The MINISON Project presents

TMP Magazine

Haunted Highways

Issue 6

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TMP Magazine
The Minison Project
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Murder
Animal Death
Death of a Parent
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References to Suicide
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Pandemic
Alcohol Abuse
Implied Domestic Abuse
Gun Violence
Some Visceral Descriptions of Body Parts
If ghosts existed,
they wouldn’t be the
remains of a soul unascended,
with roughly human form,
restless, bidding for blood,
but physical disturbances
in the natural order of things,
like the vortices of
Alaska or the Bermuda Triangle,
though smaller, tiny ephemera
that torque the ordinary
musings of atoms
and in so doing haunt
houses and forests
and anywhere one might stop to rest
and ponder if we’re really alone,
or if there are yet forces
we do not fully comprehend.
I arrived at the trailhead by late afternoon, far later than I had intended. It was an exceptionally hot day in Japan despite it being early October, and my pilgrimage to the forest from far off Tokyo had been unforgiving. Yet despite several egregious missteps along the way, and my own repeated misgivings throughout my journey, I had finally arrived at my destination a bit before dinner time.

I had departed that morning alone. It started with a two-hour train ride from Shinjuku Station in the congested heart of Tokyo to Fujikawaguchiko, an idyllic lake town built atop the sloped foothills of Mt. Fuji.

From there it was another hour-long shuttle ride around the northern slopes of the mountain until I reached my target: Aokigahara, the Sea of Trees. More widely known as the Japanese Suicide Forest.

To the adventurous and inquisitive, Aokigahara is a true bucket list item. It is beautiful, remote, and mysterious - its intrigue only amplified by its macabre reputation.

Places like that capture my own imagination, and I became fascinated by Aokigahara upon first hearing about it. I had been biking around Lake Kawaguchi a few days prior when I suddenly discovered we were only within a few miles of it. Adventure called to me, and I was helpless to resist.

For the tourism-minded, however, the excursion from Tokyo is an arduous one to a place best avoided. Although I had five other travel companions in Japan, I had the sense that none of them would want to join me on my expedition. As uneasy as it would make me feel, it would have to be a solo trip.

Having arrived, however, I knew that the hassle was worth the reward.

Aokigahara was like no forest I had ever visited before. It sat upon 30 square kilometers of hardened lava spewed out by Mount Fuji in 864 CE. Because of its location at the foot of a mountain, the forest’s ground was uneven and rocky and trees had difficulty penetrating the iron-rich soil. Roots spilled out wildly overtop one another to find shallow
purchase in the thin earth. The trees were remarkably thin but grew densely. Moss covered nearly every inch of ground that hadn't been carved out by hikers.

All of this transformed the forest into a lush isolation chamber. The porous soil and mossy turf absorbed sound while the sea of trees fenced your field of view. Only small patches of open sky made it through the thick canopy to illuminate the forest floor. No birds or insects could be heard at all. Uttering any sound felt offensive, as if you were treading hallowed ground.

The effect was utterly mesmerizing. The very air felt ethereal, as if you were gazing upon a forest on some other planet. It was easy to see why Aokigahara draws people in, for one reason or another.

Another thing became apparent upon my arrival: I was hardly the only visitor to the forest. Because I had arrived so late in the afternoon, I chose one of the shorter hiking trails
that took me from one of the side entrances towards the main one. Both entrances had parking lots, tourist attractions, and of course, plenty of tourists.

This contradicted the many clickbait articles you could find on Aokigahara, all vying to lure you in with the wildest tales. Some claimed that the forest’s magnetic soil disrupts cell service, compasses, and GPS, while others claimed that vengeful yūrei haunt the forest and can be heard wailing for victims in the dead of night. A few even claimed that locals consider the forest cursed and refuse to enter it.

None of these things were true, of course. Compasses do behave strangely when placed on the ground but are perfectly reliable otherwise. My own phone maintained its cell and GPS service throughout my hike. And while overnight camping tends to draw suspicion from the local police, several brave campers all attest to forest’s utter silence after dark. No yūrei, no wailing. But above all, Aokigahara remains a popular travel spot with locals and visitors alike. Locals lament its grim notoriety, but hardly fear it. Students regularly visit on field trips. I even passed by two Japanese families on my hike. After all, the Golden Gate Bridge trumps Aokigahara in suicides, but that hardly deters its 10 million annual visitors.

That being said, some warnings must still be heeded. *Always stick to the path.* For one, the forest is so dense and homogenous that straying even a bit into the wilderness will get you turned around and lost in minutes.

Far worse, however, is the alarming prospect of bumping into an unfortunate victim. Aokigahara’s biggest suicide hotspots are not found deep within the forest, as one might imagine, but just far enough to remain out of site of the trails.

Although police and volunteers conduct regular searches for victims, stumbling upon one in broad daylight is not a rare occurrence. Sometimes all it takes is a few dozen meters and the desire to go look.

I held no such desire. Although morbid curiosity had brought me to Aokigahara, I would not disrespect Japan or its dead by going corpse hunting (an attitude I wish that jackass Logan Paul would have maintained on his visit only a few weeks after mine).
Furthermore, do not follow the ribbons. These are left behind by victims to mark the path towards their final resting place, and are found by volunteers and police, who use them to find their way in and then back out of the treacherous woods. I did not see any fresh ribbons that day, though their snipped remains could still be spotted, sadly dangling from some tree trunks.

It was a very quiet hike, for the most part. I stopped to take a few photos when I could, though when I later inspected them to post a few online, I was surprised to see how many came out blurry.

My hands must have been shaky from unease. The quiet was unnerving. I learned that the forest’s acoustic profile also causes a strange phenomenon where you hear your own footsteps directly behind you whenever you are walking. It startled me a few times, and I was amused to later discover that I was not the only traveler whose nerves got rattled.
Soon, I was at the forest’s main trail entrance, my intended exit. FOMO continued to get the better of me, however, and I continued off down the rest of the main trail, intent on squeezing as much thrill as possible from my abbreviated visit.

My extended foray yielded a nice prize: A photo of a decaying bench resting along the path. There I paused and considered my next move. I couldn’t continue on the main trail to its end; it let out at the opposite side of the woods, some two hours away. By then it would be well past nightfall.

It was only then that I noticed just how dark it had gotten around me. I looked up through the canopy of branches to see if I could catch a glimpse of the sun, but there was no sign of it, and the sky was looking darker.

How much time had I spent on the trail already? Was it already past sundown? The trees made it impossible to tell.

I made it back to the main entrance in half the time. Emerging from the trees finally brightened my surroundings, but not by much. I glanced towards the western horizon - no sun in sight. It was already twilight, and soon it would be completely dark.

No sooner had my feet touched solid concrete than I saw a shuttle peel away from its stop across the highway. Panic stabbed at my heart - surely that wasn’t the last one for the day, right?

No, probably not, I assured myself.

The schedule pasted on the transit shelter, however, told a different story.

Although I understand absolutely no Japanese, it was easy enough to read the timetable. I checked the very last entry on the list, and then my phone. It was two minutes past.

Survival mode hijacked my synapses as I took account of the situation. The sun had already set and my daylight was rapidly fading. I didn’t speak a word of the language here, I was in the middle of backwoods-fucking-nowhere Japan, and the only five people I knew in this country were three hours away in Tokyo with no means of retrieving me. I didn’t even know the police emergency number.
This is bad, I thought. Very bad. Panic withdrew its knife and began pouring acid over my brain.

My thoughts raced past all the bad decisions that led me to this crisis. The impromptu day trip to a remote, alpine region of Japan completely alone. The time-consuming travel across multiple, unfamiliar transit systems. Not checking the timetable for the shuttle at any time at all before departing the train station.

I tried to remain focused on my predicament, but my thoughts continued to spiral.

The reason I had spent six hours making the three-hour trip to the forest was my ill-judged decision to bike the second leg. We had just toured nearby Lake Kawaguchi by bike a few days prior. It was an unforgettable experience and the highlight of my vacation. I was convinced I could recapture that magic with a second ride to Aokigahara, only a few miles away from the station.

That was a big mistake. Biking a lake’s shoreline is a pleasant ride. Pedaling up and down the pitched uplands of Mt. Fuji was torture. Additionally, I was only two weeks away from a type 1 diabetes diagnosis and, at this point, still woefully unaware of how this was all affecting my stamina.

I was barely halfway to the forest before I called it in and returned to the rental store. My heart was sunk, and my pride wounded.

At that point my brain screamed at me that it was too late to press on, but my heart refused to surrender with my prize within grasping distance. After all, how long might it be before I made another trip to Japan? Possibly never. Therefore, I hopped on the shuttle and drove myself deeper into peril.

Then I got off the shuttle too early, forcing me to waste more time walking the rest of the way to the side trail.

And then there was my final decision to turn back into the forest when I was right in front of my exit. Regardless of all my prior mistakes, undoing that choice alone and leaving 30 minutes earlier would have averted my crisis.
The tally of my sins left me humiliated and broken. Jesus, I hadn't even bothered to memorize the Japanese emergency number. Some fucking adventurer I am! I had just spent the entire day blissfully hurtling myself further and further towards disaster and had spectacularly failed to be prepared.

I checked my daylight once again. It was nearly nighttime, and by my reckoning I had about fifteen minutes left before pitch blackness.

I ran through my list of options. A walk back to the train station from here would take hours, and the trains were not an all-night service. That option meant a death march across brutal terrain and a night outside the station.

I examined the parking lot across the street - one car left, and its owner nowhere in sight. A few passing motorists were still trickling by, however.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, I thought. I stuck out my thumb and prayed. I had never felt more alone and desperate for help in my life.

A few cars flew by, but none stopped. I can't even recall any of the drivers looking at me. Not that I particularly blame them, I must have looked nuts.

By some miracle, though, I was not the last person leaving Aokigahara. An elderly gentleman emerged from the small tourist shack across the street to close for the night. In my panic, I had not considered going there for help. I watched closely as he turned off the lights and locked the door behind him. Then we locked eyes.

According to one source, groundskeepers find it easy to identify the forest's three types of visitors: regular tourists, the morbidly inquisitive, and those taking a one-way trip. I still wonder how that old man sized me up that evening, a sweaty and panicked white boy hopelessly thrusting my thumb out across the road in rural Japan. What a sight I must have made.

He waved me to the other side of the road and started asking questions in his best English:

"Where are you trying to go?"
"The train station."

He looked toward the transit shelter and then back to me. He held up a single finger.

"There is one more bus coming. Get on it."

I could hardly believe his words, but I was at the end of my rope and had no reason to doubt him. I breathed a monumental sigh of relief and thanked the man profusely before hurrying back to the shuttle stop and fixing my gaze at the end of the road. I watched, listened, and waited.

Surely enough, about three minutes later a splendidly lit shuttle rounded the top of the hill and invited me inside. The crisp AC and cool LED lighting that bathed every inch of the cabin was a balm to my anxiety. Two older women flashed me welcoming smiles as I collapsed into an empty bench.

Not a minute into our ride, the light outside was gone. Jet black night. But now that I was inside of that glowing, freezing, comfortable, marvelous work of Japanese engineering, I felt saved. The shuttle would take me to the station, and the train would take me home. The day was over.

Well, almost.

The forest did have one last thrill in store for me that night. Our route passed by my trail head, the side entrance. Out there, in the darkness, shone the unmistakable red and blue lights of police cruisers.

In the few seconds I had to examine the scene, I was only able to make out an officer rushing to set up flares and barricades in front of the road. Then, everything was dark again.

What could have possibly happened in the hour and a half since I had walked past that very spot? Was it a routine practice for the police to prevent victims from entering the forest past sundown? Or had I simply been minutes away from being another hiker discovering the worst just a few meters from the trail? At that moment, I simply decided to let my mind rest on the matter. My brain was fried and my body spent.
Every so often, though, the memory of that scene creeps up on me when I’m in the shower or going for a long drive. What exactly was happening at Aokigahara that night?

In spite of everything, I would make another trip to the forest in a heartbeat if I ever returned to Japan. Aokigahara left an impression on me that I will remember for the rest of my life. The Mt. Fuji region of Japan is stunning and worth the trip alone, I could spend an entire vacation there.

Next time, though, I’ll make sure I’m a bit more prepared.
Onlooker

Wolfgang Wright

I came to it late on my bike:
a car stopped in the street,
its fender dented,
a young woman’s body lying motionless on the pavement before it,
and the crack in her skull, from which there was so much blood.
By then a crowd had already gathered,
the campus police were securing the scene,
an ambulance howled in the distance,
and an old man, with an officer standing sternly nearby,
was weeping into a pair of trembling hands.
But I was able to piece it together,
how it all went down,
and how differently that same street must have looked earlier that morning,
when the sun had risen,
and there was so much calm.

And then I left.
I went to my class,
for which I was late.
I pretended to pay attention,
and contributed when I could,
but a part of me had remained at the accident,
observer intently as the paramedics scooped
what life was left in the woman
and placed it on a stretcher.
And even today,
while so much time has passed,
and I live hundreds of miles away from where it occurred,
I still, occasionally,
find myself standing there,
my legs straddled over my bike,
looking on.
“It’s just chocolate; it’s not love.”

I feel their eyes upon me as I slide the last of the chocolate bar into my mouth, the involuntary shiver of satisfaction washing over me before my skin burns with the desire for another. I swallow the urge.

“Where did this sweet tooth come from?” Tommo asks.

I shrug and say nothing, eyeing the girls that pass us by. They materialise from the swirls of mist, into the warmth of the streetlight. I watch their curves sway with every step. The three of them walk close together, leaning in as they talk. They don’t look at us as they pass away, into the deepening cold of the dark. My lips smack, thick with chocolate and desire.

“Those bars aren’t your daily dozen, you know?” Gar mocks again. He’s caught me looking. “And neither are those girls!”

“As if we’d have a chance with them,” Tommo replies, slapping my arm and pushing his greasy, ragged hair behind his ears, which protrude a little too much. The three of us sit in a row, like crows lurking on a wire, along the uncovered bus stop bench, school bags beneath us, unobserved and ignored as ever.

“But imagine…” I hear myself say, a lecherous surge rumbling deep within me, competing with my desire for more chocolate and coming out on top. I shift in my seat.

“Here, you can think about that in your own time - your own personal time.”

Gar, the smart ass. Always cocky, even with that face of his; pockmarked with acne scars, his nose crooked and a little too big. He’s got a gym body though. The girls love that, and I wish I
had it. I want it. I hold in a grunt and feel the green of jealousy clash with a flare of red rage within my chest, bilious and volcanic.

My knuckles ache with fissured cracks embedded in bruised flesh- the remains of yesterday’s wrath. I tremor as fury attempts to consume me again, but I force it down, allowing my mind to drift back to the girls.

“I could get those girls if I wanted,” I say, “They’d be lucky if I wasted my time on them.” I feel Gar’s eyes roll and the rage surges again.


“Can I have a bar?” he asks.

“No. They're mine.”

He tuts but says nothing more. I want him to. My fury is still simmering within me, threatening to bubble and boil over. And I want the release.

A cold breeze whispers around us, the branches weep overhead, and the near edge of the moon peeks from behind the clouds, looking down at us. The 46A bus thunders past without slowing, the sight of us sitting there familiar to the driver.

“So where are we for tonight? Round to mine for a bit of Fortnite?” Tommo offers, fixing his hair again. They stand to leave. I sigh. They look at me.

“Let’s go on a ghost hunt.”

They stare at me blankly, their eyes glowing in the streetlight.

“Why?” They speak in unison. Somewhere a dog howls unseen.


“Why?” Again in unison. Again the dog howls. Again I shrug.

“Yous chicken?”
They shift uneasily, stepping back from me, but not far enough to be swallowed by the shadows shifting and dancing against the streetlight, ready to pounce.

“We could go to The Quinner House,” I say, puffing my chest out and rising to my feet. They share quick, brief glances, tongues darting and lips chewed.

“Come on, The Quinner House? Sure that’s where children go to be scared. Those stories are all made up!” Gar’s calm voice carries an undercurrent of fear.

I don’t wait for an answer. I reach inside my bag, pushing past the Ouija board, to feel the reassuring rustle of another chocolate bar. The urge washes over me again as my fingertips brush the foil wrapper, and the first bite quells my tormented soul. The bar does not survive long, and I throw the bag over my shoulder and turn to the darkness.

“Either Quinner’s or we go hunt those girls. What scares you more?” I sneer, not turning to them.

I can feel their discomfort, weighted like the growing mist of the night.

“Alright, alright,” Tommo concedes, “Quinners. But only for half an hour - max. That place scares the crap out of me, I don’t care what you say Gar.”

Gar remains silent. I don’t respond, leaving the orange bubble of light.

The night is empty, and we invade the mist as it consummates with the breeze, interrupting its devilry with the patter of our feet. Overhead, the voyeur moon peels off the clouds and looms naked overhead.

“Why did you buy the Ouija board?” Tommo whispers, the wind stealing his words.

I shrug. “Boredom. Used it last week. It works.”

“My back-end it does!” Gar laughs. “It is a load of bunkum.”

I say nothing and keep walking as they trail behind. Gar knows nothing of what I’ve seen.
“Is it not dangerous to use it by yourself?” Tommo calls. Gar grumbles something. I keep walking, dipping in and out of streetlights, like a bat upon the wind. They pick up their pace.

“What time are you working tomorrow?” Gar asks me.

“I’m not. They sacked me.”

“Why?” Again a twinned reply.

“Didn’t turn up this week. Couldn’t be bothered. That’s why I wasn’t in school yesterday. Just lay in bed all day. But Ma forced me to go in today. I’m better than that place anyways, I don’t need it. To hell with it.”

There’s a pause, filled with unasked questions pawing at their lips. We walk in silence for a while, and I eat another chocolate bar, acquiescing the sick feeling in my stomach for the momentary relief it brings. A fleshy groan escapes me with the final bite, its velvety spectre lingering on my tongue. Ahead of us, The Quinner House is birthed from the gloom. Its roof smiles a crooked, decayed grin as we approach.

“Is everything okay man?” Gar asks, his voice accented with foreign concern. “Like, at home and everything. Or your mood? Are you, you know, like, depressed or something? You’re acting… different.”

“I’m fine,” I say. “We’re here.”

Gar and Tommo pause at the gate, looking up at the ravenous windows that watch us. The paint is cracked and peeling, exposing raw crumbling plaster. Time has assaulted the house, beating it mercilessly, but it stands stubborn, refusing to go down. I continue up the path, to the boarded-up door.

“Looks like it’s locked up pretty good,” Tommo tremors from the gate.

Even in the pale moonlight, I can see that the nails are well worn, from countless children playing ghost hunters, pulling the boards loose. I smile.
The boards come away without any resistance, and I swing the door open to the darkness, that waits to swallow us whole.

I walk straight through without turning back, ignoring the whimpers of protestation. I draw my phone for a light, and the little beam repels the darkest shadows, forcing them to retreat to the corners, from where they watch. The hallway is marred with dust and graffiti. Generations of spiders have made a home of the vacant light socket in the ceiling, and cobwebs reach into the ether, waiting to ensnarl a passerby.

“Do we have to do this?” Tommo asks from behind.

“Yes,” I reply and move with the light deeper into the house, to the living room, where a red pentagram is sprayed onto the scuffed, aged floor. One of them gasps behind me.

I sit in its centre, cross-legged, and lift the Ouija board from the bag, my fingers flirting with another chocolate wrapper.

“I don’t like this,” admits Gar. The two of them are standing by the living room doorway, unmoving.

“We need more light.” I reach into the bag again, lifting tea lights along with another chocolate bar. I devour it before placing a candle at each point of the pentagram, the hiss of the match splitting the silence each time.

“Come on,” I say, sitting cross-legged once again, fingers brushing the planchette in the centre of the board. The two exchange looks but say nothing, moving silently, like ghosts, into the pentagram.

They kneel, and their fingers join mine.

The planchette whines as we draw the circle; round, and around, and around.

The shadows encroach upon us, suffocating us with their weight.

“Is there anyone with us?” I ask.
The planchette aches towards YES and I hear them gasp.

“You’re pushing it!”

“I am not! Are you?”

“No!”

I ignore them. “What is your name?”

L-

I can feel their eyes dart between each other, then to me, then to the planchette which moves on.

U-

Their gasps fill the shadows that have moved closer, licking the edges of the pentagram as the candles dance.

C-

“Can we stop?”

“Yeah, come on, let’s stop.”

I-

The two whimper beside me. My skin prickles with goose flesh. The candles quiver.

F-

Blood thunders in my ears. The planchette shakes on the board, rattled by terror.

E-

Cold, unseen hands rest on top of mine, groping their way up my arms, moving the planchette to its final letter.
“Let’s end this, please,” implores Tommo, fear exuding from his words, laying wet upon my ears. His eyes brim and glimmer in the candlelight. Gar looks deathly, eyes sunken into his pockmarked face.

I swallow the urge for another chocolate bar.

“One more question,” I say. “Will you accept these two?”

“Dude, what?” Gar spits, removing his hands. Tommo sobs.

“Put your hands back, Gar, we need to finish this.”

Gar stands, his face slipping into the shadows overhead.

“Not until you tell us what’s going on. You’re messing with us, aren’t you? You-you set this up. It’s a prank, right?”

Tommo is shaking violently. I sigh, fury roiling within me. The twitch of the planchette distracts me, Tommo’s fingers still laying alongside mine.

“Okay,” I purr, glancing to the board, the planchette agonising its way along. “When I used the board by myself, he spoke to me. He promised me everything; women, fame, power. It would all be mine! All he wanted was my soul. And I- I agreed. But he gave nothing but a curse - Seven Deadly Sins; Lust, Greed, Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth and Gluttony. They’re real. They torment me, torture me, control me! I can’t take it anymore!”

I see the board's answer and smile.

YES.

“It’s been hell. But he offered me a deal,” I say, rising to my feet to join him in the gloom. “Find two sacrifices and he will set me free.”

Tommo cries, his fingers still resting on the planchette.
“Piss off,” Gar growls, not seeing the shadows passing by the candles. “You’re just trying
to scare us. As if you’re going to sell us out to the Devil. The Devil doesn’t exist! This is all so
stupid. Just quit it!”

I grab my bag, turn and run to the living room door, pulling it shut behind me and holding
tight to the handle.

I feel Gar’s pull against me, roaring and swearing, almost drowning out the wails of
Tommo.

Tommo goes quiet first; his cries die to a whimper. Gar continues to struggle, pulling
hard against me, but he soon grows weaker, his voice breaking and croaking.

“Please…”

His final words drift into the darkness, and all is silent and unmoving.

I breathe deep, filling my lungs with the liberated, dusty air.

My heart pounds painfully. I cleave my tongue from the roof of my mouth.

I smile, chuckle then laugh. I am free. I breathe deeply again, and smack my lips.

Deep within me, my soul seethes and churns, a familiar yearn creeping over me, like a
thousand invisible fingers pawing at my skin.

An ungodly groan issues from my throat as I reach for another chocolate bar.
Those Nights

Bryan Helton

in the back seat
a stranger at the wheel
those nights
would never end
the surging roar
breakers in the black sky
we were the bright tide of the moon

my left hand
out the window
in the soft sift of wind
my right ached with an ancient pain
we were driven through
neighborhoods we had known
in the long trance of youth

in your emptiness
you turned to me
your face turning to air
I begged you not
to lose your place
in the last world we shared
but you were gone
a hushed breath in the summer night air

the stranger at the wheel drove on
graveyards are for the dead
Marisca Pichette

walk with me between restful bones,
our futures incised on leaning stones.

weeds last longer than blossoms—
coating vaults & tombs forgotten.

which is it we cross together here?
cemeteries washed in eager granite

polished white & pockmarked gray?
or is it slate, lichen, creeping decay

that haunts memories & marks
infant births consumed by knee-high markers?

cemeteries are for the living, 
graveyards are for the dead.

some stones are through remembering,
content to sink under wrinkled earth

shedding layers mourning hands
recall no more, bedrock reclaimed.

walking at your side in
uneven shadows

I wonder (tasting topsoil air)
which domain we chanced to enter:

memorial
or despair?
The bottle’s story
Marisca Pichette

only words—unadded,
loose change adrift
on a sea we watched rise
apart.

barnacles scraping—
    All avoidable,
mouths stoppered with
    the same
leaky, open, cold boat.

Just two oars
and no anchor.
The Roads

Brandon Shane

My father dealt with grief,
by raging down the I-15 and as
his tires screeched down to metal
and black smoke lingered
along the cloudless sky
he experienced death
in absence of lightbulbs or human
existence, just the moon,
cacti riddled with so many knives
that nothing dared come or leave.
everything was hidden away,
there was nothing to excuse
his guilt of attendance &
all he could do was pound
the steering wheel and howl
at no-one.

Sometimes I’ll walk to the edge
of a pier, or a stern, whatever is
on the precipice- and think of him.
I’ll shed a few tears, but when a child
drowns at sea, or a fishing boat
becomes a wreck; I’ll wail alone.
Accidents

Devon Neal

Accidents are waiting for us around every corner,
their pointed fingers curled around building edges,
their other hands tugging at the board under a window unit, teetering as we walk by.

You see them everywhere, big and small,
some deflecting a thrown rock into a sibling’s face,
others reaching for the steering wheel
as you turn your head at the pink afternoon sky.

Their eyeless faces watch us for opportunity.
they crawl all over carnival rides, loosen wires
on stoplights as we drive under, reach for ankles
as they lurk in the dark of deep water.

You can hear them as they chatter in tree tops,
peeling at limbs, the rattle of unclasped screws
in elevator shafts, or their late night screams
tangled in the wind.

At night after I put the kids down to sleep,
I listen to them crawling on the roof
over our beds, or their sharp clinking at the windows,
trying to get in.
Unsatisfied with the swimming pool students were forced to practice in, sneaky park and rec classmates flocked to the oddly deep pond beyond the local farm, armed with scuba gear.

Rumors and jokes were enough to stoke paranoia that festered the longer they remained underwater. It was a spot that evoked the kind of dread a choppy ocean does.

A curious diver’s flashlight cut through the murky depths to reveal chain and cinder blocks. Upperclassmen were the first to examine the cemetery.

Horrified ascension brought them up to a cocked shotgun; the farmer eager to include them in his collection.
a magic circle

caliche fields

after j. w. waterhouse

se me asustó
con sombra de
hexed mezcal.
vato picoso
gassin’ me up
w mesquite y
“these witches
me abrigaban.
me susurraron
ciencia y toda
superstición...”
preying along
sal n th’round,
bound; i escape.
historia

caliche fields

he calls me, “sierra nevada,” and i-
think sum out there, cold beauty in the distance.
an epiphany encarcelada:
erosion is a fetishization
i still don't get; roscas infernales
still remain. rock slides and haboob storms.
missteps of a plateau and he begins,
“i feel like i just left a lot behind.”
and the wind is just a cold return, roaring
as if it knew to placate and ruin me.
but then ax, “how would you rate our experience?
one outta five?” a solid for direction
of the seasons in the shadow of thee,
mount: strange ranges we tell with our feet.
Mojave Haunting
Alisa Lindfield-Pratt

Ghost of Star Trek fan
Haunts highway to Las Vegas
Bitter and longing
Vegas fan convention dreams
Stolen with final heartbeat
That night before we hit the bar, we drove away from one haunted place, that 'burg littered with dead blackbirds and the ghosts of soldiers—Union and Confederacy—and our own personal history, drove too fast around blue curves through mountains older than history, older than bones.

On the tape deck was Bruce Springsteen’s most haunted album, *Nebraska*, blue guitar, harmonica, his voice that cut through us like a rusted knife, like the wind whistling through the car windows, tangling our hair with ghost hands, we were far from Nebraska, in a different landscape though just as haunted, so much history, how could anywhere with so much history not be haunted, how could anywhere anywhere not be

Haunted, we drove through the mountains, across the state line, into Maryland, through a town made famous by a film’s fake witch, in search of real ghosts we kept going, out to the outskirts, to the top of Spook Hill, topped with a spooky old barn, down, down, counting off six telephone poles ’til we reached the bottom, we put the silver Pontiac in neutral and cut the headlights, the February hills were silent, silver-blue with dusk, and everything still, the world holding its breath, we held our breath and

Bruce Springsteen kept singing and we waited for the soldiers, they were pushing a cannon up that hill in 1862, during the Battle of South Mountain, died when the cannon exploded, Sisyphean soldiers returning to push cars up that hill, or anything that could be a cannon, poor ghosts doomed
to go back and back to the task that killed them, everything dies, is doomed to, and soon we would go back to the bar and the things which could kill us, that is if we made it off that hill, if there wasn’t a car coming too fast through town not thinking there might be an us
stopped at the bottom, we didn’t
even think of that, we waited and then, slow came
the ghosts, pushing the car back, backwards up that
hill, slowly, in the rearview mirror we saw the moon
rising up on the other side, rising as we rose, slow
but growing close, like we were on a collision course
with it, there was the moon
silvered bone, big as the blues, older than everything,
older than history, older than ghosts, older, even
than death
Morbid Tourist
Joe Szalinski

We found it in the woods. Some suitcase, hastily hidden amongst underbrush. Appallingly unusual. A composite of corpses—victims’ shirt sleeves stuck out awkwardly, stubbornly caught in the zipper. Inside, a stash of outfits stolen from the slain. Clothes we’d seen deceased neighbors wear. Some were the same ensembles sported in their pictures on missing posters. Nothing was salvageable. What hadn’t been torn to pieces in violent struggle, stunk of rotten flesh. As we took stock of the evidence, we heard the stomach-sinking rustle of foliage behind us.
Resurrection Mary
Jessie Lynn McMains

On nights like this, when the autumn rain taps a tattoo on the roof of an unmarked grave, a dead gal gets restless. Longs for the days of dancehalls and flirtations. So I slip back into life like I’m putting on a party dress—good thing I was buried in my party dress—and waltz on down to Chet’s Musical Lounge.

It’s no O Henry Ballroom, but the jukebox still jazzes, the neon still spills like a raspberry milkshake across the floor, across the counter tops, across the men. And there are plenty of men. Some almost old enough to remember my days, others younger, aging themselves with booze. All of them just lonesome enough.

They don’t think twice about a pretty blonde dame in an old-fashioned white party dress, skin papery and white as the moon. So’s I sidle up to them, ask them to buy me a southside fizz. They ask me about myself, and I tell them I love ice-skating in the winter, rollerskating in the spring. Tell them why I came here tonight.

Because I had a fight with my boyfriend. He’s no good; he’s a gallows-bird, bound to swing. Tell them I was born here, south side of Chicago, lived here my whole life, will die here if given half a chance. And is there a chance? Hey, daddy, do you wanna dance? Let’s cut a rug, let’s jitterbug. They put dollars in the jukebox.

We begin the Beguine. Now we’re singin ‘with a swing, but here’s something you should know—Wo-ho, baby, they always say, why your pretty little hands so cold? I smile my vellum smile, and well, they say. Cold hands, warm heart. I don’t have the heart to tell ‘em what they should know. Before I know it, the bar lights are flaring brighter.

Last call, you don’t have to go, but you can’t—I have to go. Just one more southside fizz, daddy, and can you take me home? I live just a couple
miles up the road. A pretty little gal like me? Why, I can’t just take the L train. Can’t just walk home in that rotten ol ’rain. Even if they’re too drunk, they offer to drive, and it’s that offer—

Keeps ’em safe. I can’t protect the ones whose cars I don’t ride in. I hop in, shotgun, and even the radio, even the heater, turned up full blast, they don’t warm me. I know where I’m bound. Back under that cold wet ground. We drive, and—Hey, daddy, stop here just a sec, will ya? And my man, he pulls up in front.

Resurrection Cemetery. I step out and—he’ll never believe he’s seen a ghost, but he’ll never forget me. I don’t mean to be cruel. I’m no femme fatale, just a gal with a tragic backstory. I don’t mean to be mean, but I’ve only got one thing over those live girls. My indelibility. He’ll try to vanish my memory.

Like I disappeared at the cemetery gates. But as long as he lives he’ll never find another girl so pale, so cold, so fair. My death-ice hands have left burn marks on the iron bars of his heart. And on nights like this, when the paper moon rises above the measured thunder of the L cars, he’ll listen to that rain softly jazzing on the roof.

He’ll dream of a blonde girl in a white party dress. Dream a little dream of me.
No winds swept over the foyer. No voices echoed in the air as the priest read the prayers for the house blessing. I’ve never felt an eeriness settle over this house, not since we moved in, so the blessing seemed unnecessary. The house is sterile, lifeless, full of transition, renters who never stayed long enough to haunt it. But outside the house, when I run at the early morning light, the cul-de-sacs and pocket parks feel strange.

Then, the first junk car showed up on our curb, the tires slashed. When I asked the neighbors about an abandoned car, they said it wasn’t abandoned and that I should never, ever tow an abandoned car around here. If I waited long enough, they said, it would move— to another part of the neighborhood, and another would take its place. And I can’t describe the chill I felt when the neighbors said these words, with a dark look in their eyes, and a sense of urgency.

The cars were more than just eyesores. They’d groan and rattle and shake. Some would ooze with slime, sometimes with blood. There were rumors that the last person who lived in the place just a block away, called to tow an abandoned car, but their house caught fire. Smells of rancid rubber and old motor oil filled the air, and when the fire trucks tried to pull up to the curb, more cars blocked their path, shadowy shapes inside, beating their fists at the windows. So we put up with the cars, the rusted-out RVs, the ghost driver-travelers looking to pull over in front of our manicured lawn to rest their weary bones.
My legs hurt.

My friend collapsed an hour ago when his knees gave out under the weight of his body. He ate so much that his joints were more than justified in their refusal to support him any longer. Since then, I have been laying on my back to relieve my feet, especially after my last meal. The others in my section have been gorging every day since we were all placed together, and moving around just became more trouble than it’s worth.

If you can get to one first, just find a nice spot in the corner and lie back. Wait until the food arrives and try not to stray too far from your spot. Next to me, someone else had just collapsed. But he was unfortunate enough to land face down directly in the spot that I wet myself in just now. Unlucky chap. He had been wincing for a while now, so I am impressed he lasted this long. Maybe it was the foot burns that got him in the end.

The area we were kept in had a hard floor, but it was cushioned by all the shedding and pieces of dung. There was a ceiling up there somewhere, but it was bloated out by bright lights. Not the type of thing you should stare at for too long. When I’m on my back I keep my eyes closed. I’m starting to think a few of the others who keep wandering around and bumping into me might have stared at them for too long and gone blind. Better make sure I don’t go the same way.

We’ve all been stowed in this space for a while now. It would be easy to say how long if we were outside, but we’re not so what does it matter? I don’t think I’ve been outside yet, but I do think I’d like to try it sometime if I can waddle my way to the exit.
Maybe tomorrow. Not much to talk about here I’ve noticed. Thousands of us are put into the same space, but we’re so cramped that you can only speak to those in your immediate area. Either I’ve been unlucky enough to have landed with some of the most boring creatures in existence, or maybe conversation just dries up quicker than you’d think when we’re all lumped here with nothing to do.

The usual pleasantries didn’t pass much of the time. Hello…. how are you…wait who are you? Where am I…. I think I had a nightmare about this once; the usual. After that, you would be surprised to learn that there wasn’t much else to talk about. The colour of the walls wasn’t fun to discuss, and talking about how bad the air was only got you so far with making friends. Eventually, everyone realised that there wasn’t anything else to talk about. So, we just stopped speaking. Even lying down my legs still hurt. They’ve gone red. So has my body. Who knows what my face looks like at this point? The food here is very nourishing but there’s so much of it, and since there’s nothing else to do except complain, you might as well eat. The food originated from mouthpieces that dangled from above. I couldn’t see where the lines that held them up came from, but they seemed to carry the food to us every few hours. Each nozzle from where the grain pours out probably has the spittle of a thousand other mouths on it, but oh well. Get stuck in.

My stomach was barely visible when I got here, but now I must move my neck to get it out of my eye line. I’m sure it’s my stomach but I do suspect it could be my chin. If anyone around here wasn’t as fat as I was, they’d likely mock me for it. But those insults lose their sting when the insulter has a swollen red belly, and his knees might resign at any moment. Oh damn, speaking of which there goes one of mine. The left knee went first and goodness it hurt. Ok, this is really starting to hurt. Good thing I didn’t land in mine or someone else’s
urine. Thirty-two days in and only now my knee goes out. Not a bad record. Some of the others didn’t last that long. I’m winning in that regard. I have noticed some difficulty breathing but everyone else gets like that eventually so nothing to be too alarmed about. The friction on my feet was starting to get to me but I can hold up to that for a few more days.

Don’t want anyone to think I’m going lame. Can’t have that. When I reached the wall, I was alarmed to discover my other knee had popped out. I landed harder than I thought I would despite all the feathers on the ground. My head and neck were spared the worst of it but from then on, I found I couldn’t move. My stomach was swelling, and I could see enough of it now to see that it was bright red. It was bulging.

I think another day went by before something else happened. The one next to me collapsed as well. Personally, I’m a little annoyed that they lasted longer than me on both feet because she was fatter than I was. Can’t win them all. Lying on the ground reduced my options even more, both physically and mentally. What was there left to think about? I could spend some time thinking about why we’re all here. I didn’t think I should think about why I’m here, because in this crowd no individual is that important, but if we’re all together then the reason why must be incredibly important. I certainly hope it’s important. Before I could discover the deep routed and incredible secret behind our containment my line of thought was interrupted by the arrival of one of them. When I say them, I mean that I don’t know what they are but they’re here anyway. I’ve decided to call them the Takes. They just seem to come along whenever they feel like it and take some of us somewhere else. Most of the time they take larger groups but sometimes the bigger ones get taken on their own.
They’re larger than us and they’re a very odd shape. They have four limbs on their bodies while we have two. They are much heavier looking yet their legs don’t give out. Luck of the draw it must be that they’ve got them, and I’ve got these thin legs. Some of us get taken if we haven’t moved on the ground for too long. Maybe if I stay here for a bit longer, they’ll take me. Although what if they do take me? What if they take me somewhere worse than this place? Or even a place that’s no better, or even worse in some other way that I haven’t thought of yet. What if we’re in a place where there is no food or less space? Any place I imagined that I might be taken to was almost certainly not going to be where I ended up, after all, what were the chances of your imagination being so accurate as to predict exactly where you’ll end up? Oh dear, looks like the decision was made for me. One of the Takes scooped me up mid-thought. It carried me by my neck despite my objections.

My legs dangled helplessly as they carried me away from the others. That was the first time I could see almost everyone. There must have been thousands of us. The space we were in was larger than I’d imagined. Thousands of flapping wings and feathers all over the area. My tiny little eyes couldn’t take it all in. Seeing such a small piece of it in my corner had deceived me into thinking of the place as being calm. It wasn’t a very smooth journey and the space around me flew around as I was roughly carried toward my next destination. Whilst being dangled upside down I finally realised why I had been taken.

I was enormous. My feet deserved all the thanks in the world for carrying me for so long. I was plump and swollen from my body all the way to my face. My feathers were beginning to come off. I had not taken the time to look at myself properly since I collapsed but now, I can see the damage done. I was barely myself anymore. My heart had been racing for a few days now, but I could still feel it increase in response to my fear. As I
trashed around in panic, I displayed more movement in that moment than I had in my entire existence. The creature that had me didn’t seem to mind. On its grip, I could make out bits of red smeared on its skin. It contrasts with the white coating it wore on the rest of its body.

My breath was failing me. The grip around my neck was becoming severe, my heart was racing too fast, and my fear heightened everything else. In my eye line, I could make out another one of the Takes awaiting our arrival. It looked like the one that had brought me, but it was shorter and fatter. Almost like me. I wonder if we were going to the same place. For the first time in my life, I heard the Takes communicate.

“It’s suffering that one. Give it here”. The Take approached me and the claws around my neck were replaced with larger ones. Its grip was merciless.
During the Pandemic, The Beast of Bray Road Comes Out of Retirement
Jessie Lynn McMains

I told you, didn't I that I'd never really disappeared just gotten better
at hiding but the world feels different now than it has
in years the cars whose exhaust I choked on there are fewer
of them now I can once again smell the Holy Grass vanilla
sun-warmed hay on the summer fields and after rain the loamy clay
earth lets off a cloud of geosmin so thick I can almost taste it I catch
the scent of my prey more easily the gamey firm flesh of rabbit
its blood reeks with the terror of the teeth of beasts like me
the dark earthy opossum its useless warning hiss I'll even grab
a skunk from time to time I don't mind the spray I find their pungent
acrid attack makes a fine perfume if I have a sweet tooth
I'll just snatch a pie left cooling on a farmhouse windowsill like some
ruffian child from an old-time film I can smell the humans too
their terror like a sheen of sweat but it's not a terror I'm used to
not the fear of a prey animal there's a funk of sorrow mixed in
they're quieter too more wary of each other keep their distance more like me
I get curious sneak into town one night looking for news I've got
a craving for chicken too (I no longer risk breaking into chicken coops
was chased off too many times by humans and their rifles blasting
leaded death) there's an old-time restaurant which still serves 'em
braised and if one's no good they'll toss it in the dumpster what do I care
if it reeks of bad eggs if it's raw bursting with maggots a ghastly
caviar and it's there I see the signs Masks Required Takeout
Only I read the headlines in the newspaper boxes hear snippets
from radios televisions the names of the dead and all those
conspiracies the question of who to blame and do I feel sorry
for them sorry is the wrong word I guess I just want to give them
the old kind of fear the primal kind from when they respected the spooks
the creatures all the bumping night-things I guess I want to give them
a story to tell maybe a crazy one half-unbelievable but it won't kill
anyone won't make anyone bring a gun to a pizza parlor or refuse
to get a vaccine maybe one of these nights you'll see me when
you're out walking your dog or driving nowhere on the dusty
backroads you'll catch a glimpse the bloodshot yellow
of my eyes my ghastly slavering fanged jaws my furred haunches
and you'll feel that primal instinct of a prey animal that which
makes the hair prickle on your arms on the back of your (fragile
delectable) neck that which makes your blood sing danger
a reason to keep your distance but no more terrifying
than the beast which already has you ready to shake between
its teeth
"This story is dedicated to Selina Swift, for giving us all the gift of Emerald. ...oh and Jade, too. I guess."

--

"-now to ensure dear Grandmother has a little accident to gain control of the Harbor. Then I’ll have a little chat with my sister."

"This has gone far enough, Teal! I won’t let you hurt either of them!"

"Come off your high horse, Devlin! That hag died five years ago and hasn’t had the sense to realize it! As for ‘sweet’ Azure-"

"She is sweet! Azure’s a kind, patient, gentle woman, Teal! And you’re-!"

"I’m what? Not a kind, patient, gentle woman? Not a woman who hasn’t suffered enough or paid her dues? I married you, didn’t I?"

"If anyone’s suffered in this marriage, it’s me."

"Then why did you divorce your beloved Azure?"

"Because, I... I... You-!"

"Oh sure, blame me. That’s the go-to for everyone living in the Harbor. If I’m going to be blamed for everything, why not take what I want? Why shouldn’t I get something meaningful out of all the gossip and abuse thrown my way my entire life, just because I was never the picture of virtue like my twin sister. You think I’m stealing the Harbor, but you’re wrong, Devlin! I’m taking what’s owed! They can call me a bitch all they like, but now I’m going to be the bitch in charge!"

"Why do you hate Azure so much, Teal?"
“It’d be charming, seeing you defend her so much, if she deserved it.”

“She’s never done anything to you, or anyone else, to deserve such cruelty!”

“Really? Are you certain, Devlin? People always called us mirror images, even if she doesn’t have an ounce of my style.”

“Wh-what are you saying, Teal?”

“How much you do you know about Azure, Devlin? How much do you know about the real Azure?”

“Will Devlin’s faith in Azure be shaken? Will Teal’s schemes come to fruition? Can Azure convince her grandmother to have the surgery? And will Dakota finally regain his memories and escape the island? Find out on the next Ocean of Passion.”

#

“I don’t know, Buddy.”

“What do you mean, it’s good!”

“Not really.”

“It’s great, Mel.”

Carmella Camden watched herself on the mounted TV, hair teased ridiculously high, covered in flashy jewelry, a sneer across her lovely face as Ocean of Passion’s credits descended. She saw her name assigned to twin sisters Teal and Azure.

Taking her gaze off the screen, Carmella added honey to her coffee.
“You’re the only person I know who does that.” Her agent, Leonard “Buddy” Budford acknowledged.

“Mom always warned me too much sugar’s bad for you,” Carmella stated as she stirred the golden substance into the caffeinated brew.

“And what did she have to say about coffee?” Buddy inquired.

“Never a bad word against it,” she replied before taking a gulp. Grimacing, she placed the cup down. “Then again…”

“Top you off?” The waitress behind the counter asked, coffee pot armed in one hand and ready to pour. Carmella shook her head. This must’ve been simmering for at least a week. One sip was enough to keep her awake all night.

“Listen Mel, you gotta believe me when I tell you the higher-ups are loving you,” Buddy advised with his usual enthusiasm.

“I wish I could say the same thing,” Carmella sighed.

“*Ocean of Passion*’s currently the highest rated soap of the 90s. You’re beating *Days, General Hospital*, even *Invitation to Love* can’t compete. It’s all thanks to you.”

“For how much longer, Buddy?” Carmella asked. “They’ve dragged the Teal/Azure storyline as far they can go. What can they do with the twins that all the other shows haven’t done before?”

“Leave that to the script writers, Mel, and just keep bringing that same energy you’ve been bringing to the set.”

“I don’t think I can anymore, Buddy.”
Taken aback, Buddy narrowed his eyes before answering with none of his usual enthusiasm “That better not mean what I think it means.”

“It means I’m tired.” Carmella clarified. “I’m not saying I’m quitting. I’m saying I need a change of direction. I feel like I don’t know what I’m doing anymore.”

“Johnny’s scripts can get confusing.” Buddy reasoned. “But you never had a problem with them before.”

“Because at first, I knew who I portrayed.” Carmella ran a hand through her dirty blonde hair, struggling to find the words to convey after so many years on *Ocean of Passion*. “There was Teal, the lovably conniving evil twin, and Azure, the demure sweetheart with inner strength. I got that. Then I was playing Teal pretending to be Azure. Then Azure impersonating Teal. Now I can’t tell if I’m playing Teal playing Azure who’s pretending to be Teal but doesn’t know she’s Azure.”

“You’re exaggerating,” Buddy replied.

“Maybe,” Carmella removed a compact mirror from her purse and checked her reflection. “I barely remember who I was in that episode which just played.”

“You were Carmella Camden, soap actress extraordinaire.” Buddy’s expression softened. He wasn’t heartless; Buddy believed Carmella was one of the best actresses he ever worked with. “A sign of a great star is them getting absorbed in the role.”

Snapping the compact shut, Carmella bitterly noted “Whoever said that probably wasn’t speaking from firsthand experience.”
“Does this really bother you that much, Mel?” Her agent tried to appear sympathetic. “Are you sure you don’t want to quit Ocean of Passion anyway?” Not like she could. Carmella was locked in a contract keeping her for as long they featured the twins. The producers felt certain she was the only actress who could properly portray Teal and Azure. That they had no intention of paying two women when they could squeeze two roles out of one surely had nothing to do with it.

Thinking about it, how Carmella was on her way to film a special episode promising the resolution of the “Stranded Dakota” storyline, she wasn’t sure. Here they were in a grimy diner in the middle of nowhere, having driven for hours down desolate stretches of desert highway, to reach their destination. What was her destination, though? Who was she playing? Carmella wished she knew how to answer.

The “Asphalt Rose,” as advertised outside, was the only rest stop for miles on the outskirts of a town called Two Rivers. Carmella almost fled back to the car when saw the cardboard standee of Teal promoting Ocean of Passion located near the register. Thankfully, no one in the diner recognized her as she and Buddy sat down at the counter.

Buddy waited for an answer when they were interrupted by a ringing sound.

“How do you stand carrying around that huge thing?” Carmella asked as he pulled out the so-called “portable” phone from his jacket.

“Wave of the future, Mel,” Buddy quipped before answering with “Talk to me.”

“Some future,” Carmella muttered as Buddy left to finish the conversation outside. The other patrons gave him odd looks as he talked into the heavy contraption. She didn’t blame them.
She couldn’t imagine owning one of those monstrosities. Cellular phones were a fad she wanted no part of.

Carmella assuaged the rest of the diner. Men in trucker caps, older women with dyed hair and too much make-up. A few teenagers. An incredibly tall man sat in a booth by himself, taking sips from a large glass of iced tea. At the far end of the counter sat a little girl brushing a doll’s hair. The girl turned to face Carmella. Carmella smiled. The girl proceeded to hold her doll up.

The doll’s face was completely blank.

“Need anything else?” A light voice from behind the counter inquired. Carmella turned to find herself facing a teenaged waitress wearing a black eyepatch.

“I haven’t been able to make up my mind.” Carmella tried not to stare at the eyepatch. “What do you recommend?”

“Well,” a heavyset police officer chimed in as he plopped down on the stool Buddy formerly occupied. “If you ain’t from around here, they got a darn good peach cobbler.”

“Your usual, Kyle?” The waitress asked.

“I’ve never tried cobbler before,” Carmella admitted.

“Hey, you look familiar.” The officer squinted at Carmella. “You ever been in Two Rivers before?”

“I’m just passing through,” Carmella replied before turning back to the waitress. “Can I look at your menu?”
“Wait! I know you!” The officer, Kyle, shot a pudgy finger in Carmella’s direction. “You’re those sisters, on that show!” The waitress’s good eye widened in amazement and realization at who was sitting in front of her.

“If I could look at-”

“Carmella Camden!” The waitress shouted. “I don’t believe it. THE Carmella Camden!”

Suddenly everyone in the diner had their attention on her. Before she knew it, Carmella found herself surrounded by adoring fans, eagerly talking about how much they loved *Ocean of Passion*. Carmella tried to appear flattered as people asked her to sign napkins or whatever they had available. The waitress mentioned something about her meal, included a slice of cobbler, being comped.

“What brings you to Two Rivers?” Someone asked. “Are they gonna shoot an episode here?”

“I-I’m just passing through,” Carmella repeated as the diner patrons lined up to get her signature.

“Imagine. The Carmella Camden stopping at the Asphalt Rose while I was on shift,” the waitress tittered. “My parents will flip when I tell them! They love the show too.”

“It’s nice to know it’s so popular,” Carmella admitted. She wondered if small towns were so dull that a cheesy soap opera was really that important to the residents.

“Tell ya plainly, Miss Camden, your show’s the only thing some of us have to get through the day,” Officer Kyle admitted.

“I mean, it’s not my show, but-”
“Lotta strange things been happening in Two Rivers since the poor Maple girl—”

“Miss Camden doesn’t need to hear that, Kyle,” the waitress chided him.

“I’m just sayin’, that show gives us something to focus on when things’re bad. We all appreciate what you do, Miss.”

Carmella wasn’t sure what to say, so she simply nodded and said, “Thank you.”

“What’s it like being an actress?” The waitress asked.

“It’s tough. Very demanding. Sometimes I don’t know where I start and the character ends. It can be very confusing.” Carmella shook her head.

“You make it look so easy, though!”

“When I’m in front of the camera, I often wish I had a better understanding of who I’m supposed to be.”

Next in line was the little girl from down the counter, holding the blank-faced doll.

“Hi,” Carmella tried to smile. “Don’t tell me your parents let you watch my show.”

“Don’t mind her,” the officer chuckled. “That’s Chatty Cathy. Doesn’t say a word. Her parents own the Asphalt Rose.”

Carmella felt uneasy as Cathy stared at her, an empty smile on her face. Wondering where Buddy was, Carmella asked “Can I freshen up?”

The waitress pointed near the Teal standee. “Right over there. Ladies’ in on the right.”

Carmella hurried past the adoring gazes of the patrons, past the cardboard eyes of her TV persona, and found refuge in the bathroom. Back to the wall, Carmella let out a deep breath.
Splashing cold water on her face, Carmella thought the praise did feel nice. It was good to know what she did on TV made a difference to someone, but the thought of an entire town being so devoted to a soap opera seemed strange. Looking at her reflection in the bathroom mirror, Carmella said to herself, “At least they believe they know what I’m doing.”

Wiping her hands on a paper towel, Carmella turned around and gasped when she found herself facing Cathy the quiet. Had she followed Carmella in? She hadn’t even heard the door open.

“I’m sorry,” Carmella laughed. “You startled me a little.”

Still smiling, Cathy held up her doll. Its blank face now had a crudely drawn expression of sadness. Cathy pulled a string.

“Do you know who’s on the other side of the mirror?”

Carmella’s unease intensified and she moved to step around Cathy when she pulled the string again.

“As we head for our desire, sometimes we don’t know we’re on the wrong road.”

Backing up to the bathroom sink, Carmella turned to the mirror.

Her reflection stared back, a cruel smile on its face.

Then everything went black.

Carmella cried out in the darkness when the lights flickered back on. She was alone. Cathy was gone.

So was her reflection.
Hurrying out of the bathroom, Carmella found the entire diner was empty. All the patrons eager for her attention had vanished.

“Hey! Hey what is this?” She cried out. “Where did everyone go?” Hurrying out the glass doors, Carmella looked for Buddy. Not only was he not outside, but the parking lot was also devoid of vehicles.

“What’s happening?” She yelled. “Buddy?! Buddy where are you?!”

Running underneath the tall streetlights casting an orange glow on the black road, Carmella looked up and down for sight of any cars. Nothing.

“HELLO!” Carmella shouted, spinning in a circle. “HELLOOOOO!”

Aside from her voice and the hum of the streetlights, the world was deathly silent. Running her hands through her hair, Carmella tried to make sense of what was happening. All she could see was the road before her when suddenly she was engulfed in white light.

#

Buddy reentered the restaurant to see Carmella exiting the bathroom, looking much more relaxed. She agreed to pose with the Teal standee for a photo. Buddy chastised himself for thinking she was succumbing to pressure. Clearly all she needed was a few kind words from some devoted fans.

Making the “unexpected” pit-stop in Two Rivers was a smart decision on his part. When he heard how much this town loved *Ocean of Passion*, he figured despite the place’s bizarre reputation for strange events and unexplained disappearances, it might lift Carmella’s spirits.
Seeing her smile and sign a photo for the wall, she seemed like an entirely different person.

“Feeling better, Mel?”

“Much,” Carmella smiled. The smile she wore when she played Azure. “Let’s get back on the road.”

#

“Thank you for finding her, Devlin.”

“What was she doing out there?”

“This must’ve been another of Teal’s schemes, but I can’t make sense of it.”

“Thank God she’s safe.”

Teal stood in the entrance to the bedroom, her grandmother and husband hovering over the injured body sleeping on the bed. She lit up a cigarette and took a deep drag. This was a turn of events she hadn’t expected. It only went to show how totally idiotic her grandmother and husband were. They might’ve been fooled, but Teal knew better.

What woman doesn’t know her own twin?

Here they were, fawning over a total stranger, thinking she was Azure. Teal didn’t know what her sister was planning, or where she found whoever was in the bed. She always knew her sister was a conniving little snake, and this just proved it.

As soon as that woman, “Azure,” woke up, Teal would get answers one way or another.