

*Please help me.*

Yellow walls spotted with water damage and mold. A floor lamp of frosted glass atop a black pillar in the corner--no light otherwise in this makeshift conference room gone gargantuan by lack of a table. He pressed through the retractable wall, pulling on the handle and guiding it through its shrieks.

What unfolded before him, panel by panel, was identical save a door in the opposite corner and a white board upon which "I have seen the Hollow Face of God" was scrawled in his handwriting. A red marker uncapped and dried out lay on the floor but he remained without memory of this time or this space. It was much warmer and brighter than the Ohio Winter Night he was walking through. Apprehension kept his charcoal-shaded parka on. Fear, a short ton weight behind his navel, kept him moving.

*If this is your punishment...*

He chose not to linger on the details, on how the lamps were flickering, on how that's what he wrote once, long ago, at 16 in a fit of dispassionate waning faith in a journal now burned. He moved right through the open door and into a thin beige hallway full of gateways to elsewhere, an extrapolation of options.

Jimmy, all 28 years of him, lived in quiet at his parent's house. After he dropped out of college, after countless youth sports leagues evacuated following the purchase of a jersey, after each spare event of a relationship failed, it was evident that he lost interest well before the first true step was taken.

Left foot, right foot, it felt like a mimicry of forward motion against the vastness of the space. Expanding out of view, the doors looked the same and were spaced at equal intervals.

With a mental shrug, the door he chose swung open to reveal a ballroom with a chandelier ablaze with half-height candles. The parquet floor supported old patterned chairs all green and gold around tables enshrouded in blonde linen.

All wavelengths transmogrified into

Quiet.

Silence.

Motionlessness.

Not a soul in sight.

The size of the room, its emptiness and its shadow and its meant-for-crowds nature made Jimmy uneasy. He awaited the footfall or the rustle that would be his signal to run.

Yet, still,

nothing.

Rooms upon rooms amid the growing malaise and perhaps peace of acceptance.

Every night he would curl up with their calico and pore over the history of lands he knew he would never visit and listen to the same albums on repeat.

His mother couldn't say lost when Jimmy asked, "Seemed so what?" after she trailed off in the inability to say what she truly wanted to say: that she wanted him to seek psychiatric help and this troubled her oh so deeply. His father remained holed up in his workshop building birdhouses.

*The monster that lurks or the monster in my psyche.*

He knew in his dread that he was alone, marching ever forward now through the ballroom and into a den with wood paneled walls and a tattered burgundy couch and kelly green pillows before a television. He left no trace to track back for he knew no exit.

Only forward motion, sweaty and stuffy and anxious.

"Hello?" He tried the singled word, shouted into the void. It was swallowed whole and forgotten by the silence that followed--such that it generated its own hum. Peace from fear and fear from peace.

He pressed on by turning back. He moved quick through the ballroom, half-expecting to see the ghosts of 1920's revelers interrupted by an axe murder.

The hallway: endless choice and no semblance of escape. He skewered his memory in the hope of finding out how this happened—

The sidewalk.

The houses.

The Cold.

This well-known walk home from work.

Blink.

A maze of beige walls and rooms.

No known point of entry.

No known purpose for this slip.

He turned the corner. An exit sign glowed red over the door. *At least allow me this.*

On the other side, he was greeted by a stairwell: options upward and options downward with no reference point as to where a ground floor could be. Down felt like basements and boiler rooms so he chose the direction of success, toward the light undiluted and invisible.

Doors at every landing as the stairwell spiraled on the toward the sky. He stuck his head into the center shaft around which the steps curled: north unto darkness, south unto darkness.

His journey carried him past gateways and options, further and he further as his energy waned. *Keep climbing* his mind told him although the roof and its hope for lookout-orientation remained beyond the horizon which was a pinpoint of darkness. Step after step, his breath shortened and his legs weakened as his mind turned toward the shortcomings--Katie in college then Julie thereafter then the engineering department of AminCorp then the absolute collapse of his psyche--growing upward toward the sense of failure.

Up and up and up with so many corridors and rooms behind him until he could go no further. He did not know how many flights he had climbed, after false starts and chances had gone askew or missing altogether, but his body had given up.

He tumbled through the first door he reached and laid himself on the short-pile carpet that was ancient grey and patterned with chrysanthemums. Exhausted, he stared at the starfield-in-negative of the acoustic tiles. He hoped for rest but gained only worry.

The solitude of this place overtook him. He thought of throwing himself into the shaft but retreated with the knowledge that he would only fall forever, wearied with waiting for the ground to arrive.

The burnt-orange paint of the walls absorbed the fluorescent humming light. He stood and carried on, trying doors: living rooms of pristine white furniture and mid-workday offices abandoned and messy children's bedrooms and an empty utility closet with a mop sink.

He realized his thirst. He turned it on to see an outpouring of biliary liquid. Jimmy existed on the edge of memory for the people he runs into from high school around town. The water shifts into bioluminescence, glowing phosphoric as it pours and

pours and pours. Jimmy waits for another shift, a continued hope for fresh water as the need to be remembered grows within him. He sighed and turned away as the flow continued unabated with a loud splash against the basin, the sound a welcome relief from the silence.

*What are the rules?*

He focused on the hallway and decided to trudge forth along the path before him.

Left foot, right foot. He walked as he climbed: endless and unceasing as the corridor wended and offered ceaseless entryways deeper. He understood that this was the rest of his life, that there was nothing but the labyrinth now, that he could twist and turn through countless passages only to wind up without orientation. He thought of rest, he thought of his bed, he thought of the Sno Caps he ate for dinner as his last and final meal. It was all blending together and he felt as if he were forgetting too many things to be remembered ever again--as if the space itself was causing him to doubt his own memory of reality and what once was before the blink and the slip. He is a ghost still alive.

And then.

Double doors, large and steel and alarmed. He saw the small speaker and laughed at the prospect of anyone needing to be alerted by it or the lights ready to flash nearby.

He pushed the bar to open the door. Bells sounded. Lights flashed. Frigid air rushed in. Shock rattled Jimmy.

He saw black patent leather shoes, clothes of white, and blue masks that accompanied the ragged sound of several people's footsteps at a frantic pace. All these hours without a peep and now there were others hellbent on keeping him.

He pushed the door against three feet of snow, cracked it open enough to squeeze through and out. They were as silent as their creation, their eyes were shielded and unavailable.

Into the snowdrift, the horizon a blank of blinding sun. Jimmy looked back to see a small outbuilding, black against the blue of the sky.