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Far away, in a certain place and at a certain point in time, was a very ordinary bench sitting in the middle of a marginally ordinary forest—marginally ordinary being just about as ordinary as any forest could aspire to be. There were no trees in the area directly around the bench, as if some burly beflanneled bebearded man with a large hatchet came around to chop them all down so that he could sell their corpses to random people who would proceed to ritualistically gather round and cremate them, staring as the product of hundreds of years growth turned to ash and dust. Or maybe he took them and made this bench. Yes, that sounds much more palatable. Upon this ordinary bench sat an ordinary girl. This ordinary girl was staring into the thicket of trees—which were a respectable radius away from their fallen brethren upon which she sat—considering her life choices up to that point, as those who’ve made no significant life choices tend to do. This girl (whose name is Kaela) was an anthropology student at the local university. It must have been some sort of anthropological wonder to her then that in that thicket of trees she was staring into, there was a pair of eyes staring back. Well, perhaps it wasn’t an anthropological wonder, for the eyes looked for more feral than your average anthropoid—but I digress. In any case, Kaela did not seem to notice this strange occurrence happening right before her.

But I suppose she did notice because she arose from her resting spot with a quizzical look on her face, tilting her head slightly. She approached the spot the eyes had appeared in. Strangely enough, the dastardly little peepers disappeared as soon as she tried to match its gaze with her own. She scratched her head. Kaela liked to be able to trust her own senses. She drew her leather bound notebook from her pack—a notebook she kept to note whatever she felt like noting at the time. Amongst her many notes were “could Plato’s tripartition of the soul be linked with Freud’s

tripartition of the psyche?” and “buy eggs!” After making a note of the occurrence she chewed the end of the already mangled-by-her-gnashers pencil and stared back at where the eyes once were. After deciding there was no more to be done, she stowed away her notebook and headed off back for town.

Kaela lived on the main road in her small town of Smallton. She had just turned onto the main road when she saw her neighbors, Miss and Miss Doubtford, pitching a velvet royal purple tent with gold trimmings in their front yard. The Doubtfords were, in a time before this current time, actresses in films the nature of which they don’t like to discuss. They aren’t related in any way, and if you ask them if they are a couple they’ll say no; they just so happen to have the same last name, strange coincidence, no?

“Hello Miss Doubtford, Miss Doubtford.” Kaela said with a ginger wave.

“Kyra! How do you do?” Miss Doubtford said. Miss Doubtford whacked Miss Doubtford on the back of the head.

“You imbecile! Her name is Krista! How do you do, Krista?” Miss Doubtford said with a saccharine smile. Kaela didn’t correct them.

“I’m alright, thanks.” One of the Doubtfords was wearing a puce dress with crimson trim; the other was wearing a more reddish plum hue with sanguine embellishments. They smelled of raw oysters. “May I ask about the tent, by the way? Are you going camping?”

“Is it obvious then?” Miss Doubtford chortled. “Yes, we’ve decided it would be best to get out of the house for a bit. So we’re going camping for the weekend!” Kaela stared at the tent dumbfounded. “In your front yard?”

“Why yes, of course! What if we need something from the house?” Miss Doubtford said defiantly, clearly exasperated with the silly girl.

“Not to mention the nearest wood is so far away.” Miss Doubtford added.

“There’s a forest just up the way there.” Kaela said pointing up the road she came from. Miss Doubtford’s expression suddenly became far less cloying. The two Doubtfords exchanged a worried glance. The tent fell down behind them.

“Yes, well...” Miss Doubtford began. “People who go into that forest tend to go a bit...” Miss Doubtford continued.

“Loopy.” Miss Doubtford finished for her.

“Yes. Loopy. Good word.” The Doubtfords nodded. “Yes.” They said simultaneously.

Kaela frowned. She knew of the rumors about the forest of course, endless tales of travellers getting lost or getting swallowed up by living trees—but only if they were small enough to fit of course. She never believed any of it. She had been going up to the forest to relax for as long as she could remember, and Kaela could remember a lot. As far as she could tell, she was just as normal as the other residents of Smallton. Kaela began to wonder why she even brought up the forest in the first place.

“Anyway, I should be heading home. Good luck on your camping trip.” The Doubtfords turned back to the tent.

“Oh, I thought we had set this up already!” Miss Doubtford said.

“It would seem that it slipped our mind! Silly us.” Miss Doubtford wiped her brow with her handkerchief. They began to set their tent back up, and seemed to forget all about Kaela.

When Kaela arrived at her small house it was empty; her parents would normally be there but instead were taking a sabbatical at their mid-summer home, the location of which they've always, for whatever reason, kept secret from their daughter. Kaela never cared much for her parents. They cared for her and raised her well enough, but she never felt close to them—but that's neither here nor there.

Kaela threw her keys on the table and threw herself onto her couch. She didn't know why but she felt exhausted. She exhumed her notebook from her pack and stared at the note she had made about the eyes in the forest: "Pair of eyes in the forest? Disappeared on observation... consult professor." She lowered her notebook to her lap and stared forward.

Her favorite professor from last semester was Professor Humphrey, a well-built, middle-aged man who taught her class on the anthropology of Tibet and the Himalayas. He wore the same white button down shirt, wool pants, black oxfords, and tweed jacket to class every day. He also always brought a thermos and a handled paper cup, which he would periodically fill and drink from as the lesson proceeded. When the thermos was empty he would violently yet casually flick it behind him several times. Kaela never asked what the purpose of this ritual was. She also didn't quite understand the thermos. The water couldn't have been hot because there was never any steam emerging from the cup nor the thermos, so why the thermos and not a regular water bottle? She was probably overthinking it.

Professor Humphrey may not know what the eyes signified, but he most certainly would have something to say about them. Kaela had been going to him with anthropological questions all semester, and the two of them had kindled a friendship that extended outside of the classroom. That being said, this did not seem to Kaela to be an anthropological question, but a

question that begged being asked nevertheless. Kaela was getting up to go to her computer to send Professor Humphrey an e-mail when she heard a knock on the door.

Peeping through the peephole Kaela saw her other neighbor, Antoine Muskel. Antoine had been an accomplished bodybuilder in his day, and still made an effort to maintain his immaculate physique. He had a large almond shaped head, which he shaved and polished so that his dome shined in the sunlight, as well as a thin curled moustache that he waxed and trimmed thrice a day. Kaela opened the door, “Mr. Muskel, hello! How may I help you?”

“Kaela for the last time, call me Antoine!” he flexed and gazed at his muscles as he said this. He was wearing a tight-fitting red and white Breton striped t-shirt, and some exorbitantly short navy shorts. Kaela thought that it must have been hard to find clothes that actually fit you when you were as built as Antoine.

“Yes, sorry Mr. Mus—er... Antoine.” Kaela didn’t like calling adults by their first names. “Anyway, what is it that you need?”

“I was wondering if you had any flour I could borrow?” Antoine was continuously iterating through his repertoire of bodybuilding poses as he spoke. He always did this. “I need it to prepare my world-famous chili for dinner tonight!”

“I can’t say I’ve ever heard of your world-famous chili.” Kaela tried her best to sound polite as she said this. Antoine’s arms slacked to his side and he furrowed his brow.

“Well, it will get there.” Kaela felt embarrassed. She wasn’t sure why.

“Well, er... I think I should have some flour. I’ll go grab it for you.”

“Marvelous!” Antoine extended one arm out and upwards diagonally, flexing the other one. He reminded Kaela of a teapot. He held the pose and looked at Kaela expectantly. Kaela immediately retreated into her house. Several moments later she returned to the door with the sack of flour.

“Will this be okay?”

“Yes, it is perfect Kaela!” Antoine flexed triumphantly then grabbed the flour. “I will return it promptly tomorrow morning!” Kaela would rather he just kept the flour. She gave her farewells to Antoine and closed the door.

******I'm still debating internally how to bring ourselves to this place, but this is a way I
could see this going. It's an experiment******

Kaela stared at the monolithic manor before her. She couldn't help but think how foolish she was being. For her entire life, she had been told: "Don't go up to the manor, no one ever comes out of the manor alive. Avoid the manor. Avoid it like the plague."

"Turn back" she thought, "turn back turn back turn back turn back turn back." Defying her rationale, she opened the threatening double doors, actions which no doubt would ultimately spell her doom. Every piece of the foyer before her filled her with dread. The first thing to hit her was the smell, like that of a decomposing whale. The paneling on the walls depicted children being chased by monstrous bats, looks of sheer panic spread across their tiny faces. There was a taxidermy bear placed strategically in front of the entrance doors, so lifelike that it made Kaela jump with surprise. Paintings hanged around the room, depicting scenes of anguish and torment, men strung up by their wrists, slashed across the chest and stomach, clearly having disobeyed some direct orders and receiving their eternal punishment. Even the carpeting reeked of danger.

There was a spiral staircase that looked as if the weight of even one college-aged girl would cause the whole thing to collapse. It swayed back and forth even though there was no breeze, and the second floor it led to was completely dark. Kaela's conscious was screaming at her to leave now and never come back. Leave now and never come back. Forget about this place. Forget it ever existed. Forget what you've seen in here. Leave.

Somehow Kaela managed to shake these thoughts and took a tepid first step onto the staircase. It creaked loudly, sounding as if it was in a great deal of pain. She couldn't help but think how mean she was being to the staircase. This staircase never asked to be treated so

cruelly, Kaela. Does this seem the type of staircase that should be used and abused the way you seem to be planning? Why put such an innocent staircase in so much pain. You're so cruel Kaela. You're so evil. Even still, like some sadistic madwoman Kaela continued to ascend the stairs, each new step sounding to her like a scream of pure anguish.

On the second level Kaela found herself in front of a mantle, above which was an enormous painting of... her. Kaela staring at Kaela. The painted version of her was driving a sabre straight through her stomach. She studied her painted self's face. She had a look of twisted delight, mouth agape, eyes rolled back into her head. She could sense the pain her depicted self was feeling, yet could also sense the pleasure. Her painted self looked to be in the midst of an orgasm as she drove that sabre through her gut. Kaela looked down at the mantle. The very same sabre laid in an unlocked case before her.

Do it, she thought. Do it now. This is what you've committed yourself to. It ends here or it ends far worse for you Kaela. You don't know what lies before you in this horrific manor. You would be doing yourself a favor to end it all right now. Would it not be poetic, Kaela? Would it not be the most befitting end for a dastardly misfit like yourself? Do you really think you belong in this world? Well Kaela? Do you? Kaela grabbed the sword and eyed it lustfully. She lightly ran her finger down the edge. Any more pressure and her finger would have been sliced open. Her mind relished at the idea.

And so she... continued forward? I mean she continued forward, foolishly believing there was some other purpose for the weapon she now possessed. There was no light and Kaela thought she would for sure get lost in the byzantine hallways of the manor. "Shut up." She mumbled to no one in particular. She must have been going insane. "Shut up!" She shouted

louder. “Get out of my head!” You’ve resigned yourself to this fate my dear and you will obey. Kaela drove the sword through her gut.

“No I won’t!” Kaela opened the nearest door. It was locked. “Shut up, it’s open! You know nothing!” The door was locked, there was no way Kaela could have opened the door. Kaela walked into the room. She saw before her a robed man mumbling to himself. Kaela knew she had to turn back now; there was nothing for her here.

“Who are you?” she shouted all too loud. The man didn’t answer but continued to mumble to himself. She approached him, not knowing that certain death lay before her. Kaela slit her throat with the sword. “Oh, fuck your sword!” She threw it at the figure, and it fell limply before him. Get out of here Kaela. Get out now!

“Who are you? What are you?” You aren’t supposed to be here, you were supposed to stay in your little town, go back to school, and live your perfect little life! You were never supposed to question, why did you start to question? Do you think it’s somehow going to be better now Kaela? “Who are you?” The figure breathed heavily and started to grasp at his hair. “My head’s hurting. Why is my head hurting?” I’m losing control Kaela, I’ve never lost control. What happens now oh what happens now? Why do I even exist, why why why? Kaela turned around and forgot about everything. She turned around and returned to her house. She talked to the Doubtfords who were struggling to cook on their camper grill. She barged into Antoine’s house to get her flour back. She e-mailed her Professor over and over again. She left. She left she left she left!

“I’m not leaving! Who are you, what are you going on about?” I can’t. I can’t I can’t I can’t. The figure fell to his knees. Why you damned girl, why? The figure grabbed the sword. Is

this what you want? The figure raised the sword, pointing it at himself. Well? She isn't speaking.
The figure drove the sword into himself.

My head... what's going on? What time is it? Four in the morning. Early. Dream? Did I?
Castle... there's no castle. Strange. Should—should I get up?

I get up. Doesn't feel right. I look around. Doesn't feel right. I touch my face. Kaela. Me.
Notebook...

“Pair of eyes in the forest? Disappeared on observation... consult professor.”

Right. The eyes. Forgot. Probably asleep, I'll do it later. Pencil...pencil...pencil. What to
write? How to describe? Chew chew chew. Need to stop that. Got it.

“Not thinking right. Not acting right, had a strange dream of a man in a castle.
Something's missing. Probably doesn't matter.”