

I Catfish a Different Girl Each Night

"You fucking creep!" she screamed.

I just sat there, staring at the glass of water in front of me. I was used to this type of thing by now. Things always ended up like this anyway.

"Ugh, you know how freaking long it will take me to get back home?"

Yes.

"Not even gonna say anything? You play it all nice and smooth with that fake picture of yours, saying you're going to meet up with me here and now you don't even have the balls to speak up? You pathetic loser!"

She even grinned for a moment as she threw the insult at me.

Another customer of the small dinner got up. He was an older man. His attire screamed blue-collar.

"Now, now, young lady, what's going on here?"

"That freak over there pretended to be someone else! He called me all the way out here on a date and, god! How'd I be so stupid?"

His eyes wandered from her to me. They weren't compassionate anymore, no, now they showed nothing but contempt.

"Well young man, you've got some explaining to do!"

I still stared at the glass of water. My throat felt like it was clenched shut.

"Hey, I'm talking to you!" he yelled at me.

By now, the whole place stared at the awkward scene with me right in the center.

"I didn't," I started but broke up.

"Too embarrassed to even speak, eh?"

Once more, I couldn't find the words.

"Yes, sorry mom, it's gonna be at least another hour. No, I'm fine, just some weirdo. No, I didn't see Anna today. What? No, it's alright, I'll just take the train. Yes, I'm on my way."

I listened to each of her words and smiled. At least an hour, good, I thought.

"Now what are you smiling about, boy?"

The blue-collar man still didn't let off. Finally, I pushed myself past him, and awkwardly made my way to the door.

"What was that all about?" I heard a young woman whisper to her friend.

"Guess he catfished her or something?"

"Ewww, that's so creepy!"

I didn't listen to their words. They didn't know a damned thing!

'Why did you hurt mommy?'

'What? The hell are you talking about pipsqueak?'

'I saw it, you hit her, and she was crying.'

'How the hell would you see something like that?'

I didn't even see his slap coming. He stared down at me, his eyes furious.

'Linda, did you tell the boy?'

'N-no, of course not, why'd I ever-'

'Ugh, shut up, bitch!'

I still lay on the floor, my face hot with pain. I listened as dad got up and made his way to the kitchen.

I jerked away in my seat. The old lady opposite me looked over before she mumbled something to herself.

Why'd I remembered something like that now, dammit? Now where am I, I wondered? As I stared outside and read the name of the station, I sighed. It would still be another half hour before I'd be home. I checked the time on my phone again and saw that it was already eleven in the evening. Shit, and I got an early shift tomorrow.

Work was hard that day. I'd barely gotten five hours of sleep, and it was the busiest time of the year. I slumped through the warehouse, sorting shelves and repackaging products with my eyes only half-open.

"Hey, yeah you! There's some trash over here with your name on it!" one of my older coworkers called out to me.

Laughter from a few of my other colleagues erupted.

I sighed, and without making eye contact, I stumbled to where he was pointing. It really sucked to be the new guy on the job. As I was busy cleaning up the mess that he'd most likely caused by him, I heard them talk behind my back.

"The hell's wrong with him? Does he ever say a word?" one of them asked in a hushed voice.

"Dunno, think he's mentally challenged or something," another voice chimed in.

"Just leave the boy be," a third one added.

"Why are you so concerned about him?"

"Just don't want him to snap and shot the place up."

"Hah, as if that pussy'd be ever able to pull something like that!"

Laughter erupted again. You know, I can hear every single word you're saying, I thought. Shit, who am I kidding, I bet they knew, too.

After six more hours, my shift finally ended. The bus ride from work took me about half an hour. Day after day, I spent it glued to the screen of my phone.

I opened up the first of the many dating apps I'd installed. I swiped through the countless girls one by one, staring at their pictures. Long hair, short hair, happy smile, confident smile, group of girls, on and on it went.

It took me about five minutes to find one. She was pretty, long blond hair and had a shy, somewhat playful smile.

In a moment I opened the chat window and threw her one of the many one-liners I knew by heart now.

I was already home when she finally replied. The new picture I'd chosen worked wonders. For half an hour, we were joined in mindless chit-chat before I finally asked her if she had plans for the evening.

She was a bit reluctant to answer. It was always the same. I sent her a few more of my rehearsed lines, boosting her confidence, soft-soaping her and pushing more lies down her throat. She was an easy one, it took me no more than a few minutes to get her to agree to the date. I fell back on my bed as relief flooded my face.

I checked the phone once more. It was still a few hours before I'd got to go. Guess I'll set the alarm and take a nap. Wasn't like I had to dress up or prepare for the date.

Mom was crying in the other room while dad's fist came down on my face once more. Again and again, until he stopped after half a dozen times, panting.

'That should teach you to not spout those damned lies anymore!' he screamed at me.

'But I saw it again,' I mumbled in a low voice.

'What was that you little shit?'

I curled up into a ball and said nothing.

'Thought so.'

Mom was still crying.

I woke up. Why were my dreams always about him? Goddamnit!

On my way to the bus, I thought about dad.

Dad hadn't always been an asshole. When I was a little kid, he'd genuinely been the best. Then he started to drink. When I found out he was beating mom, I became a target as well.

For years the abuse went on until I learned to be smart enough to keep quiet. No, talking about it wasn't helping anyone.

When I became a teenager, and after mom's death, dad and I became close again. It was by necessity if anything. As a teenager, I couldn't just move out.

Age hadn't been kind to him, neither had the booze. On the old pictures, he was quite good looking, hell even handsome.

Now, pushing forty, he looked much older. His head was pale, his skin pudgy and grey and his stomach had developed into a bulging beer belly. Whatever he wore, it seemed to always tear at the fabric, trying to free itself.

"See her over there? Now that's my type of woman, alright," he said to me, pointing at someone ahead of me.

I stared at the young blond ahead of us. Small frame, a bit too timid and awkward. As I watched her, I saw the bruises on her arms, saw her shift slightly with her feet. I could even see the blue bruises on her hips. Exactly like mom, I thought. Always ending up in an abusive relationship, always another drunk bastard beating her.

"Well hello there young lady, need any help with those bags?" dad approached her and reached out a slimy hand.

The woman stared at him, and I saw her face contort by a mixture of surprise and disgust.

"No, I'm fine," she mumbled in a low voice.

"Now come on, don't be like that, babe, why don't you just let me help you with those, hm?"

He asked, trying to take one of the bags from her. As he did, I saw him put his slimy hand on her back.

"It's alright, I'm-"

"Now, now, modesty won't do you any good," he continued, and I saw his hand move downward.

"Dad!" I called out to him, putting my hand on his shoulder. "It's late, let's go home, I'm starving."

In a moment, the lady tore her bag free from him and hurried down the road as far as she could.

"Damnit, what the hell are you doing, idiot!?"

Another slap in the face.

"Man, I was so close to getting some," he cursed.

He was always this way. Not wasting any chance, trying to get his way with women. His behavior rude, lecherous and at times downright violent.

I didn't cry when they buried him in an early grave a few years later.

Once I entered the bus, I had another half-hour ahead of me. I sent my newest date another message. I didn't like emoticons, hell, I detested them, yet I made sure to sprinkle my messages with them. Somehow, people seemed to enjoy them.

That day I'd chosen a small bar. I'd told her it was a secret tip, but all I cared about was the distance.

The moment I arrived, I chose a seat by the window. I always arrived early, to keep watch and see if they actually came. Bus after bus arrived and finally a bouncy, beaming blond exited. She looked around for a moment before she typed something on her phone. Only a second later mine vibrated.

"I'm here, you already there?"

'Yeah, window seat, back row!'

I saw her enter, saw her look around. The place was half empty. Her eyes noticed me. At first, she looked away, but then her eyes focused on me again.

'I don't see you.'

'Yes, you do.'

I lifted my face and gave her an awkward smile before I looked away again.

It wasn't long before I heard the click-clack sound of her heels as she approached me. When I looked up again, the smile on her face had vanished.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Damien," I mumbled.

"What the hell? No, that can't be! Your picture, I mean," she toyed around with her phone, and after a short while, she held it to my face. "That's not you, is it?"

I said nothing. Instead, I kept my head low. The few other guests were already staring at me.

"Hey! Say something! Is this a freaking joke?"

The rest of the evening played out like the last one. As I stumbled out of the bar, I looked at her picture once more and smiled. In my mind, I saw her sitting on the bus, fuming, hurrying home and falling asleep, still angry about the whole thing. I smiled again.

Work was slow the next day, allowing me to steal away every once in a while. For a few minutes at a time, I scanned profiles.

I noticed her instantly. Short brown hair, cheeky smile, tank top.

We hit things off well enough, but she was a tough one. She was cheeky alright, calling out my lines and bluffs one after another.

Still, the picture I used did the trick, and she finally agreed to meet up with me.

The rest of the shift passed quietly. A few of my coworkers noticed my happy expression, which prompted a few more insults. I couldn't care less.

Once I arrived at the small restaurant I'd chosen, I decided on a window seat once again. The waiter came again and again, and by the third time, he started to get pushy. In a low voice, I ordered a drink.

I scanned the street, but there was still nothing. I opened my phone and sent her yet another quick message.

'Hey, where are you?'

'Sorry Romeo, went out with a few friends today.'

I stared at my phone with a deep frown. Shit, she wasn't coming, was she? I cursed to myself.

'Where are you going?' I asked her.

'Timbers! It's great, why don't you come by later?'

I opened Google Maps in a moment. Timbers, a bar in the freaking center of town.

"Are you ready to order yet," the waiter asked in a strained voice, "sir?"

"Fuck," I cursed once more. It was going to be one of 'those' nights.

"Sir, if you don't plan on ordering anything, then-"

Without even looking at him, I got up and left. Once I stood in the open street, I opened the app once more, staring at her picture.

I was antsy when I entered the bus again. I couldn't let it end like that. This was NOT how things were supposed to go!

It took the bus almost half an hour before it made it to the city center. The whole time I was nervous, shifting in my seat. Every once in a while, I stared at her picture, taking in as much as I could about her.

Before the bus had even rumbled to a stop, I was at the door, hitting the stop button.

Now where the hell is it?

I hurried down the street into the direction Google Maps told me, but there were too many damned clubs and bars around.

Then I saw it. The bright neon sign of the small bar named Timbers was only a hundred meters ahead of me.

I was in a minute later. The bouncer eyed me for a moment before he shrugged. My eyes wandered over the guests. Shit, it was way too damn late already. Would she even still be here? To make things worse, the place was packed! I shuffled through the guests and earned a few angry stares from people, but I went on.

Finally, my eyes grew wide. Short brown hair, cheeky smile, and a tank top like the one in the picture. When I saw the guy sitting next to her, his arm around her shoulder, I frowned.

I pushed my way back to the bar and ordered myself the cheapest cocktail they had. Then I made my way back towards them. I watched him as he whispered in her ear. I saw how he rubbed her upper arm and inched in closer. She giggled, yet when he tried to kiss her, she turned away and whispered something in his ear. She was cheeky. The guy however grinned, and when I saw that, rage exploded in my mind.

That smile, that damned smile. That's when I knew.

I stumbled forward, shakily and nervous, yet I didn't take my eyes off the guy. I'd almost reached them when I ran straight into a buff, tall guy.

"Hey, watch out where you're going!" he yelled at me and pushed me aside.

I stumbled forward and crashed right into the guy sitting next to the short-haired girl.

My hand collided with his face, and I spilled my drink all over his cloth.

Both of them screamed up in surprise. In a moment she retreated to the bench's end to not be drenched by the rest of the drink.

I pushed myself upwards and mumbled an excuse. Before I'd so much as finished it, the guy's fist hit me square in the face. There was an explosion of pain, and I could taste blood in my mouth.

"The fuck are you doing you goddamn freak!"

Once more he hit me in the face, then a third time. When I went down, he didn't leave off, kicking me again and again as he screamed obscenities at me.

"I'm going to fucking kill you, you piece of shit!"

I grinded up at him. He tried to kick me one more time, but right at that moment one of the bouncers tackled the guy.

Another guest was there, kneeling by my side.

"Hey, are you alright? You want me to call an ambulance?"

I shook my head, and then, with a tremendous effort, I tried to get up. Then heavy hands heaved me upwards, and I found myself face to face with the buff guy from before.

"Shit, man, sorry about that," he said clearly embarrassed about shoving me.

"Didn't know that guy was a freaking psycho!" he said and pointed at the guy taken away by security.

Soon after the barkeeper approached me, asking if he wanted me to call the police. I nodded.

It didn't take them long to arrive, and with the help of the buff guy and the bouncers, we gave them a detailed description of the man.

"You need us to take you to a hospital, sir?" one of the officers offered.

I shook my head. "No," I mumbled, "I'll be fine."

Once they were gone, I thanked the security and buff guy. He grinned at me.

"Tell you what, if you'd ruined my date, I might have kicked your ass too."

I gave him a weak smile. "Yeah, guess she was." I looked around for a moment.

"She's gone, booked it the instant that guy went all out on you! Looked mighty scared."

I nodded, thanked the guy once more, and left the bar behind.

On my way home, I took out my phone once more to look at her picture yet again. For the first time the whole evening, I was able to relax.

I could see her sitting in a taxi on her way home before she went to bed.

Gone were the images of her bloodied and beaten body. Gone was that guys grinning face as he stood above her.

The premonition had changed.

Even though it hurt like hell, I smiled.

She was saved.

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They said my child would change everything, but I never expected this to happen

You were born to change the world.

I hated that. My world wasn't perfect; in fact, it wasn't even good. But human survival is based on our need for the status quo. This is true even when 'business as usual' is slowly drawing life out of us, second by second. We walk happily forward, somehow able to forget the fact that passing time is another way of describing death.

My life, a wise man once said, is measured out in coffee spoons.

You took all that away from me.

And I hated that.

The fear of caring for an entire *human* - and a helpless *infant* human at that – shook me to my core. I was so much more afraid of facing you than – well, anything – that nothing frightened me.

There's no fear of getting fired once you've already quit. So I walked into my boss's office at the box factory and told him that I was worth more than he'd been paying me. I also explained exactly why he'd been losing money. Spoiler: he was just as afraid as *I* had been of facing himself and making difficult decisions. I'd known it for quite some time, and had been afraid to tell him.

He promoted me on the spot.

The bump in pay was completely neutralized by preparing for you.

Dorothy wasn't 'the one' for me to marry. We both knew it, and we were both afraid to let go.

Then she told me that she was pregnant, and that I had to marry her or leave. *You* denied me the opportunity to stay comfortably afraid to move.

So we accepted that we weren't 'the one' for each other, but that the idea is probably based on a fantasy anyway. We embraced what worked between us, we accepted what didn't, and we moved on together.

I had never realized just how much time I spent doing *nothing.* Internet chat rooms, watching TV, hitting the snooze button, sitting on the couch, spending an hour getting ready for the day when I can make it happen in nine minutes, 19 minutes here, 13 minutes there – holy shit, I was wasting 24 hours of every week on absolutely nothing whatsoever.

Were those things worth a day of my life? No, but I gladly paid the Reaper anyway, and I was agonized when I learned I'd have to give that up. But it turns out that's just enough time to put you to sleep, pick you up, get food in you, clean the food that comes out of you, and repeat the process eight more times a day. I would have to construct my *entire* life around this reality. Eventually, you would grow old enough to handle those things yourself, and would never once show appreciation for my efforts.

That's what I'd signed up for without wanting any of it. Life was going to be *real,* and that challenged everything I knew.

I hated the vulnerability.

Because nothing can describe the raw terror of a grim-faced doctor explaining that there are "serious problems with the pregnancy."

You cracked open a nerve that I never knew existed. I would have lived, and died, placidly unaware of the horrifying knowledge that I'd been sitting on unused pieces of my soul.

Those pieces were rotting away.

Thank you for showing me how scary that is.

And thank you for forcing me to push myself so far into my discomfort zone that I had to give up on doubting myself. There just isn't time to question whether I'm strong enough when my child is suffering. It turns out that doctors know more than they say at first, insurance has more than it gives at first, and I'm more of an asshole than I believed at first.

I know it sounds like that last part is a bad thing, but believe me when I say it's not. If you have a terrible relationship with someone, they usually drift away in time; and if you're an asshole to someone, they probably deserve it.

But even the biggest asshole in the world can't bully circumstance into submission.

We learned what it was to suffer. Another wise man once explained that suffering *is* life.

Dorothy and I lived.

And we loved – we loved because we were broken, rather than in spite of it. We watched as our status quo died without fanfare, and you were birthed with much drama.

We watched as you struggled, and we struggled as you stopped.

This letter isn't an apology, because I have no inaction to confess. This is a note of thanks, as I sit here with you in my arms, watching the sun slowly rise on the first day after your birth.

You were born to change the world.

And in the twenty minutes that you lived, you did.

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The NoSleep shutdown has ended. Here's what to expect next.

"What's a shitstorm, Pa?" I asked my father as he stared quietly at the horizon. His statue-like pause was so great that I assumed he hadn't heard me. I was about to ask again when he spoke, eyes still straight ahead.

"Ya don't *describe* a shitstorm, son. Ya *feel* it," he offered quietly, his Maine twang coming through in the powerful way it always did when he was afraid. "It's when the shitposts come in a shitflood, and the shit sticks to yer arms, legs, ears, and ass. There's shit in yer nose hairs and little shit pebbles that get matted into yer hair. The shit gets covered in shit, making shittier shit. Everywhere you step is shit, and then you go inside, and you find that the lingering smell of shit has followed you." He turned to stare at me, and the look in his icy blue eyes made me shutter. "It's shitty."

We were quiet for a moment, both of us looking out across the family farm to the gathering storm clouds on the horizon.

They would be here soon. Such was the way of things.

"Did you know that I used to live on 1913 Elm Street?" he suddenly inquired.

"That's a non sequitur. What made you ask that question?" I responded.

He shrugged. "I didn't know where else to fit that in."

We didn't say anything for a few moments.

"Back in '18, there was a shitstorm like no other," Pa whispered. "Terrible things, sonny." He swallowed. "Terrible things."

A chill ran down my spine. "But that's all in the past, right, Pa? Nothing bad that happened before will ever repeat itself, because we learn from the stupid things we do."

He looked down at me in a way that expressed more disappointment than anger. It was much worse than yelling at me would have been.

Suddenly, he whipped his hand to my shoulder and squeezed it hard enough to hurt. "Satan's scrotum, get inside! Now!"

I was overwhelmed with confusion. "Pa, what's wrong? You're hurting my shoulder!"

He just pinched harder, pulling me after him. "Lock the barn doors and get the gun! It's coming! *Run!*" The fear in his voice was enough for me to stop asking questions and start moving.

That's when the first low rumblings rolled across the countryside.

HOOOOONK.

I didn't recognize the sound, but it filled me with a chill that felt like it had swept up from the frozen plains of Antarctica.

HONK HONK

"It's almost here!" Pa screamed. "Don't touch any ice sculptures!"

We locked the barn and farmhouse doors, battered the windows, and climbed into the attic with nothing but a shotgun and our piss-stained underpants.

That's when the call changed, booming through the air with the power of a titan's fart, shaking the windows and shaking our souls.

I stared at my father, who found no word to match the look of pure terror in his blue eyes as we listened to the sound.

PENGUIN FUUUUUUUUUUCKER...

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My wife and I bought a ranch in the mountains last year, and my neighbor had some interesting suggestions on how to manage our new land. Part V: The Ghosts Arrive

[Part IV](https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/f7wxpk/my_wife_and_i_bought_a_ranch_in_the_mountains/)

After the final scarecrow ordeal in early November, I slept for almost 26 straight hours. I took most of that following week off work to get back into a groove of physical and mental stability, spend time with Sasha, and reflect. I'd put Sasha, Dash, and ol'Dan in direct danger, and felt more worthless than I ever had. I wanted to move. I wanted to sell this place, quit my job, and never look back.

Under the circumstances that accompany living here, I felt I couldn't trust myself. My instincts were to try and kill danger, not learn its nuances and live in harmony with it. I wanted Sasha to make the final call. I needed it to be her decision. I told her how I felt, and I told her how much I truly do trust her instincts. I promised that if she wanted to say, I would commit to it entirely, and that we'd act decisively *together*, but that I'd let her be the quarterback of all this... "spirit" related decision-making.

After I'd passed out that day, Dan called Joe over, and before I came to, Joe spent a long while talking with Sasha about the nature of this place and the spirit. That conversation gave Sasha a new confidence, and seemed to catalyze a deeper connection between her and this little 40-acre chunk of possessed, beautiful land. During the days that followed, Sasha listened to me, I listened to her, and she made it clear she wanted to stay, unless or until it'd make me miserable. I told her I'm in if she is, which I meant, and still do. I love this land, on the surface at least.

In that week off I spent wallowing in self-reflection (and self-pity), I somehow managed to look under my own hood for the first *real* time to reflect on how I'd been wired. It took me a while to "get right" after falling back into civilian life, and a big part of that for me was revisiting trauma, digesting it, and shitting it out behind me on the road of life. The imminent prospect of having a reunion with some of that shit was making me a nervous wreck, so, naturally, I figured maybe chain smoking and reflecting on my own head was the right thing to do.

On my 18th birthday—a clueless dipshit with *zero* life experience—I ditched high school calculus, hopped on a bus downtown, and sold my soul to an organization unmatched throughout human history in its ability to tear down and comprehensively redesign young men, from the ground up, into gorilla-brained warfighters. For the next six years, that was life, two-thirds of which was fluorescent-lit, sleep deprived monotony punctuated by training stints in fenced-off expanses of the American west. The other third, Afghanistan.

Even though everything I did was decided for me, Afghanistan was the first time in my life I ever felt free. It's where I first learned how I was unique, the first time I'd ever been valued by people above me, people I admired, first time I experienced being a real source of comfort to others. Also, the "experience of combat" between men fascinated me.

It's a defining and inveterate type of human interaction and utility. As old as feasting, dancing, monogamous romance, music, hunting, shit it's older than *farming*. And I don't mean *war*, all that macro-level strategy and geopolitical bullshit. I'm talkin about *combat*. There's a simplicity to it. The fundamentals of combat still transcend time and culture, which creates a connection to something *old,*

something that feels deeply, *tragically* human; I'm here in this cold, dusty valley to tear that man's body apart with steel and fire... *while he'll be trying to do the same to me.* The abject, terrifying clarity of it is intoxicating.

However, most of my time there was still... frustrating. A Marine infantry battalion full of fast, strong, competitive, stupid ass 18-22 year-olds programmed to eat fuckin glass and do *anything* to protect each other is a terrifying thing capable of terrifying shit, that's *not* the kind of tool you use for everything. Between bootcamp and ITB, you're turned into a rifleman, an 0311, a grunt. You're designed with the *expressly-articulated* purpose of storming beaches, sieging fortifications, spearheading invasions, or bleeding to death while trying. In my opinion, sending Marine grunts to LARP around as street cops in an area with lots of civilians, *and* a hostile insurgency *dressed* as civilians, is fantastically fucking stupid. Alas, that's a lot of what we did. Checkpoints, searching cars, frisking old people, getting harassed by snipers, driving around, slaloming duct-taped bundles of 35-year-old explosives buried under the road. *Fuck* that noise.

After over a year of that, my battalion joined a seven-country coalition force for the invasion of Marjah. *That* was my highpoint. That was a *battle.* We went from playing beat cop, to bangin it out against hardened Taliban warriors who'd cut their teeth against the Soviets when I was still shitting myself. These were *bad dudes* who'd come down from the Kush and tribal Pakistan openly, *proudly* self-branded as a religious inquisition. Guys who, if we killed, could no longer beat women and kids for wearing colors or singing in their own homes, or kill young men for learning the guitar or just talking back. It meant something.

When that operation wrapped up, well, felt to me like we went back to squabbling with... normal assholes like myself; young dudes who were just fucking pissed.

I was done. The spark was dead. I didn't wanna be a fuckin *cop.* I had an opportunity to get out, and I jumped. But that meant I had to *separate and integrate* back into 21st century America, which, to my surprise, I ended up managing. Mostly because of meeting Sasha, but also some other friends who showed me one needn't be surrounded by screaming, panic and death to "find themselves."

Since then, I've grown gentler and more caring, and I've come to appreciate the *immense* value of experiences and relationships *outside* the fuckin Marine Corps. I don't feel my purpose on earth is to fight. That being said, I'm not wired to think *around* a physical threat, I'm wired to spit in its eye, headbutt it, and heel-stomp its knuckles when it's down.

Thus, when it comes to gracefully navigating the bizarre, horrifying and violent manifestations of some ancient mother fuckin *earth spirit* that seems to have developed a *uniquely* individualized distaste for my well-being and sanity... it goes against everything in me. The prospect of this winter was a nightmare. The very people who I was programmed to confront with violence, then *actually did* confront with violence, were coming back to pay me a visit. I was fuckin terrified. But I promised Sash I'd try, and to tell her I needed to leave if I knew I couldn't take it. So, life went on.

We fell back into a healthy stride through November. I spent a lot of time grouse and pheasant hunting with Dash. Sash and I cooked every night. Once we knew we were off the hook after the third scarecrow, we hastily invited all of Sasha's family to visit for Thanksgiving and finally see the place. Her parents, brother, sisters, and one of her sister's two kids and husband all came out. A couple stayed at our tiny house, while the rest crashed at Dan and Lucy's while they spent Thanksgiving with their kids in Boise. It was actually a great time, we hiked and cooked and drank. It showed us that if we got a grip on the timing of all this spirit bullshit, we could actually lead a relatively normal life.

With “the ghost” season approaching, I also spent as much time with Dan as I could to prepare myself. I needed to be able to handle this one as calmly as possible, given how I’d escalated things over the summer. Dan and Joe said the earliest the ghosts have arrived is December 13, so between Thanksgiving and that date it was my objective to get as Zen about it all as I possibly could. I went over to Dan’s one evening for some beers and chat shortly after Sasha’s family left, and we sat out in his barn looking out over his pastures.

“It’s hard Harry. I ain’t gonna lie to ya. It’s hard on Luce too, lord knows. Sash won’t be able to see em, but she’ll sure as shit know they’re there. That’s an easy way to mess with the head, ya know? Although, I will say...” Dan took a long pull off his beer and stared ahead blankly for a while before responding “I will say, Luce and Sasha are damn lucky they can’t see or hear em.” – “Why?” I asked, already kind of grasping the answer.

“Well... the bastard ghosts are tryin to scare ya and unsettle ya the whole time they’re here, Harry. At least most of mine do. They’ll wait outside the door and jump at ya when you walk outside. They’ll pop into a window screaming when they can *feel* you’re looking outside. They’ll wait until you’re fast asleep and start screaming outside the bedroom. They’ll run around your roof at night. They’ll pound on the walls. It wears on ya.”

I felt a nauseous panic even hearing about this shit, but I needed to learn as much as I could. “Can I touch them? Can they touch me? Can they touch Sasha, or Dash, or my stuff, can they let the air outta my tires or some shit?”

Dan smiled, but a grim look slowly overtook his features as he responded: “If they’re outside your home, they can’t touch ya, and you can’t touch them. Every once in a while, if one gets *real* worked up n’angry, they can knock somethin over, like a chair or somethin. That’s not common though, seems to take a lot out of em. You can hear em touchin your house though. Poundin on the walls, runnin on your roof, smackin the glass. They don’t do any damage, but you and I can hear it, and sometimes Lucy can too. Same thing with their screaming, once in a while, if one’s real angry, and they scream right into Lucy’s ear, she can hear it.”

Dan looked up and stared out at, well, nothing, and went on “the same guy likes to pick on Lucy too, year after year. I call him the Welp. He follows Luce everywhere when she goes outside. He’s one of the worst. Real scary for Luce too. It’s horrible. Makes me wanna kill the little bastard all over again. I’ve raged, taunted, even tried to befriend him, nothin changes.”

That’s the kinda shit that scared me, and would test my ability to keep it cool. I really hoped they’d leave Sasha be. I’d sleep outside in the -15 degree winters for a month if it meant keeping them away from her. Can I just leave?

“Dan, can I just fuckin leave when they show up?” Dan looked over at me and responded promptly.

“No you can’t. I’ve tried, couple times. They’ll be there when you get back, and I’ll make you suffer the 2-3 weeks of their presence, one way or another. My 3rd year here I was really losin it. Joe told me it wouldn’t work, but I lit out, paid my summer ranch hands to feed the cattle, packed Luce and my oldest boy in the camper, spent the winter with my brother in Montana. I got back that spring, and there they were. Lemme tell ya, you do *not* wanna have to deal with the ghosts *and* the lights at the same time. No, you’ve gotta suffer through, son.” He looked at me with sympathy.

"Harry, just be glad you've only got 4. Havin 12 of em is, well... it's quite a goat rope." Dan looked over at me and looked inquisitive "how confident are you there're only four, Har?" I'd given the answer to his question *lots* of thought over the last few months.

"I'm pretty confident... *maybe* 5-6, but unlikely. Before Marjah, I only fired my rifle maybe 4-5 times, and mostly just suppressing fire up into an empty hillside after having a pot shot or rocket whip in outta nowhere. Marjah was crazy, we were in firefights all the damn time, obviously there's the possibility a stray bullet clipped someone, but those odds are slim. So yah, I'm confident it's 4."

Dan took another drink, set his beer down, turned his chair to face me more directly, leaned back, and nodded: "Tell me about em." I gave him an annoyed look. I'd never been squirmy talking about it, but given the prospect of an imminent reunion with the bastards, that'd changed lately.

"Well..." I opened a new beer. "The first time I shot a man dead, I shot two men dead. Back to back. They were right next to each other." Dan nodded, "go on, son. Tell me about it." I gave him another annoyed look.

"... It was during the first couple heavy days in the battle for Marjah. My fire team was hunkered into a berm at the end of a street waiting for orders. I was with my buddy Mike. All the sudden we see two guys, looked like they were in their mid-30s, running down a line of houses from our left. One had an AK and another was on a radio and had a big like... hockey bag fulla spent RPG tubes." I took a sip, then another.

"We couldn't believe it. I literally nudged my Mike and was like 'are those fuckin Tali?!' I mean we knew they were but just couldn't believe it. They got to the road in front of us, about 110 yards out, and crouched behind a car blocking the view from where they'd run, but exposed to us. We were so shocked we just sat there like idiots until the one closest looked up me, and I shot em both... they died right there."

I sat there and remembered how, when I shot the first guy, he dumped forward onto his face, didn't try to catch himself or anything, and the second guy looked down at him like 'heck you doin dude?' and then I shot him in the chest. He dropped the radio as he planted his palms to catch himself from fallin backwards. He looked so confused before I shot again...

Dan snapped me out of the recollection: "what're you gonna name em?"

"...What?" I asked.

"It helps to give em names. Helps to keep track of em, describe em to Sasha, helps to talk about them. Naming them makes it easier, takes the edge off a bit."

I guess that made sense. I shrugged "Pete and Hank?" Dan slapped his knee "great names! Alright, number 3." I took another sip.

"Number three was a couple days later. Old grizzled fella. 50-55 years old, at least. We were securing a canal crossing, L-shaped ambush type security formation, stayin behind cover. Two trucks fulla dudes with AKs rolled up and stopped behind a sedan we'd used to block the road. Someone kicked it off, and all the sudden our whole platoon was unloading into the cars. I was aiming at the rear passenger-side

door of the second truck when someone tried to get out, I shot him. He died with his seat belt on.”

I thought back on that moment. The car door of that truck was stuck or something, so the guy reached out the window to open it from the outside and I shot his forearm. I remembered how shocked I was by how much blood came from that wound, how it cut bright red channels through the dust caked on the car door. He yanked his arm back in, then leaned out with his left hand, exposing his head, and I shot him in the jaw and then the eyebrow...

Dan snapped me back to the present again: “What’ll you call him?”

“... He looked like a mountain man, I’ll call him Bridger.” Dan nodded approvingly, “now number four.”

“It was after the heavy fighting in Marjah ended, still in Helmand but out in the country side. *Poppy* country. *Dope* country.” Dan laughed.

“We were on patrol and got ambushed by what sounded like 50 but ended up just bein 4 dudes... NCO in my platoon got hit and we all dropped. I crawled over to the side of the poppies along a ditch, and saw a dude running, real low, right toward me with an AK, scared the piss outta me, but I got the draw on him and that was that.”

In reality, that guy scared me so bad I emptied my whole mag into him, or... *at* him, barely aiming, missed half the shots I was shaking so bad, pretty sure I shot him in the foot, neck, and 10 other spots in between... I looked back at Dan. “I’ll call him Buck.”

Dan nodded slowly, “so what about the potential other two?” I scratched my chin. “During the heavy fighting in Marjah, February, car fulla fighters tried to break through our sector and ran into our whole damn company. I wasn’t in a good position when we made contact, so by the time I moved past a little wall and started shootin into the guys in the back seat, I’m pretty sure they were dead. I mean *at least* 10-12 of our guys were already lighting up that rig, so chances are slim anyone was still alive, just don’t know for sure...”

Dan and I sat quietly with our beers for a while. Cold was starting to bite my hands. I needed to head back for dinner soon but I had a couple more questions. “Dan, will we be able to see each other’s ghosts?” Dan looked up at me: “No... at least, I can’t see Joe’s or his son’s, and he can’t see mine, but we can each feel the other’s.” Dan looked away, and sensing my impending question, spoke again without looking back “I’ll let Joe tell you about his if he chooses.” I nodded.

Sasha had been thinking a lot about Dan’s account of the one man he’d killed being respectful to him and Lucy during the ghost season; she thinks there may be way to make peace with them if we could learn more about who they were before they died, and have things around they liked, or figure out how to keep em occupied.

“One more question... you said they maintain some of their ‘earthly personalities...’ What’s that mean? You told me that one guy who you comforted as he died remembers you and is pretty mellow, but like... are they pissed they’re here? Where are they coming from? Do they even know? Do they remember who they are? Their families?” Dan put his hands up to cease my barrage.

“Easy, *easy* pal, those all got different answers” he chuckled. “First of all, I got no idea where they’re coming from, or what happens after you get killed. Joe and I are pretty sure they don’t remember where they were before they get here. I don’t think they know *why* they get brought here, but they know one

thing... *you're* the reason they're dead, and now they're seeing you live your life, seeing you love, work, eat, and lemme tell ya... they sure get pissed, hot, and bothered about *that*."

"On your other question... they remember *parts* of who they were, I think. There's no way to communicate with them directly. I tried getting a Vietnamese interpreter to write some things in English and Vietnamese which I could try to read and show to them 12-15 years back, but it's like they can't hear, or read anything. It's like direct communication is... prevented? Although, you can show them things. One of the guys I killed must've been a birder, a bird geek, ya know? Always checkin out birds. 2-3 years back, I pointed out an eagle to him, he watched it for a long while, and nodded to me, and since he's been... a bit more civil. Another must've been a gardener, because when he ain't harassin me, he'll follow Lucy around our winter greenhouse just observing the gardening methods, spend hours checkin out seed packets, that kinda shit. Then there's Wolf, the fella I have the, you know, connection with. My friend, I guess. He must've been a good man before I cut his life short... As I said, he hangs back, smiles, walks the land on his own, doesn't harass me or Lucy."

I couldn't even begin to fathom how different I was as a person from the guys I'd killed, or how I'd connect with them on any level. There's a chance some of those tribal fighters never even owned a world map, let alone knew where the hell Idaho was. Maybe some of the younger ones who had some schooling opportunities had gotten on the internet, but it was really rare for rural Afghani and Pakistani men to get schooling outside a local madrasa (Islamic school). It's like we're from different planets.

I had a few more chats like that with Dan as Thanksgiving rolled into December, all of which he'd end with "just don't let those candles go out before sunrise, if you do, fight, you can't get away in time." I could tell he was getting apprehensive too, and getting shook up after 40 years of experience, that made me nervous as hell.

Lucy had given Sasha some pointers as well. I can't imagine it's much easier for Sash and Luce. At least I can see the fuckers, for them, it's just like the place is haunted as hell. Lucy seemed to handle it well though, saying while they're here, she mostly just tries to keep Dan calm. She said a few times a season they really scare her, screaming in her ear or knockin things over when she's outside alone, but she said you kinda get used to it.

Lucy said no matter how many winters pass, she still finds Dan up in the middle of the night while they're here, sitting in the kitchen with his rifle, watching the candles, making sure they stay lit...

Sasha seemed almost excited with anticipation as December 13 got closer. I was a nervous wreck the closer it got, and trying to keep that from Sasha made it even worse.

She found some big ass 24hr-burning candles online too, and we ordered every last one of em. Figured if we lit 6-7 of those on the kitchen island every night where they stood no risk of getting put out by a breeze, we could feel confident we'd have 4 going all night and I could get some sleep. But I knew damn well I'd not be sleeping much while they were here. Shit, my anxiety got so bad after Thanksgiving, I'd barely been sleeping anyway.

I woke up on the morning of December 13 emotionally exhausted. I was almost praying they'd arrive, I needed it to start. The waiting was maddening. But, they didn't show up that day. Or the next, or the next. Since the 13th, I'd spent every daylight hour on my land with binoculars, scanning the tree lines.

I woke up on the morning of December 21, and—as I had for a week—sat up, turned around, and immediately looked out the window into the pastures. Nothing. It was snowing pretty hard. My wake-up

panic eased, then I realized Sasha wasn't in bed, which cranked it right back up. I *never* slept through her getting out of bed, *especially* over the last week when I'd wake up on the verge of pissing myself if the dog farted or the furnace kicked on.

"Sash?" I said loudly, seeing if she was in the bathroom. I got up and almost ran into the living room toward the kitchen. "Sash?"

"I'm in the kitchen babe!" she said. I could hear her smiling in her voice, it made me calm down immediately. I walked in and saw her sitting at the kitchen table with coffee and a book. Dash was at her feet and trotted over to greet me. "Shit, sorry I didn't notice you get up, I, ugh..." I shook my head and leaned down to kiss her, and as I stood back up, she gave me a smile but something subtle in it betrayed... I couldn't tell what, but I knew this woman well.

"What?" I asked her. The second the word left my mouth, she let the emotion slip through her smile again. "Babe what is it?" I asked again, seriousness in my tone.

She closed her book, and took a deep breath. What the fuck, is she about to tell me she's pregnant? She stood up, took my hands, and looked at me in the eye. She had so much strength in that gaze, she had so much faith. I was floored. Then she spoke.

"Harry... It woke me up an hour ago, at sunrise, but I wanted you to sleep. I can feel it. It might be the ghosts, or not, but I'll tell you right now, the spirit is here... I know it." Her demeanor of strength didn't change at all, while my entire stomach shot into my throat and adrenaline surged into my hands and legs. I couldn't think of what to say, but wasn't sure I could talk if I did. I thought I was prepared for this, thought I'd seen and felt all the ambient dread the spirit could cause, but I'd been wrong.

She was right. I felt it. The spirit. Standing there in that kitchen feeling like I was about to vomit, looking at my wife's beautiful, strong face, I felt the spirit in the air pressure, saw it in the light, tasted it at the back of my throat. In that moment, I don't know that I'd ever felt more childlike horror in my life. Felt like I was in a nightmare, stuck in a dark room as something I felt *wanted* me came slowly, giggling down a hallway.

I could feel *them.* I could feel *five.* I knew I'd killed five people, five *men.* I knew without seeing them. More than them, I could feel the spirit. My peripheral vision started to go dark. My ears were rumbling and I could feel my heartbeat in my face. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Chill man. Breath. You are *not* gonna pass out without even seeing the bastards.

"Harrison." I snapped out of it, and looked back into Sasha's eyes, still holding her hands. "Harrison, you've got this. *We've* got this. Ok?" I nodded and took another breath.

"There are five. I killed five men, they're here. I can feel them. I know the four, not sure who the fifth is." A brief, thin fear flushed into Sasha's face at my response, but she forced it away and replaced it with strength, took a deep breath herself, and said "well then, there are five. We've got this, ok?"

My reflexive antidote to panic showed up like a deranged sidekick; the white-hot desire to fight, pleading in *shrieks* for me to get angry. It grounded me, but I reasoned it away. Nope, tried that, didn't go so hot ya fuckin idiot. I went to the sink and chugged some water. I looked down at Dash, looking up at me, our eye contact activating the motion in his plumed tail. Then I looked back to Sasha. Sweet christ how did I get so lucky to find these two. I felt like weeping in gratitude, terror, shame, and joy all at once. *Breath dude.*

"Sash... I needa go find them. I needa go find them by myself. I won't do anything, or go more than a few feet from the fence, I swear to you, I just need to see them alone, this first time." She looked at me with challenge in her eyes, a 'you better be fuckin sure about this' look, then nodded. "Only if you bring Dash, and I'm coming out there in 10 minutes, ok?" I nodded "yah, of course." I felt like explaining my need to confront them for the first time alone, but it was something I think we could both feel, without the need for more words.

I got dressed, grabbed my binoculars, and followed Dash out into the yard. I'd stop and look out into the property every 10 steps. I got to the gate and still didn't see anything. Dash and I walked a short way into the pasture, to where I could get a view down into one of the corners of the property, and ice shot into my veins as I could *feel* the blood leaving my face.

I didn't need the binoculars. Even though they were about 250 yards away, I could clearly see five men standing a few feet apart from one another in a row, defined by the snow like shadows. My heart was pounding. The man in the middle stood out, even at this distance. He was the tallest. His perahan tunban, poncho-sized scarf, pakol hat, all jet black. I raised my binoculars. He was staring directly into my eyes. Bridger. The man I'd killed in the ambush, scrambling to get out of the dusty truck.

This isn't fuckin real, I thought. I looked up into the white sky, then back to the house, rubbed my eyes, and looked back into the binoculars. He hadn't moved. I looked at the others. None were looking at me, just gazing around, up at the trees, mountains, they looked confused. I immediately recognized the two men I'd killed first (Hank and Pete), and the guy I'd shot on the edge of the poppy field (Buck), and then the other...

Fuck me. I guess I'd killed one of those guys after all, in the back of the truck as they tried to break through our line. He was young, maybe 20-21. He had fierce, wild eyes, even as he stood calmly, gazing up toward the mountain. I looked back to Bridger, the old warrior.

Right as I saw he was still staring right at me, sporting a look of focus and an almost parental judgment, he took one step directly toward me, and stopped. It made my mouth run dry, my hands go numb. The other four looked at him, almost with confusion, then all of them—at the same time—looked up at me, straight into my binoculars, and I could see it, recognition in their eyes. Subtle disbelief chased by anger. But the youngest, the "surprise," he looked different. He lowered his head slightly but held my gaze with an expression of calm, collected, *murderous* hatred.

As I took my next breath, those five men's fury, their fear, their grief, pain, confusion, it all seemed to turn into a noxious gas that rushed into my lungs, where it twisted and weaved into a throbbing, *screaming* hot cist that ruptured in my gut and washed through my nervous system as I exhaled. It made me shudder and start to cough, the last of which was a gag.

That was the spirit, not the ghosts. I knew it, not sure how, but I did, and I took a deep breath trying to focus. There's nothing actually inside of you, relax, that was just part of this wicked fuckery. I realized Dash was pawing my leg, I patted his head, "it's alright buddy, it's alright." I thought about Joe. Follow the methods, and Sasha will be safe. I got a grip and looked back down at the ghosts, who hadn't moved or taken their gaze from me.

As we stared across the pasture at each other, I got a shockingly nostalgic sensation from my childhood—one I'd get as I'd walk along the chainlink fence around the junkyard between my house

and the bus stop, staring down in fascinated terror at the furious, snarling guard dog that would rage alongside me in a frenzied storm of frothy drool and kicked-up dust every time I'd pass by, knowing the fence was the only thing keeping the beast from ripping and tearing into my 11 year old body.

I felt the same old physical sensation too; the coiled, wet-knots of tension in my muscles as I subconsciously prepared to explode into a sprint.

I felt angry. It was initially directed at these men, but was refocused, almost forcefully like a meat hook in the muzzle of my anger being hauled toward the spirit; like it *wanted* my rage and contempt. It hit me then, a realization. This thing wanted me to give it a reason. It wanted me to rage. I'd thought on that earlier, after the scarecrow, but I *felt* it for the first time. I wasn't going to give it that. I *couldn't* give it that.

Staring down at them, standing on *my* land posing a threat to *my* family, I felt... guilt. It wasn't really guilt for killing them, but more because they got killed fighting at home, or at least relatively close to home, by dudes from across the god damn planet. I'd known years before, but never like in that moment; there's no amount of those strenuously cobbled-together musings about "serving your country" or the "inveterate nature of men in war" that can rebut these five men's unalienable right to *absolutely fucking hate* me.

I turned and went back into the yard. As I went to shut the gate, Dash looked back behind him, tilting his head as he does when he smells a grouse, and looked back at me with urgency. "I know buddy, let's go inside." I sat with Sasha and told her about what I'd seen and who the 5th man was. We'd both taken all the days off through New Years, and the prospect of this being day 1 of an uninterrupted 12-day stint here made me feel like ripping my hair out, totally trapped.

The rest of the day Sasha tried to be as jolly as possible. We weren't religious but Sash loved "Christmasing" out a house so we hung lights and wreathes, drank hot toddies, and played holiday music. Every chance I got I'd peek out a window into the pasture to see if they were starting to move closer. We'd picked out a little spruce out at the bottom of the driveway to cut down to decorate, which Sash asked if I wanted to go get with her. I didn't need to respond for her to pick up what my vibe was putting down.

"Harry, we can't let them dictate our lives. If we follow the methods, we'll be safe. I think we should make it known that we're going to go about our lives unafraid. I don't want to push you if you don't want to, I can't see em, but that's how I feel we should handle this." I just wanted to sit inside and drink more whisky for the next 2-3 weeks, but she was trying to be strong for me, I could tell, and I didn't want to leave that unappreciated.

"Let's do it." We grabbed the handsaw and walked down the driveway cutting fresh tracks into the snow, with Dash bounding ahead, his red-golden coat standing out against the snow like a warm flame.

I could feel Sasha watching my gaze as I looked out into the meadow. "Can you see them?"

Four of them had moved a bit closer to the pond out in the pasture, and were staring at us. Bridger and three others, couldn't tell which. "Four of em, not sure where the 5th is." Sash squeezed my hand affectionately. "I wish I could see them too babe, I'm sorry I can't..." I kissed her cheek. "I'm glad you can't."

We got to the little spruce tree at the bottom of the driveway. "This the one?" I asked. Sash responded with a bit of added gusto "it's perfect, don't you love it Dash!?" I smiled. She was trying so hard it gave me a wasp sting of guilt and affection.

I took a knee and started to saw at the little trunk. About halfway through, I gripped the tree with my free hand pulled to open the cut a bit for the blade, and shook snow off the limbs that snuck in the back of my jacket, startling me as the ice hit my neck and went down my shirt. "Ah shit!" I laughed, and heard Sasha laugh back at me "nice move there babe!"

I turned around to throw a handful of snow at her, and what I saw scared me so bad an electric burst of terror-wrapped adrenaline tore through my body so fast I let out a half-scream half-grunt.

My shock yanked Sasha's smile away and replaced it with a look of dread, and she immediately shot her hands up to her face "Babe what!?"

One of the ghosts, the young one, the "surprise," was standing right next to Sasha, facing her, hands clenched in fists at his sides, leaning forward into the side of her face. I started to stand up, and Sasha took one step toward me, while turning her head to follow my gaze, when he screamed.

Mouth as wide as a human's ever should be, putting what looked like every part of his body into it, he blasted out a raspy shriek that was low and high in pitch. I winced as the noise smashed into my eardrums like a truck hitting a deer without even tapping the breaks. With ripples of heat distortion pouring from his mouth like a furnace, the scream had such force it knocked off Sasha's wool hat, blowing her hair and the snow falling around her head sideways. She jumped in terror and lost her footing, stumbling to land hard on her side. I surged up and dove toward her. Dash went berserk, teeth-barred, snarling and snapping his fangs toward the ghost, but unsure where to direct the savage attack you could see he was ready to dedicate every muscle to.

It was over in 3 seconds.

"Are you ok?! Sash are you ok!?" She had tears welling in her eyes and was staring in shock into, for her, the snowflakes and air where the scream had erupted from. She blinked her shock away then nodded, looking at me with a forced smile. "I'm fine, I'm fine, Harry, I just fell over, won't even be a bruise ok?" I helped her up and turned her up the driveway, as we both yelled for Dash to follow us. I glanced at the other four ghosts, who hadn't moved.

"Could you see it before it screamed at me?" Sash asked. "Yah, for a split second, he came out of nowhere." I looked back to call for Dash again who hadn't let up on his feral snarling. The ghost of the young man was smiling at me with provocation and malice in his eyes. Although, to my surprise, he did actually seem a bit uneasy about the dog, like he was trying to hold his ground, flinching very subtly when Dash would lunge with a bark, switching his gaze from me to the dog, like looking away from Dash for too long might give him an opening. "Which one was it Harry? Is he still there?" Sash asked.

"Yah, still there..." His apparent fear of the dog made my rage boil up behind my eyes more than his cocky little smile did, like it was a weakness I needed to exploit, a broken nose I needed to keep landing punches into. As though sensing my ire, Sasha grabbed me by the chin and forced my eyes to hers.

"Harry – it's ok. Babe, it's ok, the guy just scared me, screw him, right? Let's go start dinner." She still had tears in her eyes, one ran down her frost-reddened cheek, and while she was forcing a smile, there was sincerity in it as well.

The volume of Dash's barking was amplified by the oppressive silence of a snowy afternoon in the mountains.

I took a deep breath. "You're right." I looked back at the ghost. "But fuck him, let's get our tree, yah?" When I looked back at her she gave me smile and an approving nod, "let's get our tree."

I turned back down the driveway, but I froze before taking a step as my heart lept into my throat and it felt like my stomach flipped upside down.

The other four ghosts were all on our side of the pond now, 50-60 yards away, standing, staring at me, spread out in new positions normal men couldn't have possibly reached in short time since I'd seen them when picking Sasha up, nor without leaving any tracks in the snow as they'd managed. "What!?" Sasha asked as she grabbed my hand. I took a breath and looked back to her and forced a smile. "Nothin babe."

I stomped over to the saw, and as if sensing our plan to finish what we'd started, Dash calmed, looked at me, wagged his tail, then bounded up to Sasha and planted himself, head low, between her and the ghost. I picked up the saw and looked at the young man, his smile was fading, being replaced by anger, which made *me* smile. "More of a cat guy eh?" I asked him as I bent down and sawed the last inch or so of the tree. I gripped the sappy, cold trunk, hoisted the little tree over my shoulder, and turned to the young man.

His face, all condescension gone, was twisted into a rictus of hate. Looking at these ghosts wasn't *quite* the same as looking at a living person, but the difference was small. They weren't translucent, I could see pores and scars in his skin, but it's still kinda like looking at something when you're having a migraine. Their legs, arms, torso, and head are all there, but you can only *really* clearly see whatever you're looking at directly. Their periphery is just elusive, hard to describe. We stared at each other for a few long moments. He looked to be about my age when we last met...

I remembered him then; seeing a guy in my rifle company drag his body by the ankle to a row of the other fighters he'd been killed with, the friction of the road pulling his shirt up over his head, exposing the bullet holes and coagulated blood covering his stomach and sternum. Then the image of him screaming into Sasha's face flooded in.

I pointed at him with my saw and nodded, "slick move hombre, for real, top notch spook maneuver. I'll call you Creeps."

Disgust joined the hate in his glower.

As I turned back toward Sash, my heart skipped a beat again as adrenaline shot into my face.

The other four ghosts were all clustered now, only 20 yards away in the meadow, with Bridger in the front. He looked at me with a fiery judgment. My ears popped and my hands started shaking.

As we locked eyes my mind dredged up long forgotten details; apprehensively searching his body for a suicide vest, smelling smokey pine in his clothes, leaning across him to unbuckle his seatbelt, the soft tinking of the dying engine, unceremoniously pulling him out of that smoking, blood riddled truck down onto the road; seeing shattered glass under him and *almost* reflexively reaching down to move his

head so he wouldn't cut himself, the brief lance of shock at my even having that trace of humanity left in me, which I remembered almost feeling proud of myself for...

"Harry what is it?" I snapped out of my strange recall and looked at Sasha, who looked concerned. I shook my head "nothin darlin." I turned back to Bridger, closed my eyes and bowed my head toward him. When I looked back up, his expression hadn't changed.

Sasha took my arm as we walked back up toward the house.

That was very long night, but far easier than any of the next 14.

Room 404: Not Found

Very soon, I'll be dead. Stuck inside Hotel Non Dormiunt, a place that is essentially a prison decorated with flowery wallpaper. I've prayed and begged that anyone find me before my time ends, but if you're reading this, it's already too late...

"Welcome to Hotel Non Dormiunt, how may I help you?" the pale receptionist said in a monotonous tone. He was a frail man that looked tired beyond belief, as if he'd been working nonstop for the past year without as much as a lunch break.

"I'd like to check into room 404, please," I said as I put my booking reference down on the desk.

While the lobby itself looked reasonable, the scarcity of people felt odd. I had my own reasons for staying at that particular hotel, but even then I considered just turning around and leaving.

"Sorry, sir, I can't find room 404," he said, barely fazed by the mismatch.

I took a deep breath, as the anxiety arose in my body. Obsessive compulsive disorder is a bitch, and for whatever reason, one of my obsessions was the number 404. Anytime I had stayed away from home, it had to be that number, or I wouldn't be able to rest, eat or focus on business. It was one of the few things therapy hadn't been able to help me with.

"I can assure you, I booked room number 404. The reference even states exactly that," I said, trying to maintain a friendly tone of voice.

He sighed. "Yeah, I know, it's probably up there somewhere. How about you check it out? Maybe the key is stuck in the door."

It certainly wasn't the ideal work scenario I'd imagined, but it was one I could deal with. Without further ado, I headed for the stairs, adamant not to get into an elevator, even if it meant me being out of breath.

I counted each step as I climbed up the poorly maintained staircase, unwilling to let anything break my concentration. It wasn't a habit I could justify to anyone else, but it was something I had to do, a compulsion.

"1.. 2.. 3.. 4.. 5.. 6.."

Twenty steps per floor, that's the number I settled on for each and every floor, except for the third one. It was an annoying, even disturbing discrepancy, but at least it didn't involve my floor.

Once I got to the fourth floor, I noticed the numbers not following the expected numerical order. The hallway, lined with colorful wallpaper and small chandeliers, only had six rooms: 403... 404... 409... 420... 444... 473...

Each door had its own color. Mine was a bright red one that starkly contrasted with its surroundings, decorated with a framed sign in the middle.

Just a few rules:

- 1: No smoking.
- 2: Keep quiet after 10 PM.
- 3: Do not disturb your neighbors under any circumstances.

The rules shouldn't be too hard to adhere to, and as the receptionist suggested, the key was already placed in the lock. Muffled sounds could be heard from the neighboring room, number 409. Based on the familiar grunts, moans, and heavy breathing, the person inside was either getting lucky, or murdered. There really weren't many things in between. Whatever the case, I decided to ignore the sounds, hoping they'd just keep quiet at night.

The room itself wasn't anything too impressive. Pretty much just a bed, a bathroom, and severely limited closet space. At the very least, it had a decent view of the city, and looked clean.

During the first night, I had trouble sleeping. The neighbors were quiet, but new places always wore on my mental stability. Just the act of double, triple and quadruple checking that each door and window had been locked.

I got up early the next day. Tired, but ready for the business meeting that had brought me back to town in the first place. I showered, shaved, and put on the same shirt and tie that I used for every important meeting. Not because they brought luck, it was just another symptom of my disease manifesting.

On the way down the stairs, I counted the steps just as I had before.

15... 16... 17... 18... 19...

Nineteen steps... I ran back up and restarted the process, but sure enough, one had inexplicably gone missing. After minutes of contemplation, doubt that I'd incorrectly counted the steps the day before, I forced myself to proceed, feeling like something within the hotel had gone horribly wrong.

That thought would linger in the back of my mind until I saw my old friend, and current business partner standing on the street corner. He was always exceptionally enthusiastic about us working together, despite my OCD, he never once doubted me. Not since my condition literally saved his life, as I kept insisting that he drove wearing a seat belt. Truthfully, it hadn't been for safety reasons, but because I needed 'symmetry,' in the car.

Only a few days after I managed to convince him about the fact, he'd been in a serious car crash. They said he wouldn't have survived without it.

"Hey, Derek!" he called from the distance.

I lifted my hand to wave back at him, and noticed something off about my fingers... One of them, my little finger, had vanished.

I retracted my arm, shaking it as if it could get rid of the horrific sight I'd seen moments ago. Sure enough, on my right hand, I only had four fingers.

"What's wrong?" Jake said as he got close enough to notice my horrified expression.

"My – my hand," I said with a terrified voice, as I showed him the stump that had replaced one of my fingers.

Instead of the expected sympathy, he just chuckled.

"Very funny. Do you want to get a bite before the meeting? I know about a fantastic fast food truck just around the corner."

He had brushed off my sudden mutilation as if it were nothing, which further sent me down a spiral of panic.

"I have a missing finger, how can you laugh at that?"

His face turned serious for a moment. "Come on, Derek, you always had four fingers on that hand. You were just born that way."

"No – no – no I wasn't, it - it was fine just moments ago," I stuttered.

He looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. "Are you pulling a prank on me or something?"

Without discussing it any further, I just turned around and walked away. I was on the verge of a mental breakdown, and I couldn't stay around. Jake followed me for a bit, but he refused to believe I ever had five fingers on my right hand.

"Just calm down Derek, let's just talk about this!" he kept insisting, before suddenly falling silent.

I turned around to argue my side once more, but he had vanished from sight. As if he'd been erased off the face of the planet.

I called out for him a few times, but only got concerned looks from people passing by. Once I'd calmed down enough to think semi-straight, I decided to call him.

"We're sorry. You have reached a number that is disconnected, or that is no longer in service," a monotonous voice said in return.

Confused, and horrified by the events that had just unfolded, I headed back to the hotel. Ready to pack my bags and travel home. On the way I called the police, gave them all the information about him that I knew, and said he had gone missing, better safe than sorry, but my missing body part felt more important.

There were no people manning the reception. Which meant no one to help me check out, but I didn't care. All I needed, was to get my stuff, and leave.

As I entered the hallway on the fourth floor, I slipped on something wet, embedded into the carpet. A red crimson liquid that extended out from room 409, leading in thick streaks, directly into my own room.

It was blood, still warm.

Without hesitation, I pulled out my phone to call the police. To my surprise, despite having used the phone avidly, just the day before, there was no signal. I wasn't about to risk my life by entering my room without support, so I decided to go back down to the reception, and ask them to call an ambulance and the police.

I turned around, and froze in my step, as I realized the staircase I'd climbed, had vanished from existence. What was left behind was solid floor. Same with the elevator, it had just disappeared, alongside every door, and window on the floor, save for my own. I had effectively been stranded on the fourth floor, with no means of escape.

Then, I heard a faint call coming from my room. A weak voice crying out. "Please, help me!"

With no other options, I slowly made my way inside the room. The air smelled of iron, and the floor was soaked. A streak of blood reaching from the entrance, to the bathroom, as if someone had crawled in there while bleeding out.

I grabbed the nearest object I could use as a weapon, should the attacker be in there alongside the victim. Then, I quietly inched my way towards the bathroom, holding onto a coat rack to defend myself. There, on the floor inside, lay a man with multiple stab wounds in his chest, shallow breathing and barely conscious.

"H – help me," he said weakly.

I rushed to his aid, and put the towels towards the wounds, applying pressure. It hardly seemed to help.

"Don't worry, I'm going to call for help!" I said.

"It won't – it won't work. I tried to get out of here, but it's – it's impossible."

Ignoring him, I pulled out my phone, intending to call an ambulance. In the midst of the panic, I'd temporarily forgotten that no signal could reach the fourth floor.

"Shit," I mumbled as I thought about my next step. "Who did this to you?"

Before he got a chance to respond, his body fell limp on the floor as he lost consciousness. I did my best to help, using the little knowledge about first aid that I possessed, but within a minute, he just died.

I rushed back out to the hallway, desperately looking for a way out. A fire escape, a door, a window, anything that would lead to the outside world. I even contemplated jumping out my own window, wondering if I could survive the fall, but that idea was quickly shut down as I realized even my own room was rid of any window.

I collapsed to the floor in despair. A million thoughts ran through my head, none of them a viable chance at escaping this nightmare. Every time I blinked, something else vanished from my room. The bed, the closet, even the carpet just disappeared. I could do nothing but watch, all the while thinking how long it would take for people to notice my absence from the world.

Before giving up completely, I took whatever solid object I could find, and started smashing the wall. It was an effort that inevitably ended in injuring my shoulder, the wall was simply too thick, and even if I could get through, there was no guarantee that anything better existed on the other side.

By the time I'd tired myself out, all I had left was a few books and a newspaper. Everything else, including my own luggage, had vanished. Without food, or water, it would only be a matter of days before I finally succumbed. These thoughts ran through my tired mind until I finally fell asleep, a rest that was more of an exhausted absence from consciousness than true sleep.

I awoke in the dark, as the light had long since been erased alongside everything else. In my pocket, I still had a lighter, which barely aided in illuminating my surroundings. I tried to stand up, still not willing to give up, but I couldn't... my left leg had been deleted below the knee. As with my finger, there were no signs of surgery, nor wounds. It was just a healthy stump, as if my limb had never existed.

I knew then and there, that thirst or hunger wouldn't be the things that finally ended me. I would be completely erased long before anything else had the chance to kill me. So, I started writing this letter. A final goodbye to those I love, and an explanation as to what happened to me. As I started writing, I had no pencil, nor a phone or computer left to communicate with. So, as barbaric as it might sound, I'm writing this in the blood of the murdered man I found in the bathroom.

I don't know how much time has passed, nor do I know if the world still exists on the outside. By now, I've lost my legs; My face has been partially removed, and turned into an unrecognizable lump of flesh. On my hands, I only have a single middle finger left, a perfect "fuck you," to myself before I die.

I really hope no one else suffers the same fate, and that my letters survive the deletion. At least then, my death won't be for nothing. Soon I will be gone, but before I go, I leave you with this warning:

[Whatever you do, stay away from Hotel Non
Dormiunt.](<https://www.facebook.com/richard.saxon.author>)

[Guestbook.](<https://www.reddit.com/r/HotelNonDormiunt/>)