

Gravity and Other Minor Obstructions

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

By
Jacob Trask
English Creative Writing Major

The College at Brockport
May 6, 2015

Thesis Director: Dr. James Whorton Jr., Professor and Associate Chair, English

Educational use of this paper is permitted for the purpose of providing future students a model example of an Honors senior thesis project.

Gravity and Other Minor Obstructions

Inspirations:

This seems to me like the sort of document someone would start with the cliché phrase “Ever since I was young, I always wanted to write.” Fortunately, this is not such a document. I can’t pretend that I didn’t *enjoy* writing from a young age; reading was all I did. Once I discovered the magic of our local library, there really wasn’t much to stop me. I was particularly fond of young adult suspense and science fiction novels, the likes of which include Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game*, Anthony Horowitz’s *Alex Rider* series, and Jonathan Stroud’s *Bartimaeus* series, among others. All of these books were found in the downstairs sanctuary cleverly titled the “Teen Room.” It wasn’t long, however, before I realized that there were many more books to explore in the upstairs “Adult” section of the Newark Public Library. One of the first writers I discovered in this new area was Michael Crichton, whom I discovered after spotting *Jurassic Park* on a shelf. I was pleasantly surprised to find that this book, while unlike the movie, was also unlike anything the “Teen Room” had to offer. The writing felt so much more *real* to me; the detail of the setting, the scientific descriptions, the action itself. *Jurassic Park* was perhaps my first venture into what I would consider at the time “adult literature.” Mind you, at the time I was maybe in my early-to-mid teens, so reading books like this made me feel somehow more sophisticated. It was around this period in my life that I discovered, with the help of one of the most wonderful school librarians, the world of Stephen King.

I spent quite a bit of time in the school library during high school. For me, it was the place to be during the infamous waste of time that was study hall. Combined with this were various visits that took place during gym class. As I was declared legally blind early in high school, there were a few sports that I was not allowed to participate in, such as volleyball,

archery, etc. The policy of my high school was to send students who couldn't participate in certain gym units to the library for the duration of that unit, which meant I was able to spend even more time among the shelves. I had no issue with this. As a result of the amount of time I spent there, I became well-acquainted with the librarian, a woman by the name of Mrs. Murphy. She was one of the adults at the school consistently feared by the student population for the strict way she ran the library, especially rules regarding talking volume. When I was there, I typically checked out a few books, and would find myself a spot to sit and read as much of one of them as I could in the period of time I was there. Mrs. Murphy started to notice, however, when I started to run out of things to read, and would instead prowl the shelves for something new. It was at one of these points that she recommended I try out a Stephen King novel, based upon other authors she had seen me take out (more Orson Scott Card, Dan Brown, and a few other miscellaneous novels that were in that borderline suspense/horror genre). The first King novel I ever read was *It*, which is honestly a daunting book to look at when you're fresh into high school. What I found, however, was a kind of story I had never experienced before. It was so real, so natural, and at the same time, so terrifying that I couldn't believe what I had read. Looking back on that book (I still reread it from time to time), I sometimes wonder how it's even allowed to be on the shelves in a high school. Not that I'm complaining at all; that book changed my entire perspective on literature at that age, but there are parts in there that are just awful, both in your typical scary monster sense as well as in a very real, adult sense.

From that point on, I was completely addicted to Stephen King novels. I've read nearly all of them at this point, and I still buy his new books when they come out, usually spending the obscene price hardcovers go for these days. When I was out of high school and starting out in community college, I read a very different King book, his memoir/book-on-writing *On Writing*. I

was enrolled in college as a liberal arts major when I read this, and I had the vague intention of wanting to be a writer (more on that later), so as soon as I found out about this book's existence, I knew I had to have it. My first thought about it was a naïve one: "If I read this and do what King suggests, I'll be able to write stories just like his!" Wrong. The book was no instruction manual on how to write the perfect horror novel, it was more of King pointing out what had worked for him, and merely suggesting that hey, it might work for someone else too. This book was honestly a life changer. It gave me an entirely new perspective on both my writing and writing as a whole. And for the first time in my life, I knew that writing stories was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

Perhaps the most significant impact on my decision to write came in my senior year of college. While I had been reading King and others for quite a while at that point, I had still not gotten to *On Writing* and fully developed my passion for storytelling; I think it's worth mentioning two classes I took during my final year of high school. The first was Journalism, a pretty self explanatory course where we learned how to write, well, journalistically. The best part of this, however, was that the class was in charge of the school newspaper, called the *Red Review* (Newark sports teams were named the Reds and our mascot was a fox). I had an absolute blast writing for that paper. After publishing my first couple of articles (one was a heavy metal album review and the other escapes me), I was promoted to Entertainment Editor, placing me in charge of diversifying the Entertainment section of our paper, as well as organizing and editing the pages themselves. This was perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of working on the paper. Not only did I get editing experience, but I learned how to make pages flow with each other, how to put like-minded articles together to make my part of the paper as seamless as possible. I still remember many of the articles I wrote; I have almost all of them printed out and filed into a

folder in my filing cabinet, and the rest are on my old flash drive. I still enjoy reading them every once in a while. It helps put in perspective how far I've come and how far I can still go, if I'm to take the level of improvement from my tenure at the old *Review* and compare it to some of my work now. A couple pieces still hold up though, even now, though they make me realize just how much of a smart-ass I was in those days.

The other class was a creative writing course. It was only half a year, which was extremely unfortunate, but it was one of the few highlights of my high school career. This course sparked what was perhaps my first real interest in writing poetry. Let me explain that a bit. In high school, you start reading poetry in literature and English classes, maybe a couple years sooner, but I can't recall those years that well. Regardless, you start out analyzing every single line, word, and piece of punctuation in a poem. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. However, after doing it so much, on pieces of poetry that can be considered dry, strict to form, and overall just uninteresting, poetry becomes a bore and a nuisance that one would do best to avoid. Being forced to write poetry, therefore, irritated me quite a bit at the beginning of that class.

Thankfully, my teacher knew the dangers of the educational approach to poetry and helped all of us in the class out by showing us examples of poetry that were *not* typical form (sonnets, basic rhyme scheme, etc.), *not* boring, and, above all else, were about exactly what they seemed to be. This, I think, is one of the key problems in the teaching of poetry: students are required to read between the lines on every little thing, which, while a valuable tool in learning the overall process of close reading, gives students the impression that there is no such thing as a straightforward poem. My teacher, Mr. Dalton, helped us see through that. And when it came time to write our own poems, I discovered that I was able to make pieces that were about exactly what I wanted them to be about, and I enjoyed the entire process of it. Shortly after poetry

(which took up the majority of the course time), we moved on to short stories. This was an extremely nerve-wracking time for me; on one hand I wanted to prove myself, but on the other didn't want to make a fool of myself. I didn't quite make a fool out of myself, but when I look back on the short story I wrote for that part of the class, I can't help but laugh. It was all over the place. There were magical gauntlets, a shady organization, and shape-shifting. It was insane. The story isn't the point, though; the class response to the story was my very first taste of criticism on something I wrote. The majority of the class seemed to either like it immensely or not really care about it. But there was one student in particular, a kid that I considered one of my friends at the time, that gave me a very sincere and very *harsh* critique of what I wrote. I suppose I have a lot to thank him for. He didn't pull any punches. He didn't sugar coat how he felt. And I admit I was almost angry about it at first. I thought, "This dude is supposed to be my friend, and he's making a mockery of my story in front of the rest of the class? That's not fair at all." Well, as I would learn, the world of literary criticism will always seem unfair. I think the fact that it was a friend who did it was important. It helped build a little bit tougher of a skin for negative responses to my writing, which I have definitely faced in college.

My college career, particularly here at Brockport, has further solidified my wish to pursue writing as a career. Being required to read and re-read many of the classic books I have always had trepidation about (for their reputations of being dry and boring) has helped me further my appreciation for literature, especially the overall craft of it. Two particular books that I will continue to read are *The House of the Seven Gables* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. These two books, while not being everything I love to read content-wise, were extremely insightful in the ways that they showed just how beautiful and intricate writing can be. While I can't pretend that I'll ever be as masterful at writing as Hawthorne or

Melville, I have definitely stopped viewing works of literature like theirs as nuisance and more as inspiration.

The Brockport community has really been an inspiration in itself. When I first started here, I knew one guy that I went to high school with, and that was it. My first year roommates were unlike me in every way possible, and I struggled for a bit, wondering if I had made the right decision or not. Once I got the feel for classes and started meeting people that were in my major, who were out to do the exact same things I was trying to do, everything became easier. I've made many lifelong friends here, not just in the English department, either. Those that are in the department, though, I know will be fantastic allies to turn to when asking questions about revisions, ideas, or anything related to the craft. As I type this, a few friends and I are trying to set up some sort of informal writing circle, where we get together and share stuff we've been working on: poetry, short stories, longer work, you name it. We have yet to actually meet, as school obviously takes a commanding role, but everyone is interested and engaged in the idea.

This is a highly abridged summary of how I have been inspired to write throughout the years. The fact of the matter is that it was not an instant process for me, as many people I talk to assume. I didn't grow up wanting to be a writer; I had barely even discovered my passion by the time I left high school and started college. I never really knew what I wanted to do throughout school. I had the vague idea of becoming a zookeeper, because I liked animals; the only issue with that was that I didn't enjoy science courses and I didn't exactly do well in them. Now that I'm on this path, though, I don't regret anything. I wouldn't change a single second of it. Would it have been beneficial for me to have started earlier? Most likely. That certainly doesn't mean I have no chance, however. After being at Brockport for two years, I have gained a ridiculous amount of inspiration from the professors I've had, and as a result, want to pursue college-level

teaching. At this point in my life, all of this feels right to me. I finally have a solid idea of what I want to do with my life, and I have a plan on how to do it.

With all that has inspired me, I feel I would be doing myself a great injustice if I were not to pursue writing and teaching. The insight I've gained has opened my eyes to many things in my life, including, but not limited to, the simple beauty in words, the ability to craft a perfect (in my mind) story with the simple dedication of time, and that even the most minor of experiences in daily life can have an impact on it in the future.

Writing Process:

I wasn't completely convinced when I started this project that I wanted to include a section about my writing process. I thought it seemed arbitrary, something that would be here more for a "just because" than anything else. Once I sat and thought about it for a while, however, I discovered that there was a lot that I wanted to share about the way I write things, and that it might be interesting to read. I did mention Stephen King's *On Writing* earlier, and a fairly good-sized chunk of that was devoted to how he writes. I found that interesting when I read it, so why not?

Inspiration for a particular piece of work, whether it be short fiction, poetry, or something else entirely, usually comes to me in the form of a single or couple lines. Sometimes these lines will come from nowhere, sometimes they will come from conversation, but most often they will come from objects or things I see during the day. For instance, the third story in this collection, titled "Wearing Thin," begins with the line "The red, cyclopean eye at the top of the radio tower winks at me as I pass, almost furtively." This came from a night when, while driving home with a friend, I spotted a large wind turbine that was being used to power a factory complex beneath it. As I looked up at it, I noticed the red light blinking at the top, and the line was born. I took out

my phone and jotted it into a note, and, once home, I began work on what would become the story, based purely around the light on the top of the turbine.

I almost never have a full idea for a story once I begin it. I'm not sure many writers really do. Once I sit down and start, though, it all seems to flow out (or, in many cases, it doesn't and a line is abandoned or re-purposed). A lot of my work has been drawn from personal experiences, as I'm sure is true of most writers, whether they like to admit it or not. Well, to be fair, I should say my most *recent* work is derived from personal experience; my little jaunts into the world of the supernatural weren't exactly autobiographical. Those still did have their areas of real-life in them, though, now that I think about it. One of my first pieces written at Brockport for my introductory creative writing course was about a sort of ghost that lived in the quasi-basement area of an old school. This basement really exists; it is accessible through a small, padlocked door that lies off the side of the cafeteria in the school I janitor at over the summer months. It used to be a fallout shelter, apparently, but is now used for storage. So, in that way, I suppose it's nearly impossible not to put at least a little bit of your own experience into a story. I feel like even writers like Orson Scott Card and others who do stories in a science fiction or fantasy genre still *have* to sneak something from their own lives in there.

By no means should anyone consider the inclusion of personal events or feelings as a crutch or anything of the nature; it simply makes the experience more real for the reader. I have had people who have read my work tell me that I put something into words that they had been struggling to, or described a feeling in a way that they completely relate to. That is a flattering thing to hear, to say the least, but I'm simply putting something on a page the way it is in my mind. I'm not trying to appeal to the people who read my work. I'm more trying to appeal to myself, in a way. Writing is a lot like gravity, if you think about it. It's this irresistible force;

once it manifests itself you have no choice but to obey it. But you realize later it's been there the entire time. You just haven't noticed. That might sound like some kind of twisted cliché, but it's the best I can do as far as putting it into words.

Notes:

This collection is really about trying to put those moments into words that can't be. When I started, I didn't think any of the stories would have a common theme at all, and I was fine with that. I figured that was all right, as long as it displayed my creative ability and all that jazz. But once each story was in varying levels of completion, I noticed that the pieces did, in fact, have a lot in common. Without providing any sort of plot summary or anything of that nature, they all seemed to become about loneliness. Sure, there's a bit about depression thrown in, a bit about the madness that seems to dwell just beneath the surface of the mind, and other things, but I feel that the three pieces, as a whole, are about being lonely. I felt that this topic, this feeling, is something a lot of people my age contend with, especially in college. It's a difficult time, figuring out what you're doing with your life and who else is going to be around in it. I wanted to do my best to capture that in these stories.

Signs of Madness

It was mid-April when I began to see the signs. Signs were everywhere, of course; stop ahead, yield, Exit 3 miles, if you please. I saw those every day. But then I noticed others. A deer crossing sign featuring a headless version of the animal. A u-turn made out of a snake instead of an arrow. A stop sign with an exclamation point, leaning crookedly in the middle of a field.

These were mildly disconcerting, of course, but I wrote them off as simple acts of vandalism, except for the field-bound stop sign, which I concluded must be someone's idea of a joke. I didn't worry about how it got there. I didn't worry about the others either. Since when is a sign cause for worry?

I went driving with a friend during the wee hours of the morning, windows down, enjoying the scent of a freshly fallen spring rain. We had sat atop a hill for the last hour, in her car, watching the lightning of what was perhaps the first thunderstorm of the year. As we were driving back, the headlights caught the stop sign. I pointed it out to her. She said she saw nothing, and asked if I was tired. I laughed and agreed. It seemed that perhaps I was going crazy, and by no means wanted her to know.

The next day, as I drove to work, I pondered the signs. I decided that I would take a drive after work and attempt to track down all the ones I had seen previous: the deer, the snake, the joyful stop sign. The snake and the deer were, almost sadly, just instances of street vandalism. The paint on the deer sign had been scraped away from the head area and crudely re-painted with a similar yellow to give the decapitated impression. The u-turn was also simple; someone just thickened the arrow and added a bit of a curve to the tip, giving it its serpentine appearance.

The stop sign was a bit stranger. I parked my car on the side of the road and walked into the field where it stood. I reached out and touched it. It was indeed tangible, at least to me. The

red paint was faded and rust choked the crooked pole on which it stood. It seemed to lean into the wind, almost casually, almost as if it were an old friend lounging against the outside wall of a bar. I took out my phone and took a picture of it. I thought that if I showed the picture to someone that would bring some closure. They would see it, they would marvel at its landlocked strangeness, and I wouldn't feel insane any more.

The next day, I was standing at the end of a pier, overlooking the dull gray only water seems to have with an overcast sky brooding above. I had come to meet a friend, the same friend I had watched the storm with the other night. I heard footsteps making their way softly down the wooden planks, and turned. It was her. She walked up next to me and took my hand.

Maybe she wasn't just a friend. I don't know.

We talked for a while, enjoying the view of the gray, windswept lake. Then I remembered the picture I had taken, the picture of the sign she had been unable to see. I unlocked my hand from hers in order to take my phone from my pocket. As I brought my hand up, she bumped me slightly, and my phone disappeared in the gray before me.

She apologized over and over, but it was okay. I never really liked that piece of technology anyways. It seemed to take up too much of my time, too much of my life, and the scariest part was that I never realized it when it was happening. So we left. I was most upset though that the only evidence I had of the sign was on that phone, at the bottom of the cold, dreary lake. As we made our way back down the pier, my hand securely in hers once again, I looked over my shoulder and felt a shiver run down my spine.

Out in the distance, towards the middle of the lake, something seemed to be poking up.

From the octagon shape, it seemed to be a stop sign.

I woke the next morning with a feeling of paranoia. It seemed that now the sign was following me, or that it perhaps had disciples to carry out its strange and unnerving message. I tried to put it out of my mind the best I could, but seeing it there, out in the lake, rattled me to the core.

I drove past the field where the sign sat later that day, and it was gone. No disciples, then, it was just able to change its location depending on where I happened to be. I started to wonder whether it was somehow responsible for the death of my phone, the only thing I had had that could somehow prove its existence.

A summer storm was on approach as I left work. I could see it slowly devouring the remaining light on the horizon with fierce black clouds, clouds that pulsed and throbbed with veins of blue lightning. I called up my friend from a pay phone outside a convenience store. I was surprised pay phones still existed.

“Hello?” she answered almost immediately.

“Hey. It’s me. Have you seen the clouds?”

She asked me to come over, and we would head out to our usual spot on the hill after that. As I made my way to her apartment, the first heavy droplets threw themselves against my windshield, spraying their guts across the glass in that strange way that is both cleansing and obscuring.

I pulled up to her building and saw her waiting under the cover of her building entrance. She walked out as I left my car. She always drove on these trips. We never discussed why. It was just a ritual, just a thing we had taken to observing strictly without knowing why.

On our way to the hill, the rain came down in sheets. She slowed the car some, opting on the side of caution, but there didn’t seem to be anyone else on the road, which was fine. The

route she took would bring us past Stop-Sign Field, as I had begun to call it in my head. With how torrential the rain was, I found solace in the fact that I probably wouldn't be able to see the sign, even if it had come back. As this thought crossed my mind, lightning lit up the middle of the field.

The sign was there. Lightning had struck the sign.

"That was amazing!" my friend shouted over the following roar of thunder.

I nodded in agreement, but my mind was whirling. It was back. It wasn't there earlier. I had assumed it was still in the lake, or hell, maybe it wasn't real at all, like I had originally thought.

We neared the unmarked, unused road that led up the hill we always parked on. At the top, we sat and watched the storm. It felt like hours. Once it died down, we silently agreed it was time to return to our respective homes.

On the way down the hill access road, it began to pour again, out of nowhere. She switched the wipers on full blast, but it didn't seem to be enough. Up ahead was the final curve of the access road that led into a four-way intersection that was guarded by 4 stop signs, all straight, though, and without an exclamation point. Just as we rounded the corner lightning illuminated the world once again. There, off the road, in the woods, the stop sign lounged.

I yelled. "Stop!"

My friend, startled into action, hit the brakes immediately. The wetness of the road was not conducive to instant braking, and we slid a few feet, thankfully not into the intersection. At that exact moment, a logging truck, carrying a full load, barreled through the four-way, not stopping at all.

We would have been there. We would have been in the middle of that intersection, with how far we slid after stopping. We sat in silence for a moment, realizing that we had both escaped death by mere seconds. If the stop sign had not startled me so, we would be...

I stopped thinking about it.

She asked me then, how I knew, how I was able to stop us before it happened. I said I didn't know, and glanced behind, towards the area I had last seen the sign. It was gone again. It had appeared in my life, with no rhyme, no reason, except to save my life and the life of the girl I loved.

Would it have done the same for anyone else? Did it do the same for others?

It was odd though, all the signs were there, and I had stopped to read them, and understood them, and understood what they could have meant. But after all, they really didn't mean much, not on the surface. After all, they were just road signs.

The Weigh Down

I've always felt that there's something special about the time between 2am and sunrise. I can't explain it, and I'll probably never be able to. Everything is just so quiet and still, and the sky has its own distinct color that's never quite black, but rather a velvety violet, typically interspersed with those tiny pinpricks of light that make me feel so small, so insignificant.

This is my favorite time to walk and think.

There's never anyone around and if there is, they usually avoid eye contact and stay lost in their own thoughts. I sometimes wonder if they realize the power of this time or not, or if they just happen to be out walking, for whatever reason. Maybe I'm the only one that does this. Maybe I'll never know. I'll never engage anyone else in conversation, that's for sure. It's not that I don't like people; it's just that this time is my time, and any interruptions would mess everything up somehow. So I'm glad they ignore me, and I'm glad they're okay with me ignoring them.

I'm getting a bit off track, though.

On the particular night I'm writing this, I have just taken a highly satisfactory walk, one that took me through a beautiful twilit scene; the sky was overcast with the clouds of an oncoming storm, but the full moon fought for purchase on the shifting grounds of the heavens. The light it made was strange, unearthly, and made me feel as if I were a ghost, flitting between pools of shadow and light, appearing and disappearing as if I had never been there at all. Of course, streetlights are a thing in the modern world, but I try to avoid them. They ruin the view of the sky, and that ruins my thinking. Odd, isn't it? How sometimes we know that technology, this overarching power that controls our lives, can have different effects on us than the simple beauty of nature? See, this is what I think about on my walks. Of course, it's not just philosophy and

deep metaphorical fluff, I'm human, too. It can be schoolwork, my job, my family, or, most frequently, her.

Yeah, I went there. Girl problems and stuff.

When I returned from my walk earlier, my roommate was still awake in the common room. He asked me where I'd been, and I gave him the response I always give him:

"Around,"

He nodded and smiled, but then gave me a serious look.

"Are you okay, man?" he asked, voice full of concern.

I thought about his question for a moment. Was I okay? What does okay even mean? Nothing *felt* wrong; I wasn't upset or sad or anything like that. I guess something was off, though. Something has *been* off, but I'll be damned if I know what it is.

So I told him I was fine. He didn't look like he believed me, but I think I believed myself, and that made me feel content.

Now I sit here writing this, as I always do, trying to put thoughts on paper so that maybe I can make some sense of them. I think I'm done here, though. I think I'll go to bed, so I can dream about flitting like a ghost through a twilight night.

.....

I wake to my phone ringing. It's her. My heart metronomes faster.

I answer.

"Hello?"

"Hey." She paused. "How are you?"

Great, another dumb question.

"I'm fine, how are you?"

I only want to placate her, really.

She hesitates on the line. “I miss you.”

I’m caught off-guard, and at first find myself unable to respond.

“You’re lying.”

I hang up the phone and throw it across the room. It hits the wall and the screen shatters. For the best, most likely. Nobody calls me anymore anyway. Besides her. And although I love her and miss her, I know she doesn’t feel the same. That call was a joke, just her idea of justifying to herself the hell she’s put me through. I need to take another walk tonight. A long one.

.....

The night is warm, but I dress for winter. Heavy boots, heavy socks, t-shirt, sweatshirt, overcoat, and jeans. I probably look ridiculous, although I’m not quite sure I care. It’s the magical time again. I’m guessing it’s sometime around 3:30 or 4 in the morning. I have no way to check, since my phone is broken.

I can feel the sweat building all over my body; I should have packed the clothes in a backpack and put them on later. It’s okay, though.

The sky is glorious tonight. It’s that velvety violet I mentioned before, remember? There are a seemingly countless number of stars out as well, but they don’t make me feel small this time. This time I embrace their shy light, and wonder what clandestine truths those lights shine upon. A sudden breeze rustles the row of trees I’m passing, making it seem as though I’m walking through a tunnel of crepe paper. The breeze caresses my sweaty forehead briefly, as if to remind that it’s still around at this time, and then is gone. Everything is silent again.

She is standing at the end of the street.

How could she have possibly known? She knows I walk, and she knows my favorite time, but I went a different route this time.

I have a different destination.

I approach her warily, wondering if she's there at all, not some specter of the night, some phantom sent from the depths of my soul to redirect me, restrain me.

I stop in front of her. She reaches out and places her hand on my shoulder. I look at it. It's real enough, I feel it there. Not a phantom, then.

"I came," she said.

"I know."

"Why are you wearing so many clothes?"

I start to wonder myself. I decide not to answer.

"You can't be cold."

"I am."

"Walk with me," she says.

We walk, and say nothing. She takes my hand after a few minutes, and I accept it, even though it feels heavier than the clothes on my back. She's leading me where I want to go, although she doesn't know it. I'm glad.

It was a little colder by the river and I began to be a bit more thankful for my choice of clothing. We stopped at the midpoint of the tall bridge that spanned the water, and my heart began to pound. This was where I wanted to end up, but now it felt all wrong. She turned me towards her, and in the glare of the hovering streetlight said,

"I love you."

I looked at her for a moment, and then looked down at the water.

“I love you too,” I said finally.

She nodded, and began leading me back towards home, where maybe we would be right again. I believed she meant it when she said it this time. I would be a fool for believing otherwise. It was better for me to believe it.

As we departed, I shot one last, quick look at the black waters of the river.

They were a long way down.

Wearing Thin

The red, cyclopean eye at the top of the radio tower winks at me as I pass, almost furtively. I don't want to look at it more than I need to; I mean, I know it's just a light, but something about it makes the unease I have so far managed to abandon seep back into my bones. Everything seems so much more malevolent in the early hours of the morning. Everything seems to be watching you. This particular radio tower marks the city limits and the end of the convenient string of streetlamps I'd been following. I take out my flashlight and switch it on, letting the narrow LED beam cut through the thick summer darkness. Ahead, I can make out the outline of a signpost.

BLUFFS- 1 MILE

This was it, then. My journey was finally coming to its close. I followed the arrow on the signpost and stepped off the comforting solidity of the pavement and onto a trail that led into the woods.

I walked for what felt like hours. It was strange, the sign said only a mile, but it seemed that I had already walked four in the woods alone. My flashlight was the only thing that cemented me in reality; I could still see the beaten-down dirt of the path, the occasional tree root, and the thick woods off to either side. I heard no animals, not a rustle in the foliage, not the snap of a twig or branch.

After walking in this silent isolation for what seemed like forever, I saw a light ahead, in what appeared to be some sort of clearing.

This gave me pause. Who else would be out here? Was it a park ranger or someone of that nature, who would instantly become suspicious and lead me back home? No, the light was

far too insubstantial to be anything like the light I cast in front of me. It flickered, waxed and waned. I know before I had even stepped into the clearing that it was a fire.

A man was sitting by the fire, a man with long, dark hair, an untamed and equally dark beard, and clad in all black. He looked up as I approached, face showing no shock or alarm; he must have noticed my approach, even though that should have been impossible through the obstructing woods.

I stopped at the mouth of the clearing, unsure whether or not to approach him. He continued to gaze at me, brown eyes showing as much emotion as his face showed.

“I was wondering when you’d get here,” he said quietly. “I’ve been waiting quite a while.”

As if sensing my immediate impulse to flee, he added quickly, “Sit down, by the fire. I’ll do you no harm.”

I sat on a convenient stump and waited for him to speak again. It was clear that, in some way or another, this was his show, and I would find out soon enough why. I wasn’t even sure I cared what the outcome was, be it murder, abduction, or something more sinister. I didn’t care at all.

“I know your name,” he said at last, “and you know mine, simply because it is the same. First, middle, last, it’s the same name.” He paused again and looked at me pensively. “I am you, in a way.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but he cut me off.

“I know this sounds crazy, but hey, at this point in time, you’re willing to accept just about anything, am I correct?”

I nod.

“I am a sort of representative. A being born from your own mind, with one purpose. Do you want to know what that purpose is?”

He leaned back against the log he was lounging against. I took this opportunity to notice that, other than the fire, there was nothing around that would have suggested this man had been there at all. No tent, no food, no miscellaneous supplies. He was alone with the fire, which, as I looked at him more, I noticed seemed to not be merely reflected in his eyes, but a part of them.

“You’re here to protect me, aren’t you? From myself?” I spoke at last.

“Yes! Exactly! I am here to show you what you can be if you decide not to pursue what you’re about to. I know it’s been hard, it’ll be even harder along the way, but what you’re thinking isn’t the answer, man.”

“What do you even think I’m going to do?” I shouted, surprising myself, “You think I’m going to do something drastic. I’m just taking a walk. That’s it.”

He chuckled softly. “It’s just a walk right now, my friend.”

I stood up, wanting to continue on, wanting to escape this man who seemed to know far too much, who, despite all my rationalities, did not seem to be completely real. I moved to leave the clearing and continue further into the trees when he spoke on last time.

“Walk now, boy. You know what the old cliché says: you can’t run from your feelings!”

His laughter followed me as I escaped into the dark solitude of the trees once again. When I considered myself a safe distance away, I turned and looked back towards the clearing. Pitch black. Either the forest had once again become too dense for me to see it, or the fire was gone, extinguished, like the man that sat before it.

My flashlight once again became the only source of light. There must have been stars out, and perhaps a moon, but the foliage above me had become too thick to show the sky. I knew I

was close to reaching my destination, though; it was no longer silent. I could hear the secretive lap of waves against a shore.

I rounded a corner, feet leaving the well-worn dirt path I had been following and connecting with a new one, one of gravel and loose stone. I slowed down, keeping my light aimed on the ground, knowing that this area could be dangerous.

I had reached the bluffs.

As I neared the designated observation area (a small, paved zone containing a bench and a couple of those coin-operated binocular stands), I noticed a small light ahead of me. It seemed that there was someone sitting on the safety fence, shining a light much weaker than my own, down towards the rock and water below. I crept forward cautiously, wondering if perhaps it was the man I had encountered earlier, or some other nefarious specter, out to dissuade me from my path.

It was not the man. It was a woman, the most breathtaking woman I had ever seen. She seemed to be about my age, and, for some reason, seemed familiar. Maybe it was the long, wavy brown hair, or the eyes, the perfectly shaped hazel eyes. I couldn't be sure. She was looking at me over her shoulder, and yes, I could see that she was indeed sitting on the safety fence, legs dangling, kicking back and forth like a metronome.

"Hello?" I say politely. "What are you doing out here? It must be almost three in the morning."

"I could ask you the same thing," she said, smiling. "I'm out here for a reason. Are you?"

"I don't know," I reply. "I thought I was when I set out, but then I met -I mean, something happened, and I just wanted to keep going anyway."

She laughed. “I know what you mean. Nothing has really changed my reason, though; I’m just kind of letting it play out. I’m glad you showed up. I really wanted to talk to someone, at least for a bit.”

Something about the way she talked unnerved me. I couldn’t tell what it was. She seemed too wholesome, too honest; I couldn’t help but feel there was something else, something underneath it. And the ceaseless rhythm of her legs, one two, one two, made me feel uncomfortable.

We stayed in silence for a few minutes, listening to the water below, until I finally spoke up.

“What did you come here for?”

She smiled sweetly once again, and in it, I could see immense sadness.

“For this.” And with that, she casually pushed herself over the edge and dropped into the darkness. I yelled, but it made no difference. She was already gone, and there wasn’t one single thing I could do. The drop was too far, the cliff too sheer to even attempt to get to her. I knew what I would find if I did.

I began to sob, falling to the ground on my knees. She had done what I had originally pondered, and she must have been another phantom, as the chances of that happening were far too slim to be coincidence.

I stood up abruptly. I had to leave, had to depart the area before the black, hypnotic gaze of the drop drew me in as well. I ran, this time down a new path, one much less used, crashing through trees, tripping over rocks and roots. The night came alive again in a quickly swelling crescendo of noises: the wind in the trees, the snap of twigs, the occasional chuckle of a bird.

Up ahead I could see that the trees were beginning to thin. I was almost out, almost away. Once my feet made contact with pavement, I stopped to catch my breath, and looked up. The sun was beginning to rise; I could see its faint glow on the horizon. I must have been gone for hours, maybe days, who knows. I walked around a bend in the road.

The red, cyclopean eye at the top of the radio tower winks at me as I pass, almost cheerfully. I gaze at it; I mean, I know it's just a light, but something about it makes the unease that had managed to overcome me seep out of my bones. Everything seems so much more calming in the late hours of the morning, when the sun is on its way up. Everything seems to be watching you. This particular radio tower marked the city limits and the beginning of the soon-to-be useless string of streetlamps along the street. I turn off my flashlight and shove it in my pocket, letting first subtle rays of sun wash over my face. Behind me, without looking, I know there is a signpost, pointing towards an innocent path. I'm heading in the opposite direction, though, back towards the city. I notice one of the shacks near the radio tower has been vandalized. The spray-painted message is headed with an arrow that points the direction I'm walking.

LIFE THIS WAY