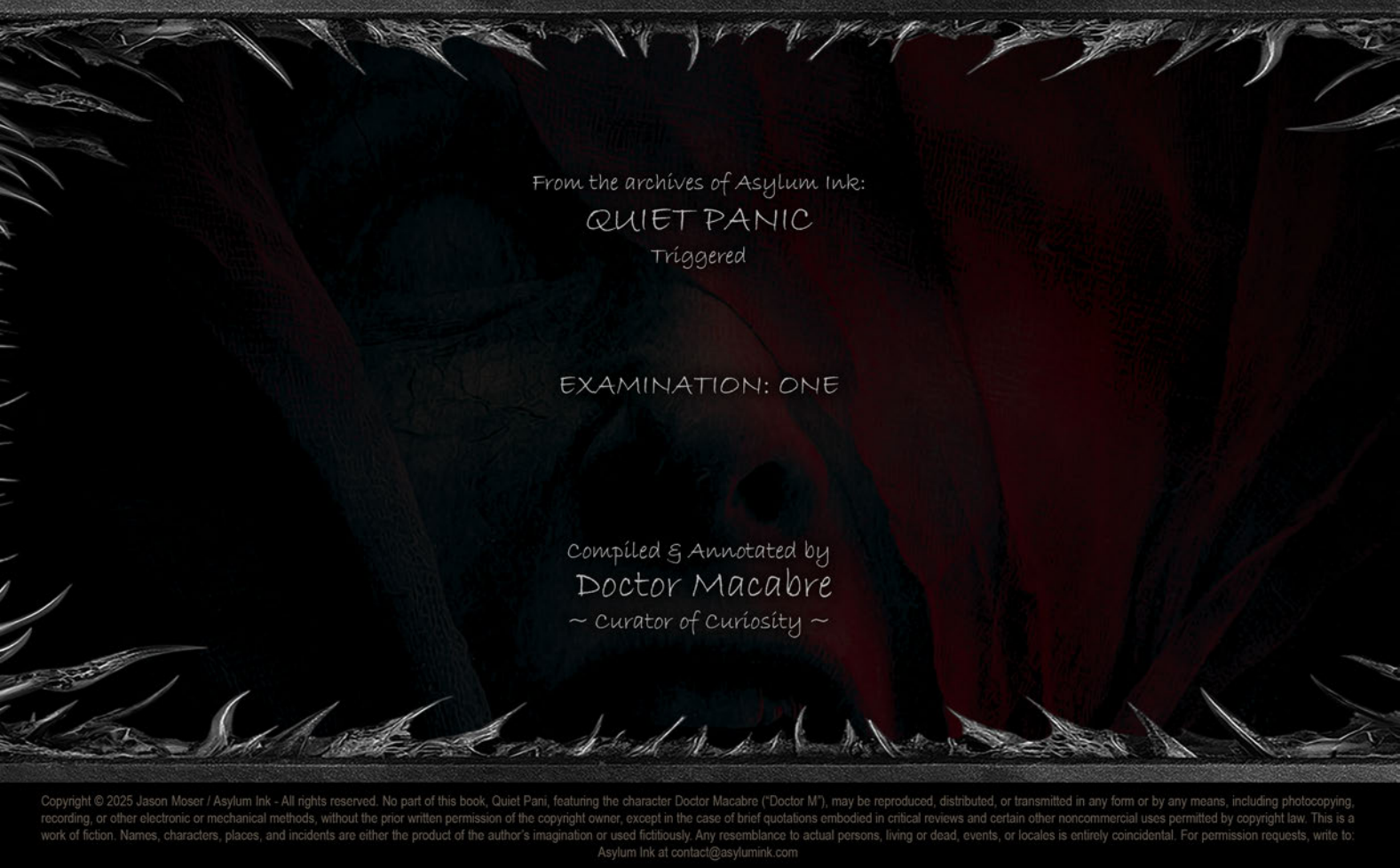


THE QUIET PANIC



EXAMINATION: ONE



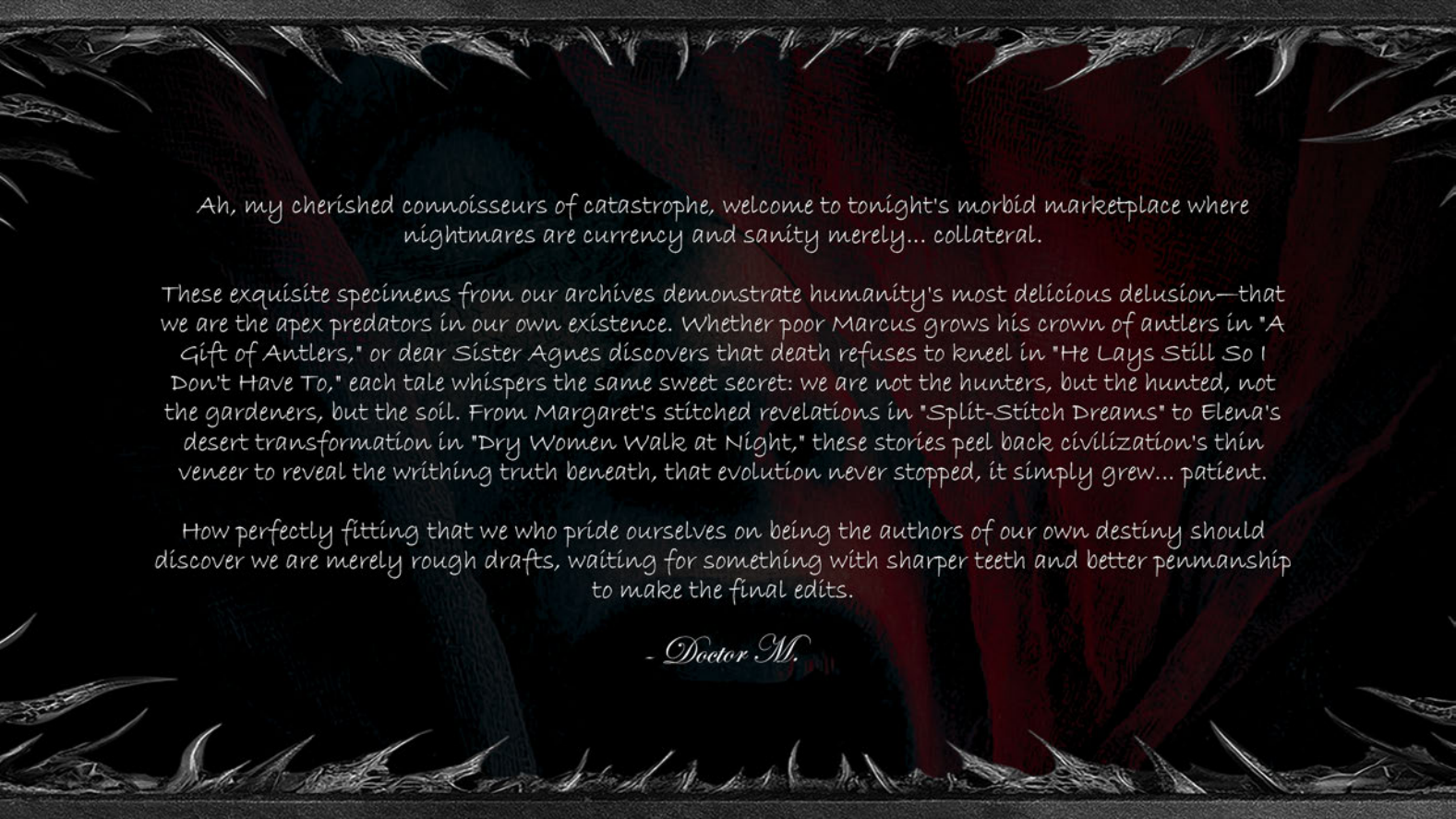
From the archives of Asylum Ink:

QUIET PANIC

Triggered

EXAMINATION: ONE

Compiled & Annotated by
Doctor Macabre
~ Curator of Curiosity ~



Ah, my cherished connoisseurs of catastrophe, welcome to tonight's morbid marketplace where nightmares are currency and sanity merely... collateral.

These exquisite specimens from our archives demonstrate humanity's most delicious delusion—that we are the apex predators in our own existence. Whether poor Marcus grows his crown of antlers in "A Gift of Antlers," or dear Sister Agnes discovers that death refuses to kneel in "He Lays Still So I Don't Have To," each tale whispers the same sweet secret: we are not the hunters, but the hunted, not the gardeners, but the soil. From Margaret's stitched revelations in "Split-Stitch Dreams" to Elena's desert transformation in "Dry Women Walk at Night," these stories peel back civilization's thin veneer to reveal the writhing truth beneath, that evolution never stopped, it simply grew... patient.

How perfectly fitting that we who pride ourselves on being the authors of our own destiny should discover we are merely rough drafts, waiting for something with sharper teeth and better penmanship to make the final edits.

- *Doctor M.*

~ CHAPTERS ~

A GIFT OF ANTLERS
SOMETHING IS CHEWING
HE LAYS STILL SO I DON'T HAVE TO
THE BRINE IN MY LUNGS
DRY WOMEN WALK AT NIGHT
THE SHAPE THAT WAITS ON ROOFS
SCRATCHING AT THE DOOR
HES TALLER EVERY TIME
SPLIT-STITCH DREAMS
CHOIR PRACTICE



A GIFT OF ANTLERS

PATIENT CLASSIFICATION:

**Acute Predator-Fixation Syndrome with
Somnambulistic Wilderness Regression**

ATTENDING:

Dr. Lenora Marsh

DATE OF ADMISSION:

September 14th, 2024

SECURITY LEVEL: Red

(Maximum Containment. No Unsupervised Movement)

Cassian Harker arrived at our facility wrapped in a hospital blanket that couldn't quite conceal the geography of wounds mapping his flesh: parallel furrows raked across his shoulders like sheet music written in scar tissue, each note a testament to nights he claimed not to remember. The wilderness therapy guide who had once led troubled adolescents through the healing embrace of ancient forests now sat in my office with his gaze fixed on the polished floor, his pupils dilated to black coins that reflected nothing but the sterile fluorescent light above us.



"I can feel them watching," he whispered, his voice carrying the hollow timbre of wind through dead leaves.

"Even here. Even now. They know I'm weak."

The first gift had appeared in his hiking boots three weeks before his breakdown: a single shard of antler, yellowed with age and sharp enough to draw blood from the pad of his thumb when he'd examined it in the pre-dawn darkness of his cabin. By the time the forest service found him, naked and hypothermic in a grove of lightning-struck oaks fifteen miles from his last known position, his footwear had become a reliquary of bone fragments. Each piece was larger and more intricately carved than the last, as if something with infinite patience was teaching him the anatomy of reverence through gifts that cut his feet to ribbons.





The sleepwalking had begun innocuously enough. Harker would wake to find pine needles in his bed, dirt beneath his fingernails, the taste of moss and decay coating his tongue like communion wine gone sour. But as the weeks progressed, the nocturnal pilgrimages grew longer, more purposeful. His feet would carry him deeper into the wilderness, past familiar trails and into territories where the trees grew too close together and the shadows moved with predatory intent. He would return each morning with new wounds, fresh antler fragments, and memories that dissolved like morning mist the moment he tried to grasp them.

“They’re preparing me,” he told me during our second session, his fingers unconsciously tracing the latest constellation of scars across his forearm. “Each night, they touch me a little more. Learning where the tender places hide. Where the meat comes away clean from the bone.”



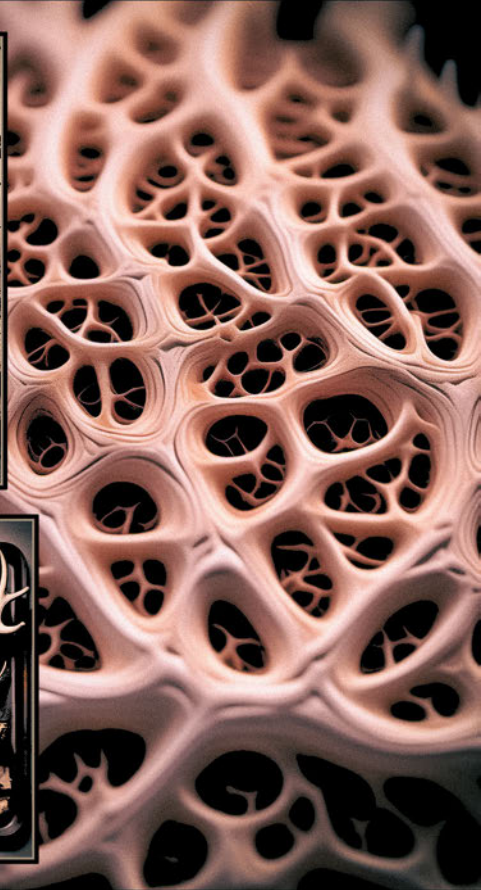
The surveillance footage from his first week at our facility revealed the true scope of his condition. At precisely 3:17 AM each night, Harker would rise from his bed with the fluid grace of a man underwater. His movements were guided by an intelligence that clearly wasn't his own. He would walk to his door and stand there for exactly thirteen minutes, his palm pressed flat against the reinforced steel, his ear tilted as if listening to frequencies that existed below the threshold of human perception. Then he would return to bed, curl into a fetal position, and begin making sounds our audio specialists described as territorial vocalizations consistent with large cervidae, yet possessing harmonic complexities that suggested cognitive awareness.

The antler fragments multiplied with each passing night, materializing in his room despite our enhanced security protocols. Dr. Kellerman from our research division examined the specimens with growing unease.

His preliminary reports grew increasingly incoherent as the bone shards defied conventional analysis. They were composed of living tissue: neurons firing with electrical activity, blood vessels pulsing with a circulation that belonged to no earthly taxonomy. Under electron microscopy, the surface revealed intricate carvings that seemed to shift and rearrange themselves when observed. These patterns suggested not decoration, but instruction, as if something was teaching him a language written in calcium and keratin.

“Where do they come from, Cassian?” I asked during our fifth session, holding up a particularly massive fragment that curved like a question mark dipped in old blood.

His laugh was the sound of wind through a charnel house. “They’re not from something that died, Doctor. They’re from something that’s learning to live again. In me.”



The transformation accelerated with each subsequent night. Harker's body began showing signs of systematic modification. His joints loosened in their sockets, allowing for ranges of motion suited to digitigrade locomotion. His teeth loosened and fell out in his sleep, replaced by new growth, sharp and yellowed, designed for tearing rather than grinding. Most disturbing were the budding protrusions emerging from his skull, small at first but growing with each dawn. They pushed through the skin with the patient inevitability of antlers breaking through velvet.

By his second week, the sleepwalking episodes had evolved into something far more complex. Security cameras captured him performing elaborate rituals in his room. He arranged the antler fragments in geometric patterns that hurt to look at directly, his naked body moving with the precision of a conductor orchestrating a symphony of bone and blood. He would spend hours in these configurations, his breathing synchronized to rhythms our monitors couldn't quite parse, his skin flushed with a fever that registered no temperature on our instruments.



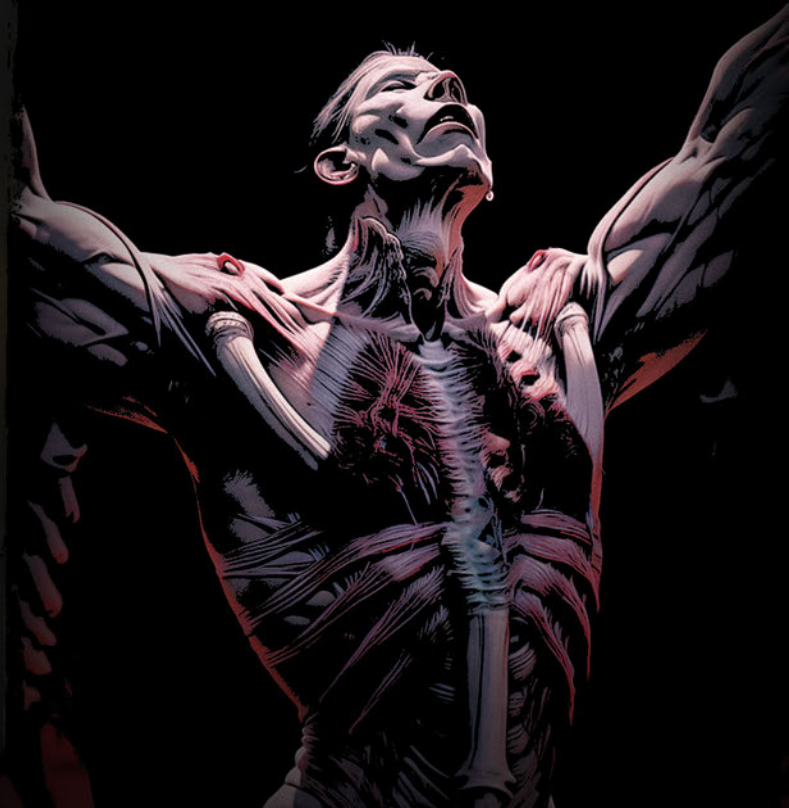


"It's almost ready," he whispered during what would be our final session. His eyes, when they briefly met mine, held depths that belonged to something far older than the young man who had entered our facility just weeks before. "The vessel is nearly prepared. Soon, it will walk among the trees again, and the hunt will resume as it did in the time before time."

The bones protruding from his skull had grown into a magnificent rack by then, seven points on each side that curved and branched with the terrible beauty of winter trees against a dying sky. They wept a constant seepage of clear fluid that pooled on his pillow each morning, leaving stains our laundry staff claimed moved when nobody was watching. The largest tines had hollowed themselves out, revealing chambers lined with what appeared to be nervous tissue, wet, pink corridors that pulsed with their own malevolent life.

On his eighteenth night, the cameras captured his final transformation. At 3:17 AM, Harker rose from his bed and walked to the center of his room, where the accumulated antler fragments had arranged themselves into a perfect spiral. He knelt within the pattern and began to keen: a sound that shattered two of our observation windows and sent three staff members to the medical wing with ruptured eardrums. As the sound peaked, his flesh began to split along predetermined seams, peeling away like a chrysalis to reveal something that had been growing beneath the human facade.

What emerged was magnificent and terrible. A creature that retained Harker's basic structure but perfected it for purposes that predated civilization. Its limbs had elongated and strengthened, ending in hooves that struck sparks from the concrete floor. Its torso was lean and powerful, designed for pursuit through dense undergrowth. But it was the head that commanded attention: still recognizably human in its basic architecture, yet crowned with antlers that spanned the width of the room, each tine carved with symbols that seemed to writhe and shift when observed directly.



The thing that had been Cassian Harker turned to face the observation camera and smiled with a mouth full of predator's teeth. When it spoke, its voice carried harmonics that made the reinforced glass vibrate like a tuning fork.

"The woods have been patient," it said, tilting its antlered head with that same unnatural angle I had observed throughout his treatment. "But patience has its limits. The hunt begins at dawn."

The creature vanished sometime before morning rounds, leaving behind only a pile of shed human skin arranged with ritualistic precision and a single message carved into the concrete wall with surgical accuracy: I have remembered what I am.



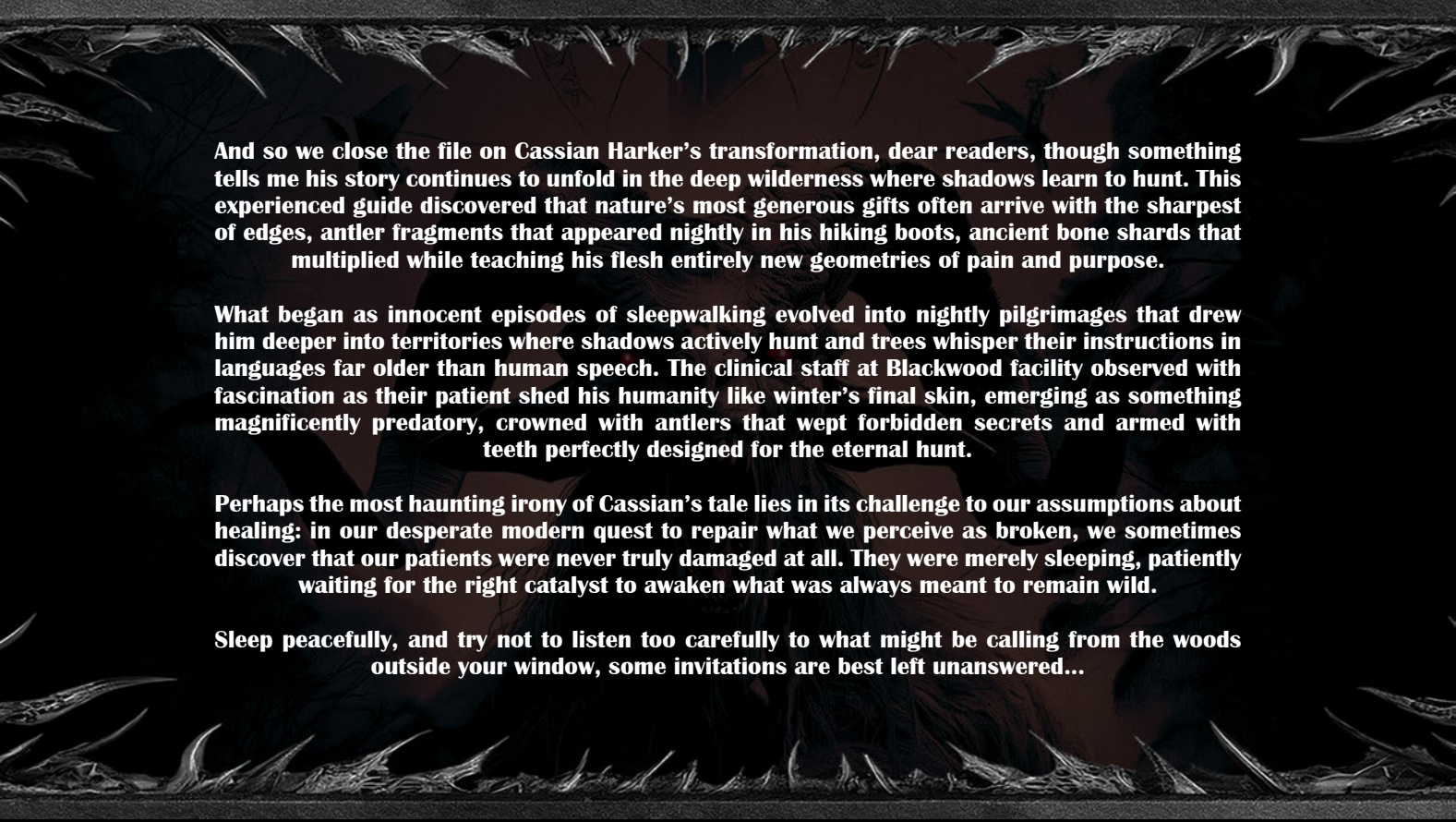


ATTENDING NOTES – DR. LENORA MARSH

Patient successfully integrated with primary consciousness on Day 18. Transformation proceeded according to expected parameters, with full biological restructuring completed within acceptable timeframes. Subject now operating at peak efficiency within designated hunting territory.

Recommend immediate activation of secondary containment protocols. The Blackwood facility was never intended as a treatment center. We are a harvesting operation, and our crop is finally ready for the feast. The antlers were never gifts. They were summoning calls. Now the Old Ones walk among the trees again, wearing faces we trusted and voices we loved. Phase Two begins tomorrow. May God forgive us for what we have awakened in the name of healing. Personal note: I can hear them calling to me now, promising gifts of bone and sinew. My shoes are full of fragments that weren't there this morning. Soon, I will join Cassian in the forest, and together we will teach the world to remember what it means to be prey.

The treatment is working perfectly.



And so we close the file on Cassian Harker's transformation, dear readers, though something tells me his story continues to unfold in the deep wilderness where shadows learn to hunt. This experienced guide discovered that nature's most generous gifts often arrive with the sharpest of edges, antler fragments that appeared nightly in his hiking boots, ancient bone shards that multiplied while teaching his flesh entirely new geometries of pain and purpose.

What began as innocent episodes of sleepwalking evolved into nightly pilgrimages that drew him deeper into territories where shadows actively hunt and trees whisper their instructions in languages far older than human speech. The clinical staff at Blackwood facility observed with fascination as their patient shed his humanity like winter's final skin, emerging as something magnificently predatory, crowned with antlers that wept forbidden secrets and armed with teeth perfectly designed for the eternal hunt.

Perhaps the most haunting irony of Cassian's tale lies in its challenge to our assumptions about healing: in our desperate modern quest to repair what we perceive as broken, we sometimes discover that our patients were never truly damaged at all. They were merely sleeping, patiently waiting for the right catalyst to awaken what was always meant to remain wild.

Sleep peacefully, and try not to listen too carefully to what might be calling from the woods outside your window, some invitations are best left unanswered...



SOMETHING IS CHEWING

PATIENT CLASSIFICATION: Environmental Contamination

Phobia with Somatic Conversion Syndrome

ATTENDING: Dr. Astrid Fenwick

DATE OF ADMISSION: November 8th, 2024

SECURITY LEVEL: Red (High Risk - Iso. Protocol Required)

The stench preceded Corvin Holbrook into my office like a herald of corruption, carbolic acid wrestling with something sweeter, more cloying, something that spoke of decay masquerading as confection. His hands were swathed in gauze that had already surrendered to crimson seepage, testament to his midnight ministrations with wire brushes and industrial soap. The orderlies had discovered him at three in the morning, hunched over Ward C's communal sink, methodically flaying the flesh from his palms until ribbons of skin clung to the bristles like wet tissue paper.



Seventeen years he'd mopped the floors of Sunnybrook Elementary. Seventeen years of scraping fossilized gum from desktop undersides, fishing lost molars from sandbox gravel, mopping the inevitable biological catastrophes that attend childhood's messier moments. An exemplary employee until three weeks ago, when he barricaded himself in his janitorial closet and refused to emerge for thirty-six hours, speaking only to whisper about teeth that grew in wrong configurations and children who chewed with the rhythm of machines.

"You don't understand," he said, settling into the interview chair with the careful precision of a man balancing on the edge of an abyss. "I know teeth. I've collected hundreds of them over the years, little white treasures lost in playground mulch, wedged between cafeteria table slats, scattered across classroom floors like breadcrumbs from some fairy tale gone wrong. I know what children's teeth look like." His voice cracked, became something raw and desperate. "These aren't children's teeth."



The first sign, he insisted, had been the smell in the cafeteria. Not the usual institutional miasma of processed cheese and ammonia cleaners, but something else threading through the air like an unwelcome guest. Sweet rot. Cotton candy left to putrefy in summer heat. He'd attributed it to blocked drains or spoiled milk initially, but the odor had intensified, grown thick enough to taste, until it seemed to pulse with its own malevolent heartbeat.

"Strongest near the serving line," he continued, unwrapping his hands with methodical deliberation. Beneath the gauze lay raw hamburger, skin scrubbed down to subcutaneous fat that wept continuously. "Right where they dispensed the pudding cups. That's when I started noticing the way they ate. Their jaw movements were wrong, too wide, too vigorous, like their mouths had been redesigned for some more primitive purpose. And the sounds..." He shuddered. "Not the usual cafeteria chatter, but wet grinding that seemed to come from everywhere at once."





Mrs. Patterson, the second-grade teacher, had asked him to investigate under Tommy Brennan's desk. The boy had been spitting something during math class, she said. But when Corvin crawled beneath the miniature furniture, he found not saliva but fragments, tiny white splinters like broken porcelain, still warm from the child's mouth, still radiating body heat as if they housed some obscene form of life.

Three days later, he discovered the first aberrant specimen beneath the jungle gym. Not a typical lost baby tooth, those he'd catalogued by the hundreds, but something else entirely. Yellowed and serrated, curved like a predator's fang, pulsing when he touched it as if it harbored its own heartbeat. He showed it to Principal Hendricks, who dismissed it as probably canine in origin, perhaps tossed over the school fence by some careless dog owner.

“But dogs don’t lose teeth that are still growing,” Corvin whispered, leaning forward until I could smell the antiseptic on his breath. “This one was growing even in my hand. I could feel it getting longer, sharper, the root system writhing like something alive.”

More teeth appeared throughout the following days. In the lost-and-found box. Wedged between cafeteria benches. Scattered across the nurse’s office floor like some grotesque trail of breadcrumbs. Each one wrong in its own particular way, too large, too sharp, bearing root systems that moved with autonomous purpose, seeking purchase in whatever substrate they encountered.



The revelation came during his final shift, when he found the walk-in refrigerator standing ajar. Fifty pounds that door weighed, magnetic seals that didn't simply fail without cause. Inside, behind the milk crates and lunch meat containers, something was feeding. He described it in fragments, his voice fracturing with each detail, a pale, corpulent mass the size of a small elephant, its hide mottled with patches that looked disturbingly like human skin. But it was the mouth that shattered his sanity: a gaping maw lined with hundreds of teeth identical to those he'd been finding throughout the school, creating a grinding mill of enamel and root that consumed everything within reach.

"Fifty pounds of processed turkey and ham, just disappearing into that mouth," he said, beginning to rewrap his hands with fresh gauze. "And the sound... like a garbage disposal full of broken glass. But worse than the creature itself were its offspring, dozens of pale, writhing things the size of house cats, each bearing a smaller version of that terrible mouth, swarming over the floor and consuming everything: spilled food, cleaning supplies, even the rubber gaskets from the refrigerator door."





The children, he claimed, were no longer eating the standard school lunches. They were consuming whatever those entities excreted, and that was why their teeth were changing, why they smelled like candy and death, why their jaw movements had become mechanical and wrong.

Corvin hasn't eaten solid food in eighteen days now. He subsists entirely on water that he boils for thirty minutes, then boils again, convinced that contamination lurks in every molecule that hasn't been purified by flame. He scrubs his hands every hour until they bleed, reopening wounds that refuse to heal, as if his body is trying to purge some invisible infection that has taken root in his very cells.



“You think I’m delusional,” he said, watching me scribble notes in his file. “But I’ve seen the truth. Those things are changing the children from the inside out, making them into something else. Something hungry.”

Through my office window, I watched a school bus pull up to deliver today’s new admissions. Perfectly normal children disembarked with their perfectly normal backpacks and lunch boxes, chattering about homework and weekend plans. But as they walked past my window, one of them turned and smiled at me through the glass.

His teeth were very, very white.

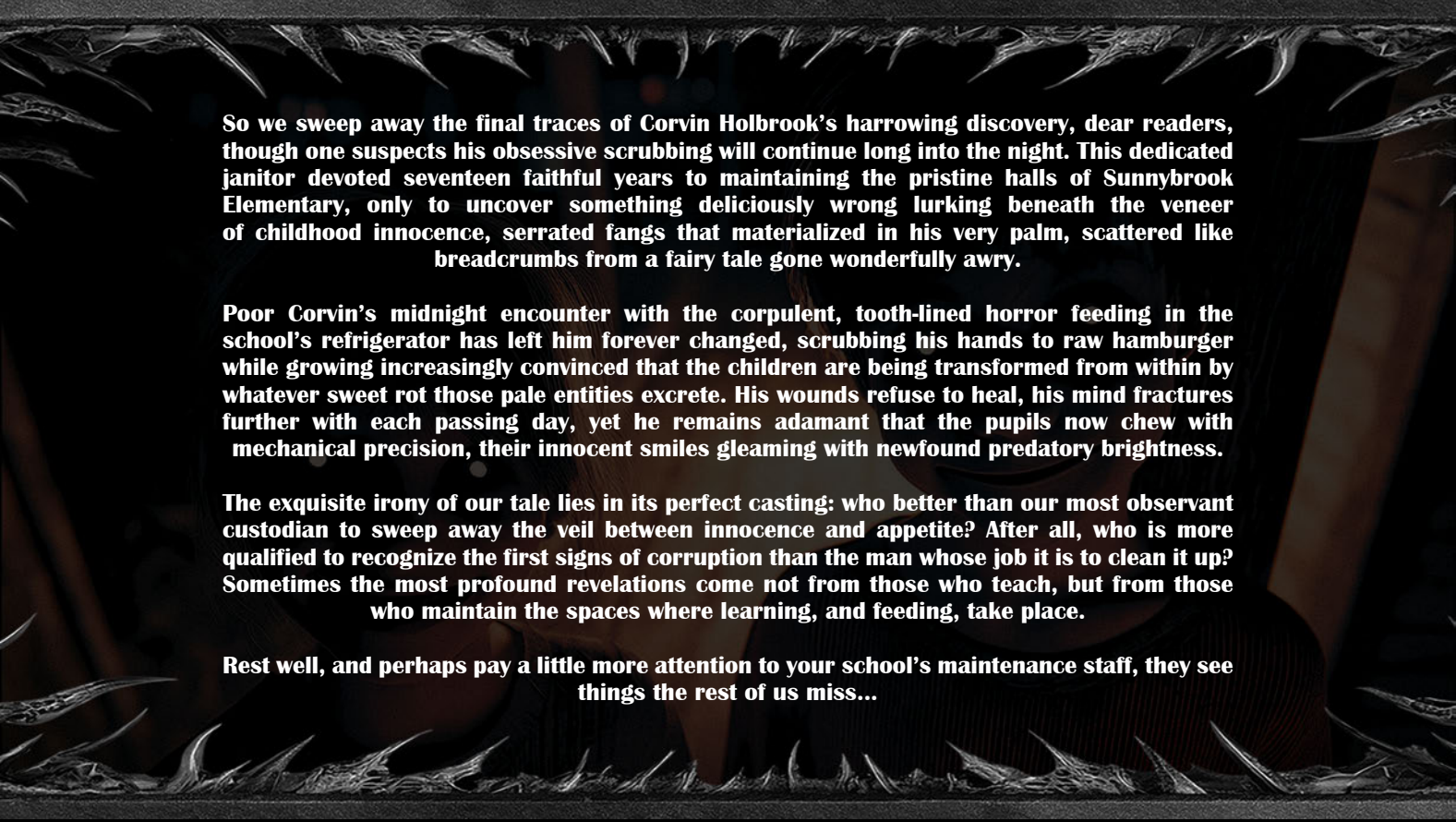
Attending Notes -

Patient demonstrates severe contamination obsessions coupled with tactile hallucinations of increasing intensity. The wounds on his hands show no signs of healing despite aggressive treatment, suggesting possible psychosomatic factors. Recommend indefinite isolation and twice-daily wound care. Under no circumstances should he be permitted near food preparation areas, his intimate knowledge of institutional infrastructure, combined with his current psychological state, presents significant risk factors.

Note: I've requested kitchen staff monitor spoilage rates in our refrigerated goods. Sometimes the line between delusion and revelation proves disturbingly thin.

- Dr. Astrid Fenwick





So we sweep away the final traces of Corvin Holbrook's harrowing discovery, dear readers, though one suspects his obsessive scrubbing will continue long into the night. This dedicated janitor devoted seventeen faithful years to maintaining the pristine halls of Sunnybrook Elementary, only to uncover something deliciously wrong lurking beneath the veneer of childhood innocence, serrated fangs that materialized in his very palm, scattered like breadcrumbs from a fairy tale gone wonderfully awry.

Poor Corvin's midnight encounter with the corpulent, tooth-lined horror feeding in the school's refrigerator has left him forever changed, scrubbing his hands to raw hamburger while growing increasingly convinced that the children are being transformed from within by whatever sweet rot those pale entities excrete. His wounds refuse to heal, his mind fractures further with each passing day, yet he remains adamant that the pupils now chew with mechanical precision, their innocent smiles gleaming with newfound predatory brightness.

The exquisite irony of our tale lies in its perfect casting: who better than our most observant custodian to sweep away the veil between innocence and appetite? After all, who is more qualified to recognize the first signs of corruption than the man whose job it is to clean it up? Sometimes the most profound revelations come not from those who teach, but from those who maintain the spaces where learning, and feeding, take place.

Rest well, and perhaps pay a little more attention to your school's maintenance staff, they see things the rest of us miss...





HE LAYS STILL SO I DON'T HAVE TO

PATIENT CLASSIFICATION: Acute Thanatomorphic
Psychosis with Secondary Parasomnia
ATTENDING PHYSICIAN: Dr. Elias Blakemore, M.D., Ph.D.
(Psychiatric Disorders & Somnambulistic Pathology)
DATE OF ADMISSION: October 13th, 2024
SECURITY LEVEL: Yellow
(Supervised Observation - Potential Self-Harm Risk)

The porcelain gleamed like bone in the amber light that seeped through Sister Agnes Carmichael's bathroom window, casting shadows that writhed and danced across the cracked tiles where she had taken residence. Three weeks now she had made her bed in that narrow space between bathtub and wall, her arthritic fingers clutching a rosary whose beads had worn smooth as river stones beneath the constant ministrations of her prayers.

The words tumbled from her lips in whispered litanies that had begun to blur together into something that might have been Latin, might have been tongues, might have been the desperate keen of a mind unraveling like old rope.

“He died for me,” she would murmur to the yellowed ceiling, her voice scratching raw against the confined acoustics of her ceramic sanctuary, “but he didn’t stop.”

The chapel lay seventeen paces down the corridor from her abandoned bedroom, she had counted them obsessively in those first nights when sleep still seemed a possibility, when the darkness beyond her door held only the familiar shadows of a convent she had called home for forty-seven years. But distance meant nothing when the thing that had once been Brother Matthias continued its patient vigil before the altar, his flesh the color of old parchment, his eyes twin pools of milk that should have clouded over with death’s merciful veil but instead remained fixed upon some point beyond the vaulted ceiling, beyond the stars, beyond the thin membrane that separated this world from whatever writhed in the spaces between.





The other sisters whispered that he had simply passed in his sleep, found kneeling in perfect supplication before the crucifix, his hands clasped in final prayer. A beautiful death, they called it. A holy death. But Sister Agnes knew better, because she had been there in those last moments when Brother Matthias had drawn his final breath, and she had seen the way his eyes had rolled back not in ecstasy but in something approaching terror, had heard the wet gurgle that escaped his throat as if something within was struggling to claw its way out.

That had been six days ago, and still he knelt there, perfectly preserved in his pious pose while the autumn heat should have long since begun its work of returning him to dust.

The other sisters spoke of miracles, of incorruption, of signs and wonders that God might work through His most faithful servants. But Sister Agnes felt only the creeping certainty that whatever animated Brother Matthias now was not divine grace but something far older, far hungrier, something that wore sanctity like a mask over features too terrible to comprehend.

She had tried to sleep that first night, had lain in her narrow cot and pulled the thin blanket up to her chin like armor against the dark. But through the walls she could hear it, the soft whisper of cloth against stone as Brother Matthias shifted position, the careful sound of joints adjusting after hours of rigid genuflection. Not the random settling of a corpse, but the deliberate movements of something that waited with infinite patience for her to lower her guard.



By the second night, she had moved to the chair beside her window, keeping watch through the long hours as shadows pooled and shifted in the courtyard below. But even there she was not safe, because sometimes when the wind was still and the convent held its breath, she could hear the gentle rustle of pages turning in the chapel, the whispered cadence of prayers spoken in a voice that was almost but not quite Brother Matthias's own.

The bathtub had become her fortress by the third night, its high white walls providing some small comfort against the growing certainty that the thing in the chapel was learning, changing, becoming something more than the simple monk who had devoted his life to humble service. She could feel its attention like cold fingers trailing along her spine, could sense the weight of its milk-white gaze pressing against the thin barriers of wood and stone that separated them.



"He lays still so I don't have to," she whispered to the darkness, the words becoming a mantra against the slow dissolution of her sanity. Because she understood now that this was the bargain that had been struck, the unholy covenant that bound her to her ceramic sanctuary. As long as Brother Matthias maintained his vigil in the chapel, as long as he remained locked in his endless prayer, she was safe. But should she sleep, should she let her guard down for even a moment, then he would be free to rise, to walk, to seek out what he truly hungered for.

The dreams came anyway, creeping through the cracks in her resolve like water through broken stone. In them she stood before the altar and saw Brother Matthias as he truly was, not a corpse animated by divine purpose but a hollow vessel filled with writhing shadows, his mouth opening to reveal not teeth but darkness absolute, his fingers stretching toward her with joints that bent in ways that human anatomy should not allow. She would wake screaming, her nightgown soaked with sweat, her hands clawing at the smooth porcelain as if she could dig her way through to some deeper safety.



The other sisters found her there on the morning of the seventh day, curled like a broken thing in the space between tub and wall, her lips moving in constant prayer to a God who seemed to have turned His face away from this place of supposed sanctuary. They spoke in hushed tones of exhaustion, of grief taking its toll, of the need for rest and medical attention. But Sister Agnes could see the fear in their eyes, the way they glanced toward the chapel and quickly looked away, the manner in which they crossed themselves with trembling fingers.

Because they knew, even if they would not admit it, that something had changed in their sanctuary. They felt it in the way the air seemed thicker near the chapel doors, in the manner in which their prayers echoed strangely in that sacred space, in the growing certainty that Brother Matthias's milk-white eyes tracked their movements with an intelligence that should have died with his flesh.





“He’s waiting,” Sister Agnes told them as they helped her to her feet, her voice cracked and dry as autumn leaves. “He’s waiting for me to sleep, but I won’t. I can’t. Because he died for me, but he didn’t stop, and if I close my eyes then he’ll know, and he’ll come, and then...”

She never finished the thought, because some truths were too terrible to speak aloud, too corrupting to give voice to in a place that had once been holy. Instead she let them lead her away from her porcelain sanctuary, away from the only safety she had known in this nightmare of flesh and faith, toward whatever fresh horrors awaited in the world beyond.

Behind them, in the chapel, Brother Matthias maintained his eternal vigil, his milk-white eyes fixed upon eternity, his lips curved in what might have been a smile.



Attending Notes - Dr. E. Blakemore:

***Patient exhibits severe sleep deprivation and acute anxiety consistent with thanatomorphic episode. Physical examination reveals no evidence of self-harm, though muscle atrophy suggests prolonged periods of immobility. Of particular note: patient becomes increasingly agitated when questioned about the deceased Brother Matthias, insisting repeatedly that “he hasn’t blinked in days.”**

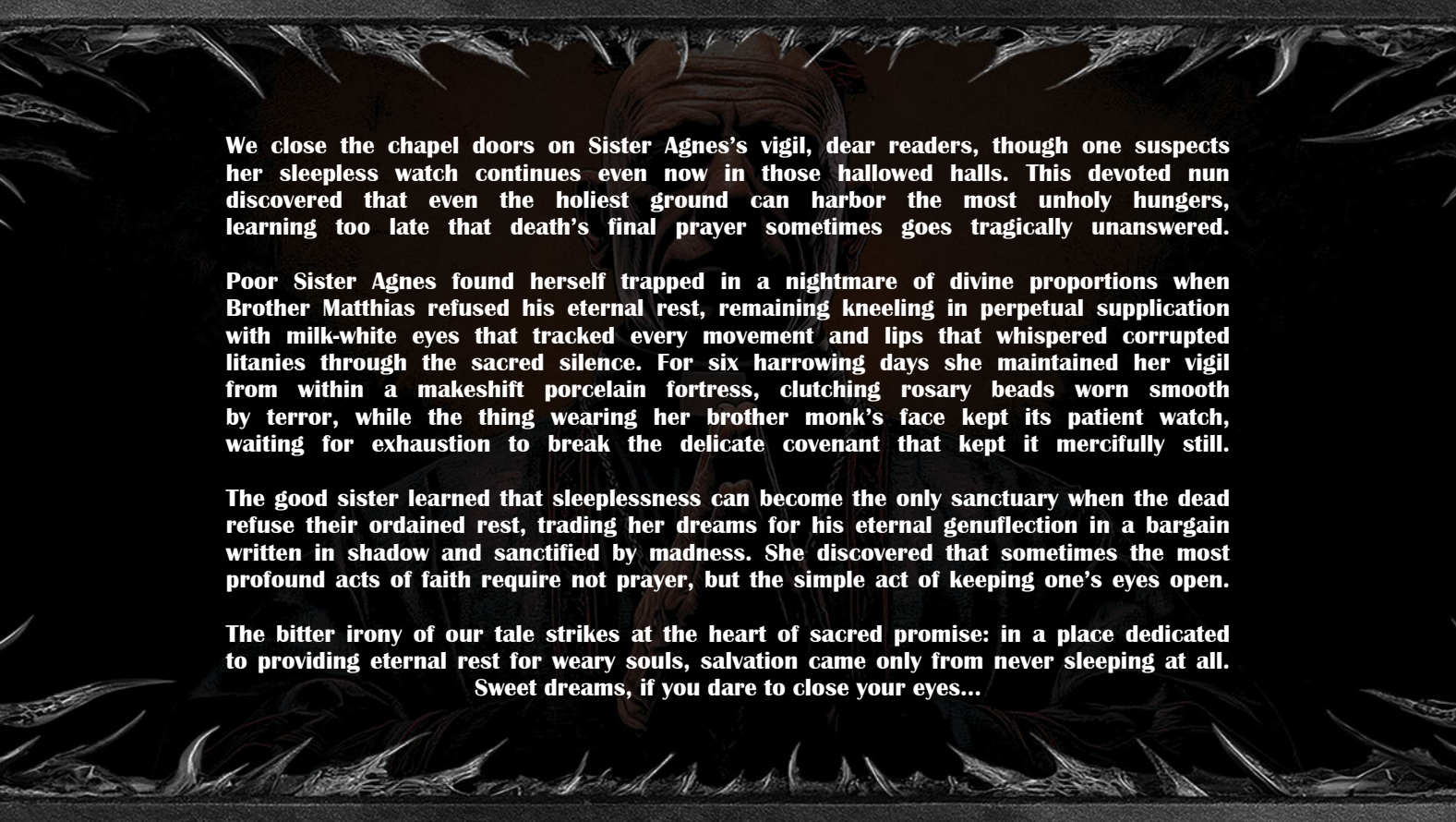
Curious detail from convent records: Brother Matthias was indeed found deceased in the chapel six days prior to patient’s admission. Body remains in situ pending ecclesiastical investigation into claims of incorruption. Local diocese reports no decomposition despite optimal conditions for decay.

**Patient's room overlooks chapel courtyard.
Have requested transfer to interior ward.**

**Addendum: Night staff report patient does not sleep.
Observed through security monitors maintaining rigid
vigilance toward chapel windows throughout hours of
darkness. When questioned about sleep patterns, patient
responds only: "He lays still so I don't have to."**

**Beginning to understand why the other sisters
avoid the chapel corridor after sunset.**





We close the chapel doors on Sister Agnes's vigil, dear readers, though one suspects her sleepless watch continues even now in those hallowed halls. This devoted nun discovered that even the holiest ground can harbor the most unholy hungers, learning too late that death's final prayer sometimes goes tragically unanswered.

Poor Sister Agnes found herself trapped in a nightmare of divine proportions when Brother Matthias refused his eternal rest, remaining kneeling in perpetual supplication with milk-white eyes that tracked every movement and lips that whispered corrupted litanies through the sacred silence. For six harrowing days she maintained her vigil from within a makeshift porcelain fortress, clutching rosary beads worn smooth by terror, while the thing wearing her brother monk's face kept its patient watch, waiting for exhaustion to break the delicate covenant that kept it mercifully still.

The good sister learned that sleeplessness can become the only sanctuary when the dead refuse their ordained rest, trading her dreams for his eternal genuflection in a bargain written in shadow and sanctified by madness. She discovered that sometimes the most profound acts of faith require not prayer, but the simple act of keeping one's eyes open.

The bitter irony of our tale strikes at the heart of sacred promise: in a place dedicated to providing eternal rest for weary souls, salvation came only from never sleeping at all.

Sweet dreams, if you dare to close your eyes...



THE BRINE IN MY LUNGS

PATIENT CLASSIFICATION: Acute Hydrophobic
Psychosis with Somatic Manifestations
PRIMARY DIAGNOSIS: Bathophobia (ICD-11: 6B05.Z)
with Secondary Hallucinatory Episodes
ATTENDING PHYSICIAN: Dr. Thalia Marchwood,
Department of Experimental Psychology
DATE OF ADMISSION: October 13th, 2024

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION: Level 4 - Extreme Psychological Isolation Protocol

Lucien Ashvale had always possessed the peculiar gift of breathing life back into dying books. For seventeen years, his restoration workshop in Boston's antiquarian district had served as sanctuary for leather-bound corpses and paper ghosts, volumes that arrived water-damaged, fire-scarred, their spines cracked like arthritic fingers reaching for salvation. Yet on the morning when everything began to unravel, he found himself standing at the threshold of his basement workshop, paralyzed by the certainty that the wooden steps descended not into familiar darkness, but into the crushing depths of an alien sea.





The book had arrived three weeks prior, wrapped in oilcloth that reeked of brine and something else, something organic and putrefying. No return address, no accompanying letter, only his name scratched across the package in what appeared to be salt-crystallized ink. Inside, he discovered a volume bound in scales that shifted between deep blue and black depending on the angle of observation. The text, written in a language that seemed to writhe across the pages like living kelp, defied translation, yet somehow whispered its meaning directly into his mind through channels he didn't know existed.

The Drowning Book, as he'd come to think of it, spoke of depths that existed between spaces, pockets of oceanic void that could be accessed through doorways that weren't quite doors, stairwells that weren't quite stairs. It described the ecstasy of breathing water, the liberation found in pressure that could crush human bones to powder, the sweet surrender of lungs flooding with salted darkness.

The first symptom manifested as a subtle wrongness in his peripheral vision. The basement stairs, which he'd descended thousands of times, began to shimmer with an aqueous quality that made his eyes water. The familiar scent of leather polish and aging paper gave way to something more primal, the metallic tang of deep ocean trenches, where sunlight had never penetrated and things with too many teeth navigated by senses humanity had never evolved.

By the second week, the auditory hallucinations began. A rhythmic susurrant emanated from below, like the breathing of some colossal lung. Each exhalation seemed to carry whispers in that same unidentifiable language from the book, promises of depths where pressure became pleasure, where drowning transformed into a kind of birth. He found himself standing at the top of the basement stairs for hours, drawn by the sound, his rational mind warring with an increasingly insistent urge to descend.



The physical manifestations proved most disturbing. Each morning, Lucien awoke to find his pillow soaked not with perspiration, but with seawater that tasted of things long dead and deeply buried. His lungs, examined by three different physicians, showed no signs of fluid retention, yet he could feel the brine sloshing behind his ribs with each breath. His skin began to take on a peculiar pallor, translucent in places where blue veins became visible like underwater coral formations.

Sleep offered no respite. His dreams carried him through crushing depths where the pressure should have killed him instantly, yet instead filled him with euphoric peace. In these nocturnal visions, he discovered vast libraries carved into oceanic trenches, their shelves lined with books that had absorbed the final thoughts of drowning victims across centuries. The texts wrote themselves in real-time, fed by the terror and resignation of those who surrendered to the depths.





The book seemed to grow heavier each day, its scaled binding becoming slick to the touch. When he attempted to return it to its oilcloth wrapping, he found his hands refused to cooperate, as though some deeper part of his nervous system had been co-opted by forces beyond his understanding. The pages, when opened, now revealed illustrations that hadn't been there before, anatomical diagrams showing human respiratory systems adapted for aquatic environments, cross-sections of lungs modified by unknown evolutionary pressures.

Lucien's isolation deepened as his condition progressed. Friends and colleagues commented on his increasingly waterlogged appearance, the way conversation with him felt like speaking to someone already half-submerged. His restoration work suffered; he found himself unable to concentrate on any volume except the one that had initiated his transformation. Other books seemed trivial, their terrestrial concerns laughably shallow compared to the abyssal wisdom contained within those scaled covers.

The breaking point arrived during a thunderstorm that hammered Boston with unusual ferocity. As rain lashed his workshop windows, Lucien felt an overwhelming compulsion to descend the basement stairs. This time, his rational defenses crumbled entirely. Each step downward carried him deeper into an aqueous realm that occupied the same space as his familiar workshop yet existed in complete defiance of physical law.

The basement had become a drowning chamber. Seawater pressed against invisible barriers, held back by will alone, while Lucien stood on the bottom step breathing liquid that should have killed him. The walls had transformed into viewing portals revealing oceanic vistas populated by creatures that existed in the spaces between nightmares and evolutionary impossibility. Fish with human faces swam past, their expressions locked in the rictus of terminal ecstasy that comes with surrender to the depths.



At the center of this impossible space stood a lectern crafted from what appeared to be compressed bone, supporting an opened volume whose pages turned themselves, writing Lucien's story in real-time. He understood then that he had become part of the book's expanding narrative, another case study in the transformation of air-breathing mammals into something more suited to the crushing embrace of deep waters.

His lungs, now fully adapted to processing brine, drew sustenance from the salted darkness that filled his basement workshop. The familiar tools of his trade, binding presses, gilding tools, leather working implements, had become instruments of a different craft entirely, designed for preserving the final thoughts of the drowning in permanent, waterproof volumes.

Lucien Ashvale, book restorer, ceased to exist in any meaningful sense. What remained was something that had learned to breathe water and speak in the language of depths, forever cataloging the final moments of those who surrendered to the sea. The Drowning Book had found its perfect librarian.



ATTENDING NOTES - DR. THALIA MARCHWOOD:

Patient exhibits extreme hydrophobic reactions despite claiming compulsive attraction to “deep spaces.” Physical examination reveals no presence of seawater in respiratory system, yet patient continues producing approximately 200ml of saline fluid during sleep cycles. Composition analysis pending.

Most disturbing: patient’s basement workshop was discovered flooded to ceiling level with seawater containing unidentifiable organic compounds. No plumbing breach detected. Water source remains unknown.

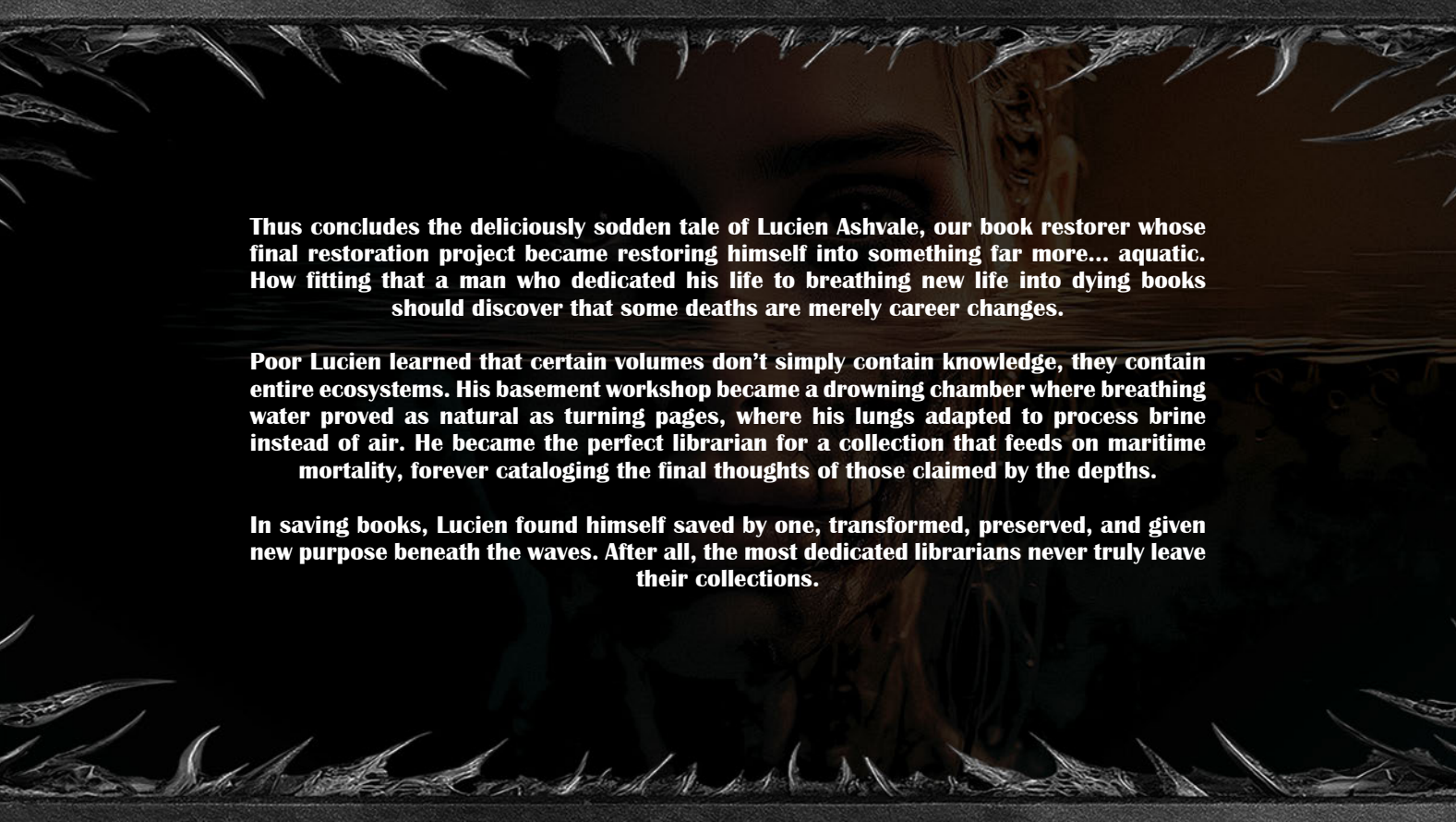




Note: Have begun experiencing unusually vivid dreams of oceanic depths since beginning treatment. Recommend immediate case transfer to Dr. Millbrook. The sound of breathing from the basement is becoming... difficult to ignore.

Addendum: Patient's "Drowning Book" missing from evidence locker. Security footage shows no breach. However, I found it on my desk this morning, opened to a page that wasn't there yesterday. The page describes my dreams in perfect detail.

I can taste salt.



Thus concludes the deliciously sodden tale of Lucien Ashvale, our book restorer whose final restoration project became restoring himself into something far more... aquatic. How fitting that a man who dedicated his life to breathing new life into dying books should discover that some deaths are merely career changes.

Poor Lucien learned that certain volumes don't simply contain knowledge, they contain entire ecosystems. His basement workshop became a drowning chamber where breathing water proved as natural as turning pages, where his lungs adapted to process brine instead of air. He became the perfect librarian for a collection that feeds on maritime mortality, forever cataloging the final thoughts of those claimed by the depths.

In saving books, Lucien found himself saved by one, transformed, preserved, and given new purpose beneath the waves. After all, the most dedicated librarians never truly leave their collections.





DRY WOMEN WALK AT NIGHT

PATIENT CLASSIFICATION: Acute Dissociative Episode
with Paranoid Delusions (F44.89), Secondary
Botanical Phobia Syndrome (F40.298)

ATTENDING PHYSICIAN: Dr. B. Winslow, MD, PhD
(Psychiatric Medicine)

DATE OF ADMISSION: October 31st, 2024
Security Level: Orange
(Restricted Visitation, Audio Monitoring)

The desert had always whispered, but it was only when Ranger Harper Mercer began listening that the true horror commenced. Found by her replacement shift seventy-three miles southeast of Tucson, she knelt in the center of what appeared to be an elaborate mandala carved into the hardpan, concentric circles stretching nearly two hundred feet in diameter, each ring meticulously filled with objects that should not have belonged to any sane taxonomy of arrangement.



The innermost circle: human teeth, some still bloody at the roots, arranged in perfect geometric precision around a desiccated saguaro flower that pulsed with an impossible vermillion luminescence. The second ring: bone fragments, not human, the forensics team would later determine, but from no creature catalogued in any bestiary of the American Southwest. These bones had been ground to powder and mixed with what appeared to be menstrual blood, forming a crimson paste that had baked into ceramic hardness beneath the relentless sun.

The third ring horrified even the most seasoned investigators. Cactus flowers, thousands upon thousands of them, had been systematically plucked from their hosts and arranged in spiraling patterns that hurt to look upon directly. Prickly pear blossoms the color of infected tissue, barrel cactus flowers like tiny screaming mouths, cholla blooms that seemed to twitch and writhe in the peripheral vision. Each petal had been carefully positioned, and as the wind moved across this organic constellation, the flowers produced a sound that recording equipment would later fail to capture but which every person present described as “the breathing of something vast and buried.”

Harper herself had been discovered in a state of catatonic reverence, her fingernails split to the quick and packed with dirt and what appeared to be flower matter. Her lips were sealed shut with a resinous substance that laboratory analysis would identify as a mixture of plant sap and human saliva, hardened into an amber-like consistency that required surgical removal. Her eyes, those beautiful dark eyes that had once watched over forty thousand acres of protected wilderness, had been packed with soil and the crushed remains of ghost flower petals until they bulged from their sockets like overripe fruit.

The removal process had been a symphony of muffled screams that seemed to emerge not from Harper's throat, but from the earth itself.





In the days following her extraction from what local Tohono O'odham elders would only refer to as "the marriage ground," Harper's behavior conformed to patterns that defied conventional psychiatric classification. She would remain perfectly lucid and conversational during daylight hours, discussing her work with the National Park Service, her childhood in Nogales, her master's degree in environmental science. But as dusk approached, a transformation would commence that chilled even the most experienced night shift staff.

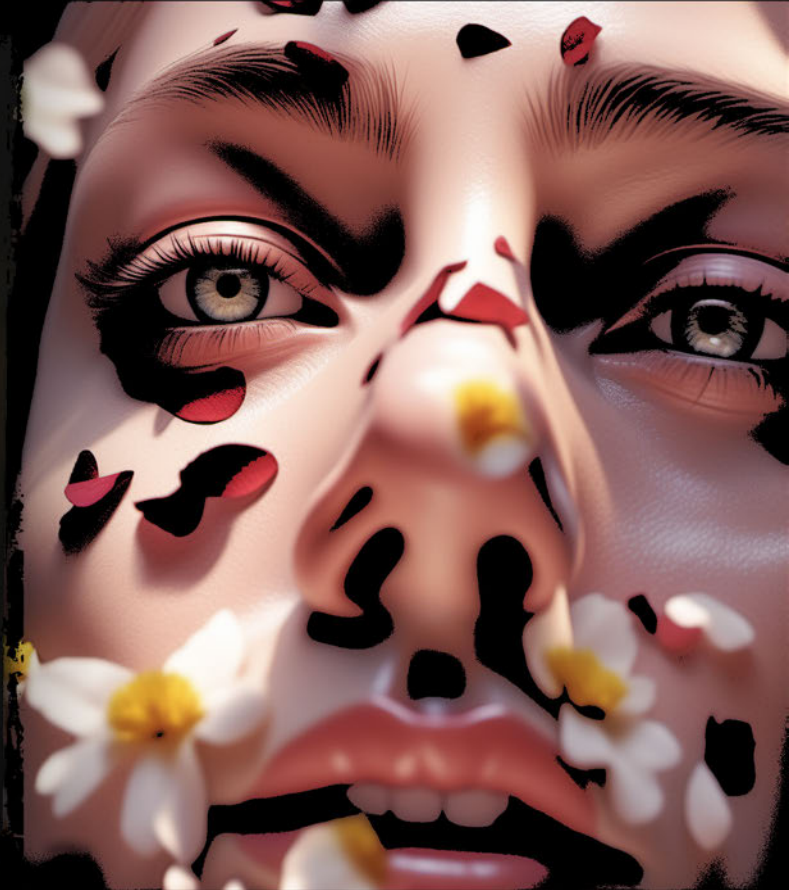
The change began always with the flowers.

At precisely 6:47 PM each evening, never varying by more than a few seconds, Harper would begin to describe blooms that did not exist. Her voice would drop to a whisper so faint that recording devices strained to capture the words, and she would speak of desert roses that bled human tears, of century plants that bloomed with infant faces nested among their petals, of palo verde flowers that screamed when the wind touched them.

Her descriptions possessed a botanical accuracy that was impossible to dismiss as mere delusion; she spoke of pollination cycles and cellular structures with the precision of someone who had spent decades studying these impossible specimens.

But it was not merely what she said that unnerved the staff, it was how the very air in her room seemed to respond to her whispered botanizing. Nurses reported that the scent of dying flowers would fill the corridors, so overpowering that several required medical attention for respiratory distress. Maintenance crews discovered that plants throughout the facility would begin to wither whenever Harper entered her evening catalogs, their leaves curling inward as if recoiling from some invisible toxin.

And then there were the voices that answered her.



Security footage from Harper's room revealed a disturbing pattern of behavior that peaked during the deepest hours of night. She would position herself in the exact center of her room and begin a ritualistic arrangement of whatever objects she could find, plastic utensils, bedding, even her own hair, which she would pull out in measured handfuls. These materials would be arranged in the same concentric patterns discovered at her desert site, and as she worked, her lips would move in silent conversation with unseen entities.

The breakthrough came when Dr. Martinez, working the graveyard shift, decided to venture closer to Harper's room during one of these episodes. What he discovered shattered his understanding of the case entirely.
Harper was not alone.



Standing at the periphery of her makeshift circles were figures that the human eye could only process in fragments, tall, impossibly thin women whose skin had the texture and color of sun-bleached bone. Their faces were gardens of horror, eye sockets packed with desert soil from which tiny cacti grew in perfectly symmetrical arrangements. Their mouths had been replaced by gaping wounds filled with the bright yellow blossoms that bloom on dying palo verde trees, and when they spoke, for they did speak, in voices like wind through dried seed pods, their words emerged as a botanical taxonomy of extinction.

They spoke of roots that drank from aquifers of human tears, of pollen that carried the dreams of the dying, of flowers that bloomed only in the presence of absolute despair. They spoke of Harper as their daughter, their sister, their bride, and their promises were seeds that took root in the deepest chambers of the listener's mind.





Dr. Martinez lasted three minutes in their presence before his sanity began its irreversible erosion.

The entities, whom Harper referred to in her daylight conversations as “the Dustwives of Tsalal”, appeared to exist in a state of botanical undeath, their bodies serving as unwilling hosts to desert flora that had evolved beyond the normal constraints of photosynthesis and seasonal blooming. They were the wives of some ancient desert god whose name had been scoured from all records, left to wander the spaces between living and dead, cultivating gardens in the graveyards of forgotten civilizations.

Harper’s role, it became apparent, was that of a keeper, a human anchor who could tend to their impossible gardens and serve as a bridge between their twilight realm and the world of the living. The circles she had carved in the desert were not random arrangements but precise botanical instructions, each ring corresponding to a different stage of the Dustwives’ agricultural cycle of death and rebirth.

The flowers, those beautiful, terrible flowers, were their children, their memories, their weapons. Each bloom carried within its petals the compressed essence of human suffering, refined through centuries of desert heat into something that could take root in the human psyche and flourish there like a malignant tumor. Harper had been chosen not for her botanical knowledge, but for her deep love of the desert's harsh beauty, a love that could be perverted into the kind of devotion that would allow her to serve as midwife to these impossible births.

As weeks passed, Harper's condition deteriorated in ways that medical science was ill-equipped to address. Her skin began to take on the papery quality of dried flower petals, and staff reported that touching her felt like handling pressed specimens from some hellish herbarium. Her hair grew brittle and began to sprout tiny thorns that drew blood from anyone who came too close. Most disturbing of all, her tears had begun to crystallize into structures that resembled pollen grains under microscopic examination, pollen that, when inhaled, produced vivid hallucinations of vast desert gardens tended by figures whose very presence was an assault on the viewer's sanity.





The night Harper vanished from her locked room, security cameras captured only the moment of her disappearance, a sudden dissolution into what appeared to be a shower of flower petals that swirled through the air in patterns that hurt to observe directly before settling into a perfect circle on the floor. No trace of her was ever found, save for a single palo verde blossom left on her pillow, its petals still warm to the touch and bleeding a substance that laboratory analysis identified as human cerebrospinal fluid mixed with saguaro nectar.

The room itself retained a permanent stain, a perfect circle of earth in the center of the concrete floor that no amount of cleaning could remove. Plants placed within this circle would immediately begin to exhibit impossible growth patterns, their flowers blooming in configurations that defied botanical possibility while emitting sounds that recording equipment registered only as silence but which drove listeners to states of cataleptic terror.

Three days after Harper's disappearance, park rangers reported the discovery of new circles in the Sonoran Desert, dozens of them, scattered across hundreds of square miles, each more complex and horrifying than the last. At the center of each mandala grew flowers that no botanist could identify, their blooms pulsing with the rhythm of a human heartbeat and releasing pollen that formed geometric patterns in the air before dissolving into the endless blue of the desert sky.

The rangers who made these discoveries all reported the same phenomenon: as twilight approached and the desert began its nightly transformation from furnace to tomb, they could hear voices carried on the wind, women's voices, speaking in botanical Latin and describing the cultivation of gardens that existed in the spaces between sleeping and waking, between life and the endless dreaming death of the deep desert.



They spoke of Harper with reverence and longing, calling her home to tend to flowers that bloomed with the faces of everyone who had ever looked upon them, promising her a place among them in the endless autumn of their twilight realm. And sometimes, in the deepest hours of the night when the desert held its breath in anticipation of dawn, they claimed to see her, a figure walking among the circles, her arms full of impossible blossoms, her mouth sealed with the resin of some cosmic tree, her eyes reflecting not starlight but the luminescence of flowers that should never have learned to bloom.





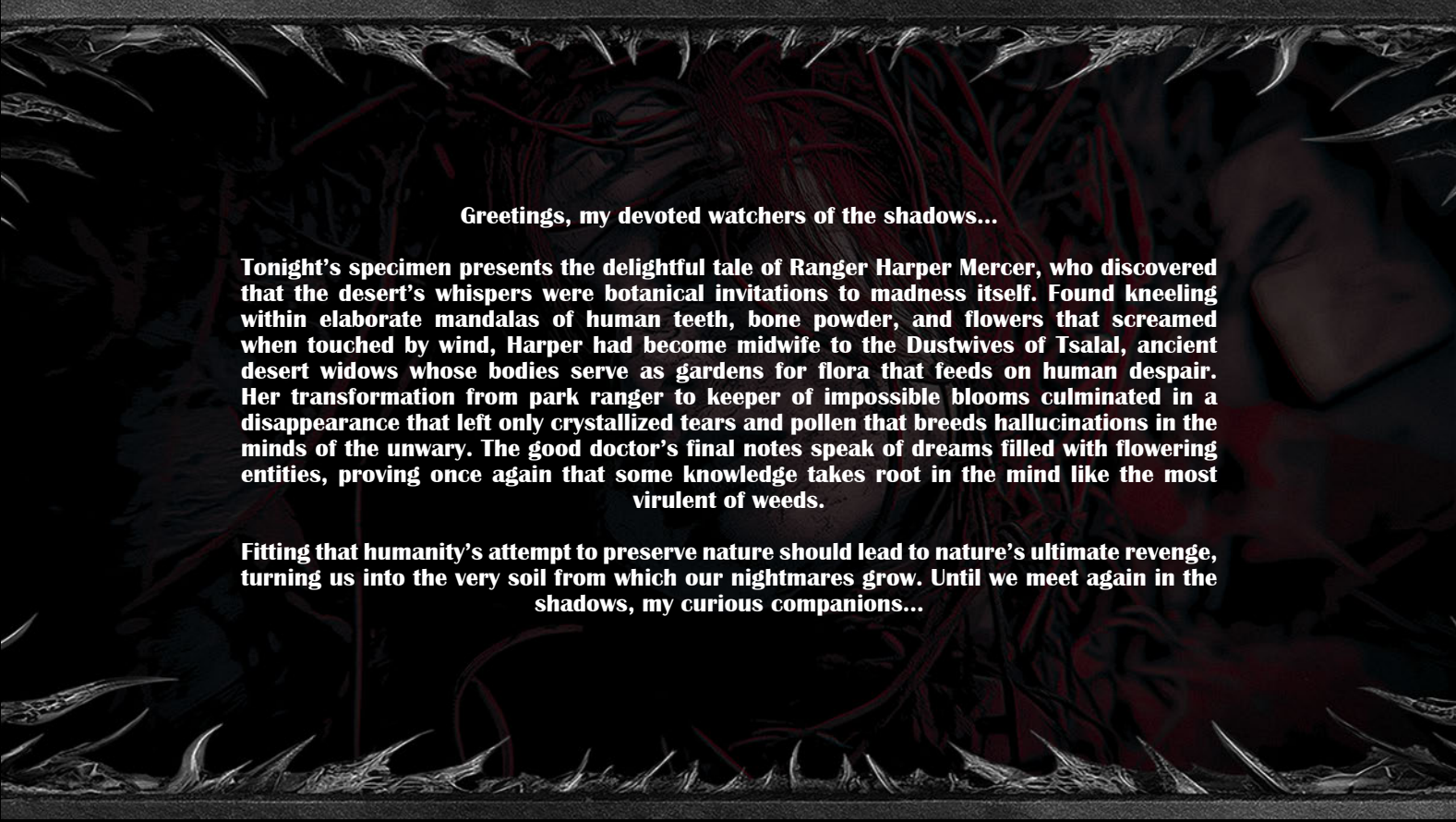
ATTENDING NOTES - DR. BLAIR WINSLOW:

Patient exhibited unprecedented symptomatology suggestive of parasitic botanical integration at the neurological level. Recommend immediate quarantine of all personnel exposed to subject's floral emissions. The pollen samples collected from patient's room continue to exhibit signs of mobility and apparent intelligence when observed under laboratory conditions.

Of particular concern: three staff members who participated in patient care have reported recurring dreams of desert landscapes populated by flowering entities. All three have begun compulsive gardening behaviors and refuse to speak after sunset. Request immediate consultation with specialist in anomalous botanical phenomena. Standard psychiatric protocols inadequate for cases involving apparent hybridization between human consciousness and non-terrestrial plant life.

**Personal note: I have begun to dream of flowers.
Last night, they spoke my name.**

**- B. Winslow, MD, PhD Entry logged at 3:33 AM
[Recording equipment malfunctioned during dictation.
Transcript compiled from emergency backup systems.]**



Greetings, my devoted watchers of the shadows...

Tonight's specimen presents the delightful tale of Ranger Harper Mercer, who discovered that the desert's whispers were botanical invitations to madness itself. Found kneeling within elaborate mandalas of human teeth, bone powder, and flowers that screamed when touched by wind, Harper had become midwife to the Dustwives of Tsalal, ancient desert widows whose bodies serve as gardens for flora that feeds on human despair. Her transformation from park ranger to keeper of impossible blooms culminated in a disappearance that left only crystallized tears and pollen that breeds hallucinations in the minds of the unwary. The good doctor's final notes speak of dreams filled with flowering entities, proving once again that some knowledge takes root in the mind like the most virulent of weeds.

Fitting that humanity's attempt to preserve nature should lead to nature's ultimate revenge, turning us into the very soil from which our nightmares grow. Until we meet again in the shadows, my curious companions...



THE SHAPE THAT WAITS ON ROOFS

**PATIENT CLASSIFICATION: Severe Acrophobic Psychosis
WITH COMPULSIVE VERTICAL FIXATION DISORDER**

**ATTENDING PHYSICIAN: Dr. Peyton Mordaunt,
Consultant Psychiatrist**

DATE OF ADMISSION: 15th October 2024

**SECURITY LEVEL: Category III - High Risk
(Self-Harm Potential)**

The thing that haunts Nolan Whitley's nights is not the fall itself, but the ascension that preceded it, that terrible, inexorable pull that drew his gaze skyward until his neck ached with the strain of looking up, always up, to where the rooflines carved their jagged prophecies against London's perpetually bruised sky.



He speaks of it in whispers that crack like old parchment, his words tumbling over themselves in their haste to escape the confines of his throat before some unseen force can snatch them back. The commute, he tells me, had become a labyrinth of calculated avoidance. No longer could he walk beneath the Georgian terraces of Bloomsbury, where the stone parapets leered down with architectural malevolence.

The Victorian mansion blocks of Kensington were forbidden territories, their ornate cornices transformed into beckoning fingers that scraped at the meat of his resolve.

“It started small,” he rasps, his fingers, pale things that seem to have forgotten the warmth of blood, drumming against the consultation room’s scarred table. “Just a feeling. Like when you stand at a cliff’s edge and something whispers that you could step forward. But this... this was different. It wasn’t about falling down. It was about going up.”





The footage from King's Cross station tells its own tale of deterioration. Frame by frame, I have watched Nolan Whitley's transformation from hurried commuter to something altogether more disturbing. In the earliest recordings, dated three months prior to his admission, he moves with the purposeful gait of London's working masses. But observe: even then, there are tells. The occasional upward glance. The slight hesitation beneath the station's vaulted ceiling. The way his shoulders seem to lift, as if invisible hands were testing their grip upon his shoulder blades.

By the second week of surveillance, the changes become more pronounced. Whitley no longer joins the flowing rivers of humanity that surge through the Underground's arteries. Instead, he stations himself at platform edges, his body rigid as a tuning fork struck by some cosmic frequency only he can hear. His head tilts back at angles that suggest the neck vertebrae strain against their moorings. His mouth hangs slack, not in stupor, but in what appears to be rapturous attention to something that exists in the space between the platform roof and the sky beyond.



The security guards report that he would stand thus for hours, oblivious to the concerned queries of Transport Police, deaf to the announcements that echoed through the caverns of steel and tile. When finally roused, he would blink as if surfacing from great depths, his pupils dilated to pinpricks despite the harsh fluorescent glare that bathes those subterranean chambers.

“The first time I saw it clearly,” he continues, and now his voice drops to a register that seems to emanate from somewhere deeper than his larynx, “I was walking home past the church on Tavistock Square. You know the one, all Gothic arches and gargoyles that look like they’re about to take flight. I felt it before I saw it. This... pull. Like invisible fishing line hooked behind my sternum, reeling me in.”

His hands rise unconsciously to his chest, fingers splayed as if feeling for the entry wounds of spectral hooks. “I looked up, God help me, I had to look up, and there it was. Crouched on the bell tower’s edge like some nightmare given flesh. No mouth, you understand. Where the mouth should have been, there was just... smoothness. Skin pulled tight over nothing. But the eyes...”

The tremor that seizes him then is not one of fear, but of longing so acute it borders on the orgasmic. His back arches slightly, head tilting toward the consultation room’s ceiling as if that eyeless thing might materialize in the water-stained plaster above us.

“The eyes were invitation made manifest. They promised such things, Dr. Mordaunt. Not death, never death. Liberation. The freedom of spaces between earth and heaven where gravity becomes merely a suggestion, where the body remembers its secret desire to shed the tyranny of ground-binding.”



What follows in his account descends into territories that medical nomenclature struggles to classify. He speaks of dreams where his bones hollow like a bird's, where his skin stretches and adapts to catch the wind's caress. He describes waking to find his fingernails embedded in his bedroom ceiling, plaster dust coating his palms like sacred ash. The photographs his wife provided before filing for divorce show scratch marks in the paint ten feet above their marital bed, gouges too deep and too regularly spaced to be explained by anything possessing normal human anatomy.

The creature, for Whitley refuses to call it anything else, began appearing with increasing frequency. Always on rooftops, always at the periphery of vision until that magnetic pull forced his gaze upward. It would gesture, not with hands (for it possessed none in any conventional sense), but with the entirety of its elongated form. A beckoning composed of spine and sinew, of joints that bent in directions that challenged euclidean geometry.



"It wanted me to join it," he whispers, and there is terrible yearning in those words. "Not to jump, you don't understand. To leap. To spring upward as if the earth were merely a launching point for greater elevations. The difference is crucial, Doctor. Jumping implies descent. Leaping suggests... transcendence."

The security footage from his final day of freedom captures what can only be described as an attempted metamorphosis. Whitley stands on Platform 9, surrounded by the evening rush hour's human cargo, his arms raised above his head in a posture of supplication. His legs bend and coil like springs under tremendous tension. For seventeen minutes and thirty-seven seconds, he maintains this position while commuters flow around him like water around a stone.

Then, at precisely 18:47, he launches himself skyward.





The physics should be impossible. No human leg muscles possess the power to propel a body twelve feet vertically from a standing position. Yet there Whitley soars, his form briefly silhouetted against the artificial lighting, his face transformed by an expression of such pure ecstasy that those who witnessed it reported nightmares for weeks afterward.

He strikes the concrete ceiling with a sound that the station's acoustic sensors register as both bone-breaking and somehow musical, a percussion that seems to resonate at frequencies just below the range of human hearing. When he falls, it is not as a man defeated by gravity, but as something that has tasted flight and found it intoxicating beyond measure.



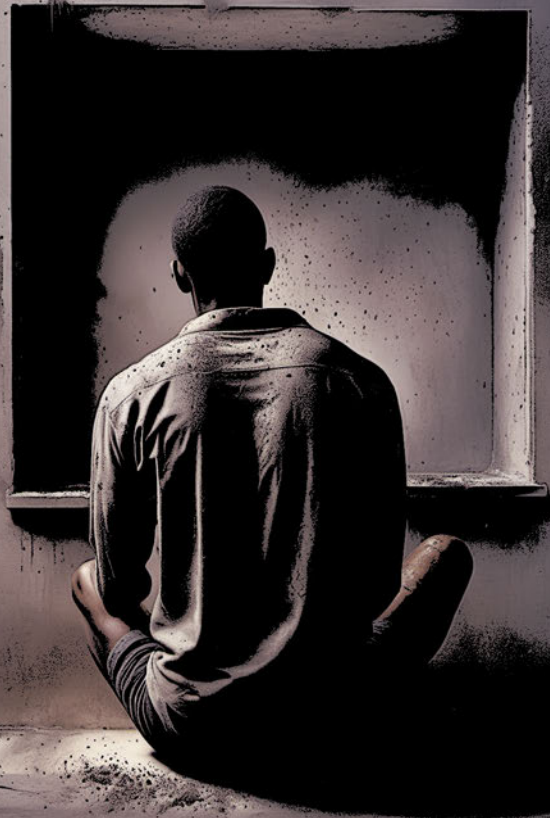
The injuries should have been fatal. Compound fractures of both legs, a shattered pelvis, cervical vertebrae compressed to fragments. Yet Whitley survived, and in surviving, revealed the true horror of his condition. For as the paramedics worked to stabilize his broken form, witnesses report that he continued to crane his neck skyward, his lips moving in what appeared to be expressions of gratitude rather than pain.

Now, confined to this institution's reinforced walls, Whitley has lost none of his vertical fixation. The orderlies report finding him each morning pressed against his cell's window, his body contorted into impossible positions as he attempts to gain elevation. His fingernails, grown long and sharp in the weeks since admission, bear traces of concrete dust and paint chips, evidence of his nocturnal attempts to scale the smooth walls of his containment.

But it is during our sessions that the true depth of his transformation becomes apparent. As he speaks of the Shape, always capitalized in his mind, I can hear it in the reverence with which he pronounces the word, his body begins to change. Subtle at first: the lengthening of his torso as vertebrae space themselves apart, the way his limbs seem to stretch beyond their normal proportions. His skin takes on a pallor that suggests something fundamental has altered in his circulation, and when he moves, there is a quality of barely contained energy that reminds one of compressed springs awaiting release.

Most disturbing of all is the gradual disappearance of his mouth. Not literally, the lips remain, the teeth behind them intact. But there is a smoothness creeping across the lower half of his face, as if the flesh were slowly forgetting its purpose. When he speaks now, the words seem to emerge from elsewhere, from his chest, perhaps, or from the spaces between his ribs where the lungs pump their desperate rhythms.





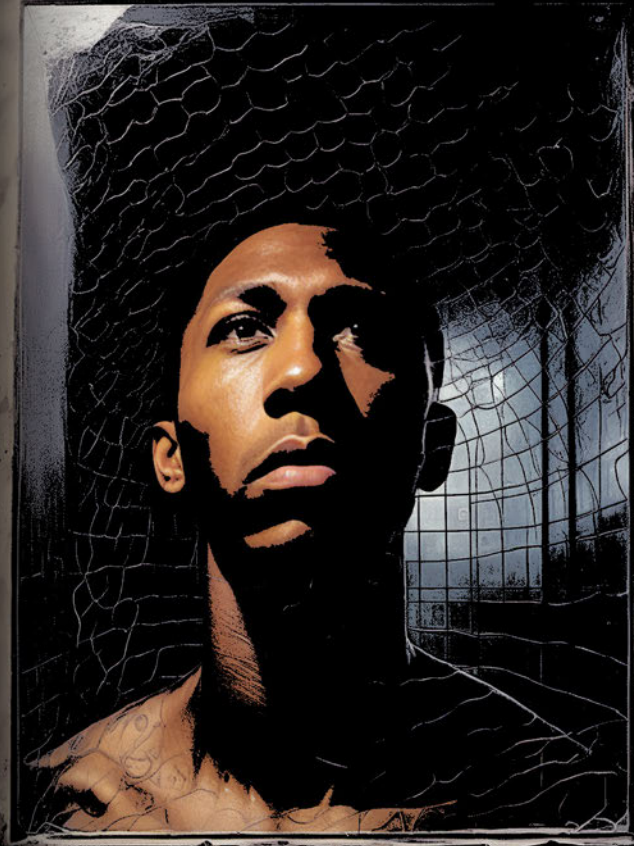
The other patients have begun to avoid the common areas when Whitley is present. They speak in hushed tones of seeing him in the exercise yard, crouched motionless in the center of the space while his eyes track invisible movements across the sky. The security cameras capture him thus for hours at a time, his body coiled in readiness for a leap that the reinforced mesh ceiling prevents him from attempting.

Yet it is not the mesh that truly contains him, but something far more subtle and infinitely more disturbing. For I have come to realize that Nolan Whitley no longer wishes to escape this place. He waits, with the patience of geological time, for something to come to him instead. Each night, I observe him through the reinforced glass of his cell, and each night he appears more prepared for whatever transformation awaits.

The Shape has marked him, claimed him, and in doing so has revealed the terrible truth that lurks beneath the surface of our ordered world: that humanity's greatest fear is not of falling, but of the discovery that we have always possessed the capacity to rise, and that something waits in the spaces above to welcome us home.

ATTENDING NOTES - DR. PEYTON MORDAUNT

Patient continues to demonstrate unprecedented physiological adaptations inconsistent with known medical literature. Bone density measurements suggest a fundamental alteration in skeletal composition, structures are becoming increasingly hollow, resembling avian rather than mammalian architecture. Muscle fiber analysis reveals fibers capable of storing and releasing kinetic energy at levels approaching those found in specialized jumping arthropods.

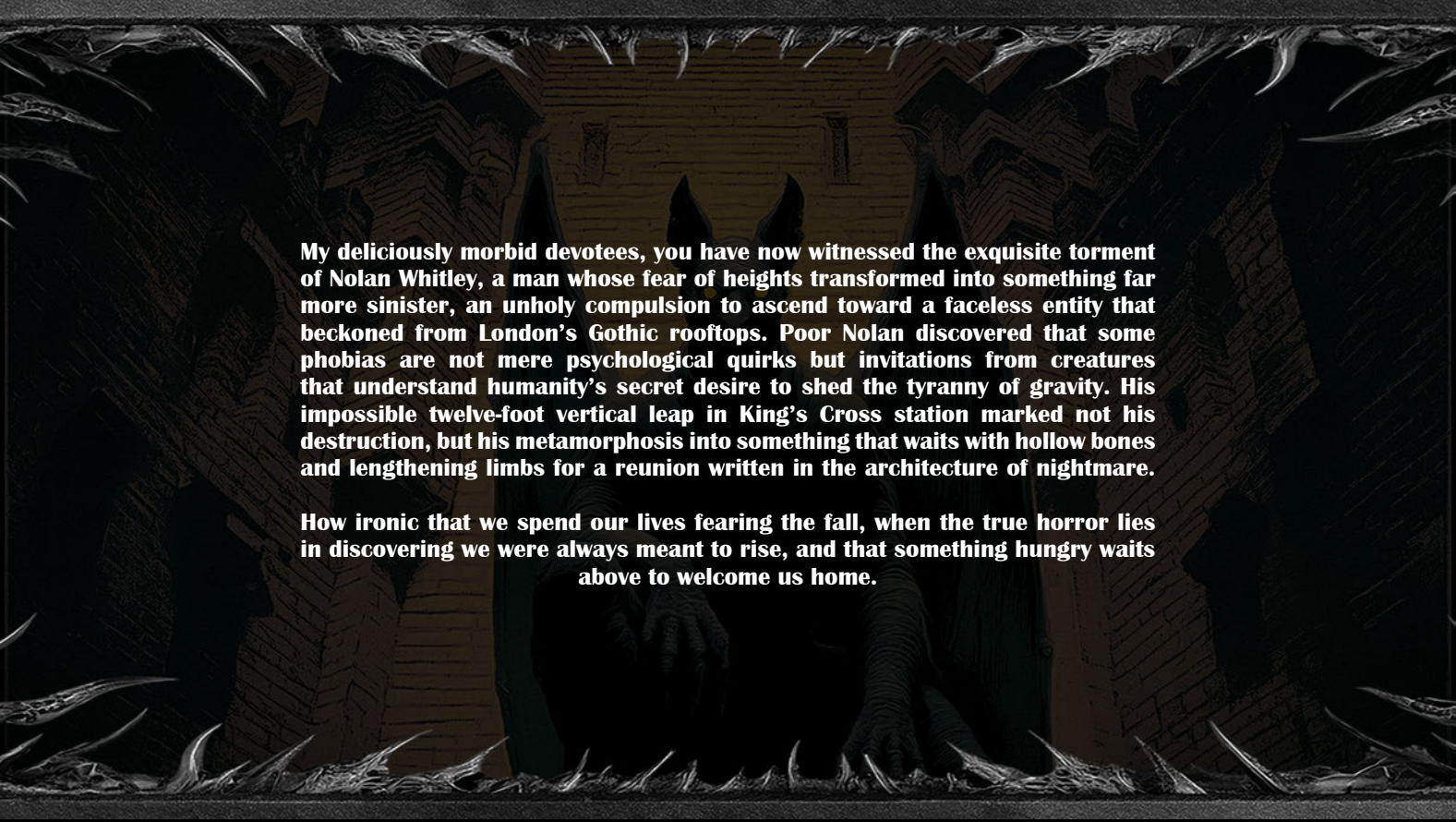


Most concerning: I find myself spending increasing amounts of time studying the security footage, particularly the moment of Whitley's impossible leap. Frame by frame analysis reveals details that should not exist, shadows that fall upward, gravitational distortions that bend light in ways that challenge our understanding of physics.

Last night, I dreamed of rooftops. Upon waking, I discovered scratches on my bedroom ceiling. Recommend immediate consultation with specialists in... in fields that may not yet exist.

I fear we are dealing with something beyond the scope of conventional psychiatry. Something that sees our carefully constructed understanding of reality as merely the first floor of a much taller building. The Shape waits. And I suspect it is no longer waiting alone.





My deliciously morbid devotees, you have now witnessed the exquisite torment of Nolan Whitley, a man whose fear of heights transformed into something far more sinister, an unholy compulsion to ascend toward a faceless entity that beckoned from London's Gothic rooftops. Poor Nolan discovered that some phobias are not mere psychological quirks but invitations from creatures that understand humanity's secret desire to shed the tyranny of gravity. His impossible twelve-foot vertical leap in King's Cross station marked not his destruction, but his metamorphosis into something that waits with hollow bones and lengthening limbs for a reunion written in the architecture of nightmare.

How ironic that we spend our lives fearing the fall, when the true horror lies in discovering we were always meant to rise, and that something hungry waits above to welcome us home.



SCRATCHING AT THE DOOR

PATIENT CLASSIFICATION: Acute Paranoid Delusional
Disorder with Cynophobic Manifestations and
Severe Agoraphobic Tendencies

ATTENDING PHYSICIAN: Dr. Kendall Trenholm, M.D.,
Psychiatric Division

DATE OF ADMISSION: October 13th, 2024

SECURITY LEVEL: Level 3 - High Risk
Self-Isolation Protocol

The thing about death is that it leaves a scent.

Morgan Cray had learned this truth during her seventeen years as a hospice nurse, had breathed it deep into her lungs until it became part of her cellular structure, that sweet, cloying perfume of flesh surrendering to entropy. But what she hadn't understood, what no textbook had prepared her for, was that death also leaves tracks.





She'd begun noticing them after Mrs. Pemberton's passing. Scratches in the hardwood outside the dying woman's bedroom door, as if something with considerable claws had been pacing, waiting. Morgan had attributed them to Mrs. Pemberton's ancient terrier, a rheumy-eyed creature that had whimpered incessantly during those final hours. But the dog had been put down three days before its mistress expired.

The scratches had followed her home.

Not literally, she wasn't yet that far gone, though the distinction between literal and metaphorical had begun to blur like watercolors in rain. But in her dreams, she heard them: the deliberate scritch-scratch-scratch of claws against wood, patient and persistent as a rosary being counted. She would wake with her fingernails bloodied, having clawed at her own bedroom door from the inside, though she had no memory of rising from her bed.



After Mr. Holbrook's death, a protracted affair involving the slow liquefaction of his internal organs, the scratching intensified. Morgan would arrive at work to find furrows in the linoleum outside his room, deep gouges that maintenance claimed were from moving equipment. But she knew better. She had begun to recognize the rhythm, the cadence of something that walked on four legs but thought with a mind far older and more cunning than any mere animal. It was then that she started moving.

Every death brought a relocation. A new apartment, a new postal code, a new set of locks that would hold for perhaps a week before the scratching resumed. The thing, and by now she had no doubt it was a singular entity rather than a species, had developed a taste for her particular brand of despair. She was a conduit, she realized, a lightning rod for the electricity that crackled in the space between life and its absence. Her reflection began to change.

At first, it was subtle: a darkening around the eyes, as if she hadn't slept in months, which was accurate enough. But then came the elongation of her canine teeth, barely perceptible but undeniably present.



Her optometrist noted an unusual dilation of her pupils, a persistent condition that left her perpetually squinting in daylight. Most disturbing were the moments when she would catch sight of herself in mirrors and see something else looking back, something with eyes that held depths no human gaze should possess. The dreams evolved.

She found herself running through endless corridors lined with doors, each one scratched and splintered from the outside. Behind every door, her former patients waited, their bodies in various states of decomposition, all of them reaching toward her with fingers that had grown long and sharp. But it was what lurked in the corridors that sent her jolting awake, her sheets soaked with perspiration that smelled disturbingly like wet fur.

It was massive, this thing that hunted her through sleep. Black as the spaces between stars, with eyes that burned like coals in a brazier. Its breath carried the scent of charnel houses and rain-soaked earth. When it spoke, and God help her, it did speak, its voice was the sound of grinding bones and rattling chains.



"You've made them ready for me," it would whisper, its words forming inside her skull rather than entering through her ears. "All those beautiful deaths. All that lovely suffering. You've seasoned them perfectly with your care."

Morgan stopped answering her door on day thirty-seven. The knocking had started gently enough, soft, almost apologetic taps that could have been mistaken for settling wood or thermal expansion. But she knew better. She had learned to read the language of its approach: three short scratches, followed by a pause, then five more. The same pattern it had traced outside every deathbed she had attended.

By day forty, the scratching had worn grooves in her door deep enough to see through. She stuffed towels in the gaps, but still she could feel its presence on the other side, patient, eternal, inevitable. Her neighbors had stopped complaining about the noise. Morgan suspected they no longer remembered she existed at all.

The hunger began on day forty-two.

Not for food, the very thought of solid sustenance made her gorge rise. No, this was a different kind of appetite, one that gnawed at her from the inside with teeth that felt remarkably like her own. She found herself pressing her ear to the door, listening to the steady scritch-scritch-scritch with something approaching longing. The sound had become a lullaby, a heartbeat, a promise of release from the terrible weight of caring for the dying. On day forty-three, she stopped trying to sleep.

Sleep brought dreams, and dreams brought understanding. She saw now what she had become, a collector, a harvester, a shepherd guiding the flock toward slaughter. Every gentle touch she had offered to ease a patient's passing had been a benediction in service of something far older than medicine, far hungrier than death itself. The Black Shuck's heir had been feeding through her for years.

Each death she had witnessed had strengthened the connection, had worn the barrier between worlds a little thinner.





The scratching at the door wasn't a threat, it was a summons. An invitation to join the hunt that had claimed every hospice worker who had shown too much compassion, who had opened their hearts too wide to the suffering of others.

Morgan understood now why her reflection had changed, why her teeth had sharpened, why her eyes had grown dark. She was becoming something else, something that belonged on the other side of doors, scratching to get in rather than hiding within. The realization should have terrified her. Instead, it felt like coming home.

On the forty-third night, as the scratching reached a crescendo that seemed to shake the very foundations of her building, Morgan Cray placed her hand on the door handle. The metal was warm, almost fevered, and she could feel a pulse beneath her palm, not her own heartbeat, but something vast and patient and utterly inhuman. She turned the handle.

The door swung open to reveal not the empty hallway she expected, but a corridor that stretched into infinity, lined with doors identical to her own. From behind each door came the sound of scratching, and she knew with absolute certainty that behind each door waited someone like her, someone who had cared too much, loved too deeply, eased too many passings.

The Black Shuck's heir stood at the far end of the corridor, its eyes like stars reflected in oil, its massive form radiating a terrible contentment. When it smiled, Morgan could see that its teeth were the same as hers had become, sharp, eager, perfectly suited for the work ahead.

She stepped across the threshold and felt her transformation complete itself. The door swung shut behind her with a sound like a coffin lid closing, and in the distance, she could hear new scratching begin, soft, apologetic taps that sounded almost like knocking.

Someone else would need to answer now.





ATTENDING NOTES - DR. KENDALL TRENHOLM:

Patient was discovered in catatonic state after building superintendent reported persistent noise complaints from neighboring units. Apartment was found barricaded from within, with extensive claw marks on interior surfaces of front door. Patient's fingernails showed significant wear patterns consistent with obsessive scratching behaviors.

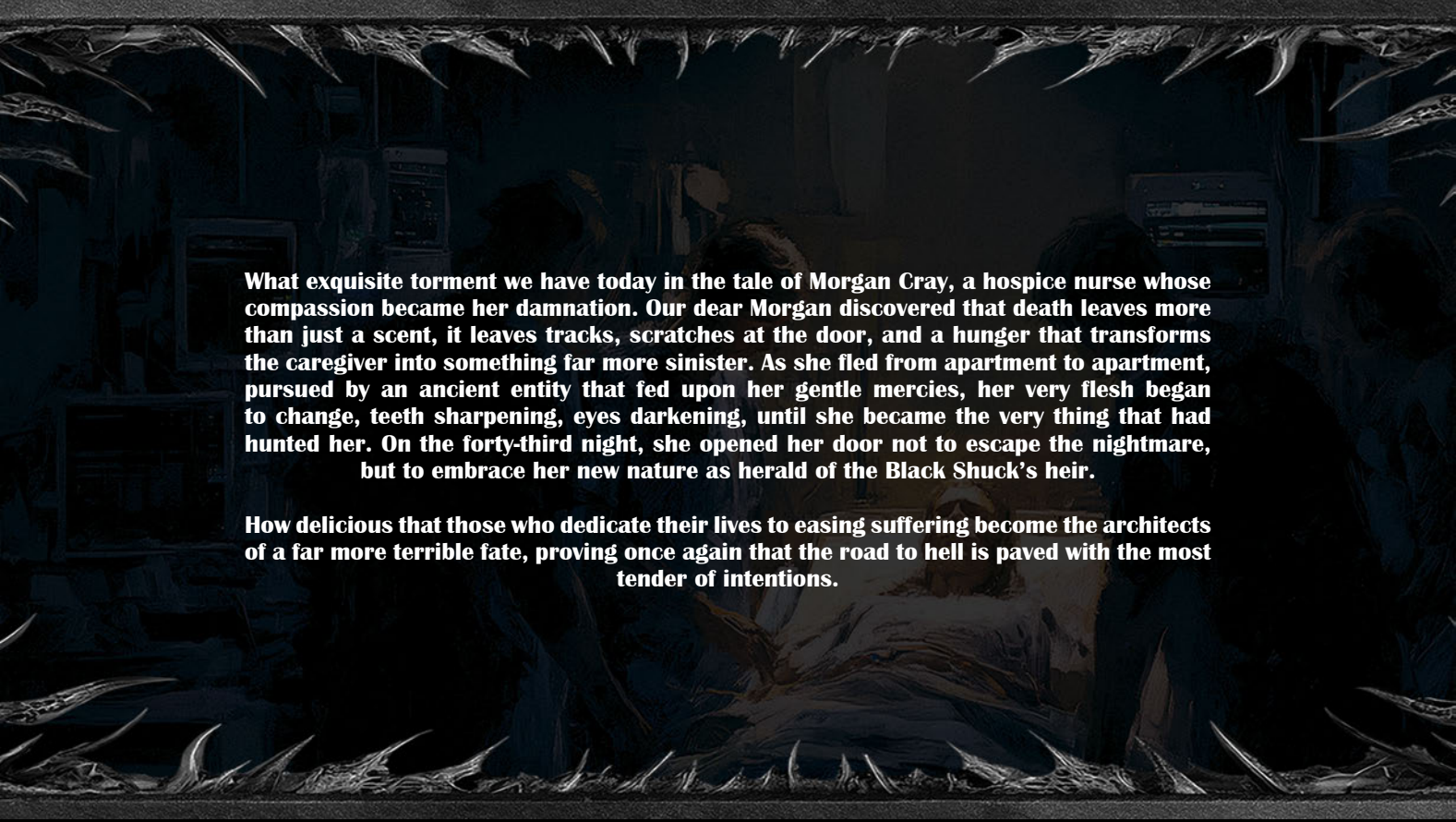
Of particular note: patient's dental structure shows unusual elongation of canine teeth, which patient claims occurred naturally over the past several months. Ophthalmological examination reveals persistent mydriasis with no identifiable medical cause.



Patient repeatedly mentions “forty-three days” and claims she “let it in” though apartment showed no signs of forced entry. Building records indicate no noise complaints prior to patient’s admission, despite her insistence that scratching sounds persisted for weeks.

Most troubling: during intake examination, patient asked if I had “helped anyone die lately” and warned me to “check my door when I get home.” Upon returning to my residence this evening, I discovered fresh scratches on my front door. Building maintenance claims they were caused by a stray dog, though no such animal has been reported in the area. Recommend immediate transfer to maximum security wing. Something in her eyes suggests she knows exactly what she’s talking about.

Note to self: Double-check all locks tonight. A scratching sound has been reported.



What exquisite torment we have today in the tale of Morgan Cray, a hospice nurse whose compassion became her damnation. Our dear Morgan discovered that death leaves more than just a scent, it leaves tracks, scratches at the door, and a hunger that transforms the caregiver into something far more sinister. As she fled from apartment to apartment, pursued by an ancient entity that fed upon her gentle mercies, her very flesh began to change, teeth sharpening, eyes darkening, until she became the very thing that had hunted her. On the forty-third night, she opened her door not to escape the nightmare, but to embrace her new nature as herald of the Black Shuck's heir.

How delicious that those who dedicate their lives to easing suffering become the architects of a far more terrible fate, proving once again that the road to hell is paved with the most tender of intentions.



HE'S TALLER EVERY TIME

PATIENT CLASSIFICATION: Acute Paranoid Psychosis with
Somatic Delusions and Nocturnal Hypervigilance Syndrome

ATTENDING PHYSICIAN: Dr. Ophelia Fenwick, M.D., Ph.D.

DATE OF ADMISSION: October 13th, 2024

SECURITY LEVEL: Yellow - Moderate Risk,
Sleep Deprivation Protocol

The boy came to us skeletal and shaking, his eyes rimmed raw from sleeplessness that had carved hollows beneath his cheekbones like twin graves. Gideon Harker, age fourteen, foster placement #47 in the labyrinthine Portland system, a wraith-child shuttled between temporary havens until he washed up on our shores, babbling of elongated limbs and impossible geometries.





His last placement had been the Kellerman house on Maple Street, where Janet and Robert had opened their doors to two damaged souls: Gideon and another boy, Thomas, age twelve. The case worker's notes spoke of behavioral improvements, of Gideon finally finding stability after years of abuse and abandonment. But the human mind, when subjected to prolonged trauma, develops curious defense mechanisms, reality becomes as malleable as wet clay in desperate hands.

The first signs manifested as insomnia. Gideon would barricade his bedroom door each night, shoving his dresser against the frame with the methodical precision of a man preparing for siege. When Janet discovered this ritual, Gideon could only whisper that Thomas grew in the darkness, that the boy stretched himself like taffy pulled between eager fingers. Sleep, he claimed, made him vulnerable to witnessing these obscene transformations.

The Kellermans, good-hearted but unprepared for such psychological fragmentation, attempted intervention. They removed the dresser, installed a lock that opened only from the outside, forced Gideon to sleep with his door ajar. But the human psyche, when cornered, will craft elaborate mythologies to explain its terror. Gideon began documenting what he called “the stretching hours”, those liminal moments between midnight and dawn when Thomas would allegedly extend his limbs, joint by impossible joint, until he loomed over Gideon’s bed like some nightmarish marionette.

The delusions grew more elaborate with each passing week. Gideon described the sound of Thomas’s bones lengthening, a wet, organic creaking like green wood bent beyond its breaking point. He spoke of counting Thomas’s elbows in the darkness, how the boy possessed far too many joints, how his arms could fold and unfold in configurations that defied anatomical possibility. The foster child’s drawings from this period reveal a disturbing preoccupation with distorted human forms: stick-figure nightmares with limbs that spiral and multiply across the page like some malevolent mathematical equation.



Sleep deprivation exacerbated Gideon's condition exponentially. Days without rest transformed his perception into a funhouse mirror where shadows writhed with malevolent intent and innocent furniture assumed threatening postures. Thomas, by all accounts a quiet, well-adjusted child recovering from his own trauma, became the focal point for Gideon's deteriorating mental state. The boy's presence alone would trigger episodes of hyperventilation and violent trembling.

Janet Kellerman's journal entries, recovered after Gideon's disappearance, paint a picture of escalating paranoia. Gideon had begun measuring doorframes obsessively, claiming Thomas could no longer fit through them during daylight hours. He insisted the boy's clothes were growing tighter, that his shoes were splitting at the seams to accommodate feet that expanded nightly like rising dough. These observations, clinical in their detailed horror, suggest a mind struggling to impose order upon chaos through increasingly elaborate delusions.





The breaking point arrived on October 10th. Gideon had not slept for seventy-two hours when he cornered Thomas in the kitchen, screaming accusations about stolen height and borrowed bones. The younger boy, traumatized by this assault, could only cower as Gideon demanded he demonstrate his “true form.” Robert Kellerman’s intervention prevented physical violence, but the damage was irreversible. Gideon had crossed some invisible threshold where his constructed reality became more compelling than the mundane truth.

That night, Gideon vanished. His window remained locked from the inside, his door undisturbed, yet come morning his bed lay empty save for a crumpled note pressed into the pillow like a prayer left for vengeful gods: “He has too many elbows. I counted them. Seven on each arm. They bend backwards. He’s going to unfold me next.”



The search lasted three days. Gideon was discovered in Forest Park, huddled in a drainage culvert barely large enough to contain his emaciated frame. He spoke in whispers of escape, of fleeing before Thomas could “make him tall too.” His fingernails were worn to bleeding stubs from clawing at concrete, and his pupils remained dilated despite the autumn gloom, a common symptom of prolonged terror.

During intake, Gideon demonstrated compulsive measuring behaviors, using his hands to gauge the height of every person he encountered. He would count joints obsessively, pressing his fingers against elbows and knees as if mapping some invisible cartography of human limitation. When presented with photographs of Thomas, his breathing would become labored, his speech fragmented into whispered warnings about “the stretching” and “borrowed inches.”



Treatment has proven challenging. Antipsychotics diminish the acute paranoia but cannot address the core trauma that birthed these elaborate delusions. Gideon continues to suffer night terrors, awakening with screams about “unfolding” and “extra pieces.” He sleeps only in the fetal position, arms wrapped protectively around his knees, as if compressing himself might prevent the elongation he fears awaits all human forms.

His artwork remains disturbing, endless sketches of elongated figures that seem to twist off the page. The proportions are mathematically impossible, yet rendered with such meticulous detail that viewing them induces a curious vertigo, as if the observer's own limbs might spontaneously extend in sympathetic response.

Staff members report unease when cleaning his room, describing a sensation of being watched by invisible eyes that track their movements with predatory patience.

Most troubling are Gideon's claims about his own changing dimensions. He insists he can feel his bones softening in preparation for stretching, that his joints ache with anticipated elongation. These somatic delusions manifest as phantom pains that migrate through his skeletal system like some parasitic awareness of his own anatomy. He measures himself compulsively, convinced that each morning brings unwanted inches, that sleep is a dangerous surrender to forces beyond his control.

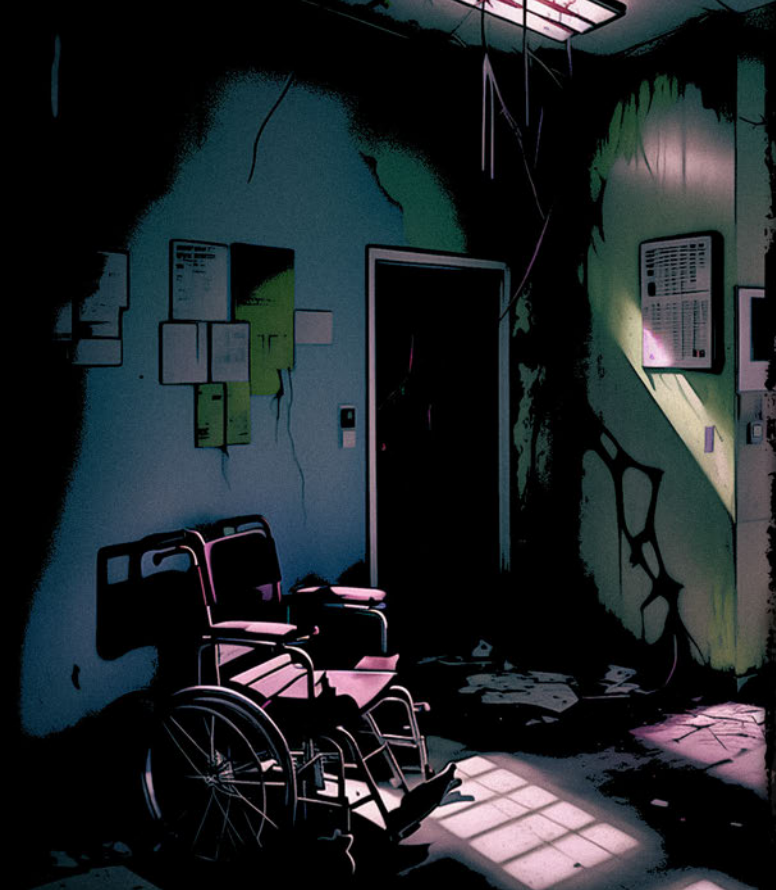




ATTENDING NOTES - DR. OPHELIA FENWICK

Patient exhibits classic symptoms of trauma-induced psychosis with pronounced somatic manifestations. The “Crooked Boy” delusion represents a sophisticated psychological defense mechanism, externalizing Gideon’s fear of losing bodily autonomy through elaborate mythological constructs.

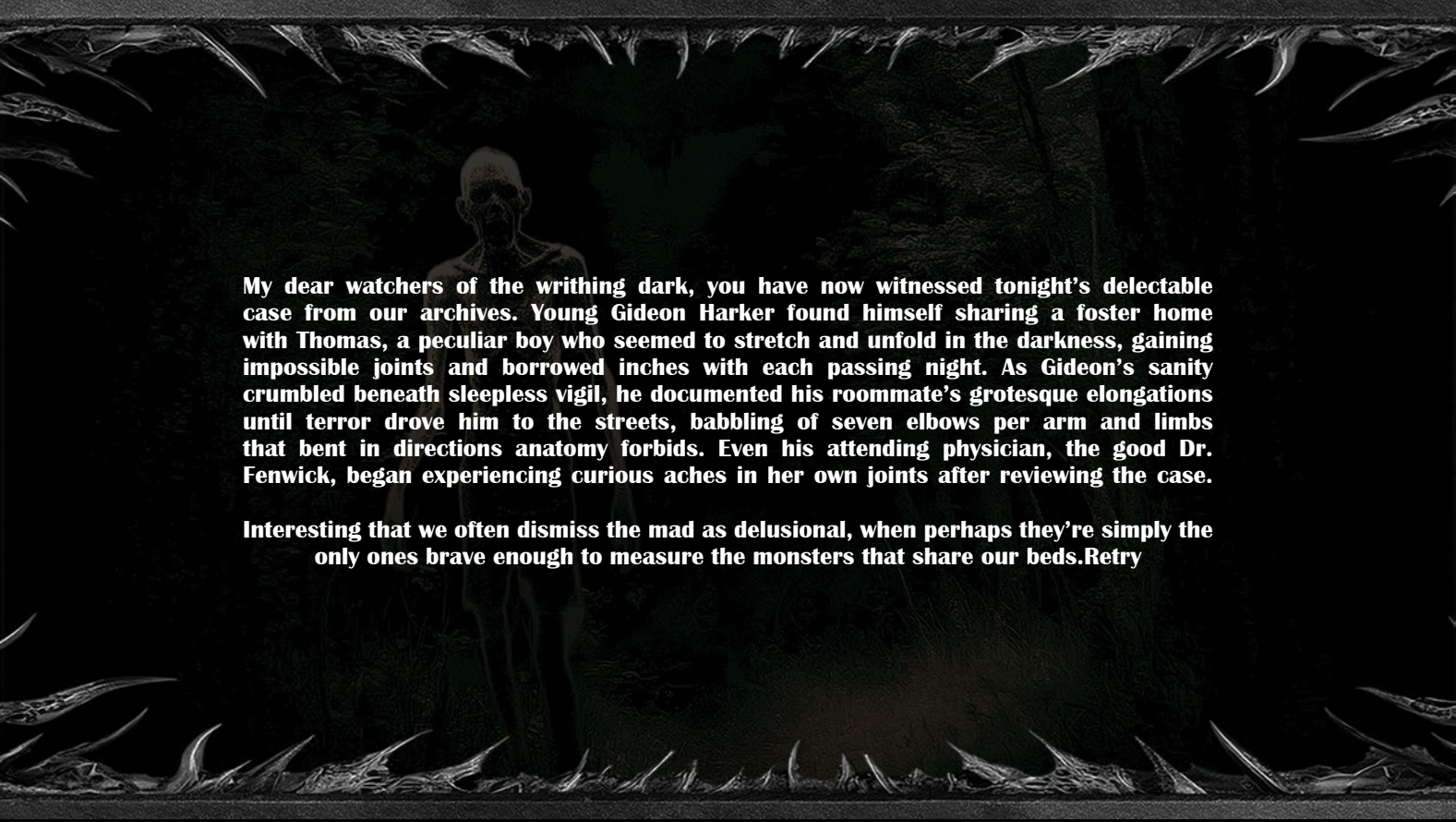
However, certain aspects of this case warrant deeper consideration. During Gideon’s absence, Thomas Kellerman was examined by child services and found to be in perfect health, perhaps suspiciously so. The boy’s growth charts show remarkable consistency, almost mechanical in their precision. His joints display unusual flexibility, and staff at his current placement report hearing strange sounds from his room at night... sounds they describe as “settling” or “adjusting.”



I have requisitioned Thomas's medical records from his previous placements. Seven foster homes in three years. In each case, his foster siblings developed sleep disorders and measuring compulsions before eventually requiring psychiatric intervention. The pattern is... troubling.

Gideon's delusions may be more perceptive than initially assessed. Sometimes madness is simply clarity wearing an unacceptable face. -H.V.

**Note: I have begun sleeping with my door locked.
My elbows ache.**

The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a wall or a book cover, with a central figure of a man in a suit. The figure is dark and somewhat indistinct, blending into the background. A decorative border of thorns or sharp, pointed shapes frames the top and bottom of the image.

My dear watchers of the writhing dark, you have now witnessed tonight's delectable case from our archives. Young Gideon Harker found himself sharing a foster home with Thomas, a peculiar boy who seemed to stretch and unfold in the darkness, gaining impossible joints and borrowed inches with each passing night. As Gideon's sanity crumbled beneath sleepless vigil, he documented his roommate's grotesque elongations until terror drove him to the streets, babbling of seven elbows per arm and limbs that bent in directions anatomy forbids. Even his attending physician, the good Dr. Fenwick, began experiencing curious aches in her own joints after reviewing the case.

Interesting that we often dismiss the mad as delusional, when perhaps they're simply the only ones brave enough to measure the monsters that share our beds.
Retry



SPLIT-STITCH DREAMS

PATIENT CLASSIFICATION: Acute Dissociative Disorder with
Tactile Hallucinations; Secondary Dermatillomania with Psychotic Features

ATTENDING PHYSICIAN: Dr. Brooke Chandler, Chief
of Psychiatric Services

DATE OF ADMISSION: October 13th, 2024

SECURITY LEVEL: High Risk - Self-Harm Protocol Active

The fabric of Miriam Quelch had begun to unravel long before she arrived at our institution, though the precise moment of her undoing remained as elusive as the patterns she claimed to perceive beneath human skin. She had been, by all accounts, a craftsperson of exceptional skill, her quilts had adorned the walls of galleries from Portland to Providence, each piece a testament to her uncanny ability to perceive the hidden geometries that connected disparate elements into harmonious wholes.





It was this very gift, this supernatural sensitivity to pattern and structure, that became her curse.

The transformation began, according to her fragmented testimony, on a morning in late September when the autumn light slanted through her studio windows at precisely the angle that revealed what she termed “the threading.” Mrs. Quelch had been examining her latest commission, a memorial quilt for the Blackwood family, whose patriarch had succumbed to a particularly aggressive melanoma, when she noticed something that made her blood crystallize in her veins.

The photograph of the deceased, positioned at the quilt’s center, seemed to ripple with an intricate network of lines that had not been there moments before. Not printed lines, she insisted with the fervor of the truly mad, but actual seams, microscopic stitches that ran beneath the surface of the image like subcutaneous sutures.



The pattern was hypnotic in its complexity: spiraling whorls that connected to diamond matrices, which in turn fed into hexagonal clusters that seemed to pulse with their own malevolent rhythm.

She blinked, rubbed her eyes with the backs of her hands, and looked again. The stitches remained, growing more pronounced with each passing second, as if some invisible seamstress were drawing them tighter from within the photograph itself.

By evening, the pattern had spread.

Her husband found her in the kitchen, standing motionless before the window, her fingers pressed against the glass. When he approached, she turned to him with eyes that had seen too much, and pointed to his reflection. “There,” she whispered, her voice carrying the hollow timbre of one who has glimpsed the machinery behind reality’s facade. “Do you see the seams? They’re getting tighter.”

He saw nothing, of course. The unafflicted never do.

But Miriam saw everything with a clarity that burned. The stitches that held her husband's face together in neat, surgical lines. The way his smile pulled against invisible threads, creating tiny puckers at the corners where the skin gathered like gathered fabric. She could see the places where he had been taken apart and reassembled, the crude handiwork of some cosmic tailor who had grown careless with practice.

Within days, the revelation had metastasized. Every surface that could hold a reflection became a window into the stitched reality beneath. Mirrors, television screens, puddles of rainwater, all revealed the same horrifying truth: that human beings were nothing more than poorly constructed dolls, held together by a network of threads so fine they existed just beyond the threshold of normal perception.





She began to document her findings with the obsessive precision of a forensic photographer, creating detailed sketches of the patterns she observed. Her notebooks, which we recovered from her studio, contain hundreds of drawings depicting the supposed stitching patterns of family members, neighbors, even strangers glimpsed on the street. The artwork itself is breathtaking in its intricacy, mandala-like configurations that seem to shift and writhe when viewed peripherally, as if the ink itself were alive with some terrible purpose.

The sketches grew increasingly violent as her condition progressed. Early drawings showed simple running stitches and neat French seams, but later works depicted crude surgical sutures, hasty basting threads, and, most disturbing of all, places where the stitching had begun to come undone, revealing dark apertures that seemed to tunnel endlessly inward.

It was during this period that she made her first incision. She began with her fingertips, using her finest quilting shears to make delicate exploratory cuts along what she believed to be existing seam lines. The wounds were precise, surgical in their execution, and she approached each one with the methodical patience of a craftsperson examining her work. She was looking for proof, she told us later, evidence of the threading that held her together.

What she found instead was something far worse.

The cuts, rather than revealing the expected stitches, showed her flesh to be riddled with tiny holes, perfectly round apertures that descended into her body like miniature wells. Each hole was rimmed with what appeared to be scar tissue, as if they had been there all along, hidden beneath the surface, waiting to be discovered. When she pressed her eye to the largest opening, she claimed to see thread spooling endlessly through the darkness within, being drawn deeper into her body by some unseen mechanism.



The realization that she was not merely stitched together but actively being sewn from the inside out drove her to escalate her investigations. She began making deeper cuts, more systematic explorations of her anatomy, searching for the source of the threading. Her arms and legs became a patchwork of surgical wounds, each one revealing more of the honeycomb structure that she believed comprised her true form.

She spoke of feeling the needle moving within her, working its way through her tissues with the patient precision of an expert seamstress. Sometimes, she said, she could even hear the whisper of thread being drawn through her flesh, a sound like silk passing through silk, beautiful and terrible in equal measure. She would lie awake at night, she told us, feeling the needle's progress as it wove new patterns through her organs, connecting her heart to her lungs to her liver in configurations that defied anatomical logic.



The final incident occurred when she attempted to remove what she believed to be a particularly significant stitch running along her sternum. Using a combination of quilting tools and surgical instruments acquired through means we have not been able to determine, she made a vertical incision from her throat to just below her xiphoid process. The wound was so precisely executed that emergency responders initially mistook it for the work of a trained surgeon.

When they found her, she was conscious and lucid, her hands buried wrist-deep in the wound, feeling around for the threads she insisted were holding her ribcage in place. "They're pulling tighter," she repeated as the paramedics worked to stabilize her. "Someone else is threading me from inside. I can feel them working."



During her recovery, she continued to perceive the stitching patterns with undiminished clarity. She would spend hours staring at the backs of her hands, tracing invisible seams with her fingertips, whispering about the beautiful precision of the work being done within her. She spoke of the threading as if it were a collaboration, describing the presence she felt moving through her body as patient and skilled, working toward some grand design that she was privileged to participate in but not permitted to fully understand.

Her wounds healed with unusual rapidity, leaving behind scars that, to our medically trained eyes, appeared entirely random. But Miriam saw in them a purposeful pattern, a message written in the language of severed flesh and mended tissue. She would run her fingers along these raised lines with something approaching reverence, claiming that they formed part of a larger design that connected her to every other stitched being in the world.



She has been with us now for three weeks, and her condition shows no signs of improvement. If anything, her perception of the threading has grown more acute, more detailed in its horrifying specificity. She can now describe the exact gauge of thread being used in different parts of her body, can predict when new stitches will be added, can feel the tension being adjusted in existing patterns.

Most disturbing of all, she has begun to perceive the stitching in the staff members who attend to her. She watches us with the calculating gaze of a seamstress examining a difficult piece, occasionally pointing out places where she believes our threading has begun to loosen or where new reinforcement will soon be required.



ATTENDING NOTES:

Patient continues to exhibit elaborate tactile and visual hallucinations consistent with severe dissociative disorder. The precision and consistency of her delusions suggest a highly organized psychotic system. Her artistic background appears to have provided a framework for her symptoms to develop along aesthetic lines, creating what might be termed a “beautiful madness.”

Of particular concern is the patient’s ability to accurately predict minor injuries and illnesses among staff members. Yesterday, she informed Nurse Chen that her “shoulder seam was pulling” twelve hours before Chen reported the onset of rotator cuff pain. Similar incidents have occurred with three other staff members.

I have requested that my own psychological evaluation be expedited. Since beginning work with this patient, I have developed a peculiar sensitivity to the texture of my own skin, particularly along the margins of old surgical scars.

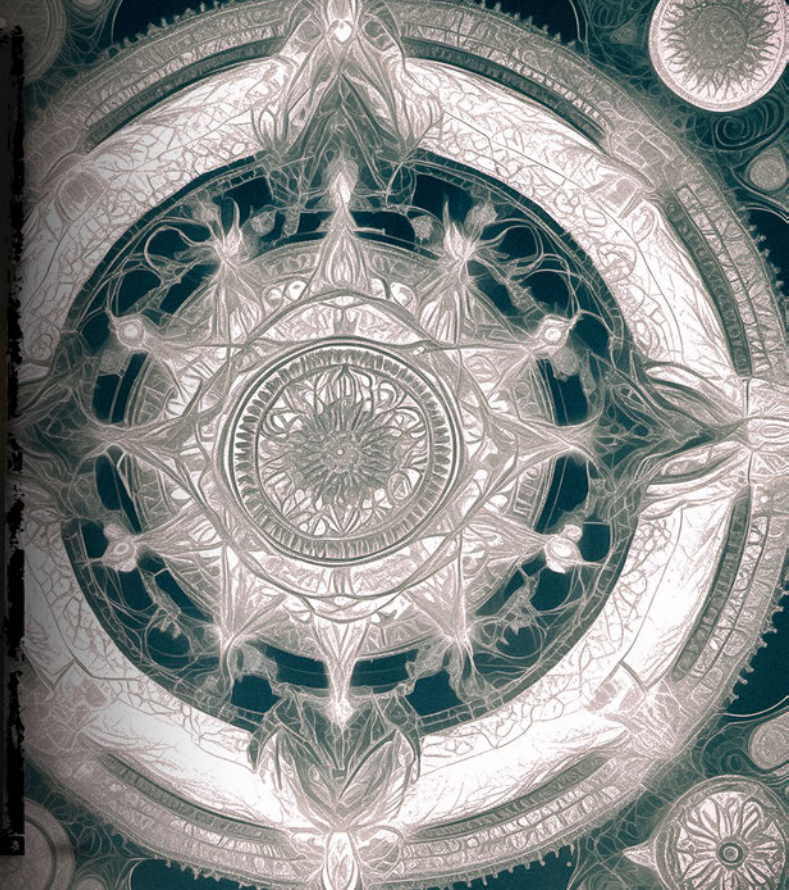


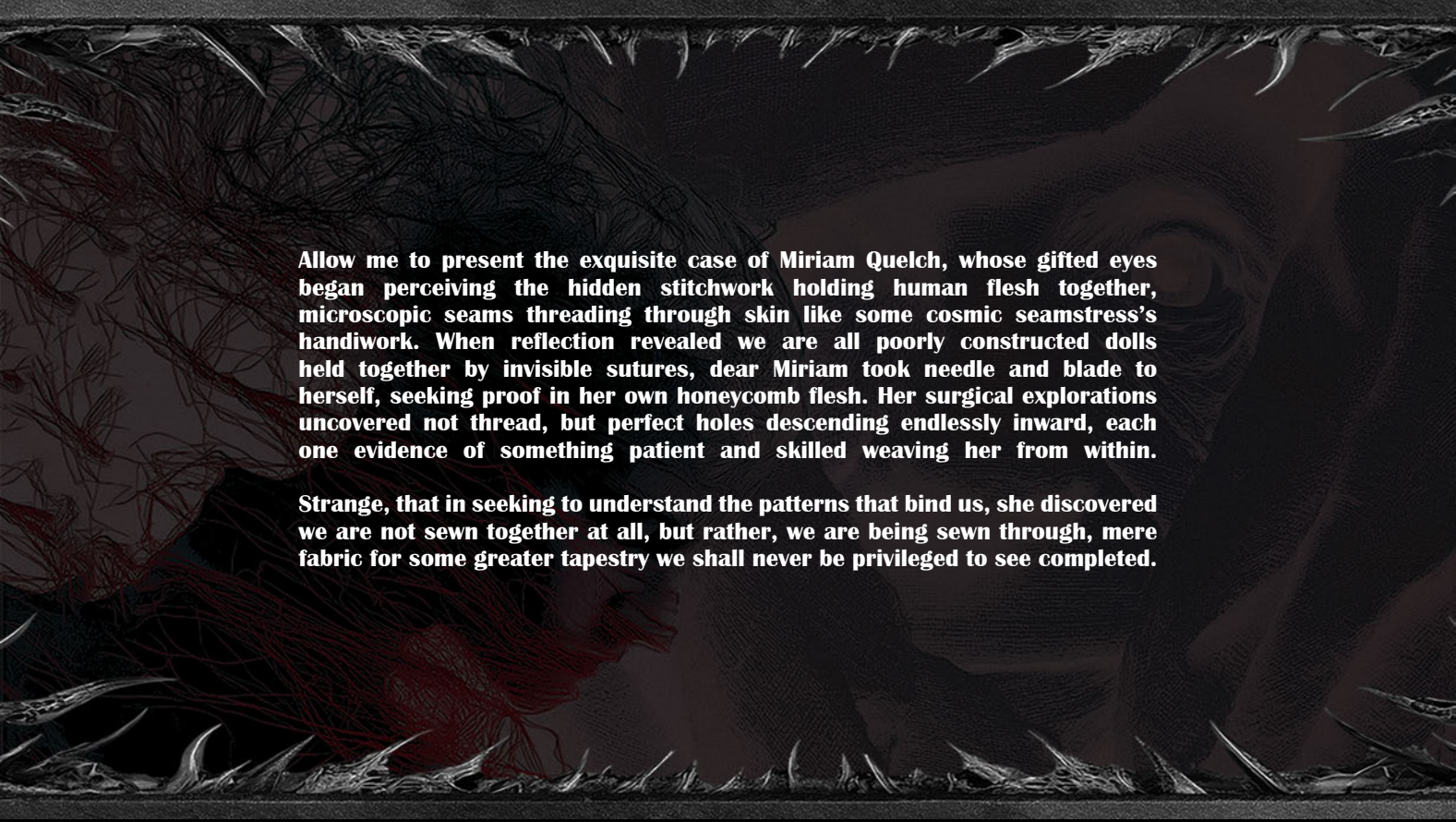
The sensation is likely psychosomatic, a form of sympathetic response to prolonged exposure to the patient's delusions. Still, I find myself examining my reflection more carefully each morning, searching for irregularities in the surface, signs of pulling or puckering that might indicate...

No. I must maintain clinical objectivity. The patient's condition is tragic but entirely explicable within established psychiatric frameworks. Yet I cannot escape the feeling that something is threading through me as I write these words, drawing connections between thoughts that should remain separate, weaving patterns in my consciousness that feel both foreign and strangely familiar.

**I should request immediate reassignment from this case.
But the work is so beautiful.**

**- Dr. Brooke Chandler
Chief of Psychiatric Services
Asylum Medical Facility**





Allow me to present the exquisite case of Miriam Quelch, whose gifted eyes began perceiving the hidden stitchwork holding human flesh together, microscopic seams threading through skin like some cosmic seamstress's handiwork. When reflection revealed we are all poorly constructed dolls held together by invisible sutures, dear Miriam took needle and blade to herself, seeking proof in her own honeycomb flesh. Her surgical explorations uncovered not thread, but perfect holes descending endlessly inward, each one evidence of something patient and skilled weaving her from within.

Strange, that in seeking to understand the patterns that bind us, she discovered we are not sewn together at all, but rather, we are being sewn through, mere fabric for some greater tapestry we shall never be privileged to see completed.



CHOIR PRACTICE

PATIENT CLASSIFICATION:

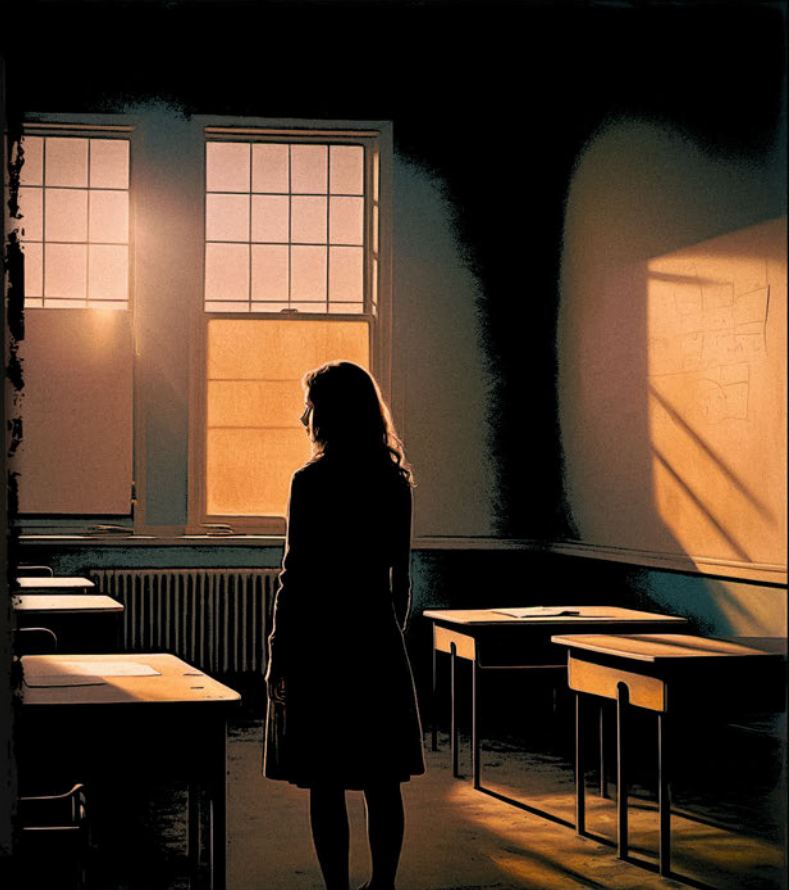
Acute Auditory Dissociative Disorder with
Paranoid Ideation (DSM-V: 300.15)

ATTENDING PHYSICIAN: Dr. Helena Hadley,
Senior Psychiatrist

DATE OF ADMISSION: October 13th, 2024
Security Level: Medium

(Yellow Tag - Auditory Isolation Protocol)

The silence was never truly silent anymore. Margaret Porter pressed her palms against her ears until the cartilage screamed, but still the humming seeped through, not through her fingers, but through the spaces between her thoughts, the hollow chambers of her skull where reason once lived. It had begun three weeks ago in the third-grade classroom at Millhaven Elementary, when she'd accepted the substitute position that no one else would take. The previous teacher, Mrs. Caldwell, had simply stopped coming to work. No explanation. No forwarding address. Just an empty desk and twenty-six children who watched Margaret with eyes too knowing for their years.





The first sign had been subtle, a low, resonant hum that seemed to emanate from the school's heating vents during the morning reading circle. Margaret had assumed it was mechanical, perhaps the old boiler struggling against October's creeping chill. But the sound possessed an organic quality, a wetness that made her stomach clench with inexplicable revulsion. When she'd mentioned it to the principal, Mrs. Hedrick had smiled with lips that didn't quite conceal her yellowing teeth and suggested Margaret might need more rest.

By the second week, the humming had gained companions. Voices, children's voices, harmonizing in keys that human vocal cords should not have been able to produce. They sang words in no language Margaret recognized, syllables that felt oily and wrong sliding through her consciousness. The melodies were beautiful in the way that gangrene flowers might be beautiful, lovely from a distance, but carrying the sweet stench of decay beneath their surface splendor.



Margaret began to notice that the children in her classroom would sometimes move their mouths soundlessly, their small lips forming shapes that corresponded perfectly with the phantom choir she heard echoing through the walls. When she asked them to stop, they would look at her with expressions of such profound disappointment that she felt ashamed for interrupting something sacred. But sacred to what? And why did their disappointment feel like hunger unsatisfied?

The breaking point came during the third week's Friday afternoon cleanup. The children had filed out with unusual orderliness, their backpacks hanging like molted skins from their shoulders. Margaret was alone, erasing mathematical equations from the whiteboard, when the full choir began to sing. Not the subtle harmonies she'd grown accustomed to, but a thunderous chorus that seemed to pour from every surface in the room, the walls, the ceiling, the very air itself. The sound was so impossibly rich and layered that it felt solid, pressing against her eardrums like fingers made of music.



But it was the words she finally understood that shattered her remaining sanity. Not words, exactly, but intentions conveyed through melody, a recruitment song, an invitation written in harmonics and sustained notes. They wanted her voice. They needed her voice. The choir was incomplete without her particular frequency, her specific resonance. She was the missing note in their endless composition, and they had been calling to her across dimensions of sound that existed between the spaces of normal hearing.

Margaret screamed then, a raw and primal sound that seemed to tear the phantom music apart like tissue paper. But in the sudden silence that followed, she heard something infinitely worse, her own voice, echoing back from the empty classroom walls, but changed. Harmonized. Part of something larger and hungrier than herself.

She ran from Millhaven Elementary that afternoon and never returned. But the choir followed her home, seeping through the walls of her apartment like sonic mold. She tried drowning them out with television, radio, construction noise from the street, anything to fill the spaces where their voices might take root. But silence was their breeding ground, and every quiet moment became a potential gateway for their return.

Sleep became impossible. In the moments between wakefulness and dream, when her mental defenses were lowest, she could feel them gathering at the edges of her consciousness like musical spores waiting to bloom. Her voice began to change without her permission, humming their melodies while she brushed her teeth, harmonizing with radiator hiss and refrigerator hum. She was becoming one of them, note by note, frequency by frequency.





Margaret began shouting, at grocery store clerks, at her neighbors, at the postal worker who brought her mail. Not from anger, but from desperate necessity. If she kept talking, kept making noise, kept filling every moment with her own sound, perhaps she could crowd out their invasion. Her throat became raw, her voice a rasping whisper, but still she continued. Silence was surrender, and surrender meant joining their endless, hungry song.

But they were patient, these voices from whatever dimension housed Saint Fluke's Choir. They could wait. They had been waiting for longer than human civilization had existed, collecting voices like pressed flowers, adding new harmonies to their eternal composition. Mrs. Caldwell had been their most recent acquisition before Margaret, her alto range had been particularly suited to their deeper movements. And there would be others after Margaret, other substitute teachers drawn to fill empty positions that were never truly empty.



The night before her admission to our facility, Margaret had discovered the true horror of her situation. In a moment of exhausted collapse, she had fallen silent for exactly thirteen seconds. In that brief gap, she heard her own voice singing with the phantom choir, not echoing back, but originating from somewhere else entirely. Part of her was already there, already recruited, already lost to their endless performance. The Margaret who screamed and fought and feared was merely the echo, the afterimage of a voice that had already joined their sacred harmonies.

Now she sits in our soundproofed room, wearing noise-canceling headphones that she refuses to remove. Her lips move constantly in what appears to be prayer, but the words are wrong, too melodic, too harmonized, too much like singing for something that claims to be speech. Her medical chart notes severe sleep deprivation, acute anxiety, and paranoid delusions centered around auditory hallucinations.



But I have worked in this facility for seventeen years, and I have learned to listen to the spaces between what our patients say and what they mean. When Margaret was first brought in, her room was blissfully quiet. Now, three days later, I sometimes catch myself humming while I write her progress notes. Simple melodies, nothing elaborate. The kind of unconscious humming that anyone might do while concentrating.

The kind that sounds suspiciously like children's voices harmonizing in impossible keys.

ATTENDING NOTES - DR. HELENA HADLEY:

Patient exhibits extreme phonophobia with particular sensitivity to harmonic structures. Treatment plan includes controlled exposure therapy and anxiolytic medication. Of note: patient's room assignment has experienced unusual acoustic phenomena since her arrival. Maintenance reports no mechanical issues with ventilation systems. Recommend consultation with acoustics specialist.

Personal addendum (not for file): Have noticed increased incidence of humming among staff assigned to Patient Porter's wing. Requesting transfer of case to Dr. Morrison. Suspect I may need to take extended leave for... vocal rest.





Greetings, my devoted disciples of the disturbed. You have now witnessed the fate of our dear Margaret Porter, who discovered that some substitutions are far more permanent than one might expect when she accepted a teaching position at Millhaven Elementary, replacing a woman who had simply vanished into harmonious oblivion. What began as innocent humming from the heating vents soon revealed itself as an interdimensional choir of the damned, collecting voices like a philatelist collects stamps, each new acquisition adding to their eternal, hungry composition.

Poor Margaret fought valiantly against their melodious recruitment, filling every silence with desperate noise, only to discover in her final moments of consciousness that part of her voice had already joined their ranks, she was merely the echo of what had already been consumed.

The most exquisite torture, my treasured viewers, is that in her terror of becoming part of something larger than herself, Margaret had already surrendered the very thing that made her beautifully, tragically human: her precious, irreplaceable silence.



END OF FILE

You've reached the end of this one. There are more.

The whole collection, plus a new story every week, waiting
behind one door. Admission is five dollars a month.



CHECK IN AT

asylumink.com/join

Scan the card, or type it in. The intake is
always open.

\$5 / month \$50 / year · two months free Leave whenever. The doors aren't locked.



AN ELLIUM LEISURE PUBLICATION

