

FOR WE ARE MANY
WILLIAM BECKETZ

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If you have any sensitivity whatsoever to descriptions of suicide, self harm, or sex, this is not the story for you. For We Are Many is very extreme and very mature for the sake of artistic purposes. If you would prefer something less brutal, New York Onions is free on my website.

This story is a homage to a darker version of myself. He might not be pulling the strings anymore, but he lives somewhere deep inside of me. This story takes me to a really deep and dark place, one that some of you reading might be familiar with or have visited from time to time. Occasionally, I find myself dipping my feet into the tar-black pool of what once was, before snapping to my senses and not letting the water fill my lungs. It's a place I used to live in, but it's very far behind me now. This story is me walking alongside the pool.

This story wouldn't have been possible without contributions from Travis Hill. Even though we haven't spoken in a long time, he deserves credit for coming up with some of the original concepts and allowing me to make them into a story. A big thank you to him.

I usually like to dedicate my work to someone, but this time, it's just for me.

-William Becker

(1) the report said that Lovelace's head went in and out of the water multiple times, and an instructor could be seen pulling him above the surface repeatedly. He and other students entered the water at 1:17 p.m. and Lovelace was pulled out at 1:24 p.m.

Erase Me

In a second-floor bedroom of a small residence out in the suburbs of middle America, Robert sat on his couch, surrounded by the ruins of what was once his shelter from the hell of living. It still was home to him, but it no longer did anything to remove the shroud of emptiness that had consumed his life. He had kept the curtains drawn and the lights off for nearly a month, letting only dull sunlight penetrate the dark air, which was beginning to develop a thin, permanent mist from his cigarettes. Around where he was lying, there were dozens of pizza boxes, beer bottles, bags of Chilli Cheese Fritos, and plastic Stouffer's dishes. All of the trash had started to attract a crowd of flies, and if he ever found the energy to look down around him, he could occasionally make out the wriggling body of a cockroach. Not long ago, the very sight of the mess would sicken him, but things felt as though they had slipped into a hell that not even he could dig himself out from; this same hell produced an overpowering sense of apathy.

In front of the couch was his flat-screen TV, which through the cracked glass, he could faintly make out that same hour-long BDSM porn montage that he had been jerking off to every night for weeks. At least if he started longing for human contact or got too depressed, he could find a sense of familiarity with his own body. Masturbation was a distraction that he was far too keen upon burying himself in. Feeling that release as he edged himself and played with his cock relentlessly was the most gratifying thing in his entire world; the feeling of freedom seemed to disappear when the earth shattering post-climax clarity came. Robert understood in those moments of clarity that he was disgusting and pathetic.

It wouldn't be long till the city turned off the electricity, as he had stopped showing up to work a few weeks beforehand. His savings had become dwindling at best, only able to get him food for the rest of the week.

It's almost time, he thought to himself, sending a shiver down his own spine. He groaned, then rolled over, burying his head into the stained couch. Robert wriggled back and forth,

shaking at the very idea of what was about to happen.

“Y-you can d-do this,” he stuttered to himself, his hands becoming like wet noodles as he fought to pull himself to his feet.

“C’mon, breathe, breathe, it’s okay,” he whispered to himself, gently tapping his cheeks with his palms in an effort to snap himself out of the fit of shaking. As he climbed to his feet and moved towards the cardboard box on the other side of the room, his mind jumped back to those “inspirational” posters he had seen all over the internet for years.

“Hold on, pain ends,” they had said as if pain was merely something to be waited out or left behind. For some people, he had realized, pain stalks, haunts, then breaks into their houses into the middle of the night, and then rapes them endlessly until the next morning; till they rise from their slumbers and feel an invasive and melancholic hollowness that never seems to end, ruining every waking moment of life. The stretched and abused skin always lasts for some people, with only brief distractions.

Above the tornado of thoughts, his phone dinged from the corner of the room.

“Fuck off,” he snarled at the phone, quickly stomping over and snatching it up. Her name filled up his lock screen, with dozens of ignored calls and text messages. He didn’t want to talk to her. He had heard enough from her.

12/13/2018 11:51 PM. THE DEMON: *Hey, I know it's late and all and you probably have my number blocked, but I've been thinking about you for a little while, and hope you're doing okay. I would really like it if we could get together and talk things out. Is that okay?*

Another text had been sent on his birthday, just a week before.

12/07/2018 8:30 AM. THE DEMON: *Hey, Robbie, just wanted to text you to say happy birthday. Hope you have a really special day! Can I stop by?*

At first, the text messages he ignored had just been from her, but as the days grew longer and the thoughts more intense, they extended to everyone.

12/07/2018 11:32 AM. MOM: *Hey, sweetie, it's been a while since we've heard from you! You need to come back home to see us! Your father and I miss you and love you so much! We have something really special planned, so give me a call when you get this.*

He dropped the phone onto the stained carpet, not wanting to read anymore. The tears had set in quite often in the past month, and reading the message from his mom was no exception. His entire body started to shake, screaming that he should just call her. He needed to hear her voice, hear it say that she loved him still. At the same time, he knew that it was far too late to go back and change anything. He wasn't in the state to talk. Robert knew that his voice would shake; that he would tear up or hint that something was deeply wrong with him. He couldn't put her through any more pain.

He grabbed the long cardboard box from the other side of the room, then moved back to his couch, staring mindlessly at the TV in front of him. The paper note next to him seemed to scream out at him in agony, begging for him to

follow through. He closed his eyes, then opened the box, taking the metal thing in his hands and-

~~You know you're happy when you stop praying everyday.~~

Hemorrhage

The only thing that Robert found himself doing on his birthday was leaving the house and driving to a nearby pawn shop called Robbins Hometown Tactical. The store was owned by a balding, middle-aged man who might've been the quaintest individual in town. He was an Austrian man named Moritz who had moved to the U.S. when he was just a teenager. He was overly patriotic, as made obvious by the various American flags around the store and on the sign outside. Robert also made note of the Trump flags that were usually hanging outside in the windows.

Moritz claimed to have served in the Gulf War, which few people seemed to question because of his missing left arm, but word around town was that he never actually served and that the missing limb was a birth defect. After all, there was no muscular growth on his left arm or any scarring that an amputation would undoubtedly leave. Truthfully, Robert didn't give a flying fuck if the man was a Nigerian Prince brought forth to foretell the coming of the apocalypse, he was there for only one thing: to blow the few hundred

dollars he had gotten in the mail from various family members on a new gun.

Robert nervously lurked into the store, eying the dozens of guitars, banjos, and ukuleles. *Maybe buying something nice will make this all be okay again*, he thought to himself. Having a way to decompress could help stop the thoughts, he knew it, but then again, he'd have to play for months and months before he even became capable with an instrument, and when he did, who would give a fuck? There are millions of guitar players around the world and unless you're outstanding at playing, no one will care. He moved past the instruments, then to the glass counter, behind which were dozens of guns, varying from a crossbow, to shotguns, to semi-automatic rifles, and beneath the counter were handguns and revolvers. Directly behind the cash register was a *System Of A Down* poster with a tank on it. The barrel of the tank was pointed into the sky and on top of the barrel was white text that bluntly read, "mine is much bigger than yours."

He surveyed the selection of weapons for a minute, letting all of the facts and statistics he had read on the internet run through his mind.

Moritz came trotting in from a doorway at the end of the counter, the smell of cigarettes permeating his body odor.

“Hello,” Moritz said plainly, running his hand through his greying facial hair, “how are you today?”

“I’m good,” Robert replied, eyeing the man. He thought back to an old Reddit thread he had seen about gun store owners denying sales because of red flags. In the back of his mind, he scrambled to find a way to “act natural.”

“Can I help you with anything?” Moritz inquired, resting his one muscular arm on the counter, leaving a big print on the glass beneath it. Robert internally chuckled at the thought of this one-armed man working out. Moritz held an obviously fake country accent.

“Yeah, I’m looking to buy a gun,” he muttered, “what do you know about guns?”

“Depends on what you would like to do. Why are you buying one?” Moritz beamed out with a smile. Robert looked up at him, making a nervous sort of eye contact, praying that the Armenian wouldn’t see the fear and sleep deprivation haunting his face. In all honesty, Robert hadn’t spent much time thinking of a false reason.

Simply, his rule of thumb was to avoid getting straight to the point. If he outright asked for the cheapest gun in the store, the man would get suspicious and have good reason to deny the sale. Effectiveness wasn't a huge problem for Robert, as he wouldn't need to use it much, but either way, it's not like he needed the money for anything else,

“Just to have around, you know..., just in case,” Robert stuttered for a minute then resumed eye contact, “the ZOMBIES COME.”

Moritz chuckled. Robert sighed, the joke hit. He didn't want to make the man feel guilty for selling him a weapon. Robert needed to be just another face in the crowd.

“Hell yeah, my friend, I hear you. Lots of people would call you nuts, but let me tell you, I was down in Florida a few months ago. I was by myself at a bar and then the damn power went out! Immediately, my mind ran with the idea that shit was hitting the fan! I didn't have a gun or food or money or anything! Shit was scary. If it was actually the apocalypse, shit, brother, 99% of everyone around me would've died. I realized how not ready I was. It's what made me get my concealed carry. Highly recommend that by the

way. You know, we probably won't see anything crazy like that, but if we do, gotta be ready. You got any kids?" He barked out at Robert, randomly interrupting his own monologue as if he was the real-life representation of Holden Caulfield.

"No," Robert said sadly.

"Girlfriend?" He barked back. Robert hesitated for a moment, then finally spat out his lie.

"Yeah."

"You gotta keep her safe. Say, you ever see The Walking Dead?"

"Yeah, few times, but—"

Moritz interrupted by opening the back of the glass counter, then he reached for a big silver revolver with a curved black handle that looked like an ornate knife handle.

"You know that Rick Grimes fella? He carries one of these," the man gestured down to the weapon.

".357 Mag, Colt Python. Beautiful, right?" Robert didn't give a shit about how the gun looked. For all he knew, Moritz was just spitting out random buzz words that sounded like they were accurate and impressive.

"Yeah, it is," he spat back coldly, "how much you asking for it?"

“1,700 dollars, plus taxes and fees,” Moritz replied.

“Yikes,” Robert said with a wince, “outta my budget. Only got 1000.” His mind flashed back to the cover of the Dawn Of The Blackhearts bootleg LP by Mayhem, where Per “Dead” Ohlin was photographed with a shotgun next to his head. Blood and bits of his brain were splattered over his face, hair, and his bed around him. He had killed himself and one of his bandmates had photographed his dead body. The image circulated for a while, before ending up as a cover of a bootleg made by a fan. Without any more hesitation, Robert spoke.

“Something amusing happened to me once: I had internal bleeding [...] until my heart had no more blood and my veins were nearly empty. Clinically speaking, I was dead. [...] I saw everything in a strange blue color [...] and for a moment everything was tinted with blue, then it turned white and something “warm” surrounded me. I later asked someone about these colors, [a person] who had a near-death experience and knew more about the “supernatural” than I did. He told me that I reached the first “level” of the other world; which has the color blue. The terrestrial level (where we live) has the color black. [...] The next level (between worlds) is blue [...] and the last level is white. No mortals can go there. If a mortal succeeds in reaching (the white level) then he stops being mortal and can't return to [our] world anymore. [...] There are more levels/colors beyond the white one, but I don't know anything about them—only spirits and very powerful wizards can travel there. What I experienced was the white level, entering it without knowing. It was the realm of the dead; [because] I had actually died.”⁽²⁾

“A shotgun.”

Moritz stared back at him, studying him for a moment, then he put his hand out and said,

“Okay, yeah, not very flashy but I hear you, what is the-”

“Look, I don’t know anything about guns. I don’t want a piece of crap obviously, but I can’t spend more than a thousand. You could probably just toss me something random that won’t fall apart next week, and I’d be happy. I just want some peace of mind about the whole zombie thing, you know? Hell, even thinking I could kill a few of them and keep my home safe, that’d make me happy,” Robert cried out, his voice beginning to take on a frantic tone. It was a wonder that Moritz didn’t think he was schizophrenic or something was wrong with him. Regardless, Robert stared into Moritz’s eyes but wasn’t really looking at anything at all, just allowing himself to be taken over by a haze of babbling. Moritz kept listening, mainly because of the sheer absurdity, but also partially because Robert was rambling so fast that it was difficult to get a word in at all.

Robert took a deep breath, then jumped back into his rant, “for me, it might just be a peace of mind thing. It doesn’t matter if it actually makes sense, just so long as I wouldn’t be out there bare-knuckled or with a kitchen knife, or if

someone breaks in, I don't wanna be running around the house trying to put all the pieces together or going through some complex loading process. I want to be able to pick it up and shoot it when I need it, and I-

"Hey, hey, easy there," Moritz interrupted before Robert could lose control of himself. Moritz wasn't quite sure what the hell was going on, but as far as he was concerned, Robert really needed a gun, and then he needed to go back to whatever flat-earth loving, conspiracy theorist hell-hole he had crawled out of.

After Robert filled out a 4473 form, his background check gave him the green light, and a little bit of awkward conversation between the two, he left the store with a Remington 870 shotgun.

Flirty Fishing

The alcohol and Kratom ended up lasting him until pretty close to his birthday. After Thomas dropped off groceries, he stayed inside for almost two months, each day becoming incomprehensible from the next. Whenever thoughts of her entered his mind, he washed them out with a shot of Jack Daniels, followed by a cigarette, and if he ended up getting antsy, a cup full of Kratom would rarely be far behind, and because the grainy tea tasted like trench mud, some chips would push it down his gullet, and then some water would make it into a balanced meal. He laid on the couch for ages just becoming lost in the films, the rancid smell of rotten food, ants, mice, cockroaches, alcohol, and jizz rags in his trash can slowly becoming overpowering.

He wasn't sure when this happened; when everything had begun to smell so bad, as he was usually pissing in the trash can, then dumping it into the backyard when it filled up. As his seemingly never-ending alcohol and kratom

binge went on, he noticed whatever left the tip of his penis started to have bits of red blood clots in it. He noticed this when he jerked off and he noticed this when he pissed in the trash can. It was a wonder it never leaked through to the carpet, but he supposed he didn't care either way.

Near the end of November, there was a knock on his door. It had been nearly three months since she had left, so when he nervously opened his duct-taped door to come face to face with her, he was repulsed.

"Hey, Robbie, how are you?" Kierston asked with a smile, barely able to see him in the dark void that was his doorway. He stepped out into the light of day, shielding his eyes from the intense sunlight. She cringed when she got a better look at him. His clothes were covered in food crumbs, he had grown a beard that had never been washed, and he smelled of something ungodly. When he forced a grin, she noticed his miserably yellow teeth, swollen gums, and his cracked front tooth. His hair was oily, long, matted, and smelled awful. He looked as though he was homeless.

“Jesus Christ, what happened to you?” she gasped. The fact that she had the nerve to show up at his house after what had happened was strange to him. Nevertheless, he tried to act calm. Maybe things could somehow be better.

Robert really didn't have a good answer for her.

“It's been a rough couple of months,” he replied back, “why are you here?”

“I wanted to see if you were still alive. You haven't talked to me in months” she said solemnly, avoiding his eyes.

“Well, I am,” he snapped back, shifting uncomfortably. What was he even supposed to say to her?

“Do you hate me?” she said after a brief moment of silence.

“I don't know,” he replied plainly. They looked at each other, frozen in the moment. She could barely recognize him.

“Can I come in and talk?” she asked.

“What do you want to talk about?”

When Feilding decided to put a hole in her head in 1970, she used a much more modern tool: an electric foot-operated dentist's drill. Feilding, then 27 years old, applied a local anesthetic to her scalp and taped glasses to her face to prevent blood from dripping into her eyes. Then, using a mirror for guidance,

she bored a hole about a half-inch wide in the top of her head just above the hairline while a friend filmed the procedure. She says she immediately felt better.—⁽³⁾

“I just wanted to thank you.”

“For what?”

She nervously swayed from side to side, then finally said, “for being the best boyfriend I could have asked for. You deserved the world, and I’m sorry I couldn’t give that to you,” Kierston lamented, looking Robert up and down, feeling as though SHE had been the one to cause all of this. She felt as though she had broken him, made him ugly, made him useless, and destroyed him.

“You don’t have to kiss my ass,” he snarled.

“I really don’t want to fight,” Kierston confessed, “I’ve done a lot of bad. I know I really hurt you and words can’t really do anything to fix that. I can’t change the past.”

“Are you here just to taunt me?” Robert lashed out, clutching the door and tilting his head at her.

“What happened to you? You haven’t answered your phone in forever. All your windows are blacked out. You don’t look healthy,” she probed, smelling his rancid breath as he gritted his teeth, “and I’m not being mean, but has

anyone checked on you? Has anyone actually come over and seen you?"

"No," Robert said plainly, "no one cares about me anymore."

"I have always cared. From when I left the first time, all the way until now."

"You sure never fucking acted like it," Robert grumbled.

"I know. Sometimes, I'm not very good at that, I admit it, but I'm being honest with you and I think—"

"It doesn't matter anymore," Robert interrupted, "I'm fucked up now and you're gone."

"You're the one who broke up with me!" she replied.

"You needed some fucking help."

"I know. I've been in therapy for a while now."

"Good for you," he spat.

"I think getting some help might do something for you. It's not that bleak out there."

"Yes, yes, it is. Life fucks you in the ass then you die." Robert thought back to those older text posts that 15 year olds on Facebook always seemed to think were deep: no one dies a virgin. He cringed.

“Look, I want to help you. You deserve something nice. I can get you some therapy and help you clean up!” She said.

“Am I not handsome enough for you?” Robert said, flashing his broken tooth at her. She seemed taken back.

“No, it’s just-”

“Just what? I barely ever leave the living room now. Who do I need to impress? Certainly not you,” he snapped.

“You aren’t well, I can see that. I don’t care how you look, but I do care that you take care of yourself and treat yourself right,” she pleaded. Robert glared at her, wishing he could punch her in the face. He wanted to slam her against the wall and beat her until her nose was broken; until she was as ugly and useless as he was.

“You’re only saying that to make yourself feel better, so you can’t say you ignored me when I’m gone.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You don’t give a fuck. You just feel guilty and want to feel like you did something good for once,” he growled back.

“That’s not true at all. It really bothers me that you take the moral high ground with me. I’m

trying to be better and do right by you," she mumbled.

"You can shut up now. Get the fuck off my doorstep," Robert demanded, pointing his finger to the street.

"Robert, please!" she begged. Without even responding, he spat on her face, sending his saliva in a thick glob onto her forehead. She blinked slowly in horror, then Robert slammed the door in her face.

Something Good To Die For

After he returned home from the hospital, Robert's life went into a standstill. He didn't feel anything, not for himself, and certainly not for her. He pulled his crusty, blood-stained sheets from his mattress, tossed them in the garbage, and then went to the store to replace them. As soon as he returned from the store, he went into his living room, the smell of her perfume still permeating the air, then sat on his couch. He turned on the TV and for nearly a day he watched movies. He didn't really process what he was seeing, instead letting himself get lost in thought. The ache in his stitched up wrist was the only reminder that he was still tethered to the earth.

Sometimes, he would get up and go grab a bag of chips, but other than that, he sat there for countless hours, watching everything that the TV spewed out at him. Eventually, the glare of the sun began to get annoying, as it created a black mirror on the screen that allowed him to see himself, so he paused the movie he was watching and went speeding to the store. A few hours later,

every window in his house was covered in duct tape, forming an impenetrable darkness that swallowed everything but the light of the TV. From then on, he usually lost the energy to stand up after binging on snack food, throwing most of his food scraps and trash on the floor of the living room.

After a day or two of this with little to no sleep, his cell phone started to ring. Every hour or so for a few days, it would get buzz as someone texted him or called him, checking to see if he was okay. The noise eventually ruined his mood, so with each subsequent ring, he turned the volume of the TV up even further, drowning all other sounds out completely. Very quickly, without any clock or real human interaction, combined with the constant drone of the blaring TV, he became disoriented and lost all sense of reality. Sleep would be the only break from this constant onslaught, but he could never tell how long he had been asleep for. Most of the time when he needed to piss, he wouldn't have the energy to go all the way downstairs to the bathroom or to his bedroom, so he took a trash can in the living room, pulled out the garbage bag, then pissed in the bottom of that. At first, the

smell was awful, but it quickly became meaningless in the overwhelming wall of extreme sensations.

It didn't take too long for the insects to come. The first ant appeared as a fast moving speck on the edge of the TV, then it crawled across an actor's face, like a slow moving blackhead on the person's forehead. He groaned, then found more ants scavenging through the bags of chips and beer bottles. They marched along, occasionally scurrying up his limbs and investigating his unmoving body. At first, they disgusted him, but very quickly, he dismissed them, just as he dismissed everything else in his world.

After a few weeks of not speaking to anyone, neglecting his phone, and binge eating, he ran out of food.

But when he saw Jesus afar off, he ran and worshipped him,
And cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not:
For he said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit.
And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion:
FOR WE ARE MANY.
And he besought him much that he would not send them away out of the country:

~~Now there was there nigh unto the mountains a great herd of swine feeding:~~

~~And all the devils besought him, saying, Send us into the swine, that we may enter into them:~~

~~And forthwith Jesus gave them leave. And the unclean spirits went out, and entered into the swine:~~

~~and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea, (they were about two thousand;) and were
(4)
choked in the sea:~~

He yanked the phone from the charger, opening it up to see dozens of messages.

9/15/2018 3:22 PM. THE DEMON: *Hey, just got a call from Thomas, he told me you haven't been into work in a while. I really really hope you're okay. You haven't read any of my messages in a while, so I'm pretty worried. I'm probably going to come see if you're still around in a few days.*

9/13/2018 9:30 AM. THOMAS: *yo, yo, we've been short for a few weeks. Where the fuck are you? Lmao, seriously dude, I'm worried about you. At least tell us if you're sick. The boss is so fucking pissed. Are you still in town?*

He flicked through a few more from friends, before finally landing on one from his mom.

9/2/2018 12:06 PM. MOM: *Hey, Kierston told your father and I what happened. I know I've*

never been very touchy feely with you, but I want you to know that I'm very sad about it. You've always made Momma bear very happy, and to know you've been struggling this much hurts her heart. Give me a call soon, please.

He sent Thomas a text, then checked his bank account to see how much of his savings he could waste. He didn't need to save up anymore for a ring or anything like that. Truly, he didn't give a shit how much money he spent. He arranged for Thomas to buy him a shit ton of liquor in preparation for a party that he was having, as well as some Kratom, cigarettes, and a lot of junk food. Robert made up some excuse as to why he wouldn't be home, sent a couple hundred dollars to Thomas through Venmo, and told him that he could just stick the groceries on the back porch.

Skoptsy

Becoming consumed in Kierston's garden was something that Robert found himself deeply missing. In the four months that she had been gone, he had constantly been missing her. He would bury himself into porn and the thoughts of her on those long, stuffy nights in his bedroom. It always made him sad that none of the girls looked like her. Losing her had felt like being imprisoned in a labor camp of depression and loneliness, and finally being with her again was his liberation, his escape, his ladder up from the dark hole that he had been swimming in.

For a time, Robert had become consumed in the rage he felt for her. To him, she became that whore, that demon, that fucking bitch. But when a call came in early August from his ex-girlfriend saying she would like to see him again, he welcomed her with open arms. The two met in a diner in town one Saturday night, and like the oldest of friends, they started conversing as if nothing had happened at all.

After they had paid for their meal, the two

found their naked bodies intertwined in the backseat of Kierston's van, the windows fogging up with the heat of passion. The gentle thumping of the suspension as the two kept in rhythm with the music of their love provided a squeaking noise in the parking lot.

By the time August was over, Robert's dream of the two moving in together finally came true, and suddenly, everything from April until that moment became a blur, seeming to disappear from existence entirely. Kierston's infidelity was a subject that never was talked about, and for a while, the two were happy with the way things were.

After a month or so of living together, Robert had found more substance in his life, and the two were living happily. In the back of his mind, Robert felt like things were finally okay. The happiness he had been so desperately craving was finally right in front of him. His girlfriend (maybe even his wife) would bring him the light in the storm of life. He planned on waiting a year, but he started putting a quarter of his weekly paycheck in his dresser when she wasn't looking, hoping to eventually buy her a fancy engagement ring. She was something to work for, something to

break him from the monotony of life.

Just as quickly as things came together, they fell back apart again. One day at work, in fact, one of the last few days he would even have the motivation to go into work, his boss let him go home a few hours early. As he drove home to Kierston, he noticed a grey SUV parked at the end of his driveway. His mind instantly went into overdrive, searching for any reason as to why some stranger's car was in their driveway. Maybe she was having a friend over or a neighbor had just parked there for the night; almost anything would be better than the truth. He quietly stepped out from the car, nervously clutching the house keys in his hands, trying his best to keep them from rattling. In a blur of movement, he opened the front door and went down the hall, feeling as though he was watching himself in third person.

As his shoes grazed the carpet and his footsteps were muted by the sounds of two voices moaning from the bedroom, the denial set in. He smacked his head with his palm and grunted, trying to wake himself up from the horrible nightmare. This couldn't be real; Kierston was better, she had promised to be better and she

seemed like she meant it. Before even going into his bedroom, he wandered into the kitchen and pulled a knife from the counter with shaking hands

Moving from the kitchen seemed to take ten thousand years as he listened to their deep, sensual moans and indistinguishable whispers.

Garden Grove police Lt. Jeff Nightengale said Catherine Kieu Becker drugged a meal and served it to the victim, whose name was not released, shortly before the attack Monday night.

Nightengale said the 51-year-old man felt sick, went to lie down and lost consciousness. The 48-year-old Becker then tied the victim's arms and legs to the bed with rope, removed his clothes and attacked him with a 10-inch kitchen knife as he awoke, Nightengale said.

"He was conscious when his penis was removed," Nightengale said.

Nightengale said Becker put the penis in the garbage disposal and turned it on.⁽⁵⁾

He didn't fully understand what he was doing. His rage, confusion, and depression all seemed to collide at once, absolutely overwhelming him with raw emotion. He had never really been a violent person, but every single instinct inside of him screamed that he needed to react violently. Robert listened to the other man groan at her through the wall.

"Goddamn, you're so tight," was responded to with a moan from her, the same moan that he had heard every time he had been with her, only more passionate.

"Fuck, baby," she cried out, her voice echoing through the house.

“You like that? You slut, you little bitch. You like my cock in your pussy?”

Robert winced, his teeth chattering as he held his hand on the door, then pushed it open, immediately seeing a naked man with tattoos covering his back in bed with Kierston, his hands on her thighs as he thrust into her. She kept her legs spread, her head lying on the pillow behind them. She rolled her eyes back as he fucked her in the missionary position, not even noticing him enter the room. Robert stood in the open doorway, watching their bodies writhe and intertwine, both rolling in the sheer pleasure, unable to comprehend anything outside of their tiny bubble. He watched them for a moment without moving. This was the woman he had fallen in love with, the woman who he had let move in with him, the woman who was his everything, and the woman he wanted to marry. Still, there she was, being taken by a man that wasn't him, and loving every second. His skin was a sharp contrast to Robert's, being absolutely plastered in tattoos, and his hair was short and bleached, as opposed to Robert's natural long hair. She had always talked about scene kids

being her type in high school, but this was something else.

“Kierston,” he said softly, but still loud enough to be heard. The man stopped thrusting into her, quickly whipping around to glare at Robert, immediately seeing the knife.

“Oh fuck!” the man gasped, then jumped out of the bed, not even picking up his clothes as he went sprinting into the bathroom, locking the door behind him.

“Robbie, I-I’m sorry,” she stuttered, pulling the covers over her naked body and trembling at the sight of him.

“What the fuck?” Robert asked, unable to say anything coherent. He heard the window open in the bathroom as the man jumped through it. He hadn’t even taken his clothes with him.

“Baby, calm down, please.”

“What the fuck?” Robert repeated numbly.

“Should I call the cops?” the voice in the bathroom said.

“What the fuck?” Robert said again.

“It’s n-not what it looks like.”

“Then what is it? What the actual fuck? How is this fair? After everything we’ve been through? You told me you *fucking* loved me,” Robert

snarled, clenching the knife even tighter, his hands growing sweaty and almost losing grip. He slowly approached her.

“Baby, what are you-”

“Don’t you *fucking* dare call me that, I’m not your baby, *you stupid fucking whore!*” Robert screeched.

“Please, calm down!” she wailed back at him, tears freely streaming down her face. Robert stopped in his tracks, looking down to the knife shaking in his hands, the sweat staining his pits, and his legs that barely seemed like they could carry him.

“How could you? I let you move in and tell you that I love you. I fucking trusted you, and this is what I get? Are you trying to teach me that I shouldn’t trust the people I love? Is that fucking it? Is that what you fucking want from me? Would that make you happy?”

She stared at him, shaking in a combination of terror and guilt.

“God damnit, *fucking* answer me!” he shrieked.

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

“Why the fuck not? Why the fuck don’t you fucking know?” Robert roared, gripping his own hair with a closed fist. Kierston cringed as if he

was going to rip his own hair out. Every part of his body was screaming that she needed to pay.

“You go and fuck some asshole- some asshole I’ve never fucking seen in my entire fucking life, in my own bed? How the fuck is that okay? Do you expect me to just be fucking okay with that?”

“No, I’m-I’m sorry.”

“That’s what you said back in April, and what’s new? You’re still a fucking slut! Good fucking job, Kierston! Do you want an award for being a steaming sack of shit?” Robert quickly dashed to the bed, and in response, she rolled off the side and fell to the floor. Her shaking arms fought to grab onto the side of the mattress to bring her back to her feet. He wasn’t ready to hurt her, but it felt good to scare her.

“I’m sorry, R-robbie, I make mistakes, okay? I know I fucked up. You deserve better, you really do,” she cried. He watched as Kierston grabbed her clothes from the bedroom floor. She kept an eye on him, terrified of her own boyfriend.

“Get the fuck away from me,” Robert snapped under his breath.

“Baby, please,” Kierston begged, barely able to put her own clothes back on.

"I said get the fuck away from me," Robert said again. As Kierston put her bra and panties back on, she extended a hand towards him and tried to walk closer. In a blur of emotion, he closed his left fist and pointed it at his head, flexing his arm, then took the knife in his other hand and brought it up to his wrist. Suddenly, he didn't want to hurt her. He knew that he couldn't become the bad guy, not now; not after everything they had been through.

"Baby?" she called out, taking another step.

"After everything I've done for you, how could you?" Robert cried to her, letting the knife rest on his skin.

"Please don't," Kierston begged. She was powerless. In an odd way, it felt good for him to have the power over her. No matter what she said, there was no way she could win him back again. With just a little bit of pressure, he could slit his wrists and then she would have to watch him bleed out on their bedroom floor. He hoped she would cry, that she would call 911 and beg for him to be okay again. Maybe she would open the door for the paramedics as they hauled his lifeless body out to the ambulance.

"Fuck you! You don't get to say anything."

“Baby, please, I love you. I’m not worth this. You’ve come so far! This isn’t the way you need to go!”

In the most sadistic way possible, he looked her in the eyes, licked his lips, then smiled at her.

“Rot in hell,” Robert spat, then dug the knife into his wrist. He expected the slice to be easy, like cutting bread, but the knife was duller than he first thought, so he had to jam it with all of his might, then force it into the meat and veins of his wrist. He clenched his eyes shut as it pierced his skin, quickly meeting his veins with a sharp pain that was followed by a series of dull throbbing sensations. He felt the blood go dripping down and hit the carpet of the bedroom. He became absorbed by a sea of pain, drowning in it. He forgot that Kierston, who was watching in horror, was even in the room. There was a lot more blood than he had expected, his arm almost immediately becoming soaked in it. It felt as though a boiling vat of acid had been poured on his arm, leaving it with a wet feeling that was the worst pain he had ever felt in his entire life. There was blood everywhere: on his arms, his hands, his shirt, the carpet, the knife, and his pants. He dropped the knife, then opened his eyes.

Kierston had run out of the room, leaving him alone and drenched in his own blood. He stumbled towards the bed, sending his freely dripping blood onto the sheets, then he raised his left arm and looked at himself. His arm looked like he had worked all day in a slaughterhouse, yet his wrist had been pulverized. There was a deep trench where his wrist ended and his hand began. Inside of the wound, he could see his tendons flex with each painful movement of his hand.

“Fuck,” he mumbled out, already beginning to feel lightheaded. He watched his tendons move even more, becoming numb in the blindingly white agony, then he toppled over the bed, putting his blood covered hands out to catch himself, soaking the sheets even further in the fluid that made up his insides. He tried to find the strength to bring himself back to his feet, but he was already too weak. The first time he passed out, he heard sirens coming from the distance and Kierston loudly screaming outside for neighbors to come and help. Suddenly, there were people in the room checking his pulse, then someone was putting a rag over his wound and putting pressure on it. The next time he woke up,

he was in the back of an ambulance and a paramedic with a name tag that read Mark Hammelton was fighting to stitch him back together.

GAG

Her phone call came at eleven o'clock at night, after Robert had just gotten back from a movie with a group of his friends. Almost instinctively, he answered the phone on the first ring.

"Hello?" he answered. He heard Kierston breathing into the microphone, her teeth chattering as she struggled to speak.

"Babe, you okay?" he asked.

"I know that you, uh, are going to be mad at me, and that's okay, cuz anyone would," she started, pausing in between each word with a deep breath of air as if it was taking all of her strength to speak. She spoke in a low, hushed voice, that was almost completely devoid of emotion.

"I think you deserve better." Immediately taking it as one of her lapses in self-confidence, Robert was quick to try to pull her self esteem back up.

"No, I don't think so. You make me very happy, you always have."

“That’s v-very sweet of you, but let me finish...please,” she begged. The urgent tone she had taken was scary in a way. Although it hadn’t happened in some time, she had a history with thinking she wasn’t good enough, but after a brief stint in therapy, she was able to stop putting herself down. Strangely, her voice lacked the depressive tone that came when she was obsessed with hating herself, instead, being replaced by an emptiness that was fearful and guilty.

“I’ve been cheating on you,” she said without any further hesitation. Almost immediately, Robert lurched over as if someone had punched him in the stomach, muttering a few cuss words under his breath.

“I know it’s wrong. I just can’t get my feelings together. I’m getting help, I promise. I’ve been seeing someone. I have a problem,” she whined.

“God damnit,” Robert growled, moving towards his bedroom window, “how many times?”

“Please don’t be mad at me, babe, I love you.”

“Answer me. How many times?”

“You know when Lauren and I had a girl’s night a few weeks ago? We got drunk, and well, we kissed. It’s happened a lot.”

“What the fuck?” Robert gasped, horror overtaking any rational thought.

“That’s the only time physically, but honestly, I haven’t been emotionally faithful. Sometimes, I end up downloading Tinder and texting guys, but it never goes anywhere. It’s like someone else is doing it, like I’m not in control.”

Robert’s horror became too intense to allow him a coherent response. On one hand, he wanted to cuss her out, but on the other, he just wanted to be locked away forever.

“I want to be better. You don’t have to take me back, but I’m going to get some help and take some time to be a better version of me. You’re the best man I’ve ever been with, you know that, right?” Unfortunately for her, he wasn’t listening anymore. With sadness overtaking him, he found himself deeply staring into the sunset outside his window.

“And that’s why I’m going to take some time. Whatever you decide, I support you one hundred percent. I love you.”

Robert kept staring, the tears freely flowing from his eyes, snot trickling down over his lips, but still fighting to keep himself silent. After so much time spent fighting for her, so many years

working to afford a home so they could move in together, and so many times where he had to avoid temptation because she hated drugs and was an insanely jealous woman. He thought back to the times where he was at parties and could've easily flirted with some random chick and just fucked her bareback in a friend's bed, woken up with her the next morning with no recollection of what her name was, then he could've gone home and kissed Kierston with the same lips that grazed some other woman's shaved cunt, the smell of her pussy still on his breath.

"Are you there?" she asked.

Married women start having affairs for various reasons. Perhaps their husband is not giving them the attention and respect they deserve. Perhaps they still love their partners, but the spark has vanished from their marriage. Alternatively, they may have an open relationship, and both have affairs to satisfy their physical needs whilst still sharing a tight emotional bond.⁽⁶⁾

But unlike her, Robert was happy. He was satisfied physically. He was happy taking her on dates on Friday nights, having sex every other day, so by default, he was good to her and faithful. It was hard for Robert to determine how someone cheating could be an indicator of anything other than being unhappy with their partner. As he dipped into long, barely relevant

trains of thought, the sun had dipped beneath the horizon, and Kierston was saying she loved him into the phone.

Blank Page

He closed his eyes, then opened the box, taking the shotgun in his hands and loading a single bullet into it. He forced the stock into the carpeted floor, then put the barrel into his mouth. The sweat dribbled down onto his clothes, his pit stains feeling like a sticky ocean of filth.

The metal was cold in his mouth. In a way, it was sad to think that it would be the last thing he would ever taste. Not a cheesecake, not

chocolate, not medium-rare steak, not alcohol, not some girl, not kratom, and certainly not Kierston. He held the gun in between his legs on the couch, then secured his right hand around the barrel. His left hand gripped the trigger guard, ready to send a round screaming into his brain.

He wondered if it would hurt, feeling a chunk of metal go piercing through his skull. Would it just be black? Would he even have time to think about everything that had happened? Robert had been suicidal as a teen, and he had been for a while when she first left, but he never would have fathomed that he would muster the courage. This was finally it. No one could stop him from splattering his brains against the wall behind him. There was no going back or pussyfooting around how he felt. This was the end.

More than the afterlife or the life he had lived, (he had spent many days thinking about both. He was pretty sure God didn't exist or was a bastard) he found himself wondering who would find him. Maybe the neighbors would hear the gunshot and call the police. Maybe someone would smell the maggots and flies and ants eating at his

body. Maybe the city would come to investigate the abandoned remains of his house. That was all he was worth: just another dead body that some asshole would have to put up with. Maybe his remains would give someone nightmares or make someone's day a bit worse. Maybe he'd be another sad story on the internet about how some poor worker had found him and been haunted forever. They wouldn't care at all about why he had done it or what he liked about life or who he loved or who would be at his funeral or what his favorite food was or that time he went to the park when he was a kid and saw a puppy for the first time or the time he had his first crush or how happy he was when he bought his first house or a million other things.

Robert turned the safety off, then jammed his left thumb down on the trigger. There was an instant boom as his jaw and the back of his head exploded, instantly killing and mutilating him. Blood sprayed on the wall behind the couch, dripping down it like paint, then the shotgun recoil sent his head flying backwards and the gun itself toppled to the floor.

His neighbors heard the distant sound, but shrugged it off as some hunter or someone off in

the woods. Within the hour, the ants were the first ones to find him. They started crawling up the couch, picking at the giant hole leading to his brain, eating at memories, sensations, feelings, thoughts, and reactions. Others started to burrow through the skin, tearing it to shreds, leaving Robert as a collection of veins, tendons, muscles, and organs. The insects that had made a home in his disgusting living room devoured every inch of his flesh, until a few days later, he was a collection of bloody bones. On the Friday of that week, a few days into Robert's decomposition, the mailman noticed that his mailbox was full, and when he noticed the car was still in the driveway, he dropped the mail on the doorstep. After noticing the intense smell of rot, he made the decision to call the police, for someone had died.

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