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Mental [In]Stability: Isolation and Hallucination in the Horror Genre

Catherine Marshall Krafthefer

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MENTAL (IN)STABILITY: ISOLATION AND HALLUCINATION IN THE HORROR GENRE

Catherine Marshall Krafthefer

Mental [In]Stability: Isolation and Hallucination in the Horror Genre

Catherine Marshall Krafthefer

Columbus State University, 2015

B.A. Columbus State University, 2015

This manuscript analyzes the writings of Edgar Allan Poe, Stephen King, and Catherine Krafthefer. In this paper, mental [in]stability is defined and examined in each of the authors' works. Themes of physical and emotional isolation, as well as hallucinations, are established as contributing factors to mental [in]stability. These specific characteristics demonstrate the notion that the horror genre is a shift from realism to world where the protagonist is in a state of mental [in]stability, causing him to question his entire reality.

A Senior Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts at

Columbus State University

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Bachelor of Arts Senior Thesis

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APPROVAL PAGE

Bachelors of Arts Senior Thesis

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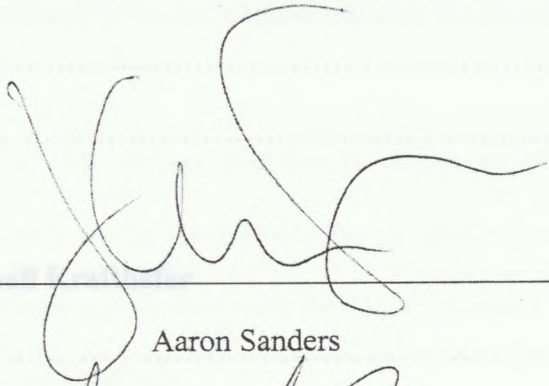
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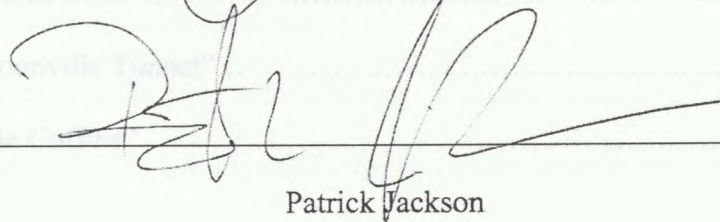
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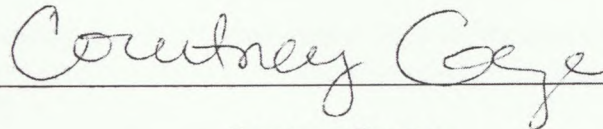
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My stories are expansions of legends told in real life, but I remove the real world aspects of the stories and put my protagonists in a place where reality is confused. Each story demonstrates in a different way of how this state of mental [in]stability can be reached through isolation and hallucinations.

[In]Stability Mental [In]Stability: Isolation and Hallucination in the Horror Genre

Catherine Marshall Krafthefer

Columbus State University, 2015

This thesis is a critical analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat" and *The Shining* by Stephen King. Mental [in]stability is defined and then used to describe how the protagonist in these stories moves from a place of realism, to a world where they no longer understand their reality. This idea of mental [in]stability is also demonstrated in the three short stories I have written.

In Poe's "The Black Cat," his narrator tells the tale of how he lost his mental [in]stability. By moving away from his realistic world, the narrator lost his ability to reason as his mental [in]stability declined. Poe executes this decline with the use of isolation and hallucination in order to change his narrator's surroundings.

Jack, the protagonist in King's *The Shining*, is another example of this decline of mental [in]stability. He and his family are trapped in the Overlook hotel for the winter, and as Jack begins to realize his isolation, his desire to drink alcohol comes back. This isolation, combined with hallucinations of seeing ghosts, is what causes Jack to become completely mentally unstable by the end of the novel.

My stories are expansions of legends told in real life, but I remove the real world aspects of the stories and put my protagonists in a place where reality is confused. Each story demonstrates in a different way of how this state of mental [in]stability can be reached through isolation and hallucinations.

[In]Stability: The Shift from Realism to Horror

In his scholarly article “Geometries of Terror: Numinous Spaces in Gothic, Horror and Science Fiction,” Manuel Aguirre explains the effects of physical and emotional spaces in the horror genres, dictating how each contributes to the fear in a story. But before delving into specifics, Aguirre defines the importance of the horror genre in literature: “fear provides a major theme in Gothic, but clearly this theme is not just a matter of cognitive import to characters and readers. Rather, it wills itself a perlocutionary act; it aims no less than at changing them and us—if only emotionally, if only for the brief spell of a page” (Aguirre 2). The purpose of the horror genre is to motivate readers to question the truth of their reality, which is similar to the purpose of other works of literature except the horror genre accomplishes this through a state of fear.

This fear that Aguirre mentions is the driving force in the horror genre, in order to get the characters and readers to question reality, which is executed by moving realistic characters from a place of established reality towards situations where his/her existence is questioned. Because characters and readers alike are questioning what is and is not real in a story, the foundation of mental stability crumbles, thus fabricating fear for both parties. By exploring this shift from realism, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat” and Stephen King’s *The Shining* use isolation and hallucinations to create a world where the protagonist reaches a state of mental [in]stability: something I try to imitate in my own stories as well.

Before examining these texts, I feel that it is important to first define what I mean by “[in]stability.” In realism, the protagonist of a story understands everything about his world, or as P. Sajeev describes in his paper on the revival of realism:

Realism is a faithful representation of everyday life. The characters and plot are commonplace and the story narrated is plausible. The narration is linear with an omniscient third person narrator. Realist writers always keep a healthy and viable connection with the past, from which they assimilate the necessary energy for fictionalization of their present context. They help imagination to produce visible effects of reality, thereby creating a reality effect to the events and movements of the everyday life. (2)

In the horror genre, the shift from the honest world of realism to a space where reality is confused with deception is when mental stability becomes mental [in]stability, as the character no longer leads a life that is "common." In this state of [in]stability, the character in question does not have a definite understanding of what is true and what is not; this could range from something that happened in his past, to where he is in a current, physical state. I use the term mental [in]stability when discussing the works of Poe and King because the protagonists in both "The Black Cat" and *The Shining* do not know whether or not their mental state can or cannot be trusted: he could be stable just as easily as he could be instable, much like the truth behind what is or is not believed to be his reality.

The factors that control this state of [in]stability are isolation and hallucination. Physical isolation plays a key role in [in]stability because the character is removed from the outside world, thus forcing him to determine on his own what the true reality is. Emotional isolation is similar in that the character must rely solely on himself to discover the truth of the situation he finds himself in, but different from physical isolation, as emotional isolation does not necessarily mean that the character in question is alone physically.

The second factor that controls [in]stability is the act of the character experiencing hallucinations. If a character has a hallucination, he is in a mental state where he does not know what is and what is not reality. In these specific works of Poe and King, these hallucinations are made worse by the abuse of alcohol. When the protagonist is drunk, as well as being in a state of mental [in]stability, it makes it that much more difficult for the character (and the reader) to understand if his hallucinations are real or rather figments of his drunken imagination.

Hallucinations are also made worse by the character's physical isolation, because if he is the only character that is there to witness the hallucination, he is unable to determine whether it is real or not because there is not a second party to either agree or disagree with him. Typically, the more the character begins to believe in the hallucinations that he is experiencing, the further his mental [in]stability deteriorates.

By using the state of isolation and the act of hallucinating to construct mental [in]stability, the horror genre removes itself from a world of realism and strips the characters of everything they once believed to be true. By doing so, the reader is asked to question what it means to have a foundation of mental stability and why it is vital to the survival of humanity. Poe and King attempt to answer this question by demonstrating what would happen in the event that a character is mentally [in]stable, as each character moves from a realistic world to one of chaos.

For instance, in *The Shining*, King uses the possibility of the existence of ghosts to force his protagonist, Jack, to question his mental [in]stability, but because of the protagonist's alcoholism, the determination of his mental state is proved to be even more difficult. In Poe's "The Black Cat," the ability for an animal to have complete control over the narrator's emotions is the catalyst for the story, but because of the narrator's mental [in]stability, the reader questions

the narrator's state of being, rather than wondering why these cats have such a great effect on him. While out of context, these bits of narrative can seem ridiculous, but they play major roles in these specific stories to move the plot along and act as a platform to discuss the state of mental [in]stability. Because of this, through their works, Poe and King are able to define the importance of the human's mental stability in horrifying times as each author proves that the fall of mental [in]stability often results in the destruction of the man's character as a whole.

The stories that I have written follow a similar model, as I have used my stories to discuss how isolation and hallucinations can effect mental [in]stability. For example, in "Alfred's Cat," the narrator is physically and emotionally isolated when he is forced to witness a murder. His state of mental [in]stability is then questioned because the situation is so out of the ordinary for him, he does not know what to make of what has happened. In "Moonville Tunnel," the protagonist is isolated physically and begins to have, what she believes to be, hallucinations. However, due to the nature of the circumstances and her previous state of mental [in]stability, the reader is left to decide what is real and what is not. And in "The Coffins," the protagonist is isolated both physically and emotionally, as he tries to decipher the truth behind a conspiracy theory that he has heard. What he sees is real, but it is so strange to him that he is not sure if he is hallucinating or not.

It is interesting to see how authors like Poe and King are using similar themes in their stories, even though they are writing so many years apart. These themes consist of the fear that comes from being alone as well as the unexplained world of hallucinations. In the instance of this particular thesis, these two sources of fear are the reason for a character's mental [in]stability, which is what Poe, King, and I use to bring the horror to a high point in our stories, as characters are moved from realism in order to question the reality of their surroundings. The

questioning of surroundings force writers and readers to examine what it means to have mental [in]stability and how it affects humanity.

Narrating [In]Stability in Horror: Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat"

Often referred to as the grandfather of horror, Edgar Allan Poe created narrators that suffer from mental [in]stability, usually paired with some form of addiction or obsession, which often give his writings questionable narratives. However, by using mental [in]stability, Poe makes the impossible believable for his readers in "The Black Cat" because the narrator is taken from a realistic setting to a place where he is unable to determine the reality of his new situation.

The story begins with the narrator explaining that a series of events changed him from a docile man to one who continues to be haunted by what he has done, so before the reader knows any details of the account, there is already a discrepancy between how the narrator sees himself and how everyone else sees him: "For the most wild yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not" (Poe 203). When the narrator proceeds to explain his story, the reader is then forced to accept his version of what happened, thus already blurring the lines of his mental [in]stability, and by doing so, Poe suggests that the story itself is not a reliable truth.

The theme of having an unreliable narrator is not one that Poe uses exclusively in his story "The Black Cat," as Poe often created characters that are victim to mental [in]stability, or as in his paper "Edgar Allan Poe's Fantastic Short Stories," Santiago Guerrero-Strachan states: "most of Poe's characters suffer a kind of mania that makes them see a distorted reality"

(Guerrero-Strachan 70). In “The Black Cat,” Poe has created a protagonist who is overcome with feelings that he cannot control, feelings of rage and violence. These feelings leave him in a state of emotional isolation, separated from his wife and eventually his beloved pet cat: “I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence. My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my disposition. I not only neglected, but ill-used them” (Poe 204). This is the first time that the narrator admits to his crimes in the story, displaying the effects of his emotional isolation on his mental [in]stability.

Pluto, the narrator’s beloved cat, was the one thread that proved the narrator had a shred of humanity: “my favorite pet and playmate... Our friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years” (Poe 204). However, the instance where he gouges Pluto’s eye out for biting him is when the reader understands that the narrator’s temperament has changed and will not return to the way he was once before. The narrator explains: “I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fiber of my frame” (Poe 204).

At the time of the incident, the narrator had been drinking, furthering the confusion of his state of mental [in]stability. Soon after this event, the narrator feels guilty for what he has done to the cat, so he hangs the cat to death—to end its suffering. Though Pluto would have survived and healed in time, the narrator saw that the cat was wounded, much like himself, and he made the choice to end the Pluto’s life instead. By doing so, the narrator simultaneously rejected his own reality: “[I] hung it *because* I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin—a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul” (Poe 205). In his scholarly article, Wagdalen Wing-Chi Ki explains: “The hanging of Pluto is a voluntary act of calculated wrongdoing, or moral

suicide in the traditional sense, for the narrator 'enjoys' the death of the cat and the damnation of his soul. His new 'ethical' being is characterized by elevating evil to the level of a maxim, for it is now his principle to act against the good" (Ki 577-578). Pluto was the one constant that seemed to be holding the narrator's mental [in]stability together, and without Pluto, the narrator was more emotionally isolated than before.

Because of this furthered state of emotional isolation and mental [in]stability, the narrator witnesses what seems to be a hallucination after his home catches fire: "I approached and saw, as if graven in *bas-relief* upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic *cat*... There was a rope about the animal's neck" (Poe 205). Though there are bystanders who seem to see the image of the cat as well, the narrator continues to obsess over the image, wondering why it is there. He admits that even though he has an explanation for the impression of the cat, he thinks, "it did not the less fail to make a deep impression upon my fancy. For months I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat" (Poe 205). This hallucination of sorts has caused the narrator to question the reality of his situation, which is only made worse when a new cat, that resembles Pluto, enters his home.

After the new cat arrives, the narrator begins to feel indifferent about the creature: "I soon found a dislike to it arising within me. This was just the reverse of what I had anticipated; but—I know not how or why it was—these feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred" (Poe 206). This hatred led the narrator to an eventual murder attempt on the cat, but in the process, he killed his wife instead. Without much hesitation, the narrator buried his wife in the walls of his cellar and moved forward with his life.

It seems as if the narrator thrives on physical isolation once the wife is killed: "I soundly and tranquilly slept; aye, slept even with the burden of murder upon my soul... Once again I

breathed as a freeman.” (Poe 208). It is possible that here, the narrator speaks about the evil personality that had risen in him during these events that he describes. However, due to his state of mental [in]stability, he accidentally informs the police where his wife’s body is hidden, as he taps on the very spot of the wall where his wife’s body is. A cat’s howl comes from behind the wall, and the wife is discovered. His subconscious desire to not be alone, combined with his overwrought guilt caused the narrator to become completely mentally unstable, thus confessing to his crimes.

In order for this kind of character to be believable for the reader, Poe made the setting of these stories parts of common, everyday life and “stripped away [the fantastic’s] supernatural features” (Guerrero-Strachan 71). By placing his characters in a real-world situation, “the reader cannot tell whether the events have a natural origin or they are supernatural” (Guerrero-Strachan 71), thus forcing the reader to accept the narrator and his surroundings as they are, knowing that the narrator has moved from realism to a place where he is emotionally isolated, having hallucinations, and experiencing the downfall of his mental [in]stability.

Jack and [In]Stability in Stephen King’s *The Shining*

Stephen King has written multiple novels in the horror genre that share similar elements of writing in them: isolation and hallucinations of the supernatural persuasion. These elements contribute to the collapsing of a character’s reality, and thus his or her mental [in]stability. Though this crumbling [in]stability is what moves the story away from realism, King often creates characters that are already suffering, or are in recovery from, some form of addiction which brings a realistic element to the plot, causing the reader to be more invested in the story.

These characteristics are seen in King's *The Shining*, more specifically in the protagonist, Jack Torrance.

In the novel, Jack is a recovering alcoholic who takes the position of a caretaker for the winter, which leaves him stranded in the Overlook Hotel with his wife Wendy and his young son Danny. King goes to a great length to describe how physically isolated the Torrance family is while they reside in the Overlook:

Flakes of snow swirled and danced across the porch. The Overlook faced it as it had for nearly three quarters of a century, its darkened windows now bearded with snow, indifferent to the fact that it was now cut off from the world. Or possibly it was pleased with the prospect. Inside its shell the three of them went about their early evening routine, like microbes trapped in the intestine of a monster. (317)

Here, the Overlook acts as a prison which traps Jack and his family inside for the entirety of the winter months. This is where physical and emotional isolation begins to have a negative effect on Jack, as his mental [in]stability begins to decline.

King is using isolation to prey on Jack's previously established mental [in]stability. In addition to this physical isolation from society, Jack feels emotionally isolated due to his alcohol addiction, and the fact that his wife refuses to understand what he is going through. Prior to moving into the Overlook, Jack tried to stop drinking after an accident where he believed that he hit a child with his car. But after realizing the reality of the situation he was in—being stranded in the Overlook—the desire to drink grew stronger as the days crept on.

This desire, compiled with his obsession of old newspaper clippings he found in the cellar and his unfinished play, sparked the deterioration of his relationship with his family. These marital issues further pushed Jack into a state of mental [in]stability, causing his old, bad habits

to return. As a result, he became violent in nature towards his wife and child. In his book *Landscape of Fear*, Tony Magistrale mentions that, "King's version of the moral allegory owes its formulation to, and is once again reminiscent of, the romance tradition in nineteenth and twentieth-century American literature. Typically the tales of Poe... Poe's troubled narrators" (Magistrale 57). As mentioned with the narrator in Poe's "The Black Cat," the protagonist slips from a realistic character into one that loses his reality and succumbs to a more evil personality that is fueled by mental [in]stability.

During this isolation and Jack's desire to drink again, he begins to have what he believes to be hallucinations. He hears and sees people in the halls and rooms of the Overlook, as does his son. While it is suggested that the wife also has these visions, King does not explicitly say if she does or not. Jack, as well as his son, have a questionable state of mental [in]stability, but because the son has what they call "the shining," there is an explanation as to why he has these hallucinations. Jack assumes that he too has this gift, but it is not certain, so it is suggested that the isolation and hallucinations sparked by the Overlook are what caused the downfall of his [in]stability.

At the climax of the novel, Jack hallucinates and believes that he is drinking and in attendance of a party in the Overlook. There is a moment where Jack is confused about what has happened, because he was sure that the Overlook did not have accessible alcohol or other guests at the time: "The ballroom was empty... [Jack's] head still reeling, he still felt drunk, but when he turned back to the mantelpiece, his drink was gone... The place was empty... but the bar was fully stocked. God be praised!" (King 540-541). It is possible that Jack only imagines that he has been drinking, thus his subconscious is forcing him to act drunk, as the beginning of the novel states that the only alcohol in the Overlook is cooking sherry.

Even if the drunkenness were only fabricated in Jack's mind, he acts as if he were drunk, which would explain his hallucinations and violent behavior. Alcoholism is an aspect used in the story to attract readers, as it could be classified as realism, thus giving readers something to relate to. Magistrale has noted this use of King's commentary on contemporary American culture in his novels: "Because many of these references initially appear to be nothing more than innocuous aspects of American life, they often lull the reader into a false sense of security so that the terror, when sprung, becomes all more terrifying" (Magistrale 54). King uses relatable, alcohol abuse as a foundation to support Jack's hallucinations and crumbling mental [in]stability.

These hallucinations have given Jack this idea that the Overlook Hotel is his permanent home—that he must kill his family and stay there indefinitely. He storms the hallways of the Overlook with a roque mallet, with every intention of killing his wife and son, but when Jack failed to murder Wendy, he turned his attention towards murdering Danny. It is at this point in the novel, where Jack hesitates to kill his son, that King lets the reader know Jack has reached a state of mental [in]stability where he cannot turn back to reality: "Its hands closed around the mallet again, but instead of aiming at Danny, it reversed the handle, aiming the hard side of the roque mallet at its own face. Understanding rushed through Danny. Then the mallet began to rise and descend, destroying the last of Jack Torrance's image" (King 653-654). After this scene, Jack's character is no longer referred to as Jack, but rather an "it"—the thing that destroyed and took the place of what once was Jack Torrance.

While these traits of isolation and hallucinations are critical to the storyline, they are merely stepping-stones to the loss of Jack's mental [in]stability, and how this loss is the core of the story's horror. In his critical essay of King's work, "Horror Springs in the Fiction of Stephen King," in response to King's own statement on *The Shining*: "The book, to me at least, seemed to

be primarily a story about a miserable, damned man who is being driven to destroy all the things he loves,” Don Herron suggests: “Horror springs in King’s stories from contemporary social reality, and I’d say it is this quality more than any other which has made King a best seller” (Herron 74).

By the end of the book, Jack’s physical and emotional isolation, alcoholism, and eventual hallucinations have turned him into a monster of sorts, as his mental [in]stability has completely deteriorated. Before the end of the novel, as Jack sits locked inside the pantry by himself, he begins to wonder aloud: “Aren’t you the fellow who once was going to live by his wits? Jack Torrance, best-selling author... All any of that shit boiled down to was living by your wits” (King 578). Here, King is commenting on the importance of one having mental stability, otherwise living a sane life is impossible.

The Use of [In]Stability in “Alfred’s Cat,” “Moonville Tunnel,” and “The Coffins”

For my three stories, in order to model this shift from realism used by both Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King, I borrowed from my own personal experiences but put twists in the plot, so to bring the protagonists to a level of mental [in]stability. “Alfred’s Cat,” a story told from the perspective of a housecat named Percy, extends the boundaries of physical and emotional isolation and demonstrates how that affects the loss of mental [in]stability, thus changing the nature of the narrator. “Moonville Tunnel” is about a middle-aged woman who is trapped in a train tunnel by her own hallucinations, and she struggles to determine what is and is not reality while her mental [in]stability crumbles. Lastly, “The Coffins” is a story about a young man who stumbles upon a government conspiracy, the knowledge of which causes him to become aware

of his physical isolation and have hallucinations, thus furthering the state of his mental [in]stability.

I had the idea for “Alfred’s Cat” after having watched a documentary about the infamous serial killer, John Wayne Gacy. I learned that Gacy hid a number of his victim’s bodies in the structure of his home, which reminded me of Poe’s stories, including “The Black Cat.” While considering the crimes of Gacy, I wondered what it would have been like for a housecat to be stuck in that situation. I have a cat, and she is always so interested in everything that I am doing: she watches me cook, she watches me brush my teeth, she watches me watch documentaries, etc. So, I couldn’t help but think: “What if a cat was forced to see his/her owner commit murder?” The idea of having a cat named Percy narrate the series of events is what shifts my story from realism. Using physical isolation, I demonstrated how this all affected Percy’s mental [in]stability.

“Alfred’s Cat” is told from Percy’s point of view in order to portray these feelings that a housecat might have in such a situation. Though it is impossible to know what cats are really thinking, I assumed that a housecat would be well-versed on the particular personality of his/her owner. Therefore, Percy is a reliable, all-knowing narrator who has to watch the unfortunate decline of his owner’s mental [in]stability. Percy has some sort of defense to hide and protect himself from Alfred, but ultimately, Percy has no form of escape and must rely on Alfred to feed him and keep him alive. Because of Alfred’s now violent temperament, Percy also suffers from mental [in]stability, as he experiences what it is like to live in a constant state of fear. Percy desperately wants to escape his home, but since he is a cat, he feels physically isolated and trapped behind the walls of the house, which now he sees as a prison.

“Moonville Tunnel” is based off of a real place in Ohio, and it really is supposedly haunted. When my husband and I went to Ohio to visit his parents, we took a daytrip to see the Moonville Tunnel. Of course we didn’t find anything but an old, out of commission train tunnel, but my imagination was still running wild. I had my notebook with me and was jotting down every storyline that popped into my head. I rearranged the real setting and used bits and pieces from various tellings of the local legend, but once I created the character Kate, who suffers from severe Panic and Anxiety Disorder, the story moved from realism to a space where Kate cannot decipher what her true reality is.

At the beginning of the story, Kate is enjoying her physical isolation, as she is traveling out of town from the bustling streets of New York City. But once she gets to the graveyard and train tunnel that are supposedly haunted, her mind starts to race, wondering what could happen to her out there in the middle-of-nowhere. It’s not until she tries to leave the area when she becomes trapped, and Kate starts to panic. She becomes aware of the potential dangers of her physical isolation, and her mental [in]stability starts to slip.

I created the story of “The Coffins” from a wild tale that my husband’s barber told us one time. She claimed that somewhere in Georgia, “the government” was storing large coffins, big enough to fit multiple people in the event of an Ebola outbreak. I scoffed at this idea, but she told me to look it up on the Internet when I got home. My curiosity got the best of me, so when I got home, I found a video of these supposed coffins. However, after doing some research (and having to sift through many websites and videos of conspiracy theories), I discovered that these containers were not coffins, but liners to caskets, hence their large size. So in the event of a heavy rain, the caskets buried in the ground would be protected by these liners. Manufacturers who supply these liners store them on leased property because there simply isn’t anywhere else

for them to be stored. Even though I knew the truth behind these “containers,” the idea of a government-induced mass killing inspired me to write a story about a man who would stumble upon these “coffins.”

Marcus, the protagonist of my story is alone, driving through middle-Georgia and trying to make his way back home. The engine in his car overheats so he has to walk to a service station for help. At first, he is afraid of walking through the woods in Georgia by himself, because he is a black man from Chicago, and he assumed that a small town in the South would still abide by the rules of its racist roots. Earlier the narrator mentions:

The car was going a steady fifty-five miles an hour. Marcus figured that he shouldn't try to speed in these parts, the cops would be quick to pull over a black man such as himself.

He didn't even want to think about what they would do to him out there in the middle-of-nowhere—Marcus refused to admit that it scared him. (48)

By the time he gets to the service station, his physical isolation has made him very anxious. It is at the service station that he learns about the conspiracy theory, then he has to walk back to his car, alone, afraid of white supremacists and government-hired snipers. Marcus' once-strong, healthy mental state has dropped to a place of mental [in]stability.

Paired with physical isolation, I use emotional isolation in my stories as well to further worsen the state of my protagonists' mental [in]stability. By adding emotional isolation to the stories, the protagonists' feelings of fear are increased because they realize that the options of figuring out their true realities are limited, as they are alone and have no one to turn to.

In “Alfred's Cat,” Percy feels emotionally isolated because his once-stable relationship with Alfred has turned into a violent and frightening experience. Not only does Percy miss the love he and Alfred shared, he also feels neglected, as now there is no one there to take care of

him. In the story, he explains: “Just as I heard a mouse squeaking from not too far away, the front door upstairs opened and slammed closed. Alfred was home. The mouse scurried away, frightened by the noise. Some higher power was certainly testing my own patience at this point. I couldn’t eat, I couldn’t escape, and now I couldn’t even fend for myself” (Krafthefer 30). This emotional isolation and neglect has pushed Percy to the next level of mental [in]stability as the reader begins to see his demeanor change.

Kate, in “Moonville Tunnel,” relies on the company of others for comfort because of her Panic and Anxiety Disorder. When she is stranded at the tunnel by herself, not only is she petrified by the aspect of physical isolation, she is terrified of having to go through this experience alone. She tries to make contact with a shadow, whom she believes is a man, and she tries to call 9-1-1—but she has no success. Being emotionally isolated causes Kate, in other words, to shut down and give up hope. She succumbs to the isolation and does not fight being scared of what is happening around her. Her mental [in]stability has almost completely deteriorated at this point in the story.

Marcus, like Percy, starts off as a strong character—he is strong willed and won’t admit to any emotions that he may be feeling, sad or fearful. However when he learns of the conspiracy theory, he begins to wish that his friends and family back home were there with him, or better yet, that he were home. He thinks about his mom and his best friend, Otto, as he makes the trek back to his car. Paranoia rises within him as he fears that he will not get to see them again. This emotional isolation is what sparks Marcus’ desire to sprint for his vehicle, as he no longer trusts his reality or his mental [in]stability.

It is at this point in all three of my stories, after an established state of isolation, that I incorporate the idea of hallucinations. In mental [in]stability, hallucinations are key to a

character's distrust of reality, as they do not know what is and is not really happening around them. All three of my stories demonstrate this to a certain degree.

Towards the end of "Alfred's Cat," Percy has a difficult time believing what is happening before his very eyes—his once beloved owner, Alfred, is murdering an innocent woman in their home. Percy hesitates to react to the situation, one because he does not believe that he could be of any help to the woman, and two because he is afraid of Alfred. Percy fears that what is happening in their upstairs bedroom is real-life, and he no longer wants to trust his own reality. But this fear of hallucination is short-lived, as Percy braves the stairs in order to find out what is really going on. Unfortunately for Percy, Alfred really is trying to murder the woman. But because Percy had a moment of self-doubt and pondered the possibility of a hallucination, he no longer trusts himself or his own mental [in]stability.

Hallucinations are an important piece to the plot in "Moonville Tunnel," as they are in King's *The Shining*: the reader sees what is happening to the protagonist but doesn't know what to believe as the true reality because of the protagonist's previously established mental [in]stability. For Kate, her panic attacks cause her to question her reality on a day-to-day basis. So in combination with the physical and emotional isolation, Kate has no chance when it comes to understanding the things that appear to be happening around her:

Then everything stopped: the wind, the rain, the light, the voices. Kate didn't realize that she had her eyes closed tight. When she opened them, there stood the entrance of the tunnel just fifty yards from where she was. Her BMW was parked just outside, underneath the tree where she had left it. For a brief moment, Kate couldn't decide if this was a trick or not. (46)

Because she has already succumbed to a state of mental [in]stability, these hallucinations only frighten her more and paralyze her in such a way that she no longer has the desire to escape.

For Marcus in "The Coffins," hallucinations play only a small, but very important role in the fall of his mental [in]stability. After he learns of the conspiracy theory, he becomes paranoid. The old man at the service station tells Marcus that the government would kill anyone who found out about their plan. Marcus wanted to blow-off the old man and pretend that he was crazy, but the idea of someone killing him over that secret ate away at him. As he walked back to his car, he felt like there were eyes watching him. With every snap of a twig, Marcus is turning to see if someone is following him. The closer he gets to his car, the darker it gets, the more alone Marcus feels, these small noises and feelings form into hallucinations. Marcus finally breaks into a sprint for his vehicle, when his mental [in]stability falls apart.

As mentioned previously, I believe that these elements of mental [in]stability create a sense of horror because they move the story from a place of realism to a place where any reality can no longer be trusted. I believe, that in order to live a healthy, fulfilling life, one must have their mental health, and for these protagonists that is not the case. Because each one of their minds has been crushed to a state of mental [in]stability, their worlds simultaneously fall apart, leaving them with nothing, not even the truth of reality.

Afterward

Going into this study, I already knew a great deal about Edgar Allan Poe and his writings, but I wasn't as educated on the works of Stephen King. After conducting my research, not only did I learn even more about each author, but I also noticed how much they had in common, and

how much King was inspired by the writings of Poe. For me, the biggest thing that stuck out about both Poe and Kings' stories were the connections that their narrators made with the readers. Because of this running theme that the narrator is questioning the reality around them, Poe and King were able to write less believable storylines, as everything could be explained through the narrator's mental [in]stability. This connection is something that made me look at my own works and reevaluate if my stories were believable or not. And while I had to work on my protagonists quite a bit, in order to make their stories believable to the reader, the elements of isolation and hallucinations fell into place as the characters' mental [in]stabilities crumbled.

In some ways I can relate to this faltering mental [in]stability, as I am currently being treated for Panic and Anxiety Disorder. I tend to obsess over worst-case scenarios in my head if I am in a stressful or anxious situation. The germ of the idea for all of my stories stemmed from personal experiences and real-life stories, only greatly played out and highly exaggerated. I believe this is why I enjoy the horror genre as much as I do—I appreciate the storylines, as I am sure that the authors, on some level, have to allow themselves to go to a darker corner of their minds in order to develop the story that they are wanting to write.

Instead of trying to stifle the anxiety formed from my disorder, I have been inspired by the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King to let my darker thoughts run free and develop into stories.

The White Tiger? *W/P Journal of English Studies* 9:1 (2011) Catherine Marshall Krafthefer

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Alfred's Cat

by Catherine Marshall Krafthefer

Alfred had not been the same since he decided to audition for the lead female role, Rosie Alvarez, in New York's newest production, *Bye Bye Birdie*, which was to open April of 1960. Every day and night, he stood in front of the oversized mirror that hung in the formal living room of our home. He always rehearsed in costume: dress, wig, makeup and all. Yes, I felt it to be a little odd, but his falsetto voice was undeniable. After each performance, in front of the mirror, he turned to me and asked how it was. I never failed to *meow* in response, even if at times, I felt that his depiction lacked passion. Alfred looked so happy dressed as Rosie, and I wanted to encourage him as much as a housecat could.

The closer his day to audition came, the more excited he got. Rosie and *Bye Bye Birdie* were the only topics that he could seem to speak of. From my spot on the back of the oversized, orange couch in the living room, I watched him brush his wigs. His hands were that of a man's—strong and bony. He kept his brown hair short, so he could slip his wigs on with ease. His body was thin and slender, but I knew he had great strength, as he often rearranged the furniture in the living room to suit the scene he wanted to rehearse for the play.

Finally the day came for him to audition. Too excited and nervous for breakfast, Alfred stroked my dark gray fur and filled my food bowl just before he left.

"Wish me luck, Percy!" Alfred yelled as he fled from our home, and I patiently awaited his return.

Several hours later, Alfred stomped through the front door and threw his costumes and wigs on the floor of the adjacent kitchen. Apparently, the casting crew did not even ask him for

callbacks. He cried into my fur that night, moaning about how they only wanted a *woman* to play the part. I purred in response, trying to console the man, but he couldn't be comforted.

That night, he put each costume on and rehearsed the show over and over again, into the wee hours of the morning. I watched from underneath the couch, afraid to get in his way. These odd, solo rehearsals occurred every night. Unfortunately for me, the house had an open layout, so his living room rehearsals were unavoidable if I had to travel anywhere within the home. I would try to creep by, so that I could eat or use the litterbox, but I always failed to go unnoticed.

Oftentimes, he would spot me slinking along, scoop me up and shake me violently, asking "Why me? Why me?" I never had a response for him, but out of fear, I would scratch him with my claws so that he would let me go. Some nights he would apologize for his actions and try to make it up to me with an offering of canned tuna. But on the more troubling nights, he would throw me down to the ground, kicking me as I tried to run away. I would sulk in the corner for a few days, mending my bruises and licking his dried blood off of my claws.

A few weeks went by, and Alfred seemed to have come to terms with the rejection of his role. He had packed up his costumes in trunks and stored them in the cellar—the most dreadful place. The ground consisted of packed dirt, the walls of bare concrete. There was not but one singular light in the whole space, which illuminated only the stairway that led from the kitchen to this dirt and concrete, hellish nightmare. Once, Alfred put a flap on the cellar door so that I could venture down there and use my litterbox at my leisure. I laughed at the notion and continued to defecate on the carpeting upstairs until he gave in and moved my box from the dungeons of hell.

One morning, Alfred was drinking his coffee at the table and reading the newspaper. I was perched on the windowsill behind him, staring at birds that fluttered by, free in the outside world. A rattling noise came from Alfred's direction, and I looked up to see that his arms were

vibrating with anger. His face was flushed a deep red, so I jumped off the windowsill to hide underneath the couch.

“Percy!” He shouted. I came to halt in the middle of the living room and flattened my ears. “That damned show opens tonight,” he spit, arms still shaking. Suddenly, he let out a terrifying and maniacal laugh. “I wonder what whore they found to play *my* Rosie!” He slammed the paper down on the table so hard that his cup tumbled over and hot coffee spilled everywhere.

He stood up from the table, and I took the opportunity to run and hide, afraid that I would, once again, become victim to his anger. I watched from underneath the orange couch as Alfred picked up a pair of scissors from his desk and began to clip the announcement from the newspaper. Coffee continued to drip in a steady stream, from the top of the laminate table to the floor below.

Alfred stomped up the stairs, and I dared to follow him. But instead of going to his bedroom like he usually did, he turned a sharp corner and went into the spare room. It had been sometime since I had been in the spare bedroom. Alfred used it as a guest room for his mother when she visited. I used to nap on the end of the bed, in the sunlight. But soon after she passed away, he stripped the room of everything that it had. Bare, hardwood floors and pale-yellow walls were the only things that the room consisted of. Alfred kept the room locked, and I assumed that he did so just to keep me from batting the door open and letting the furnace heat an unnecessary room. But when he swung open the door, I realized that this was not the case.

Apparently, during one of my many cat naps I suppose, Alfred had brought all of his trunks up to this room. He displayed the costumes on creepy mannequins, had all of his makeup organized out on a vanity, and on the wall opposite of this display, he had begun to hang

newspaper clippings and pieces of the script. It became clear to me that Alfred had not accepted his rejection, but rather it had manifested into some type of obsession.

I avoided Alfred for the next few days, as he was constantly coming and going from the house. He had forgotten to feed me at some point halfway through the week, and I could feel my stomach rumbling. I tried my best to catch stray roaches that would wander in from the porch, but it was not enough to satisfy my hunger. There were few windows in the house that I was able to jump to, but Alfred never failed to leave them closed. If the doors to the outside were unlocked, I may have been able to bat them open, but I was not so lucky. Against my strongest urges, I decided to descend to the cellar to see if I could catch a mouse for dinner.

The flap smacked my hind quarters as I passed through the thin plastic that was atop the stairs. I so wished I could reach the string to turn on the light as I peered down the dim, concrete steps. My pupils dilated so I could see in the darkness. With each step I took, I would pause to ensure that I was not in any danger. Once at the foot of the staircase, I sat unsettled and waited for my prey to run by.

A mantra kept running through my head: "All you have to do is survive, all you have to do is survive, ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS SURVIVE." But it didn't matter if I screamed the thought in my head or not—I couldn't force a mouse to run by, and I certainly couldn't ask Alfred to feed me. He might have chopped me up and had me for a meal himself, considering his current mental state.

Just as I heard a mouse squeaking from not too far away, the front door upstairs opened and slammed closed. Alfred was home. The mouse scurried away, frightened by the noise. Some higher power was certainly testing my own patience at this point. I couldn't eat, I couldn't escape, and now I couldn't even fend for myself. Annoyed and curious, I darted back up the

stairs and tried my best to see through the plastic cover on the pet door to learn what Alfred was up to. I saw two figures struggling their way up the stairs—Alfred was not alone.

I heard the muffled screams of a woman trying to break free from the grasp of Alfred's hands, which were masking her face. Her dark-brown hair was messy, as the struggle between the two must have been continuing for some time now.

Once I heard their footsteps on the floor above me, I dared to exit from behind the safety of the plastic flap. I crept along the hardwood floors, my ears flat so that I could hear if anyone was approaching me from behind.

"No! Why me?" I heard the woman screech from the room at the top of the stairs, along with the distinct sound of duct tape being ripped off its roll.

I peered my head over the bottom stairs, straining to make out the movement in the room. Alfred was laughing like a mad man, and the hair on my tail puffed out. I wanted to escape, but I couldn't. The front door remained closed and locked shut. The shadows in the room danced, as Alfred walked around what appeared to be the woman sitting in a chair.

I considered trying to help the woman by attacking Alfred, in the hopes that she would let me escape the house with her. I lurked my way up the stairs, the woman's heavy breathing getting louder and louder as I drew closer to the room.

When I peeped my eyes around the corner of the doorframe, the woman was facing me while Alfred's back was to me. Her eyes widened upon seeing me, and I noticed a printed advertisement hanging behind her. The dark hair, deep-brown eyes, and ivory colored skin are one in the same.

She is *Rosie*.

My God, he has gone completely mad.

I hid in the shadows, hoping Alfred wouldn't see me and tie me up along with Rosie. He had wrapped duct tape around her entire head to cover her mouth. It was too tight, and the skin around the tape started to turn a light shade of purple.

Her wrists were duct taped to the arms of the chair, and her feet were bound as well. She was screaming behind the tape, but it only sounded like a muffled moan. Tears were streaming down her cheeks as she darted her eyes around the room, realizing Alfred's obsession, thus answering her question, "why her?"

Alfred let her squirm in her chair as he got dressed in one of his costumes. He pulled the brown wig over his head. Quickly applying make-up and pulling on a pair of pumps, Alfred pulled a large knife out from one of the drawers of his vanity.

The hair on my back stood on end, in expectation of what would come next. Alfred began to dance around the woman, knife in hand.

"Bye-bye Birdie," he was singing on a loop. With each "birdie," he made a small slice on the woman's arms by flailing the knife about in the air. She would wince and scream each time he did this.

"I'm going to make you ugly," Alfred whispered near the woman's ear. He then took the knife to cut off large chunks of her hair, letting it float to the hardwoods beneath them.

She began to wildly stomp her feet, though they were wrapped together at the ankles. She managed to knock over her chair and Alfred in one, fell swoop. While he scrambled to grab his knife, she kicked him in the shin and scooted her way towards the doorway.

I bolted down the stairs, to not get in their way. I don't know if Alfred pushed her, or if she pushed herself in attempts to escape, but Rosie, chair and all, came tumbling down the stairs, causing a great commotion.

Rosie. The chair split into pieces, allowing for Rosie to stand and try to tumble away. But she fell over, as it appeared that she broke one of her legs. Alfred was laughing as he strolled down the stairs.

“You can’t get away now, dearest Rosie,” he spoke softly.

He grasped the woman up by a fistful of what remained of her hair and slammed her down on the couch, right above where I was hiding. I grew very nervous, as there was no way I could escape without Alfred seeing me.

“I’m going to slice that pretty little throat of yours, so that you can’t ruin Rosie one more time,” Alfred was laughing.

The woman screamed behind her duct tape once more, and I bravely stuck out one paw with outstretched claws. In a quick motion, I swiped across Alfred’s bare leg. He cried out and bent down to discover the source of his pain. I hissed and tried to scratch his face, but he withdrew.

“You’re next, little rat,” he hissed back at me before he stood up.

I heard a slicing noise and Alfred humming the finale to *Bye Bye Birdie*. He started to laugh as I saw the blood begin to pour off the orange fabric and onto the hardwood floors. Large pools of deep-red blood began to form, and I inched my way along to the other side of the couch so that the liquid wouldn’t touch me.

“Percy!”

Every muscle fiber in my body froze.

Alfred peered under the couch and saw me there, crouched and shaking. He grabbed me by the scruff of my neck. I protested by hissing, showing my teeth, and trying to claw him, but this didn’t faze the man. His wig had fallen off somewhere in his altercation with the now-dead

Rosie. He'd lost one of his shoes and his costume was torn as well—he looked insane. This was not the Alfred that I had lived with and loved for so many years, for I no longer knew him. I wanted to hurt him, hurt him badly and then run far away—a desire I had never felt before. He held the knife up to me, blood still dripping off the sharp edge.

“Should you be next?” He asked. “You’ve been a real pain in my ass lately.”

Suddenly, there was a loud knock at the door, and another party introduced itself.

“New York PD, open up!”

Alfred dropped me, and I scampered off to hide in the cellar. I heard Alfred scramble to pull Rosie’s body off the couch, but then the police busted down the front door.

There were a series of hollers and yells, so I looked through the flap of the cellar once more. The police and Alfred seemed to be in a stand-off, with dead Rosie now halfway on the floor, and blood smeared all down the front of Alfred’s dress.

Alfred lunged at one of the officers with his knife, so another officer pulled the trigger on his drawn handgun. Multiple shots and a few seconds later, Alfred’s body was dead on the ground, next to Rosie.

I noticed the front door was open, so I took the opportunity to run out from the cellar and make my way to freedom. Just as I was to cross the threshold of my prison, a third officer scooped me up. I cried out a *meow*, and he softly stroked my fur while speaking in a thick, New York accent.

“It’s okay, little buddy. It’s over now.”

I glanced out the open door and breathed in the fresh air. Snuggled close to the officer’s chest, I felt safe. The nightmare was over, Alfred was gone, and I was a loving housecat once more.

Moonville Tunnel

by Catherine Marshall Krafthefer

Kate lined her lips with a matte, fire-engine-red lipstick. Her duffle bag was packed with a change of clothes and the proper papers she needed in order to mark her three-times great grandfather's grave. The commute from New York to the small town in Ohio had been long, but she found the autumn air in Chillicothe to be crisper than the bogged-down air in the city. She sighed, temporarily relieving the tightness in her chest.

She had checked in at a small motel off SR-50, the only road that ran through that part of town. Though she would have preferred to stay in her room for the night, she was starving and noticed that there had been a diner just a few miles down the road. Slipping on her black, leather gloves, she buttoned her wine-colored pea coat and grabbed her purse. Just before leaving her small room, she grabbed the two medicine bottles off the table and shoved them into her purse—her anxiety medication.

Her silver, two-door BMW was the only car in the lot, besides the owner's beat-up truck. Kate knew that she didn't belong in a small town like this; she stuck out like a sore thumb. She made the conscious decision to have the grave marked as soon as possible, and to get the hell out of there. She had only agreed to come down to Ohio because her ill grandmother could not rest knowing that her grandfather's grave would forever read *Unknown*. Her family had been meaning to mark the grave ever since Kate's aunt traced the lineage back so many generations and learned of the relative's resting place, but none of them had been willing to make the trip before then. Plus, Kate's therapist thought it would be good for her to go on an extended road trip by herself, to get out of the city, and to physically distance herself from her problems for a while.

The roads were quiet and empty, something that Kate was not used to. The sun was setting, casting an orange glow on the dying, multi-colored leaves. She took a moment to breathe and appreciate being out of the city. Pushing down on the acceleration of her BMW, Kate was curious as to how it felt to drive fast on an open road. She noticed a cop car in the distance, parked at the diner, so she slowed down and crept into the gravel parking lot.

Kate parked her car among a few others in the lot of the diner, which looked like something that had been plucked right out of the fifties. Neon lights illuminated the words "Diner" and "Open." The walls consisted of large picture windows, framed by what appeared to be aluminum.

A small bell rang when the door swung open, and Kate sat in a booth nearest to the door. There was a jukebox in the corner, and a Hank Williams Jr. song played throughout the restaurant. All the booths and tables had metal frames with red vinyl seats. There was a bar at the counter where old-style milkshake machines sat. Sizzles from various grills and loud hollers came from the kitchen. A plump waitress rounded the corner of the counter and approached the booth. Kate asked for a menu, and the waitress laughed while shaking her head.

"Honey, I don't think anyone has asked to see a menu here in thirty years. You must not be from around these parts," she said.

"I'm not from here," Kate replied, trying to muster up a smile. She realized how stiff she had been sitting, so she tried to relax her back and shoulders.

"We just have your basic diner food, request anything and Ed can whip it up for you. He makes a great stack of pancakes and one hell of a Rueben."

Kate paused for a moment before she spoke again, pondering the endless possibilities.

"Can I just have a cup of coffee, some toast and eggs?"

"It'll be right out, Hun," the waitress smiled and walked away.

Only a few minutes passed, and sure enough, there sat a cup of steaming coffee and a heaping plate of eggs and toast in front of Kate. She tried to scroll through the news on her phone, but she couldn't get enough reception to load a page. Frustrated, she tossed her phone back into her purse and sighed.

"Everything okay, sweetheart?" The waitress asked, approaching again, this time with a carafe of coffee in her hand.

"Yeah," Kate began. "I was trying to look at the New York Times on my phone, but I can't get good enough reception."

"Oh here," the waitress grabbed a newspaper off the counter behind her. "It's the Chillicothe Gazette, but it's still something to read."

Kate smiled and took the paper. She wondered what kind of news such a small town would have to report. As she was flipping through the pages with stories about various car accidents, community events, and ads for the local farmer's market, there was one story that sparked Kate's attention. She shoved a forkful of eggs into her mouth as she began to read:

Moonville Tunnel Legend: Fact or Myth?

As Halloween time approaches us, many of those in the community think about visiting the highly talked about, spooky Moonville Tunnel. There are many accounts where people have had unexplainable experiences while visiting this local landmark, but are these tales true? This reporter visited the tunnel this past week to see what there was to see. Though there are no new findings here to report, we cannot forget the original tale.

Back in the 19th century, the Moonville Tunnel was popular for transport in and out of the city of Moonville. On one cold, winter's night, a passenger consumed too much alcohol and allegedly raped a woman on board. It just so happened that this woman was the wife of the train conductor.

In hysterics, the wife told her husband what happened. The conductor handed the controls over to his apprentice and set out to find the man who assaulted his wife. The man was casually sitting at the bar, drinking when the conductor found him. There was a scuffle, and before the conductor knew what he was doing, he threw the man off the train. Legend tells us that the man was caught under the tracks in the Moonville Tunnel and was immediately killed as the train ran over him.

The body of the man was found a few days later and buried in the adjacent Moonville Cemetery, in an unmarked grave as no one could identify the body. Supposedly now, the ghost of the man haunts the Moonville Tunnel, where he died. When he appears, a green light can be seen at the end of the tunnel, signifying exactly where he died. Legend says that he summons the ghosts that haunt the cemetery, and they terrorize citizens of Chillicothe who dare go into the Moonville Tunnel.

Recognizing the name of the cemetery, Kate pulled out the address to her ancestor's grave. Scribbled on a piece of her aunt's stationary was the same name and address seen in the newspaper. Though her anxiety caused a small tug in her stomach, Kate scoffed at the idea of a ghost haunting a tunnel, as she was completely atheistic in all of her beliefs. She finished her dinner and paid the bill before leaving the deserted diner. The wheels on her BMW kicked up dust from the parking lot as the diner faded in the distance.

She returned to her room and undressed for a shower. The shower was grimy in comparison to her modern New York City penthouse, but the temperature of the water heated her to her bones. She slipped into her silk nightgown and brushed her blonde hair before she pulled

back the comforter on the bed. The cotton sheets were scratchy against her smooth skin. Trying to ignore the discomfort, Kate pulled out *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, a novel that she was close to finishing. It was not long before she fell asleep, book in hand.

Not hearing the alarm go off on her phone, Kate accidentally slept in past noon. She could not believe how late she slept, as she had not done so in a number of years. The quietness of the countryside must have aided Kate in her sleeping-in, and she supposed that she needed it.

She quickly got dressed—pulling on a pair of skin-tight blue jeans, a black sweater, and black, leather riding boots. She put her pea coat and gloves on, and gathered all of her things before leaving the motel room.

Once in her car, with the heater running, she opened the folder that contained the directions to the cemetery. She had the previously made headstone in the backseat of her car, wrapped in a thick, wool blanket, sitting next to her Louis Vuitton duffle bag. Supposedly, all she had to do was leave the headstone at the grave, and the caretakers of the cemetery would switch them out for her, as they could not meet her that weekend. As she looked at the directions to the cemetery, the name *Moonville Road* seemed to be burning in her mind. She popped her Klonopin and Paxil into her mouth and swallowed them down with a gulp of her Fiji water. She decided to not let silly superstitions bother her. Ghosts didn't exist.

It took Kate about half an hour to drive to the gravesite. She was expecting there to be some sort of gate or sign, but there wasn't. She drove across a short bridge that ran over a swift moving creek. To her right, she could see the train tunnel through the trees. Past the train tunnel, on the opposite side of the road, was a small graveyard. She parked her car just off the road, underneath a large tree that stood overshadowing the graveyard.

Before getting her ancestor's grave marker out of the car, she wandered through the small cemetery first. There were not even two dozen headstones in the graveyard. Her aunt had read that the majority of the bodies buried there belonged to those who had died from tuberculosis. If a resident of Moonville died of TB, they would bury them outside of the town in this graveyard to prevent further infection of the others.

Though her aunt could not find their ancestor's name on the list of Moonville residents who had died from TB, it was assumed that this is what ended his life. They had found a document showing that their ancestor boarded the train headed for Moonville, but that was the last recorded document from his life that they had been able to find. It was possible that upon entering the town, their ancestor had passed and was buried in the cemetery, but marked as *Unknown* because no one in the town knew him.

Most of the headstones were illegible, having been worn down from years of weather. Almost all of them were crooked in the ground, as they had either sunk during the rain, or had been knocked over by asshole kids who came up there to party. Kate thought to herself that it probably was a popular spot for the high school kids to smoke and drink, as this part of the town was cut off from everything else.

She stopped just before a small headstone that had been knocked out of the ground completely. She wasn't able to make out the name, but she was able to read the date that had been chiseled into the marble: July 5, 1874 to July 15, 1874. Kate frowned at the idea of a newborn dying. There was a small, pink sweater lying near the grave, and Kate thought it was creepy that someone would leave that sweater here, so she didn't touch it and retreated back to her BMW for the headstone, suddenly wishing that she weren't so alone.

She pushed back her driver's seat in order to reach the grave marker. It was quite small, so Kate was able to manage moving the marble slab on her own. Making sure that the marker was snugged into the crook of her arm, she shut her car door and locked it, just in case. In her other hand, she held the crumpled piece of paper that showed a photo of the unmarked grave, so Kate would know where to place the new marker.

It didn't take long for her to find her ancestor's grave. The current marker sat crooked in the ground like the others, and faded letters read *Unknown*, as it did in the picture. She lay the new headstone before it and unwrapped the blanket. The words her grandmother had chosen now lay before her:

Harold Alexander O'Brien III

1823-1860

"I once was lost, but now I've been found"

Kate thought the quote from "Amazing Grace" was appropriate, as it took over one hundred and fifty years for her family to find his grave. She didn't know anything about her three-times great grandfather, other than he came from Ireland and traveled quite a bit.

Kate took the blanket and folded it under her arm. She didn't know if she should say anything at the grave, because her ancestor probably didn't have a proper funeral. And though Kate didn't believe in an afterlife, she figured she should say something out of respect.

"Well, great-great-great-granddaddy," she began. "I feel dumb saying this, but I hope you're resting peacefully. We don't know how you died, but you were young, and I am sorry for that," Kate concluded before she awkwardly took a few steps backwards.

The edge of one of her boots sunk into the soft ground, causing Kate to fall backwards. She sat there for a moment, dumbfounded. While on the ground, she noticed bells on some of the

headstones. She remembered in grade school when her teacher told her and her classmates about how during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, people were accidentally buried alive due to improper examinations by doctors. When this was discovered, safety coffins were invented, which were coffins that had bells strung to the insides of the caskets. So when someone would miraculously awake in his or her grave, they could ring the bell and would be dug up by the groundskeepers. Kate noticed that every single grave had these bells except for her ancestor's.

When Kate stood up and brushed herself off, the bells started to ring. She thought it was the wind, but she realized that there was no wind blowing. She dared to get close to one of the bells to see why they were ringing, and it appeared that the bells were ringing on their own. Looking around to see if it was someone playing a trick on her, she saw no one, and her heart began to race. The ringing of the bells grew louder and a number of crows in the adjacent woods began to caw.

A loud crack of thunder exploded in the sky and dark clouds quickly moved over the area. Kate started for the tree where she left her BMW, but she soon discovered that it was no longer there. Large, hot drops of rain began to fall from the sky. Kate stood just outside the graveyard, looking at the space where her car should have been. Lost in confusion, she didn't notice that the rain was burning through the material on her pea coat. When one of the raindrops hit the only exposed skin on the cheek of her face, she experienced searing pain, like she was being burned with acid.

A few more drops landed on the exposed skin, and she moved her gloved hands to protect the better part of her face. The acid rain began to seep through the leather gloves so she looked for shelter. The tunnel was just across the street, only a couple hundred yards away. She took off in a sprint for the safety of the tunnel.

“What the hell?” Kate exclaimed once she stood just inside the north entrance of the concrete, train tunnel. She searched her pockets for her phone, sighing relief when she found it. Though her happiness was short-lived, once she realized her phone displayed that it had no service.

“Of course not,” Kate whined as tears brimmed the edges of her eyes. She glanced over to the graveyard, where the rain continued to pour. The shadow of a man could be seen standing over the grave where Kate had just laid her ancestor’s headstone. Waving her arms madly, she tried desperately to get the man’s attention, hoping that it was the graveyard’s caretaker. After the shadow made no effort to recognize her, she strained her eyes to see better, but the shadow had disappeared. A loud scraping sound came from behind her, like the head of a shovel being dragged across a concrete surface.

Whipping around to see what the source of the noise was, Kate found that there was nothing behind her for as far as she could see. The tunnel faded into black, and she could not see the other exit. Goose bumps flooded her skin and suddenly, Kate felt very claustrophobic, despite the open end of the tunnel that stood before her and the flatness of the surrounding area.

When she looked back towards the graveyard, the shadow of the man was still gone. This made Kate feel better and worse at the same time—she knew she wasn’t alone. The scraping noise got louder, along with what sounded like a man’s painful moans, but what he was saying was incoherent. Kate covered her ears with her gloved hands and squeezed her eyes shut. She thought to herself, “this isn’t real, you’re just having a panic attack.” And all at once, the scraping and the moaning stopped when a wave of heat flooded the tunnel.

Kate suddenly felt compelled to take off her pea coat, scarf, and leather gloves. She laid all the clothes in a pile just to the side of the tracks. She noticed the wood was worn and the ties

were either rusted or missing. Loose rocks and wood were scattered across the ground of the tunnel. The concrete walls of the tunnel were cracked, and in places, crumbling to pieces. Poorly executed graffiti coated the walls: vile phrases, misspelled curse words, so-and-so loves so-and-so, but then there was one magnificent piece of art that stood out among the scribbles—a portrait of large man in a black coat, carrying what appeared to be a green lantern. The man's eyes made Kate shudder with fear and anxiety.

The moans came back and grew louder, causing Kate to panic. She held her hand out in the rain to see if the water would still burn her skin. A drop of rain landed on the back of her hand and made a sizzling sound. On reflex, Kate drew her hand close to her body and let out a whimper. The rain had left a small hole on the back of her hand, like she had been burned with a cigarette.

“There has to be some logical explanation for all of this,” Kate wondered aloud. “My car was stolen, the rain is from pollution, and the wind is causing the tunnel to make that creepy moaning noise. Yes, that must be it.” She laughed a nervous laugh, but the tightness in her chest returned and her breathing remained quick.

Trying her best to convince herself that she was just being silly, Kate leaned over to pick her things up. Then there came a loud popping noise from the other end of the tunnel. A green light flickered faintly in the distance when a strong gust of wind came through the tunnel and knocked Kate off her feet. As she fell, Kate twisted her ankle and landed on a pile of rubble.

“Jesus Christ!” Kate cried out as she grabbed her ankle.

The green light at the end of the tunnel was brighter now. The gust of wind continued to whip through the tunnel, so Kate scooted as close to the concrete wall as possible. She picked up her phone in the hopes that cellular service might magically appear in this crazy storm. One bar

was illuminated in the left-hand corner of her phone's screen. Dialing 9-11, she hoped that someone would be able to come save her.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?" The dispatcher answered

"My name is Kate, and I am at the Moonville Tunnel. I seem to be stuck in a storm, someone stole my car, and I am injured. Please send someone to help me." Kate was yelling over the wind.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?" The dispatcher said again. Kate repeated herself, yelling louder this time. The wind picked up speed, bringing some of the acid rain into the tunnel with it. The green light seemed closer. Kate turned her head to guard her face from the rain, but she could smell the scent of burnt hair, as the rain singed the back of her head.

There were a series of loud dial-tones and then an automated voice could be heard: "You shouldn't have come here. You shouldn't have come here. You shouldn't have come here."

"What? Hello?" Kate was yelling into her phone and looking at the screen. The call had been disconnected, and then her phone's screen went black. She tried to turn it back on, but she was unsuccessful.

Furious and frightened, Kate tried to throw her phone at the opposing concrete wall, but it got caught in the wind tunnel and was carried out of her sight. She looked down at her ankle, which was bent at an awkward angle and already swollen to the size of a baseball.

The rain continued to pour and the green light was now closer, still. There was a flash of lightning, and Kate saw the shadow of a man in the tunnel, holding a lantern, which produced the green light. She screamed and scrambled to her feet, ignoring the throbbing pain in her ankle. The wind pushed her deeper into the tunnel as the force grew stronger. She tried to hold onto the wall, but there was nothing to grasp. The man with the light was getting closer, as Kate tried to

fight against the wind. Her body was twisted when she tried to and go back out the north entrance of the tunnel. Suddenly, she felt a cold hand grab the back of her neck and the green light seemed to encapsulate her.

A voice whispered in her ear, "You shouldn't have come here."

Then everything stopped: the wind, the rain, the light, the voices. Kate didn't realize that she had her eyes closed tight. When she opened them, there stood the entrance of the tunnel just fifty yards from where she was. Her BMW was parked just outside, underneath the tree where she had left it. For a brief moment, Kate couldn't decide if this was a trick or not. She wondered if all these unexplained occurrences had just been a manifestation of her anxiety after she had read that newspaper article. But she decided that she wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to escape. Running towards her car, Kate didn't stop to grab her things.

Just as she reached the end of the tunnel, everything went black. She turned around and saw that her BMW was now outside of the opposite end of the tunnel. As she turned to start running towards it again, the car seemed to get further away from her. The faster she ran, the longer the train tunnel got.

The image faded to black, but Kate continued to run. The bright-green light shone from behind her, growing brighter and brighter. Upon turning around, she heard the loud horn of a train and the rushing sound of the wheels on the track, which sounded similar to the scraping noise from before. On the tracks, Kate fell to her knees to cover her ears, and she was sobbing.

The green light was rushing towards her, and it was too late when Kate realized that the light was fastened to the front of a train, moving at full speed. The vision of a man being thrown from the train flashed before her eyes just as she died on impact.

The Coffins

by Catherine Marshall Krafthefer

Marcus was driving down a two-lane road that continued on for as far as his eyes could see. He was somewhere in middle Georgia, but he didn't know exactly where. The air conditioning in his car blasted on the highest setting, rattling the dash. He drove an old, '79 Buick that had belonged to his grandfather. The chipped, maroon paint matched the vinyl interior that covered the seats. This car was the reason Marcus was driving through Georgia: his grandfather, whom he had never met, had passed away, leaving his belongings to the only surviving blood relative—Marcus. He inherited the car, a beat-up doublewide filled with old newspapers and busted pieces of furniture, and a small savings account with a couple hundred dollars in it. He sold the double wide, cashed out the savings account, and was now driving the car back home to Chicago.

Marcus had not yet adapted to the mid-August, Georgia humidity, and he was sweating profusely. His deep-black skin produced beads of sweat, which reflected in the sunlight that was beaming through the windshield. The starch in his collar stiffened, and Marcus yanked on his wrinkled, red tie to relieve his neck of the pressure. Since he had made it to McRae, Georgia before his grandfather's funeral, he decided to attend the small ceremony—it was the least he could do for a guy who had given him a car. The radio in the Buick was working, but there were no radio stations nearby that he could tune into. Marcus recalled that he had not seen another car in about an hour, and he hoped that he was going the right way, northwest towards Atlanta. He glanced down at the cracked screen on his iPhone to check the GPS.

"Damn," Marcus muttered when he realized that he couldn't find a cell signal either. He shrugged and continued to putter down the road, as he figured that it had to lead to somewhere.

There was nothing ahead of him and nothing in the rearview mirror, not even a gas station or a house. The road was lined with endless rows of pine trees, and he wondered if there was anything else planted in the state of Georgia.

Marcus reached for the pack of cigarettes sitting in the cup holder below the radio. Letting the cigarette hang from his mouth, he lit the end of it and began to smoke without ever taking his eyes off the road. He rolled down the manually-operated window to let the smoke escape. The breeze felt good on his skin in combination with the air conditioner that continued to blast away. He sighed and rested the back of his head on the headrest. The car was going a steady fifty-five miles an hour. Marcus figured that he shouldn't try to speed in these parts, the cops would be quick to pull over a black man such as himself. He didn't even want to think about what they would do to him out there in the middle-of-nowhere—Marcus refused to admit that it scared him.

Lost in thought, it took a moment for Marcus to notice that smoke had started to come out from underneath the hood, and Marcus was confused. He couldn't figure out why his cigarette smoke would be coming out from underneath the hood of the car. It was then he realized that he needed to pull over. He applied the brakes and steered the car onto the dirt shoulder of the road. Red dust kicked up all around the vehicle, and upon flicking off the radio, Marcus heard something rattling loudly. When the car came to a complete stop, he turned off the engine.

Opening the door, his beat up loafers steadied themselves on the red, Georgia clay. While taking off his sunglasses, Marcus used his foot to grind his cigarette butt into the pavement. Leaning inside the car, he placed his sunglasses in the cup holder with his cigarettes and pulled the lever to unlock the hood. Not knowing much about cars, he hoped that it wasn't something that would cost him a lot of knowledge, time or money.

He walked around to the hood of the car and lifted it with caution, allowing the smoke to pour out at his knees rather than his face, as he had seen so many fools do on television. The engine had over heated. Marcus stood there before the car, staring, not knowing what to do. Once, he watched his stepdad pour a jug of water on the radiator of a car that had overheated, but Marcus didn't have a jug of water. He had an old, half-drunk Coke from the day before, which had most likely come to a boil in this heat.

Taking off his tie and rolling up his sleeves, Marcus walked back around to the driver's side of the car. He opened the door and tossed his tie across the center console and into the passenger seat. The engine pattered and quit when Marcus attempted to start it. Hoping that he could find some service so he could call triple-A, he walked around in circles, holding his phone high in the air. There was no use in trying to get service; there wasn't a cellphone tower for miles. He stuffed his phone into his back pocket and slammed the hood of the car shut.

The lack of a solution gave Marcus the urge to look through the car, to see if he could find anything that would be useful. When he found an old, wrinkled map of Georgia stuffed into the glove compartment, Marcus could have kissed his dead granddaddy. He grabbed another cigarette from the cup holder, along with his lighter. He unfolded the map and laid it across the hot hood of the car. It took him a few minutes to guess where he was on the map. He had to do a little math in order to calculate the general area in which he was. Lighting the cigarette, he crossed his arms and studied the map.

As he suspected, there wasn't anything for miles and miles. There was, however, a town west of where he stood. He figured that they must have a gas station. Unfortunately, there weren't any roads connecting him to the town, but there was a large forest in-between. Marcus

hated it, but he decided he would have to cut through the forest to get to the town and back before nightfall.

He finished his cigarette and flicked the butt onto the road where it landed next to the remains of the first. Opening the driver's door again, he rolled up the window and collected the pack of cigarettes, along with the keys from the ignition. He stuffed the cigarettes and the map into his back pocket and loaded his front pocket with the set of keys, his lighter, and his wallet. Wishing that he had a bottle of water to quench his unbelievable thirst, he locked the doors to the Buick and began walking through the set of pine trees to his left.

Marcus had only been walking for twenty minutes when he came to a clearing in the trees. Because of the tilled clay, he decided the trees must have been recently cut, most likely harvested for paper. His loafers sunk down into the soft dirt. Marcus leaned over and rolled up the bottoms of his khaki pants. He'd long taken off his button down shirt and thrown it over his shoulders to protect them from sunburn, continuing on in a soaked, white undershirt.

The sun was setting, plastering a glare across Marcus' face. He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it as he continued to trudge through the soft dirt. He came upon the trunks of the trees that had been taken from the field. They had been meticulously stacked in pyramids that stood about ten feet tall, and went length-wise down the property as far as Marcus could see. He decided it would be faster to try to climb over than to walk around them; he did not want to deviate from his straight path as much as possible.

Carefully placing his hands and feet, Marcus climbed over the stack of tree trunks with ease. He plopped down on both feet, landing in recently mowed grass. Wiping the sawdust from his hands on his pant legs, he looked up and found himself in another field. Instead of trees, rows

of large, black containers had been stacked. Confused but curious, Marcus walked towards them to get a better look.

Each stack had ten containers that stood well over Marcus' head. The containers appeared to be made out of thick, black plastic, stretching about eight feet in length. Marcus noted that it appeared as if the containers folded in half, like a take-out box. He shrugged and figured that the containers were used for transporting some sort of crop. However, he couldn't help but count the rows as he walked by. By the time Marcus reached the end of the field, he had counted one hundred rows with ten columns each. He was pleased to see another stack of tree trunks to climb over because he suddenly felt uncomfortable and wanted to be off the property.

"Why do they need so many?" Marcus couldn't help but ask himself aloud.

After jumping off the stack of trunks, he could vaguely see a clearing through another forest of lined pine trees. Without thinking, he broke out into a sprint. Though he was winded, he did not stop running until his feet hit the pavement of the adjacent road. Panting heavily, Marcus took his button down and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He turned north towards the town he had seen on the map.

A car crept up from behind Marcus and rolled down their window. The dark-tinted windows and sleekness of the car took Marcus aback, but he was thankful that the driver was African American.

"Are you lost?" The driver asked through his cracked passenger window, behind his dark sunglasses.

"Just lookin' for the nearest gas station, my man." Marcus tried to act chill, but he couldn't help but notice that the man was dressed in an expensive suit. He felt it strange that a sharp dressed man would be cruising through a small, southern town in such a sleek car.

"It's right up here on the right. Do you need a lift?"

"Nah, I'm alright." Marcus waved the guy on. He figured he had come this far without running into any trouble, and he wasn't looking to get himself into any kind of situation. The car drove off, and Marcus noticed that the license plate was oddly marked, like it was some kind of government-owned vehicle.

Only a few more minutes of walking and Marcus arrived at his destination. It was weird that the gas station stood on the corner by itself, for beyond that, there was nothing as far as the eye could see in every direction, save for more pine trees. A slight twinge tugged in Marcus' stomach as he wondered where the rest of the town was. Ignoring his thoughts, he walked through the doors and air conditioner blasted him in the face. Walking directly towards the refrigerated section, he selected a bottle of Gatorade and a gallon of water, for the engine. He plucked a small, black drawstring bag off of a rack and grabbed a bag of Doritos from the chip aisle. The cashier was an elderly white man, whom Marcus figured probably wouldn't like him.

"Is this it for ya today?" The old white man stretched out his wrinkled hands to collect the items from Marcus. The wiry, white hair of his head matched that of the scraggly beard on his chin. He had on a thin, red windbreaker that had holes worn through on the elbows.

"Yes, sir." Marcus replied, almost whispering.

"You look tired."

"I am. My car broke down about an hour from here. I just had to walk through that forest down the road." Marcus wiped the sweat from his eyes, and the old man was gaping at him.

"You cut through the property right down here?" The old man was pointing behind him, his hand shaking.

"Yeah. I didn't have a choice, really." Marcus suddenly wanted to take back what he told the man, as he hoped that this man wasn't the owner of the land.

"Did you see anything unusual?"

"Maybe, I don't know." Marcus was more suspicious now than anything.

"Do you know what you saw?" The old man had quit scanning the items and was now looking at Marcus with wild eyes.

"No. I saw a bunch of containers but I figured they were used for transporting crops or something." Marcus was holding out a worn, ten dollar bill, trying to pay for his items so he could leave.

"More like transporting bodies." The old man muttered and looked away, as if it were nothing.

"Excuse me?" Marcus wasn't sure he heard the man correctly. He still held out the money, his hands now starting to tremor.

"Those things that you saw, those were coffins."

"What?" Marcus raised an eyebrow at the man.

"Did you see large rows of plastic containers?"

"Yes!" Marcus desperately wanted this man to get to the point.

"They're coffins! The government is storin' 'em here and are preparin' for a mass slaughter. They're gunn' blame it on some disease." The man looked insane now, waving his hands about in the air.

"That can't be right." Marcus shook his head and chuckled nervously.

"I'd be careful walkin' through those parts, if I was you. I heard they got the Army protectin' those things day an' night." The man's voice had lowered to a hushed whisper. He

handed Marcus' items over, his hands shaking so violently that it almost looked as if the old man were faking it. Marcus grabbed his belongings and hurried out of the store.

"Crazy old, white cracker." Marcus muttered to himself as he unloaded his pockets and jammed everything into the backpack except for his Gatorade and Doritos. He was going to sit outside and fuel up before walking back to his car, but he decided to eat and walk at the same time.

By the time he got back to the property, the sun was almost gone and now at his back, so Marcus decided he would walk back to his car as quickly as possible. He stuffed the empty chip bag and drink bottle into the bag, along with his soiled button down, and he began to walk into the forest.

Quickly and quietly climbing over the first stack of trees, he shuttered at the sight of the containers. He refused to believe that they were coffins, but he couldn't get the old man's words out of his head. Marcus decided to run past the containers; the gallon of water sloshed around on his back. But while he was running, a shiny sticker caught Marcus' attention. Reluctantly, he stopped and walked over to the container with the sticker on it.

10000-453782-974—Distribution: Georgia

Marcus studied the sticker and tried to determine where it came from. He ran his fingers across the slick, metallic of the label, then let his hand run across the container. The plastic was rough and appeared thick, like the kind of plastic those fold out tables are made of. Goose bumps covered Marcus' body and he shuddered at the thought of a government-induced, mass killing. He wondered what excuse the President would use to cover up his decision to exterminate a large portion of the population.

There was a rustle in the brush just beyond where Marcus was standing. It startled him so that he skipped over to the pyramid of tree trunks and fumbled his way to the top. Just before he climbed over to the other side of the stack, he decided to snap a quick picture of the containers, so he could ask his friends back home what they thought they were used for. There was just enough light left for Marcus to get a good picture without having to use the flash. He scooted over the stack of trees and moved as quickly as he could through the dirt field and pine trees in order to get back to his car before the sun was completely set.

He pulled the gallon of water out of his bag as he continued to walk towards the road where he parked the Buick. His phone lit up, notifying him that he had a text message. Marcus figured that he must have run across some service at some point. The message was from his mom, wondering if he was okay. Marcus wanted to send her the photo of the containers, but he no longer had service. He went to his photos folder anyway to gaze at the picture one more time, but the photo wasn't there. Marcus stopped and stared at his phone.

"Did I not take the picture?" His stomach turned, because he was certain that he had. The disturbing thought of the picture being deleted from his phone entered his mind. Marcus remembered back to the last Presidential election when his friend, Otto, claimed that Romney had initially won the race. Their local news had posted the poll results, and Otto claimed that he had taken a photo of the announcement stating that Romney had won. But when Otto looked back at his television, the results had been changed and Obama was now the winner. Confused, Otto checked his phone, and the photo had been deleted. Otto went around town claiming that the government deleted the photo from his phone. Marcus continued to press on towards his vehicle, the goose bumps had returned.

As he got closer to the edge of the forest, he smelled something burning, and he figured it was his engine from before. The sky was almost completely dark, so Marcus did not notice the looming cloud of smoke ahead.

When he approached his car, he saw an orange contraption around his wheel—he had been booted. Marcus wanted to scream when he realized what had happened, but as he approached his car, he noticed that the entire thing had been set ablaze and burned to a crisp.

“What the fuck?” Marcus stood in the middle of the road, astonished. He couldn’t believe that an overheated engine would have burned the entire car to the ground.

Suddenly, something hit the water jug and then the side of the car next to where Marcus was standing, and it made a loud ‘ping’ sound. Water was now pouring out from the container in two thin streams. Marcus held the container close to his face to see that there was a small, round hole on either side of the jug. He froze in place, fearful that some crazed farmer was out to kill the black man that had walked through his property.

Another ‘ping’ noise rang out from the car, and upon turning to see who was the cause of the gunshots, Marcus saw a dozen men standing in the forest behind him, dressed in dark uniforms and holding rifles with green, night-vision scopes on them. Before Marcus could say anything, a bullet pierced his forehead, and he fell to the ground. The water jug slammed to the road, next to Marcus’ head. The blood and water ran together on the cooling asphalt.

Four of the uniformed men picked Marcus up and carried his body back into the woods. Another one of the men smashed Marcus’ phone with the heel of his boot before picking it up, along with the now-empty water jug and the cigarette butts Marcus discarded earlier. As the rest of the men retreated into the forest, a sleek black car pulled up past the burned Buick.

A well-dressed, black man stepped out of the vehicle, straitening his tie. He took off his sunglasses and folded them, putting them into his pocket. Opening the trunk of his car, he slid on a pair of black, leather gloves and pulled out a tow kit. After removing the boot from the Buick, he quickly attached the front of the burned vehicle to the back of his.

Carefully placing the boot and the gloves back in his trunk, he looked around before getting back into his car. All of the uniformed men were now out of sight. Soon, he pulled off, towing the Buick behind him. A flash of heat lightning filled the Georgia sky for a brief moment, and the vehicle drove off towards the service station where the old man in the red windbreaker waited for him.

