

Simulacra and Manifestation

The noise in the woods was a cacophony of sound: cicadas screeching, woodlarks singing, the crunch of dried grass under our feet. The mossy, fetid smell of stagnant pools left over from a pitifully meager summer rain, too weak to chase away the drought; sweat and musk, legs pumping through twisting and turning trails that extended on into dense patches of undergrowth still clinging to life. The uncomfortable warmth of that afternoon had faded already, and a stale, tepid breeze was the only thing making our hike bearable.

“You’ve heard the story about this place, haven’t you?” Brad asked. His voice was exuberance personified. Wrestling matches watched from the side of the ring and arrogance are my fondest memories of him; lazy Sundays over at his house, while his mother screamed in the background and we played games together.

“I’ve heard what the weird kids say,” Elle said. She seemed out of place there in the woods that day, like she was some ethereal priestess unsullied by man. She was beautiful, but out of reach. Maybe even out of touch.

“Hate to break it to you, but I think *we’re* the weird kids,” Ronnie said. She seemed Elle’s complete opposite- coffee brown where Elle was pale, sardonic where Elle was cheery. They seemed like complete opposites of each other.

“Ain’t that the truth,” Brad said back, and he threw his head back and laughed. He was so handsome I rued the fact that we were cousins, sometimes.

There were four of us on that fateful summer afternoon.

“They say Old Lady Carver lived in the house with her six kids,” Brad continued, after we’d hid under a tall willow. Ants crawled across the trunk in waves.

Elle seemed unimpressed, though I know secretly she was buying the line he was selling.

“They say when she had her sixth child, she swore that she’d never have another - that she’d give up any other kids she was going to have to the Serpent God.”

“I’m not stupid,” Elle said, pausing between two trees. The breeze ruffled her hair. “That’s the story of the Jersey Devil.”

Brad frowned. His frowns were always uniquely his- his whole face shrugged, turned upside down. It was an atrocity, really.

“It’s super not,” he said. He sounded disappointed, and his face looked lost. Mischievous he may have been, tough as well, but he never was the brightest light in the vanity.

Despite my discomfort during the hike, it was all my idea. My birthday- the first day of school- was the following day. Everyone asked me what I wanted to do.

“I want to see a ghost,” I said, because it honestly seemed like a good idea at the time.

So there we were. Trudging through the Scalitaw Forest right outside city limits- forging into unknown wilderness, all in the hopes of finding a small, decrepit, plantation styled house that may or may not exist in the hopes that we may, or may not, see a ghost.

As a backup plan Ronnie brought her grandmother’s old spirit board. Elle packed a bible. Brad brought his fists, and a crowbar. I brought a talisman my grandmother gave me for protection. Just in case.

And my prototype was snug in my backpack.

I stopped to lean against a tree after another few minutes. The bark pressed through my T-shirt and rubbed against my back. My sides were a throbbing mass of pain and discomfort. My backpack felt like there was a dead body in it, and I hadn’t exactly been active that summer. Most of it I spent indoors, locked away in my room, carefully tinkering.

“I don’t think I can make it,” I gasped.

Ronnie slapped me on the back of the head as she walked past. She was my best friend- had been since I’d moved to this city so many years ago. Physical violence was a sign of continuing affection between us.

“We’re already here.”

I could barely see it through the thick crowd of trees obscuring it. An old log cabin sitting squat and flat amongst the foliage.

“They really exaggerated what this place looks like,” I groused.

“I thought it would be more... I dunno, Civil War-ry,” Elle said, shoulders lifting.

I was too out of breath to respond with a snarky comment. I was just as disappointed as she was. That was the first of many disappointments in my adult life; it would not be the last.

The evening sun started to wane overhead, and dusk began its descent.

Ancient, lichen-encrusted tree stumps decorated the open enclosure near the cabin. They looked incredibly comfortable to my aching calves. Some unknown visitor before us arranged a big circle of misshaped stones around an old burned-out campfire.

“We rest,” I bellowed, in my best Dwarf voice. Even though I missed our LARP sessions that summer I took solace in the fact that I hadn’t lost my voice for it. Funny how little things like that mean so much when you’re that age.

I unhitched my backpack and sat it on the ground, gingerly perching on a stump. I still remember it- the moss was the perfect cushion. I felt connected to the entirety of nature, directly through my bottom. I felt like a king sitting on a throne made of duck down and clouds.

“The cabin is that way,” Brad said, pointing.

“Durr,” I said. “I need to rest first.”

“It’s going to be dark soon. We should probably get in there before the light disappears. Unless you want to bark your unprotected shins on a rusty nail.”

“You’re the devil,” I moaned. I sluggishly got to my feet again.

The girls were grinning at the two of us. I grinned back at them and hoisted my backpack over my throbbing shoulder again.

The four of us gathered at the front door. The small awning over the front porch sagged; old, foul-smelling moisture dripped from the primitive gutter system. Dried, withered ivy tangled its snakelike way around the support beams. The floorboards groaned under our weight.

Brad tried the knob. It fell off in his hands.

“Looks promising,” Ronnie muttered.

“On to Plan B, then,” Brad said.

He shrugged off his backpack and pulled out the crowbar. Elle made a small noise behind us. I swivel to look at her—her face was stricken with worry, and pale.

“Are you sure this is okay?” she asked.

Brad wedged the crowbar in the door and heaved, as if in response to her question. The old wood splintered at the joint and creaked open, wide. Darkness loomed before us all.

I remember feeling my Adam's apple bob as I stared into the dark depths.

"We're better off doing stupid things now," Ronnie said. "They wipe your record when you're under eighteen."

"I don't know," Elle said.

Secretly, I agreed with Elle. We didn't exactly have permission to travel there. As far as I was aware, though, it was public lands. But... you're only young once. And I had to test the prototype.

Brad smacked his flashlight with the butt of his hand. It flickered on, sputtering in flashes of white.

"Ladies," he said, bowing to us. He disappeared into the gloom, avoiding my eye roll.

The sky bled into orange and red off in the distance. The trees cast long shadows that reached out to us. Elle turned her face to Ronnie and me, as if to ask for guidance.

"Put it this way," Ronnie said. She half-smiled. "You can stay out here by yourself or you can come inside with us."

She, too, disappeared into the cabin. Elle looked out into the wide expanse of the forest. The cicadas were screaming. Unseen owls hooted to one another. The forest was filled with the countless sounds of icky, wild, animal things. I'm sure Elle was imagining, like I was, the blue haze of evening descending and the shadows wrapping around her feet. She turned back to me.

"Is this a good idea?" she asked, biting her lips.

"Probably not," I said.

I turned my flashlight on and I, too, stepped into the darkness.

The inside stank of rot and dust- that smell like you get in an old person's house, like old heater lint burning for the first time in winter. My flashlight beam ran over piles of old trash and graffitied walls. What were windows once had been boarded up with two-by-fours.

A clatter of noise came from behind us. I swung my flashlight around and Elle was illuminated against the doorframe. She held her hand up to block the beam from searing her retinas.

"I got scared out there," she said. "Get that out of my face."

“Sorry.” I shot her a quick smile that I’m not entirely sure she could see and swiveled the light back around.

Brad bent over in front of the fireplace. He sat his flashlight flush in the ashpit and craned his head up into the flue. His voice was muffled.

“Speak up!” Ronnie snapped.

Brad popped his head back out.

“The fireplace is clear,” he said. “We’ll have light... if we want to be uncomfortably warm.”

I heard Ronnie rustling around on her side of the room, and then the quick catch of noise as a match flared. She placed several small candles on an old table and lit them one by one; they flickered dimly in the gloom. The light fought to wade through the darkness that hung heavy in the room. Though I thought of myself as a rationalist, I admit I was pretty spooked. If the effect of candles was to promote a certain mindset during a ritual, then it was working.

Ronnie, ever-prepared, brought an IKEA snap-broom. She pulled it out and started twisting the plastic pieces together. She planned on sweeping most of the trash up and out the door. So we didn’t step on any hypodermic needles or anything.

As for me? I looked around at the dimensions of the cabin. I was considering the space we had, and what I was going to do with the equipment I brought, and where I was going to put it.

I considered myself a scientist. Anybody can be one- any mad man with a set of pincers, screws, and a notebook. I read in a textbook from the public library once about this group of Japanese soldiers. Unit 542, I think it was. They captured Chinese civilians and experimented on them. They basically tortured these people to death, and took copious notes. You know- how long it took them to die. What it took to push them over the edge of the abyss, into that unknowable other side.

Science is beautiful, isn’t it?

I’ve often wondered about death. When I was much, much younger my mother passed on. I often wondered where she went. My father- an avid church-goer- always told me she was in a better place. And for the most part I had believed him, unquestionably.

But there comes a time when you have to know. When you can’t take things on faith. I wondered what my mother would be like- what she would look like. I wonder if she would like me. If she would like the way I turned out. I wondered if there was a way to ask.

If I took it on faith that there was an afterlife I might get the whole idea wrong. So why not experiment a little? Start knocking things around, stirring things up?

It's what any scientist would do.

I arranged auto-shutter digital cameras two to a wall, on every wall. They were battery-operated. Each camera was to go off at one-minute intervals, clockwise. They were pointed at the table with the candles, where we were to hold the ritual. By my calculations they should have all lasted for at least two hours. For maximum exposure time I set my watch as a reminder to change them. What I was hoping to capture I still can't say.

I mentioned my plan for surveillance to my friends and I was greeted with nods. Elle looked at me with a hesitant expression.

"So what are we going to do here? Just a stake-out?"

"We're going to hold a séance," I said.

She had a wary look on her face.

"I told you I wanted to see a ghost." I shrugged.

"I didn't know you'd be going out of your way to find one!" she said, and her flustered voice sounded too loud in the muted ambience of the room.

The door at the front of the cabin swung back open, and I jumped nearly out of my seat. It was just Brad, returning with some old twigs and branches. He bent down at the fireplace and started to stack them.

"Have you got the inhibition relaxants?" I asked Ronnie.

She smiled at me and nodded, pulling a prescription bottle out of her purse. Four tightly rolled blunts were hidden inside- one for each of us. I got a distinct smell of tropical fruits wafting from the bottle.

"They call this stuff Fruity Pebbles," Ronnie said. "AKA Rainbow Road. As in the Rainbow Road to Asgard. I had a friend try this- says he was flat on his back all night, being mounted by a Valkyrie as he flew through the cosmos."

"Sounds pretty intense," I said. Every now and again I had a small toke, but it was a rare treat. My brains tend to turn to mush for a few days after a bit of green.

Ronnie rounded on Elle.

"Are you going to be a little bitch about this?" she asked, waving a blunt.

“No,” she said, and grabbed one.

These were my friends, and I loved them. I was hoping this experiment would be a success. I was hoping that the four of us would relive this moment later on in life, and know that it was what defined us. Getting high and trying something new. Breaking that final barrier of reality down- peeling back the impermeable, ripping through the Veil and punching through to the other side.

I hoped we would see a ghost that night. For my friends, and for myself.

The issue of successful manifestation is complex. The idea of spirits is an old one, stretching back to the earliest of human history. Grimoires and ancient tomes from eons past all give varied info, usually involving obfuscated rituals and eldritch formulas. This is the first barrier to the budding summoner. The important thing to know: the fundamental idea underpinning nearly every spiritual paradigm is the same.

There are, it is said, two planes of existence. The physical world we know, the corporeal, and the ethereal, the home of the spirit. One is our dimension filled with permanence and physicality; the other is composed primarily of energy. Inherent to this system is a division, or a wall, that separates the two. The ritual given in nearly every paradigm weakens the wall. The invitation, or evocation, allows a spirit to come through the weakened portal; and then the spirit uses a materialization medium.

This last bit has been the tricky part, historically. The opening of a wall between dimensions is done easily enough: draw a nine-foot circle to draw good energies to you, and draw a triangle to entrap a spirit. This is only an example. The specifics vary according to path. The real sticking point is how the spirits reveal themselves to you. In the past, there were mediums who acted as vessels the spirits could move through.

But this ‘possession,’ or ‘horsing’ effect has never been verified, and only relegated to psychological or sociological phenomena.

More than anything else, independent physical manifestation would be the biggest boon to mankind. If we could somehow manifest a spirit physically, instead of mentally, there would no longer be any question as to whether a ghost or spirit exists- and thereafter the biggest metaphysical question that plagues man about the afterlife could be answered once and for all.

Some people have used incense. Some have used blood. Some have used clay figures; binding spirits to a physical form already constructed.

Me? That long, grueling summer indoors I found a blueprint for Simulacra.

“So how does all this go?” Elle asked.

We were sitting around the table, our backs to each cardinal direction. Melted wax dribbled down the side of each candle and spread onto the table; an incense censer smoldered, heavy fumes wafting with its dark smoke. In the middle of the table, the centerpiece of it all, the *raison d’être*: a mason jar filled with what looked, to the untrained eye, like mayonnaise.

“We’re going to perform the summoning ritual,” I said. “First, we smoke a little Rainbow Road. This should eliminate the effect of consensus reality on us.”

Elle looked at me like I’d grown a third eye.

“Even I’m confused on that one,” Brad said.

I sighed.

“It’s like this,” I said. “Observation affects the thing being observed. Let’s say, for instance, that whatever a spirit is made of is an energy wavelength. It’s the same energy as consciousness. If we take in to mind the fact that our consciousness is a frequency of its own, then four frequencies all spamming the engrained idea that spirits don’t exist can cause a null effect on whatever could be trying to happen. In other words, our disbelief is a kind of psychic energy that can overwhelm the psychic energy emanating from a spirit. We’re using a mild psychotropic for its emotional effects. Since we’ll all be on the same substance our psychic emanations should all be on a matching wavelength.”

Elle and Brad both looked a little lost still. I sighed, again, and opened my mouth to elaborate. Ronnie reached over and put her hand over it before I could start talking again.

“Let me explain,” she said. “In plain English: Everyone has a color. If we have too much of the wrong color in one area it’ll overwhelm a weaker color. So we have to adjust our colors to match whatever color we’re calling up.”

Brad and Elle nodded. I inhaled through my nose heavily, exhaled through my mouth. My warm breath blew back at me. Ronnie was my best friend for a reason- not only did she get me, she could also translate.

“So I know why we have to smoke now,” Elle said. “So what happens next?”

“The really fun stuff,” Ronnie said, with a smile.

I nodded in agreement.

“We hold hands and perform a *séance*,” I said. “We all say a bit of the Lord’s Prayer. Just something to get us all vibrating at the same resonance. Then we keep chanting. This is to weaken the walls. Then we call forth the spirit.”

“What exactly are we summoning?” Elle asked.

“Whatever shows up, I guess,” I said.

I tried not to think of my mother, but I did. I wondered if she could see me- see what I was doing now. I wondered if she wanted me to reach through and crack between our worlds, our dimensions. I wondered what we were going to call forth. I wondered if whatever it was would be friendly, or hostile. I wondered if I was doing the right thing.

But there we were. Around our heads, every minute, a camera clicked. I checked my watch- thirty minutes until battery change. After that, it would begin.

“So what do we do after it shows up?” Elle asked.

“We give it a body,” I said.

I pointed at the jar of not-mayo. It glistened wetly under the light of the candle flames.

Simulacra was my chosen manifestation medium- my prototype. It was baseless organic matter. A liquid slurry composed of plasma and proteins, all fresh, all collected over the course of a few weeks. The prised-free components that made up the cellular structure of organic beings. It was flesh that has no form, cells that had no structure, protoplasm that contained no ribosomes.

I cultured it by centrifuge, prepared from my own blood. Spinning separated the different parts; all that was left was protoplasm, nuclei, and proteins.

My hypothesis? Whatever spirit we were to conjure would enter the Simulacra and take the proteins to rewrite its own DNA blueprint on the flesh. And, in so doing, it would manifest its own flesh, its own form, its own body.

The memories of that night are etched in fine-grain detail, like they happened just yesterday.

“What’s the real story about this place?” Elle asked.

“You know, The Trail of Tears led directly through this area,” Ronnie said. Her voice was quiet. “The forest was the dividing line, so to speak. It was officially Indian Territory once you passed it. They called the woods around us the Forest of Bones. ‘Cause so many people died here. Folks weak and sick from a thousand mile march were finally able to sit. No wonder the place is filled with death.”

“How do you know so much about this?” Brad asked.

“I had to do a paper for Zenigraf in 10th grade,” Ronnie said. “Can I continue?”

Brad motioned her onwards.

“They tried to make a settlement here,” Ronnie said. “Just a small one. You know how it goes- you need outposts when enough people travel one way. It was a good idea at first. Nearly everyone they evicted from white lands had their own job. And the forest was supposed to provide protection. But the settlement died and dried up on its own after a few decades. They called it the ‘Skeletal Forest’... the First People, I mean. Trying to use English. The surveyors moved in and misunderstood the whole thing. Named it the ‘Scalitaw’ because of a misunderstanding, thinking it was some native word. And here we are, smack in the middle of it.”

“What about this cabin, though?” Elle asked. Her voice sounded as if she didn’t want to know.

“It belonged to the Cherokee woman,” Ronnie said. “Lady Carver.”

Outside, as if on cue, there was a rush of noise like bullfrogs singing.

“I thought they set up tents and all that,” Elle said.

Ronnie shook her head.

“It was a genocidal march,” Ronnie said. She was as angry as I’ve ever seen her. Ronnie’s family was Haitian in origin; I think ethnic cleanses boiled her up on principle. “It didn’t matter how westernized and civilized the red man was, they were all sent on. This was supposed to be the cabin that Thomas Carver built with his own two hands. The Cherokee woman was his wife. They lived together here in wedded bliss. Until she died.”

Elle’s face was guarded. I have to admit- Ronnie’s story was spooking me out more than a little. And I was the one planning on summoning a spirit.

“They don’t say who it was that killed them,” Ronnie continued. “Well, they do say, but nobody can agree on who did it. Some say it was white men who had come to take their lands. Some say it was a jealous neighbor. Some say Lady Carver, the Cherokee woman, killed Thomas Carver in his sleep and then slit her own throat.”

Ronnie ran a delicate finger across her neck, as if slicing her head off. Her pale nails and cuticles stood out against her dark skin. Elle and myself both brought a hand to our throats, wincing.

“Why would she do such a thing?” Elle asked.

“Why would anyone do something like that?” Ronnie asked back. “Because they can. Because they had a good reason to do it.”

“But why slit your own throat?” Elle asked. “Why not just run away?”

“She lived in the Forest of Bones,” Ronnie said. “Imagine it- marriage was definite back in the day. A woman was her husband’s property. Imagine if your husband beat and abused you. But you were surrounded by death and dying every day- your own people, dying from starvation and cold and wildlife on all sides of you. You know there’s no escape from torment on any side. So what better way to take your revenge? You kill your captor and kill yourself to escape the pain.”

Elle’s eyes were moist, reflective. I could see candle flames dancing in them.

“What about her neighbors?” I asked. “Why would they murder the couple?”

“They said the Cherokee woman had another suitor. Before she was Lady Carver it’s said she was the prettiest young woman in her tribe. Many men wanted her- desired her. It wouldn’t be a big stretch to say they were jealous. Jealousy can drive a man to do many things.”

Brad’s face was pensive, and he was quieter than usual.

“I always thought the story went that Lady Carver kept getting pregnant,” he said.

“That’s the Jersey Devil, Brad,” Elle said, sighing. “We’ve been over this.”

“I read it in a book once, honest,” Brad said. He never was a big reader, either: usually when he read the novelty of it seared itself into his brain like a photo. “She had six kids by her husband. And she cursed her womb. She said she wouldn’t bear any more children. She swore her seventh child to the Serpent God of the forest. When time passed and she was pregnant again, she changed her mind. She loved her child too much, she wouldn’t give it up. But she was bitten by a snake, they say. The Serpent God cursed her.”

“The Serpent God?” I asked. This was new to me.

“Hobomok,” Brad said. “One of the shape-shifting gods of the Wampanoag. They say Hobomok cursed her. Her bottom half turned into a deer, and her neighbors chased her out of the house and into the depths of the forest. Nobody saw her for the longest time- until one day a hunter brought her back. He’d shot her with an arrow, and slit her throat. Thomas Carver held a funeral service for her, and they buried the body. Ever since then there’s been sightings of a Deer Lady all over Northeast Green Country. They say she always stares at you before she gallops away.”

We all sat in silence, then, for a few minutes.

“I wonder which one is true,” Elle said, in a quiet voice.

“Well, we can always find out,” I said.

Soft rains pattered against the roof. My watch beeped, and I knew what to do.

Though I gave them an explanation earlier- even though I tried to explain what I meant, to give them some reason we needed everything we needed, the real truth of the matter is I hardly scratched the surface.

Scientists say we live in a holographic universe. That we are echoes, bounced and twisted. External projections of the universe itself. They say it is like we are inside some huge virtual computer program. We are all players in some vast, cosmic MMO... and the Elder Gods, so to speak, whoever it is that programmed the whole damn thing in the first place... they watch us as we work. They wait and watch as we stumble through our lives. We are Sims living in our McMansions, player characters driving an avatar through this twisted game world.

Basically. It's a little more complex than that. But in any game, any programmer hardly needs to tell you that there's such a thing as error checks. We have error checks all over reality. The map itself- the world- the thin skin of reality itself, it has an error check. When there's a glitch it tries to patch itself up. The universe rethreads, retreads, and reskins itself.

Consensus reality- the brain's ability to dampen what we think we have seen, the ability to rationalize it away- it's an error check, too. A redundancy check.

If the world screws up and throws an exception, and the error check fails, that's where the brain comes in. The brain patches things up- rationalizes, takes away the fear, melts it away. Sometimes overwhelming the unchecked exception through a null-wave of disbelief.

This behavior is known as Redundancy.

We have to eliminate redundant error checks. That means making the brain melt; that means smoking the Rainbow Road. That means peeling away the mind while we do a ritual to peel back the fleshy layers of the world itself.

Only then would the Simulacra be accessed. Only then would the Simulacra be controlled. Only then would we be able to see if my prototype works like it should.

Ronnie sat the spirit board between us all. It was old and made of lacquered, varnished wood. There was a sun on one corner, and a moon in the other corner. Down below, the alphabet was spelled out from A to Z, with YES, NO, and GOODBYE scripted on the bottom.

"Everyone!" I announced. "We smoke."

There was a lighter to everyone's left. As one we grabbed them with our left hand and take a joint with our right hand.

"Mine spilled everywhere," Ronnie whined.

"Mine's all wet," Brad said.

“My lighter is busted,” Elle said.

I sighed.

“Puff and pass, then,” I said. I lit the Rainbow Roach and took a deep inhale; I held it in, waited until my lungs were screaming, and then passed it to the right. I coughed the cough of kings. I heard Brad wheezing off to my right after an aborted inhale.

“It totally tastes like fruity pebbles,” he muttered, in awe.

The room began to spin around me. I felt invincible, unstoppable, as if reality itself was quaking. I unfolded the ritual words Ronnie and I worked on for so long. The letters seemed to wriggle on the page. The jar of Simulacra caught my attention; it seemed to shine in the gloom.

“Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil,” I said. A cherry-picked line, but it would do. The other three followed my words, as if in prayer. “For I know I am protected by the power of The Almighty. Everyone bow your heads. Focus on your intention here. Know that this is a sacred circle and we are protected by the power of the infinite.”

We all held hands and bowed our heads. When I closed my eyes, I saw a million hazy images flickering behind my eyelids- washed-out shadows of motion, of strange things long gone. I saw a crowd of people walking endlessly, one after the other, until each one of them dropped to their knees. Soon there was a rotting pile of those who had died in my mind’s eye.

“Open your eyes,” I said.

As one, we did.

“I open the portal between realms,” I said. I felt a hard knot in my chest. “Come, oh spirits, who once walked this earth. Come to us, now, at our behest. I call upon thee, oh spirits.”

The candles started flickering. It was barely perceptible. Elle’s eyes grew wide; Brad’s eyes were slits. Ronnie looked un-phased.

“I call you, oh spirits of the dead,” I said. “Lady Carver, the Cherokee Woman. I call thee, and implore thee to come forward. Make contact with us. Give us a sign that you are in the room today.”

Something popped in the fire. Elle twisted to look at it, but I grabbed her hand and made sure we didn’t let go of each other.

“Say it with me,” I said to everyone else.

“We implore thee.” Our voices together sounded like Gregorian Monks, perhaps.

The room changed. It’s hard to say why, exactly. Maybe the weed kicked in- maybe something, somebody, showed up. The atmosphere grew dense. Like the air developed its own sense of gravity. I thought again of the vision I had behind closed eyelids- a pile of corpses, of the dead that all died here. My chest muscles tightened and quivered.

“Is anyone there?” I asked the emptiness.

The boards over the windows rattled, and a cold wind tore through the room.

“Oh-this-is-so-bad,” Elle said, between clacking teeth.

Ronnie shushed her.

“This is really good actually,” I said. My voice quivered like Shaggy from that old cartoon. I tried to swallow some excess saliva and then compose myself. “I think we’ve made contact. Who wants to try communication?”

Three hesitant faces shone in the light of the candles.

“I’m so high right now,” Brad said, after a minute. “Let’s do it.”

He placed two fingers on the planchette, a triangle-shaped piece of wood with felt on the bottom to make it slide. Elle looked at it like she would a scorpion. Ronnie, after a minute, placed two fingers on it. I put two fingers on.

It was like plugging a vacuum into the wall when it’s already switched on. The planchette zoomed around and around the board. Elle scribbled the letters down frantically. After a minute or so, the planchette came to a dead stop.

“What does it say?” I asked.

Elle held the paper up to me, a solemn look in her eyes.

THANK YOU

The fireplace screeched. All the hair on the back of my neck stood up at once.

“We need to leave,” I managed to whisper.

Before I knew what was happening I heard a shattering noise from the table in front of me and a scream.

The glass jar of Simulacra shattered. The white plasma glopped out of the cracked glass and smeared over Ronnie’s spirit board. Brad’s face dripped blood.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“The glass popped and got me,” he said, his face blank.

“Chester,” Elle said.

I patted around in my pockets and found an old hanky, passing it to Brad.

“You’d better look at this Chester,” Ronnie said.

I turned to her. Her eyes were wide, frozen, staring at the table. I followed her gaze, and the room started to spin around me.

The Simulacra was bubbling to itself. Whatever was there, whatever entity arrived... it managed to take possession of the prototype.

Rivulets of ooze extended themselves forward, as if they were pseudopods. Was this the secret? I wondered. Did I finally crack the code? I felt revulsion and exultation in equal measure. I felt like Dr. Frankenstein must have felt; like I had birthed a miracle, yet clothed it in the depths of evil.

The pseudopods began to divide and boil; I could see fingers separating themselves from the rest. I was mute with terror.

“Can’t you stop it?” Ronnie asked me.

Stop it? I was at a loss for rational thought, let alone formulating plans. Truth be told, I had no idea what I was doing, and I really didn’t expect the Simulacra to work. How to stop it hadn’t even crossed my mind, not even once.

“Use your bible!” Ronnie screeched.

Elle nodded and grabbed it out of her backpack, then began to whack the ooze with it. She tried to pull it away, but the Simulacra had it now. It roiled up and over the book and pulled it inside. We all pushed up from the table and backed away.

“What is that stuff made from?” Brad asked.

“Blood,” I choked out. “Blood, skin, flesh. All combined and separated.”

“Set it on fire,” Ronnie said. She looked at me, and at the candles. Theoretically the bubbling goop shouldn’t be able to touch it for fear of being burned.

I grabbed a candle and tipped it over the goop. My hand was shaking. The Simulacra was growing still- building a shape, a form, a body. Before my eyes a neck and head seemed to float up to the top of the soupy mess. I was paralyzed with fear. I still remember the candle wax dripping and hitting the quivering pseudo-flesh.

Then it opened its boiled-egg eyes. All I could see was blackness. Its maw yawned open wide and its teeth were molten, blocky chunks.

“Poor little boy,” the half-formed thing whispered, and I thought of sewer waste slopping against an open drain pipe. I could barely hear it- even to this day I wonder if I was making it all up. As it talked to me its body was beginning to grow upwards and solidify; as if it was finally coopting human shape.

“You want your mother back, don’t you?” it asked. There was a cruel leer on its unformed face. “She never was on this side.”

It was instinct. I eased my grip ever-so-slightly and dropped the candle, and the thing shrieked. Its flesh caught and ignited; perhaps that was the soft-alcohol suspension its structure

was coated and bathed in. I backed away and beheld it- my own invention, a greater success than I had ever imagined, rippling in agony on the table.

But then I felt strong fingers on my shoulders, and I was dragged backwards from the cabin. I was pulled through the open door and into heavy rains. Whatever that thing was boiled and roiled and shrieked to itself.

It got to unsteady legs and hobbled towards us, even as its form charcoaled from the flames.

Ronnie rushed out in a blur of red and black and slammed the door behind her. She had our bags. Elle was over by a far stump, her whole body shaking. Brad had his hand on my shoulder.

“Did you get the cameras?” I asked.

She looked pained.

“I had to leave one,” she said.

We all looked at the cabin. The door was shut. Black smoke was rising higher and higher from the chimney. We all knew it was bound to catch fire, sooner or later. The rain was pouring down still. By the time morning came, the cabin would be gone. The idea of the fire spreading didn't occur to any of us.

We ran. Through pouring rain we hiked our legs up and took off. I tripped, slipped in mud, banged my shins. Panted and moaned. By the time we made it to Brad's car we were covered in grime, sopping wet, and scared witless.

The drive home was terse, silent, and pitiful. I think it was the last time we were all in the same room together.

Time passed. We did not talk about the incident. Maybe we were too scared to bring it up. Maybe we knew we dodged a bullet somewhere. Maybe we were frightened of our futures, and so caught up in becoming adults we forgot about the time we saw what really was.

We drifted our separate ways. Brad took out a ton of student loans to go to Northeastern State. He got a degree in Applied Health Sciences and started working full-time as a Health and Fitness Instructor. He moved out to Cali sometime in 2009, and word is he's got a two year old and another kid on the way. I mourned for the loss of my cousin; even more than that, I mourned for the loss of my brother.

Elle got pregnant. She had everything she could have wanted: got a full ride, with scholarships, to Brown... but she stayed in Green Country and let some local drug dealer knock her up. The only time I hear from her is when she posts a picture of the food she's cooked on

Facebook. I don't have the heart to like anything she posts, though some nights I hover the mouse over her name in my chat box and start to type: 'Do you remember that time in the woods?'

I wonder if she does the same thing.

Ronnie and I still talk. She is, after all, my best friend. We graduated together, and got our first apartment together. I was there for her when her grandmother died. I felt her pain, her grief, her suffering. She was there for me when my first serious boyfriend dumped me. I was there when she got held up at gunpoint for her car.

We talked about that night in the woods once. She'd just dropped her boyfriend off on a bus to go to Basic. She was maudlin. We drank strawberry daiquiris together and watched TiVo'ed soap operas until the night bled through the windows and the scented candles had burned down to the stubs.

"Did you ever look at those photos?" I asked her. We were sitting out on the balcony, our feet sticking between the metal railings. The stars felt close against us; the autumn wind blew our hair back.

She nodded. She needed no other elaboration.

"The cameras got wet," she said. "From the rain that night. The memory sticks fried. We didn't get anything."

"We got something," I said.

She nodded, and we clinked glasses together and poured more shots.

"Did you hear what it said?" I asked, after a few more rounds.

She nodded.

"It told me about my grandmother," she said, and we drank to her memory.

I didn't speak what it said to me. But Ronnie was there for me, even when I got the call from out of the blue. When a strange woman I didn't know cried on the phone to me, told me she regretted leaving me, regretted leaving my Dad.

All of that seems like a distant memory now. I moved in with Marcus right before I turned twenty-seven, right out of community college. He was broad, tall, strong. He could protect me from just about everything. He made me feel normal again- made the world feel normal.

Some nights I would stay up until dawn thinking about what happened, and dreading the things I saw when I closed my eyes. Still he would be there, soothing me, comforting me, rubbing my back and coaxing me back into bed.

When I told him what I'd seen- as all relationships must deal with honesty- he nodded, and we took a trip back to my hometown. We went back to the woods. We hiked all the way back through the Scalitaw, fought our way through undergrowth and thick foliage and heavy trees. We found the remains of the cabin. It was scorched inside, in places, but relatively unharmed.

I sat on the stump outside and bellowed in my Dwarf voice again to ward away the darkness as he trudged in and looked around.

“Broken glass and soot marks everywhere,” he said afterwards. He handed me an elderly bundle of electronics. “And this.”

The camera. I had almost forgotten about it. It seemed impossible that it would be there after so many years. But impossibility finds its own way, its own times. Maybe, I thought, it was another exception that reality had thrown.

I did not look at the camera until we got back home. I hid myself in our dark bedroom, clicked on the bedside lamp, and hesitantly hooked it up to my laptop. It whirred and hissed. LED lights came on. After the photos uploaded themselves I looked through them, one by one, and sat back, staring.

Most of the pictures weren't anything more than black squares. But there was a picture, one picture, for each of us. Ronnie, Elle, and Brad were the same age in the photos as they were when we were at the cabin so many years ago. But the photos were taken in different places, different surroundings.

Ronnie- burnt alive in an industrial oven.

Brad- hand on his heart, splayed out on a wooden gymnasium floor.

Elle- head slumped over her steering wheel, blood dripping onto the dashboard.

My gorge rose. I hesitantly clicked at the last picture on the roll. It was a picture of the Simulacra- a picture of the monster that I called forth and gave birth to, of the darkness that I could have unleashed on my friends.

It had my face, and it was leering straight at the camera.

After a few moments, as if by instinct, I dragged the pictures to the recycling bin and dropped them in. I right-clicked it, and deleted them for good.

Marcus brought me dinner half an hour later. He slid into bed next to me, rubbing my shoulders as I mechanically ate. I hadn't moved from the spot. The camera was still plugged in, and I was still staring at the blank screen.

"You able to rescue anything?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"The rain must have got it," I said. "Totally fried."

I sleep much better at night now. Life has an easy rhythm, an easy cadence to it. I don't think about that night anymore. Hardly ever.

But when the thoughts do sink in... when I wake up from a nightmare about those photos, about what could have been... I think about Redundancy. I think about error checking. I think about how the Universe works to fix its own mistakes. Maybe there really are two sides. Maybe somewhere, on some other side, there is another me staring at the photos of his laughing friends in lieu of his real memories of his dead ones, and he mourns for his loss, for what could have been.

I can't decide which one of us got the better deal.