

PITH



Extremely Short Stories
by
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Secrets

The twins kept secrets from their parents. They kept them in jars covered in masking tape so that nobody could look in and see them. The boys would do horrible, nasty things. They would set traps for old ladies in their knitting, poke kittens with sticks to make them hiss and write love notes addressed to pretty girls with forged signatures of ugly boys. The twins kept their secret bottles in a hole at the back of a disused shed in their yard. When the hole filled up, the boys found a large rock and smashed the secrets and plugged the hole. From then on all that ever grew in the garden were horrible, knotted and mangled potatoes that no one would eat.

Elsewhere

She placed her finger on the tiny latch and pressed down gently. A soft click slipped out into the night as the circular door swung towards her on a delicate hinge. A faint emerald green light that came from deep inside the tunnel fell out onto her belly. She bent over and peered inside as the velvet nothing swallowed her body, leaving only her eyes. A pinprick of white light appeared in the distance. A deep, hollow note crackled from beyond the walls of the cave as the light grew larger and more painful right up until the moment she arrived.

Escape

He jumped out the window and stumbled over the shrubs hitting the ground harder than he'd expected. Scrambling to right himself, he peeled layers of clothes from his body with each step. He had to start fresh. Running through the garden naked and grinning, he rubbed anything that was in bloom into his skin and hair. She knew his scent and he had to hide, quick. Too much of a good thing is always a bad thing he reminded himself for the last time as he slipped around the corner and into Mathilda's embrace.

The Cat

A dusty white cat surveyed the silent cobblestone courtyard. There was a pressurized stillness in the air as though the world was holding in a breath. A door burst open with a clatter as a flustered and flushed auburn haired girl tore past the cat, who barely moved, while tracking her intently with just his eyes. She disappeared down an alley across from the door she'd emerged from. They always choose the same, obvious route, chided the cat, shaking his head back and forth. Just once, he wanted to see one survive and prove him wrong.

Quite Big

People had always told him he was intimidating. He stood taller than any of his friends by 6 inches at least. His hands were just too strong. Studying the veins on the back of his left hand he noticed he was still holding the pitcher, or what was left of it. The handle gripped tightly in his hand, shards of glass jutting out by his knuckles, he exhaled loudly for the first time in what felt like days. He'd made the right decision, he nodded to himself solemnly, no more balloon animals, ever.

Falling

She kissed him hard as the wind rushed by them, tearing at their exposed skin. He gripped her jumpsuit as tightly as he could, squeezing air from her lungs. Her cheeks flapped violently. 'You OK, babe?' She screamed as they tore through the air, closer and closer to the ground. He couldn't fill his lungs to reply. He was not OK. Tears welling in his eyes, he hid his face and hugged her even more tightly. He let out a moan. 'Here we go!' she shouted as she pulled the cord.

The Collections

Oh god, so many fingers. Everywhere. All of them pointing in the same direction. But what are they pointing at? Better not walk in front of them, don't want them pointing at me. How could someone do this? Keep moving. Head down, just keep going. Oh god, feet too? How are there more feet than fingers? There must be hundreds of them. This can't be the right way. Keep going. Two more rooms, then I'll call for help.

Perfection

I saw your shoulder the other day. On the bus. And on Tuesday I saw your hand. That was on the bus too, of course. I'm pretty sure it was your hand. I recognized the cuff of your brown leather jacket. There's a piece of thread that hangs from the edge an inch above the wrist that I guess you haven't noticed yet, because it's still there. You should really cut that thread off, it just looks sloppy. And you're not sloppy. You're the most perfect thing in my head.

Preparations

We scaled the tower to the main platform. It was narrow and dank inside the huge covered bridge. My heart leaped as Steff stumbled, nearly falling through one of the larger holes in the old wood slats. Light shined up through the floor and projected irregular shapes on the ceiling of the shoddy structure. We watched as train car after train car carried house-sized munitions as if on an endless conveyor-belt at the deadliest supermarket on the planet. Clouds hung low and grey over the city at the other, far-end of the tunnel. Time slowed until our eyes were full of dust and debris.

Taking It All In

At the bottom of the ocean her cold dead eyes saw everything in blue. A cold blue that told her that her world, the one she'd known so recently, was now frozen and no longer hers. This would be her vista until her retinas disintegrated or were consumed by the living creatures around her. She thought about the past, but dwelled on the present. She thought about the sky. Also blue like the frigid sea. The sky eventually left her memory, and her eyes fell from their sockets. Her toes remained for years to come, enveloped in canvas and cement.

Once More, With Dispassion

He opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling. His arms splayed straight out from his body in either direction. His body formed an angular island in the enormous bed. *This has got to stop.* He looked at the ceiling for a few more minutes, but decided he couldn't postpone the day any longer; it was time to get up. He hung his head as he walked out into the living room and stumbled past the evidence of the night before, much worse than he'd remembered. This ends tonight, he decided, knowing full-well he'd prove himself wrong before noon.

Hidden In Plain Sight

'Don't shrug at me! I know you know where he is! This has your name written all over it!'

His mom glowered at him from across the kitchen. Sunlight made patches of parallelograms across the surface of the table in front of him. He watched the shapes undulate as the faintest summer breeze glided in through the open crack at the base of the window. It was funny, really, it was all right in front of her, too. All she had to do was look at him. Just look him in the eyes.

Perseverance

His forehead broke the surface of the water just in time to receive a stone large enough to knock him back down. He'd lost breath on his way up and was quickly losing more on the way back down to the deep river's floor. His heart raced. He could feel it in his arms and toes as his whole body began to seize. He tried to calm his mind to regain his orientation. He thought he had a sense of where the sunlight was coming from. When he felt the gravelly floor push against his back he used all of his energy to propel himself off of it back up towards the light. He was just too weak.

The Party

It was supposed to be a one-beer-evening but to nobody's surprise ended up closer to 7. (Probably 8.) Josh was at his brother's place, so while the surfeit of lager was not intended it was no real concern either as Josh would just pass out and sleep it off and Bill would drive him home in the morning. I'd have expected Sasha's reaction to be one of surprise when she found him, blue-lipped and pulseless at 6:38 a.m. after tripping over his leaden legs on her way to the basement to retrieve her church pants from the dryer.

The Stash

The walk was significantly longer than he had anticipated. He regretted leaving the car, so conspicuous by the side of the road, abandoned for so long. The pull on his arm muscles from the weight of the bundle was becoming untenable. He crouched down and looked back towards where he'd left the road. He couldn't see the blue Chevy anymore — this was far enough. The contents of the bag rolled and spread fluidly, knocking against his boot as it hit the ground. He pondered just leaving it there to rot and get picked apart by scavengers. Too risky.

Contraband

This was his second offense. The first time the rattling had tipped off one of the dogs by the east gate. He'd learned from that mistake. He couldn't figure out how he'd gotten caught this time, though. He'd been so careful but they found every last one. Even the one below the false sole in his left shoe. And the one in the cuff of his pants. How could they have possibly known about that one? He'd been so discreet, so deliberate in his actions. This had become his art; the deceit was so carefully crafted. If he survived this, things would have to change. There would be no going back.

Welcome Home

Abe watched as his friend emerged from the wall of dust, still 300 yards away, well within the perimeter line. He knew he was only feeling a fraction of the pride that must have been thrumming through his buddy's chest. A full year — nobody thought it was possible. Charlie had long ago shattered the prior record of 4 months in the can. He seemed tired. He slouched with a slow, almost lazy stride. Abe could tell when Charlie noticed him at about 100 yards from the line. The helmet on his shoulders perked up a bit and Charlie focused his march.

Unity

Each unit was designated a fenced area, 500 yards square. There was a small shed full of standard construction and woodworking tools in one corner and raw lumber in another. The units filed into their pens and huddled in the centers of their cages. The distance between each group was vast. Regardless, everyone still spoke in short whispered commands. Unit 8 was the first to take action: 20 men grabbed 20 shovels and started digging directly in the center of their plot. Within a couple of hours they had a deep foundation framed out and were working on the roof of the fort.

Record

She ran the cloth gently over the wet clay again and again to smooth out every last imperfection. She worked at it for hours, keeping the surface moist and stopping only occasionally to pick up a new, clean rag. It had to be perfect if it was going to work. As she progressed she used less and less water and only touched the cylinder with sparing, delicate swipes. By the end she simply let the clay spin in the air, allowing it to toughen up slowly, gradually. She positioned the horn and the arm with the needle close to the turntable, ready for the capture to begin, when the noise returned. She would have her proof.

Starting Empty

Permafrost was too close to the surface for any significant structure to be built without heavy equipment. The three of them stood shoulder-to-shoulder under the willow tree, shivering, confused and worried. They'd had to start over before, many times in fact, but this time it felt like too much. This time they were without their tools. This time they were so, so cold. Katie's voice was the first to cut into the icy air.

'Do either of you have any magic left?'

'I don't feel anything.' Louise turned her worried face down at her hands, stretching her fingers. 'I don't feel anything at all'

Too Soon

He wanted to tell them to stop. He wanted to scream at them for being fools. His notebook wasn't even half filled. They all knew as well as he did that the story wouldn't be finished until the last page was complete. Shawn was the first to reach the idol. He put his hand out and stopped just shy of touching it. Jonah let out his held breath and tried again to shout. Wet gurgling sounds came from his throat. The others didn't hear over the sound of their panting as they raced to catch up with Jonah. The idol started to growl.

Lost and Found

It was just so completely dark. All she could hear was her heart pounding and her breath and the white-noisy rush of blood coursing through her body. A dizzy feeling washed over her, as though the world started to tilt. And for all she knew, it had. She dropped to her knees for fear of tipping over. Her hands and knees sunk into the soft earthy moss.

‘I see you. I hear you. I know you so well.’
Said a voice from deep in the woods. She held her breath and hugged the ground.

‘I wish you wouldn’t do that.’

About a Girl

She had teeth like a broken fence and the sad face of a bloated goldfish. Her hands were softer than air and she had patience for only babies and dogs. She gamboled through life marking years with scars and schematics from projects and artwork gone both poorly and well. She made you forget about what couldn't be. She reminded you to think less, like you used to. She had a way of looking through you with her big globby eyes as she'd take your memory and your soul and crush it to dust, filling hourglasses with your silty remains.

Us

Back before there were cars and houses, or books or pencils or even people. Back before there were things there were thoughts. Thoughts without bodies; feelings without reference. Emotions were raw and alive. And in that time I was you and you were me. We were everything and nothing at once. But I had an idea. I was an idea. I decided to be more than thought. And so did you. So we pooled our energy and swallowed ourselves and we became. We brought about ourselves as one then split again and became each other. Don't you remember me? I remember us.

Consummation

We looked up towards the nival peak beyond the sprawling brown-green forest, for a brief moment ignoring the enormous distance. Jacob took a breath and walked towards the trees. The rest of us, dumbstruck, could do nothing but stare. This was it, the final push.

On the fifteenth day we lost Gabe. He'd held on for so long. We were numb from the shock. Nobody wanted to believe he wouldn't make it. Even though none of us really thought he could.

The forest became a nightmare as we lost track of the days under the dense canopy. The crepuscular desolation consumed us.

Bugs

The bugs were first discovered in the sheep's matted wool. They came from somewhere extraterrestrial. Most agree they weren't from Earth. The first major infestation was found in Scotland, if the history books are to be believed. Too little was recorded and too few records remain to have any certainty. The bugs control most of us now. But we few 'invisibles' keep the species alive. Well, truly alive. The bugs will always need hosts, after all. We will build our numbers, though. Slowly, eventually, we will rise again. We know their weakness and we have a plan.

Stories

These are stories that our great-great-grandparents told each other when they were children, stories about the brown hills beyond the orchard on the far side of town. Stories that involve witches and ghosts and murderers and ghouls. Most of them are false. But a few are fibs. And even fewer are true. And this one, the one your grandfather tells you about the boy and the girl and the Halloween murder and the townsfolk and the pyre and the chanting and the mob and how he was there and how they all lynched the wrong man. That one's especially true.

The Room with the Mirror

There was a sweet, chemical scent in the air. She observed the expressionless face in the large, letterbox mirror before her. She was so pale. It seemed as though she'd lived her whole life underground. Where had she been? What had happened to her? She could hardly remember anything from the last eight months. Time was a vast chasm that she had fallen through, as though propelled by a force stronger than gravity. She tumbled into this room and fell into this chair and watched her eyes get small and her head begin to tilt as she glided down to the very end.

Travel Sick

The pressure in his head mercifully equalized as the pod regained its horizontal position. He fiddled with the keys in his pocket through the fabric of his pants. His heart sank into his shoes as the pod momentarily lost altitude. He frowned at the thought of the life ahead of him. This was only one of many identical trips. The reporters never failed to point out the irony that despite his having invented the technology, there was little chance he'd experience time travel in his lifetime.

The Grass was Deep

The grass was deep. From where he lay he could see only green in his peripheral vision. Arms stretched out at his sides, he cut a stout, lopsided asterisk in the hillside. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with warm, humid air and as he slowly exhaled he imagined his breath propelling the clouds, steering their course far above the valley. He closed his eyes and made the sky break apart into hundreds of thousands of tiny shards, spilling down onto the valley below. When the storm was over he reopened his eyes and observed the shrinking sky and the ground closing in on him as he sank deep into the hungry soil.

Biding

The stink of maggots and wet popcorn hung thick in the still air. It was 4:27AM on a Tuesday and a light rain had just broken the humid, horrible night. Grey steam wafted up into the street lamps along the deciduous-canopied road. No lights were on in any of the brownstones that lined the way. It would be days before anyone noticed this neighborhood. The vile things that lay bleating and growing beyond each door had plenty of time to fester.

Megalomania

The bay was almost completely dry. It was low tide and the only water that remained was in shallow pools where seaweed, snails and other ocean detritus collected. Sean crouched by an enormous boulder near the edge of one of the larger pools eagerly awaiting the screams. Nobody had seen him sneak off. He'd gotten very good at that. He lived for the chaos that he controlled. He saw himself as an expert puppet-master, a god, even. He had complete control, when he wanted it. And he wanted it now.

The Trip

He was losing his memories. He could feel them leave his head. Or perhaps more accurately: he could feel their vacancy. He remembered the town that he grew up in, but not his house. He remembered his grandparents, but not their dog. He could remember his high school. And he could remember his friend Lisa, but he was sure that there must be more. He could remember the general shape of his parents, oblong and harried. But he couldn't remember his street or his brother or what the cat was called. And then he could only remember the morning and the night. He was all that was left in his mind, and like a switch, with a quick shudder he lost that too.

How Awful

The boys lay by the side of the road in comically clichéd death-poses. One had his hands wrapped around his throat and his tongue lolling out to one side. Another's body was curled into a fetal ball with one hand cupping his belly while his face was scrunched up into a pruney mess. They stayed this way until eventually one of the shoppers stopped and hovered above them. A tiny grandmotherly-type said, 'How awful,' which only triggered convulsions in the boys' bodies from poorly-suppressed giggles. 'Filthy vermin the whole lot of you - glad you're preparing for what's coming your way.'

The Blond One

Ben called her the blond one, though her hair was actually a sandy light-brown. When he looked at her he squinted his eyes so that if she happened to look up from what she was doing and notice him, he could just close his eyes and pretend he'd been sleeping. Her name was Melissa Gert. By Ben's estimation, her name did not remotely square with her beauty. On Wednesdays he would watch her sit on a bench as she waited for the bus that would take her away from him. When she turned fifteen she moved to another state to live with her father. Ben couldn't tell if she was sad to leave, though he desperately hoped that she was.

The Receiver

Maybe if Kayla had gotten the name right the first time none of this would have happened. I mean, it's not like it's magic or anything. Physics dictate the pattern of the breath and the rhythm with which it hits the receiver that's lodged in the clown's papier-mâché ear. I don't think there's even a computer inside. I think it's some sort of mechanical lock-type device. She was just trying to show off by throwing it a twist. She thinks it's magic. And now she's fucked it up for herself and for the rest of us. This won't end well.

A Cold Wait

It was too cold to move much. The slabs of beef and pork hung in columns all around them. The motion sensors were mercifully broken. The lights remained blindingly on. They waited for the morning shift to arrive. They expected to hear the door open any moment. Bill had the bat in his left hand. He kept moving his left arm in slow, serpentine paths to keep the blood flowing. Charles could only sit and stare, cupping his hand warmers close to his face.

Offerings

One foot in front of the other. Clop, clop, clop, clop. Down they went, deep into the core of the earth. Charles thought of his sisters. Bobby thought about his bedroom and his mom tucking him in. Randy thought about death as he marched on, following the bobbing blob of light that dangled from the pole in front of him.

They stopped when they reached the plateau, 50 paces from the center of the earth, where a glowing sun-like orb hovered below them. One by one they stepped off the ledge and into the light.

The Girl with Tears in Her Eyes

The girl with the tears in her eyes was never happy. Her eyes were like saucers of water forever being jostled, the contents tipping out onto her cheeks, tumbling to her knees. She had to wear special pants. There was a profound beauty in her sadness. So much so that men, women, children and the elderly all lined up to give her presents in attempts to warm her heart and ebb the flow of her tears. Some gave her flowers. Some gave her love. Some gave her food and shelter. And some just gave her their time. But nothing could stop the tears until the day she perished from dehydration at the age of 24.

Nerve

She looked beautiful today, her auburn hair falling in delicate rivulets across her shoulders and back. Her eyes were enormous and always seemed to be laughing at a joke that she'd just remembered. He gave her her change and then said:

‘Um.’

‘...’

‘I get off in a few minutes, are you going to be around? You wanna grab a coffee someplace other than here?’

He couldn't believe he got the words out. It was painful and stilted and awkward, but he felt better for having actually done it.

‘No, thank you,’ she replied.

Compulsion

He licked his lips and kissed the ground. When he sat back up Sharon smiled at his dusty lips, now a red-brown where they were once a pale strawberry.

‘Why do you do things like that?’ She asked him as she placed a hand on his knee and watched him twitch from the unexpected contact.

‘I can’t help myself.’ He said.

‘Weak answer.’

‘I’m sorry. It’s the truth though. I have these compulsions and I feel completely powerless. It’s more than a little frightening for me.’

Sour

It's as though she couldn't hear them. Her face was entirely devoid of emotion. It made absolutely no sense. She loved that dog more than anything in the world, we all knew it, she's said as much, using those very words, in fact: *More than anything in the world*. It didn't even look like shock or pain; Her face was a blank slate. We took turns trying to snap her out of it. One of us tried pinching her, another shaking her. I gave her a hug, hoping she just needed some compassion and love. Nothing. She stood in place for over an hour as we unwittingly watched her mind go completely sour.

Dessert

The chocolate was more than he could handle. It was such a perfect balance of sweet and salty-bitter. And the way it melted; It was as if it was made of liquid air. It was worth the cost. He wanted to savor it but was told he mustn't. Swallowing the last morsel he flexed his body and prepared for the blow. But the blow didn't come. Instead there was a sound: a high pitched wail from inside his head. A scream that started off quiet, as though it was far, far away. But then it got louder and louder until he couldn't stand it. That's when the punch to the gut came. He'd earned his dessert.

The Dirigible

They looked down on the city far below. Jane plugged her ears with her fingers. Without the sound of the engines, it felt like they were on a slow, moving sidewalk with a glass floor. Jane pretended that she was an angel looking down on another world, trying to decide which building to visit, which child to grant the gift of eternal bliss to. Her father took her hand, pulling her away from the window, reintroducing the cranking tantrum of the airship's engine. He told her she needed to be careful by the window. He didn't want her to fall out yet.

The lookout

Sophia frowned and contorted her face into a lumpy mess. She whined and used her little-girl voice and begged Jason to let her go with them. She just wanted to be part of the group, for once. He reminded her that she was their lookout. It was unfortunate but true. He wanted her there as much as she did. But the boss being her father meant that she'd barely get reprimanded whereas the others would just get shit-canned. They needed her and she liked that. She just wished she could be there when they lit the thing, just once.

The Drive In

The open lot was speckled with cracks in the concrete where pale green blades of sickly grass broke through. The screen was so much larger than any indoor movie screen - probably three times as big. Cars were piled up on either side of the small building below the white behemoth. When there were no spectators, a wind-tunnel formed in the lot making it difficult to stand still. It took her breath away. She felt vulnerable, tiny. This was well planned. These were professionals. As they made themselves visible, her mind crumbled before the spectacle. She never stood a chance.

Six Walls

He focused on the door. The room had a solid, cell-like quality. It was hexagonal, which was strange, but somehow fitting. The walls were clearly made of particleboard, poorly painted, too, he could see markings underneath the paint. Still, it felt as though he was in a cement block. His feet were not bound but he couldn't move them. Had they glued his shoes to the floor? More likely they'd drugged him. Except there was no they, only him. His compulsions had gotten away from him again. If only he could remember what he'd done. And why.

Our Concern

Henry wanted to tell her that it was all going to be ok. He couldn't though, because she was much, much smarter than him and she understood the severity of her condition far better than he did. All he wanted was to help, but at every turn he found himself making things worse — more difficult. It was as though he had the ability to slow down time, but only during the moments when horribly uncomfortable or painful things were happening, usually caused by his own words or actions. Yet there she lay, looking up at him, that dopey smile and total calm just wafting off her and into his heart.

Hope

She looked onto the scene from her seat under the shade of the willow tree, taking it all in. Two grown men arguing over ping pong balls (official size and weight) in the middle of a vast expanse of an emerald green lawn. One tall, bald and sweating under the noontime sun, the other round and stout with a sharp crew cut and caterpillar moustache; They looked like a bowling pin and ball, wobbling together as though an eight-year-old, going for the spare, had rolled the one into the other. She held her breath hoping they'd both would fall into the gutter.

Coming of Age

The boys huddled on one side of the fence while the girls smoked and smirked on the other. To the boys, the girls were a mystery, tall, intensely foreign, like aliens from their sci-fi stories. The girls knew what the boys were, but that didn't dissuade them. They could be indifferent while still being acutely interested - they were girls, after all. Every once in a while a boy would lean against the fence and fall through as though by accident, only to land at the feet of the one he loved.

He watched

He watched as everyone lived their lives. He sat in his rocking chair on the bedraggled wood porch and consumed the actions of the living that walked before him. He was empty, always empty, always trying to fill up on life, but never his own.

For a while he had a dog that would pick up balls that it found in the yard and throw them up in the air and chase them all by itself. His dog was the perfect dog. The dog would play alone and ask nothing of the old man. The old man had only to consume the joy of the dog from the safety of the porch.

And Son

The sign was poorly laid out. It read: SANDERS CONVENIENCE, in large, red letters. Only the SANDERS was on the far left side of the sign and CONVENIENCE was on the far right. There was an obvious two foot gap between the words that Jonah knew was meant for him. When he was younger, Jonah thought his father's store was the best place on earth. It wasn't the main floor but the basement that captivated his imagination. He'd spend hours in the paper goods room building forts with all the extra cardboard shipping containers. These days the scent of the mildewed paper and spilled soda only made him nauseous.

None Of It Was Real

He looked at himself in the mirror. His caterpillar eyebrows shadowed his eyes so completely that his face resembled an alien skull. He grinned as the sounds from the next room grew louder. The sounds of scabbling scratches on drywall and coarse, wet clattering of nightmares realized filled the negative space. None of it mattered, though. None of it was real. Anything beyond the confines of the studio had no real weight, no importance, not to him. He stared into his ocular void as the terror broke through and reclaimed him.

All Seeing

The terrain had flattened out significantly in the last half-mile or so. What was so recently an arduous hike had turned into an almost lazy evening stroll. They could see for miles now, or so it seemed. The sun setting behind them made the horizon before them a dim blur of browns and blues. All they were sure of were the eyes that monitored their progress. The ever-watching eyes that would blink into nothing when they would spot them only to set upon them from another unseen location just as quickly. They would never be alone.

The Chosen One

In the town of Bohne, every family had the same composition. There was a father, a mother, a son and a daughter. The children were two-and-a-half years apart, give-or-take a day or two, and the husbands were all three years older than the wives. Planning and scheduling was everything in the utopia of Bohne. Only one citizen of each birth-year was ever encouraged to make their own decision. This citizen was called the Yearn. The Yearn existed fully outside of the ordered system, though they were required to live within the walls of the city. Year 15's Yearn was Barry. To pass the time, Barry did a lot of murdering.

Love For Life

Mind your pappy, her mother would always say. What were his wishes now, she wondered. She walked in circuitous paths throughout the tattered bungalow, gliding over the refuse and debris of his final days, frozen in a fine dust that seems to collect in old folks' houses like this faster than anywhere else in the world. He would want to do it all over again, she figured. He'd have it all and more the second time around. The man knew what he loved, and he loved everything.

The Classroom

She walked down the reverberative hall with an apathetic stride pausing at each door and standing on her toes to peer into the classroom. Each room was as empty as the last. The school was closed for summer. Even the chairs and desks had been packed away to allow for the cleaning crew to scrub away the filth the students had caked onto every surface. The rooms were all checkerboard linoleum wastelands. All except for one. The classroom marked 111, at the end of the hall on the right glowed in the late afternoon light. She opened the door and allowed the hot breath to warm her cheek.

The House

If it were up to the two of them they would stay in the house forever. The house liked them and it had proven itself time and time again to be an excellent fortress. The walls seemed completely impenetrable by the nightbears and the basement's walls were too alkaline for the burrow-fowl. They were thankful to have found the place and to have been accepted by it. Their parents were only proving their ignorance. They were dolts who deserved the grizzly fate they were careening into head first. It was unfair to insist the kids join them in their folly.

The Carnival

The massive dog lay on its side before him. Jim watched as the creature's rib cage grew and shrunk with each laborious breath. He got down on his knees and pressed an ear up to its chest. Inside he heard the sounds of a carnival. The trapeze artists were up, people were gasping at the mid-air acrobatics. Oohs and ahhs reverberated inside the glum beast. The carnival was giving it indigestion. Too many happy people made the dog whine. Eventually it shrugged Jim away and slumped off to a corner where it vomited streamers and clown cars and at last went to sleep.

A Fine Trick

Every year, on the last full moon of summer, at precisely midnight, the stars do a funny thing. Most people don't notice because it requires a special move and the event only lasts for an instant. At the stroke of midnight, while looking at the North Star, spin three times clockwise while knowing love and whispering your anger. When done correctly the gaping maw of time will reveal itself to you for a brief moment. In the case that you've performed the task incorrectly, either nothing will happen at all, or you will simply cease to be.

Margaret's Song

Margaret felt the weight of the hammer in her hand. She gripped the handle and placed its cool cheek upon her own. She closed her eyes and focused on the dead sound of nothing in the room. The air was so still. She rocked forward and back in her seat as she sang a quiet song to the tool.

*You and me
We will be
Happy and completely free
I and you
We know too
We won't be satisfied 'till we're through
Us, fuss, muss, cuss
I will make this clear like **THUS**.*

The hammer landed as final punctuation.

3:35 p.m.

One of the reasons Alice likes the little old man on the corner is that he gives her candy when he sees her. She suspects she's the reason he's always on the corner at 3:25 p.m. each day. She thinks that maybe he stalks her at night. She doesn't know that he stalks her in the morning and evenings too. She likes the attention, but mostly she likes the candy. She'll figure it out soon and stop going to the corner every day at 3:25. But until that day, she'll love life.

The Gate

She waved them through, despite her apprehension. The tall one with the moustache was just no good, it was obvious to anyone. The short one, though, he was tougher to read. Hard to imagine a roly-poly fella like that getting into much trouble. Tommy, the short one casually flipped the switch on the box in his pocket moments before passing through the metal-detector. The men maintained their stride as everyone else in the room dropped to the ground clutching their ears from the pain of the noise from the device.

Wooded Paths

There were so many paths. Many more than the boys had ever thought possible. Toby insisted that if they just kept taking the left option they'd have to loop back to where they started eventually. Bobby knew this was flawed logic but needed to have faith in his older brother, if only to have faith in anything at all. The enormous woods looked quite different from when they'd first ventured in. Here, all the trees had eyes. Toby was pretty sure they were never going back home.

Cold

The clouds rushed over him and he lay motionless observing the way the frigid humidity encouraged the rapid development of ice-pellets on the tips of his exposed body hair. He was thankful his death came quickly. Grateful, even. He'd seen most of the others tumble like rag dolls across the rocks making the horrible, vital sounds of tormented animals. He wondered if their eventual death offered the same calm, almost serene lassitude in which he was now delighting.

The Three

The three of them huddled together in the booth at the back of the restaurant. Their foreheads tipped towards each other, each talking into the other's lap. The girl on the left grabbed the girl on the right's shoulder. The one in the middle looked up, wide eyed and in pain. They began to sway, as a group, back and forth. And then the humming. It began low and deep and quiet. Lower in pitch than you'd imagine possible from a young girl. And then the hum grew. The harmonic triad pulsed and swelled to fill the room to capacity as the structure crumbled to the ground.

Ruin

Monica wore a charcoal grey cable-knit sweater-vest every day of her senior year at the university. She insisted it made her look distinguished yet grounded. It was her uniform and she acknowledged it as such. The sweater followed her into her mid-twenties and right up through her twenty-ninth birthday when a suitor by the name of Chuck set it aflame in an overly flamboyant demonstration of half-baked virility while brandishing a clove cigarette and copping a cheap feel. The sweater was ruined, and soon, so too would be Chuck.

The Frogs

The Basil twins chased one another across the lawn with frogs half the size of their heads held in their arms. The frogs, terrified, though not letting on, went limp in the boys' grip, arms slack and legs dangling and bouncing off the boys' bellies.

Once the sun had set behind the house, leaving a grey patina on the lawn in front, the frogs again began to stir. At first it seemed they'd just awoken from a lazy mid-summer's nap, but quickly it became clear they were...agitated.

Forever

They'd been afloat for twenty-seven days. Mark was keeping track in a notebook he'd brought along to catalog the sea birds he'd hoped to see. The air was completely still. The sails hadn't moved since the first day. The only movement in the water was from the gentle rocking of the boat as its occupants shifted to keep from going completely stir-crazy. When one of them would reach into the water, fish would swim up to their hands and allow themselves to be caught. And when water was brought on board, it desalinated before it touched their lips. It seemed they could live this way forever.

Chose

There were 144 boxes laid out on the table in a 12-by-12 grid. Each box contained a plan. Each plan was complicated but thorough. The plans lead to riches. Some required sacrifice. The boy was instructed by the gentleman in the suit to choose. He couldn't, he told the man. He must, said the man. The boy felt sick. There was a moment of near-panic that struck the boy as he contemplated the people who would surely die if he chose the wrong box. For all he knew, his own name might be on the termination list of any one of them. A cool calm flooded his veins as he settled on the reality that he had no choice to make, after all.

Demon Time

He pulled the blanket over his head and squeezed his knees up to his chest. Maybe the demons would just go away. He knew, of course, that they wouldn't, but he liked to hope. He'd been hoping for some 23-odd years. Every night they would come, right after he turned out the lights. He thought once, that he'd trick them by just sleeping with the lights on, but that didn't work. Really, it seemed, they just knew when he needed sleep, and that's when they arrived. Every day, in his bedroom, as his own private horror show.

Sunshine

All of the children in the hamlet wore sunglasses while outdoors. It wasn't so much a law as it was an acknowledged requisite for life. The sun, once a life-giver, now "proven" to be quite the opposite. Since the discovery of the soul, scientists immediately began observing the gravitational-like pull the sun had on the soul through the eyes of children under the age of twelve. Some theorized that the amount of soul that the sun draws through a child's eyes is directly proportional to how short their life will be. Most feared the children who walk around without glasses; they had nothing left to lose.

Franklin

Franklin, at 8 years of age, was a well-traveled boy. He'd seen the Eiffel Tower, the Pyramids, the Great Wall, the Kremlin and most of the other bucket-list-landmarks. He'd seen them alone, to boot, as his parents didn't love him much. They assumed responsibility for him by providing him with money for airfare and lodging to keep him out of the house and out of their hair. Eventually, Franklin realized there was never any reason to go back home again at all.

Mr. Bailer

The air was thin and crisp and Charles held his bookbag to his chest for warmth. As he approached his favorite bookstore, he saw shards of glass strewn across the sidewalk. He peered into the dark store and called out for the owner, Mr. Bailer, but got no reply. Charles entered the store and made his way over piles of books and debris to the back. There he found Mr. Bailer, glowing.

‘Sir?’

‘Come here, boy. I want to give you this.’
Said the shimmering man.

Charles took the man’s hand and was instantly transformed into light. The shopkeeper fell into a heap in the corner as Charles hovered above the books and back out to the sidewalk.

The Pattern

She was alone in the house. She sat on the edge of her bed with her eyes closed. Her straight brown hair hung over her face as she listened intently. She'd heard the pattern of noises so many times before. It was obvious to her that the house was trying to tell her something. It began again with the floorboard creak. Then came the snap-groan from the basement and the ticking in the vent. What was it saying? She wanted to believe they were sounds of approval - acknowledgment that she'd done the right thing. She knew her parents never really appreciated this place. She'd done what she thought was best for her and the house.

The Performance

The three of them grabbed the gigantic door's handle and pulled. Slowly the slab swung open to reveal the enormous chamber. As their eyes adjusted to the dim light, they found they were on a stage. And as the door slammed shut behind them, the roar of the audience tore through the theater and made them brace against each other. The orchestra pit swirled to life with a dissonant mess of notes that gradually mixed together to form the most beautiful chord. The tones continued for a minute and then stopped abruptly. Silence filled the room as the crowd waited for the three to prove their worth.

Numb

The horizon stared back at him, cold and emotionless. He'd grown so used to the iridescent blue-green sea and aqua-orange sky-at-dusk that their impossible beauty no longer registered. All he could see was a void where the world ought to be. He knew it was probably there, but it no longer held any anchor in reality for him. Fifteen years of hair no longer tickled his back. Stumps for fingers no longer felt anything at all. He was numb, almost completely. And now he was finally growing to like it.

The Test

The foul child lay the tiles on the floor in the pattern he'd learned, despite his every effort to ignore his teachings. The miserable teacher scolded the boy mercilessly for each misstep and poorly aligned placement. Both set of grandparents frowned in disdain from the observatory, high above the pitch, well protected from the event. Once the piece was complete, the boy resumed his position at the center of the great table and awaited his judgment. The dreadful masters studied the work for longer than anyone was comfortable before declaring the correction dues.

Wonder

Each time the bowl was filled, the stick on which it was balanced would bow down and knock the bowl against a rock and spill its contents into the stream. The contraption would then right itself and begin anew. Over and over this would happen and each time Juliet's eyes would grow wide just before the bowl began its journey down towards the stream. It was a simple pattern and a simple pleasure; it was this type of satisfaction that she had learned to appreciate from the unpleasantness of her youth.

Ants

Ants began to pour in on all sides of the room. When the couple noticed they stood up quickly and began to inspect the cracks and corners of the walls to see if they could clot the flood of insects. It was a half-hearted attempt, as they knew it would be futile. The orchestrator simply wasn't that stupid. When they discovered the hidden latch in the wall it was too late, the insects had overtaken them.

The Twins

Julia and Jennifer would spend as much time as their parents would allow them to drawing in their bedroom, under the covers in the middle of the room with the door closed and barricaded by bins of toys. Julia drew flowers and Jennifer drew their demise. Julia brought life to her paper while Jennifer worked in shades of grey. Jennifer would make threats to the family dog and Julia would show the dog hiding places. Jennifer and Julia cared very much for each other, despite their philosophical and mental differences. Jennifer had a plan. Julia did not.

The Doll

The doll sat on the highest shelf in the shop, the owner never having expected to meet the client he'd just shaken hands with - the one who would take her home. The customer brought the doll home and placed it in the soup pot. As he cut up the carrot and slid the slices into the pot, the doll began to take control of her faculties. Singed from the heat and soaked through in boiling water, she lunged and clung to the customer's face. When the customer stopped, she set out on soggy-foot to reclaim her spot on the top shelf.

Maurice

Everything in the bar was made of a dark, red, well-worn wood. The light was low and indirect allowing each patron to feel as though they were invisible to all the others in the room. Maurice, hunched in the corner booth farthest from the entrance, nursed a beer in one hand while manipulating a key in his pocket with the other. He considered the key: one that would open the door that lead to the woman who had control of his heart and made him aware that his decisions were never truly his.

Perseverance

The theater was still dark and the audience was patient. They knew what they were getting into before they bought their tickets. They were understanding. The silence had gone on for so long though. The shift from calm patience to furious and fed-up was lightning quick.

'Fuck it!' Yelled a man in a pale lime sweater-vest as he bolted from his aisle-seat near the middle of the theater. His outburst drew sour grimaces from some and short smiles from a few others. The actors hadn't been on stage in twenty-three minutes. Soon more than observed the remainder of the scene from the catwalk, until the very last patron finally acquiesced and left, head hanging low, defeated.

Journey

It had been hours since the landscape had changed in any appreciable way. Miles and miles of dusty brown dirt and clear blue sky eventually, finally gave way to a bubble of earth that slowly rose from the horizon.

‘Do you think that’s it?’ the gangly stick-boy asked.

‘Are you fucking serious?’ the other shot back with a terse, vitriolic grunt. ‘There is literally nothing else around for miles. How could it be anything else?’

They walked the remaining miles in silence and never spoke to each other again once they'd passed through the gates to the bunker.

A Moment

She breathed in and then, as slowly as she was able, let the breath back out. Her heart raced and she was starting to perspire. Fiona had never felt panic like this before. The sensation was equal parts exhilarating, terrifying and numbing. There was no chance that the mugger wouldn't notice her, too, on his way back out onto the street. Her cover was decidedly temporary. When he'd sufficiently recovered, he got back to his feet and turned towards her. Their eyes locked, as did all the joints in her body. She felt nothing anymore. She observed herself as she failed to acknowledge his violence.

Maps

The thugs took turns mapping the streets. They mapped not the roads themselves but the residents — the marks. They worked in pairs. One would cause a ruckus, while the other took note of the respondents. The neglectful and jaded were the ones of particular interest to the scouts. Those that couldn't be bothered to look up from their myopic lives would be the ones who wouldn't bat an eye as they deftly tore through the neighborhood ransacking anything that wasn't bolted down.

Birds

Birds followed him wherever he went. They would scream to alert their brothers and sister of his presence. He wasn't to be trusted. Alas, the only creatures that knew his intentions could only sing about them. To the rest of the world he was a jovial man who brought with him birdsong and plague.

Sunset

It was dusk on the longest day of the year. The young couple sat cross-legged, watching the bugs swarm as sweat dripped down the center of their backs. He put his arm around her and pulled her close. She kept watching the bugs, in a daze. The colors in the sky deepened and the bugs grew larger as day turned into night.

When the last warm tone had drained from the horizon the girl turned her head towards the silhouette of the boy. She asked a question about his childhood. His answer described their future.

An Escape Plan

The boat listed to one side, then slowly back over to the other. Had it been more even and involving less tumbling it would almost have been nice, like a cradle rocking. The boat groaned under the pressure of the water. As the storm rolled in slowly over the horizon he briefly thought of letting the weather do the dirty work. None would be the wiser; he still had his escape plan. He was getting tired of waiting, though. It would be best to handle things now, while the rest of the crew is distracted. He readied the explosives.

It's Better Down Here

She'd lived in the city her entire life. She didn't know how to handle all the open space. She could see for tens of miles. She'd never experienced the vastness of the open prairie. It made her feel ill. She lost her balance and found herself lying in the dirt beside the road. Her cheek kissed the ground and before she could feel the pain along her thigh she tasted the silty dust that blew up from her impact. It's better down here anyway, she thought to herself.

Extremes

His parents kept their feelings about his behavior to themselves. This made it very hard for David to rebel, despite his best efforts. He broke every law, sang every hymn, punched every teacher, worked at every soup kitchen he came across. David became the extreme of all things at all times. His parents, ever supportive, stood by him with each action's reaction. When David visited his parents in their last year he was covered in scars from full-body tattoos all horribly, surgically removed. He thanked them and they smiled.

Horses

All the horses in this town are born with 5 legs. You'd think it was a genetic thing but it's not. There's something in the air, we've decided. There have been hundreds of experiments performed in hopes of getting to the bottom of the mystery. None have yielded even the most modest of reasonable theories. So most of us have taken to ignoring the extra appendages and getting on with our lives. A horse is born, a leg is removed, the pile grows taller.

Change

The three friends sat around the small table drinking coffee, feeling like adults. Sara looked over at Paul and kicked him under the table. Paul made no acknowledgement of the attack except for a tiny curl of his lips on the very edge of his mouth that only she would recognize as a smile. The next day it was the same thing. And the day after that, the same again. Lacey was always wise to the flirtation but didn't pay it much mind. When Paul met Denise the kicks and their meaning changed.

The Visitor

Our time with her was so brief. She came into our lives one morning and we all fell in love with her. She said she was tired and just needed a place to rest for a bit. Our front stoop would do just fine, if it was okay with us. It was fine. She held her delicate chin in her palm and seemed to look into us when our eyes met. It was Aunt Mary who found her first, but one by one each member of our family made their way to the front of the house to see what was going on. Each of us made attempts at conversation but no one could get more than a word or two out. As the sun formed a corona behind her, late in the day, she told us goodbye and continued down the road to the sea.

Passage

He sat, exhausted and proud, in the nest below the balloon as it transported him across and over the great river. He was so glad to be free of the terrors of the Dark Bank. As he neared the middle of the journey the balloon began to lose altitude. Deep down he knew it would come to this — the engine needed fuel, it would have to be the shoes. He shed a tear as he removed the hard-earned trophies from his feet and placed them into the dying fire. They caused the flames to double in size instantly. The makeshift-dirigible leveled out and coasted to safety.

This Way

Jenny didn't want to hold the goblin's hand, she was scared of his cantaloupe-sized eyes, but the goblin insisted. His skin was so slimy and pliable. It looked like it should be rough and thick but she could feel his bones swimming in his flesh when she grabbed his claw of a hand. Jenny's sister, Dana, took her other hand. The creature moved quickly through the tunnels dragging the sisters behind him. Occasionally he'd mutter duck and Dana would crouch low to barely miss a suddenly-sloping ceiling. It was too dark for human eyes. Dana hoped they were trusting the right monster.

Ugly Babies

Thirty ugly babies looked up at her, a sea of googly-eyed fleshblobs, each one more hideous than the last. She felt cornered in the room with them, despite being next to the door from which she'd just entered. Babies always creeped her out. Ugly babies were just the worst. All at once, the babies stood. They took a communal (baby-) step forward, towards her. The woman stepped back and pressed her back up to the wall behind her and reached for the doorknob. In a blinding, fluid instant the babies made their move.

The Back Room

There was a single room at the back of the house. It spanned the entire width of the property. It was a narrow room, but not quite a corridor. Paul liked to hide out in the back room because it smelled of rich, old wood and dust which reminded him of his favorite toy chest at home. His captors allowed Paul free reign of the house, so long as he never set foot outside. They mostly left him alone in the back room. The morning of his escape he'd barricaded the room from the inside just after setting fire to the thick shag rug in the master suite. He wasn't sure how it would end — the "how" wasn't really his concern.

The Craft

The five of them reached out their hands to their neighbors and walked onto the field. They were going to do this together. The ship moved in closer above them. The exhaust from the engines formed a huge flattened circle of grass around them. Patricia started to shake. James and Sarah had to sandwich her to keep her upright. The pylon shot out of the center of the craft at such speed and with such force that it sent a shockwave through the ground, knocking the teenagers off their feet. As the landed, the ground collapsed below them and they were consumed by the darkness of the forming pit.

The End

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