

SOPHIA'S BLESSING

MODERN ATTITUDES TOWARDS WISDOM USING MEDIEVAL ALLEGORICAL
MODELS

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Preface

This project started in a course I took from Professor Judith Kellogg: English 780W: Medieval Women Writers from which I gained more ideas and momentum for its creation. I began to take an interest in the allegory of the medieval times, and wanted to recreate that genre in a modern time frame. Titled “Sophia’s Blessing,” this piece is concerned with a character coming to grips with the world around her. As a woman in the 20th century, she doesn’t feel certain anxieties that women in medieval times felt due to their gender. However, the world is still a place in which she needs to locate herself, and traveling through a kind of dream state allows her to enter a carnival of humanity. With her dog, Sophia, the Greek word for wisdom, representing the main virtue that allows her to move forward, she is guided by Evagrius Ponticus¹, head of the carnival, as she experiences the extremes of what “being human” can mean. Using allegorical dream vision, she begins to come to grips with humanity and what she is as a human.

I am hoping the project will shed more light onto the already chaotic times of the world. Living in Hawaii, although far away from the conflicts of Palestine and Israel, events that take place closer to home are just as difficult to understand and deal with. Family violence, suicides, rape, theft and murder among many other acts detrimental to social beings, are found no matter where you go. And often the justifications for actions tend to be unacceptable or simply don’t make sense for the survivors and others involved.

¹ Also known as Evagrius of Pontus (345-399 AD), he was known as a spiritual guide from the monks of the Egyptian desert. A monk named Loukios wrote to Evagrius requesting a treatise on how to counter demons that attempt to undermine the monastic life. The response was a letter called Antirrhētikos which is divided into 8 books giving instructions on how to combat demonic thoughts (Evagrius and Brakke).

The project continues to evolve into a multifunctional piece. For those who are searching for their own identities, measuring imperfections against the ideals created by society is an inevitable exercise. I want to create a piece that enables the modern reader to view the process from a new perspective. The next idea I want to highlight is one that has been lost to the past. Loosely translated as sorrow, the idea is something closer to despair. Sadness and despair are inevitably linked to hope. Not only do I want to draw attention to the social relations between humans in regards to the seven sins, but to include the idea of despair in a world that seems to be filled with people who are constantly depressed for good reason or not. I also want to explore wisdom: How it functions in relation to humans, society, the individual, and how it can be used to center the self in the world.

In regards to my field and how it engages scholarly concerns and debates, I am concerned with how close one can get to understanding the relationship between religion, morals, laws and common sense within society. I discovered that medieval dream vision often addressed these concerns and seemed an appropriate place to start.

The frame of dream vision starts with a character or narrator who is concerned with some problematic aspect in relation to his or her experience. The narrator falls asleep and is led through a symbolic, generally allegorical landscape, guided by a divine or auspicious figure who assists him or her in coming to terms with the problem at hand. The assumption is that the dream is a privilege, sent by a higher power to reveal truths that are not readily recognized or found in waking experience. As readers, we walk with the dreamer to gain the same enlightenment. The dilemmas have a tendency to be of a spiritual nature and can address other related issues such as salvation, loss

and spiritual alienation. A good example would be *Dante's Divine Comedy*. Problems can also range from issues of love and relationships as in *Romance of the Rose*, to social injustices as in Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*.

Hildegard of Bingham represents another type of vision, more concerned with creating a connection between the earthly and the divine. The visionary experience isn't just allegory and symbolism, but a place where humans can transcend their current states and become enlightened in a variety of social and spiritual concerns that must be negotiated in the waking state. Hildegard's visions symbolically describe biblical history from the time of creation to the time of salvation. It also allowed her to interpret the meaning of the sacrifice of the Son for man to gain salvation despite the sinful nature of humans.

Through personal experience, dreams in general seem to be a natural place where a person can view their innermost thoughts. People can gain insight into personal stresses or other ideas that they may not be aware of. During the crafting of this paper, dreams played a very important role in the formation and generation of many ideas which lead to further development.

This frame, personal connections, use of symbolism and allegory² are elements of this particular genre that I want to use as the basis for exploring modern battles of a social, spiritual and psychological nature. Similar to *Alice in Wonderland*, the dreamer moves away from the daily reality. Going down the rabbit hole to another place, re-conceptualize her circumstance, and then waking up she gained insight from the vision.

² Allegory is defined by Holman as: "A form of extended metaphor in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. Thus, it represents one thing in the guise of another-an abstraction in that of a concrete image. By a process of double signification, the order of words represents actions and characters, and they, in turn, represent ideas."

The intent is to find some kind of personal resolution. In “Sophia’s Blessing,” my narrator is guided by the allegorical figure of wisdom (Sophia) and learns that for many issues in life, there may not be answers. But that it is okay to **not understand everything**. However, it is important for the character to try to see the entire picture and to deal with the acceptance of the self in relation to the complex social world that she inhabits. The other important idea imparted by Sophia is Hope, which allows the character to see the possibility for change and deviation from a continuous cycle of chaos and death that occurs around her every day.

Working on this project allowed me to ask important questions about the writings that originally inspired me. Perhaps more specifically, how close is Dante’s *Inferno* to real life? Was it really just religious allegory or story telling for entertainment? How many people have to really think like Christine to begin to gain their own volition in life as in *The Book of the City of Ladies*? Must women and men continue to dream, struggle and strive for truths in the same way as Hildegard Von Bingen so many centuries ago? There is so much wisdom to be had from the past that I am willing to go down the rabbit hole to find it. I still want to try to gather this wisdom that King Solomon said could not be mastered.

Dreaming

Two weeks of restless sleep really took a toll on my body and mind. Distressing dreams continued to wake me up, and I couldn't seem to recall anything except the last part: A white piece of square paper with the words "Evagrius Ponticus" written in big bold letters.

The word for sleep or to dream in Latin is somnium. Personified, sleep is either the cousin or lover of death. And after a prolonged period of restlessness, I wondered if death had really taken a liking to me and if his cousin had fled.

The only comfort was my dog, Sophia. A cuddly fuzzball is helpful when things get rough in life, at least that's what I have always felt. Sophia has been my little shadow ever since I rescued her from the river near my home. But that's a whole other story.

About six more weeks passed and the dreams persisted. The lack of deep sleep finally got to me after a little over two months. I just arrived home from an afternoon stroll through the neighborhood and decided to sort through the mail before going inside.

Junk, junk, bill, junk, 50% off sale at the market, junk, bill...letter?

"Here you go, Sophia, you can tear these up for me," I handed her the bundle of junk mail. She ran off to the porch, bundle in mouth, and pulled on the edges of the envelopes with her paws and mouth, dug through the plastic windows, and shredded the guts from the bundle with tiny teeth until white confetti flew all over the place.

“Good girl. Now let’s see what we got here. Two bills and a letter with...no envelope...”

The tri-folded piece of paper was sealed with red wax in the shape of a serpent.

**The Monks of Greece Proudly Present:
A Carnival of Freaks!**

Honored Sponsors:

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Admit One with Guest

Come and release all your stress at the Carnival of Freaks. Gaze at the world’s highly studied facets of humanity, personified for your enjoyment and amusement.

**Special Touring Event: The 8 Faces of
Humanity**

Shoes required. Free refreshments provided.

Warning:

**Not for the unstable or morally compromised.
Groundless and grounded individuals welcome.**

By invitation only, please present this letter to the ticket master upon entering the carnival grounds. One pet or human guest is allowed to accompany you. Nearest entrance is located between any two large weeping willows. We look forward to your visit.

Best regards,

Evagrius Pontincus

“Release all your stress, huh? Maybe it’s stress that has been making me restless. Maybe I should go to this...carnival. Although I’m not exactly fond of the idea of freak shows, I guess a break from all the academic stuff wouldn’t hurt. What do you think, Sophia? It says I can bring you along too. Want to be my guest?”

She just stared at me with huge silver eyes. Shreds of advertisement were sticking out of her fuzzy grey fur.

“Well, someone had a lot of fun, huh?” I picked her up and brushed off all the shreds. “Let’s clean all this up and take a bath. I need some time to think about the carnival.”

Sophia cleared her nose as I proceeded to sweep up the pieces. After dinner and a shower, I stared at the letter again as I sat on my bed with the lamp on. That name, Evagrius, lingered in the back of my mind. An uneasy feeling came over me. Folding up the letter, I put it on the night stand against the lamp and got into bed.

“Come on, Sophia, sleepy time!” She came running into the bedroom and leaped onto the bed. She took her place above my head on the pillow.

“Even if I wanted to go to this carnival of freaks, the entrance is between any two large weeping willows. I’ve never seen any since moving here for school. Maybe it’s in a spot we haven’t been to yet.” I felt for Sophia with my head and turned off the lamp.

There were gravestones in rows in front, behind and all around me. The grass was damp and the space above the stones was misty. Fog, I guessed, although I had never seen fog before. Each gravestone had pink and yellow roses in simple brass vases. The petals of every rose glowed with a strange warmth, and the colors danced on the headstones like fireflies. The feeling was unknown but unthreatening. No one else was there. After I walked for a while, I noticed the graves were slowly moving farther apart from each other. The two closest graves parted, and I could see a lake. It was surrounded by more graves, but the flowers here were red and orange lilies. The graveyard was glowing, as though being near a fire, but no flames flickered in the air or colored the ground with ash. The fog parted along with the graves. A path of step stones emerged from the water which lead from the edge of the lake towards the

center. I decided it might be fun to hop from stone to stone. As I approached the middle of the lake, two weeping willows with branches rose from the black water. Willow branches were crying tears of dew, where each drop created ripples on the lake's surface. The path led straight between them. I realized I was dreaming and was immediately taken out of sleep. The alarm clock was showing a digital 2am.

"This is getting tedious," I said aloud as I sat up in my bed.

Sophia was still asleep. I grabbed my grey little dog and tried to go back to sleep with her in my arms. But the dream kept repeating itself, and no matter how many times I tried to let it continue, I was constantly being awakened after seeing the willows. The only other detail that I could discern was that each tombstone had a different symbol on it. Different faiths of the deceased; everyone dies as death does not discriminate, the only vague idea that went through my mind.

Eventually I gave up and stared at the ceiling. Sophia moved around and put her chin on my forehead. She got back to her usual spot and I knew she was worried about me. I closed my eyes and opened them; the ceiling was still there but no sleep.

"It's okay, I got some rest last night," I scratched the top of her head with my fingertips. The tip of her black nose twitched above my head. I got up before my alarm went off and Sophia followed me through my morning routine.

That afternoon, we took our usual walk around the neighborhood. I had the letter in my mini backpack. The thought of the carnival and the name

Pontincus, no matter how much I tried to occupy myself with other thoughts, just lingered in the back of my mind. At certain points, I wondered if I was awake in the reality before my sleeping issues began or in some unknown reality.

Between the Realities

It took a few more days of internet mapping and exploring, but I finally found a willow tree in my neighborhood. Surprisingly, it was located behind my house. I just didn't see it because: First, the property on which the willow tree stood was huge. Second, the tree was in the center of the property, and third, because the back side of my house is enclosed by a red brick wall.

While taking our usual afternoon stroll, Sophia and I went to the street side entrance of the massive property to see if we could get a view of the willow. However, the property was fenced in. A sign hung on a metal chain between two metal poles over what looked like the only path in.

"Private Property. Keep Out," I read. Well, no sense going in this way. Maybe it's government property?

"Come on, Sophia. Maybe we can find a hole in the back wall and take a peek." We walked away from the chained-link fencing.

The property stretched a good block or so on one side. I wondered how big it actually was. The whole area smelled like pine trees and the greenery had grown at least three stories high in certain areas. Occasionally small animals scurried between the trees and beneath the fallen pine needles. Birds were singing from somewhere inside but weren't visible from where I stood. According to the map I found on-line, part of the property line was drawn against the streets and surrounding homes, but another section was left unmarked. When I looked at the satellite view, the unmarked area was just forest. I thought maybe I should ask around and see if anyone knew about that place.

Just as I was about to turn the corner at the end of the block, someone tapped my right shoulder.

“Excuse me, miss?” said a young man’s voice.

I turned to the right but there was only asphalt. I looked behind me and again, no one there. I looked in front and then at the fence on the left. There were only trees, but I stared beyond the links and spotted a streak of black moving between the brown and green trunks. The leaves didn’t rustle, the wind was still and while this shadow moved quickly, nothing was audible. I became aware of an unsettling silence in the area. A silhouette suddenly stopped in front of me behind the fence. Although standing about six feet tall, the figure was indistinct. I stepped back an inch to get a better view. It was only a few feet away from me.

“Yes?” I said, not taking my eyes off the shadow, watching for sudden movements.

“Are you interested in this property?” asked the same voice.

I did a 360 scan around me and gazed back at the fence. In that instant the silhouette took on a more solid shape. It had no distinguishing facial features, but a white butler’s outfit appeared revealing the shape of a human body. There was a round shape for a head and the outline of hands covered in white gloves. Arms, torso, and legs were hidden under a white dress shirt with a top coat and long white dress pants. Shiny black shoes glimmered in the sunlight, and the clean white coat stood in dramatic contrast to the wearer. Sophia’s hair stood on end, and a small growl resonated from her mouth.

“Interested in the property?” I repeated, still trying to figure out what I was talking to. “I just wanted to know if anyone lives here and if they could tell me more about that willow tree in the center of the property.”

“Oh, yes. This property is inhabited by many things including unfortunate souls, as well as one who is said to be wise in his own unique understanding of the divine. The willow tree has been living on this ground for centuries. Some have speculated that it’s over 500 years old. It used to have a partner willow tree, but sadly someone came onto the property and chopped it down much to the Master’s sadness. Therefore, this fence and the many signs posted all around the property serve as a means of preventing such a thing from repeating itself. I myself make rounds to ensure that no one with an ax has entered unlawfully. By the way, you wouldn’t happen to have an ax on you, now would you?” His body movements suggested that he was speaking and gesturing like any other person might, but there still wasn’t much in the way of flesh.

“I don’t go carrying around axes on my walks,” still staring at the figure. “It’s disappointing when someone callously cuts down a tree that has lived for so long. And it wasn’t even on his property. Such careless behavior saddens me.” I really couldn’t help but feel for the lonely willow. As if it didn’t represent enough sadness in the world, it no longer had anyone to cry with.

“You shouldn’t feel so bad about it. That happened a long time ago. But I’m sure your compassion is appreciated. In fact, I’m so sure that your compassion is felt by the willow that you will be able to find a way to bring the

second tree back and enter the carnival,” he finished as his figure faded away into the air.

“Wait! The two willows, how do I bring the other tree back? I can’t get in!” I shouted through the fence, grabbing the links with both hands and moving closer to the trees.

“Don’t worry. I’ll let you in. You have an invitation, right? But I suggest you have a look around the curiosity shop first. There’s a nice one in your closet, run by an old woman named Mary. She can help you with this.” His voice now echoed from the tree tops.

“Wait...what? In my closet?” I stepped back from the fence and Sophia nudged my leg. I picked her up and held onto her until I got home.

“Either I’m really losing it, or there’s a curiosity shop in my closet and I was talking to a shadow in a white butler’s outfit,” I told Sophia as I put her down at the porch. She turned around to look up at me, her silver eyes staring straight into my eyes and then into my soul.

“It’s okay,” I added. “As long as one of us is still grounded I think we’ll be okay.” I let out a huge sigh.

We both went into the house to cool off and eat lunch. Towards dinner time, I thought about which closet the shadow could have been talking about. I have a hallway closet, one in my bedroom, one in the bathroom, and then one in the second floor bedroom. But I’ve opened them all before and I don’t recall a curiosity shop being in any of them. I looked up curiosity shops on my computer. There used to be one somewhere on that same property as the willow tree about

70 years ago. Before the property had lines drawn around it, there was a two-story building with a number of in-home businesses that were run by a variety of people. Some people had recalled that the building was full of hippies, or even witches. But the place was torn down and the owners mysteriously vanished into the forested area. The shop that I was looking for was on the second floor of the building. The most referenced story that I found, said that an old woman would sell herbs and medicines that assisted in the recovery process of people suffering from long term illnesses. Her stock included things that might be sold as natural supplements, kind of like products in a health food store. She also sold homemade tonics for stomach problems and stress related issues. If the regular medicines didn't work or if the side effects were more devastating than the cure, people would go to her for an all natural approach instead. One unusual note that I found while cross checking the story, was that she had an odd collection of items. If anyone wanted to see them or purchase them, they would have to knock on her door three times instead of calling to her as was customary for these vendors.

I closed all the windows on my screen and sat back. Sophia jumped up onto my lap and curled up into a ball. I looked down at her and stroked her soft fur.

“Hey there, Miss Ammonite. Found a nice spot, huh?” I asked her. She huffed without moving her head and stayed in her position.

“Okay, I get it. We better eat dinner before we go into any adventure, right?” She uncurled herself, stared straight at me while licking her mouth and wagging her tail.

It was about 7pm when I dressed as if we were going for a walk again. I decided to take a red mini pack with my wallet, basic walking necessities, and the invitation inside; I had black walking shoes and a bottle of water carried in a separate sling just in case. This time, I put Sophia’s doggie bag on her, which looked like a saddle that wrapped around her back and underneath her belly. I always thought it looked kind of weird, but she didn’t seem the least bit bothered by it. It held a small container for water and a pouch of treats just in case our trip to the second floor closet took a little longer than anticipated.

“Second floor, knock three times,” I said as Sophia and I ascended the stairs of our home. The second floor was just as I had left it, cleaned with the bed made just in case I ever had a guest spend the night. I walked into the room and stood in front of the closet with Sophia standing next to my right ankle. I was just about to knock on the door, when I stopped myself. Maybe I should test this first.

“Ms. Mary? Is anyone there? I would like to buy one of your tonics please,” I said aloud at the closet.

It was silent for a few seconds, and then the top half of the closet door opened as if someone pulled the door from the inside. There were now two doors instead of one, or at least the top part swung separately from the bottom half. An old lady with brilliant blue eyes looked at me. Her hair shone a silvery

grey against the candle light that came from behind her. I couldn't tell exactly how she was dressed, but she had a gentle presence that calmed me greatly.

"Well, hello there, little one, I haven't had a customer in a long time," she said in a soft, gentle voice. "What can I get for you, dear?"

"Uh, well, actually I wouldn't mind one of your tonics. I haven't been sleeping well recently, and I'm afraid my mind hasn't been in the best condition as a result. I'm tired, but I'm sure I'm stressed about something. Maybe you have something that can help me?" I thought it wouldn't be so bad to have a natural cure handy.

She turned around to grab something from a lower shelf. "I have just the thing for you." She came back up in a few moments and handed me two glass bottles filled with a light-yellow liquid. Both were corked when she handed them to me.

"This is just some relaxing tea, my dear. It will help with the lack of sleep and put your mind at ease. But I think you should take two. Having an extra one wouldn't hurt."

"Really? Oh...okay. Umm, how much for the tonics? I mean how much for the teas?"

"Nothing this time. Don't worry, you'll know when you will need it when you meet her," she said, smiling at me.

"Wait, are you sure? Wait. Her? Well, I can still pay."

"Oh, don't be silly," she said, turning around to close the top half of the door. "Just knock three times, dear. I'll help you get what you need next."

The top half closed with a soft click. I looked back at my hands, still holding onto the two bottles. I looked at Sophia who tilted her head up at me.

“Gee. I guess I do have an herbalist in my closet! The shop must be here too then. How peachy is that, huh, Sophia?” I started to laugh to myself. I put the two bottles into my backpack.

Sophia cleared her nose and put her two front paws on the closet door, which had now become one door again. I knocked three times and the door vanished altogether. Sophia backed away from the opening and then followed me in. The room was lit by white candles. The ground was made of smooth stone instead of wood and carpet like the rest of my house. The same old lady stood behind another counter in the corner to the left. The walls were lined with shelves filled with trinkets, miniature replicas of dining rooms, pendants made of crystal quartz, music boxes, and all sorts of odds and ends. I walked in farther and noticed a reflective surface in the middle of the room. As I approached, I saw that it was a small circular piece of glass embedded in the stone floor. It couldn't have been more than a foot in diameter. I had never seen such an oddly placed mirror and began to stare down at it.

“You like the mirror?” asked Mary.

“Oh, yes,” glancing up at her. “But why is it in the ground? Does it catch water or act as a drain or make some kind of neat light show for the shop?”

“Haha, of course not,” she said, smiling. “Touch the mirror, my dear. I think it's what you need.”

Kneeling down, I placed my left hand onto the face of the mirror and it began to push up against me. My hand was slowly rising with the glass, as somehow it moved out of the stone and upwards. I let my hand go up and finally the mirror turned over and a border formed around the edges. Snakes encircled the sides. At the top and bottom of the mirror, the same symbol of the snake that I saw on the invitation appeared.

“The border is made of pure silver,” said Mary. “The snakes represent healing. You must be very ill-at-ease for the snakes to come out and protect the mirror. What troubles you, my dear?”

“I come from such a troubled time. Or maybe that’s what someone might say in the future about people born in my time. But then again, tragedy happens no matter what time frame you are in. At first, I knew the world wasn’t supposed to be all candy and popcorn. But I didn’t learn how bad it was until I got into intermediate school. After that, the world only got worse. As I became more aware of what was going on around me, the more frustrated and flustered I felt about everything. Why was I brought into such a terrible world? Why are so many things awful in this world? Why is the newspaper so damn depressing most of the time? “

“The world bothers you, my dear?”

“I know it sounds silly considering there isn’t much to be done. But lots of events that have been happening are really getting to me - things like 9/11, Israel-Palestine Conflict, The War in Iraq, and The War on Terrorism. So many are dying and continuing to suffer all over the world. Even here at home, we

have to deal with homelessness, murders, suicides, and the economy going down. When I was in high school, people were more interested in what Clinton did in bed than his political endeavors. In college, I began to realize the weight and extensiveness of local issues, political conflicts, and their consequences. Seriously, I can't make heads or tails of some of the things that happen. To even begin to become properly aware and educated on half of the problems that occur in your community is daunting at best. Trying to comprehend what can be done on the international issues...I don't know what is worth doing! What can I possibly do?"

"Now that is a lot to concern yourself with. Great philosophers have dealt with these same matters for centuries. But it doesn't seem like the world changes despite all their efforts, does it?"

"No. I just don't know what's going on around me. I feel like I might float off at any moment because I can't ground myself even with all my beliefs." I put the mirror on the counter and picked up Sophia. She put her head on my left shoulder and began to nod off as I scratched the back of her neck.

"Well, there are things that can and have been done about many issues the world faces, my dear. Now, if certain things are worth doing for whatever reason it is, that is a relative issue I suspect. But for you, I think the carnival will help you understand something you already know. It might help you a great deal," She took the mirror, walked behind me and stuffed it into my mini backpack. "There now. You take that mirror with you. I'm sure you will find what

you need to know. And don't forget to drink the tea later on, okay? I always sweeten it with a little mixture of honey and sugar cane water."

Mary guided me out of the shop with her hand on my right shoulder. "Evagrius is a little odd at times, but he doesn't mean any harm so don't be afraid when you go to the carnival. And always remember, you have little Sophia with you. What a good girl, aren't you?" She scratched Sophia's head gently. Sophia kept her eyes closed, leaning her head slightly towards Mary.

"By the way, I encountered a...person...who guards the area where I'm supposed to find a weeping willow. He said he would let me in, but I don't exactly want to trespass either. Is there another way in for the purpose of entering the carnival?"

"Ah, yes, check around your red brick wall. There should be a door there. And if you can't find it, I'm sure Sophia can. Just go and have a look around my dear, and don't worry. You will find what you need to know."

I began to step out of the door and back into the second floor room. "Thank you," I said as she closed the door behind me.

"You're very welcome, little one." Her voice began to echo and trail off as if she was moving farther away from me. The door shut and the lights that came through the cracks disappeared. I woke Sophia up and put her back on the ground. I opened up the closet door again. Empty.

I looked down at Sophia. "Well, then, let's go to the brick wall, shall we?" She just yawned at me in response.

“You can’t be that sleepy yet, can you? It’s only--” I glanced around the room and looked at the grandfather clock that stood in one corner. “--7:05pm? Wow, that didn’t take long at all, did it?”

We continued down the stairs, through the living room, past the kitchen and out to the back yard. I turned on the back light, hoping I wouldn’t need to use a flashlight and spot search.

“So, if we are looking for a door...and it’s just a solid brick wall, then what would indicate that there is a door here? It’s not like there is a doorknob sticking out.” Sophia and I approached the center of the wall. I decided to feel the surface for anything unusual. Maybe there was a hidden button? But my fingers only got dirty from patches of dirt.

“Okay, forget finding a door if the wall is dirty. Let’s go shoot it down a bit first.” We went to the side of the house where the hose was. I unwound the hose; Sophia grabbed part of the nozzle with her teeth and ran towards the wall with it. She put the hose down, and I turned on the water. I had never cleaned the wall; it never occurred to me that I should, but there was a lot more dirt than I had first thought. After a minute of rinsing, I uncovered something on the wall about four feet from the ground. While I pulled the hose in and wound it back up, Sophia began to sniff the ground and walked towards the right corner of the yard against the brick wall.

“Well, will you look at that?” It was a white circular indentation with three smaller holes drilled in the shape of a triangle. “Door knobs don’t need three holes for screws, or at least not that I recall. So maybe there was a knocker?”

Boy, this must have been a heavy door to open.” As I continued to stare at the shape, imagining what could have been there, Sophia ran up to me and started to spin in circles.

“Okay, okay, I see you. What’s up?” She dashed to the right corner and began to paw at the brick wall. I went over and noticed that one of the bricks was loose. I managed to slide the brick from the wall and a piece of metal fell out with it. “A knocker, a really old fashioned knocker, with snakes on the handle to boot.” I held the metal piece with a napkin I had in my pack and dusted it off. “Good girl, Sophia.” I pulled out a treat from her doggie bag and gave it to her. She ate the treat as she followed me back to the spot on the wall. Fitting the knocker into the wall, I knocked three times, and a segment of the wall began to shift back and slide to the right. A dirt path lit by that evening’s full moon, led straight to the weeping willow in the center of the property. Crickets chirped in the darkness of the shrubbery and the smell of pine trees saturated the air along the way.

A lone willow stood in the center; no grass grew beneath its hanging branches. Instead of dirt, the willow had grown over a giant stone encircled by a small trench of water that extended to the edge of the branches. The roots snaked down around the center stone and into the trench. Although the air felt dry, the branches seemed to have dew dripping off and into the trench, creating ripples now and then. Stepping stones led from the outside of the trench to the center so one could cross over and tend to the tree. I glanced around the area and found a similar foundation about 10 feet away to the right. But instead of a

willow tree, there was a stump sitting on a giant stone in the center of a trench filled with water.

The entrance was supposed to be between two weeping willows, but with one gone, how would I find it, I thought to myself as I moved towards the center of the stone with the willow stump. I took out the mirror, looked back at the standing willow, and then at the stump in front of me. Facing the stump, I looked at the mirror for a bit and then held it out in front of me. The reflection of the willow from behind caught my eye and the mirror began to tremble. I let the mirror go and it maintained its position in mid air! I grabbed my mini pack and moved over the trench. I turned to watch the mirror as the bottom edge stood on the stump. The face of the mirror began to rotate towards the sky and the moon was reflected. The mirror began to glow, and shattered into starry dust. The particles fell to the stump, and the stump split in half. A small green sprout came out of the center and a new willow tree emerged. As the sapling grew larger, it pushed the stump farther in half and forced the roots deep into the trench. I pulled away from the two trees, Sophia at my side. I could hear carnival music coming from between the two trees farther back.

The Carnival

Following the music, Sophia and I reached what looked like the carnival entrance. We came up to a make shift arch way with two red poles pounded into the ground about ten feet apart. A large yellow sign hung between the red poles about seven feet in the air. Giant black letters read, "A CARNIVAL OF FREAKS."

"Welcome to the carnival. Ticket please," said a young man's voice.

Once again the whole area fell silent, and the same shadowy figure in a white butler's outfit appeared beneath the sign. "Glad you could make it. Ticket please," he repeated with his gloved hands reaching out.

"Yes, well, Ms. Mary was most helpful in getting here," I said slowly as I took the invitation out and handed it to him. Sophia's hair stood on end and she gave a low growl. Her eyes opened wide, staring at the shadow, trying to seem intimidating.

"I don't think your dog likes me much." He opened the invitation and seemed to glance over it. "Please follow me."

"I know you don't like him, Sophia," I said softly as I picked her up and followed the shadow, "but I guess we don't have much choice but to follow him if I'm going to find what I need." Sophia stopped her growling and cleared her nose as we ventured deeper in. At a distance was a large ferris wheel slowly rotating. A giant merry-go-round was running with no riders in it. Music and sounds of people talking, children running, and balloons popping, could be heard, but there wasn't a single person around. The smell of hot dogs, damp grass,

sweet fruit juices, popcorn, and cotton candy floated through the air. I even caught a whiff of funnel cake and chocolate on a breeze that passed by. Sophia, still in my arms, stared at all the lights and movement, tilting her head now and then as if she wasn't sure what to make of the whole thing.

“The show is just starting. Please step inside. Evagrius should be here soon,” said the shadow as he motioned towards the entrance of what looked like the big top tent. Sophia began to sniff the air as we moved inside.

The arena didn't have the standard ring design. There were no tiered seats surrounding a center stage. Instead, we walked into an old fashioned playhouse. The whole stage was made of what smelled like sandalwood with red curtains and all. Half of the arena was the stage and the other half was seating. It was almost like a modern theater without the freezing cold air conditioning. Instead of grass, the ground inside was lined with stone walkways and carpet under the seats. Spotlights lit the stage while smaller lights lined the ends of the seating rows. After taking a seat in the center row, and putting my mini pack between my legs on the carpeting, Sophia jumped onto my lap. The lights began to dim and an unseen audience began to clap.

Our Daily Feast

A wooden sign was lowered with two ropes on each top end, to the center of the curtain: Two Men Eat Breakfast. The red curtains pulled apart revealing a simple wooden wall. A young woman nursing her child with a cornucopia poised at her feet was carved into the background.

The spotlights dimmed, and the stage had candlelight illuminating the scene from the edges. A thin pale man stood behind a counter. He was the baker at this establishment, dressed in a hair net and apron streaked in black. Next to the counter was a glass container filled with breads and pastries. The scene seemed typical until you glanced over at the left wall. There were two skeletons chained to the wall by their wrists, hanging from thick iron manacles. A wooden sign hung around each one's neck. The first said, "I'm too fat" while the second said, "I'm just not hungry."

Suddenly two thin men came running onto the stage from the right and smashed the glass case with their fists. They began to grab for the foods and gorge themselves on whatever they could hold. Shards of glass cut into their hands, lips, and mouths. As the case began to empty, the baker would go in back and bring out another tray of breads and pastries. At least twenty servings of each were replaced. The two men continued to eat off of the floor as the food started to crumble and fall. Two dark silhouettes rushed onto the stage and replaced the glass over the broken case.

Once the men were satisfied that there was no longer any food to be had on the ground, they smashed open the case again and continued to eat as

though they were starving. Both continued this way for five more rounds of goods and glass. One man, still thin after eating so much, began to cough up blood; it covered the floor and began to soak into the bread crumbs that fell on the ground. He desperately continued to try and eat but he fell over, face first into the shallow pool of blood that formed beneath him. He drowned, and the two dark silhouettes rushed out to drag him off the stage by his heels.

The second man who became enormously bloated continued to eat the gleaming pinkish mixture off the ground. Just as he got up and lifted his arms in front of the case, his whole body crashed into the glass. Half of his body was buried under Danish rolls and bear claws. His legs were sticking out of the display dripping crimson beads.

The curtains closed and a wooden sign was lowered: Intermission. Next Chapter: Two Men Eat Lunch. The clapping sounds started again, while my arms remained stuck to the arm rests of my seat.

“Bravo! Bravo!” shouted a man’s voice from the back. Sophia jumped up to my shoulder as we both turned to see a tall gentleman dressed in a white top hat and coat. He was standing and clapping with the unseen audience. A gold and white belt held his white business pants up. His coat tails, embroidered in gold, gleamed in the dim lighting.

“So,” he said coming down the aisle, “how did you like the first part of the attraction?” Gold boots began to shimmer as the lights came back on and the sign was lifted from the stage.

“I think I’ll skip the second half.”

“Are you sure? The second time they are chained up like dogs and are constantly being fed by their loved ones until they die.”

“Like I said, I think I’ll pass. By the way, would you happen to be Evagrius Ponticus?”

“Yes! And a truly delightful thing it is that you could make it here. I’m glad for the company; our poor circus hasn’t had guests like you in centuries. I was hoping my new acts would draw some attention. So thank you so much for coming.” He pulled my hands off the arm rests and held them in his. “I am ever so grateful!”

“You’re...welcome. Um...could you let go of my hands please?”

“Oh, yes, of course I’m so sorry.” He pulled away. “I’m just so thrilled to have a guest at our carnival. Please follow me. If you don’t intend to stay for the second act, then we can at least move onto the next attraction.” He led me out by one hand. With my mini pack on my opposite shoulder, Sophia jumped off my lap and followed.

He led us up the aisle and to the side of the stage.

Terrible Self

The only source of light was a small bulb which hung from the center of the narrow passage. The door to the left had a carving of twins standing back to back with swords at the ready. They leaned against each other in an amazing act of strength and balance.

Upon Evagrius opening the door for me, there was another stage which looked like the same as the first. Except now the stage was facing me. If it was the same stage as the first; it must have turned 90 degrees. Two wooden seats with higher backs rose from the ground. Sheets covered the seats and pillows provided extra back support. But the light was already fading and I couldn't make out the colors. A small pillow with tassels appeared next to my feet, and Sophia dug at the center before settling on top. Another wooden sign was lowered: The Self. The clapping could be heard again.

Women, men, children, and infants were weighed down by balls and chains. All who were bound constantly cried and screamed while pounding their fists on the stage. So many tears fell to the stage that in a matter of minutes, small puddles began to form. Suddenly two men wearing blindfolds came out screaming at the top of their lungs, running wildly with swords in both hands. They continuously screamed and ran in circles around the stage. All those that were chained were having their extremities sliced and cut off by the two men's swords. The two men continued in this mad fashion, until heads began to fly off into the back and foreground. Flesh flew onto the walls, creating a mosaic. Blood mixed with the fallen tears. The crying and screaming slowly died down,

until the two men were the only ones left running around the slivered bodies. Then, multiple silhouettes began moving on and off the stage, replacing those that were dismembered with others that were chained. And when the two men had finished severing the flesh of others, they began to cut into each other. I noticed that they were twins dressed in red tunics, long green pants with brown belts, and black buckles. Still yelling and screaming incoherently, one cut off the arm of the other; the other cut off the other arm of the first and they dismembered each other until they could no longer move.

While all this took place, two figures stood on the right side of the stage away from the twins. One stood frozen in place with wide eyes, staring at the scene. The figure next to him was laughing as if watching a comedy. Both continued on in these states even after the curtains closed.

“Bravo! Bravo!” said Evagrius, who had again stood up to clap with the clapping sounds. “Will you be staying for the next act this time?” He sat down again.

“I think not...I don't think my constitution can handle this.” I felt sick in my stomach. Acid was welling up inside. Thankfully the curtain had closed, so the smell of iron and metal began to fade.

“Ah, of course, how silly of me. This is very different from the usual showings we have. I understand completely. Please, if you feel uncomfortable at any time, let me know and we can move on to something more to your liking. Yes?”

“Okay, how about something a bit more toned down, like no blood and gore?”

“Ah, yes, I have just the thing. Please remain seated. The scene will change for you. Don’t you just love technology?” He pushed a button on his arm rest. The stage began to move and made a 75 degree turn. The lights went out for a few seconds.

“Please wait momentarily. The lights should come back on shortly. It takes a bit of energy to do this and the solar generator just needs to be given priority to the shifting instead of the lighting. We have tried to go green like all other businesses these days.”

“I see. Or, I mean, I understand,” I replied hesitantly, trying to take deep breaths. I didn’t realize that Sophia had climbed onto my lap with the tasseled pillow in her mouth. She put the pillow between my leg and the arm rest and curled up in my lap.

Just Here

When the lights came on, Evagrius was standing and fiddling with a panel of some sort on the right side wall.

“Sorry about the sloppy condition of this stage. As you can see it is extremely dusty in here. My help has been rather questionable as of late. Unfortunately, I had to take on some of the cleaning chores in addition to my own management duties.”

“What do you mean by that? Or do I really want to know?” I asked, staring at his back. His coat tails fell gracefully with the gold embroidery shining in the spotlight. The stage had what looked like oddly shaped pillars coming up from the wooden floor here and there. Some were taller than others, and they weren’t perfectly cylindrical. In fact, they looked more like silhouettes.

“Well, it is dusty and it shouldn’t be. All I ask is that my hired help turn on the fire sprinklers to water the attraction. And all it takes is the push of a button. Is that so much to ask?” he sighed as he took his seat again. All of a sudden, a ringer went off. Evagrius stood up and reached into his side pocket. He pulled out what was probably a cell phone and began to tap at the screen.

“Ah, here’s another text message from my ‘diligent worker,’” he said as he read off the message to me.

Busy right now, will b back 2 wrk later.

Worker 69

“It’s so hard to find good help these days,” he said as he shook his head and sat back down. He put his phone into his front pocket and pushed another button on his arm rest. The sprinklers showered the silhouettes, revealing life-size wooden sculptures of humans. Naked men, women, and children all posed as if reaching for the ceiling. All heads were turned upwards, mouths wide open and both arms extended. Their feet disappeared into the ground as if they were part of the wooden flooring.

“So...what’s with all the statues?”

“They aren’t statues,” said Evagrius staring straight towards the stage.

“Okay, they are wooden sculptures then?”

“They aren’t sculptures either,” said a female voice. “Listen closer.”

I looked around but couldn’t locate anyone else with us. I looked down at Sophia, but she was curled up next to my leg fast asleep. I decided to close my eyes, taking the advice. Evagrius didn’t seem to hear what I just heard. I could hear my own heartbeat, and then the beating of other hearts slowly began to grow louder and louder. They were slower than my own, but I could hear the pulsing. Eventually I could feel them resonating from the stage.

“Wait, are these alive? I mean, the sculptures, the statues? I mean, are they...alive?”

“That’s right,” said Evagrius. “Amazingly lifelike, aren’t they?”

“Wait. How can that be? What do you mean? How is this possible?” I stood up from my seat and slowly walked over to the figure closest to us.

“What do you mean, ‘what do you mean?’ We are still alive,” said the wooden figure with only the eyes moving in my direction. “We are still here. But just here. Why does it take so much effort? There must be an easier way.”

“So much effort to what?”

“So much effort to do things. So much effort to eat, sleep, work, play, and even breathe. I think I will go on living later.” The figure’s gaze returned upward towards the ceiling.

“I didn’t think humans had that option,” I said softly to myself.

“Well, they do actually,” said the same female voice I heard earlier. “It just depends on how they go about executing their decision. Most are just lazy or manipulative enough that they make others do the work for them while they continue to survive. Essentially, however, they are just existing.”

“Excuse me, Evagrius. Did you just hear something?”

“What? I’m sorry, I wasn’t paying attention. These people never cease to amaze me, you see. Now, what were you saying?”

“Um...never mind. I was...enjoying the attraction! How interesting this particular one is.” I tried to smile.

“Ah, how wonderful. Yes! Please enjoy them. Feel free to move about and have a look around.” He motioned me to go further on the stage.

As I walked farther over the damp wooden stage, I began to think about what the female voice had said. *But they aren’t, I mean, they don’t even technically fit the scientific definition of being alive,* I thought.

“Yes, well, I suppose not. They don’t reproduce, they don’t really eat or convert much energy or do much else for that matter,” replied the female voice.

“And yet their hearts still beat?” I asked aloud by accident.

“That is absolutely correct!” said Evagrius, who suddenly appeared next to me.

“Exactly how many colors of wrong can I paint them?”

“I don’t think they would appreciate being painted on,” replied Evagrius as he held his slender fingers up to his chin. “Although I suppose they could use a little more color in their lives, don’t you think?” He looked at me with a sly smirk on his handsome face. I turned to look away for a moment.

“So, why are they looking up if all they are doing is existing?” I asked, looking into the darkness. “I can’t see anything on the ceiling.”

“Ah, yes, we need a little more light. Hold on for a moment please.” He went over to what looked like a fuse box and threw an old fashioned switch lever.

The ceiling was a giant relief of plants, medicine, foods, flowing water, trees, mountains, animals, and other humans. The sun and the moon were pictured on opposite ends of the relief.

“All their necessities. It’s too much trouble for them to obtain,” said the female voice again. This time, Sophia came off of the seat and sat next me while staring at the ceiling. I turned to look down at her and picked her up. I stared straight at her, and she returned my gaze with her silver eyes.

Are you talking to me?

Not really, just thinking to you. My mouth isn't moving, so technically I'm not talking.

And Evagrius can't hear you?

No. Just you.

Since when were you able to talk or communicate like this?

Since it was time for me to help you out a little.

I put Sophia back down gently. I stared at her, not knowing what to make of this and decided it would be best to press on for now. I turned to Evagrius.

"Would you mind if we went on to the next attraction?"

"Not at all. Please follow me."

We walked to the side of the stage and down a staircase. Strings of white Christmas lights hung on the rails above the steps. Eventually the lights snaked their way onto the corners of the walls and ceiling. The three of us were looking at another wooden stage. This time, the curtains were black.

Those With and Without Butter Knives

“For this attraction, it’s more appropriate that you stay on the side and watch. The proper viewing of this is best while standing,” said Evagrius, who pulled me towards the wall farthest away from the curtains as they opened.

In front of me, seated on the floor, were at least 15 men, women, and children. All were naked and blindfolded. Little by little, each of them attempted to cut their own skin off with butter knives. Pieces of flesh and spots of blood littered the stage. All screamed in pain as they continued to mutilate themselves.

In front of each person was a stone tablet with two simple sentences on them: “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.” “There are always those worse off than you.”

“The blindfolds keep them from skinning themselves completely,” he explained. “Unfortunately, they also prevent them from seeing the very truths that can lead them to taking better care of their own bodies.”

Starting to feel queasy again, I leaned against the back wall. “I don’t understand. Why anyone would want to skin themselves?”

Evagrius tried to explain something to me, but the screams were getting louder and louder by the second. I couldn’t hear him. I put my hands over my ears and closed my eyes. The whole scene was becoming unbearable.

They aren’t content with what they are or what they have. Their bodies limit them. They can’t have all that they desire, so they try to free themselves by taking their skin off. What others have or things they see that they can’t have, make them feel trapped within themselves.

That doesn't seem to be the way out of that kind of situation.

Just then, one of the figures took off the blindfold and began to stab the person next to him. The blindfolded person screamed, flailing arms, and legs around like a baby on its back. After being stabbed multiple times, the blindfolded person went limp. A trap door opened and the violent figure fell beneath the stage. The curtains closed, the sounds stopped, and the stage became unnervingly silent.

“Oh, my. Well, that one didn't last too long,” said Evagrius. “Looks like I will need to make some improvements on this attraction for more of a dramatic effect.”

“What happened to the figure that fell down beneath the stage? Why did he attack the other person?”

“Well, his desire turned into something much worse and so he has been moved to another part of the stage. We can't have him destroying the 'piece' full atmosphere here.”

“How is all this screaming peaceful for you? Wait...on second thought, don't answer that.”

“Very well. As you wish. Well, if you want to see the rest of the attraction, please come this way. Watch your step now.” He led me off stage by the hand and we descended a small set of stairs.

Beneath, the stage was lit with multiple candles lined against four walls and across the open space forming an 'x'. Despite the numerous flames, it was horribly cold. I could see my breath! Sophia came up to me and started to

shiver. I picked her up and held her close to my body. Evagrius pulled me towards him with his hands on my shoulders. People that fell below the stage continued violently to stab others that were present with butter knives until they collapsed or died. There were no sounds as they desperately tried to lunge, dash, and thrust knives into each other.

As one killed the other, they began to eat their felled victims. The cannibalistic behaviors these people displayed were unlike any other animal on the planet. They took their victim's butter knives, flesh, and eyes. Breaking bones and trying to gnaw at them wasn't enough for some. And if they had too many butter knives to carry, they stabbed themselves with those butter knives, and left them in place so their hands would be free to gather more.

It was a bit too much to take in. I ran up the stairs and out onto the stage feeling the acid in my throat. Sophia jumped out of my arms and I collapsed onto the seat with my hands over my mouth. Evagrius came running after me. Putting one hand on my back, he dialed a number on his cell phone. My body began to shake, and unfortunately, I think I passed out.

Are you okay? That was way too extreme. Hold on, alright? It looks like Evagrius is getting someone to come and take you to a place where you can rest.

The Woman in the Nurse's Outfit

When I woke up, I was resting on a very soft bed.

“Sorry about that. I should really caution people with weaker constitutions that the scene below stage might be a bit much,” said Evagrius who was sitting on a chair next to the bed.

“You think so? They were eating each other, you know.” My voice was weak from the pain in my throat.

“Well, how about something a bit more pleasurable? Say, how about I take you to our next attraction after this? I'll have our entertainers in g-strings come and give you a massage with some of our premium pheromone oils? Guaranteed to get your blood flowing while relieving stress at the same time!”

“Pass,” is all I could say before passing out again. While half asleep, I could feel Sophia at my head.

Boy, this fellow just doesn't know when to stop talking. Can I bite him?

Maybe he'll stop.

No biting, Sophia. Like Ms. Mary said, he probably doesn't mean any harm. Has he just been talking this whole time?

Yea, about all the wonderful services his next attraction provides. But I don't think you want to know exactly what he's talking about. It sounds kind of x-rated and you need to wake up first.

When I did get up again, though, Evagrius was gone and a woman in a nurse's outfit was standing near a counter. Black high heels, short white skirt, tan stockings, a small white buttoned top with a small white nurse's hat on. It

looked like she got her outfit from an adult store. She had some Bunsen burners turned on and the two glass bottles were slowly being heated. Sophia was on the ground attempting to zip up my mini pack, her tiny mouth pulling at the even smaller black zipper.

“Oh, you’re awake,” the nurse said, putting one hand on my forehead to move my hair out of my face. “Thank you for bringing me the tea from Ms. Mary. She’s the only one that really knows how to make this chamomile tea right.”

I took the bottles out and gave them to her. I thought some tea might help after all that. I think you lost your dinner back there on one of the stages.

I guess...I'll eat something again when we get back home. What is it I'm supposed to find out anyway? What's the point of seeing all this other horrible stuff on top of every other horrible thing going on these days?

I think we need to see one more thing to figure that out. Then we can sort things through. How's that?

Nothing too graphic already, please? I don't know how much more I can take...

“So, how are you feeling?” asked the woman in the nurse’s outfit with impressive cleavage.

“Um...a little better, I think,” I said as I slowly got up from the bed. I realized I was covered with purple silk blankets. The pillows were a dark maroon. The material was soft and the fuzz gently massaged my face so that my skin and eyes relaxed. “You needed the tea?”

“Are you kidding me? It’s a pain to walk in these high heels, but it looks just so wonderful with this costume, don’t you think? It’s the only thing I thought would match.”

“How about you use red shoes and white stockings to go with the Red Cross designs on your hat and top? The black is good, but it tends to pull attention to your top half more than your bottom half because of the color contrast. The white stockings would keep the theme of red and white consistent.”

“You know, that might not be a bad idea. I’ll go check the costume tent for red shoes and white stockings later. Thanks for the idea. Now don’t forget to drink your tea,” she said, handing me one of the glass bottles. She had put a neon-pink swirly straw, shaped like a heart, inside. “I’ll let Evagrius know you are awake.” She turned around towards an intercom in the wall, her long bright red hair swishing.

“Thank you. By the way, what do you do here? Are you a carnival worker in charge of this nursing station?”

“You could say that. I don’t really do nursing. I actually do research on viruses. The costume is for show when we have guests,” she said as she adjusted the outfit around her chest. “These push-up bras are killing me. Why do we need to use these with such skimpy outfits for work?”

“Oh. Okay. So what are you researching, exactly? Any interesting bugs recently?”

“Yes, very much so. Evagrius managed to obtain a few samples of a virus called luxuria-minor. A very rare disease. It’s fascinating to say the least. I have learned a lot about it since getting the real thing under a microscope.”

“What is it?”

“Well, it’s kind of a disease in the way it spreads and multiplies. It behaves very much like any other STD we have running around today. The only difference is that it takes an even longer period of time to destroy its host. It allows the host to feel pleasurable by altering the hormone balance in the body. This increases its chances of being spread during sexual intercourse. But the most fascinating thing I have found so far is that to make sure the host continues to infect others, it has developed the ability to behave like a drug. After a while, it taps into the brain’s pleasure center directly and takes control of the neuron synapses. The process in the brain is similar to what meth, acid, and other highly addictive drugs do. It creates a need for the human to have sex. In a more simplified explanation, it turns them into sex addicts. It also reduces the chances of females becoming pregnant and increases the chances of males becoming sterile. This seems to be due to unusual reactions during hormone adjustments it makes. However, it isn’t the perfect killing machine. It takes time for the sterilization process to really become a threat to humanity. And while the host doesn’t feel anything while infected, there have been cases where the infected simply die of other causes. Luxuria-minor might not be aggressive towards other viruses and diseases as I originally theorized. But it can kill victims in a few other ways. In the grand scheme, being sterile means no more babies or continuation

of genes. This also means that other STD's are more likely to spread at an alarming rate. And without being able to detect them ahead of time due to luxuria-minor's ability to mask certain symptoms of other STD's-- well you get the idea. Also, after prolonged periods of exposure to the virus, the body's capacity to regulate and tolerate such high levels of hormones becomes maxed out. Ultimately it exhausts the host to a point where he or she just dies within a few seconds after a certain physical limit is reached. The limit, of course, being relative to the host."

"Wow....that sounds intense. Isn't it dangerous to be researching something like that? Well...I guess that was a rhetorical question. But it seems like something that could be used as a bio-weapon or chemical warfare. I'm surprised you don't belong to the military or other government agency on the side."

"Well, let's just say there's a reason why people can't find Sodom and Gomorrah anymore."

"Ah, I think I know where this is going. And I guess I shouldn't bother to ask you about how you go about your research, so I won't. But changing the subject, if you really don't like high heels much, do you perhaps prefer other kinds of dress? You said the outfit was for work. If not in a lab coat, what would you wear?"

"Probably the same things you do."

“Well, I don’t wear high heels, period. I don’t think I would go into a job that would require them either. That means that foot wear has to be something comfortable. But I guess that would be relative.”

“Well, we know ourselves best, considering I’m you.”

“What?”

“Don’t tell me you think I actually have bright long apple-red hair like this.”

She pulled off a wig. After removing a hair net, she revealed dark brown hair, like mine. It was the same length in long natural waves. She then took out a pair of glasses that looked exactly like mine. “These are titanium too, by the way,” she said, tapping the corner of the frame.

“But if you are me, then why are you taller?”

“Because I work for the circus. It’s magic.”

“...”

“Okay, that was bad. It’s the high heels. If I take them off, I’m the exact same height as you are.”

“Wait. So, if you’re me, then what am I doing at a carnival on one end of...I don’t know...wait, wait...this isn’t working...”

“I think you already know what you need, but you just don’t know exactly what you want yet. I remember a time when I was denied existence by you. But you eventually came around to accepting this part of you, me.”

“Accepting a part of me? What did I deny exactly so that you couldn’t exist?”

“Your natural drive. Your instinct, your desire for sex, desires for indulging in a multitude of physical and non-physical things, your wants and everything you have to restrain yourself from. All of those desires which you have to learn to balance out so as not to deprive yourself completely of your needs. I’m the ‘you’ that you must contend with but at the same time, co-exist with. I am a part of your humanity, so to speak. But I guess you really didn’t deny me so much as you just weren’t aware of me until a little later. But that too denies me my complete existence.”

“Then, you are all the things I want in a physical form?”

“For the most part. But my life is in the carnival and you live another life. That makes us fundamentally different. Next to being you, I also have my own existence. So you go to school, study, and write. I study viruses and take care of guests here at the carnival.”

“Okay...this is all very...overwhelming.” I put the bottle down on the ground and fell back on the bed. I could feel Sophia sitting next to my left leg on the ground. Looking up, I realized there was a canopy over the bed with a glass ceiling.

“Never thought you would ever get the chance to talk to yourself, did you?” asked my reflection. I looked in front of me, but the woman in the nurse’s outfit was gone. I looked back at the ceiling.

“I always thought I should. And there were a few times where I literally felt like I was standing next to myself. Was that you by any chance?”

“Possibly,” said the reflection with a nod.

“I guess it wasn’t just the shoes, was it?” I smiled slightly.

“No. I needed the tea because you needed it too. And that way, I don’t owe the carnival anything for services rendered. That bed can’t be used for free, you know.”

“I see. Kind of like paying the doctor fee, right?”

“Yup.”

“And what’s the point of me meeting up with me then?” I asked, sitting up again and sipping the last of the tea.

“So that you know you are still here. I’m still here and that makes you human in one sense.”

“Contending with myself makes me human?”

“That and a variety of other things. Humans are complex, to put it in the broadest sense. Exercising patience with yourself and being able to have this control over all the things you decide to do or not do, is one thing. Your ability to exercise discipline, the ability to go beyond just your basic instincts is something that makes all humans unique in one of many ways. To be able to feel hope as well as despair is part of being human.”

“That sounds way too philosophical for even me. But then again, I think I get it. I have to understand and be patient with myself as I change before I can begin to understand and deal with others. But what does that have to do with the world around me?”

“Ah! There you are! How are you feeling?” said Evagrius as he came prancing into the room. “And how do you like the attraction so far? Feeling any better with that tea?”

“Attraction? I thought this was a nurse’s office.”

“Well, that and it’s on a stage, how about that? Isn’t it creative?”

“Wait, I’m on stage?” I turned around. The wall had disappeared behind me. There were rows of theater seats in the dimmed lights. The applause started again.

The Angel of Ivory

“By the way, do I get paid for performing?” I asked as I got up from the bed and placed the bottle in my bag. I found the second bottle empty and already inside my mini pack. The straw had vanished.

“Oh, well, not exactly. But let’s say everything should be settled after this? Hm?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“Marvelous! Now, if you’re feeling better, please follow me. We still have a few more attractions to see.” He passed my mini pack to me and led me by the hand.

“I pray there won’t be any more gore in the next shows,” I stated with my free hand on my stomach.

“No, no! None of that at all. I felt by this time it would be more appropriate to slow down the pace. We have been moving quite quickly and all the other performances are over. And we can’t have you getting weak again. I think you will find these acts more to your liking. At least you won’t have to worry about your constitution.”

“That’s much appreciated.” We walked out from the nurse’s stage, through a door in the backdrop with Sophia in tow.

“Just keep walking and don’t worry. The light bulbs went out and my ‘ever diligent’ help didn’t get the chance to put the new ones in yet,” said Evagrius as his figure faded from sight, his hand still leading me into a pitch black passage.

“Sophia, stay close,” I said. I could feel the tips of her fur on my right ankle.

“Not to worry,” he continued. “I know this place like the back of my hand. Which come to think of it, I don’t really look ...”

The next thing I heard was a big thud and Evagrius’s hand quickly fell from mine. I stopped, not knowing what had happened.

“I was sure the door was a little further down,” said Evagrius, “but oh well. Here we are.” This was followed by a knocking sound.

A soft light began to seep through a single vertical line; I moved forward and realized that it was red velvet material parting from the center of where we had been standing. I walked onto another stage covered in grey dirt with large rocks scattered all over the place.

“Go ahead and enjoy the last stage,” said Evagrius, pushing me forward gently.

I walked farther onto the area and saw head stones lining another section of the stage.

This place feels awful familiar. Like déjà vu.

Really? I’ve never seen this before.

I think I had a dream about this stage.

Well, dreams can be connected to reality.

Now which reality would that be again?

The one we are usually in.

“I see. Well, these don’t look like the graves I’m familiar with. They look like something out of Europe. Fancy and elaborate letters for names chiseled into each head stone and gigantic stone crosses as markers for the dead resting below. Wow, look at this!”

A large slab of grey slate stood in the shape of a cross, surrounded by other oddly shaped grave stones. It appeared to be the center of the graveyard. There were no loose flowers or vases on any of the graves. Weeds poked through the rocky terrain. The wind blew gently, the weeds leaned against each other and I could hear running water out from a distance. Vines with little white flowers climbed on taller standing stones, while amaranth decorated the edges of shorter ones. The base of the giant cross read: ALL END HERE.

“Now that’s a rather depressing statement.”

“I suppose so, but it is a true one,” said another voice.

I turned around and saw a statue farther down a row of grave stones. An angel carved out of ivory, with magnificent wings spread open. It was dressed in a simple robe with long sleeves that fell in graceful arcs. The hands were placed together in prayer with the head angled upwards. The face looked like it was screaming towards the overcast sky. The statue stood on a base that was at least five feet tall.

The head turned down, smooth grey eyes stared at me as its mouth closed. I took a few steps back and the face continued to follow me. I couldn’t tell what kind of a stare it had, but the feeling sank into the center of my body. It was the same feeling I had when someone in the family died. It was the same

feeling I got when I held family members in my arms over the loss of a life. That heavy, empty feeling which took all the energy from my very existence.

The angel spoke: “Many have died, for many different reasons at all times in this world. Nothing stops this cycle, no matter how painful it is. Did you know that all those that die in the carnival are brought to rest here? And that every single one of them has had people who came to mourn them? And even if there wasn’t a living relative, their other deceased family and friends came for them? That’s why some are adorned with little vines that bear white flowers. They are prayers and feelings of grace. Amaranth grows in the memories of love, kindness, and caring of others towards them. Many are resting now. But others are tormented. Some died having regrets while others go on to exist by sheer sorrow or anger. A handful even continues on as other negative energies, losing their human forms all together. I beg for mercy that those souls will find rest. I also guard this place from the living, those that don’t belong here so soon. I cry because I have wings and will never be able to fly with them.”

“So why continue to struggle? If everyone ends here no matter what they do, what’s the point of constantly contending with yourself when the world would have you die? It’s a cycle that can’t be stopped, right?”

“Can you see into the future?”

“The future?”

“How far can you see into the future?”

“I don’t know. I’m not clairvoyant. Although I do dream from time to time and I get déjà vu once in a while but...”

“That isn’t far enough. To truly understand why and how you live and what your decisions and existence mean in the world, you would need to be omnipotent. Otherwise, you can’t possibly be seeing the whole picture. Death is only one part of something much greater. You will get there, everyone does. But how will you get there? Will you take your own life? Will someone else take it from you? Will an accident happen? Will you simply go in your sleep? Will you be tormented with the aches and pains of old age and suffer until death takes you? Or will you die a martyr? Will you die as a hero or perhaps a saint? Will you be executed as a tyrant or a murderer? Will you die if your writings survive?”

“How would anyone know how he or she would die unless they took their own lives? What’s the difference? I still feel stuck. I know I can’t control death. I can’t stop all the innocence from being destroyed in this world. I can’t protect anyone completely, no matter how precious they are to me.”

“Don’t expect yourself to be able to do every single thing completely and perfectly. That’s impossible. But you can always strive to get where you need to be, and that effort is worth a lot more than none at all. Take note now, of how many ways there are to perish from a physical existence. One can die in a number of ways. By saying that, it means that there is a difference when one person dies compared to another person dying despite the end result being the same. I would bring into question the means then. How one gets there. I’m sure you’ve heard it before: Does the end justify the means? It’s the little things in life you do, and other statements like that. It’s those things that we can’t see. Something one does today matters, since those decisions affect things that

happen tomorrow and into the future which we can't really see or predict completely. Ultimately, our vision is limited. Therefore, there isn't any real logical way to know what the true point of doing anything in life will be. But that doesn't mean that you can't make some kind of goal, find something to believe in or aim for a particular purpose. You aren't trapped simply existing. It is possible to get more out of life. You can't control death, but you can control a lot of other things in your life. You do what you can while you still can. Death will always come for you, so don't worry about that. For me, who has only seen death and as one who guards the dead, it is more important that you live before all this happens. It is part of being human, part of being alive even in the scientific sense."

"Then are we really lost as humans? The big picture is still foggy and I don't know where I'm at yet."

"That's okay. You don't have to know exactly where you are on the map yet. But even deciding to seek out where you belong is important for anyone. It's part of your development emotionally, physically, and socially considering you are a human. Even doctors have come to the same conclusions through their own studies in the sciences."

"So what should I do, then? How should one go about figuring out this world we live in? One where people, despite being social, will kill each other for one reason or another? In a world where people are dependent upon one another in some way? Where people do really stupid things so blatantly? I don't

get it. And that's where I feel like I always get stuck. When I try to conceptualize what's going on around me."

"Do you really need to know?"

"It would be nice to know. It would help a lot, actually."

"It would help, but do you NEED to know?"

"..."

"There are many things, because you are human, that you can never know. Incidences will happen that don't have a ready reason available. Then there may be reasons given, but they don't always make sense. But does that really stop you from continuing to live or continuing to seek out who you are and where you are? Should it?"

"No. It doesn't in any case. Or, I don't want it to."

"Then that will have to do until you can see the whole picture. Don't let the ideas of death or the emotion of despair distract you from trying to see the bigger picture. They never truly can as long as you don't want them to. Unlike me, who has wings but can't fly, you can break from those concepts and continue to live. The fact that you can say that you still want to continue, despite not understanding everything in the world, is proof that you can move. Unlike me, a statue carved of ivory."

"Something with movement?" I asked, but the statue had already returned to its original position screaming towards the sky.

I like the idea of moving. When a person stands still, you don't really get anywhere. At least, that's what it always seemed like to me when we go for our walks around the block.

Am I struggling to move from where I am now? Is that what this is all about?

I think it's more along the lines of you trying to navigate your way through life. Everyone does that in some way or another I would think.

The Shadow of Nothing

The whole area went silent again. The wind had stopped. Sophia's ears perked up. She began to growl, her eyes wide open, and teeth bared to something behind me. It was the shadow again, with the white butler's suit.

"Okay, something about you doesn't feel right," I said, staring straight at the shadow.

"I suppose it never did. No one ever understood how great I was. Even in life, I was everything a woman could want. I had influence in the government. I had wealth and prestige. I traveled the world and yet no one ever recognized me for the greatness that I was."

"All right, so how did you end up here? You said you made rounds to guard this place, right? You even took my ticket when I first entered, if I'm not mistaken?"

"That is correct. But I assure you, that is simply because the world refuses to see my gloriousness."

"I take it you think you should be in charge of the carnival too? Say, instead of Evagrius?"

"Of course! Why not? After all, I am far more capable of running a business than he ever was. What good is a monk in business after all? People are so blind. They just don't have the mental capacity to understand what is really in front of them. Especially when they see me. They are just too incompetent and dumb to realize pure magnificence when they see it."

“I hope you don’t expect me to take you on your word for all this. Besides, what are you doing here?”

“I’m part of the attraction. After all, I am put to rest here. The angel did tell you that, right?”

“The angel said all those who died in the carnival are put to rest here. But just to be fair, what’s your story?”

“My story? Well, it is one of epic proportions, of course. You see...”

“That’s enough!” shouted Evagrius, walking towards us down a row of graves. “If you really want to know his story, walk to the other end of the cemetery. There is a small tomb near the river for certain people who belong to the carnival. Go inside and look for the book that tells the story of the two willows. You will see just how great he really is.”

“Stand aside, shadow,” I said. “I will find out who you are. I want the truth! As close to it as I can get.” I was already walking towards the opposite end of the graveyard. The shadow bowed as I approached and moved away to the side. Sophia hesitated to pass him, but growled and continued on behind me. The farther away from the shadow we moved, the more I could hear water flowing. After a few minutes of passing several rows of graves, I came upon a cube-shaped tomb. The walls didn’t have any coats of varnish or paint on them, and were made of a wood I had never seen before. The edges were trimmed with branches from a willow tree, or at least something similar to the one at the entrance to the carnival. As the green leaves hung, they cried slowly with tears falling onto the rocky ground every minute or so. As I was observing the tomb,

the overcast sky darkened and a light drizzle began to make the leaves bawl with sadness. I grabbed Sophia and we ran into the opening of the tomb. The inside was lit with torches. The walls and flooring were made of stone. The room was empty except for a wooden altar that stood a few feet away from the entrance. It was made from the same wood that I found on the outside. The back wall had the relief of a willow tree carved into the stone. Sophia trotted up towards it and sniffed at it for a bit. She then lifted her head up and looked at me with her ears up and tail wagging. I walked towards the altar and discovered a book inside its recesses. The back half was somehow attached to the top of the altar. The cover and pages could be flipped for reading. The cover read: The Story of the Willows.

The Story of the Willows

Once upon a time, hundreds of years ago, there were two willows whose roots stretched far below the surface of the earth and into the river Styx of the underworld. Drinking the water of the dead, the trees gained a great affinity with the spirit world.

One day, a man full of pride, having boasted about his magnificent strength and cleverness to his friends and family, was met with a challenge by a simple woodsman. The woodsman claimed that the man was nothing more than a self-centered, miserable man in denial. He accused him of lying and that he could prove this man's true incompetence by challenging him to a wood cutting contest. He said that the man was so dull, that even the sharpest of axes would refuse to cut for him. The man boasted that he would cut down not one but two trees with any ax given to him by the woodsman, granted the woodsman could cut a tree down with the same ax.

So off they went into the forest with a few of the men from town in tow. The woodsman carried his ax with him and cut down a tree in three strokes. He then gave the ax to the man, who never having cut wood in his entire life, tried to cut down another tree of equal width. He tried for hours, but his strikes were not precise. He constantly swung at different points on the tree. Instead of cutting it down, he simply sliced off pieces of bark.

The woodsman, having won the challenge, declared that everyone would now know the truth about the man and that a prideful spirit is always torn down by the truth. The man could not accept his defeat. With the woodsman's ax, he

killed all the witnesses and proceeded to chase down the woodsman. The woodsman was fast and nimble. When the man thought he had cornered the woodsman against a willow tree, he swung at him with all his might. But the woodsman dashed away from the blade of the ax. Instead of hitting the woodsman, the ax cut straight into the tree. The woodsman ran farther into the woods to escape. As the man pulled the ax from the tree; the willow screamed with pain. Terrible curses and accusations of murder flowed out from the wound of the willow's trunk. The sounds were so loud, the man fell to his knees and dropped the bloodied ax.

When the woodsman decided to come back around and escape from the woods to notify the town's people, he found the man's head tangled in the branches of the dying willow tree. The man's body lay on the ground with the ax in his spine. Horrified, the woodsman ran to the town and told them what had happened. The men went into the forest and found their friends and family members chopped to pieces. They moved onto the willow and saw the headless body, whose head hung from the branches. They didn't know what to make of the whole situation. They went to the leader of the church in their town and explained what they had seen. The leader of the church instructed the men that their friends and family were to be buried properly at the cemetery. They then had to craft a tomb made of the willow tree that had been injured and bury the headless man inside. The branches would be used to craft the roof and eaves of the tomb. None were to enter there until another willow took the old one's place.

And so the stump of the willow and its lonely mate waited for centuries until a new willow grew in the old one's place.

The Blessing

Chills ran up my spine as I closed the book.

I didn't think he was much to begin with. But...I never thought a person would kill someone just because he had lost a bet he knew he couldn't win.

What the heck is wrong with him?

People do a lot of bad things in general. I guess it's not too surprising to find people doing terrible things to others for reasons like losing a bet. I mean, some people kill for no reason at all, right?

I know, but this makes even less sense now.

As I walked out of the tomb, I called for Evagrius. But he wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"Evagrius! I know you can hear me! I'm still on a stage, right?"

"So sorry to keep you waiting!" said Evagrius, who came running from the cemetery. "I didn't think you would finish this so quickly. So how did you like the attractions? I hope you enjoyed yourself. Oh, and by the way, there are refreshments closer to the river. Perhaps you would like to rest a bit before leaving? After all, I did offer refreshments in the invitation."

"Evagrius, please! What is the point of all this? Ridiculous as these attractions are, I still can't make heads or tails of what I went through at the carnival, much less what happens in the real world. I thought..."

"Oh, that part. Don't worry. You need to relax first. Just reflect a little with your dog, and I'm sure everything will come to you." He pushed me by my shoulders towards a gazebo behind the tomb. "And please feel free to enjoy the

view of the river. It's the same one that runs near your neighborhood." He sat me down in a very comfortable chair and ran back towards the tomb. The seat had giant arm rests covered in white silk with a feathery white backing. There was also a small cylindrical pillow in back for some extra support. Sophia had a similar seat across from me, but it was stacked with tasseled pillows so she could sit on top and get a good view of the iron table with a small white tablecloth over it.

Two tea pots with hot water, a set of tea cups and loose teas in clear glass jars were set on the table. Two silver, triple-tiered serving stands stood at the left and right. The left stand, complete with tongs for each level, displayed delicate offerings of: baked vanilla meringues, strawberry mousse cakes with tiny chocolate snakes on the top and a hand full each of thin mint chocolates, thin chocolate covered peppermint sticks, and candied rose petals. The right stand featured peanut butter doggie biscuits, cookies made with carob chips, bacon bite strips, and tiny poi flavored dog bones.

"Oh, dear. I guess he got away again," I said aloud, sighing.

That's okay, we can figure this out now. So, could you please pass the doggie treats?

Ah, of course. So what was the point in all this again? I have seen so much and yet I still don't get much. Although I have to admit, movement and being able to move forward seems like an important point. I guess I don't have to know or understand everything, but I don't want to be completely ignorant either.

I put several doggie treats onto Sophia's plate. I served myself a little of each offering from the left stand. I brewed some mint tea and let it sit for a bit.

Well, like the angel said, you can't know everything. But you can still do what you can while you still can. And you don't have to focus on death, since life comes before that and you have time to live.

So what does that accomplish? I guess it allows me to understand that I need to keep moving to figure this all out. But I still don't see what all this was about.

Let's go back for a bit. Remember the first two attractions with those men who ate too much or the skeletons that didn't eat enough?

Those people over indulge or don't eat what is necessary to survive, right? I thought that was something everyone had to be aware of if they wanted to stay fit and healthy. Everyone is different, and as such they need to learn how to balance themselves out in all that they do, right?

That's a good start. Now how about those twins that went around cutting up everyone and killing each other? What do you think about that? I'll tell you right now, they represent the self in direct conflict.

You mean like internal conflict? When you just can't live with yourself?

That and when you have things that aren't resolved yet. Like when you get into a fight and you end on bad terms. You can't come to grips with what someone has done, and you are so upset you feel like you could explode. Things that make you feel all terrible inside, not just angry.

I see. Well, if that's the case, then when that happens, others tend to get hurt too?

In some way or another, yes. Sometimes they end up being abusive physically and mentally. At other times, they are just those people with a burr on their butts and they make everyone else miserable for it. Sometimes they are just miserable for one reason or another and are generally unpleasant. As a result they end up ruining other people's days. They are difficult to get along with and can make things even more difficult to deal with just because. Ultimately, they aren't very sociable, despite being human, and humans being social creatures.

I've met people like that. I would seriously rather avoid them first and foremost. Secondly, I don't want to be like them. I always thought it was best to remember that you shouldn't go around making other people's lives any worse. At work, I always thought to myself that no matter what happened, I would try to do my best to stay cheerful. At least I wouldn't make another person unhappy or miserable no matter how bad I felt that day. I would hope it wouldn't encourage more grouchy people out there.

That's good too. Now how about the attraction where the people were 'just there,' as one of them tried to explain to you? What did you think of that?

I guess I'm still amazed at their option to live later on. Like I said earlier, I didn't think people had an in-between option. But I guess there must be some kind of fine line between what is actually defined as living, just being there, and being dead.

Not bad. Now I know you probably don't want to think about this. But since you more or less had an explanation of what was going on with those people with the butter knives, I think that is rather self-explanatory right?

I stopped eating my strawberry mousse cake and leaned my head back for a bit. Sophia continued to munch on her cookies. I poured myself some tea and sipped at it.

Yea, there's no need to go over that. How about I give you a general idea about what I thought on it? Like desires can be really dangerous? To a point where people will kill to get what they want, or they don't care who they hurt to get what they want. And that requires serious consideration when deciding what to do in relation to others.

I think that's a good idea to take from that whole incident. Now about the nurse we encountered?

I smiled for a second behind my tea cup before putting it back down.

That one is good. I kind of liked encountering myself and seeing that I really was dealing with myself in some way. I hope I find my own balance soon.

So, we covered the angel already. That was a lot of information at one time. Now, about that shadow...

I detest such people. I never want to be like them in any way. I hate people with ice on their noses. I wish their heads full of hot air would make them float off into the sky. That way I wouldn't have to deal with them. I mean really, that goes right on my list of people I don't like: Jerks, pompous oafs, malicious

plotters and people who think that others owe them everything just for being there. I would rather avoid confrontation with all of them, given the option.

I had a feeling you understood why I was growling so much.

Well, I didn't like that shadow either from the get go. I just got these bad vibes from him. Rather unpleasant and unnerving all at the same time.

Well, it sounds like you took quite a bit from the carnival. But you're still not quite coming to terms with this whole thing?

The world is a dark place no matter what. Humans don't or haven't changed since forever. We keep going to war, killing each other, and we will always remain in conflict. As long as we are humans, I really wonder if there is a way to break the cycle. As humans, we think differently with a variety of thoughts and ideas. Because of that, we don't move as one united entity very often. But if we are all the same, we lose who we are and all the potential for that which we can become. We all depend on each other in some way or another. And yet we feel we can be independent of one another completely. Or we are made to become independent at one level but can't be completely independent on another. What should I really be seeing here? What's different?

You did something that proves that there is the possibility of moving away from such destructive tendencies. Do you remember what you did?

I stared back at my fluffy Pomeranian blankly. What does my dog know that I can't remember?

Remember how you rescued me from the river?

Of course! You were still a tiny puppy. You could curl up and you would fit right into my hand. You were so cold, I wasn't sure if you were going to make it or if I would be able to get to the animal hospital in time. But somehow you pulled through. It was great! The doctors were so happy, and they let me adopt you since I found you without an owner. You were so cute then too. Oh, you were so tiny. Ah, happy place. I love puppies.

I'm glad you saved me. You didn't have to, but you did. You heard me crying and came running to the river while it was raining heavily. You looked all over until you found me in the center of the river, washed up on a partially submerged piece of land. You grabbed me and ran through the rain for a long time to get me to the animal hospital. And even after all that, you came back to the clinic to check up on me for almost a whole week. You would pet me, cuddle me and hold me as if nothing else mattered in the world. It meant everything to me for you to be there. Then when I was strong enough to walk around, you took me home and cared for me this whole time. It might have been something trivial to you, but how many times would a human go out of their way to save another human? How many humans would go out of their way to save a dog like me? I'm an animal, not a human. Some humans don't value us much. In fact, some see us as food and we are no different than cattle or pigs that are raised for slaughter and sold. But despite all that, you still risked your life to save me.

My mother told me once before the flooding happened, that all these dogs that we could see through the cage wires were kept in cramped cages. They were forced to breed, and the puppies were sold for money. Many were sick, in

pain, and neglected. The smell was awful, even for a dog. We were nothing more than money makers to humans as far as my mother was concerned. With hardly any food or water, she used to lick the rain water off the cage bars and would try to pull branches and grass that managed to grow close enough to the cage to eat. It was a terrible place. We couldn't escape. Dogs would cry all night, confined in those cages that we could only walk circles in. Then the heavy rain came. Many of the cages were washed away. I don't know how many of the other dogs drowned. We were lucky, the cage struck a rock in the river and the doors were opened. We tried to swim for safety, but the current was just too much and my mother didn't have enough strength.

I lost everything that day. My mother and siblings were taken by the river. I was the only one that managed to survive. I didn't know what to do. I kept whimpering and barking because I needed help. I don't know how I made it, but I'm glad you came.

I was already crying half way through. I couldn't stop, it was too much to hear coming from my happy, intelligent and spunky dog.

Don't cry. I'm happy because you're here with me. I won't leave you alone either for as long as I can. I promise.

Sophia had gotten down off her seat and jumped into my lap licking my face to clean off the tears.

"I know. I'm just glad that you're happy now. I didn't know all that happened."

Like the angel said, you don't need to know everything. But I'm still glad I got the chance to tell you all that. Just remember, it's those instances when you decide to reach out and help. Those times when you try your best to do what you can. All of those actions and decisions add up to something. That's why I could help you here in the carnival. A lot of things happen for a reason. We just don't always know what those reasons are when they happen.

After crying so much, my eyes started to close just as Sophia finished her sentence. I guess I fell asleep, but I could still hear the water from the river flowing. I opened my eyes again to find Sophia curled up on my stomach. My mini pack was under my head like a pillow, and I was staring up at the stars. I looked at my watch. It was 10pm. I woke Sophia up and I looked around to find myself near the river not far from the house. I opened my mini pack and found the two empty glass bottles still inside.

Sophia?

My dog stared at me and started to sniff around the grass nearby. I got up and called her back as we headed home.

I took a quick shower and decided to go back to the second floor closet one more time. With both bottles in hand, dressed in my paw print PJ's, I went up the stairs with Sophia following me.

"Ms. Mary? Are you there? I would like to speak to you."

The top of the closet door opened, and Ms. Mary was there just like the first time.

"Oh, hello there again, dear. How was your trip to the carnival?"

“It was very...interesting. I also wanted to return your bottles. Thank you for your help,” I placed the empty bottles on the counter in front of her.

“You’re very welcome, little one. I do what I can when I can, you know. But when you get to be my age, it gets a little harder to move around and such. You tend to do things a lot slower than before. But it’s not that bad either, I suppose.”

“So, you knew what was in the carnival prior to me going, didn’t you?”

“Well, I don’t know much about Evagrius’s new ideas that you encountered. But I did know that you would need some tea to get through. It never hurts to have a little something extra with you, right?”

“I guess not. Especially in this situation. Um, by the way, is there some way I can help you by any chance? You wouldn’t let me pay for the tea so, is there something else I can do?”

“No, no. Nothing needs to be done. Oh, would you look at the time?” She glanced towards one side. “Now it’s off to bed for you, my dear. And thank you for letting me use your closet for my business. I really like it here.”

“Oh, well, please feel free to stay longer if you need to. I don’t mind as long as people aren’t just running in and out of my house,” I said smiling.

“I think I can manage that,” she replied, laughing softly. “I’ve been doing this for...oh, quite a while now.”

“Glad to have you around, Ms. Mary. Isn’t that right, Sophia?”

Bark!

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