maybe an hour," he replied. "Not more than that. But that's not...ah Jesus. Here she comes."

A tall, slim figure was approaching from the direction of town, running at a breakneck pace. Janice could see long blond hair flying out from under a black winter hat. It was Amanda. Once she recognized her ex, Janice felt a strange mix of horror, anger, and relief. She shot to her feet, surprised at how quickly she had recovered from not being able to stand only a few minutes earlier.

She remembered now. She had come to Maine to finally get closure with Amanda, and they had—

Oh.

Oh no.

Amanda hurdled driftwood and thorn bushes before skidding to a halt right in front of Janice. She was red faced from running through the cold, blowing clouds of steam from her mouth like an old train. Her gray eyes were fever-bright and her lips were terribly chapped. Before Janice could move away, Amanda had locked her in a firm embrace that Janice did not reciprocate.

"I was so worried about you," whispered Amanda. "But you're all right."

"What's going on?" Janice asked.

Amanda took a step back and studied Janice's face. "You look good," said Amanda, ignoring Janice's question. "Better than I expected, even. Oh, I'm just so happy you're ok."

She went to hug Janice again, but Janice stopped her with one hand on Amanda's shoulder.

"What the fuck is going on?" Janice asked. "Why am I here?"

"The important thing is that you're all right now, Janice," said Amanda. "The worst years of your life are officially behind you. It's all smooth sailing from now on."

"Tell me what's going on," Janice asked, her voice beginning to shake.

"You're all right now," said Amanda. "Just relax."

"I am not going to relax until you tell me why I'm here and what you've done."

Amanda reached out to put her hand on Janice's shoulder, but Janice darted away. Amanda sighed. "Look, just calm down. You're not sick anymore. That's good, isn't it?"

"What do you mean, I'm not sick anymore?"

"You don't have cancer anymore," said Amanda. "It's gone. I...well, a few other people and I managed to fix it so you're not going to die. You're better now."

Janice faintly remembered the stale smell of the hotel bed, and Amanda insisting that the cult she was in was not a *cult* cult.

"That's impossible," said Janice. "You're not even a doctor. You're not...Jesus Christ, I need to get home. I need to make an appointment for my surgery."

"You don't have to do any of that," said Amanda. "It's all taken care of."

A light wind began to blow. The hairs on Janice's neck stood up.

"I need medicine. Medicine that you can't give me."

“No you don’t. We have better things than medicine here,” said Amanda, as if she was being perfectly reasonable.

Janice stared at her, incredulous.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

The gull had stopped crying. Evan wasn’t saying a word and he wasn’t looking at either of the two women. It looked like he was trying to will himself invisible. Amanda took another step toward Janice, and Janice took another step back.

“You don’t have to keep moving away from me,” Amanda said, a little exasperated.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Janice replied, her hands balled into fists.

“I already did. You had cancer. You don’t have cancer anymore. End of story.”

“You’re lying,” Janice spat. “It doesn’t just go away like that. And that does not explain a goddamned thing.”

“Evan, am I lying?” Amanda asked.

Evan snapped to attention, looking from one person to the other.

“Goddammit, Amanda, you said you would leave me out of this,” he sighed. “But no, you’re not technically lying. You’re just leaving out a lot of information.”

Amanda threw up her hands and rolled her eyes before turning toward him.

“Evan, you are not being very helpful right now,” she said.

“And you’re not being very honest,” he replied.

“Honest? I’ve been nothing but honest.”

Janice started to back away, but she had only taken a few steps before Amanda noticed.

“Hey. Hey! No, don’t leave, Janice, there’s nowhere for you to go.”

Her already empty stomach felt as if it were imploding. Hot ribbons of fear snaked out through her body, and she could feel her heart beating in her throat, still much too slow.

“Is that a threat?” Janice asked.

“No, it’s not a threat, just come back here.”

Amanda held out one hand and raised her eyebrows.

“No,” said Janice.

Amanda started to move forward, then stopped. “Ah, I knew it,” she said.

“You’ve woken up too early. You should lie down again for a little while. It would do you good.”

The wind picked up, whistling through the dune grass. Amanda took a few more cautious steps. Janice was very aware of how the space between her and her ex was shrinking.

“Janice,” said Amanda, “I think you need to go back in the water for a little while.”

Back in the water? Amanda was trying to drown her. Some kind of a cult sacrifice, that was for sure.

“No. No, you can’t make me. I wasn’t supposed to wake up at all, was I? Is that why I was in the water?”

“For heaven’s sake, no! I’m not going to make you do anything. This is for your own good. You’ll be fine,” Amanda insisted.

“You’re trying to kill me,” Janice said, raising her voice.

At that, Amanda's resolve faltered, and Janice saw it in her face.

"N-no, I'm not trying to...look, please trust me."

She put a hand on Janice's shoulder.

Janice shoved her with shocking force, so hard that Amanda lay winded on the ground some ten feet away. Evan just stood and stared. Janice turned and ran in the direction of the beach houses, crashing through driftwood and tripping on loose sand as she went.

• • •

Out of principle, Evan did not help Amanda get up from where she had fallen.

"I told you this was a horrible idea," he said. "How many times did I tell you this was a horrible idea?"

Amanda coughed and struggled back to her feet, awkwardly brushing sand off her back.

"What did you tell her, Evan?" she asked. "Did you say something to turn her against me?"

"I didn't tell her a goddamned thing. Any antipathy she's feeling toward you is clearly a result of whatever you did to her before now. What did you even think was going to happen? That she was going to wake up with no memory of how she got here and just jump straight into your arms?"

Amanda glared at him.

"You could never understand what she and I have."

"Anyone ever told you that you talk like a glitched out artificial intelligence? Listen to yourself sometime. It's a trip. She's clearly already started to change," Evan

continued, “so you better catch her fast, if you don’t want anyone else to know about all the rules you’ve broken. And before she becomes an even bigger security issue than she already is.”

“You broke those rules with me, asshole,” she wheezed.

“Yeah, I did. And I’m done. I did what I promised to do and now I’m out. You wanna keep fucking up, you can do it without me.”

“Evan, please—”

“Nope. My life debt to you is fulfilled and I’m washing my hands of this nonsense. Don’t call me.”

“You’re not gonna tell Annie, are you?”

He stopped, and turned toward her.

“I don’t think I’m gonna have to. I think this is gonna get out before I can even get to her.”

“She’s gonna kill you when she finds out that you helped me.”

“I’ll face that when it comes.”

Amanda gave him one last long, measured look, then turned away, and tried to follow the hectic trail of broken wood and trampled grass that Janice had left behind her.

• • •

Huge crows moved in insectoid clouds across the sky, appearing through the naked tree branches like an ever-moving game of connect the dots. The dune grass stretched far away, tawny as a lion’s pelt next to the gray sand.

She ran.

Rocks, sand, and sticks scratched at her bare feet, and still she ran, frigid air whistling through her legs. At first she was just running to get away, but as she went on and no one seemed to be following her she altered course slightly to head toward the beach houses. Even if no one was home it could still be helpful. Maybe they had a landline and she could call the police.

She approached the first house and noticed that there was a note taped to the railing of the steps.

*Karen—
Door's unlocked.
Feel free to grab your share of the vegetables
if I'm not back when you get here.
See you next Wednesday!
—Alex*

Thanking the heavens for her luck, Janice jogged up the spiral steps. The door was indeed open.

“Hello?” she called out as she opened the door, but there was no one there.

Inside it was chilly, but not as cold as the outside. She stepped immediately into the kitchen and scanned the walls and counters for a phone. There was a brown paper bag full of vegetables next to the sink and a large plastic cat food dispenser, but no phone. Aside from the kitchen, there was a bedroom, a TV nook with an armchair, and a single bathroom with a serious grout problem. None of these rooms contained a phone, though she searched all of them. Frustrated, Janice returned to the kitchen and looked out the window, expecting to see Amanda running after her.

What she saw walking up the beach was so surprising that she stared for a full minute before scrambling backwards in an attempt to escape. Two hulking figures were approaching the house. They had the rough outlines of people, but their legs bent

backwards at the knee, and they walked with strange, jerky movements. What Janice had initially taken for skintight jumpsuits turned out to be scaly skin. One was light green and the other was dark gray. They had the rigid, masklike faces of fish, and they were making a beeline for the very house Janice was in.

Janice had a gut feeling that meeting them would be very bad. Tripping over her own feet, she sprinted into the bedroom closet and slid the door shut, praying that she would not be visible through the wooden slats. Even though she was seized with terror for the second time in the last fifteen minutes, she could feel that her pulse was still too slow, as if her body was out of sync with her mental state. She could hear thumping footsteps on the outside staircase but she could not see the front door from where she was hidden. A moment later she heard the door open and the two strangers enter the house.

“Donovan, I swear to God, if you keep asking me questions about werewolves I will punt you straight into the middle of the harbor.”

“Ok, ok, fine, don’t lose your temper.”

They both had guttural, croaking voices, more expressive than she would have guessed based on their staring faces. They also seemed to be in the midst of a very strange argument.

“Let’s just grab the vegetables and leave. I’m still pissed at Karen for making me do this.”

“I promise I won’t talk about werewolves anymore. But...”

“...But what.”

“If a priest blessed the ocean, would all the water in the world become holy water?”

“...What?”

“If a priest blessed the ocean, would it turn into holy water?”

“No? It would still be salt water, Donovan. A priest blessing something doesn’t change its physical composition.”

“I know, I know, but would it all be holy? Do priest blessings have limited range?”

“I have no idea. What the fuck? Why are you asking me this?”

“I’m just curious, Lil. Wondering things, you know. Thinking out loud. Ok, what if Sylvie blessed the ocean? Then would the whole ocean be holy?”

“I don’t know, Donovan. I’m not an expert in things that will never happen.”

“Well, it would be terrible for vampires.”

“...WHAT?”

At this point, crouching in the dark behind an assortment of flannel shirts and wire hangers, Janice began to wonder if she had ever actually woken up and this wasn’t some completely bizarre nightmare.

“You know, vampires. Holy water makes them burn and stuff.”

“Why would vampires be—no. Goddammit, no. Vampires aren’t real.”

“But if they were—”

“NO. They’re not real, they’re not going for a swim, and Sylvie can’t turn the ocean holy. Technically it’s already holy, and I feel like I should say again that vampires aren’t real because you don’t seem to get that.”

“You don’t know that, Lil.”

“You are eight hundred years old. You know that vampires aren’t real. You know that werewolves aren’t real either! And you know that priests can’t literally make something holy. Why do you insist on asking me pointless questions about things that aren’t real?”

“Technically, their existence hasn’t been disproved, they just—”

“Stop it! Stop. I am ending this conversation. This is done. Do not continue to talk. We are going to leave this house, and then we are going to walk in opposite directions because if we don’t, my head will explode.”

Donovan said nothing to that. Janice heard the crinkling of the paper bag, the creaking of the front door, and then the thumping of footsteps receding into silence.

She crouched in the dark for several more minutes, anticipating the strike of some beast that never came. Janice was certain of four things in particular. Something very bad was going on. Something very bad had happened to her. She needed to get out of this house and find somewhere safer. Finally, she had just overheard two sea monsters arguing about whether or not other supernatural creatures were real, and she had no idea what to do with this information.

Infanticide

It's about two AM when Lydia stops pretending to sleep and rises from her bed. She looks around the shabby bedroom, gaze pausing briefly on her sleeping husband as her eyes adjust to the dark. The only sound in the room is the rattling of the window-mounted air conditioner. Lydia slides her legs out from under the cheap polyblend sheets and sets her feet on the hardwood.

By now, after many nights of cautious exploring, she knows exactly where to step to avoid creaks. She crosses the room to the bureau with long, confident strides, pulls open the underwear drawer, and withdraws a black extension cord from the cocoon of underwear it's been hidden in for the last three months. Another moment and she's out in the hall, shutting the door behind her. The recently greased hinges make no noise at all.

It's disgustingly hot away from the air conditioner. The air smells, as always, of salt and fish. The people who lured her here assured her that she would get used to the smell. That everyone did eventually. It would be like grief; one day she would just stop noticing it. Well, she didn't. She never would. The ever-present reminder of the ocean turns her stomach.

Sweat soaks the armpits of her nightgown: the same one she wore when she first went to bed with her husband nine years ago. Now the hem has come all undone and the rosebud print is dull and yellowed. Lydia walks south past her five-year-old daughter Amanda's room and doesn't even think about looking in. She pauses at the hall window, momentarily distracted by the fat full moon that renders everything in shades of pewter and platinum.

The ocean is blazing with light. To anyone else, the gentle furrows of seawater would be beautiful. Lydia knows what's under those waves. What's waiting for her. Behind her is the town Nekton Heights and the island marshes, full of frogs and strange plants. Ahead of her is the city, named with a cluster of syllables that she cannot pronounce and has trouble remembering. It's hidden by a billion tons of salt water, but it's there. And here she is, confined to this beach house like a hostage.

She doesn't see anyone walking on the beach, but that doesn't mean that no one is watching. Lydia gathers up the extension cord in a lasso loop. Her hands are shaking even though she doesn't feel nervous at all, so she stops and takes deep breaths until they're steady. Then she approaches the door to the nursery and turns the doorknob, the movement so slow as to be almost imperceptible. If she turns it any faster, it will squeak. She opens the door and steps inside as quick as she can.

The door shuts behind her with a tiny click. There are two air conditioners blasting in here, one in the back window and one in the window that looks out over the porch roof. The air is stale and dry. In one corner, this night's attendant is dead asleep in a rocking chair, her snores drowned out by the combined buzzing of two air conditioners and a water filter. A lamp decorated with seashells shines on the bureau next to the rocking chair. The nursery is a small room made smaller by the enormous fish tank that takes up a quarter of the floor space. If the aquarium lights were on, they would bathe the room in an alien turquoise glow. Right now the tank is dark, and full of murky shapes. If Lydia presses her face to the glass, she'll see soft sand, waterproof baby toys, and the tank's single occupant.

She can't look just yet. She wills herself not to look at the thing in the tank. Not to lose focus. If she wants to carry out her plan, she'll first have to deal with the person asleep in the rocking chair.

Kayla Winters is on duty tonight, filling in for her older and hardier sister. She's not even supposed to be here, really. The influence of her mixed parentage is obvious—a blue tint to her flesh, fine slits of rudimentary gills on her neck rippling as she snores—but she's barely twenty, and the stranger ingredients of her biology have not truly begun to assert themselves. By the time she's thirty she'll look right at home in a Bosch painting. The other three attendants are all robust hybrid women on the far side of middle age, strong as elephant seals and quick to react. Lydia would never stand a chance against any of them.

Kayla is supposed to be guarding the thing in the tank. Her head lolls back against the rocker, both arms dangling almost to the floor. A dog-eared copy of *Jane Eyre* lies open in her lap. Lydia knows that Kayla is a great lover of nineteenth century literature. It's all she ever brings with her for her daytime shifts. It's something they talk about occasionally: whether Rochester deserves forgiveness, whether Heathcliff is Catherine's bastard half-brother. Kayla gets so animated about these subjects it brings a purple flush into her cheeks. She almost looks human in those moments.

Lydia doesn't hate Kayla. Far from it. Of all the people she's gotten to know over the last eight months, Lydia likes her the most. But she knows that Kayla will defend what's in that aquarium with her very life, and the thing in the aquarium has to go. If Lydia moves straight for her end goal Kayla will undoubtedly wake up and stop her.

Lydia has thought about this a lot, and she can't come up with another way to resolve the problem, at least not with the limited resources at hand.

The warm lamplight lies across Kayla's piscine face like golden silk, softening her already soft features into something cherubic. Hybrids like her, much like resurrected children, never achieve senescence. They grow up, but never old, changing in body and mind about when human beings reach the peak of maturity. They are tremendously strong and resilient. They cannot die. But they can be killed.

Lydia raises the looped extension cord, holding it over Kayla's head like a black halo. Then she yanks it down around the sleeping girl's neck and pulls.

• • •

The death of Lydia Aaron's firstborn daughter didn't destroy her right away. Maybe it was shock. Something about the loss was just too big to process. It was a bit like being the target of the world's most heartless practical joke, and some part of her kept expecting someone to jump out and yell gotcha.

Lydia put baby Sylvie in her crib one night and everything was normal. The next morning Sylvie was dead. SIDS, the doctors said. Could happen to any baby, they said, but Lydia knew this kind of thing wasn't supposed to happen in New England in the twentieth century.

Was she on her belly when you went to bed?

That wasn't even the right question to ask, but people kept asking it. No. She was on her back. She was still on her back when Lydia found her in the morning, stiff as a doll and somehow heavier than before.

Was she on her belly?

There was a funeral. Everyone in the cul-de-sac showed up. Lydia broke down the crib and put it out with the morning trash. She locked the door to the nursery with all the toys and baby clothes—all the hand me downs from her aunt, and the teddy bear that Lydia herself had curled up with as a child—still inside. Hugh somehow convinced her to try again, and after what seemed like no time at all there was another baby on the way. It was almost as if the first time was just a big screw-up. If they skipped right past it, it would be like it never even happened.

Where were you when she died?

Amanda was a very different baby than Sylvie was: quieter, not as hairy, not as rosy in the cheeks. Hugh converted the guest room into a new nursery and painted the walls sea foam green instead of pink, like before. The door to the old nursery stayed locked. Lydia spent every night on a twin mattress next to Amanda's crib and never got more than an hour of sleep at a time.

Sometimes she woke up standing at the door of the old nursery. If she pressed her ear to it, she thought she could hear labored breathing and the rustling of sheets.

When Amanda was a year old and Lydia had lost almost forty pounds, Hugh persuaded his wife to go to grief counseling with him. She left fifteen minutes in. A couple months later they went again, and Lydia stayed for a whole half hour.

Three years passed, and Amanda was in preschool when Lydia started going to a free support group by herself. The house was just too empty during the day. Now when she heard breathing and rustling she couldn't pretend it was her living daughter. The whole house was choking: every hall a collapsing throat.

Plus, Amanda was learning that other mommies didn't sleep in the same room as their kids, and other families didn't have a forbidden room that was always locked. Amanda didn't know about her dead sister. If not for her own sake, Lydia vowed to get better for her living daughter.

Most of the people in the group were adults who had lost parents or siblings. There was one man there who talked less than Lydia: Harvey Wilton, the only other person who had lost a child, a short, balding man with watery eyes and a pronounced double chin.

A long time ago, a speeding truck killed his toddler son. It wrecked his marriage, and Harvey was drinking himself to death when he joined this very support group, and a kind woman who had also lost a child told him about a small humanitarian organization based in Maine. They ran a retreat for people who had lost children, where a grieving parent could stay for as long as they needed free of charge. The island used to be a sacred place. Nowadays it was a sanctuary for the bereaved.

It was a transformative experience, Harvey insisted. It helped him quit drinking and gave him a new lease on life. It was the next best thing to getting his son back. Yes, the Order of the Beloved is religious, but they don't proselytize. She wouldn't have to join to take advantage of their services. If Lydia wants, he could put in a good word for her. Her husband and daughter could go with her. They could all get healed together, just like Harvey did so many years ago.

Lydia pocketed the pamphlet he gives her and forgot about it for a while. When she had a night terror so powerful she woke up Amanda with her screaming, she told

Hugh she was finally ready to get some help. Inside of a week, the Aaron family was on their way to Maine.

• • •

On the third night of their stay, a woman in a long gray dress knocked on the door of their beachside cabin and beckoned the young parents to follow her. It was past ten at night, and Amanda was safely in bed. They didn't have to come, the woman told them, but it would be very difficult to explain what they would miss.

It was a cold night, and the sky was like an expanse of velvet onto which snowflakes had fallen. A half moon lit up the ocean in spectral gradations of light. The woman, who told them her name was Annie, led them behind a number of other cabins to a rutted path that they had never seen in daylight. The going wasn't very treacherous, but Lydia still wondered how Annie didn't trip in such a long dress.

She told them that what they were about to see was something unique to the Nekton Heights community: a religious ceremony, yes, but not like you would see in any church or synagogue. This was something only performed for bereaved parents, and it was personalized for every family. No, this wasn't for them. It was for another family. The Order wanted the Aarons to see one, so they could make an informed decision if they wanted to join up.

Up ahead, through a grove of scraggly, stunted pines, dozens of candles glowed around a tide pool. Dark shapes drifted here and there, and as they approached the clearing, Lydia could see that the shapes were people in black robes. Her husband made a scoffing noise and she glared at him.

Annie stopped the Aarons at the end of the path and pulled two things from her dress pocket: a small flashlight, and a dog-eared photograph. She flicked the switch on the light and aimed it at the photo. It showed a smiling little boy of about seven, with curly black hair and light brown skin.

This is Ian McGuire, she explained. Take a good look. Last year he fell out of a tree house and broke his neck. Tonight his parents seek to honor him.

Lydia tried to identify Ian's parents in the group of hooded figures, but it was impossible. No faces were visible. She made to step into the clearing but Annie stopped her.

We're only here to observe, said Annie.

The hooded figures assembled in a circle around the tide pool, each holding a tall white candle. One stood on a rock with a huge book in hand, and two left the circle to kneel at the edge of the pool. Lydia supposed they must have been the McGuires.

The figure on the rock coughed, and then all was silent save for the gentle crashing of waves on the shore nearby. Everyone in the circle bowed their heads, including the sitting pair. The figure on the rock began to speak, slowly at first, voice rising and falling with the rhythm of the words. Except the words were not words. Lydia strained to understand what was being said, but she couldn't recognize the language. It was not English, or Spanish, or French, or Chinese, or even Latin. Had it not been for the repetition of certain syllables and the pauses between bursts of noise she would have taken it for pure nonsense. It reminded her of when she had heard a Beatles record played backwards and the familiar lyrics of "Yesterday" transformed into eerie gibberish.

Lydia was suddenly and acutely aware that the only light was coming from the candles held by the hooded figures. She looked up at the sky, and there was no sky. No stars. No moon. No sense of any distance at all between herself and the impenetrable blackness above. The only sound she could hear was that of chanting, and she could no longer feel the cold night air on her bare face. She tried to turn and look back at the path but Annie stopped her with a firm hand on her shoulder.

Bad idea, she whispered. Don't do that. Watch the pool. Don't look away.

Lydia flicked her gaze to her husband and saw that he was fixated on the pool. The water in it had turned gray and opaque. A whirlpool appeared in the center, growing from the size of a fist until the whole pool was a gurgling whirl of sludge. The lead figure's chanting came faster and faster, and even though only one person was speaking it sounded somehow like the synchronized barking of dogs.

Lydia smelled ozone and something heavier, like mud and horse manure mixed together. The flames of the candles were glowing silver and stretching higher and higher in the blackness. The bare hands of the hooded figures were gray and black; all the color had gone out of the world. She thought she could see the branches of the stunted trees waving and convulsing, jet-black pine needles bristling like quills, but there was no wind blowing, and she did not dare turn her head to get a better look.

Now the sludge in the pool was whirling faster and faster. The lead figure reached new heights of guttural shrieking, and Lydia realized that the kneeling people had begun chanting something as well. It was difficult to make out at first, but then she recognized a phrase that she herself had repeated many a time, curled up on the hardwood outside the old nursery.

come back

come back

come back

And then it was over. In the time it took Lydia to blink, the chanting came to an end, the smothering darkness receded, the waves crashed on the shore, and the candle flames glowed orange and yellow once again. Some of the hands holding candles turned out to be green instead of white or brown. The pool was no longer a swirling mass of gray. The water was clear, but it wasn't empty. Lydia knew, with the same detached realization that had accompanied the discovery of Sylvie's death, that there was a little boy lying under the water, and that he had curly hair and a bright smile and a neck that was decidedly unbroken.

The McGuires removed their hoods and pulled their rejuvenated son from the tide pool. Tears filled Lydia's eyes and blurred out the scene. She reached for Hugh's hand. Neither of them said anything about how what had just happened was impossible.

This could be your town, too, said Annie. This could be yours.

• • •

Kayla's eyes shoot open when the cord bites into her flesh. She whips her hands up to grab it, but it's already too tight for her to pry it away with her chubby fingers. She tries to grab Lydia's hands but the woman keeps twisting out of the way. Kayla's gills are flaring wildly, showing livid red flesh within, but those gills are only useful underwater, and even fish need oxygen.

She kicks out twice, and Lydia feels one of her ribs snap. Lydia flinches hard, but stands her ground, her face contorted in a snarl of hatred and determination. *Jane Eyre*

falls to the floor with a thump. Kayla grabs the lamp off the bureau and smashes it over her attacker's head, sending painted seashells flying and plunging the room into total darkness. Lydia rears back, yanking Kayla from the rocker. They tumble to the floor together in a maelstrom of limbs and strangled grunts.

Kayla slashes at Lydia's face and scratches two deep gouges on Lydia's cheek. They sting like hell, almost as bad as the broken rib. Blood oozes into Lydia's left eye and leaves her half blind.

She pulls the wire so tight the rubber insulation squeaks as it rubs together, then lowers her chin to her chest and bashes Kayla's forehead with her cranium. Lydia shoves the stunned girl to one side and pins her belly-side down on the soft nursery rug, never once letting go of the cord. Planting one knee at the small of Kayla's back and pressing her other foot between Kayla's shoulder blades, she leans back as hard as she can without falling over, holding the two ends of the cord like reins.

She knows she has to act faster—knows the thing in the tank is stirring, maybe slithering toward the glass to look even though it has no eyes—but the cord is wrapped as tight as it can possibly go and Kayla just won't die.

The pinned girl is struggling again, flailing around with the jerky motions of a hooked eel and gurgling somewhere in her collapsing throat. It's a horrible, infantile sound, and a spike of hatred cuts through Lydia. Kayla's supposed to live forever, surrounded by undying friends and family who will now be faced with mourning her for all eternity. How must the poor girl feel right now, confronted with this horrible, human thing that was never supposed to happen to her?

She wrenches Kayla's head back. Nothing happens. She does it again, and again, and on the fourth try Kayla's head snaps back. At last, she ceases to move. Lydia's hands are raw and stinging as she finally lets the extension cord slide free. Kayla's head flops down onto the rug. Even if she isn't properly dead, she's not in any condition to stop Lydia's next move.

Granted, it wouldn't take much to stop her now. Her arms are like rubber, the broken rib is throbbing with every beat of her heart, and her back muscles are shuddering in a symphony of pain. The top of her head is throbbing so intensely she can feel it all the way down her neck. Lydia touches the stinging cuts on her cheek and feels a slow cascade of moisture. It isn't just blood, though. She's crying. It feels completely disconnected from the rest of her, almost like her eyes have gone to sleep. Someone else's tears.

Her body is screaming out for rest but she knows there's no time. There's always someone lurking nearby and they probably heard the struggle. Lydia straightens up, takes three deep breaths, and turns to face the tank. Spots dancing in her field of vision, she unhooks the top screen of the aquarium and dips her arms into the frigid water. The cold makes her pause and gather her wits yet again. She moves her hands this way and that, but the thing seems to have moved from its spot up against the glass.

"Come out," she whispers, in singsong. "Come on. Come on, little thing. You wouldn't exist if it weren't for me."

She brushes aside plastic aquarium plants and a few decorative rocks before she makes contact with something slick. As quick as her exhausted body will allow her, she snatches the thing and hoists it out of the water with both hands. It lets out a series of

quiet sucking noises but is otherwise silent. It squirms in her grasp, but it's only a baby, and there's nowhere for it to go.

"I don't want to hurt you," she croons, shuddering at the slimy texture of its skin.

"I didn't want to hurt Kayla either. I don't want any of this."

Lydia can hear herself sobbing, but she doesn't feel sad so much as furious.

Indignant, maybe. Disbelieving. Much the same way she felt about the first loss.

The thing has grown over the last eight months, but it still looks much the same as it did the night that it appeared in the tide pool, when Lydia's desperate love somehow summoned it into being. It has two chubby arms and two baby legs kicking uselessly in midair. Other than that, it has nothing in common with a human being. Its wrinkled, white body is shaped like a cigar thrown in a puddle, waterlogged and misshapen. It has no face at all. At the top of its "head" is a ring of thumb-sized tentacles surrounding a circular maw like a lamprey's mouth, full of sharp teeth.

It was born with teeth. She remembers that night better than she does the night of Sylvie's death. It had all been exactly like the first resurrection she and her husband had seen: black robes, cryptic chanting, silver flames glowing in strange darkness. All except the result. All those silent, implacable strangers—not strangers anymore, new neighbors—murmuring in surprise, and the leader almost dropping their book in wonder. Candle light illuminating the writhing horror in the tide pool, taking up the space that should have been for her baby.

Someone explained to her, pressing a mug of Lipton's tea into her quaking hands later that the night, that this was the culmination of some prophecy. The Scion of Dagon, born of human love in an inhuman form, destined to unite worlds and bring forth great

changes. A messiah. They had been waiting centuries for this. Could have happened at any resurrection, they said. Just the luck of the draw. Could have happened to anyone.

Of course they can't let her or her family leave now. She knows too much. They can't perform another resurrection. This monster is what came out. They can't bring her baby back again; she's already here. This is her daughter now. Isn't it a privilege, though, being the mother of a living god?

Sylvie. She knows that the lumpy, toddler-sized thing squirming in her hands is named Sylvie, but it hurts to make that connection. Her greatest regret, besides coming to Nekton Heights in the first place, or maybe besides ever going to that support group and being taken in by those false promises, is that she didn't have the presence of mind to demand that this thing be given a different name. She'd been promised a human baby that would one day transform into something monstrous. Not this. Anything but this.

"You're not my daughter," says Lydia. "You're not a person. You don't deserve to exist in her place."

Tears are streaming from her eyes and she can't wipe them away. Lydia braces herself against the aquarium and kicks at the air conditioner in the front window. It gives way, leaving scraps of duct tape on the sill and colliding with the porch roof in a thunderous crash. Lydia doesn't need to be quiet anymore. The thing is in her grasp, and even though it has no neck for her to crush she's certain it won't stand up to a two-story drop.

She's struggling to get a better grip on the mucus-coated body when Sylvie opens her mind way up wide and *screams*.

Lydia feels it like a hot electric pulse in her brain, like touching a hand to a burner turned up high but even worse, a thousand times worse, because it isn't something she can move away from. Her skull is like a mold with liquid iron gushing into it, spilling over and setting fire to everything it touches. Her whole mind is drenched in this sound that isn't a sound, and the mental siren has eclipsed everything else in the world.

And then, the single most horrible moment of her life: everyone is in her mind.

Everyone is in her mind and she is in everyone's mind. Everyone. Every person in Nekton Heights—and some who aren't people yet, the hybrid children gestating in their salt-soaked eggs in the marshes, dreaming the amniotic dreams of the unborn—and every thinking thing under the sea, asleep or awake, is right in there with her

in there

all in there together

and she sees the city beneath the waves, sees it through the eyes of everyone who lives there—and now she understands they get around with eyes that look sideways instead of forwards—sees glowing coral like a garden of tumors, statues worn smooth by ruthless ocean currents and not a single one of them depicting a human being, an army of scaled and slime-bellied brutes all hoping for the safe growth and good health of the monstrous baby that let her see all this, gray and green and white and blue and lit with the most breathtaking bioluminescence, and some of her hands are webbed and some of her hands aren't hands at all, and she has a thousand legs and dorsal spines and teeth made for cutting

and she is every single person on the island, every human and near-human, she feels everything they feel, everything but her own body, everyone's love and fear and anticipation for the precious baby in her arms, and the onslaught of dreams and nightmares and aches and pleasures is just too much to bear and most of it blurs together in a stupendous roar but there are little things that stand out like Kayla, not quite dead but very close, too broken to think of anything but how she'll never get a chance to finish *Middlemarch* now like her husband, dreaming of his wife giving birth to a triangle like little Amanda, dreaming of nothing at all like the neighbors, springing from their beds in a panic like a skinny man in old-fashioned clothes fleeing a strange city under a searing bright moon like two women clinging to each other in a green tiled bathroom like Sylvie

Finally, there is Sylvie. She knows which mind is Sylvie's because it glows with holy power like radium, a green flower of energy exploding outward in the darkness. The flower blooms, blinding even though Lydia can't truly see it, and then it recedes.

A thousand thousand staring eyes turn upward, and landward.

Everyone is awake now.

Her hands are still slick with mucus when she regains consciousness, curled on the floor with her muscles spasming violently. Her brain is like tissue paper. Every little thought tears at it. She opens her quivering mouth and spews blood. Her tongue feels wrong. She's in so much pain that it takes her a whole minute to realize she's bitten it so

hard that a third of it is almost severed, connected only by a tiny flap at the tip. It rests in her mouth like a salted slug. She reaches her fingers in, plucks out the ruined mass of flesh, and bites through the connecting flap. Her vision goes white, and for a long moment she thinks she's going to faint. The moment passes. She sets the piece of her tongue on the ground and wonders if she should do something about it.

Lydia can't walk. She crawls around Kayla's body even though crawling over her would be a more direct route to the hallway. Wouldn't be respectful to drool on her, especially after killing her ended up being largely pointless.

The nursery door is open. Lydia must have dropped Sylvie, and then she crawled away. Somehow it's the most amazing thing that Sylvie was able to open the door with her slippery fish hands. Good job, Sylvie. Well done.

Lydia crawls with her head down until she bumps against the banister. Then she looks up, her vision sparking as she moves her head. Sylvie's toddled all the way to the top of the stairs, leaving a trail of mucus behind. She's making that sucking noise again and waving her little tentacles around. The real Sylvie did something similar with her pacifiers. Lydia can no longer determine what kind of emotion that memory inspires in her.

YOU CAN'T EVEN REMEMBER WHAT SHE LOOKED LIKE, says an unfamiliar voice in her head.

There's movement on the staircase. In the darkness and the haze of debilitating pain, Lydia can still recognize her neighbor, Laurel-Ann Forsberg. Laurel-Ann has the beginnings of some beautiful dorsal rays on the back of her neck and eyes that glow orange like incandescent bulbs. They still face forward like a human's. Lydia can see

them blazing in the dark. Laurel-Ann's mouth drops open in one of the only universal expressions of shock as she scoops the terrified infant into her arms.

Since everyone was in everyone else's mind, she knows exactly what Lydia did in that nursery, and what she was planning to do next, and why.

Lydia tries to speak, but it hurts too much. Nothing comes out of her mouth but a fresh spurt of blood. Laurel-Ann just watches as Lydia hoists herself up on her rickety legs with the help of the banister.

Then Lydia meets Laurel-Ann's gaze, and the two women stare at each other as the sound of shuffling feet draws nearer to the house.

A door creaks open just behind Lydia.

"Mommy? I had a bad dream," says Amanda.

Lydia spits more blood down her front. She hears her daughter approaching, asking why Mrs. Forsberg is in the house, why Sylvie is out of her tank. Lydia shuts her eyes and covers her face with her free hand. She wants to apologize to her daughter for...well, for everything, but there's nothing she can say.

They Must Die of Looking in the Glass: Lovecraft, Body Horror, and Uncanny Procreation

Howard Phillips Lovecraft is mostly lauded for his exploration of cosmic horror and things that are fundamentally inhuman: incomprehensible colors from the depths of space, cities built upon non-Euclidean geometry, and creatures so powerful and so removed from the human experience that the most appropriate label for them is “gods.” The true horror is that these supposed incomprehensible beings are not so distant as they first appear. If these monsters were completely alien, how would we recognize them as monsters? Truly cosmic horror might not be presentable in any meaningful way. How would we even understand it? Without some human connection, we would feel nothing but incomprehension.

In two of Lovecraft’s best stories, that horror takes the form of a perverse fecundity that threatens to overrun the Earth with human/monster hybrids. Human fecundity is not itself frightening. It is the dissolving of boundaries between humanity and monstrosity by way of hybrid children, creating a flesh and blood link between the human race and the emotionless cosmic void. These offspring will eventually change the very nature of what we call human. Children are the future, and the future is scaly. Some of the reader’s horror comes from the revelation that no invasion took place and the children themselves are not necessarily the product of assaults. Someone, at some point, made a conscious decision to bed down with a monster. After all, if there were nothing alluring about the monstrous partners, then there would be no threat in the first place.

The Shadow over Innsmouth tells of a young man just come of age on an architectural and antiquarian tour of New England. During a spur of the moment visit to

the isolated coastal town Innsmouth, he encounters some strange people with fish-like facial features. The town drunk tells him that Obed Marsh made a pact with the god Dagon that obliged the residents of Innsmouth to interbreed with immortal fish-people called Deep Ones. The children of these unions are born looking human, but when they reach adulthood, they begin to transform into Deep Ones themselves. The narrator dismisses this as drunken madness, but later that night he finds himself pursued by a murderous crowd of Innsmouth natives—with a great number of Deep Ones among them—who don't want him passing on what he's heard.

He escapes, and takes his story to the authorities. Innsmouth is nearly destroyed and almost all its residents are arrested and put in camps, never to be seen again. The narrator later investigates his own ancestry, and finds that his “missing” grandmother is a member of the Marsh family. He goes into deep denial, but tracking the “slow ravages of disease” in his reflection confirms that he is transforming into a Deep One. By the end of the story his horror changes to acceptance of his birthright, and he resolves to join his grandmother in the undersea city Y'ha-nthlei as soon as he is able.

The Dunwich Horror takes place in another of Lovecraft's fictional Massachusetts towns, this one deep in the woods. Lavinia Whateley, an eccentric and shunned spinster, gives birth out of wedlock. Her son Wilbur matures at an abnormal rate, reaching puberty by four and adulthood by fifteen. He and his grandfather build a barn to house an unseen creature that once lived in their attic, but has grown too big for the house. Unwilling to call attention to their bootlegging activities, the people of Dunwich decline to alert the authorities about the apparent animal sacrifices happening on the Whateley property.

Wilbur's grandfather dies, and Lavinia disappears soon after. Dr. Henry Armitage denies Wilbur's request to borrow a copy of the Necronomicon from Miskatonic University. In attempting to steal the book, Wilbur is killed by a guard dog, and in death is revealed to be only partly human: under his clothes is a phantasmagorical body of eyes, teeth, scales, and tentacles. Dr. Armitage decodes Wilbur's notes and deduces that he meant to open a gate between worlds and summon dark gods—the Old Ones—to decimate the Earth.

With no one left to take care of it, the invisible thing in the Whateleys' barn breaks loose and terrorizes the countryside, destroying houses and leaving entire families crushed in its path. Dr. Armitage and two of his colleagues concoct a spell that renders the creature temporarily visible—an “octopus, centipede, spider kind o' thing” with half an enormous human face—and splits it into its disparate parts. Before it dies it screams out in English, “HELP! HELP! ...ff - ff - ff - FATHER! FATHER! YOG-SOTHOTH!” Dr. Armitage then explains to the horrified locals that Lavinia had two children. This creature, the titular horror, was Wilbur's twin, “but it looked more like the father than he did.”

Dunwich and *Innsmouth* both present the dissolving of boundaries between the human and the monstrous by way of reproduction. Lovecraft has a particular knack for mixing very familiar things with things so starkly alien they hardly seem to exist in the same universe. The way he blends the familiar and the unfamiliar, like so many horror authors before and after him, ties in with the literary concept of the uncanny. It is precisely this combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar—the human and the purely monstrous—that induces the greatest fright in the reader.

The uncanny is not just a literary experience but a visual one. In robotics, the uncanny valley is represented by a graph that charts typical emotional responses to representations of human beings. Generally speaking, the more human a robot seems, the more affection it inspires in the observer. The same goes for cartoon characters, statues, paintings, and other such representations. However, the graph does not show a consistent upward slope. The pioneering roboticist Masahiro Mori found that after a certain level of realism is reached, there is a sharp drop in affection. (Bryant) This dip is what he calls “the uncanny valley.” This is where nearly perfect representations of human beings fall, when they stop looking obviously fake and start looking dead, diseased, or wrong in some other way. The slope begins to rise again as the representation becomes virtually indistinguishable from a living human being.

Mixed signals cause the most intense psychological discomfort. This applies to fragmented bodies as well as whole ones. This is why photoshopping human eyes onto anything nonhuman instantly renders that thing intolerably creepy. Kermit the Frog is adorable. Kermit the Frog with human eyes, as seen on the blog “Muppets with People Eyes,” is an abject horror. (see works cited for a link) Likewise, the scariest monsters tend to be the ones that aren’t acceptably different, i.e. aren’t different enough: the ones that are read not as monsters that might look like people, but as people who have something seriously wrong with them.

This idea of acceptable difference occupies a whole lot of territory in the horror genre both as a theory and as a practice in monster design. This is why most of the monsters in the *Silent Hill* franchise—a critically acclaimed series of video games about a haunted town—are made up of distorted human forms (a body made of nothing but legs,

a human centipede, a colossal two-headed baby, etc.) and a big part of why zombies have such an enduring presence in popular culture. Even H.R. Giger's iconic design for the *Alien* franchise is largely reducible to recognizable human components. It's no coincidence that one of Giger's biggest influences was the writing of H.P. Lovecraft; he even named his landmark art book after the fictional Necronomicon. The uncanny valley is most often discussed as a visual phenomenon because movies and video games provide the readiest examples, especially since the advent of computer-generated images. Plus, Masahiro Mori found that adding animation/movement to the equation exaggerates both the zenith and the nadir of the graph.

There is considerable overlap between the uncanny valley and the literary tradition of the uncanny. Consider Frankenstein's monster. Despite writing more than a hundred years before the Masahiro Mori's investigations, Mary Shelley describes a near perfect example of an uncanny valley dweller. Designed to be beautiful, the monster instead comes to life a shambling horror. While unfinished, Victor's creation is merely "ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived." (Shelley 35) A corpse by itself is certainly frightening, both as a thing in itself and as a reminder of our own mortality. A moving body cannot be just a corpse, and that is when the observer realizes that something, somewhere, has gone horribly wrong. A moving corpse violates our distinction between the living and the dead: it creates a category in crisis.

Another great example comes from the story that Freud analyzes for his famous essay on the uncanny, E.T.A. Hoffmann's supremely unsettling "The Sand-Man." At one point, protagonist Nathanael abandons his decidedly human fiancée in favor of the

mysterious and laconic Olimpia. Olimpia turns out to be a wooden automaton, cleverly made so as to fool most people, but only Nathanael is so blind as to find her appealing instead of repellant in her unnatural perfection. (Then again, the uncanny valley doesn't have absolute values, and what unsettles one person may attract another.) When Nathanael sees Olimpia with her eyes removed, he realizes that she's really a doll, but she still looks human enough to trigger sympathetic emotional responses. He reacts with horror and suffers a mental breakdown. That kind of cognitive dissonance—when something looks too real to be fake even when there is empirical proof that it *is* fake—is what the uncanny is really all about: confusion leading to dread.

Shelley is mostly concerned with the impossibility of artificially recreating the human form. Hoffmann's concept of the uncanny is primarily concerned with vision, as shown by Sand-Man tearing out the eyes of children and Olimpia with her doll's eyes rolling on the floor. To interpret a story that is so obviously and interestingly about vision and blindness in terms of the castration complex, as Freud does, is somewhat ludicrous; when it comes to "The Sand-Man," Freud's concept of the uncanny is deeply flawed. Still, there is much to be said about this.

Freud presents the uncanny as the blurring between the imagination and reality: seeing something that should not be, "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar." (Freud 825) The more familiar something seems, the more unsettling it is when something about it is out of place. He makes mention of a "fertile but not exhaustive paper by Jentsch (1906)," (Freud 825) that he praises for its ambition. However, he dismisses key parts of it as Jentsch's conclusions do

not fit with his own conception of the uncanny. Jentsch asserts that uncanny feelings are produced when we have

‘doubts [as to] whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate’; and he refers in this connection to the impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata. To these he adds the uncanny effect of epileptic fits, and of manifestations of insanity, because these excite in the spectator the impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity.” (Freud 828)

Freud is correct when he says that the doll Olympia is not the only important figure in the story, but despite her subdued presence, she carries more immediate significance as an uncanny figure than does the Sand-Man: the fairytale figure in Nathanael’s childhood nightmares who he conflates first with his father’s frightening business associate, and then with a sinister optician. The Sand-Man lends himself more easily than Olympia does to a psychoanalytic reading involving castration and father issues, but this does not make him the focus of the story. The protagonist Nathanael does not ultimately find Olympia terrifying because he is afraid of castration, but because she falls quite neatly into the uncanny valley. She is so close to human that she troubles his sense of what it means to be human himself: Since Nathanael feels such harmony between Olympia’s “soul” and his own, this implies a certain soullessness—a certain inhumanity—on his own part.

Rather than letting the fear of blindness stand by itself, Freud insists that it is only a stand-in for the castration complex. The fear of castration is a perfectly valid fear, but it is by no means the same as the fear of having one’s eyes gouged out. Surely Oedipus—knife in hand and with nothing to lose—had intended to castrate himself, he would have castrated himself. Self-inflicted blindness is not necessarily “a mitigated form of...castration”. (Freud 831) The one does not supplant the other, though they may stand

together. Freud also gives an unfortunately literal reading of the story in concluding that “Coppola the optician really *is* the lawyer Coppelius and also, therefore, the Sand-man.” (Freud 831) Sometimes writers use coincidences to heighten ambiguity—here again Jentsch’s idea of intellectual uncertainty may come into play—but Freud dismisses Hoffman’s obliquity and ambiguity and falls into the same trap that the protagonist does by insisting that these three characters must be one and the same.

His attempts to articulate a sexual component of the uncanny aren’t completely misguided, though his interpretation of blindness as the disguised fear of castration isn’t really useful for a literary analysis of “The Sand-Man.” His conclusions would be meatier if he found a way to incorporate both themes—sexual and visual—in his theory of the uncanny. Those topics taken together would also bring him much closer to Lovecraft’s concept of the uncanny, in which couples the theme of vision with a fear of potency. For Lovecraft, the two are connected, but much like the coupling of the familiar and the unfamiliar in something uncanny, the one does not override the other.

The sense of the uncanny in general arises from intellectual uncertainty about whether something is a living human being or not. Frankenstein’s monster and Olympia the doll are both created by scientists instead of born from a human womb. They lack mothers. While they might at first appear to be human, there is a clear dividing line between them and us. Not so with Lovecraft’s monsters. His beasts are, it is implied, conceived and born in the old-fashioned way. The uncertainty in his stories comes from whether or not the carnal act involved two humans or not, and so the Lovecraftian uncanny is all about a horror of sex and reproduction. Here, having a mother is not

enough to disqualify one from being a monster. Sometimes, the mother herself is a monster.

The fear in these stories is not of castration at all, but of procreation. If the castration complex represents a loss of male power and potency, then Lovecraft is concerned with both male and female potency amplified in monstrous couplings that should be impossible. Not only are said couplings possible, they are productive, and the resulting children are at least temporarily capable of passing undetected in human society. Men and women are equally capable of producing monsters. So, this does not really support a reading based in castration anxiety. It's not the loss of male power so much as the dilution of humanity and biological degeneration. In *Dunwich*, it's even implied that Wilbur is the one who kills his human mother, demonstrating that the father's imprint on her children is stronger than hers.

Are these children human? Not completely. Did some weird monster sex happen? Absolutely. A great number of Lovecraft's stories turn upon the revelation that some pale, gibbering horror is descended straight from human beings. Over and over again, Lovecraft's fiction circles back to the horrible idea that these monsters are not conjured up or called out of the air but born to our very neighbors. Sometimes, as in *Innsmouth*, they are us! In the most fundamental way possible, we are closer to monsters than we think.

In most stories that deal with the uncanny, something believed to be a human being turns out to be something else. This is true of these two stories, but the reverse comes up as well: the revelation that something apparently monstrous is at least partly human. And however powerful they seem, the monsters are dependent on their human

collaborators. The precise mechanics of Wilbur Whateley's conception remain unknown and unknowable. However, the fact that there aren't ever increasing numbers of Yog-Sothoth's children running around shows that it takes some concerted effort and collaboration for him to reproduce. Yog-Sothoth is functionally impotent and without human assistance would be totally isolated from our world. Either Lavinia or her father or the both of them made a conscious decision to strike a deal with this entity

Deep Ones don't have the same limits as Yog-Sothoth when it comes to reproduction, though it's implied that they cannot reproduce among themselves. Why else would they join forces with human beings when they could just as easily stay in the ocean, away from prying eyes and angry mobs? That they need to collaborate with human beings suggests that without ordinary people, there would be no more monsters. Is it the monsters that have a human element in them, or the humans that have a monstrous element, or both? According to Zadok Allen, the original Pacific islanders met the Deep Ones by accident and came to an agreement. So, it wasn't a case of monsters attacking people and begetting children by force. Even more interestingly, the first generation of Innsmouth cultists is made up of men who take Deep Ones as wives. All the specifically named first generation pairings are between human men and monster women; the only explicitly "male" Deep Ones are the sons of these women. Maybe Deep Ones are a single sex species?

Deep Ones would be "acceptably different" as monsters were it not for their partially human offspring. When Robert Olmstead sees a bas relief of Deep Ones on a tiara, it is unsettling, but not wholly repulsive. Seeing hybrids in Innsmouth is certainly creepy, but they don't look quite inhuman enough to be really disturbing. At that point in

the story he is still reading them as ugly people and not hybrids. Robert's first glimpse of a pack of real Deep Ones on the move, however, is so horrible and disgusting that he faints on the spot. Having seen the intermediates of carvings and Innsmouth folk, he recognizes these monsters not as monsters but as relatives. It is their familial connections to humanity that render them truly horrifying. Deep One hybrids are frequently referenced as having irregular movements as well. Here again we see the linking of disgust to animation, with the mob's unnatural hopping movements propelling them into a darker realm of horror.

Robert is initially unnerved because unlike the ticket agent who tells him about the blighted town, he cannot dismiss his instinctive revulsion as simple race prejudice. He cannot identify the racial "otherness" in the Innsmouth bus driver's features—"[he] certainly did not look Asiatic, Polynesian, Levantine or negroid" (Lovecraft 585)—and that raises some very uncomfortable questions. If he isn't mixed race, then what is he? Already, the narrator isn't seeing the same things other outsiders are. He sees that there is something profoundly different about these people and is drawn to them. Where other people see only grotesque carvings on the museum tiara, he sees an alluring work of art, and where others see a depopulated shell of a city, he sees something strangely appealing. The revulsion is very much mingled with the attraction.

Zadok Allen means to repulse the protagonist by telling him the wild truth about Innsmouth, but instead invokes the same fascination with the grotesque that drew Robert there in the first place, asking him

Haow'd ye like to he livin' in a taown like this, with everything a-rottin' an' dyin', an' boarded-up monsters crawlin' an' bleatin' an' barkin' an' hoppin' araoun' black cellars an' attics every way ye turn? Hey? Haow'd ye like to hear the haowlin' night arter night from the churches an' Order O' Dagon

Hall, an' know what's doin' part o' the haowlin'? Haow'd ye like to hear
what comes from that awful reef every May-Eve an' Hallowmass?
(Lovecraft 607)

It turns out, of course, that Robert would like this all very much. The mixed signals are strong, and his destiny is calling to him.

The issue of attraction versus repulsion relates to something I think of as the “Vampire Problem.” Vampires in fiction run the gamut from animalistic brutes (*30 Days of Night*) to practically harmless brooders (*Twilight*) but the scariest ones find a happy medium between charm and savagery. Traditionally, vampires cannot enter the home of a human being unless they are invited in. If vampires were not attractive, they would never be invited in. If there were nothing attractive about becoming a vampire, vampires would not be a threat. To be truly threatening, a monster must be capable of seduction. How could we be tempted away if the beasts were not tempting in some way? When monsters don't threaten by attacking or killing, our only real defense against them is a healthy disgust. When that disgust fails, more monsters are born. Thus, Yog-Sothoth and the Deep Ones have been “invited in,” despite having nothing attractive about them at first glance.

It's interesting to note that Lovecraft, who was virulently racist and had no qualms using nonwhite people as monsters in his stories, takes the time to place Deep Ones outside of traditional racial categories. There isn't quite a clean one to one correspondence between Lovecraft's own hatred of miscegenation and his fictional concept of Deep One hybrids. There is definitely a connection, but it's more complicated than it first appears. While it does work on some level as a metaphor for mixed race families, the Deep One family is a thing in and of itself, as shunned by the indigenous

people of New Caledonia as it is by wealthy New Englanders. When Obed Marsh returns to the original Dagon cult in pursuit of more gold he finds that it has been wiped off the face of the earth. The people on the neighboring islands found out about the interspecies relationships and murdered everyone involved, destroying all their houses and even refusing to admit that there had ever been people on that island in the first place. Not even the US government is that thorough when they raze Innsmouth. At the very least Lovecraft is reaching for a bogeyman that will scare more people than just fellow racists. Biological degeneration threatens all men, I suppose. It is curious, though, that both cults balk more at mating with sea monsters than they do at murder and human sacrifice. Killing people seems to be less horrifying than bringing unnatural life into the world.

None of this is to say, however, that Lovecraft was not racist or that his racism did not infect his work. Lovecraft was an astoundingly bilious and hateful person. His wife, Sonia Greene, who was Jewish and had to frequently remind him of this fact, cited his anti-Semitism as the primary reason for their separation. She wrote that

Although [Howard] once said he loved New York and that henceforth it would be his 'adopted state,' I soon learned that he hated it and all its 'alien hordes.' When I protested that I too was one of them, he'd tell me I 'no longer belonged to these mongrels.' *'You are now Mrs. H.P. Lovecraft of 598 Angell St., Providence, Rhode Island'.* (Lovecraft xli)

They lived together for ten whole months! So, he was to a certain extent a proponent of assimilation. The problem with that is if assimilation can work one way, it can certainly work the other way too, and the "alien hordes" could emerge triumphant. In *Innsmouth*, we have an apparently normal Anglo-Saxon family that turns out to be hiding fish people only a few generations back. This fear of biological contamination is everywhere in Lovecraft's work. This is where we get Robert Olmstead inheriting some very strange

genes from his human mother. This is something that comes up with some frequency in Lovecraft's work: a disgraced offshoot of an otherwise noble family that threatens to ruin the reputation of the whole clan.

The connection between Lovecraft's racism and the fear of biological degeneration in his stories is complicated because of how heavily he bases his protagonists on himself. He was torn between pride for his ancestry—he could trace his mother's side of the family all the way back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony—and anxiety over the fact that both of his parents were mentally unstable and died in the same institution. A nervous breakdown in high school prevented him from getting his diploma, which in turn prevented him from attending his beloved Brown University. When H.P. Lovecraft writes about Wilbur Whateley, he describes a repulsively ugly man with a hideous body, born from a stunted family, whose aspirations to higher education are thwarted by circumstances beyond his control. When H.P. Lovecraft writes about Wilbur Whateley, he writes about himself.

Robert Olmstead also serves as a stand-in for the author, and it's very interesting that he continually casts his stand-ins as monsters or monsters-to-be. Before his health began to fail, Lovecraft frequently traveled around the eastern United States on antiquarian tours, sometimes with friends but often by himself. He ate poorly and traveled on a shoestring budget, opting only for the cheapest possible accommodations: just like Robert. How do we reconcile Lovecraft's view of his own racial superiority with how he inserts himself into his stories: as a man ready to abandon human society to live in the ocean, a man with crotch tentacles? In these two stories in particular, there's more going on than just a regurgitation of the institutionalized racism that he grew up with and

espoused in his personal politics. The ugliness is coming from somewhere inside him. He looks at himself—an intellectual, Anglo-Saxon man from a “noble” family, with no apparent faults of ancestry save for a Welsh grandmother—and is repulsed. It’s almost as if he sees something alien in himself that he cannot reconcile with his self-image.

This brings me right back to vision and eyes. As in “The Sand-Man,” the eyes in *Innsmouth* are still the ultimate signifiers of the uncanny, but the fear is no longer that of loss of vision: now, the real horror is in seeing the truth of things and never being able to stop seeing it. Robert Olmstead’s eyes reveal him as a member of the Marsh family, and his piscine relatives are wholly unable to shut their eyes. Long before he sees his true face in the mirror, he finds himself incapable of looking away from the ocean and eventually from the surging mob on the lookout for him, “for who could crouch blindly while a legion of croaking, baying entities of unknown source flopped noisomely past, scarcely more than a hundred yards away?” (Lovecraft 633) He just had to look.

Vision itself has a quality of potency in these stories, with multiple characters fainting at a ghastly sight or being in some way contaminated by the things they see. Laying eyes upon the Deep One tiara is what leads Robert to Innsmouth, infected by the hints of what might be hiding in that town. Zadok tells him that Captain Obed could “read folks like they was books.” Robert’s own ability to read monstrosity in himself and other people is something that comes not just from his own experiences, but from his human ancestor. He supposedly has his great great grandfather’s “sharp-readin’ eyes” (Lovecraft 602) but he is remarkably inept at seeing when he’s in mortal peril until it’s literally breaking his door down. However, he also reads things in art that other people don’t necessarily see.

Everything in *Dunwich* is viewed from a distance, through the eyes of peeping toms and tentative translations of coded notes. Lavinia and her young son are “fleetingly spied” running nude through the wilderness, though the observer thinks Wilbur might be wearing a fringed belt. Wilbur is constantly under threat of being exposed, and Wilbur’s enormous brother, who does not get a name in the text—I’ll call him Orville, in reference to another remarkable set of brothers—is so inhuman he can’t even be seen. When he is seen, it’s through a telescope, like Olimpia [!]. Finally being rendered visible is what makes him weak enough to be killed. Only when he can be positively identified can he be destroyed.

In the notes that Dr. Armitage manages to translate, Wilbur writes, “I wonder how I shall look when the earth is cleared and there are no earth beings on it.” (Lovecraft 373) Wilbur is referring to his appearance, but the phrasing makes one wonder not just how he will appear physically but how he will *see* things. He won’t have to cover his extra eyes with constricting articles of clothing when the apocalypse comes. What will those eyes see that is now hidden from us?

Orville’s two red human eyes show him to be a member of the Whateley clan, and he and his brother both have a surplus of eyes on their bodies. The suggestion is that the Whateleys can see things they aren’t supposed to: monsters from other worlds, mechanisms to bring about the end of the human race as we know it. But the most horrible aspect of Orville’s body is the gigantic half of a human face perched atop his writhing bulk, the sight of which sends Curtis Whateley into a dead faint: the familiar amidst the totally alien. The townsfolk naturally assume that this was some beast that Wilbur conjured into existence, and the revelation that this thing was born of a human

woman is so revolting that the story ends right there with no description their reaction to this piece of news. Those two red eyes are a direct link to the unnatural mating that produced him. The alien is not so alien, and this unknown does not remain unknown.

At the beginning of *Innsmouth*, Robert Olmstead is leading a lonely life. He's traveling on his own, with the smallest budget possible, to look at old buildings. At the end of the story, he dreams of being with his family. There's a home waiting for him under the sea. He'll never be alone again. Everyone is equal there and no one will die. Robert's transformation gives him a chance at joining a community. It also gives him a body. Not unlike Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, Robert has very little bodily presence in the story he's telling. He gives the reader no idea at all of what he looks like until he begins to transform. Even then he mentions nothing of mourning the loss of his hair or any other part of his human appearance. After being tormented by visions of his grandmother and the undersea city, he finally sees the truth of his being. He accepts his nature, and is accepted by his family.

Robert's monstrosity is so subtle he doesn't even notice it for the first twenty-one years of his life. That he remains undetected by others for so long, even well into his transformation, suggests that maybe Deep One hybrids aren't as distinguishable to ordinary people as they are to other hybrids. The end of *Innsmouth* posits that becoming a monster might not always be horrifying, which is in itself horrifying: that there will come a day when looking upon the denizens of the ocean will no longer repulse him, when they become as ordinary to him as strangers on a bus. At the same time, he is not his own person, an atavistic force of genetics having supposedly taken control of his free will. It could be, however, that this is just an excuse to cover him choosing to join the monsters.

How can he help it if it's in his genes? There is definitely something alluring about abandoning humanity, but it's more acceptable to cover it up with "my ancestors made me do it" instead of admitting to the allure. This comes back to the uncanny's foundation on the mingling of attraction and dread.

So then, what do the eyes have to do with the monstrous procreation? Are these stories about vision, or are they about weird monster sex? Is there a straightforward connection between a proliferation of eyes and the children of demons? One might well ask if Wilbur Whateley and Robert Olmstead are monsters or men. They are both, and they are neither. Wilbur is an outsider both to his human relatives and to the extra-dimensional creatures he purports to serve. Robert is a loner freak in human society and almost certainly a pariah in Y'ha-nthlei for bringing about Innsmouth's destruction. They see and feel things others do not. Robert and Wilbur both seek to move to a place where they will fit in. Robert probably gets that wish; without a sympathetic community to fall back on, Wilbur dies, and so does Orville.

The core of the uncanny lies in vision—the task of identifying monsters by sight: asymmetric faces, unnatural movements, voices mismatched with mouths—which all too easily becomes a temptation. The final piece of this puzzle is choice. The temptation to mate with monsters would be insignificant if the characters did not ultimately choose to do it; temptation is nothing at all if there is no choice to make. They see the monster—they perceive it as inhuman, accurately identify it as *uncanny*—and still choose to draw near, to join themselves to it. They see the horrifying thing, they are horrified, and they are seduced. Robert's uncle died of looking in the glass. He saw himself, he was

horrified, and he ended his life. A story can be a kind of looking glass. Could Lovecraft bear what he saw in it? Can we?

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If you want to see Kermit the Frog with human eyes, go to

<muppetswithpeopleeyes.tumblr.com/post/2448198387>.

I really, truly do not recommend it.