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I Didn't Mean to Get You All Riled Up
The Gruesome Tale of Buster Malone: Pikachu's Last Survival

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ABSTRACT

Through a collection of short stories, this thesis aims to position Generation Z (1997 – 2010) against the backdrop of the equally chaotic, ludicrous, and exploratory mannerisms of 1980s North America. Many of these short stories discuss, either overtly or subtly, issues of gender, sexuality, stereotypes, and mental health in order to navigate modern society's perception of such topics and to ultimately say, "This is our reality, so let's make the best of it." Members of Generation Z are particularly interested in nostalgia and vintage materials, claiming it elevates their modern aesthetic while bringing them back to a simpler time. However, with this thesis, I will attempt to show that Generation Z does not simply use nostalgia as a means of "aesthetic"; Generation Z uses nostalgia as a form of escapism.

Our faceless narrator, Buster Malone, takes us through a list of quotes taken from individuals who embody the tumultuous essence of the 1980s and asks us, "Why is this funny? Why do you feel uncomfortable at the end of this story? What does this say about *you*?" Ultimately, Buster Malone implores readers to understand that blurring the lines between reality and fiction, between audience and actor, between author and reader, can be beneficial for seeing today's social issues in a new perspective. We cannot take life too seriously when everything is awash in the bright neon lights and outrageously fake blood splatters of the 1980s.

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Chapter 1 - BUSTER MALONE'S LIST OF NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

1. Even Sonic, with his lightning-fast speed, can't outrun God.
2. I'm not sexist enough to understand this.
3. I'm up to my neck in grape juice.
4. If I was a furry, I would be honest with you.
5. I'm a TV *whore*.
6. Don't tell God we just line danced.
7. You better put on your fuckin' thermals, it's gonna get fuckin' *breezy!*
8. "Cory in the House" – that's a good anime!
9. Objectively, and this is a fact, the only plants that are not gay are cacti.
10. It's that time of year again – shut up and wipe my ass!
11. Why do we question witches? Why do we question democracy? You need to stop asking questions.
12. Shit my pants, that was spooky!
13. Do you prefer your orange juice with or without pulp fiction?
14. How can we fuck someone we can't even see?
15. My boss is a fucking naked mole rat who treats me like a worthless American flag.
16. I'm not a bad person, I just have opinions.
17. Nothing brings friends together like AIDS.
18. Gays don't drink butter.
19. Bippity, boppity, go fuck yourself, bitch.

Chapter 2 - SIGOURNEY WEAVER

“Get off yer horse and fight me like a man, Davis,” former Oscar nominee Michael Jenkins snarled in a deep, rasping Southern accent, left hand outstretched towards the horse in front of him while the fingers on his right hand curled to wrap around the gun in his holster. The lens of the camera centered on Michael’s waist inched forward to capture the movement.

“Davis,” played by young and upcoming actor Charlie Barclay, swung his legs over the side of his horse, cuing the animal trainer to quickly lead the animal out of the frame. “It don’t matter if I’m on a horse or on my own two legs,” he drawled, clenching his toothpick between his teeth. “I’ll still knock ya down like a son of a bitch!” he concluded, hand coming down on his own gun and whipping it out of its holster.

The director shifted anxiously in his seat, motioning for the boom operator to take a few steps back. Michael, with his one hand still in front of him, pulled his gun and spun it around in a sequence he had practiced for weeks. Cameras followed the swift spinning of the gun, while others came in close to Charlie’s eyes narrowing.

“I’ll kill ya!” Michael yelled, both hands landing on the trigger.

“Not if I kill ya first!” Charlie barked, toothpick falling to the ground and legs immediately opening into a power stance position.

The extras, saloon owner, and main love interest stood inside a wooden structure in the background of the scene, murmuring among themselves and rapidly fanning their faces. The director snapped his fingers twice, causing the love interest to spring into action, dramatically falling at Michael’s feet in a swirl of petticoats and sawdust.

“Oh, John!” she wailed in a nasally whine, hands clutching at her breast. “Oh, John, please don’t! You’re not a killer!” she continued, head flopping onto the ground as her shoulders shook with fake sobs.

“Any man can kill, Rose!” Michael yelled. Annoyed, he pushed Rose’s head to the side with his boot, causing her body to fall limply to the side as he took a step towards Charlie. Cameras followed his footsteps and the squinting of his eyes. “Just like any man can die,” he finished in a low, gravelly voice, hand pulling the trigger.

Charlie jumped out of the way, body sliding into a mattress disguised as a bale of hay nearby. Gasps and screams erupted from the extras, who tightly clutched the cardboard columns of the saloon. Rose’s crying became louder as her body continued to be splayed out on the ground, arm flung over her face as the camera slowly panned past her heaving, corseted chest. Michael twirled the gun in a fluid, unnecessarily fancy motion, eventually shoving it back into his holster. Stepping over Rose’s thrashing limbs, he walked towards the saloon owner, who had brought out a large mug of beer. Michael swiped the cool glass from the trembling owner, and had just put it up to his lips when the director yelled “Bang!” in an effort to cue Charlie to pull his gun out, proving that he wasn’t dead. The extras flew to the sides of the set, as a gun whirred in front of Michael’s face, breaking the mug. Shocked, Michael dropped the remaining glass in his hands on the dusty ground, blood trailing through his fingers. Charlie’s brows furrowed as he looked at the scene before him, realizing that he had flung his gun instead of the nail that would have been replaced in subsequent edits as a lightning-fast bullet.

“Shit, Mike!” Charlie called out, jogging over to see the damage he had caused. Rose, known more commonly throughout the movie industry as Angie Cottell, sat up on the ground, unaware of what had occurred due to her dramatic tantrum.

“Oh God, what happened now?” she whined as three makeup artists held her under the arms and hoisted her up to sit in her personalized chair. The stylists quickly went to work – undoing and tightening her corset, wiping the runny mascara from her cheeks, and patting her face back to its unnatural shade of white.

The exasperated director sat back in his chair, head in one hand as he pushed the main camera away from him with the other. The medic appeared to materialize in front of Michael, who was comforting the shaken Charlie. The veteran of spaghetti westerns explained that “this happens all the time – someday, it’ll happen to you, so don’t worry, cowboy,” while the new actor tried to keep his focus on Michael’s reassuring grin. Suddenly, a loud *thud* resounded throughout the set as Michael attempted to show Charlie, in detail, that the glass merely grazed him. The medic let out a surprised yelp as he dropped Michael’s hand in favor of tending to an unconscious Charlie, who was being vigorously fanned by the more promiscuous extras, included in the movie for more risqué scenes. Angie rolled her eyes as she met the back of the director’s head, which only slumped further into his chest.

As most extras focused on grabbing snacks and drinks, the main characters were either having their makeup touched up or were being examined intently by medics. With the set bustling, no one noticed three small heads peeking from behind Charlie’s hay bale crash pad, watching the scene unfold. The heads receded behind the mattress, where 12-inch tall, pale green creatures with bulbous, hourglass-shaped bodies stood in a circle. Their bodies slightly shifted from side-to-side as they hovered above the ground, creating perfect circular shadows beneath them.

“What was that red substance exuding from their appendages?” one of the creatures asked in a high-pitched nasally whine, turning its head to glance back at the chaotic scene.

“It is obviously a type of toxic substance that these bipedal beings use in combat,” another answered, shaking its head disapprovingly at the curiosity of his kin. “We should not be here,” it continued in a rushed tone, gliding over to the two creatures and forcefully pulling them back behind the crash pad with a seemingly invisible magnetic force.

The creature that hadn't yet spoken pushed backed against his brethren as if repelling a magnet and peered around the hay bale once more. “The transportation vessel crashed,” it spoke quickly, narrowing the three slits in its face to magnify the scene before it. “We must find dark matter fuel if it exists in this galaxy, or suffer at the tentacles of our mission captain.”

All three creatures rapidly vibrated at the mere thought of returning to their world having not completed their mission.

“Making peace with and ultimately exterminating the Earthlings of the Milky Way Galaxy was the mission and continues to be our intent. As soon as we acquire the dark matter, we can repair the transportation vessel and attack the Earthlings to acquire their rare scandium element, hence returning to our world coated in our enemies' vital organs and being hailed as brave warriors,” the creature continued, spinning to face its fellows. They bobbed up and down in agreement.

“Do not forget yourself Lieutenant,” the most frightened creature of the trio reprimanded, ending his sentence with a drawn-out gurgling noise meant to represent the Lieutenant's name. “We must first make peace with the Earthlings. Do not let your hatred of them come between us and our mission.”

The two other creatures stood still for a moment before bobbing up and down in agreement. They all turned to look around the hay bale.

“These bipedal beings are completely incompetent,” the Lieutenant gasped, his eyes widening as he watched Angie swat at her hair stylist with a paper fan after spraying hairspray into her mouth. Angie hacked and coughed, coating her shoe-shiners’ faces in spit.

“What do you mean?” one of the creatures asked.

“Simply observe, Captain. Look at the way they attempt to maim one another. They are not even trying to properly kill their enemies.”

Charlie slowly came to on the ground. He quickly collided head-first with the chest of a busty extra as he attempted to sit up straight, earning him a blood-coated high-five from Michael. The creatures vibrated in disgust and returned to their positions behind the crash pad.

“Lieutenant, the Continual Transfuser. We must make haste if we are to gain the Earthlings’ trust. Begin to scan for scandium,” the Captain commanded.

The Lieutenant reached into the center of his body, which had the flexibility and bounce of Jell-O. A small, sleek, charcoal grey cylinder was pulled out, a few mint green strands from the creature’s body continuing to cling to it. It was covered in bright white symbols that told the creatures’ origin story and served as a reminder of their mission and ultimate goal. The Lieutenant placed it onto the ground, and the three creatures stood in a circle around it. After joining at the hip, the air began to vibrate with magnetic frequencies, and the cylinder began to rise in the air until it was at the creatures’ eye level. The creatures focused intently on the cylinder and they mumbled in their language to activate the device. The cylinder wobbled in the air for a minute or two before slowly finding its bearings, pointing behind Angie’s head.

“It has found scandium!” the Captain cheered. The Captain reached for the cylinder, stopping just short of it in the air. The three creatures broke their physical bond and moved into a single-file line behind the Captain.

The creatures began to move. At first, no one noticed the small green creatures hovering slightly above the ground, as they moved too quickly and were too small to be observed by the disinterested human gaze. As they approached Angie's chair, Charlie finally stood up and began to wobble his way over to his own personal chair. His vision blurry and hazy, he didn't notice that he had stepped in something squishy until his ears were pierced by a supersonic sound that caused him to fall onto his knees.

"Lieutenant!" one of the creatures cried, breaking the line to tend to the now-squished Lieutenant on the ground. As the bond was broken, the Continual Transfuser fell and the Captain rushed to grab at it before it hit the concrete.

"Major, what is the meaning of this?" the Captain barked. As he turned around and saw the sorry sight of the Lieutenant barely clinging to life, he rushed back and emitted a high-pitched squeal that caused the humans on set to cover their ears immediately and bow their heads in an effort to escape the noise.

"Lieutenant, who did this to you?" the Captain questioned, tentacles already reaching for his laser gun. The Major cradled the Lieutenant's body in his tentacles as it began to melt into a slimy puddle of goo. The Lieutenant barely croaked out a coherent noise before he slipped through the Major's tentacles.

"These Earthlings will pay!" the Captain roared, ending his phrase in a battle cry. He powered up his laser gun and charged towards Angie's chair.

The Major attempted to grab onto the Captain's body to inject reason into him, but swooped to save the Continual Transfuser from hitting the ground. He looked at the Lieutenant, at the cylinder, and at the Major before tossing the cylinder high into the air and rising to its height. He began to move rapidly towards the Warner Bros. logo embedded into the side of the

building and settled onto the roof. He took out his own laser gun and aimed it at Michael and the medics.

The Major and Captain began firing bright green lasers onto the set, causing crash pads, tables, and chairs to erupt in a fiery blaze. The people on set threw themselves onto the ground or ran away from the set screaming, as they figured the set had begun to spontaneously combust. Michael ran towards Angie and threw himself over her, his forearm crushing her breasts as they landed on the ground with a thud.

Angie began to scream, “Sexual assault!” but none of her personal crew listened.

Cardboard paintings and photographs of buildings fell over, crashing down onto the makeshift saloon that led into an air-conditioned, modern building. Hay spewed everywhere and many of the extras began choking on the pieces that got stuck in their throats. People fell to their knees and writhed on the ground, their eyes tearing up from the fumes and the rising smoke. Small golf carts arrived in pairs with muscular police officers jumping out of them to carry the people off set. Fire sirens began to blare from the street and the flashing red lights illuminated the set in an eerie glow.

After 15 minutes of pure, unadulterated chaos, the Major and Captain were satisfied with their work, and felt they had properly avenged their fallen comrade. The Major floated back down to the ground and met with the Captain. They put away their laser guns and hurried away from the blazing set, Continual Transfuser vibrating in front of them.

News of the fire on Stage 63 hadn't yet reached the rest of the Warner Bros. lot, which was packed to the brim with golf carts, movie stars, and buffets lined up on cheap folding tables. The Continual Transfuser pointed the remaining two creatures toward the center of the lot.

“There must be scandium somewhere close!” the Captain whispered to the Major as the device began to vibrate more rapidly and began to emit high-pitched beeps at an erratic pace. As they moved, they saw gigantic movie posters lining the buildings’ exteriors.

“Look, Captain,” the Major exclaimed as the Continual Transfuser stopped at a poster of *Gremlins* (1984) outside of Stage 37.

“My goodness!” the Captain cried in disgust. “What are those hideous creatures?”

“I do not know,” the Major admitted. He pulled a small book out of his body and began to thumb through it. “According to my copy of ‘Earthlings Abridged,’ calico-colored creatures with sharp and pointed ears are preyed on by humans every blue moon. They track and hunt them, which results in a bloody feast that is celebrated entirely in the nude,” the Major continued. Upon his completion of the passage, the creatures began to gag.

“That is truly horrendous! Look at these poor, innocent creatures. The Earthlings must truly be slaughtered once and for all,” the Captain stated.

The Continual Transfuser continued to move through the set before stopping at another movie poster that was currently being rolled onto the side of a building.

“My goodness!” the Captain exclaimed again. “Who is that?”

The Major squinted at the words on the poster. “*Labyrinth*? Why, it is a maze, Captain! They are trapped in a maze! How can these beings be so cruel to one another, trapping them in mazes for their own personal enjoyment?”

The creatures shook their heads and moved on.

“Say, Major,” the Captain stated after a few minutes of silence. “Who is this Clint Eastwood character I keep seeing on these images?”

The Major opened up 'Earthlings Abridged.' "It says here that when an individual is mentioned several times and is pictured as an icon, they are one of the gods the Earthlings worship. This Clint Eastwood must be a sort of god!"

"Ah, of course! He does seem to have the rugged, masculine look those Earthlings appear to adore so much. And those hairs on his face above his eyes! What are they called, Major?"

"Eyebrows, I believe."

"Yes, eyebrows! So much hair and thickness. I wonder how many virgins they sacrifice for him on an annual basis."

"My guide book states that approximately 370 virgins are sacrificed every year in the land of Hollywood."

"My goodness! He must have an entire harem."

The creatures continued until the Continual Transfuser stopped at the approaching feet of a tall woman. She was clad in a white dress with a turtleneck, and her hair was teased and hairsprayed to reflect the glow of the waning sun on the horizon. Her face had a youthful, childlike appearance to it, yet her features were sharp and angular.

"Major, who is that gorgeous specimen?" the Captain asked, transfixed on the woman's exposed neck.

Upon finding nothing in his guide book, the Major looked around at the various buildings and posters. This woman was mentioned in several of them and appeared very prominently in the foreground. "*Ghostbusters? Aliens? Working Girl?*" the Major murmured. "Captain! This is their queen!" the Major suddenly exclaimed.

"What? Are you sure?"

“Yes, Captain! Observe the length of her neck and the purity of her clothing. She is a goddess among men! Look at how they revere her. She has fought the paranormal and slain the atrocious Glorprians of Andromeda-7. It is portrayed right here as a heroic battle!” The Major pointed at the *Aliens* (1986) poster to illustrate his point.

“Queens are incredibly important to the Earthlings’ culture! It says so right here in my guide book! ‘Queens are considered on a level above gods, as women do everything in their culture and expect nothing in return. They are the ultimate selfless creatures who fight in battles and rip the heads off of men lesser than them. Notable examples include Joan of Arc, who slayed dragons, Marie Curie, who invented the revolutionary radio, and Cleopatra, who founded the colony of Germany.’ This woman, this Sigourney Weaver, is a goddess among men, for she has fought the Glorprians while remaining pure! She is the holder of scandium, the rare Earth element! This is the one we must approach about gaining the Earthlings’ trust. This is the one we will use to destroy the Earth and all those who reside within it,” the Major babbled excitedly, his form quivering.

“Perhaps we can spare Clint Eastwood, for the remaining Earthlings who join our intergalactic battle will have to be reminded of their home world and religion,” the Captain responded as he began to glide towards mankind’s savior – Sigourney Weaver.

Chapter 3 - ILLUMINATION

She met him at the arcade, bright flashing lights illuminating their faces as the screams of young children surrounded them. She was leaning against a nearby machine and had been watching the game mindlessly, petite frame swallowed by her acid-wash jeans, a fuzzy sweater that scratched her skin, and the crowd around her. He had a pocket full of quarters that caused his belt to droop slightly. As he leaned down toward the machine to place a quarter below the neon “Centipede” logo, she felt the rough leather of his bomber jacket brush against her neck and slightly graze her cheek. She didn’t want to look at him, afraid to break the bubble she had created around the two of them; yet, she caught his profile just a minute later as the crowd forced him to lean into her. His rounded face and slightly stooped shoulders expressed a protective nature, but the green light reflected in his eyes masked a secretive, mischievous streak. As he leaned back, a strand of lime green hair peeked out from his baseball cap, which nestled just a bit too loosely on his head.

He watched the screen intensely, eyes darting back and forth to follow the current players’ movements. The points kept adding up – 10, 100, 200, 600 – faster and faster, and he seemed to forget to blink the higher the scores went. She glanced at him occasionally when she thought she felt those green eyes staring at her, but he was focused. As the two kids ended their game with a score in the hundreds of thousands, his mouth slowly curved into a smirk, as if he could envision his future victory.

He seemed to materialize out of the crowd and mold himself to the machine, his hands instinctively curving over the black joystick and hovering over the red trigger that controlled the shooters. She stood off to the side, not wanting to break her reverie by facing him head-on, for she was sure that something about her fantasy would be shattered if she moved even an inch. She

watched his wrists smoothly ripple and move, skin tightening around the knuckles and bones; he was dynamic yet still. Reality pushed her further into her entranced state when he cocked his head in her direction, eyes never leaving the screen, and asked a question out loud.

“You impressed?”

“Maybe,” she answered, voice soft and wispy.

He chuckled softly, but loud enough to for her to become embarrassed by her response. She felt herself being pulled closer to the machine, enough to where she could see the light stubble dotting his cheeks.

“Not good enough for you?”

“Maybe.”

As he achieved the high score, gasps and cheers surrounded the machine and he turned to face her fully. The bubble that was created when he was pressed against her formed around them again, and everything seemed to slow to a halt. His lips were relaxed into that same cocky smirk, and she realized that he stood a good six or seven inches above her, yet she held her breath as though he was mere millimeters from her face.

“Want to get a pop?” he asked.

“Yes.”

They were young then, too young to understand anything other than the neon lights and the way they danced around the machines. Their fingertips tapped against each other as if playing the keys on a piano, occasionally lingering for just a moment longer than the one before. As they ran to different games and played until they were no longer having fun, they learned about one another. He was a guitarist and spoke fondly of his instruments – many of them custom, one sentimental. He wanted to be a rockstar and was overly fond of root beer. He lived

with three younger brothers and a hardworking mother who supported his dreams but neglected to give him the money he needed for his current shade of hair dye.

They were both secretive; though she was comfortable with him – and he, she presumed, with her – they expressed things they would not tell mere strangers, yet refused to share basic information. She told him about her years of classical ballet training and her wish to go to art school, despite having very little talent in the arts. As they stood in line for their sodas, she blinked up at him with her bright green eyeshadow sparkling in the fluorescent lights, linked her arm through his, and whispered to him about her wildest, most grotesque dreams, and he threw his head back and laughed.

They quickly found a small circular table situated in the far corner of the room and settled onto the squeaky red chairs across from one another.

“Do you believe in love?” she asked as she twirled her straw between her fingers and looked at him with suggestive eyes, head slightly lowered. Her Coke bubbled in front of her and her left hand became slick with condensation.

He chewed slowly on his straw and reached up to adjust his cap, letting some more green hair fall out. A bright white light shone behind him, seeming to envelop his torso in a soft, otherworldly glow. As he hummed into his drink and avoided meeting her gaze, she could feel her cheeks flare up. She didn’t know why she had asked, and though she wished she could take back her question, she was still curious to hear his response.

“What kind?” he finally asked, voice low and husky.

“You know, true love. Love that leaves your skin feeling scorched when the other person looks at you, even if you don’t know it. Love that makes you feel lightheaded and dizzy, but you never want to feel grounded ever again. You know, fairytale love.”

“Why would I believe in that?” he responded after a moment of thought, eyes sharply flicking up to meet hers.

She chuckled nervously and looked toward the side of her cup so as not to meet his eyes directly. She lightly drew circles and figure-8s on the table.

“Because everyone’s looking for that kind of love. Even if you don’t believe in it, you still want it.”

He opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, his gaze hardening and shoulders tensing up slightly. She leaned forward in anticipation, chewing methodically on her straw and training her eyes on his neck. His eyes quickly flickered over to the photo booth in the corner and he resumed his laidback, casual stance that seemed to invite anything and anyone inside. She noticed with resignation that his eyes retained their steely gaze, even as his mouth resumed the smirk it had worn the entire night.

“Want to see something?” he questioned, hands reaching across the table to stop her fingers, which were still tracing patterns. His palm completely enveloped her own as he turned her hand over to hold it.

“Yes,” she answered quickly in a breathy voice she didn’t recognize as her own.

As he stood, pulling her up with him, and began to take long, slow strides toward the photo booth, she realized that she was beginning to feel exhilarated and dizzy. They seemed to cut directly through the crowd, weaving in and out of machines and ducking between people’s outstretched arms, their own hands enclosed in a tight grip. She was afraid that if she let go, he would slip out of her grasp completely and wouldn’t return. His form almost flickered in front of her as they passed beneath rows of fluorescent lights and alternated between neon glows and complete shadows, causing him to disappear and reappear in front of her. She was transfixed.

He sharply yanked the curtain of the photo booth and stared directly into the bright light above the camera, while she had to shield herself from the blinding bulbs. Letting go of her hand, he stepped forward to set the timer on the machine for 10 seconds and resumed his place by her side, arm slinking around her waist and hiking up her jean jacket. He stood straight, facing the camera, and she did the same. The flash went off, momentarily blinding each of them with a white light, but the spots quickly faded.

Despite the screams of the children outside and the noisy, mechanical sounds of each machine whirring and buzzing, they could hear each other's short breaths in between the quiet ticking of the second timer.

He re-materialized behind her; she didn't even feel him detach from her side. He leaned down next to her face, nestling his head in the crook of her neck and gently nuzzling her collarbone before staring ahead at the camera. Shuffling back, he placed his hands around her waist. She remained rigid, yet felt as though she were floating, weightless, about to faint. The timer was at six seconds.

"I want it," he whispered into her neck.

"What do you want?" she asked, breath stuck in her throat.

"That love you were talking about. I want to capture it like a snapshot and have it imprinted on my memory. I want it to burn me like a flame. *You* burn me like a flame."

The light flashed once again. With a twitch of his hands, she was turned to face him. He placed a finger under her cheek; although he didn't apply any pressure, she still lifted her face to meet his.

"I don't even know your name."

"You don't have to."

His eyes burned a hole through her lips, causing her entire face to erupt in a raging blush. The room was spinning quickly, too quickly for her to keep up with, but they were enclosed by a curtain and all she could see was him and the black – or was it navy? – background behind him and yet it was still spinning even though he remained perfectly still and clear. He was a snapshot illuminated.

The flash went off again. Two more ticks of the timer and his lips were on hers, eyes wide, green, and unblinking, a circle of light surrounding his pupils. She pressed against him, arms tightly wound behind his neck and knuckles turning white as she clenched her fists. His mouth was soft, warm, lips gently puckered, lime green hair tickling her right cheek. How long had his cap been askew? He blinked slowly, hands tightening around her hips as he softly pulled away.

“No,” she mouthed, eyes closed for a split second, and she pushed against him harder, raising herself onto her tip-toes to lock his head into the crook of her elbow. She could see his eyes glowing on the backs of her eyelids.

With the next flash, he was gone.

She returned the day after he disappeared, but he couldn't be found. Instead of dancing over the wires, head hazy and full of light, she found herself tripping over them to land face-down on the carpeted floor, mind entirely empty. Groups of laughing kids walked around her, over her, and on top of her as if they didn't know she was there. She rolled onto her back and let hot rivulets flow from her ears to stain the ground, her mouth open in a silent cry for help.

For weeks, she stumbled, lightheaded and chronically heartbroken, through the arcade for hours at a time, violently shoving children to the ground just to sit in front of a game she had

never played and stare, unblinking, into the virtual world ahead of her. Her hands and arms soon became stained with angry red streaks that followed her veins. Her heart beat loudly in her chest from the moment she woke up, tucked tightly into her bed, to the minute she went to sleep, curled up in a corner of her bedroom and rocking furiously back and forth. She could hear her blood course rapidly through her veins every second of the day.

One month into his disappearance, she took pictures of her tear-stained face, bloodshot eyes, and scratched-up fingertips in the photobooth. She vomited over the floor and fell unconscious after staring into the light for too long.

Two months into his disappearance, she clawed at the mirror in her bathroom, ripping shards of glass off of the wall and throwing them to the ground. Her feet never truly stopped bleeding.

Three months into his disappearance, she began to sleep under the neon “Centipede” logo, anticipating being hauled off into the streets every morning. But she needed to be there, to see him, to hear the jingle of the quarters in his pocket.

Four months into his disappearance, she trudged up and down the stairs in the arcade, dressed in dirty clothes and her old, worn-out ballet shoes. He made her want to dance again the moment they locked eyes.

Her eyes became hollow sockets and her body, a sagging sack of skin. She eventually lost track of time, as she had nothing left to ruin and make her feel something, anything, to take away the sting she felt of that fairytale love. Her younger sister came and went from her apartment, bringing brown paper bags of painkillers and needles to help numb the pain, as well as boxes of bright green hair dye. She curled up into a tight ball in the corner of her bedroom, rocking furiously back and forth until she couldn't feel her back hitting the wall.

She finally used the eight boxes of hair dye her sister had brought her. Wearing her fuzzy sweater and acid-wash jeans, she scrubbed at her neck to get rid of the itch the fabric gave her as she tilted her head towards the ceiling. Eyes wide and wet with tears that hadn't fallen for days, she took the eyedrops given to her for her swollen and red eyes and gently dropped the bleach into them. Flashes rapidly went off in between her burning blinks. Mouth open in a terrifying scream, her shaking hand caused the dropper to fly from her fingers and bounce off the wall. All she could see was bright white as she fell heavily to the ground, the blisters in her floors wedging themselves into her exposed skin.

She met him at the arcade, bright flashing lights illuminating their faces as the screams of young children surrounded them. She was leaning against a nearby machine and had been watching the game mindlessly, petite frame swallowed by a long white jacket with several buckles that shaped her body into an hourglass figure. He had a pocket full of quarters that caused his belt to droop slightly. As he leaned down toward the machine to place a quarter below the neon "Centipede" logo, she felt the rough leather of his bomber jacket brush against her neck and slightly graze her cheek.

This time, she wasn't afraid to break the bubble. "It's you," she whispered breathily, hands aching to reach out and rest on his shoulder. She tugged vigorously on her right arm, which wrapped around her torso in an uncomfortably tight position.

"You impressed?" he asked. His voice sounded the same after all this time.

"Where have you been? I've been looking for you! I came back here every day! What is going on?" She tugged harder, feet tripping over one another in the process. She doubled over to land on her knees, hair thrashing about wildly as she struggled to break free from her jacket.

“Not good enough for you?” He continued to play the game expertly. The points kept adding up – 10, 100, 200, 600 – faster and faster, and he seemed to forget to blink the higher the scores went.

“Help, please!” she screamed. Footsteps thundered towards her but she couldn’t see who was approaching. Her vision became blurry and she was beginning to feel exhilarated and dizzy all over again. There was no crowd this time.

As he achieved the high score, gasps and cheers surrounded the machine and he turned to face her fully. He towered several feet over her and his lips were relaxed into that same cocky smirk.

“Want to get a pop?”

Staring up at him from her pathetic heap on the ground, she felt the rough texture of her ballet shoes on the soles of her feet. Her jacket began to bloom with spots of blood on her sides and arms. He knelt down to cup her chin in his hands and squeezed her jaw bone roughly. She suddenly felt a painful stinging sensation in the crook of her left elbow but couldn’t take her eyes off of his.

“Yes.”

Chapter 4 - APPLE JUICE

“Oh, my God, Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art... thou, Romeo? Thou? Ugh, whatever. Deny thy father and refuse thy name; or, if thou will be not, be sworn my love, and I’ll no longer be a Capulet bitch.”

“No, no, no!” Matthew screeched, hands flying into the air as he stepped toward the cardboard balcony and glared up at the girl playing Juliet in the school’s annual spring play.

Sighing, the girl repositioned herself on top of the ladder inside of the balcony cutout so that she was kneeling, skirt billowing around the paint-stained ladder steps. She put her head in her hand and looked lazily down at the top of Matthew’s head.

“What is it now, Captain Gay?” she whined in her trademark Valley Girl tone that pierced the ears of the stage crew.

Anyone sitting at the back of the auditorium could have seen the fumes coming out of Matthew’s ears and nose as he huffed erratically, hands shaking at his sides.

“*Okay*,” he enunciated, emphasizing each syllable. “First of all, it’s Matthew, *Elizabeth*. Second, nowhere does it say ‘Capulet bitch,’ I don’t know where you’re getting that! Third, I’m not really feeling you, you know, *feel* it.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes slowly as she took out a piece of wrapped gum from inside her corset and popped it into her mouth, loudly smacking it as she replied.

“Oh, you’re not? You’re not *feeling* it?” she asked sarcastically.

“No, I’m not! You’ve just learned that you can’t be with the love of your life, your mom doesn’t understand you, and your very soul is wracked with the burden of your family’s rivalry. You’re a pain to be around, so you’re sitting on your balcony waiting for your

prince to come snog you because you're too weak to challenge authority! Now, let me *feel* that annoyance! Aaron, dim the lights for Miss Incompetent!"

With one final smack, Elizabeth spit her gum into her hand and placed it onto the side of the ladder as a nice surprise for a member of the stage crew. Standing up, she adjusted her corset and fiddled with her chest, scoffing as she saw Matthew stick his tongue out at her.

After his fingers skimmed over the lighting board and the lights gently dimmed, Aaron leaned back in the spinning chair he had lugged up to the tech booth a year prior. His eyes closed and a sigh made its way out of his chest. He still didn't know why he had signed up to be on the stage crew for the third year in a row when all he wanted was to be back in his dorm, laying under the covers and shining a flashlight over a book he'd read five times before.

Aaron had never been drawn to the stage from a young age. He preferred to read and take long walks around the block, if only to escape the emptiness of a large and cold house. Being the deciding factor in his parents' inevitable and drawn-out divorce, Aaron had grown up mainly in isolation from others, and his interactions with other humans consisted solely of the words "Shut up!" and a subsequent ringing on the side of his face that wouldn't go away for days. Upon losing a couple of teeth from one particularly harsh slap over shuffling the divorce papers, Aaron came to the realization that no one truly listened to him, rendering him mute for the foreseeable future.

A subtle attraction to the stage came later. He first met Elizabeth practicing a monologue from some old cartoon during his second week of sophomore year, searching for a quiet place to hide from his taunting roommates. Lying on the floor at the back of the auditorium, Aaron abandoned his book and slowly crawled to the aisle, a shaggy brown mop of hair flopping onto the floor behind the seat in front of him. A bright pink light illuminated her as she stood with feet

shoulder-width apart and arms stretched toward the sky. Her head was thrown back and her long, platinum blonde hair swept over her shoulders, her neck glistening with sweat under the hot lights. Aaron was mesmerized.

He had only recently resigned himself to the fact that he longed for Elizabeth, not the stage. That night he met her, lying in his sheets, biting down on his fist, and coating the top sheet of his newly made bed with hot white streaks, he understood what the word “lust” meant. He didn’t know how well she did in her other classes, although he knew her schedule, and didn’t know what her favorite color was, although he knew she looked ravishing in baby pink. However, Aaron did know that he wanted to hold her and feel his hand wrap around her neck as she molded into him and grabbed at his shoulder blades, gasping for breath.

The trance continued into the present moment as he watched Elizabeth struggle with her corset and blow a stray hair from her brown wig piled high with braids away from her face. His reverie was only partially broken as he heard the creak of the door to the tech booth open. One hand immediately clamped down onto his shoulder, while the other landed with a loud *smack* on the lighting board.

“God, she’s a piece of work,” Matthew huffed, knuckles turning white as the hand hovering over the knobs clenched into a fist.

Aaron looked up quickly to see the bottom of Matthew’s chin and sharply flicked it to bring his attention down to him. Swatting his hand away from the lighting board, Aaron signed with his other hand, *Don’t damage the equipment!*

Matthew sighed and sat down on the floor next to Aaron, the other chair being occupied with piles of boxes and empty vinyl cases. He ran a hand through his dark purple hair, which

shone with hair mousse and other styling gels as he signed back to Aaron, *Shut up. I know you mean her.*

They both looked simultaneously down at the stage where Elizabeth was yanking her skirt from the ladder step it had gotten caught on and was waving to the tech booth to continue the show. Aaron leaned forward to fix the lights, a light pink illuminating her cheeks as she began to recite her opening lines once more. He could see her skirt still partially tangled in the ladder. *She must fall so prettily.* Her voice flooded through the large, worn-down speakers situated in the booth and Aaron leaned back again, yet his eyes steadily watched her with a fire.

“You scare me sometimes, dude,” Matthew mumbled out loud as his eyes caught Aaron’s intense gaze.

His hand came up to the headset delicately positioned around his neck and shouted, “Passion!” into it, causing Elizabeth to shoot a deathly glare up at the tech booth. Despite the blinding lights shielding them from her gaze, the pair could feel that piercing stare, causing chills to ride up their spines.

The rest of the play went relatively smoothly, with Matthew occasionally shouting a phrase or two into the headset and Aaron being commanded to switch this light or turn that one off. Finally, Act IV, Scene III came up and Aaron sat forward in anticipation. Ignoring Matthew’s odd side eye, he rested his elbows on his thighs, head gently hovering above his interlaced knuckles.

“You wouldn’t believe what I went through for this scene,” Matthew stated abruptly, shocking Aaron out of his trance.

The former rocked back and forth on his heels as he felt Aaron’s questioning look on the side of his head.

“You know what she’s like. I mean, not like *I* do, but she insisted on having fun during this scene. I said, ‘You’re not having fun doing this amazing play?’ and she goes, ‘I work for alcohol.’ Can you believe that? The annual spring play for a high school and just because she’s a senior, she thinks she can demand whatever she wants. So, I go, ‘No, you’ll drink apple juice like every single fucking year so far,’ to which she huffs. After an *eternity* of negotiations, we settled on-”

Sparkling grape juice, Aaron signed to complete Matthew’s sentence. They had had a similar situation for the past three years. Aaron leaned back on his chair, eyes fluttering down to his hands, fingers toying with the lines on his palms. *Sounds like Liz*, he signed, mainly to himself. *She’s not one to be picky about her poison. Fucking bitch.*

Aaron had made advances toward Elizabeth before, ever since that first realization of lust. It was difficult for him to reconcile with the fact that every hair toss, obnoxious scoff, and those two dumped water bottles that left him completely drenched, were definitely directed at him. Shaking his head, he leaned forward again, head lowered toward his toes.

“O look!” crackled through the speakers as Matthew narrowed his eyes at the stage. “Methinks I see my cousin’s ghost, seeking out Romeo, that did spit his body upon a rapier’s point. Stay, Tybalt, stay, or whatever... Romeo, I come! This do I drink to thee.”

With a sly toast up to the tech booth, Elizabeth tossed her head back and tilted the vial toward her mouth. Even across the auditorium, Aaron could see her gulps in slow motion, sensually moving her neck up and down, up and down. His palms grew white as he grabbed the arms of the chair, his jeans becoming tighter by the second. Matthew’s hand reached out to flick on the dimmer and the lights slowly faded to black as Elizabeth crumpled onto the makeshift canopy bed and began to shake violently.

Aaron closed his eyes and began to rock slowly back and forth in his chair, smirking subtly as somebody below the booth let out a bloodcurdling scream.

“Oh, finally! Some real passion!” Matthew muttered to himself, rolling his eyes.

However, the pair soon heard frantic crackling and cries of “Shit! Shit!” and “Oh, my God!” mixed in with multiple mentions of a seizure coming through Matthew’s headset. Matthew immediately sprung into action and threw open the door to the booth, bounding down the side steps of the auditorium.

As Aaron watched through the window of the tech booth, left hand reaching down to unzip his jeans and right hand boosting the bright white lights to illuminate the stage, he saw Elizabeth convulsing on the bed, legs hanging off the side, arms thrown across her chest, and froth dripping from her mouth down to her neck. She looked like a broken porcelain doll, chest heaving with short, shallow breaths and head gently writhing from side to side. Her billowing skirt had hiked its way up her thighs, exposing her milky skin and a harsh red scratch from when she had gotten stuck on the ladder earlier. Aaron could hear multiple button tones as numerous people dialed, he presumed, 9-1-1. His left fist moved in time with the shrill of phones ringing and the thumping of feet on the hollow stage floor, his head thrown back, a grin spreading from ear-to-ear, eyes wide open, focused on the miniscule dots of the popcorn ceiling.

Matthew trudged gently up the stairs a few minutes later and sat back down on the floor, eyes deliberately aimed away from Aaron’s splayed legs and the tissue box that had gotten knocked over from a stack of vinyls to beside Aaron’s chair.

Is she okay? Aaron signed, feigning concern in his face, watching as a few of the stage crew hoisted Elizabeth into the air and dragged her unceremoniously off-stage.

No, Matthew signed.

Did you call 911?

Fuck no, I'm glad she's gone. Fucking nightmare. Should have drunk apple juice like the rest of us.

Chapter 5 - 2:00 AM

“This is *so* fun!” Jennifer shouted as she stumbled into the second-floor bathroom, her roommate following her on steadier legs. Her hands tightly gripped the rusty sink as she stared at the faucet, laughing breathily.

“Yeah, super fun. They don’t even have anything in there for us to get wasted on,” Lisa quipped sarcastically from the corner, fishing in her pocket for an extra cigarette. Jennifer sighed and turned around to study her companion. They were dressed similarly – stockings, leather skirts, tight tops – rendering Jennifer’s snarky comments regarding Lisa’s outfit useless. Instead, a smoking reprimand bubbled up in her throat and manifested as Jennifer snatched the cigarette out of Lisa’s mouth, grinding it under her boot.

“You’re already drunk. Remember?” Jennifer joked, gently slapping Lisa on the shoulder. She turned back to the sink to adjust her earrings, continuing to look slyly at Lisa through the mirror.

“Don’t think I didn’t see that,” she reprimanded as she caught sight of Lisa’s tongue poking out in derision. “We have a psych report due in, literally, two days.”

“And you’re the one who forced me to come here tonight! ‘It’ll be fun, Lisa.’ Remember that? ‘There will be *drugs*, Lisa.’ Remember that?” Lisa mocked as she patted down her stockings and reached into her boot, still anxiously looking for that cigarette.

“Yes, I do remember that. Listen, I had a reliable source – don’t roll your eyes, he’s reliable enough – tell me that these guys from the science club were throwing a party tonight and I figured we should loosen up! Don’t tell me you don’t want to loosen up,” Jennifer replied as she turned the faucet on and gently splashed cold water over her neck and forehead.

“Jen, I saw an adult man tonight attempt to make out with his *calculator*. We’re surrounded by gamers! You’ve taken me to a place where grown men play video games 24/7 and drink too much soda. God, Jen, we’re the only ones within a five-mile radius with elevated estrogen levels! Really, the only way I’ll stay here tonight is if these nerds have mixed one illegal substance with another and they’re hiding it in their basement or whatever,” Lisa ranted. She took off her boot and shook it up and down until a slightly damp cigarette fell onto the floor, letting out an excited yelp as she made her discovery. She reached into her shirt and pulled out a lighter, long nails scratching the paper as she adjusted the cigarette in her mouth and let her eyes roll back into her head.

Jennifer sighed and turned to splash some water over her neck and chest. She empathized with Lisa, there was no doubt about that. The science club had rented out a house near the university weeks before, claiming they needed a space to perform “non-sanctioned experiments” away from campus grounds. There hadn’t been any explosions since the building was inhabited, and no one had detected radiation thus far, leading most students to believe that the science club truly wasn’t doing anything “fun.” However, word had gotten around; one source led to another, and Jennifer eventually learned that the club was planning on unveiling something monumental that night, something that they had uncovered in their new house, something that would change the world for the better. The big scientific surprise wasn’t why Jennifer was at the house, though. Ever since Lisa succumbed to a date with that fidgety physics major and came back to the dorm three days later with punctures along her arms and neck, she had been acting strangely, and Jennifer figured that a night out would help shake her friend back into her normal state.

Jennifer cocked her head to the side, fidgeting with her golden earrings, which shone brightly in the bathroom’s fluorescent lights. “Don’t have a cow, Lisa. Just... I don’t know. Take

a freakin' chill pill! Can you do that?" *Can you do that without coughing up blood or waking up in a cold sweat, standing over my bed?* she thought as she cast another quick glance at Lisa through the mirror.

"Hm. Your exasperated tone and worried look make me think I'm not living up to your party expectations," Lisa scoffed, gently swaying her hips from side to side and caressing her arms and thighs sensuously.

Jennifer scoffed at Lisa's overly sensual movements and tugged at Lisa's arm, stepping out into the party once again.

The house was certainly odd. According to neighborhood and campus legend, the three-story sagging and creaking shack had been abandoned since it was first built. Twenty years after its construction, a professor driven mad by an experiment gone wrong had gone streaking down the block, locking himself in the attic of the abandoned house. Of course, he never came out, and kids that poked around the building in subsequent years found discarded bolts, shards of glass, and the occasional reptile creeping around the perimeter. Back in her first year, Jennifer heard that the professor collected insects and ate so many of them that he became a giant beetle, forever destined to wander around the third story and its abundant natural lighting. While this rumor gained quite a bit of traction, the most common myth read that the professor was eaten by a giant python that escaped from the zoo, but he never died. Instead, he and the snake morphed to become the legendary basilisk. Clearly, many of the rumors had gaping plot holes and one-dimensional characters; yet, they were continually passed from year to year, equally revered and absorbed as when they were first created.

"Oh my *God*, he's playing fucking Tetris!" Lisa's nasally voice whined loudly into Jennifer's ear, breaking her nostalgic spell.

As the pair continued down the hallway, Lisa sniffed at the various computers set up on the floor and tables. “And what’s that? Oh my God, oh my God, it’s Centipede. We have to bounce right now!” she continued in a stage whisper, digging her nails into Jennifer’s shoulders.

“Honestly, I’m more of a Ms. Pac-Man gal, myself,” Jennifer joked, darting from beneath Lisa’s tight grip on her shoulders. Gently nudging her hair into its original form, she looked Lisa up and down as her roommate shivered in disgust, eyes quickly darting back and forth across the hall.

“Why don’t you go outside for a minute? You can’t catch geek disease in the night air,” Jennifer suggested, patting Lisa’s shoulder in mock sympathy.

“News flash, geek disease is airborne. That’s common knowledge,” Lisa stated, turning to flip her hair dramatically before beginning to stumble her way through the wires crisscrossed on the floor, taking her leave.

Softly chuckling, Jennifer turned to see if she could remember where the kitchen was when the lights went out, leaving the first floor in total darkness. The beat of a popular song that had been playing since the girls sought refuge in the bathroom began to pulse through the walls in earnest, hushing everyone in the house.

“Legend. Myth. Rumor. All traits describing fictitious beasts that don’t follow the rules laid out by the sciences. Half man, half horse. Shapeshifter. Perhaps, a serpent king? In our unearthing, have we summoned the devil himself?” a booming voice crackled through the air, accompanied by the exciting shuffle of feet. Rolling her eyes, Jennifer tried to make her way to the source of the sound, arms in front of her to avoid any obstacles.

The voice continued its speech. “Be aware, this is no average mixer. This is something bigger than all of us, both literally and metaphorically. You have all been gathered here tonight

to witness something spectacular, something monumental, something that defies the laws of nature!” The rustling of a tarp mingled with the murmurs and whispers of the crowd surrounding Jennifer. She reluctantly peered between the shoulders of the guests in front of her, who had formed a circle in the living room. Curiosity bested her as her eyes alit upon a large cage that shuddered erratically in the center of the space. A man in a dark cape twice his size wielded a large cane, which he tapped on top of the cage as he spoke.

Jennifer’s eyes widened and a hand cupped her gaping mouth. “Grody Brody?” she whispered under her breath, recognizing the caped man as the acne-covered physics major that had taken Lisa out on her date.

Brody continued his speech, measuring each step with a flourish of his cane. “This, gentlemen, is it. We have studied the stories and memorized the myths. We have poured every waking hour into this, our most ambitious undertaking yet. They said we were crazy! They said we were hallucinating!” A chorus of “yeah’s” and hums of agreement met the caped man at this statement.

The crowd behind Jennifer moved closer to the cage in anticipation, rows of people swaying in time with the music, both crowd and bass line anxiously waiting for the beloved instrumental section. Jennifer slightly stumbled forward, eyes desperately searching for Lisa in the crowd.

“Nature has been melded with the unnatural, the mysterious with the known. They say the legends are false? Our peers, our very institution, will mock us no more! It is time for us to wield this weapon of mass destruction. Unleash the basilisk!” the man cried as he moved the megaphone from his mouth and swatted the cage with his cane.

Jennifer blinked slowly as the tarp was lifted to reveal a large, slithering lump on the ground. Enormous fangs and chilling eyes were the only visible objects within the moving mass. Juniper green slits surveyed the room as the creature's mouth slowly opened and closed to test its range of motion. A slime-like substance slowly dripped onto the ground, burning a hole through the carpet on impact. The cage door appeared to unlock on its own, and the basilisk's ebony scales fluttered slightly and settled back into its body as it felt the temperature change. The room became colder than ice, but no one dared to move. The monstrous being appeared to be eyeing its victims one by one, tail wrapping through the metal of the cage as it sniffed at the partygoers, finally settling its line of vision on the record player in the corner of the room. The crowd parted in an almost biblical fashion, allowing the creature to feel its way around the room, tongue gently flickering out to test its surroundings. As the song neared the highly anticipated guitar solo, the basilisk's head suddenly stood up straight, cocking its head sharply to the side, body rising and becoming rigid.

It was deathly still. The only movement came from the sound waves produced by the spinning vinyl. The basilisk breathed in and out, slowly, steadily. The speaker who had opened the cage raised his arms over his head, mouth opening to shout, when the familiar chord progression of the song's bridge vibrated through the air, causing the basilisk to whip around and snatch the caped man into its mouth, crushing him in half and swallowing him.

The same chords repeated – A, D, E, A – as additional instruments and sound effects were layered into the song. A dark green shadow loomed menacingly outside the house as the basilisk honed in on its next victim, its tongue lashing out faster than when it first emerged. A shaky breath escaped Jennifer as she began to back away from the center of the room, the floorboards creaking in a steady 4/4 rhythm on the second and third floors, almost as if the song

had awoken all that was hellish and otherworldly. The *thump* of feet on the wooden floors accompanied a lime green glow that made its way in through the ceiling cracks and washed over the panicking bodies. The shimmering light illuminated the basilisk's filmy eyes as its tail moved slightly to puncture the chest of a man inching towards the cage, the cymbals providing a soundtrack for the impaled body as it was flung about like a doll. The survivors leapt over the mutilated bodies strewn on the floor in time with the drums.

Bodies were largely snapped in half, some partly devoured, as the basilisk continued on its carnivorous path through the house. Blood splattered the windows with a sickening squelch, dark red globs slowly trickling down the walls. Jennifer stumbled backwards, nearly tripping over a severed leg, and tried not to projectile vomit as she caught a glimpse of her blood-soaked body. She turned to run towards the front door, panicked bodies making her lose her momentum. A boy to the right of her was running at full speed, glasses tucked into the neckline of his shirt and a head cradled in the crook of his elbow like a football. He sped up, arm outstretched to unlock the front door, when the basilisk's tail wrapped around his torso and punctured his head from ear to ear. As his body was flung towards the basement, two severed heads bouncing rhythmically on the steps, Jennifer stopped dead in her tracks and crouched down to the floor, tears streaking down her face. The basilisk clearly hadn't seen her trying to get to the front door, so she figured her best option would be to crawl under a piece of furniture or play dead on the floor until there wasn't a living soul left in the house.

Quickly getting onto her hands and knees, she began her rapid shuffle across the floor towards a wall, any wall, eyes shut so that she couldn't see the material her hands were sinking into. Upon colliding headfirst with an overturned coffee table, Jennifer's eyes shot open in shock. She was unable to tear her gaze away from Brody's face, which was draped over one of

the coffee table's legs like a sheet. As she saw the teeth littering the ground beneath his grotesque image, her eyes fluttered shut and she fell against the floor, her last thought a faint recognition of the basilisk's eyes.

Ankle boots stepped around the mangled and twisted bodies, bloodied footprints marking Lisa's path as she wandered through the first floor. The computer screens had gone blood red and several whistling moans emerged from the walls of the house, as if spirits were trapped inside. The record gently scratched, looping the same chord progression and warbling the guitar. All the clocks in the house had stopped, frost curling into the glass and freezing time itself.

Lisa ran the back of her hand along her mouth, wiping away blood and traces of organs. Her body was covered in tiny puncture marks, out of which oozed a black, tar-like substance. A girlish giggle erupted from her mouth as her juniper green eyes surveyed the room with delight, her entire body filled with warmth. She twirled elegantly between the bodies, golden earrings brushing against her neck, when Jennifer's voice shook her from her trance.

"Why did you do it?" Jennifer asked shakily, hunched over and clutching a wound she had discovered in her side upon regaining consciousness. She limped unsteadily across the room, stopping a few feet from Lisa's rigid stance.

Lisa turned and placed a hand on her hip, tongue darting out to lick at the corners of her mouth. "Well, you remember Grody Brody? That little shit? Yeah, he did this to me. Turns out the house was technically haunted after all," she responded in a lighthearted tone.

"I kinda like it," she continued, stepping over to Jennifer and clutching her hand in a tight grip. Jennifer didn't attempt to pull away; after all, this was Lisa, her best friend, her roommate.

She couldn't be that different, right? This wasn't her fault, right? Jennifer watched in a daze as Lisa's skin fluttered gently like the basilisk's scales.

"It's empowering. Feminism and all that, I guess," Lisa spoke, softly running her free hand over Jennifer's hair. "Do you know the story 'The Frog Prince'? Brothers Grimm? Wacky stuff. Didn't like it in high school, don't like it now. It's so gross trying to fuck a reptile. Like, who wins in that situation? But, nothing really matters when you're too doped up to fight it and Brody is filming you in that position over and over again..." Lisa trailed off, a stray tear running down her cheek.

"You always liked the rush," Jennifer spoke in a hushed voice, eyes meeting Lisa's in a deathly glare. Lisa recoiled from the look, eyebrows furrowing as she tried to understand.

"What?"

"You left for three days when you went out with Brody, and now what are you saying? He raped you? He made a snake rape you? You fucked a snake? What is wrong with you, Lisa? I thought you had ditched him and went to shoot up in a parking lot somewhere. I thought the cops would find your body in a dumpster. And now what? *You're* the basilisk from the rumors? Please. You're just a sadistic whore!" Jennifer screamed, anger radiating from her body.

Lisa stepped back, eyes welling up with hot tears. "You don't mean that," she whispered, shaking her head slowly as if to block out Jennifer's words.

"Oh, yes, I do! Little slut, thinking she's such a rebel when she's really just a fucking wastoid."

"You're just jealous you never got a man and I've gotten dozens! Maybe even hundreds!" Lisa snapped back, eyes shut so that she didn't see what would happen next.

“Yeah, that’s called being a-“ The word “whore” died in Jennifer’s mouth as Lisa’s tongue snaked out and penetrated Jennifer’s right eye. Lisa heard an agonizing scream and opened her eyes to see Jennifer writhing on the ground, her hands covering her eye and blood spurting out erratically from her splayed fingers. Lisa choked back a sob as she ground her heel into Jennifer’s throat, moving her heel from side-to-side as though putting out one of her beloved cigarettes.

“You don’t mean that,” she repeated, bending down to brush a matted lock of hair from Jennifer’s face and closing her left eye. Before standing back up, she neatly plucked the gold watch from Jennifer’s hand and slid it onto her own wrist, where it shone with the rest of the collectibles Lisa had picked up that night.

She shook her head and sniffed, continuing on with her mission. Wandering through the house, she tapped on the walls with her long fingernails, saying *hello* and *I didn’t mean it* to the spirits of other “experiments gone wrong” trapped within. Upon finding Brody’s face, she picked it up and went hunting for his body, his skin draped over her shoulder like a shawl. She nudged his intact body towards the door with her shoe, sighing in disgust when she tripped over a torso in the middle of the floor. “God damn it,” she whined, picking at the fresh blood stain on her miniskirt. She finally propped his body against the door and gingerly taped his face back onto his head with duct tape she had fished out of the closet. Upon taking a step back to evaluate her work, she bent forward to stretch his mouth into a gaping, toothless grin.

Once she had identified Brody’s gang of nerds, or at least the ones who drugged her and tied her up in the first place, she placed them on the stairs and floor, facing the door or each other, as if they were waiting expectantly for someone to arrive. Most of them had the same shit-

eating grin that was plastered on Brody's face, although some heads were placed backwards or their bodies were mutilated beyond recognition.

Serves them right for turning me into a fucking shapeshifter, Lisa thought. Her lips curled back and she hissed savagely at the dead bodies. As she made her way towards the back door, swiping an unopened can of beer from the kitchen counter, she caught sight of Jennifer's gorgeous watch on her stained wrist.

"Oh, shit, my psych report!" she exclaimed, jumping over the body slumped against the door and running down the street. The door swung shut with a sickening crunch and lifeless eyes followed Lisa's path through the night.

Chapter 6 – They Live Over There

When the murders began, the population was 347.

The Bible-thumping, fundamentalist Christian community resided in a woodsy Texas town that was so small, you couldn't even see it on a map. Travelers and outsiders swore the name of the town couldn't be found on any sign and no one truly knew the exact population. The locals in nearby Bandera, Texas, which had a consistent population at a whopping 833 individuals, only knew of a diner, a church, and a small cul-de-sac neighborhood in the unnamed town to the south. No one knew when the diner was built, but the Bandera residents always seemed nervous when the topic was mentioned.

The diner itself looked like it came directly from the 1950s and had never been remodeled. Rumor had it that that it was built on a burial ground for Confederate soldiers. There was a plaque commemorating it underneath the broken jukebox. When a traveler brought it up, they would be offered a chocolate milkshake free of charge. It was understood between local and outsider that the plaque shouldn't be brought up again.

“Bob and Pam?” the workers would ask, mindlessly scrubbing the same spot on the diner counter until it became rusty and began to flake onto the ground. They continued to scrub as they answered, eyes blank as if overcome by some supernatural force. “Yeah, they live over there,” they would say without pointing in a cardinal direction.

The waitress' aprons fluttered in the hot air from nearby fans. Their skin was taut, as if it was being held by strings that were pulled upwards. A few travelers thought they saw the faint wisps of translucent ribbons extend into the ceiling, but they chalked these thoughts and visions up to being frightened and uncomfortable.

“Who, Mary and Phil? Yeah, they live over there.” The outsiders were always unwanted, but the diner had a gas station in the back that used only diesel. No one knew how the workers got to the diner in the first place, or if they ever left, but there was nothing around the diner for miles. Dry air only met arid and cracked land with a few sparse cacti located on the surface. Plants didn’t last long in this town.

One day, the town began to bustle. Rows of sleek black cars with flashing lights inside of them rolled over the flat roads. Men in sharp navy blue business suits with young, sexy, scantily-clad girls draped over their arms like furs walked into the diner on their way to Bandera to establish the first nightclub in the tri-county area.

“It’ll bring so much business, I tell ya,” one heavysset man barked out to the waitress assigned to their booth. He cut off the end of his cigar and it landed in his lemonade. The girls around him giggled, and the waitress saw one disappear underneath the booth for a few minutes. The cigar butt floated and bobbed, but the man didn’t seem to notice when he took a large swig from the plastic cup. “So much business. You’ll have to create a second space!”

The waitress nodded absentmindedly, eyes glazed over and bloodshot.

“Say, what is this town?” one of the girls whined nasally, her breasts pushed together and shoved across the table as she leaned forward, arms outstretched in front of her. Her gold necklace read “Alexa” in script.

“This is Deathfall, population 347. It’s run by Pastor Smith,” the waitress answered in a monotone Southern drawl.

“Deathfall?” The girls snickered.

“Sounds scary. I know *I* would never live in a dump like this. And I would *never* go to church!” the first girl retorted. She lay her head on the shoulder of the man in the suit. “You wouldn’t leave me here, would you, Daddy?”

“Aw, sugar, we’ll be out of here soon enough,” he answered with a smack to her shoulder.

When the cars left an hour later, every worker at the diner stood at the window and watched them drive to Bandera, right hand crossed over their heart and prayers filling their minds.

“Or, at least that’s what I’ve heard,” Susie said, smirking at the gaping mouths of her classmates around her. She had stunned them into silence with her storytelling abilities once again.

“Oh, Susie, that’s old-timey stuff! That happened before we were born! The timelines don’t even match up,” little Timmy retorted, snot dripping from his nostrils.

“Oh, yeah? You’ve never even been outside of Deathfall!” Susie shrieked, flicking little Timmy on the forehead.

“No one has,” Marianne quipped quietly from the corner as she started wistfully outside of the dusty window of the church. “But I know there’s something outside.”

The circle of kids turned simultaneously to look at Marianne.

“What’s outside?” little Timmy asked, head tilted curiously to one side. He scooted towards Marianne and sat criss-crossed by her side to look out of the window.

“Um, I’m not sure. I know there’s a place far away that has flashing lights and loud noises. Mama tells me it’s aliens but I know it’s not. Grandma tells me it’s not. She’s been

there,” Marianne responded, eyes glued to something on the horizon. The kids went silent at this revelation until the Sunday school teacher walked into the room. As Pastor Smith began to shuffle his papers, the kids slowly stood and walked over to their assigned seats.

Susie suddenly stood up, her paisley overalls covered in sand and dirt. She marched over to Marianne and little Timmy and stood in front of them, blocking their view.

“Hey!” little Timmy whined, but he was ignored.

“There’s nothing outside, Marianne,” Susie grumbled at the younger girl sitting on the floor. “That’s a lie.”

“It’s not,” Marianne responded calmly, not moving from her position. Susie’s face became hot and red, and she grabbed Marianne by the braids and dragged her away from the window and down the empty aisle towards the pastor’s desk. Marianne writhed and cried but didn’t tell Susie to stop. The other kids watched.

Susie dropped her grip on Marianne’s hair and stood triumphantly in front of the pastor. “Marianne says there’s something outside of Deathfall, Pastor Smith. Marianne says her grandma has been outside and has seen flashing lights. Marianne doesn’t believe that aliens are inside of Deathfall. Marianne is a liar, Pastor Smith!” she yelled.

The other kids gasped and began to murmur among themselves. Pastor Smith slowly raised his head to look at Susie over his wire-rimmed glasses. Despite his sagging skin and creaking bones, the pastor spoke and thought as if he were a young man, as if his mind was somehow decades younger than his aging body. He stood from his chair to look at Marianne crying silently on the floor, hands clutching at her head. His hands shook with the effort of supporting himself on his rickety wooden desk. His back curved and each joint in his spine audibly cracked and echoed around the room.

“Is this true, Marianne?” he spoke with a deep, booming voice.

Marianne continued to cry.

“Answer me, Marianne!” he yelled, voice ricocheting around the room and causing the Bible verses pasted onto the wall to flutter.

When Marianne didn’t answer, the pastor let out a short, angry huff and moved around his desk, shoving Susie in the shoulder to clear his path. He stood over Marianne; after a few moments of looking over her body with disgust, his lips curled back into a sneer, he grabbed her by the arm and yanked her into an upright position. Her feet dangled slightly above the ground as he hauled her into the hallway. The kids listened as his footsteps quickly receded and the door of the Bad Closet was slammed shut.

“Susie, you shouldn’t have done that,” little Timmy said quietly after a few minutes of silence. “Marianne is going to the Bad Closet.”

“She was telling lies. We can’t do that, we’re not supposed to. ‘Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight.’ It’s what Pastor Smith teaches us. She shouldn’t have lied, because now she won’t get into heaven,” Susie snapped, but her lip began to tremble as she recited the Bible verse. She and little Timmy stared at one another, but Susie broke her gaze first and solemnly walked to her seat at the front of the room.

Ten minutes passed in complete silence and stillness, and Pastor Smith re-entered the classroom with a long, metal ruler clutched tightly in his hand. He moved more lithely and with more flexibility, the kids noticed. Marianne followed close at his heels, hands tightly bundled in the hem of her skirt and head bowed. She moved to the back of the room and took her seat. Blood slowly trickled in a rivulet down the inside of her legs, leaving a trail to mark her path down the empty aisle.

“Now class,” Pastor Smith said in a calm voice. “What does the Bible tell us about sin?”

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord,” the class recited unanimously. Little Timmy quickly turned his head to look at Marianne seated a few rows behind him, but she was looking out of the window once more, a puddle of blood forming between her legs.

Marianne’s grandmother was the first murder. They found her on the front lawn of Marianne’s house, her body nailed to a crudely-made cross and saggy skin drooping with the weight of death. Someone had scribbled “SIN IS LAWLESSNESS” into the cross and had burned the same message into the grass. Marianne didn’t come back to school after that, and only her mother continued to go to church every Sunday, bringing freshly-baked apple pies as if nothing had happened. Deathfall’s population was 346.

“Mary?” Susie’s mother, Sue, tentatively asked Marianne’s mother one month after the murder.

“Yes, Sue? How’s the new baby?” Mary asked as she cut a large slice of apple pie and slid in onto a paper plate. She turned around to face Sue and handed her the plate with a plastic fork pointed towards Sue’s chest.

Sue noticed with a start that Mary’s face was stained with tear streaks. “Oh, the baby’s alright. Susie’s been just wonderful helping around the house. I just wanted to see if you were doing alright, Mary. Your mother was... has passed suddenly, and I-”

“Oh, come now! Don’t mince words with me, Sue! My mother was brutally murdered and placed on display in my family’s front lawn,” Mary interrupted with a wide grin that split her face from ear-to-ear.

Sue instinctively took a step back, right hand immediately rising to cross herself, and she bowed her head. “Mary, I didn’t mean-”

Mary slowly began to advance towards Sue, her pie-cutting knife wielded like a sword in front of her. “No, you did mean, Sue. You did mean. My mother is dead, Sue. Someone in this blessed town took her, and I’ll find out who. Believe you me, Sue, I’ll find out who.”

The church had finally begun to clear out. “Mary, please, I don’t know who did it. Maybe she-” Sue stuttered.

“No, Sue, enough. This is what she deserved for not believing. She wasn’t a believer, but she was a damn good citizen of Deathfall, and I won’t spend another minute in this town knowing that it’s full of murderers and pedophiles and rapists and realists!”

Mary’s eyes had begun to glaze over by this point, and her mouth started to foam and dribble down her chin. She continued to back Sue into a nearby pew, and her reverie was only broken when Sue’s back hit the wooden seat with a loud *thump*. Suddenly, Mary’s pupils widened until they nearly consumed her bright blue irises, and she straightened up, pie knife clattering to the ground. Sue had her cross tightly in her hand.

“Oh, Sue, I just don’t know what’s gotten into me!” Mary exclaimed with a pronounced Southern drawl. “I just... I never knew there was something more...” Her eyes swiveled to see a man in a navy blue suit enter the church and sit in a pew at the very back, his head bowed to his chest. “Say, I think he lives over there,” she said quietly before turning to run out of the church’s back entrance, accidentally knocking a cradle of holy water to the ground in her haste. Her skirts billowed behind her.

Deathfall, population 345. Mary was the next victim, and everyone knew Sue had done it. They found Mary after Bible study one afternoon, sprawled on the ground and eyes open wide with terror as Sue desperately tried to cover Mary's slit neck with her very own Bible study blueberry pie.

Men in navy blue business suits with large gold crosses on their necks started to roll into the town after Mary's untimely demise. Sue was placed gently into one of the vehicles and was carted off towards Bandera, but the Deathfall residents didn't know that. Mary was the first to question authority; her mother was a warning sign, and there was no strike two or three for her family. Mary had sinned, and sin was lawlessness.

Both Sue and Mary were gradually replaced in Bible study, in church, and in their homes by automated mannequins with angular, robotic movements. The mannequins looked, talked, and acted like them, but everyone ignored the way Sue's head would swivel when she spoke in tongues during church, and Mary's slightly off-center head. The men in navy blue business suits brought them to town and called it a favor for maintaining order.

"Remember, folks, there's really nothing, nothing, really, outside of this here charming little town," one of the men yelled in the city square one morning. "Trust in your pastor, go to church, socialize with your friends, but don't go a-searchin' just out of curiosity!" Then, the black cars left.

As women began to question the amount of pies they made weekly, the amount of children they had to take care of, and the amount of times they had spewed utter nonsense to gain the approval of Pastor Smith, the number of automated wives, mothers, and daughters grew. The mannequins were part of Deathfall; they had always been there. Deathfall was a safe haven, Deathfall was good, Deathfall was the almighty. That's what Pastor Smith told them.

Rebecca and her husband, Chris, lay on the bed one morning before Bible study, thighs slapping against one another rhythmically and both heads turned to face out the bedroom window.

“Say, Chris?” Rebecca asked, not even slightly out of breath. Her eyes narrowed at the window.

“Yes, dear?” Chris replied, out of breath due only to the sheer physical exertion.

“What is that red goop running down the window?”

“Oh, Rebecca, you’ve been off that for years-”

“No, Chris, not that! It looks like it’s raining but it’s... red.”

“I’ll take a look, dear.”

Chris finished with a barely audible grunt and rose to stand before the window. After tapping a few times on the glass, he unlocked the window and pushed it up, releasing a stream of blood into the bedroom. “It’s blood, dear,” he replied calmly before sitting back onto the bed and putting his socks on.

“Oh, Chris!” Rebecca cried, shooting out of bed to grab the blanket that had fallen onto the floor. “Close the window, it’s going to stain the floors!”

Young Susie was laying in the gutter over Rebecca and Chris’ house, hand tapping erratically on the window as her small body shook with the effort of taking her final breaths. Little Timmy ran outside to grab his soccer ball when he noticed Susie gurgling and causing the gutters to leak. Her legs lay neatly next to little Timmy’s soccer ball in the bushes.

“Susie, stop!” he yelled playfully, picking up one of her legs to kick the soccer ball so that he could run after it. When he tripped over Susie’s leg on his way to get the ball, he rolled over and laughed, his legs kicking up in the air and grin spread from ear-to-ear. “Susie, come

play! I got your foot!” he cried, crawling over to the gutter and opening his mouth to catch some of the blood streaming from Susie’s body and onto the bushes below.

“Oh, little Timmy!” Rebecca sighed, running to grab her son by the hand and take him inside for a clean-up. “Blood isn’t ketchup! We’ve gone over this!”

Little Timmy smiled at his mom and swung his free arm, blood running from his mouth down to his neck.

Population 287. The bodies continued to pile up in the front lawns and grocery store aisles. Mothers had trouble reaching for the fruity, sugary cereals, but there was no cemetery nearby. Bible study continued.

“Oh, precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints,” Sue sighed loudly, tightly clutching the gold cross around her neck.

“Sue, will you please stop quoting the Bible? It’s driving me up a wall. Drink your goat’s blood, you damned machine,” Pam snapped, flipping her black hood back and taking a shot of tequila. The lime she bit into dribbled juice down her long, flowing cloak.

Sue merely continued to look at her Bible, occasionally mumbling verses under her breath.

“Pam! Don’t talk that way! You are a righteous Christian woman. We do not use those words,” Rebecca sighed, cutting the soft cocaine powder on the coffee table into straight, narrow lines with her husband’s credit card.

Pam rolled her eyes, her face illuminated by the candles lined up on the table. Her French-manicured fingers deftly rolled a \$5 bill into a tight cylinder. “Well, I’m a God-fearing-” She paused to snort a line of cocaine and threw her head back. “-woman and I believe there’s

something He's not telling us," she finished, her eyes squeezed shut. She slowly turned her head to look at Rebecca, who continued to slowly cut the cocaine into lines.

"Look at us, Rebecca," Pam sighed. "This is supposed to be Bible study and we look like we belong in a God-forsaken Satanic book club."

Rebecca looked around the room. The candles were lined up in rows on each table in the small basement, red wax pooling into the small glass dishes that Sue had put out in anticipation of Bible study with her fellow women. Each woman was dressed in a long, black, hooded cloak, meant to shield each woman's body from the eyes of the Lord and to make them one with their faith. The electricity in the cul-de-sac had been shut off for two days now – Bandera was taking all of the energy to power its new nightclubs and restaurants. The candles were purely for practical purposes. It was even darker in the basement compared to the rest of the house, as the blackout curtains had been drawn for both religious contemplation and maximum security.

At least we're not using them for sacrifices and Satanic rituals, yet, Rebecca thought, smearing her neat cocaine lines all over the table with her pinky finger before collapsing face-first into the table. Her head bounced off of the wooden surface and her body slowly rolled off of her chair. Pam rolled her eyes and they both began to cackle.

"Stop it, both of you!" Sue shouted suddenly. She stood from her chair, limbs erratically bending into a more humanoid shape. Her Bible fell open onto the table and electricity began to spark from her ears and the metal screws holding her joints in place.

Pam and Rebecca, the two remaining human women in Deathfall, looked at Sue in shock. Rebecca was soon overcome by a fit of giggles and turned her gaze to the ceiling.

"We are Christian women, good Christian women! And bad company ruins good morals. You are bad company," Sue shouted, her voice beginning to gargle and her eyes glazing over.

“Like the band?” Rebecca asked before Sue stomped on her neck, crunching it beneath her metal foot.

Pam became hysterical with laughter, even as Sue brought her Bible down onto her head and face until Pam’s upper body was nothing more than a lifeless pulp.

Sue straightened her back and tapped on her left temple to send copies of the murder scene and DNA samples to the men in the navy blue business suits. “Bible study will continue next week, ladies,” she said cheerfully, and the women blew out the candles.

Easter came and went. The population had dwindled to 103. The children were learning in school and obeyed the Bible. The women obeyed their husbands, and the husbands obeyed the law. Everyone obeyed Pastor Smith.

As he preached the words of the Bible during Easter Sunday’s sermon, Marianne stood soullessly beside the pastor, her braids tightly wound behind her head and bruises littering her arms and legs.

“‘For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.’ We, Deathfall, are the light. We have nothing to fear and nothing to hide. The God-fearing aliens who created this world and have provided our town with good and purity now live and walk among us. Soon, they will reach out to Bandera and will shut down those God-forsaken establishments based on sin and evil. We do not trust those neon lights, do we? We cannot trust anyone outside of this church, can we? The only person you should trust is me, for I am your priest and your pastor. I only desire what is best for Deathfall.”

Pastor Smith slowly began to disrobe. His naked figure became illuminated by an otherworldly glow coming from the stained glass windows of the church. He pulled Marianne to

his side and began to trace her face and neck with long, sharp fingernails. Marianne trembled in fear and disgust as blood slowly trickled down her body.

“Soon, Deathfall, I will also be your God.”

Little Timmy scrambled from his seat in the front row and fell to his knees before Pastor Smith, screaming, “Amen!” A chorus began throughout the church of “Amen!” and the women spoke in tongues as they fell, writhing and frothing, to the floor. The men in the navy blue business suits sat in the back pews and laughed until they were red in the face.

Chapter 7 - HIM

monday.

so... there's this guy. HE sat next to me today in class. i don't know why, but HE struck me in a weird, electrifying way. wherever i go, i like to find someone who's pretty good-looking – it just makes life easy on the soul when you have someone easy on the eyes to look at. HE asked me what the homework was, and i told HIM. for the rest of the day, i felt like i was floating! unfortunately, i didn't get a good look at HIM, so if HE sits next to me again, i'll take a closer look. it's not like anything will ever happen between us, so there's no harm in looking. i like having someone as cute as that want my help. i hope HE asks for the homework again.

friday.

we talked for a couple of hours today and i got a better look at HIM. HE dresses kind of baggy, kind of unkempt. HIS hair is nice. i like looking at peoples' hair, it's one of the first things i look at in a new person, and i really like HIS. i mean, it's not shaggy or really long, it's nice hair, HE takes care of it... HIS eyes are really nice, too. HE has these crystal, light green, kind of greyish eyes. they're so gorgeous, and HE has really long eyelashes. i told HIM that HE has long eyelashes and HE said "thanks" and then we went to class and after we got out of class, HE asked me for my number and i gave it to HIM. i think HE may like me! is it weird that i look forward to these days now? is it weird that i would do anything to keep even a short conversation going with HIM? is it weird that even though HE asked me for my number, i'm already getting a little possessive?

thursday.

HE works and i really want to see HIM more often. we talk a few days a week, but i feel like HE'S always running off somewhere... i don't know where HE goes. i almost feel like HE wants to get away from me, like i'm being too clingy or i'm coming on too strong or something. maybe i'm overwhelming. i don't know. anyway, it was raining and we got out of class early, so HE decided to walk a different way to get to the bus. i'm not following HIM! i'm accompanying HIM, i'm escorting HIM. there was no one else around. we took some roundabout way, it was really nice, but it was raining and i had my umbrella out. HE took my umbrella and HE held it over my head and it was so gentlemanly. and then HE started teasing a little bit, you know, how boys do. (i guess that's what boys do, i'm not really sure) but it was really nice. we walked and talked and laughed and i made HIM laugh. we've had about a month together so far. is HE making an effort to be with me?

HIM: i like hiking

me: i don't like hiking

HIM: oh, well that's okay because you'll like it eventually

me: how are you going to get me to enjoy hiking when i don't like it in the first place?

HIM: well i'll get you to like me and then i'll take you hiking and then we'll go hiking and then you'll like hiking because you'll like me

i thought "wow, HE must like me, it's only a matter of time before HE asks me out" and i would totally say yes!

tuesday.

a lot has happened. i asked HIM out again (actually, a few times), more as friends, and HE gave me these terrible excuses, these stupid excuses. i guess HE doesn't want to go out with me but

that's okay because we're still friends and i can still like my friend and be attracted to my friend.
i guess we're friends, HE said that the other day, that we were friends... are we? are we?
anyway, we're friends now. i like HIM and i don't know if HE likes me. if HE wants to be
around me so damn much then why is HE refusing to hang out as friends, not even a date, i
didn't even say that! i'm afraid that HE'LL, that HE won't, that i'll have to give HIM the
homework. i like helping HIM with the homework but i worry that that's the only thing HE
thinks i'm good for, like HE never texts me first and if HE does, it's only ever about school. i
can be used for better things than that, right? i mean, if we're friends like HE says we are, why
does HE only text me about school if HE'S the one that asked for my number in the first place
and has been leading me on and i don't know what's happening i see HIM and i study HIM. the
profile, the curve of HIS face, the way HIS hair falls in front of HIS eyes.

thursday.

i hear the door slam

you haven't done anything

i still think you're mine

monday.

today, HE looked really tired and i asked HIM if HE got any sleep. HE said HE didn't because
HE was up texting someone all night and i immediately got so mad and super super super
possessive. i know i don't have the right to feel that way but i still felt that way and i don't
understand why and why HE'S making me feel that way, why doesn't HE do something about

it? i'm not obsessed, i'm just worried that HE'S not paying enough attention to me as HE should be. HE didn't look me in the eyes. i think i'm going crazy.

friday.

i saw HIM walk out of the building with a girl. so what the hell do you think i did? i followed them. okay, i know it was wrong. i was outside and i saw them talking and i followed HIM. i... i don't even know why i did it! i knew in the back of my mind that it was wrong but i did it anyway because i wanted to see where they were going, that's what i wanted to know. and i followed HIM, i did, and i kept at a safe distance because obviously i don't want HIM seeing me like that. we were walking in negative space, it was just me and HIM and this other person and everything else peeled away like wallpaper. sounds psychotic, doesn't it? would you believe me if i said that this wasn't the first cute person i've followed just to see where they were going? would you believe me if i said that? i saw them go into another building and i thought "well that's that, HE'S forgotten about me. let me just go inside and feel sorry for myself" and that's exactly what i did, yes, i walked all the way back to a place he told me about a few days (weeks? months? hours?) ago. but... then HE came in. that was nice. i felt really happy, almost like i'm not myself unless i'm with HIM and HIM alone. i like to think that she had another hour to kill but HE came back for me. only me. not her. only me. i didn't tell HIM that i followed HIM. i don't think i ever will. HE told me about HIS past relationships. HE hasn't had many of them. HE told me about this one thing that HE did and it sounded so romantic and HE'S just a hopeless romantic and i really like that in a guy. she broke up with HIM but i know that if HE had done that with me, we wouldn't have broken up. so, all day, i've been day dreaming about our valentine's day together. imagine if HE did something like that for me. only me. god, sometimes

i just really want to grab HIS face and have HIM stare me right in the eyes and tell me exactly what i want to hear. i want HIM to ask me out, and i want HIM to tell me exactly what HE thinks of me. why can't HE tell me exactly what HE thinks of me? i just want HIM to tell me what HE thinks of me, what HE wants to do with me, to me

saturday.

i have patiently waited
for us to be together
i don't regret what i did
and i think to myself
"why do i wait for you?"

wednesday.

oh, diary. things took a turn for the worst, or for the better. today, i told HIM that sometimes, i feel unlovable and oh! HE told me that HE would have sex with me. i didn't know how to feel about that. HE explicitly said that HE would only (only) fuck me because apparently, i'm not that kind of friend for HIM even though HE'S been leading me on!!! but sure! no, no, that's fine, it's not like i care, because i don't. i do. i feel like we've been moving in slow motion, like we've been in a pool and i'm trying to get from one end to the other but the other end keeps getting farther and farther away and all of a sudden there are sharks in the pool and they're completely preventing me from being with HIM, ever. is that possible? can that happen? am i really insane? would i have sex with HIM?

sunday.

HIM: so... about last week

me: yeah, i don't know about being with you

HIM: what, am i not good enough for you?

tuesday.

i feel like i need to tell everyone about this, about this experience, about this relationship that isn't real. it's all in my head. i know that it's all in my head, and i've let myself create an entire universe in which we're together even though we're not and i feel so stupid like a pawn is HE going to knock me off the chessboard i've never been good at chess is what i'm feeling real is any of it real? i've been dreaming about HIM i've been dreaming about HIM why don't we just do it? what am i afraid of if our relationship isn't even real, if neither of us is real? what is HE afraid of? i'm thinking about HIM so much. you know, i once read that if you dream about someone, it means that they're either dreaming about you or they're actively thinking about you.

armageddon.

i tried to ignore HIM but i can't seem to focus on anything else but HIM. why is HE being so damn cryptic? i made a mistake.

me: we're attracted to each other, right?

HIM: yeah

me: (and then i go on and on and on and on about not knowing how i feel)

HIM: yeah, i won't have sex with you

can you believe it? HE told me no! what the hell? what? HE told me, HE said, HE didn't want... god. i'm making a big deal out of this. HE'S terrified of commitment but HE'S bewitched me, HE'S enchanted me, i don't know what to do, i don't know what to do. HE'S been the object of my desire, crazy desire, and it's driving me insane, it's driving me up a wall. it's like armageddon. oh! we kissed and we kept kissing for a long time and we only stopped because... because it was over. what was over? in hindsight, there's a lot of things i would have wanted to do differently, better. i still had my fucking coat on! what was over? i felt like i was floating again, after crying over something that didn't even happen and HE oh HE made our relationship both so much simpler and so much more complex that i just don't understand how it happened this way we kissed, oh god, oh god, HE doesn't want to see me again. it's like armageddon. i don't know how to get out of the glass box that HE'S put me in, i see HIM but i can't have HIM, i can't focus on anything but HIM only HIM we kissed i still can't believe it i shouldn't have done it i should have done it but HE didn't have to keep leaning into my skin oh god it's all HIM my world is HIM HIM

apocalypse.

houston, phoenix, philadelphia, la la land, we have a problem. a huge problem. i thought i would move on from HIM, i thought i wouldn't need HIM but i needed HIM in any way, in every way, i could get HIM. i stuck my neck out, i felt like dying, the thought of it made me sick, the walls were closing in and i was laughing, HE was laughing.

me: we should have sex

HIM: that would hurt us

me: don't make me the enemy, you're not the only victim

HIM: but you are the enemy. don't you see? you're reminding me of when we kissed. i don't want to be near you, i don't want to see you

me: but you seemed fine when you were leading me on before

HIM: that was then, this is now. i can't deal with this, with you

HIM: we're both emotionally fucked

HIM: good night

what does this mean? am i the bad guy? am i the villain? how does my villainous costume look, where's my loyal sidekick, what's my funny one-liner that i always say before my inevitable defeat? i laughed. is this what insanity feels like? you'll never get away with this! do i text HIM again? do i pretend this never happened? will HE pretend this never happened? do i apologize? i was hurt, too. it hasn't been easy getting over HIM yes HIM. we never had anything real. what did i think was going to happen? that we'd be together forever? was i really so stupid to believe that HE would meet me in HIS car in the middle of the night and kiss my neck and grab my ass and never stop thinking about me? it's two in the morning. go to bed. where's my bed? why did i do that to me, to HIM, to us? i can't stop thinking about it. i crave HIM. i need HIM. i want to hurt HIM, i want to help HIM, i want to kill HIM, i want to love HIM. i've lost a friend. you're not mine, HE's not mine. oh god, what did i do, what did i do? am i the villain? don't make me the villain, i only did what i thought i wanted. i still want HIM HIM HIM i can't get over HIM i'm so hurt but i'm still laughing god i'm insane it's only ever been HIM all i know is HIM i'll never see HIM again but it hurts so much because i fucking hate HIM it's all HIM

monday.

you've been crying

(have you?)

about me, i hope

(but that's not true)

i remember the way

your lips felt on

mine

i miss you

but you don't miss me

hello.

i didn't mean to get you all riled up.

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ACADEMIC VITA

Ariel Anne Hooks

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Education

Pennsylvania State University
BA in English with Honors
BA in History
Schreyer Scholar

2018 – 2021
Abington, PA

- Honors Awards
 - Dean’s List, English Faculty Award, President’s Freshman Award
- Honor Societies
 - Schreyer Honors College, Sigma Tau Delta, Abington Honors Program, Civitas Victus Dictio (CVD) Honor Society, Phi Kappa Phi
- Thesis
 - “I Didn’t Mean to Get You All Riled Up, or The Gruesome Tale of Buster Malone: Pikachu’s Last Survival”
 - Makes an aesthetic commentary on Generation Z and its fascination with nostalgia, using the genres of horror, camp, absurdism, and postmodernism to explore nostalgia as a form of escapism.

University of the Arts (Pre-college Summer Program)
Music, Business, Entrepreneurship, and Technology

2015
Philadelphia, PA

Experience

President of Sigma Tau Delta
Pennsylvania State University

2020 – 2021
Abington, PA

- Create and host events intended to foster literacy and to create a community of English lovers.

President and Chief Editor – “The Abington Review”
Pennsylvania State University

2019 – 2021
Abington, PA

- Evaluate and edit student-submitted work for publication.
- Review and oversee the publication process of the final magazine published in spring.
- Delegate editing and administrative tasks to officers, hold them accountable for their work, and set deadlines. 2019 – 2021

Writing Consultant – Tutoring Center
Pennsylvania State University

2019 – 2021
Abington, PA

- Work with students individually and in groups to improve and edit their academic assignments.
- Create plans and outlines for students to complete assignments over a period of time.
- Present to professors and students on behalf of the tutoring center on campus.

Communication Coordinator – Short Story Dispensers
Pennsylvania State University

2019 – 2021
Abington, PA

- Evaluate and edit student-submitted work for publication in electronic dispensers located across Penn State’s campuses.
- Connect Penn State campus libraries and host events across the campuses to promote writing contests and literary clubs.

Assistant to the President
Kolber Advertising

2019
Philadelphia, PA

- Coordinated on-site and off-site activities with talent, outside companies, and internal staff.
- Tested and evaluated new products for advertising potential.
- Managed communications and relayed information.

Volunteer

Photographer
Independent

2015 – present
Philadelphia, PA

- Provide professional photographic shots of live events for potential inclusion in promotional materials.

Musical Entertainer
Independent

2008 – present
Philadelphia, PA

- Volunteer as a vocal entertainer and piano player at various adult daycare centers and children’s summer camps.

Skills and Interests

Fluent in Russian
Proficient in French
Writing

Editing
Photography
Baking