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PORTFOLIO

EDAN RAY

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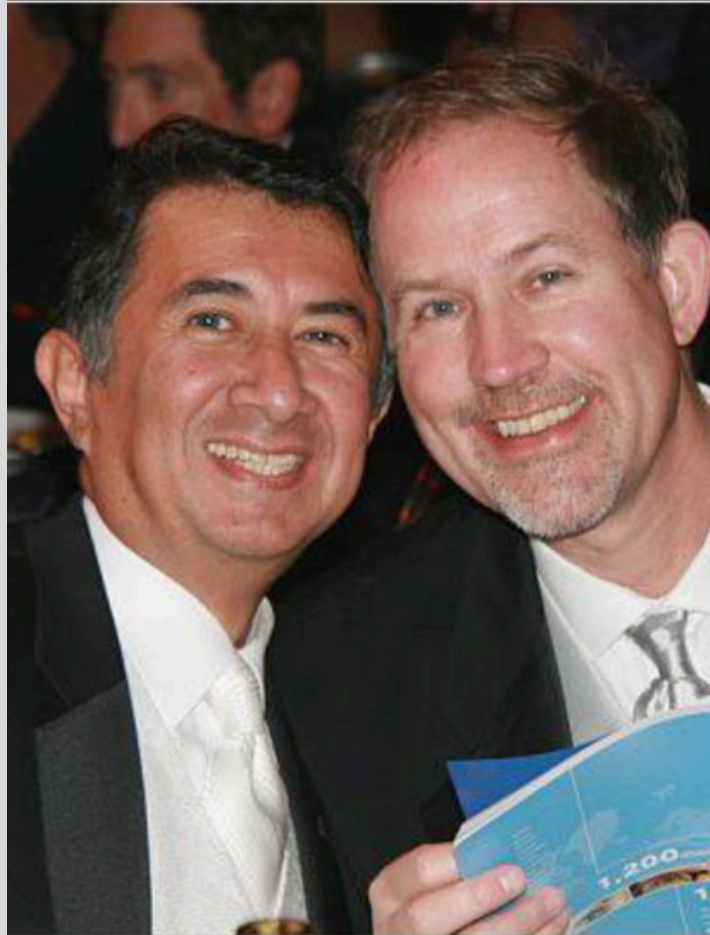
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MAGAZINE WRITING

THE NEW NORMAL

Patched together with fields of corn and soybeans, the state of Iowa is always described as a landscape of undulating hills and gentle valleys. With the hum of cicadas and curving roads dotted with weathered barns and fertile plains, the orange and pink colored sunset makes it all (at first glance) peaceful. Though the snowy day of April 8th, 2002, was far from peaceful for Victor and Randy Ray who raced through the hospital at 3 o'clock in the morning.

The city of Cedar Rapids has a balance between urban convenience and Midwestern charm, but the hospitals stay the same no matter where you go. The smell of sterilized cleaning supplies, the uncomfortable waiting rooms, the beeping machines, and (depending on which hallways you walked down) the loud screaming of women in labor.



(Photo Provided by Black Tie Dinner)

But there was one scream that Victor and Randy had just missed. My own mother's. The woman who chose them to adopt me.

"She was going to let us in the delivery room, but by the time we got there, she had already started. We stood outside the door as you were born."

My parents and I sit together at the kitchen table. It's a tight fit in a home well lived in. The same cicadas buzz right outside the glass doors leading to a cozy backyard where four dogs run around. The tiled floors are cold against my feet which is a stark contrast to the dry heat of the well-known Texas summer. With motorcycles revving their engines on the streets just passed the gates of our backyard, neighbor's dogs barking, and pops of fireworks that someone decided to let loose on a random Saturday, Texas is a different kind of peaceful.

"When did we decide to have kids?" Randy laughs. "Who knows? To me, it was more of an evolution."

Both of them grew up in Texas in the 1960's. While they were both in the same state, they lived completely different lives. While Victor went to a Catholic boarding school from 4th to 9th grade and lived in a very traditional Hispanic household, Randy lived what he called "the typical, white Anglo Saxon-American experience."



(Photo by Victor Ray)



(Photo by John Frazier)

“How did we meet?” Victor asks. “In a warehouse. 1986.”

“Best Little Whorehouse in Texas.” A theater production. As one of their favorite jokes to tell anyone who asks, they met on the stage. It was a hobby they both loved and shared together. The moments spent singing songs with friends, dancing to the same tunes, singing in the same rhythms, while nearly blinded by the spotlights and limited movements by the stage itself. There was something magical about the limitations, and something fantastical about the art form.

Theater has always been known for its inclusive and loving atmosphere. So, they stuck to it and went together to sing in more productions and corrals as a happy and open couple. But, living in the 90’s, there were places that didn’t share the same open-mindedness.

“Workwise, I couldn't tell people. I wouldn't feel comfortable or safe telling people,” Victor says.

“For me,” Randy adds, “I couldn’t because I was active-duty Army at the time.”

It was against the regulations to be gay. Before Bill Clinton’s “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell Policy” it was very possible to get discharged from the army for being gay. While there were a lot of pushbacks for their relationship, adopting children was not illegal, but frowned upon. The evolution from no children, to thinking about adopting children, to a little baby ending up in their arms was slow and steady. Both of them finally decided to go through the process in their early 40’s. For a lot of gay people, even single mothers, while it wasn’t illegal, it wasn’t the norm. They didn’t think it was an option they had.



(Photo by Lori Metcalf)

And it was in the late 90’s that things started to seem possible. They started to prepare. In 2001, they finally sat down with the adoption attorney in a small and cramped office with a book in their hands. Similar to a scrapbook, they had taped together their lives for the mother to be to read when deciding on a couple to give their children to. This book had not only pictures of the both of them inside but also their dogs, descriptions about their house, their jobs and financials, their families, why they wanted a child, and why they were the best pick.

“When we met with the attorney,” Victor says, “it was a good two-hour conversation about all kinds of stuff, and then he's like: ‘What kind of baby do you want? Boy, girl, Black, White, Brown?’ I go: ‘I don't care.’ He goes: ‘What about health issues?’ And I go: ‘I don't care. I want a baby. I don't want specifics. Just a baby.’”

Then, it was a waiting game. While Victor and Randy were placed in line to speak with the mother to be, there were two couples in front of them. Weeks went by with no good news from the attorney, but things were happening behind the scenes.

What goes unnoticed during this process is how strict couples are about their kids. They want them to be a certain way. The first couple decided to drop out of the race with the mother (who is white) because she divulged that the father is black. The second couple dropped because they found out the mother to be didn't know she was pregnant for the first month and drank heavily at that time. That second couple didn't want to risk fetal alcohol syndrome, and quickly left.



(Photo by Victor Ray)

Then came the happy news straight to Victor and Randy's phones. Victor started going to African hair care lessons, and they went to each and every doctor's appointment up until the day of April 8th, 2002, at 3 o'clock in the morning.



(Photo by Victor Ray)

I asked them about my brother, Jarrod. Two years younger, I wondered out loud how he came to be. The story of adopting the first child was so long and complicated, how did Victor and Randy come to adopt a second? How did they decide they wanted to go through that process again?

"I had to lobby hard with Randy to agree to a second child," Victor says. "And it took some convincing, but Angie, his best friend, changed his mind."

While they didn't need to completely re-make the book filled with their information, they added the new addition and sent it to Jarrod's mother all the way in Missouri, who was only sixteen at the time. It only took a few days to hear back from her. "You're it," she said.

"She wanted a biracial family," Victor says, "because she knew that Jarrod was going to be biracial, and she wanted specifically a gay family. Because she knew that that's the only way they could have children."

Jarrod was born shortly after that, months early. Nobody expected this to happen, and everyone was rushed back to the hospital with the underlying fear of Jarrod in danger.

"I had to go to the doctor to finish my physical for the adoption paperwork to get Jarrod during it all," Victor says. "My doctors said: 'Your blood pressure's kind of high.' And I said: 'My son was born, we're leaving town. Let's finish this.' He goes: 'Okay, I get it now.'"



(Photo by Kathy Valentine)



(Photo Provided by Unknown Church Photographer)

“His blood pressure's never gone down since,” Randy adds.

It was when Jarrod turned 2 that Victor and Randy finally decided to get married in the beautiful city of Victoria in Canada. The city clings to the edge of Vancouver Island, where the Pacific's briny scent mingles with blooming gardens. Old-world architecture meets the present with grace: the grand, ivy-clad Empress Hotel stands sentinel over the harbor, where sailboats bob on the waves, and sea planes come and go.

“We've considered ourselves married since 1986,” Randy says. “But in terms of legally getting married, it was June 2006.”

They remember the chaos of the day. Having to watch over wedding guests and two children of their own. I, the flower girl, saying hello to anyone I thought was “pretty,” and Jarrod, constantly asking for snacks and getting up from his chair to run around. Victor and Randy, when they got some time alone, visited cozy tea shops and antique bookstores, walking along the cobblestone streets with lamp-lit avenues, the Parliament buildings glowing in the moonlight. They enjoyed the views of snow-capped mountains, and the nightlife of street performers, bustling markets, and gulls along the shoreline.



(Photo by Victor Ray)

As we sit at the kitchen table and reminisce more about the life they had, it was important to note that at this point in their lives, they cannot see themselves anywhere else, with no one else but their family. It's the new normal for them, and it's a normal that will last well beyond their children. Two husbands, crazy memories, and equally crazy kids.

Seven Webtoons That Will Change Your Brain Chemistry

The Webtoon World is Vast... Let's Slim it Down



(Art by Juniljus)

Please help! I don't know where to start! Webtoons have been around for years, and there are so many genres and authors to choose from. If you want to start reading webtoons, I know from experience on just how daunting it can be. I mean... where DO you start? Well, here are some vanilla, yet plot filled webtoons, that can get you started on the journey. Trust me, when you know what you like, finding the next will be a piece of cake.

LEE Gpiee's FALSE MEMORIES

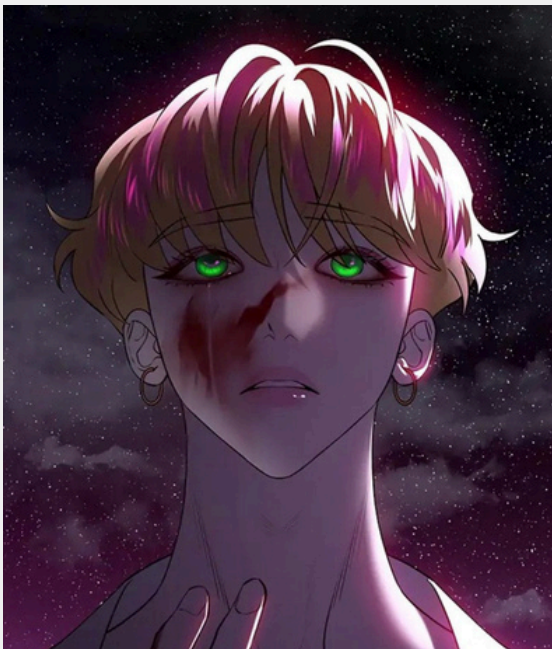
With LEE Gpiee's other known works like ANTI P.T., Roomate 101, and Doridosim, we have False Memories. Our protagonist Lee Wan who, because of his intense anxiety, has quite the scary face! But he just wants to make friends. With his calm and kind nature, Lee Wan catches the eye of the school's "bad boy" Cha Ha-Woon, who really only wants Lee Wan in his gang because of how scary he looks. But, being in a gang means having enemies! And when someone comes around and takes a swing at Cha Ha-Woon's head, he loses his

memories and ends up relying on Lee Wan to figure out the mystery of who he is...They might fall in love by the end of it, but what do I know?



(Art by Lee Gpiee)

While a little violent, False Memories is a good start into the world of Webtoons, specifically BL Webtoons. It's got suspense, mystery and romance. It'll have you pulling at your hair in anger, and cringing at the cuteness of it all at the same time.



(Art by Aheuredal)

Aheuredal's MYSTIC PRINCE

There's nothing better than fighting to the death with your seven other brothers as you high-tail it to the throne for everlasting youth. Except you're the only girl.

No, they're not her biological brothers, but they're all the same age looking for the same thing. To overthrow the king and make the world theirs. Jeok-Yeon is a woman with fierce tenacity, and this can be because of her overflowing fire power that threatens to consume her every night. With her second in command Biseol at

her side, that has some secrets of his own, this manga is filled with mystery, betrayal, and tragedies left and right.

The author of this webtoon showcases the kind of person she is through her explanation of the meaning of her name. Stating: "I'm literally in the woods, drawing webcomics. In Korean, "Aheure" means the ninth day of each month and "dal" means the moon. I chose this name because... well, I liked the sound of it, more so than its meaning, haha."

If you're looking for a good historical manga with touches of fantasy and romance, you've got the webtoon for you.

Haribo's **AT THE END OF THE ROAD**

Normally, I think we can all agree that if you were given a second chance at life, this wouldn't be seen as a bad thing. But, what if this second life was in a different body? Our protagonist Taemin finds himself in the body of Siwon after getting hit by a truck. Fate works in mysterious ways, I guess. Siwon lives in an abusive family, has horrible health, and gets bullied in school often. Well, Taemin isn't gonna sit around and let that happen to him. And while he tries to get a grasp on all this, he has to look out for Woojin, an old friend from the past that keeps giving him creepy stares.



(Art by Haribo)

Haribo is well known for their other works such as *Mad Dog*, and their enticing stories always stand out from the rest.



(Art by Midnight Studio)

Kim Suji and Midnight Studio's **TWILIGHT POEM**

You ever want to strangle a main character going back and forth between men because there is an obvious answer? Me too. But you know what? That's okay sometimes.

In *Twilight Poem*, we have Soru who has the ability to heal others but not herself, using her blood.

In the background, we have demons that are trying their hardest to become human. In order to do that,

they need to consume hundreds of humans and their energy. With everyone out to get her, Soru takes refuge in the general's quarters while Yato, a powerful demon is on the way to kill her. But Yato and Soru have a past together. And while Yato is a demon, he is struggling with some very human emotions....

While Twilight Poem is a complex read that goes into the themes of human nature, it's pretty relentless when it comes to our main character Soru being taken advantage of. But, at least the ending is satisfying and happy.

Nichtigall's **TREAD LIGHTLY ON THAWING ICE**

The enemy of my enemy is my friend... That I occasionally stare at and think about often.

With the beautiful art, nearly perfect pacing, and great writing, Tread Lightly on Thawing Ice will have you searching frantically for more just like it.

After being traumatized by seeing his master's death, our protagonist Ye Kang-Oh has his memories wiped by the leader of a demonic

sect. He grows up forgetting about this master, gaining traction and notoriety. But, suddenly, a mysterious servant named Woo comes into the picture. And there's something about him that just seems so familiar.



(Art by Ganno)



(Art by Paspaskim)

With Cirrus's main goal is to annoy the life out of Skylar, that annoyance turns into something more and the two end up getting to know each other on a deeper level than before. They come to realize that they might need each other more than they thought, and their goals change into wanting to help each other.

Paskim's **LOST IN THE CLOUD**

Who doesn't love a enemies to lovers arc? I sure do. And after reading this Webtoon, you might come to like it as well.

It's a coming of age story with a dark twist. Our protagonists Skylar and Cirrus have their fair share of mental health problems as they go through their high school lives. They absolutely despise each other. Until they don't.

Paskim's inspiration for continuing the webtoon came from a scene they drew themselves before it hit the internet. Specially, the 9th cut from episode 40 and episode 41.

Ryuhō's **FOR MY DERELICT FAVORITE**

What is this dream? Well, to fall asleep one night and wake up in your favorite novel.

Now I know what you're thinking: She must be the main character of this novel she transmigrated to. Nope. Hestia is on the sidelines, just living a regular life as a noble. But, she's an avid fan of the novel's second love interest Kael. After Kael is betrayed and thus kills himself, Hestia cannot take the pain of her favorite character having such a fate and kills herself as well. And she wakes up back at the start of the novel! Prepared not to have Kael's fate happen again, she bursts into his castle and demands they marry. So, they do. And Hestia works in the background to shape Kael's future into one in his favor.



(Art by Kimyong)

This webtoon is hilarious, sweet, and satisfying as we slowly unravel the novel's characters from the inside out and watch as the enemies fall.

DAREDEVIL MODE

It's so messed up... Why do I love it?

It's not just blood and jump scares. Sure, horror delivers its fair share of adrenaline spikes, but what keeps us coming back isn't the shock; it's the story behind it all. Lore—those twisted, intricate webs of background details—draws us into the horror genre more than any single scare ever could. Why do we become captivated by a haunted animatronic pizzeria in *Five Nights at Freddy's* or the cursed family secrets in *The Fall of the House of Usher*? It's because these narratives hide layers of mystery, building a

world that we can get lost in, even as we dread what lurks around every corner.

LORE'S A HIT!

So... what is lore? Lore is a backstory. A deeper context inside a world, story, or character. It takes advantage of our imagination. It's the one thing shaping the plot and the motives behind the characters actions. In horror, lore turns simple scares into something exciting, giving us clues to unravel and mysteries that beg to be solved, long after the initial fright fades. It lets us become detectives, which is something that has been a trend for a long time on social media.



To viewers, a good stereotypical horror film means you can watch and laugh at the stupidity of it all. *Photo from Evil Dead Rise (2023) IMDb*

1. Five Nights at Freddy's



(Picture Provided by Blumhouse)

For a lot of people in Gen Z, Five Nights at Freddy's was the pinnacle of horror online. Created by Scott Cawthorn, Five Nights at Freddy's was supposed to be his final game, as others have failed in the past. But, unexpectedly, Five Nights became an online sensation. Known for its animatronic animals, dark visuals, traditional pizza place setting, and standard jump scares, it was a wonder as to why kids were so infatuated with this simple game.

It all came down to a single cut scene of a newspaper clipping, letting the audience know that the pizza place was getting shut down because five children had gone missing.

Immediately, people wanted to know what happened. They were willing to play every game to get to the bottom of what happened to those kids, if the animatronics had something to do with it, and how five kids could go missing before the place was finally shut down. Suddenly, Cawthorn had a big hole to fill. It was after eleven more games throughout the years that all those answers came to light, and all the horror games, again, filled with the standard jump scares, were consistently popular because of that underlying mystery people just had to solve.

2. The Mandela Catalogue

The Mandela Catalogue, created by Alex Kister on YouTube in 2021 is considered to be in the "analog horror" genre. Analog horror is another form of serial narrative, using videos that have a VHS look, disturbing imagery, jump scares, and are deep in their lore. The story is updated in chunks, or "seasons", and



(Image created by Alex Kister)

every season ends in a cliffhanger.

The Mandela Catalogue is one of the most popular pieces of analog horror online right now. Combining the “lore” of the bible, and modern society, the story asks the question: “What would’ve happened if Lucifer won?”

At least, that’s what people theorize the story is about. But that’s how the series gets you hooked. People are continuously coming back to The Catalogue, investigating all the VHS tapes, coming together to talk about their findings and theories, and waiting for the next installment that will get them closer to finding the answer about what’s really going on in Mandela County.

3. Haunting of Hill House



(Poster by Netflix)

Getting a seal of approval from Stephen King himself, Mike Flanagan, the creator of Netflix’s hit tv show The Haunting of Hill House (2018) has proven himself time and time again as a master of evolving the horror genre using lore.

With other hits like The Fall of The House of Usher, Ouija, and Midnight Mass, they’re fan favorites for their complexities when it comes to story. Hill House, at first glance, seems like your

stereotypical horror show involving ghosts, possession, and a haunted mansion. But there’s a mystery underneath it all that keeps people watching. Even viewers who don’t typically like horror will sit through hours of Flanagan’s work just to see where his stories will go.

Mixing the horror genre with the theory of time and being haunted by your own death, Hill House is stocked full of lore that, for many, is hard to keep up with. But, it’s been a Netflix favorite since it’s released, and while the horror aspects of it are amazing, people just cannot stop talking about the complex story blended within it.

Lore is the foundation that enriches the story's depth and intrigue.



For some horror fans, the desire to feel fear is a manifestation of an adrenaline-seeking personality.

There's a shift in horror today. More and more creators are moving away from the religious and creating their own avenues for horror. *Photo by Amblin Entertainment. The Haunting of Hill House (2018)*

FEAR = BRAIN ACTIVITY

"All it takes is a moment (even less than a second) to realize we're safe and switch over to laughter and joy." -- Pittsburgh-based sociologist Dr. Margee Kerr.

Let's discuss the basics. What parts of our brains light up when we feel fear, and why? CSP Global dives into The Cognitive Processes in the brain one by one.

1. **The Thalamus.** This is the part of the brain that decides if the sensory data we're getting should be transferred to the rest of the body.
2. **The Sensory Cortex.** The sensory data is processed.
3. **The Hippocampus.** Gives our memories context.
4. **The Amygdala.** Helps us determine what's a threat and what isn't. We store our memories involving fear in this part of the brain.
5. **The Hypothalamus.** What gives us fight or flight.

WHO AM I?

There are elements that can influence how we react to horror.

- **The Excitation Transfer:** An emotional response when the mystery in a horror movie is resolved. You may enjoy horror more if there's a "satisfactory" ending.

- **Individual Empathy.** The amount of empathy you hold towards human beings can determine whether or not you will enjoy horror movies. People with less empathy are able to watch as bad things happen to the characters, while people with more empathy are not.
- **Sensation Seekers.** Another word for Adrenaline Junkies. If you're seeking to feel something intense, horror may be the way to go. "About 10 percent of the population deeply enjoys the adrenaline



Some say feeling a high dose of adrenaline in the right, and safe, setting can bring you relaxation.
Photo by The Michigan Daily. Nope (2022)

In the end, the viewers aren't watching the videos because they're scary, but because they want that new nugget of lore.

HUMANS ARE GONNA HUMAN

We're humans. We crave a good mystery, and we love to be the ones to solve it. With the new age of social media, everyone's a detective every day. Horror movies, and shows, usually dive into the mystery of things right away. They captivate you to want to figure out all the answers, which is what makes you stay in your seat. Even if you don't like horror, I can guarantee that if you find a horror flick with a good enough mystery, you'll see yourself sitting down to watch it all the way through. And you won't know why. But now you do. You just love lore like the rest of us.

So, be honest.... What's your current horror obsession right now?

GAME WRITING

CHARACTER REWRITE

POPPY FROM *POPPY PLAYTIME*

In *Poppy Playtime*, Poppy is a small, doll-like figure with a friendly and innocent appearance. Her red hair is styled in pigtails, dressed in a classic blue dress with a white lace collar, embodying the vintage toy aesthetic of the 1950s. As a central character in the game, Poppy was designed to be the first intelligent doll. She's capable of holding conversations and responding to children's needs, marketed by the in-game company Playtime Co. as a groundbreaking, life-like companion.

However, beneath her innocent exterior, Poppy is part of the sinister atmosphere surrounding Playtime Co., a toy factory where disturbing events have taken place, and abandoned toys have mysteriously come to life. Throughout the game, Poppy's presence becomes increasingly eerie, and it becomes obvious that she played a larger role in the twisted experiments and strange occurrences within the facility. By the end of the first chapter, it's hinted that Poppy might not be as innocent as she appears, suggesting that she holds power over the factory's dark secrets and its monstrous inhabitants.



(Art by Nick Heltne)

CHAPTER 1: A TIGHT SQUEEZE

Poppy is initially introduced as an innocent, doll-like character, supposedly the first toy created by Playtime Co. that could actually communicate and interact with children. Although she doesn't appear in much of this chapter, her unsettling tagline: "I'm a real girl, just like you" creates a sense of unease. As a sentient doll, Poppy wants to be just like the other girls. She wants to be pretty and

well-kept just like any other girl would. She wants her shoes shined, her hair brushed, and her dress cleaned. Smelling like poppy flowers, Poppy is encased in her own jail cell (a glass case) that's filled with red poppy smoke to keep her asleep. It's when we, as the character, break this case open that Poppy is freed.

She symbolizes both the allure of childhood toys and the haunting fear of the unknown, her character evolving from a mysterious, almost childlike figure to a complex, morally ambiguous presence in the factory.

CHAPTER 2: FLY IN A WEB



Art Provided by Chaser (Wallpaper.com)

Skirting around the line of helpful to manipulative, In Chapter 2, Poppy's character, now free to roam the factory, becomes more central. She displays new layers to her personality. As the character tries to get out of the factory, Poppy is there to help. You let her free! Of course she would want to help you.

But as the game continues, Poppy begins to realize that our character is smart, fast, and able to make quick decisions. Looking at how things are still not good at the factory, the secrets still hidden, and the other dolls like her still suffering, she wants you to stay. She wants you to help get the truth out there. She wants you to put an end to this factory.

CHAPTER 3: DEEP SLEEP

Guiding you now through Playtime Co.'s Playcare, the abandoned daycare inside the factory, Poppy in chapter 3 as a more complex role. Within the ominous environment, Poppy's influence, while not overt, lingers through the clues provided to the player by our new helper Ollie through a Playtime Co. phone. This subtle presence raises questions about her motivations, as the player uncovers disturbing secrets about Playtime Co.'s past and the experiments with children within Playcare.



(Art by Nick Heltne)

Fans speculate that Poppy may be a tragic character trapped by the experiments of Playtime Co., with a lingering connection to the sinister workings of the factory. Her cryptic behavior implies she could be caught between helping the player and fulfilling some darker purpose or curse binding her there.

CHARACTER REWRITE

WILLIAM AFTON FROM *FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S*

William Afton, also known as Purple Guy, is the co-founder of Fazbear Entertainment. As one of the engineers behind the animatronic mascots used in the Freddy Fazbear's Pizza locations, he's the primary antagonist in the series. He is portrayed as a twisted, sadistic character that is also a serial killer, specifically killing children. Afton's is commonly associated with themes of evil, revenge, and the haunting consequences of his actions.

Afton's always had a fascination with life and death. It was when he figured out that he could place souls of people inside his animatronics after the death of one of children that his obsession hit new heights. He continued to make animatronics that could capture the essence of life—though in a horrifying and twisted way—at every pizza location that popped up after the last were forcefully closed.

Afton's motives are not always clear, but the consequence of his decisions are the fact that the souls remain trapped inside those machines, coming alive every night to seek him out and kill him for revenge.



(Art by Scott Cawthorn)

It's in the first game *Five Nights at Freddy's* that we play as a security guard. The souls inside the animatronics confuse you for Afton, coming after you each night to come to watch over them.

HIS DEATH

In one of his attempts to hide from the vengeful spirits of his victims, William Afton hides inside the

Spring Bonnie animatronic suit, one of the first he made for the pizzeria. Since it's the first one he made, it has some special rules.

1. Don't get the suit wet. You cannot sweat, cry, or breathe too hard because of this.
2. Don't be in the suit when it switches from "human mode" (the suit being able to have a human inside, acting as a mascot) to "animatronic mode" (the suit can walk around on its own).

a. This is because the suit will crush you as the animatronic skeleton is forced into action. It was raining on this day. And the suit got wet. It malfunctioned immediately. Afton is now trapped, merging his physical body with the suit to become Springtrap, a zombie-like animatronic.

Springtrap embodies both Afton's essence and his evil, as he becomes an undead threat that haunts the games in different forms. It's a running gag that he will never die, and if he does, as his tagline states:

"I always come back."

OTHER GAMES



(Art by Wilyskytreader, GlitchedPie, and Vij)

Afton appears in various forms throughout the games, including as Scraptrap, Glitchtrap, and Burntrap—each an iteration of his character and a new manifestation of his malice.

His actions continue to influence the series' events, and he is a recurring, shadowy presence that impacts the lives of other characters, like his children, Michael and Elizabeth Afton, who also have tragic roles in the story.

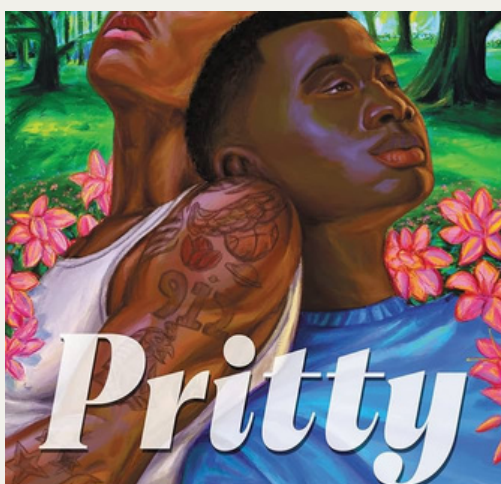
Afton represents a character driven by obsession, cruelty, and a disregard for human life. His fascination with animatronics as vessels for the soul suggests a desire to conquer death or control life in his twisted way.

William Afton, after all the games in the Five Nights at Freddy's series, has made himself one of the most infamous villains in horror gaming.

CULTURE WRITING

A WORLD THAT NEEDS HEALING

Keith Miller knows his book is in danger, but he's excited at the thought of it getting banned



(Art by SOGO Arts)



(Photo by PrideIndex)

Keith Miller's bravery is both inspiring and intimidating—in the best way. His novel, *Pritty*, is a whirlwind of mystery, family drama, and swift romance. Hearing him discuss the challenges his book is facing at the Savannah Book Festival only heightened the thrill of reading it, confirming that Miller is exactly the right person to tell this story.

BANS ON CREATIVITY

Many novels are getting banned today for a range of reasons, whether religious, political, or personal. We're in an era where book bans have become increasingly common.

One such novel facing scrutiny is Miller's *Pritty*, primarily due to its depiction of a gay relationship and the use of curse words. The protagonists, Leroy and Jay, share a relationship that, while not the central theme of the book, is crucial in highlighting complex issues like family dynamics and the exploration of Black masculinity. Regarding the language used, Miller explains: "Certain curse words are a part of language and vernacular."

The novel tackles many themes he's passionate about. At the festival, he posed questions like, "How do I live and love if the world told me not to love?" and spoke candidly about the likelihood of his book getting banned given its setting

in the Deep South. "They don't care how you feel. They don't ask for permission," he said. Having moved to Savannah at age six and now 35, Miller understands that the Deep South becomes a part of you, shaping your identity forever.

In a world dominated by technology, social media, and constant judgment from people of diverse cultures and backgrounds, writing a story like this requires immense courage. It takes someone truly special to commit to staying authentic, no matter the obstacles, and to write the story your heart tells you to write. As Keith put it, "The book is about people, so it's about you."

AN ERA OF EXPRESSION

Today, more people than ever are embracing who they truly are. We're living in an era where hiding from others' judgments is becoming a thing of the past. Who cares what people think? With this openness comes a surge of creativity, showcased across social media and in libraries. From stories about diverse relationships to new narratives on television featuring underrepresented voices, it's encouraging to see the world evolving. Miller's book captures this spirit, and those who read it can feel the resonance of this cultural shift.



(Photo by Alexey Kim)

Many of the reviews talk about how tender the novel is. How emotional it made them. How beautiful it was. Some mention how they hardly ever finish a book, but this novel just had to be completed. The characters,

settings, and experiences spoke to them and had them uncover memories of their own childhoods. Even while I was reading it, I could relate to a lot of things the characters were facing, especially Jay.

LOVE OR TO BE LOVED?

Jay, as a character throughout the novel, spoke to me in many ways. He cares so much about the people around him. So much so, that he cares too deeply about how they feel for him. He feels as though he has to be someone they can be proud of. The way others perceive him is incredibly important. In my own life I struggle with thoughts like those. Am I making the right decisions? Is everything I'm working towards going to be worth it in the end? Am I truly happy with the person I am today? Does it matter?



(Photo by Savannah Morning News)

These thoughts echoed through my mind as I read this book over the past few weeks. It was a journey of deep reflection and soul-searching. Books like this, written by authors who confront these struggles daily, are vital for young people like me. Miller exemplifies someone who knows who he is and what he stands for. As he said, "In a moment of hurt there is always something that can hold us together." Books like his create connections, reminding us to come together in the fleeting time we have. Banning stories out of fear (whether that fear stems from misconceptions about "turning gay" or from moral objections) only hurts those who are simply trying to live authentically. And that shouldn't be a crime.

Everyone grapples with bravery at some point in their lives. What truly matters is how you respond when the moment to be brave arrives. Keith Miller may not realize he taught me this, but that's okay. What's important is that his passion and resilience (even his wild excitement over the prospect of getting banned) never fades. Because, honestly, that's bravery all its own.

Opinion Essay

A few months ago, social media was flooded with revelations from New York rapper Cleotrapa, a proud dark-skinned Nigerian descendant, about the mistreatment she faced while on Ice Spice's World Tour including: not appearing in any promotional photos, tasked with opening the shows before the shows even began, not getting paid for her performances, and having to pay for hotel rooms and food herself. After posting her five-part series on TikTok, people began to speculate whether or not Cleo was telling the truth. On the sidelines, there was another conversation brewing about how Ice Spice's light skin might have had something to do with the way she behaved. Whether the people heavily involved in this event agree or disagree, this issue is no longer about the mistreatment less prominent artists face in Hollywood. It's about how light-skinned and dark-skinned women within the Black community treat each other.

The divide between dark-skinned, light-skinned, and biracial individuals within the Black community isn't new. Colorism—a prejudice that favors lighter skin—has historically shaped how opportunities and privileges are given out. We, as light-skinned women, are often perceived as benefiting from this, leading to accusations of colorism and a lack of self-awareness. This is when I hear terms directed towards us like: “the White women of the Black community.” This is a response to how we're all seemingly “comfortable” with treating our dark-skinned counterparts horribly because we're more “favorable” to society.

However, generalizations like these are harmful. Just as it's wrong to categorize all dark-skinned women as one way, it's equally harmful to paint all light-skinned women with the same brush. These divisions within the community only make way for the same colorism that many of us are trying to dismantle.

As an upcoming graduate in the arts, the hierarchy with big and small creators in the music industry scares me. As I studied the reaction to this event, I knew this deflection wasn't just an innocent shift in focus—it was a convenient way for people to avoid the uncomfortable conversation about how we treat people, whether they're friends or people we work with, all the while trying to come off as a good person. It's a distraction. This is not to say that having conversations about colorism isn't important. It is. I'm a light skinned woman myself. But how the conversation of somebody's actions came down to skin tone reflects a larger problem. In a way, everyone was distracted by the larger issue that they forgot the real one.

If we want to make progress, we need to be better at recognizing when we are shifting away from the core issue. This fight shouldn't be between skin colors; it should be between the dynamics of artists, peers, and those who work together in the music industry.

When it comes to holding people accountable, focusing on the fact that Ice Spice is one person who makes her own choices doesn't mean colorism isn't real, nor does it dismiss the role it may play in some situations. But the choices people make stem from individual behavior and dynamics, rather than larger societal trends. As a light-skinned student about to graduate, I wonder what I should expect coming into an industry for the arts. Will people judge my decisions based on the color of my skin, or will they focus on holding me accountable for the things I can actually control?

Edan Ray
October 30,
2024



(Art by Luo Di Cheng Qiu)

THE ODD SUCCESS OF MO DAO ZHU SHI'S *ADAPTATIONS*

Combine the popular hit tv show “Supernatural” with Han Dynasty China and you have “Mo Dao Zhu Shi” (MDZS.) Also known as “The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation,” we follow the lives of Wei Ying and Lan Zhan as they train and study together on their expedition to becoming immortal. Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, or MXTX for short, has two other novels that follow a similar general plot, but are very different in their own ways. When it comes to “MDZS” and its five other adaptations, all of them reaching massive success, one does wonder where it all came from. It started off as a fictional Chinese LGBT+ serialized novel in 2015 on an online site called Jinjiang Literature City. The rated 17+ novel taking

place roughly between 222AD and 589AD goes into Chinese mythology and the systems of cultivators, demons, and magic that involves getting strong enough to one day become immortal.

“MDZS” has been adapted into six different mediums across eleven years, including the novels. Two different forms of animation, a comic/manhua, an audio book, and a live action tv show. Over these last few years, the popularity with this one story has spread from China to America. Every time a new adaptation is revealed, the fans of the content are over the moon with excitement. But why? They’ve read and reread the story many times at this point. What has them so excited to experience it again?

THE ADAPTATIONS

The “manhua,” meaning “impromptu sketches” or “comics” in English, was the first installment of many adaptations to come in 2017. There was an initial burst of excitement as the artist was announced, but after the work became too demanding to handle, the artist was changed after the first few chapters.



(Art by JLANEZ)

This didn't hinder anyone from continuing to read each chapter that came out. All the fans of the novel were too excited to see the faces of their favorite characters for the first time interacting. The success of this manhua, combined with the growing popularity of the novel, opened doors for the other adaptations that came soon after.

Nearly a year after the release of the manhua, the first season of "The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation," or "GDC," hit Tencent in July of 2018. With now three seasons, some say it's the most faithful adaptation of them all, excluding the audio book. Hitting now 8 million viewers on YouTube, with its beautiful animated and CGI visuals, pops of color, and intense action, the animated adaptation proves to be fun, thrilling, and captivating.



(The Untamed - Netflix - 2019)

THE BIG DEAL

In China, Danmei, or BL, is heavily censored. Dr. Chi Zhang, a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, and Dr. Ming Zhang, a feminist scholar and digital media ethnographer of SOAS University of London states: "China has imposed several bans on BL and danmei-adapted dramas as the state considers the genre and its derivative works as having "deformed tastes", a "malevolent culture" that is "wrong", "erotic and violent." In order to get passed this, Chinese authors will usually go by fake names. They'll publish these works online. If they are to be published in China, they will be heavily censored. Instead of the two men being "in love" they'll be "sworn brothers" or "best friends." But even through all this censorship, "MDZS" is still incredibly popular in not only foreign countries, but China as well.

It's a stark contrast to its happy-go-lucky counterpart "Mo Dao Zhu Shi Q" the second animated series. The goal for this adaptation is to highlight the important moments of the story using cute and adorable "chibi" versions of the characters the fans have come to know and love. Released in 2020, this adaptation brings a breath of fresh air to the otherwise sad and serious story as it's filled with jokes and laughter.

It was "GDC" and "Q" that sent a wave of new fans aching to see what else the story had to offer. With the unserious and hilarious "Q" characters combined with the beautiful artwork of "GDC" appearing all over social media, new eyes just had to know what the fuss was all about.

A year after the first animation hit Tencent, "MDZS's" live action adaptation "The Untamed" was an even grander way of showcasing how one could change up the same story to make it more complex in June of 2019. "The Untamed" is a 50 episode season filled with added scenes never touched on in the book.

Though the overarching story in the live action adaptation is slow, and the budget a bit lower for CGI and special effects, it remains close to people's hearts as a fan favorite. No one really cared if it didn't look perfect all the time, the core of the original story remained the same, and at the end of the day, that's all that matters when it comes to adaptations.

NBC News reported in 2023 that book publishers had a sudden rise in LGBT+ books, calling it the “Renaissance of Gay Literature.” But it was before this, years before, in 2021, that the novel “MDZS” was reaching high viewership on Amazon and other platforms as revealed by their translating and publishing company Seven Seas Entertainment. It wasn’t just “MDZS” reaching these accomplishments, but all of MXTX’s LGBT+ novels.

“I never thought my work would be well received by foreign readers. I was very happy and also very surprised,” says MXTX, during an interview with Japanese novelist Risa Wataya for Subaru Magazine. “Maybe [the popularity growth] because everyone focuses on the characters and their feelings, not the setting and value system of the work.... It could also be because my own setting is relatively simple and easy to accept.”

So... Why all the success? It all comes down to telling the original story correctly, while also changing it just enough to fit the new medium. It has to have that perfect balance of new and old to make sure the fans are kept happy. They are the ones who keep the story alive after all.

“I love great stories that make me think,” says Trizia Chin, a fan from the Philippines during an interview with We Comics. “I love how the author was able to make me dwell inside the cultivation realm... Besides being fictional in a fictional world, the characters felt real. There’s a good show of a gray area between right and wrong. There are characters that were misunderstood, believed to be evil, but pure in their hearts... MDZS makes me think, love characters, empathize with characters, cry, connect, cringe, pity, smile, frown and many more emotions mixed in between with them. That’s how deep and dynamic MDZS is and I love it! I really can’t get enough of MDZS. It’s an amazing story.”



(Art from Tencent)

**WRITING FOR FILM &
FICTION**

GERASCO

FADE IN:

1 INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT 1

The hall lights flicker. There's a slow tick of a clock in the background.

2 INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT 2

On the sink, makeup, creams, and serums are thrown haphazardly. A prom dress is tossed on the toilet.

Blood is splattered all over the floors next to a lifeless body of a woman unknown to us.

The drops of blood lead to the bathtub. Filled with bloody water, LORIE (35, female) washes her legs inside.

MATCH CUT TO:

3 INT. BATHROOM - DAY 3

The ticking disappears. The bathroom is free of blood and clothes, clean. Lorie stands in front of the mirror, suddenly dressed. She puts on mascara.

Once finished, she stares at herself for a few moments. She smooths her wrinkles.

Catherine knocks loudly on the door.

CATHERINE (O.S.)

Mom! Can you please hurry up?
I'm gonna be late!

Lorie looks at the clock on the wall.

LORIE

(mumbled)
Shit.

She hurries to pull her hair into a neat pony tail.

LORIE (CONT'D)

Sorry, honey! J-Just a second!

She gives herself a final look in the mirror.
With a sigh, she opens the door.

4 INT. HALLWAY

4

Catherine leans on the wall beside the door
in her pajamas.

LORIE

Sorry--

The two swap positions.

CATHERINE

You're so self-obsessed lately.

She slams the door closed.

A picture hanging on the wall falls to the
floor. Lorie pauses before kneeling to pick it
up.

The picture is young Lorie wearing a high
school graduation cap and gown with her
pregnant belly.

CATHERINE (O.C.) (CONT'D)

(attitude)

Mom!

SMASH CUT TO:

5 INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

5

Lorie chops a vegetable with a knife at the
counter. Around her are bags filled with
chopped vegetables and fruits. She moves back
and forth, filling a lunchbox with said
foods.

She zips it closed, a now dressed Catherine
running into the kitchen.

She rushes around, going into the fridge to grab
a drink, and looking through cabinets.

LORIE

(happily)

Here, made you some lunch!

CATHERINE

Yeah, I see that. Thanks.

Catherine turns to her mother to take the lunchbox. Catherine freezes, bouncing the lunchbox in her hands.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Did you give me just vegetables again--

LORIE

We've already had this discussion--

CATHERINE

That was obviously one sided--

LORIE

So, I'm just looking out for you. You were the one who said you wanted to lose some weight for prom--

Catherine leaves the kitchen, Lorie following her towards the front door, bickering the whole way.

6 INT. ENTRYWAY

6

CATHERINE

Yeah, yeah, yeah--

LORIE

I'm keeping an eye on your calorie intake--

Catherine stops at the door to glare at her.

CATHERINE

That's not something I need
to be worrying about.

LORIE

And it's good for skin! It'll
keep you wrinkle free!

Catherine, done with it all, opens the door.
She walks outside.

CATHERINE

Yeah, I bet. See you after
school.

LORIE

Love you!

Lorie watches her daughter get into her car and
drive off.

Once she's gone, Lorie finds a mirror.

When she sees herself, she starts to fidget. The
ticking of the clock is fast. She touches her
face, looking down at her clothing and body.

She closes her eyes, taking a deep breath and
letting her fidgety hands fall to her sides. As
she continues to stare out the door, the ticking
of a very fast clock gets louder.

She flexes her hands, her knuckles cracking.

7 INT. CATHERINE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

7

Catherine is back on her bed, wiping off
her makeup. She talks to her friend SARAH
(female, 17) on speaker phone.

CATHERINE

I mean, is it wrong to
like, say I don't want to
wear her prom dress? It's
ugly as hell.

SARAH

No, like, you're allowed to have your opinion. Why haven't you told her?

CATHERINE

I don't know. Uh, I just feel like she'd get mad.

SARAH

Why would she get mad?

CATHERINE

I mean, it's her old prom dress, so she loves it. But, like, she keeps bringing up health shit and talks about her past all the time.

SARAH

I bet it's because your dad has a hot new girlfriend. I mean, she's like... half her age.

8 INT. HALLWAY

8

Lorie stands by her daughter's room, listening. She stares blankly into the light.

CATHERINE (O.S.)

Last I checked, she and Linsey got along.

9 INT. CATHERINE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

9

The clock ticks fast. Lorie slides a needle into Catherine's arm, drawing her blood.

She straightens when the needle is filled, flicking it. She stares at her daughter, who is asleep.

She then puts the needle in her own arm, injecting the blood into herself.

Next to her on the bed, a phone is turned on. On the screen, it states: "Could Young Blood Stop Us From Getting Old?"

The tick of the clock slows, and Lorie slowly smiles.

10 INT. BATHROOM - DAY 10

No ticking. Lorie stands in front of the mirror looking strangely content. She looks younger, her skin smoother.

CATHERINE (O.S.)

Mom! I'm heading to school!

11 INT. FRONT DOOR 11

Catherine leaves through the front door, Lorie hurrying to it.

She waves excitedly.

LORIE

Have a great day! I love you!

Catherine stops by her car, weirded out by the enthusiasm.

CATHERINE

Uh, yeah! Love you too...

She gets into the car, and leaves.

12 INT. CATHERINE'S BEDROOM - DAY 12

The ticking is slow. Lorie stands in front of the full length mirror with her prom dress on.

She tugs at the zipper, which is stuck. She stares at herself with a frown, not looking as youthful as she did this morning.

Frustrated, she smooths her wrinkles.

13 INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

13

The ticking gets faster.

Lorie is slumped over the counter, head in her hands. The television is on in the living room, a gentle hum.

Catherine in her pajamas are turning off the lights. She stops by the kitchen.

CATHERINE

Mom, you alright?

Lorie looks up, emotionless.

LORIE

You going to bed?

CATHERINE

Yeah...

LORIE

I made you your tea.

Lorie points to the two cups on the counter.

CATHERINE

Oh, thanks.

Catherine walks over, taking a cup. Next to them, a suspicious medicine bottle. Catherine leaves.

LORIE

Goodnight.

CATHERINE

Night...

14 INT. LIVING ROOM

14

The television switches to a commercial playing for skin care.

15 INT. KITCHEN 15

Lorie looks up, the ticking getting faster.

The commercial gets louder and louder.

With the commercial and the ticking, we can hear Catherine's voice complaining about Lorie's prom dress.

CATHERINE (O.S.)

LORIE (V.O.)

God, I mean, look at this! This dress is just butt ugly!

That's why he left you, you know...

Along with her voice, Lorie's thoughts of wanting to be young again, and hating the way she looks.

CATHERINE (O.S.)

LORIE (V.O.)

It's such an ugly color, and it doesn't fit right!

You're getting old.

It all jumbles together in a symphony of chaos.

16 INT. CATHERINE'S BEDROOM 16

Catherine sits on her bed, taking a sip of her tea with her phone to her ear.

17 INT. KITCHEN 17

CATHERINE (O.S.)

LORIE (V.O.)

Don't try to lie to me, Sarah, it's gross.

You're running out of time.

Lorie pulls on her hair, trembling, and looking more and more crazed.

18 INT. CATHERINE'S BEDROOM 18

Catherine is asleep on the bed, the cup in her hands falling to the floor.

LORIE (V.O.)

Take more.

19 INT. KITCHEN 19

Then, silence. Lorie relaxes.

20 INT. CATHERINE'S BEDROOM/BATHROOM - NIGHT 20

MONTAGE

- More and more needles get filled with blood.
- Back in the bathroom, Lorie wipes her face with makeup wipes.
- Back in Catherine's bedroom, Lorie flicks multiple filled needles.
- Cleansing her face with a small silicone brush until she's red.
- Tons of needles go into Catherine's arms and legs.
- Painfully using a gua sha.
- Needles enter Lorie's arms and legs.
- Peeling a mask off.

END OF MONTAGE

21 INT. KITCHEN - DAY 21

Lorie makes another lunchbox for Catherine, who stops in the entrance of the kitchen.

CATHERINE

Mom... Can I tell you something?

LORIE

(tired)

Mmmhmm...

CATHERINE

Do you promise not to
get mad?

LORIE

Mm.

CATHERINE

Your prom dress... I
don't wanna wear it.

Lorie freezes.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

I know it means a lot to
you. And, like, I get it.
You didn't get to wear it,
so you want me to wear it,
but, um, I-I just don't
like it.

Lorie slowly turns around.

LORIE

(unsurprised)

You don't want to wear
it.

Catherine fidgets.

CATHERINE

(pause)

No... Sarah helped me pick
one out that I like. I
swear it's not
expensive... Is that okay?

LORIE

Of course, sweetie. It's
just a dress.

CATHERINE

... Really?

LORIE

What?

CATHERINE

I don't know... I thought--
Never mind.

She walks over to take her lunchbox, pressing
a kiss to her mother's cheek.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Thanks, mom. I'll see you
after school.

LORIE

(emotionless)

Have a great day.

The fast ticking begins.

When Catherine leaves, Lorie scratches
at the inside of her elbow.

22 INT. CATHERINE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

22

The ticking stops. Catherine plays music in
her prom dress as she makes the final
adjustments in her mirror.

23 INT. BATHROOM

23

Lorie stares at herself in the mirror,
emotionless. In the mirror, she still looks
young. But when we pan to see the real her,
she's old and wrinkled again.

24 INT. CATHERINE'S BEDROOM

24

CATHERINE

Mom, if you want to take
pictures, we got to do it
now!

She starts to look through her drawers.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Mom?

25 INT. BATHROOM

25

Lorie continues to stare at herself.

CATHERINE (O.S.)

(teasing)

Hello~

Catherine opens the door. Lorie looks at
her daughter through the mirror with a
fake smile.

LORIE

Yes, honey?

CATHERINE

Pictures. You want to
take them?

Lorie stares, then slowly turns to look
at her with the smile fading.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Hello? Earth to Mom--

Lorie grabs the handheld mirror and smashes
it into Catherine's cheek.

The glass shatters, falling to the floor as Catherine falls with it, going limp on the ground.

The ticking slows.

Lorie stares down at her, then looks at the bloodied and broken mirror. She leans down, picking up a shard.

She stabs Catherine once more.

CUT TO BLACK.

26 EXT. LORIE'S HOUSE - FRONT PORCH - MOMENTS LATER 26

The ticking is even slower.

On the front porch of the house, two of Catherine's friends LANIE (female, 17) and Sarah wait in their prom dresses.

Sarah is on the phone, the call disconnecting.

LANIE

She still isn't picking up?

SARAH

No, that bitch. I swear if she's ditched us again.

She knocks angrily on the door.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Catherine! I swear to god, we're gonna leave without you!

LANIE

Sarah, don't--

The door opens.

LORIE (O.C.)

Hello girls.

The two girls stare at Lorie, their faces morphing into shock, both of them impressed.

SARAH

Oh, hi Ms. Castor... We're here to pick up Catherine.

LORIE

She just left.

The two girls glance at each other.

SARAH

That bitch, ugh! Well, thanks anyways Ms. Castor... We'll go now.

LORIE

Have fun at prom!

Sarah walks back to her car. Lanie goes to follow, only to stop and look back at Lorie.

LANIE

Thanks...! You look fantastic by the way!

Lanie quickly catches up to Sarah.

Lorie stands in the doorway, looking very young and youthful in her prom dress. She happily waves after them.

27 INT. LIVING ROOM

27

The small analog clock on the wall has stopped ticking.

FADE OUT.

END.

DO EVERYTHING IN
LOVE

FADE IN:

1 EXT. CAMERON'S HOUSE - FRONT - EVENING 1

EVE (23, blonde, female, wearing a necklace with a cross attached) stops in front of the door. The door also has a cross hung on it.

She raises her hand, hesitating, before knocking.

2 INT. LIVING ROOM - SAME TIME 2

CAMERON (25, brown hair, female) sits on the couch reading a book on architecture. She turns her head at the knocks, getting up.

She looks through the peephole, before opening the door.

CAMERON
Eve?

EVE
Hey... Can I come in?

CAMERON
I... Y-Yeah! Yeah!

Cameron steps to the side.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Come in.

Eve walks inside.

2A INT. LIVING ROOM - SAME TIME 2A

Cameron leads Eve into the living room.

CAMERON
So... How did you know I was here?

EVE
It's a small town, everyone knows.

CAMERON
 (slightly upset)
 Oh.

Eve sits down on the couch.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
 Is there anything you'd
 like to drink? Tea?

EVE
 Yeah, tea would be great.

CAMERON
 Chamomile, right?

EVE
 ... Yeah.

2B INT. KITCHEN - SAME TIME

2B

Cameron grabs a cup, filling it with tea.

CAMERON
 So, how have things
 been?

EVE
 Fine.

CAMERON
 ... Just fine?

There's awkward silence. Cameron walks
 back to the living room.

2C INT. LIVING ROOM - SAME TIME

2C

Cameron hands Eve her drink. As Eve reaches
 up to take it, there are bruises on her
 arms.

This catches Cameron by surprise. Cameron hesitates, before slowly sitting down next to Eve.

There is a large gap between them.

CAMERON

Mm... Okay. What'd you do today?

EVE

Let's see... I went to the store. I just got the usual. Juice. Laundry detergent.

CAMERON

Sounds relaxing. Did you get anything nice for yourself?

EVE

... Juice.

CAMERON

... Anything else?

EVE

There's no need for me to buy things for myself.

CAMERON

... Alright. How's your husband?

Eve stares.

EVE

You know how he is.

CAMERON

Okay. Um...

EVE

How have you been? Well?

CAMERON

I've been great.

EVE

Come back to town to
visit?

CAMERON

Yeah. I came back to
see my parents.

(pause)

So... why are you here?

EVE

Cause I wanted to talk
to you.

CAMERON

Oh... Uh, why me?

EVE

I... I don't know. I feel
like you're the only
person I can talk to.

CAMERON

Well, you have the
entire congregation and-
- Oh. This is about your
husband.

EVE

I've been thinking about
things I'm not proud of.
I--

CAMERON

Like your bruises?

Eve pulls her sleeves down.

EVE
I try not to.

CAMERON
Eve, that--

EVE
I know how it looks. I'm
going to do something
about it.

CAMERON
W-What... what are you
going to do?

EVE
(reluctant)
I want to leave.

Eve sets the cup down, getting up to pace.

EVE (CONT'D)
But what would people
think? They would judge me
so harshly... I'm scared
that something will happen
to me.

CAMERON
Eve...

Eve turns to Cameron.

EVE
Yes?

CAMERON
How about you come with
me? I can take you away--

EVE
(sharp)
Why? Just so you can leave
me again?

CAMERON

No--

EVE

Your so called best
friend!?

Cameron stands.

CAMERON

I-- I had to! I had to
protect you, I had to
protect myself!

EVE

From what?!

Cameron steps back.

CAMERON

I... I can't say.

Eve steps closer.

EVE

No, say it.

CAMERON

Eve, don't.

EVE

No, I deserve to know!

(pause)

No, it makes sense now...
I was forced into this
life because of you!

CAMERON

What!? Because of me!? You
seemed pretty happy when I
left!

Tears pool in Eve's eyes.

EVE

Cameron, I wasn't happy
and you knew that! You
know that! I was
sixteen! He was thirty-
two!

Cameron turns away.

CAMERON

It's too late now...

EVE

But why did you leave?

Cameron scoffs.

CAMERON

Why did I leave?

She turns back around.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

(voice raising)

Do you really want to
know?

EVE

(raising)

Yes, I do. I wouldn't be
asking if didn't--

CAMERON

(shout)

I left because I was in
love with you!

Eve is frozen. Cameron steps closer.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

Eve--

Eve takes some steps back.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

Don't look at me like
that--

EVE

I-- I'm sorry I have
to go.

Eve turns to leave, but Cameron grabs her
wrist.

CAMERON

No, it's late. Let me
drive you back.

Eve shakes her off, face still turned
away.

EVE

I don't think that's a
good idea.

Cameron watches as Eve leaves.

3 EXT. CAMERON'S HOUSE - FRONT - SAME TIME 3

Eve rushes down the porch stairs, quickly
walking down the street.

4 EXT. CHURCH - FRONT - MOMENTS LATER 4

She stops a few feet away from the church,
looking up at the steeple for a few moments.

She enters.

5 INT. CHURCH NAVE - SAME TIME 5

Eve looks through the windows of the doors,
looking around.

She enters.

As she does, she knocks on the door.

EVE

Hello?

She lets the door close behind her.

She stands there for a moment, taking a look around.

After a moment of silence, she walks down the aisle.

Once she makes it to the alter, she looks up at the cross. After a pause, her eyes tear up.

EVE (CONT'D)
(whispering)
Oh God... Please help me...

She kneels on the cushions of the alter rails, putting her hands together in prayer.

5A EXT. CHURCH - FRONT - DAY (FLASHBACK) 5A

PETER (male, late 30's) stands in front of the church with a black shirt and a white collar on. Eve stands next to him.

He happily says goodbye to his guests that walk out, shaking their hands. One guest hugs Eve.

As soon as the guests walk away, Peter tries to happily kiss Eve. Eve moves her head slightly, making Peter kiss her on the cheek.

Peter subtly glares at Eve. He latches onto her wrist, pulling her into the church.

5B INT. CHURCH ENTRYWAY - SAME TIME 5B

Peter leans close to Eve's ear.

PETER
You never quite learned how
to submit, did you?

Peter forces her to kiss him on the mouth.

5C INT. CHURCH NAVE - NIGHT (THE PRESENT) 5C

Eve looks up at the cross.

5D INT. CAMERON'S KITCHEN - DAY (FLASHBACK) 5D

Cameron and Eve bake together, throwing flour at each other.

They come closer, smearing flour on each other's faces while laughing hysterically.

When they notice they're a little too close, their laughs quiet.

After a moment, Cameron tries to fix the tension by playfully smearing flour on Eve's neck.

6 INT. CHURCH NAVE - NIGHT (THE PRESENT) 6

Eve is frozen with her hands still clasped together. She sets her hands on the altar rails, head bowed.

EVE
(whispered)
No!

She places her head back into her hands. Eve sobs harder, her hands going to her hair. Her sobs turn into wails and--

The front door opens.

Eve lifts her head, terrified. She fixes her posture and hair, wiping away her tears and--

A hand lands on Eve's shoulder. She flinches, looking up to see-- Cameron.

EVE (CONT'D)
What are you doing here? Did you... follow me?

CAMERON
Just to make sure you were okay. I didn't want something to happen to you.

Eve relaxes as Cameron sits down on the cushions of the alter rails.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

Are you okay? What happened?

Eve opens her mouth, but stammers.

Cameron brushes a piece of hair away from Eve's face.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

I understand what you're going through.

Eve wipes away at her tears, moving to sit as well.

EVE

What? You have thoughts about leaving your husband?

CAMERON

Funny... You're really thinking about leaving him, huh?

EVE

Yeah. I mean... I feel awful about it. He loves me, and here I am thinking about leaving him.

CAMERON

Does he love you, though?

EVE

What do you mean?

CAMERON

I love you. I don't treat you as horribly as he does.

(pause)

I've prayed a lot in this church. I've had thoughts I wasn't proud of. Asking for forgiveness for

feelings I couldn't control was a regular experience for me.

(pause)

There is one verse I think about.

Cameron looks up at the picture of Jesus.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

1st Corinthians 16-14.

Eve jerks her head to look at Cameron.

EVE

Do everything in love?

CAMERON

Yeah.

(pause)

I just want you to know that whatever you decide to do, I'll do it with you.

Cameron helps Eve to her feet. She leads Eve back to the front doors of the church.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

Whether you stay or leave is completely up to you.

EVE

Then... I want to go.

CAMERON

Alright. Then we will. Where do you want to go?

EVE

Anywhere with you.

CAMERON

Really? You trust me after all this time?

7 EXT. CHURCH - FRONT - NIGHT

7

The two stop in front of the church, turning to face one another.

EVE

You won't leave me
again?

CAMERON

I promise.

(pause)

Um... You can say no
but... Can I kiss--

Eve kisses her first.

CUT TO BLACK.

END

A SHORT STORY

*A*RIEL
OF
GOD

Uriel flinches as he wakes in a dimly lit bedroom. His entire body feels clammy and cold, his breaths hard and quick. He looks at the rotating fan that's placed at his bedside, the off-balance object wobbling against the wooden floors rhythmically. He takes a moment to remember where he is, blinking. He can see the moon is high in the sky, shining through his open window. This leads him to glance at his white curtains that flutter with the wind, the crickets and frogs reminding him that he's no longer locked up behind cell bars.

Uriel takes a deep breath, turning away from the window to rub at his sweaty face. He sits up, his stomach growling. He turns to the clock on the wall, realizing he's only been dreaming for a couple of hours. The clock has yet to hit witching hour.

He's about to try to go back to sleep when metal clanks outside. Uriel flinches, getting up to run to his open window. He leans out, looking down at his friend Terry. His clothes are dirty and ragged, his hands caked with dust. He carries too many pots and pans, Mama Jones in her wheelchair sitting next to him patiently as he curses at himself. The old woman is silent, knitting a black scarf with some old yarn Terry bought for her from the homeless in the next town over.

"Terry?" Uriel calls. The young man looks up, blushing to the roots of his hair. Uriel shocked him so badly, the rest of his pots and pans fell to the floor. "Apologies. I didn't mean to scare you. Do you need some help?"

Terry stutters, the moonlight highlighting the beauty on the fourth floor. "Uriel, what you doin' up?"

The blonde archangel tilts his head, his long hair falling in his face. "I had a nightmare. What is Mama Jones doing out of her bed?"

"She wanted to help with breakfast."

"She said that?"

“Well... No. You know how she is; she don’t talk much. I just had the feelin’ she wanted to help.”

“Wait there. I’m coming down.”

“You don’t have too—”

Uriel is already gone.

Terry sighs, turning to Mama Jones who is completely focused on her black scarf. He pats her head gently. “I keep botherin’ him, Mama.”

Minutes later, Uriel is dressed in his white robes, helping to carry all the pots and pans into the kitchen of Mama Jones’s family home.

“Can you start with peelin’ the carrots?” Terry asks.

Uriel nods, wheeling Mama Jones to sit next to him as he picks up the carrots.

As he peels, Terry busies himself with washing the pans.

“Must have been a bad dream. You’re really quiet,” Terry mumbles.

“Mm,” Uriel answers.

Mama Jones noticeably pauses her knitting, before continuing.

“Thinkin’ about your family, maybe?” Terry asks.

“How are you so good at reading people?”

“Don’t know. It’s a gift, I guess. Are you still hesitant with talkin’ to them?”

Uriel doesn’t respond, focusing on the carrots. He knows Terry thinks of him as just another average human. He doesn’t understand the fact that Uriel can’t just “talk to them.”

“Do you want somethin’ from them?” Terry asks.

Uriel frowns.

Cracked and dry hands held tightly onto the ice-cold cell bars, shaking them weakly with desperation. "Please, just let me out! I didn't mean to do it, I'm sorry! I'll do anything for your forgiveness, please!"

There was only silence in response.

Uriel whimpered as he slumped onto the stone ground, his angel wings broken and twitching in pain. "Someone, please let me out."

A sharp phantom pain in his back where his wings once were travels down his legs. "I don't want anything from them. I don't deserve anything from them. But going back to the way things were is something I desire."

"Maybe if you apologized—"

"Terry," Uriel interrupts. "I gave some crucial information about my family to someone who I should not have trusted. That's not something that can be forgiven. I appreciate the sentiments, but I no longer want to talk about it."

Mama Jones stops knitting. She stares at her black scarf for a few moments, before setting it aside. She brings out another ball of yarn from behind her, this time, in the color green.

The rest of the night, Uriel is swamped with thoughts and memories of his past. As he sits in his bedroom, the witching hour now passed and long gone, he is unable to sleep. The guilt and longing for his brothers and sisters fill his chest, making it hard to breathe. These nights are common, always resulting in him trying to come up with solutions on how to get his family to forgive him. He's determined to figure it out and is willing to do anything to get that forgiveness.

A couple of nights later, everyone leaves the family house to eat dinner together in the front lawn around the campfire. Uriel sits next to Terry, while the other 18

people collect pick their places. Mama Jones continues knitting her scarf towards the edge of the group while Uriel stares up at the stars. Behind him, a small child braids his long hair.

Terry sips his soup. “You’re not hungry?” Uriel shakes his head. “Again? Have you been sleepin’?”

“Why all the questions?”

“Cause I care.” He sets his soup down. “We all care. Right Sam?” He turns to the small child, Sam humming in agreement. “Cause we’re all family now! Right?”

“Family?” Uriel asks, his voice fading.

“I know how you feel about families but—” Uriel stands. “— Where are you goin’?”

Sam whines, not having finished the braid. Uriel walks over to Mama Jones who knits in her wheelchair. He sits down on the ground next to her. He stares at the green scarf she knits, before looking up at her passive and withered face.

“How long have you been working on that scarf, Mama?”

Mama Jones doesn’t respond, but she usually doesn’t. She’s always been more of a listener. This brings a sense of familiarity to Uriel, Mama Jones’s kind and quiet nature resembling his older brother Michael.

“Would you mind listening to me talk for a while? You don’t have to respond. Although, I think I talk to you only because I know you won’t say anything.”

Uriel looks down at Mama Jones’s hands, the clicking of her needles moving in a pattern. “Terry said we’re all family. Including me. But I don’t really understand that.”

The knitting hesitates, before it continues.

“I’ve never known anyone else but my brothers and sisters. I’m beginning to think I’ll never be forgiven, and that there’s nothing I can do to be forgiven.”

The clicks of the needles quicken.

“I feel like I’m still betraying my family by making friends. I—” Mama Jones suddenly meets his eyes.

Uriel’s shocked. Mama Jones never looks people in the eyes.

She then hands him the green scarf she finished. Uriel stares at it, eyes wide. He slowly reaches for it, holding it close.

“I don’t understand.”

There’s a slight shift in the air. The energy rises just enough for Uriel to feel it upon his skin. He looks down the alleyway next to them that’s not lit by a single light source. A black cat races out of the darkness. It’s so spooked it runs right into the trashcans, trash exploding from the bins, before scampering off into the night.

Uriel slowly stands. Mama Jones watches him.

“Stay here, Mama. Do not follow.”

She reaches behind herself to grab another ball of yarn, the incessant clicking of the needles beginning again. Uriel slowly moves towards the alleyway, tying the scarf around his upper arm.

He stares into the darkness, knowing that another angel is hiding within the shadows.

Although, no one steps out to confront him. The angel stays where they are, watching.

Uriel frowns, knowing that this is just a warning. His family knows where he is now.

More and more angels will begin to show themselves to try and eradicate the humans that know of his existence. This is just how his family works. They don't want him to have happiness.

So, why is he trying to get forgiveness from a family that will never grant it to him?

Uriel's sad frown shifts to an angry glare. His eyebrows furrow, and what little holy energy he has left makes his eyes glow white. The heat tucked away in the concrete rises into the air as the alley's vibe turns threatening.

He glances at the green scarf wrapped around his upper arm, a small smile growing on his face. This color has many meanings, but growing up in heaven, the color green means new beginnings. Uriel doubts Mama Jones knows the significance of such a color, but....

"I've given up. I don't need Father's forgiveness anymore," Uriel says, looking back into the alley. "I have a new family now, and I will protect them no matter how much He dislikes it. So, you go and tell the others that."

There's a slight pause before the other energy disappears. Uriel walks into the alleyway, finding the human the angel possessed lying on the ground, unconscious.

"Uriel?! You alright!?"

Terry stands at the entrance of the alley, holding the handles of Mama Jones's wheelchair. The old woman continues knitting another scarf, the color now yellow. Uriel smiles.

"I'm more than alright. I found this man unconscious in the middle of the alley. Let's give him a place a stay for a while."

Mama Jones smirks.