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Middle American Gothic

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MIDDLE AMERICAN GOTHIC

BY

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE PAGE

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This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the master's degree and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Haleigh. You will always be my inspiration.

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ABSTRACT

MIDDLE AMERICAN GOTHIC

JORDAN HEISLER

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Though Gothicism has evolved since its inception in the eighteenth century, its most common tropes—such as deteriorating settings, supernatural figures, and foreboding atmospheres—have remained integral to the genre. While, the following fictional collection, *Middle American Gothic*, draws inspiration from these familiar Gothic tropes, it substitutes the grandeur of crumbling castles, monasteries, and sprawling estates for a common town within the rural Midwest. Similarly, while the collection nods to the existence of supernatural beings, none of its stories actually rely on anything otherworldly as a source of terror. Its setting, while not traditionally Gothic, features a series of decaying, outdated homes that mirror the town's aging population in their physique and in their conservative beliefs. Likewise, rather than relying on traditionally frightening supernatural figures, each story within *Middle American Gothic* derives terror from the monstrous actions of people who are loyal to regressive sociopolitical attitudes. In this way, *Middle American Gothic* functions both as a collection of modern Gothic fiction and as a critique of the prevailing, restrictive attitudes common within the rural Midwest. The critical afterword that follows the collection subsequently examines the ways in which the various characters and settings in each individual story fit within the larger scope of the Gothic genre. In doing so, this afterword looks not only at the ways in

which the collection is distinctly Gothic but at the instances in which it challenges and progresses the genre.

TOWN AMID THE FIELDS

When I was 12, my grandpa moved in with my family. He'd been a strong man, an independent man for most of his life, but decades of heavy drinking had gone to his head. He'd forget how to brush his teeth sometimes, or he'd take his medicine more than once in a day. Because of this, my dad said it was dangerous for him to live on his own—which I came to understand over time. Unfortunately, our house only had three bedrooms. My parents had theirs, and my older brother had his—he was a highschooler after all, practically grown. That meant my grandpa and I had to share the third bedroom.

In the early days of this arrangement, the days my grandpa was more coherent than not, things weren't so bad. See, he was this great storyteller. Years around a barroom table had cultivated in him an impeccable sense for timing, a wry humor, a wicked imagination. In those years we spent in that room together, he must have told me over a hundred stories, and no two of them were the same. He'd sit on the edge of his bed overlooking my position on the air mattress below, and he'd weave these elaborate tales about this made-up town, this awful place full of monsters—Sascha, he called it.

Of course, as I got older, I knew none of the stories were true. Sascha wasn't a town that showed up on any map. I couldn't find it named on any web page or in any book. But, my grandpa, he went to his grave spinning the same old lies no matter how often I protested. He said it was in the next town over from Herried where he grew up. He said he'd been there scores of times, that some of his closest friends in the world had lived there. He said when I got my license, if I felt so inclined, that he'd take me there.

He said, "It's not a hard place to find, my boy." He said, "You just drive west of here, west until you hit the river. From there, you paddle against the current north. Of

course, you can't very well drive because you won't find any roads that will take you into Sascha, even if there are countless that will lead you away. You take the river north and north and further north. You'll see signs saying you're nearing the state line, but still, you'll continue north until the ground begins to crack and the weather becomes unbearable no matter the season. You'll stop when you see the corn is pock-marked from locusts or you hear the howl of starving dogs—whichever comes first. If you stop there and begin to press through no more than a mile or two of dense fields, you'll happen upon it, a place you won't find on a map, a place full of rusty pickups and destitute men. I'll take you there, my boy. I'll take you there even if I don't expect you'll want to stay."

"Few people do," he said. "Those who live there have been stuck for generations like fossils in bubbling tar. I don't think they'll much care for you, as sweet as you are. Don't feel bad though. I don't know that you'll care for them either. They're a grim crowd after all—the kind of people determined to live joyless lives on Earth because they think it guarantees them paradise when their bodies turn to dust. But, still, I'll take you there. Just get your car, and we'll go if for no other reason than to prove that it's real."

The two of us never went though. We never made it to that awful little place full of those small, unpleasant people. My grandpa's condition worsened with time, and he died before we got the chance to go anywhere. He left me with only stories, with memories that weren't my own. And that's where Sascha remains, I think, somewhere between reality and nightmare, somewhere up north near the river, just on the other side of a cornfield.

STOP BY ON YOUR WAY OUT

We are, all of us, haunted—but not by ghosts. Somewhere in the back of a closet, a wedding dress is devoured by moths. An irreplaceable photograph is submerged in water. An urn containing Grandpa's remains shatters on hard wood. We lament these things once they are gone, but we otherwise take them for granted.

In much the same way, the eyes of our loved ones cease their shine. They become cloudy, tired with regret. Their skin becomes papery soft, then even softer. They grow odd hairs and liver spots. And, oh, how they become frail. They forget our birthdays, and we forget theirs. And when they are gone—for one reason or another—we begin to forget more and more. We can't quite recall that same joke they always told or the way they smiled just before erupting into anger. We pack their things away because we can't bear to look at them, their old suits, boxes and boxes of nail polish, an old poem they wrote when they were drunk. And, in storage, they wear away until they are nothing at all.

Alphonse Schwartz fixed his eyes on the bottom of page one of *The Prairie Periodical*. Eunice Adams, the oldest person in Sascha, had died. She had been 103. She had gone to bed on Monday and had not woken up on Tuesday. Now, it was Wednesday, and her name and picture were in the paper. It seemed more and more of the prominent stories in the news these days were, rather, obituaries. Eunice's twin sister, Alice who, according to the article, was twelve minutes younger, now held Sascha's esteemed title: oldest person in town—though it probably wouldn't be for long. She would pass the title onto a distant cousin, Gregory Elston, ninety-seven, who would pass it to Landon Thomasson, ninety-four, and so on.

Al, already fifty-seven, figured he would have to nearly double his age to get anywhere near such an honor. He looked again at Eunice's picture. She had survived cancer only to die of a stroke, according to the story. Al figured most old people died from infections or pneumonia. His own grandma had apparently died from loneliness according to his mother, but he figured that couldn't have been true. His father had died in an accident—drunk driving, and his mother had taken too many sleeping pills. As far as he knew, she had been his last living family member. Al fixated on Eunice again, on her tired smile, on the whites of her dentures, on her cataract-ridden eyes. Al tried to envision his own face under all those wrinkles, but he couldn't do it. Not enough imagination. He turned the page loudly.

"Whatcha readin'?" a cruel, grizzled voice asked from across the kitchen table. Seated in the only other chair was Harold Jones, a man that Al figured was well into his seventies. He didn't know exactly, though, because the old man was withholding, in more ways than one. The two lived together—as men sometimes do—in a house off Highway 83, just south of Sascha. It was a mutually beneficial relationship in that neither of them really had anyone else. Jones had been married, twice. Al, on the other hand, wasn't much of a talker, so he had no meaningful relationships to speak of. In that way, they were dependent on one another. Jones picked up groceries and ran errands in Sascha while Al provided a younger set of hands on Jones' farm.

"Paper," Al responded. He had been born with a cleft palate that, despite numerous childhood surgeries, had dramatically altered his life. On one hand, he didn't speak all too well. It wasn't such an issue that he was unintelligible or anything, just a few speech impediments audible from time to time—more frequently when he had too

much to drink. Of course, growing up in Sascha, his peers had called him "Mawbles" because, according to one classmate, Al "talked like his 'mouff' was 'fuw of mawbles.'" That nickname, to this day, was the primary reason he was hesitant to say more than a few words at a time.

"Yeah, no shit," Jones said, pushing himself up from his seat. He used his ancient hands to stabilize the rest of his body—which had been increasingly shaky over the course of the past few days. In his experience, it was the first sign of some impending threat to his health. The first and the second time this happened, he had heart attacks. The third time, he slipped a disk, causing him to keel over in the midsummer heat. Apparently, literal back-breaking work combined with decades of consuming little more than red meat and cigarette smoke had proved a detriment to the old man's health, not that he would ever admit to it. When he was certain he wasn't likely to tip in one direction or the other, Jones continued to grip the table while he slowly leaned toward the man across from him, his other hand outstretched. It was in this fashion that he ultimately snatched Al's paper from his grip—something the younger man didn't pretend to resist. Jones then collapsed back into his seat, squinting at the text like it was written in another language.

"Old Eunice kicked it, eh?" Jones began, not really reading the obituary so much as looking at the picture and headline.

"Yup."

"About time."

"Guess so," Al said.

Jones peered around the paper at Al's reaction, hoping to catch some vague sense of sympathy for the old woman, but he didn't find what he was looking for in the disinterested stare looking back at him. But Jones knew Al's soft heart as well as he knew the lump of coal in his own chest. "She was such a bitch in her old age. All pious and devout," he said, moving the paper back in front of his face to hide a menacing grin.

"Wouldn't know," Al responded.

"But you know that I knew her when she was younger, right?" Jones continued.

"I guess so."

"Course, someone as old as me knows everyone in a town this small," Jones paused for a moment. "But I guess you could say I *really* knew her. You get it?"

Al had trained his face to refrain from even the slightest twitch. He knew the game Jones was playing as they had played it often over the years. Al never won, of course. Jones always got the better of him one way or another. It was only a matter of time.

"No? Well, way back when I was a teenager, she must have been about forty—pretty used up, you know? but I was too young to know any better. Woman's a woman. Anyway, I'd walk up the highway, fixing to go to school. Eunice lived at that little green house just on the outskirts of town. You know the one, Al?"

Al remained as he was, still unmoving, unwilling to utter even a single word.

"Well, the year I dropped out of school, I didn't tell anyone. I just kept walking into town, but I'd sit in the brush across from her house, waiting for Mr. Adams to leave out the front door. Know what I did then, Al?" Jones paused again, folded the paper and stared into the glazed set of eyes across the table. "Do you know?"

"No," Al said curtly.

"I'd come in the back door!" Jones waited for the reaction he was looking for. Al's lower lip trembled, but the rest of him remained still. "I'd *come* in the back door," Jones repeated.

Al rose from his seat and made his way from the room without a word.

Jones let out a cackle. "Oh, we off to work already? Okay, think I'll enjoy my coffee a bit longer. Stop by on your way out?" he wheezed, disdain thick in his voice.

Al slapped his bare feet on the linoleum floor of the kitchen as he left the room. He found that his heavy footstep masked the cracking laughter from behind him. When he reached the living room, he pivoted left toward a hallway. It was short, only ten feet or so with three doors. To the left was the bathroom, straight ahead a small linen closet, and to the right was the house's only bedroom—which he and Jones shared. In all, the house was small. It was a single story with a rather large unfinished basement, but Al never went down there—not anymore. He wasn't partial to the dim light or the gravel floors. He didn't like how it smelled of rot, like the humidity and dirt walls were digesting the various bits of junk and forgotten memories stored within. Hoping to avoid further ridicule, Al hurried inside the bedroom and sat on the edge of his bed, the one furthest from the door. Jones had to get up to smoke a few times a night, so his bed was positioned for an easy exit.

Back when Al first moved into the house, he had been nothing more than a hired hand on the farm. In those days, he had slept on a couch in the living room, but after a few years, Jones had gotten rid of his queen bed for two twins. He claimed it was because he wanted to be able to watch the television after work without feeling like he

was in someone else's living space. From then on, the two slept together—apart, but together. Their relationship was never romantic. Jones made sure Al knew that. Sometimes, men just shared a room. Sometimes, men have unfulfilled needs. For instance, Al had this deathly fear of going into town, of interacting with people, of being ridiculed. Jones, of course, had needs too: needs that he could no longer convince women to fulfill, needs that he uttered quietly in coarse, whiskey-soaked words every once in a few months. This is not to say that Jones was attracted to Al or vice versa. Al wasn't sure he was attracted to anyone. But he figured that all people yearn to be with someone in that way, to feel the touch of another's skin, the rush of blood through their veins. In the bedroom on those strange nights, that was what Al provided for Jones. He figured there was nothing wrong about that.

But in recent months, their encounters were less frequent—nonexistent, actually. Even when Jones would stumble out of his truck, home from the lone bar in Sascha, he was more likely to collapse unconscious into his bed than to engage in any interaction—be it comforting or abusive. Granted, Jones wasn't one to be accused of kindness even in his younger years when he had been married. That isn't to say he was entirely devoid of redeeming qualities: charity, humility, humanity, at times, sensuality. He would hold a door open for a woman then would ask if she had gained weight. He'd buy a guy a beer but crack the bottle over his head without notice. Recently, however, Al couldn't help but think his and Jones' relationship had become all stick and no carrot. All burn and no sun. He now endured all of the insults, the slaps, the kicks, the barbs without any shred of kindness in return.

Al often thought about leaving, maybe going south. Jones' wives had both left him. The first hadn't lasted past their honeymoon. They went on a fishing trip together, and Jones came back alone. She had decided to take her chances with a stranger she had met at a bar in Montana. His second wife had hung around for nearly a decade—bless her heart. But their frequent spats gave way to violence, and not long after, she packed her bags and moved to Nebraska. But Al figured leaving was unrealistic for him. He just couldn't see himself hopping on a bus or renting some modern San Francisco apartment. He knew he couldn't picture himself going to a grocery store or making small talk with a man in the produce aisle. Those women, Jones' wives, they must have been brave and flirty and beautiful to embark into a world with such uncertainty. Al wasn't like them. He couldn't leave. He just couldn't.

"You gonna be ready anytime soon?" Jones stood outside the door, suddenly hesitant to see the pain he had caused.

"Yeah," Al muttered through his hands. He rubbed his eyes with rough fingers, the calluses thick from being so often rubbed raw.

"Good," Jones said. He had already dressed himself for work, so he gingerly pivoted away from the bedroom. Not long after, the front door slammed, and he was gone.

It was a particularly difficult year for Jones' farm—which might have explained his irritability if he wasn't insufferable in the best of times. It was simply too hot with too little rain and too much wind. The mid-July sun was masked behind a haze of dirt kicked up by violent gusts that perpetually whipped around the countryside. Outside of the freshly watered fields, all plant-life withered, the ground below coughing and

cracking, gasping for a drink. Even with the sun masked, the heat was unbearable. It relentlessly battered the old farmhouse, further stripping its already sparse paint. These harsh conditions forged harsh men. They accentuated frown lines and crow's feet.

When Al next saw Jones, it was near lunchtime. Al suspected the old man had been waiting for him by the farmhouse because, most of the time, the two would go the whole workday without seeing one another. For all his negative qualities, Jones was a diligent worker. He scarcely took breaks between sunrise and sunset—one of the many reasons his health was so poor. "Too much to be done," he'd say, his tongue dry, his spit like paste. While Al would regularly break for lunch, Jones would usually throw a couple hard boiled eggs into the pockets of his dirty overalls.

But today, here he was. He played like he was busy. He had the hose on and was watering the dormant lilacs on the side of the house. They'd sometimes sprout a leaf or two in the spring, but neither of the men gave them much attention, or water for that matter, on a regular basis. So, in the summer months, they would wilt. When Jones heard the crunching of work boots on gravel behind him, he shuffled to the spigot to turn off the hose. Then, he turned and met Al's eyeline in feigned surprise. His companion returned his gaze, watching as Jones gave a sort of polite nod in his direction. He did this sometimes, and Al took it to be something like an apology. Today, Al didn't acknowledge him back. He took several long strides past Jones and entered the home. He walked straight to the refrigerator and began to contemplate his meal.

"Thinking about heading into town after work. Having a beer," Jones said from the doorway.

"Yeah?" Al said. He turned to see Jones, who was staring down at his boots. His hands were in his pockets.

"Yeah," Jones said.

"Okay," Al responded, turning back to the fridge.

"You can come with if you want," Jones said.

"Can't."

"And why's that?"

"Don't feel good," Al said as he half-heartedly clutched at his stomach with one hand.

"You don't feel good?" Jones repeated.

"Nope," Al responded, dismissively.

"I've never seen you sick. You don't get sick."

"I am now. Bad." Al turned back around, holding all of the ingredients for a bologna sandwich. Jones was silent, a range of emotion showing in his eyes. After a moment, he stomped over to where Al was constructing his lunch. Al stopped what he was doing and puffed out his chest. He made himself as large as he could manage. The two stood closely, almost touching. All these years together, and Al still couldn't read the man in front of him. What was clear to him in this moment though, perhaps for the first time, was that the old man was aging. He had been old the whole time Al had known him. But there was always this way about him, a strength, a pride, like a retired boxer who could still hold his own in the ring. Looking at the old man now, this unmistakable quality was gone. His skin was a shade of gray. His shoulders were sunken, his face gaunt. How long had he looked this way?

The old man raised a hand, and Al flinched, expecting a slap across the cheek. It would not have been the first time the old man had swung at him. But, as Al braced for impact, Jones curiously placed the back of his hand on Al's forehead. He removed it and pulled a handkerchief from one of his pockets. He began to dab the sweat from Al's hairline—comforting him, like a father or something else maybe.

"You look like shit," Jones said. "Feels like you've got a fever."

"Told you," Al responded matter-of-factly

"Why don't you take the afternoon off? Watch some TV. Get some sleep?"

"But I still gotta—" Al hesitated, taken aback at the old man's offer.

"You don't gotta do shit unless I tell you to."

"Okay," Al said. "Still going to town later?"

"Figure I will. Take the edge off." Jones said. He then hacked and spit a mass of blood and mucus onto the linoleum. "Season's taking its toll. Clean that up, will you?"

"Yeah," Al said. "Stop by on your way out?"

"Sure," Jones responded dismissively—suddenly stronger than he had been a moment ago. "Whatever you say."

Al changed into his pajamas, which were really just an undershirt and a pair of white briefs, both stained from overuse. He spent some time idling around the living room looking at pictures mounted on the walls. Their frames were caked in dust. Most of the photos had faded despite their protective casing. They had been there since Al moved in. Most depicted Jones and his second wife. She was beautiful, tall, taller than Jones with straight blonde hair. She wore horn-rimmed glasses with thick frames that magnified the size of her eyes. Al imagined that, in most people, this would be an off-

putting quality, but it was quite the opposite for her. Maybe it was her genuine smile, a blush like she had just been told a dirty joke.

Jones, on the other hand, scowled in all of the photos. Even when he had been young, he looked a decade older than his age. The creases in his forehead were already prominent, and the sides of his hair were combed over the top of his bald head, as if that was fooling anyone. He maintained his hairstyle to this day, but it had become even thinner, nearly all salt and no pepper. In the pictures, his skin was still noticeably pock-marked, and his slight lazy eye angled toward his nose.

Looking at the pair standing next to one another, it was clear that Jones and this woman were oddly matched, especially considering Jones' grim and often cruel demeanor. Al pondered their relationship for a moment and found himself genuinely perplexed as to how they had ended up together for any span of time. The photos weren't of young lovers. Al had trouble picturing Jones clumsily fumbling with the clasp of a bra, joking, laughing, breathing heavily. Had this version of Jones ever existed, or had his wife liked the stink of his coffee breath, the rough sandpaper of his hands moving under her skirt? There must have been something indescribable between them, Al figured. After all, he had kept her pictures up all these years after she left.

In the end, Al spent most of his lone day off in sleep. He slept heavily, corpse-like, approaching the dark unconscious with a still anxiety. But, in his sleep, he didn't dream about ridiculous or implausible things. Instead, he projected memories on the backs of his closed eyelids—all fact and no fiction. In one, Jones pressed his cracked lips against Al's neck, his white-stubbly beard chafing Al's skin. In this memory, the two fought, trying to resist their own actions. Al yanked what was left of Jones' hair. Jones

responded by throwing a punch to Al's chest. They shoved, wrestled, and pinned one another to the floor. It was pain. It was pleasure and shame and bliss.

In another memory, Al found the door to the basement ajar, the path downward illuminated. He descended the deteriorating stairs into the damp undercarriage of the house. The basement was a maze of shelving sinking into wet gravel. From a far, unseen corner, Al heard a shuffling of feet. "Harold?" he said, his own voice unfamiliar, younger. It barely carried beyond his mouth before it was buried in the muddy walls. Al made his way cautiously around the various haphazard boxes caked in mold, hoping to find Jones. In the corner, he instead found a rat, freshly gutted and splayed on the floor. Then, from overhead a box toppled onto him—A box full of pots and pans and mice, most dead, but at least a few screeched and scurried as they hit the floor. From the other side of the shelving unit, Jones cackled and made for the stairs. When Al tried to follow him, he found the door to the living room locked. He remained in the dim light of the stairwell for hours, flinching at the sight and sound of vermin crawling below.

All that afternoon, as Al slept, he remembered his time with Jones. So, it was not strange that he awoke, as he often did, with a complex mix of emotion. He opened his eyes to find himself alone in the dark of the bedroom, sunlight no longer emanating from the adjacent window. Al had, no doubt, napped much longer than he had planned. Jones obviously hadn't stopped in before leaving for town. He hadn't bothered to say goodbye. Al checked the time. It was late, past bar close, and the bed next to him was empty, still neatly made like it had been that morning.

Al rolled out of bed, certain that Jones must have fallen asleep on his recliner. He cracked the door, still in his briefs, his feet bare—too early for clothes. He was greeted

by the violent white gleam of the TV reflecting off the hallway walls, by the familiar voices of an infomercial he had seen before. He crept out of the bedroom, hoping not to alert Jones. Best to let sleeping dogs lie, he figured. But Jones wasn't there in his recliner. He wasn't in the kitchen fixing himself a snack.

Seeing the main floor empty, Al began to take each step with an abundance of caution, fearing that Jones might catch him flat footed. In the glaring light of the TV, the room filled with shadows, with ghosts and ghouls waiting for him to turn his back. For a moment, he considered returning to the comfort of his bed. That, in his mind, seemed to be the surest way of avoiding whatever Jones had planned. But there was something that kept him from doing so, even if he couldn't quite figure out what it was. Instead, he turned off the TV, nearly blanketing the room in darkness, save for a small illuminating sliver coming from the basement. He opened the door to the stairwell and was greeted by a sickly yellow light, by noises coming from the bottom of the steps: a subtle tumbling of gravel, the scuffing of cardboard, the back-and-forth chatter of bickering mice.

"Harold?" Al tried to sound unassuming, but he could feel rage creeping up his esophagus, acidic like bile. With each passing year, it became more apparent to Al that Jones would never stop. Until the day he died, he would poke and prod and torment because that's just who he was. He couldn't be any other way—like a cat can't be a dog or vice versa. Al, though, was equally frustrated with himself. He had been to this basement before, and yet, here he was again, ready to walk among those crumbling shelves, those decomposing boxes. He wasn't like Jones' ex-wives. He wouldn't pack his bags and hail a ride into town. He wouldn't yell or cuss or slap. He would force his feelings down into his gut where they would remain, burning like an ulcer. Unlike the

blushing woman in the photos upstairs, Al didn't have a coy smile. He didn't have a songbird laugh. He had a scar on his upper lip. He had trouble sounding out complex words. He had Jones, and Jones had him—like a python does its prey.

The basement reeked of rot, even more than Al had remembered. Though the farm wanted for water, there was no shortage of it here underground. It accumulated on the walls, the gravel damp beneath Al's bare feet. The yellow light of a single bulb flickered, its coils buzzing like a death rattle. Despite its best efforts, it did little to ward off the ominous darkness. Boxes, like abandoned homes, had begun to sink amid the elements. They held memories—trinkets and pictures and wedding dresses—phantoms of time and people past, evidence that they had lived, that they had left in one way or another. They depicted friends, wives, lost loves, and loves that never were. They pictured different versions of Jones, young and old but always scowling. Yet, if they remained here for long, these boxes and all of their contents would dissolve entirely, like ghosts into nothingness or whatever it is that comes next.

Al peeked cautiously around each corner. He swept all of the rows once—then twice for good measure. With each shelf he cleared, the light near the stairwell became dimmer until once clear figures became blurred outlines. Stacked boxes became behemoths, lurking monsters, still for now but maybe not forever. The ground had become dangerously uneven over the years. The ever-living earth beneath the surface had begun to sink in some places and rise in others. Now in near complete darkness, Al had trouble discerning the various pitfalls even when they were directly in front of him. With each step, he curled his toes, trying to grip and claw his way to stability. He stretched his arms out so that his hands dragged along the boxes on either side. This near

the back wall most of them threatened to collapse even at the slightest touch. The cardboard was soggy under Al's fingertips. Most of the boxes no longer kept their original shape. Some had mutated. Others were disemboweled, their innards spilling onto the ground below. All had begun to decompose, rancid and rotting. Soon, they would be nothing at all.

Al moved slowly, alert to his surroundings. It had taken him several minutes to sweep the basement to this point when, under normal circumstances, it may have only taken seconds. Now that he was so close to the back of the room, he found that even the sound of his footsteps caused his heart to skip. As he made the final turn, he stopped abruptly, sure that he heard shuffling from one of the boxes next to him. It was the subtlest of sounds, as if something had barely grazed it from the other side. Al felt a cool sweat broach the surface of his skin. He remembered the clanging of pots and pans as they hit the floor, the fur, the feces, the clawing feet in his hair, in his every pore. This time, though, something was different. Jones had given himself away. He had prematurely ruined the surprise.

Driven by impulse, Al grabbed the center of the shelf and heaved with the weight of his body, inconsiderate of what would happen to whomever was on the other side. First, one unit began to topple, wood and boxes and cobwebs crashing into the ground, evaporating in an instant. But this shelf collided with the next in line—which balanced on its corner for a moment before collapsing as well. One tipped into another and another and another: dominos in a row. A city of rot crumbled to the floor, replaced by a cloud of dust and spores. At first, the catastrophe was unbearably loud—the world

ending in a bang. What followed was whimper, the cries of mice upon seeing their homes destroyed, and then, there was nothing, silence.

With the shelves gone, there was no longer anything to obscure the light. There was only Al, looking over the destruction he had caused. He was still for a moment, calm, his heart quiet as he looked upon the scene. But this instant of serenity was fleeting. "Harold?" Al jumped to the wreckage and began to dig through the boxes, his hands sinking into mold and dust and ruin. He scooped mounds of cardboard from between broken shelves and discarded countless forgotten things. As Al toiled, his panic began to subside. With each handful of rubble, he was more and more sure that Jones had not been caught in the destruction. It now seemed possible that he wasn't in the basement at all. Had Jones' recliner actually been empty? Had he passed out in his truck? Had he decided to sleep things off at the bar? It certainly wouldn't have been the first time. Had the door to the basement opened on its own? The house that he and Jones shared was old. Maybe the latch had given way. These kinds of things happened from time to time, Al reasoned.

His mind pondered all of these questions as he backed from the broken shelving. He surveyed the mess that he would, no doubt, be forced to clean. He took a step back, then another. He stopped when his heel thudded against firm rubber—the sole of a boot. Seated there, propped against the back wall was Jones, now illuminated by the dull basement light. His vacant eyes were open—wide, strained. One had a burst blood vessel, but what had likely been a vibrant red hours ago had become a dull rust. His jaw was clenched tight, as were both of his fists. The normally red hue of his skin was purple, icy.

Al knelt to the old man's level and cradled his face with a single hand, but the man didn't recoil at his touch as he often did. The dead don't know the shame that Jones once felt. Next to the man's body was an open box. It was in poor condition but still intact. On the side, Al could make out the words "Harold &—." Jones had pulled some of the contents from the box and laid them on the ground next to him. He had a single piece of paper clutched in his hand tightly—a photograph of him and a woman, both smiling. Neither of the two was looking directly at the camera. It must have been candid. The sight of Jones' genuine happiness was foreign to Al, incomprehensible. It was Jones, but a different version of him entirely: Laughing, carrying on in public. That must have been the reason he kept it hidden away. The woman was the same one from the pictures upstairs. The two radiated happiness, a different snapshot of their years together. Al wasn't sure what he had expected to see, but now that he was holding the photo in his hands, he couldn't help but feel empty.

In the days that followed, Al arranged a small service at the house for his companion. Neither he nor Jones were particularly religious, but he invited a priest, nonetheless. He didn't make any other calls into town—not because he didn't care to but rather because he didn't know who precisely to call. He printed an obituary in the paper, but it didn't make much of a difference. In the end, few showed up. He half expected Jones' ex-wives to be there, but they weren't among the odd smattering of people present. The priest said a few clumsy words then invited Al to eulogize his "friend." Al, ever the silent type, politely declined, and the group proceeded to put Jones' reasonably priced coffin in the ground behind the house.

From that point on, Al was haunted—but not by ghosts. None of us are. He had Jones' old recliner taken to the dump—along with all the boxes from that dank basement. There, they would sit among the forgotten belongings of others, rotting, turning to dust. Al left the old house after a short time. He couldn't bear to spend nights there any longer. The next owners knocked it down and replaced it with something new.

Al, to his credit, finally moved somewhere else, a town called Bethany an hour north of Sascha. His house there was smaller, without a basement at all. It was newer too, and it didn't smell like cigarette smoke. He was happy for a while, living alone. But, over time, he found that he could no longer remember Jones' face or which way he had parted his hair. He forgot his scent after a long day of work and the wheezing sound he made in his sleep. Al dug through his closet and into his buried belongings hoping to find an old shirt, a handkerchief, a toothbrush, but none of these things remained among his possessions. He bought a pack of Pall Malls and smoked them in his living room, but afterward he couldn't remember if Jones' smoked Mavericks. Maybe it had been Newport Reds.

At night, he parsed his memories hoping to recall a kick, a slap, a gravelly cough, but his mind had filled with deteriorating boxes, their contents already covered in mold. Yes, Al was haunted, but not by Jones. He would have welcomed that, the bad with the not-so-bad. He was haunted by the realization that Jones was gone for good, his body and belongings one with the dirt. Soon, even in Al's mind, the old man would wear away entirely, and there would be no way to get him back. To Al, who suddenly felt so alone, that was the most frightening thing he could imagine.

THE HAUNTING OF AISLE NINE

My boy, when we go to Sascha, I'll take you down Main Street. Won't take more than a few minutes. There's a little bar run by a pedophile and a cafe run by a saint. There's a lawyer's office that's never open because the lawyer mostly works from home. And there's the smallest grocery you can imagine called the Kwik Mart. It has space for a meat department but no butcher. Its nine aisles contain food staples: dairy, cereal, rice and pasta, but if you are looking for produce, you'll likely have to drive to the next town over. The floor is permanently sticky because it only ever has an employee or two working at a time, and not one of them much feels like cleaning on a regular basis. And, on hot summer days, when the door to the stock room swings open, the whole of the store wafts with the smell of rotting food. Trust me, boy, when I tell you it's an off-putting little shop in an otherwise off-putting town.

It's only worth the visit because it was supposedly haunted at one point or another. If you believe the locals, the ghost of Esther Allen used to live in aisle nine. She apparently kicked it right there, reaching for a can of stewed tomatoes. Mind you, no one ever actually saw her spirit or anything, but after her death, the cans of tomatoes in that aisle tended to fall from their shelves with no obvious explanation. Some also said that the aisle was unnaturally cold from time to time. Others said that they felt her ghostly figure pass through them, that they would apparently get these sudden, fleeting rushes of emotion as if from nowhere. These are mostly isolated stories though, accounts from known gossips and liars. The word from the more righteous members of town is that she mostly kept to herself even in death.

Still, that didn't stop some of the more superstitious people in town from trying to drive her spirit away. They brought in Father Gary to bless the place with holy water, and when that didn't take, they called a medium from the city. Nothing worked, of course, and Old Esther stayed there in aisle nine among the tomatoes for years until, one day, she just left, seemingly for no reason at all. No flourish. No announcement. No goodbye. So, old Esther left a lot of people guessing why she had moved on and many more wondering why she had stayed in the first place. Lots of folks say ghosts hang around after death because they have grievances against the living, but most people that knew Esther don't think that could have been the case for her. She had been too boring in life to develop any real grudges. Some thought, it could be that Esther just grew weary of living in Sascha like so many do. I, of course, think that she was gone the moment she collapsed all those years ago, that she left the second her body went cold. Could be that sometimes tomato cans fall off shelves for no reason at all. Not sure I know for certain, but that's okay. I don't know if anyone really does.

IN WOLF'S CLOTHING

Eric Wassenhove:

A journalism professor I once had said that good writers don't take vacations. He said, writers write whether they are on the job or in their dingy apartments or on holiday in Hawaii. He said there's always a story to be written. This philosophy had recently inspired me to cut a well-deserved vacation short. I had to get back to my office to get some writing done. That was until, at the eleventh hour, my flight was canceled. In my world, time is limited. I wasn't about to lose an entire day stuck in an airport Chili's, so to save time, I had the airline reroute me from New York to Minneapolis to Denver and, finally, to LA—the city I call home. I'd later find out that I only landed two hours earlier than my original flight, but that's a story for another time. The story for now is that because I changed courses, I found myself seated next to one Joseph Garry for about an hour and a half as we crossed flyover country.

Joe's 62 years old. His son, Tim, lives in Denver and just had a kid. That was his particular reason for being on my flight. Joe, himself, is from a small farming town in South Dakota called Sascha, and he looks the part. On our flight, he wears Wranglers and an old plaid shirt. His skin is tanned, and his hands are rough. His face is ridden with deep lines. Joe is a man that likes to talk even if he doesn't like to admit it, so it's not surprising that on our short flight we talked about a host of different things: his family, my family, my vacation to New York City, and our differing opinions about Barack Obama—spoiler: Joe is not a fan. The flight is full, and the plane is small. We are seated so close to one another that I hardly have an armrest. I feel almost obligated to exchange pleasantries under such circumstances even if I'd rather just catch some sleep. I guess

from his willingness to converse that Joe feels much the same. With about twenty minutes left in the flight, I tell Joe I am a published true-crime novelist, that I sometimes guest write for the *Los Angeles Times*. Joe says he hasn't heard of me or my book, that the work of coastal writers doesn't really appeal to him.

Joe Garry:

Look, it's nothing personal. We are from different places. We may as well live on different planets. Sascha is surrounded by farmland on all sides. No ocean. No sushi restaurants or yoga studios within an hour. You write about your kinds of people. Meanwhile, you've never met the kinds of people I know, good wholesome people. You don't write about them. I know lots of people who've died, but you'll never report on them. So, I hope you don't mind me saying that your "true crime" just isn't real to me. Now, if you came to Sascha, if you wrote a book about the goings on in my neck of the woods, that would be a book worth buying.

Eric Wassenhove:

When he says this—or something like this—that day on the plane, naturally, I can't help but scoff. Obviously, death is a horrible tragedy whether it happens to "wholesome" individuals in Sascha or the secular low-life people of LA—sarcasm intended. But I bite. I tell him that, if he knows of a story worth telling, one that I could sell to a large market, I'd be happy to look into it. He smiles. The wrinkles on his face tighten. He immediately begins to recount this story of a five-year-old girl—Annie Elsley—who he says was murdered in Sascha last year. I'll spare the details for now. I'd hate to spoil the story to come, but I'll say this: Joe's story, if true, is interesting. It's

mysterious and shocking. It's the stuff that writers dream of—as ghoulish as that sounds. And then, the plane lands, and for the time being, our conversation ends. At baggage claim, Joe finds me again and hands me a scrap of paper with a home address and phone number. He tells me to look him up if I ever want to report on a real story. I am incredulous that someone would so freely give out personal information like this to a complete stranger, but I chalk it up to small town naivety. Maybe this is a part of the "wholesomeness" he espouses. I thank him, and the two of us go our separate ways.

But, his story, Annie's story, sticks with me. After I sleep off some of the jet lag, I start doing some research. And what I find is not the intriguing story Joe had told me. It made the headlines in a small town called Aberdeen. According to the author, Annie Elsley was killed in an accident, foul play not suspected. As far as I could tell, no one else had covered the story at all, not in New York or LA, not in Minneapolis or even Sioux Falls. Looking into Annie's death, I can't help but view this distinct lack of coverage as a commentary on the flaws of the news industry. As much as we journalists would like to promote ourselves as watchdogs, as modern-day vigilantes, the truth is that we are beholden to our golden idols. We seek out stories that boost our notoriety and stories that line our pockets. As a result, towns like Sascha fall by the wayside. Stories about people like Annie are buried.

Guided by some idealized notion of journalistic integrity, I spend a few more days making calls, digging for information about Annie Elsley, but there is little to be found. Normally, under these conditions, I might consider this a non-story, the ramblings of a man convinced his small town is more interesting than the next. But my insides still churn at the thought of Annie. Maybe it is some deep seeded desire to prove Joe wrong

about writers like me, about coastal bias. Maybe it is that some part of me believes his theories about Annie. Maybe I am just feeling impulsive, the way I usually am between projects, but regardless, within a few days of arriving back in LA, I buy a plane ticket to Minneapolis. I rent a Prius and book a room at the Sascha Inn. A day and change later, I find myself in the middle of nowhere, a town of less than 500 people in South Dakota. There's snow on the ground that won't likely melt between now and spring. It's negative thirty degrees, and I don't own a parka.

Upon my arrival, I drop my bags at the motel and walk directly to the Garry home. It's a few blocks away—which in Sascha is pretty much the opposite side of town. Joe is expecting me. I had called prior to leaving LA. Something about his voice on the other end of the phone told me he was smiling. When he opens the door though, I see the same gruff man as I had on the plane. He looks to be wearing the same jeans and a different plaid shirt. He ushers me to his couch, which is protected by a plastic covering. His television is on, playing an old video recording of Lawrence Welk. It seems dated, even for someone in his sixties, but I decide not to ask about it because, frankly, Joe is a man that bristles easily. He sits in a reclining chair across from me, and begins to speak immediately, no prompting necessary.

Joe Garry:

I said it a thousand times, but I'll say it again. *The Aberdeen News* got it wrong. The sheriff got it wrong. 'Cept for a few people in town, everyone got it wrong. People walking around saying a damn dog killed little Annie. Others say it was some kind of monster. Christ. This was murder, and Annie deserves for all of us to say it. There's just too much that doesn't fit with the official police report. Listen. Annie supposedly goes to

bed. Her father, Drew, bless his heart, tucks her in, kisses her good night. She's five—tiny little thing—barely sleeping in her own room the whole night. In the morning, dad wakes up in the cold, bitter cold inside the house. Not even the furnace can keep up. He's panicked. Maybe a tree branch through a window. Maybe the door outside wasn't fully latched, and a gust of wind blew it open. He gets out of bed to check. He doesn't see nothing out of the ordinary until he goes to little Annie's room.

That's when he sees her window is open from the inside. No signs of forced entry. And it snows that night, so no footprints leading to or from the house. Now, many people say her dad was acting funny leading up to that night. They say he had no joy left in him. Maybe he yelled at his little girl too much. Neighbors say that's how it was for a while. I can't speak to that for sure. I didn't really know the Elsleys all too well. But a lot of people say Annie must have been tired of the kind of love her dad was able to give. She must have opened her window and climbed out. But I'll repeat this: the girl was five, and she never knew any other kind of life. You think she'd leave? You think she'd know that was in the cards—all on her own? Doesn't know her ABCs, but she hatches an escape plan in the dead of winter? She just wanders away from her bed? She just leaves? She suddenly has all the angst and anger of a teenage girl? I don't think so. Say what you will about Drew, but let's think about things realistically.

Eric Wassenhove:

This is the first of several conversations that Joe and I have in Sascha. We usually meet here in his living room. Sometimes he offers me slices of colby jack—which I accept even though I am lactose intolerant. During my time in town, he is my closest confidant. He arranges a space for me to conduct interviews in the meeting room of the

church basement. He also gives me names and phone numbers of people in town I might want to talk to. Some of them are people that agree with his theory, but many do not. Some are insightful. Others are mind numbing and repetitive. Still others verge on fantasy. From the range of people Joe sends in my direction, I can tell it is important to him that I get this story right—or at least his version of right. I am not sure I understand why. Whenever I ask Joe, he says it is because people here care for one another—though I cannot help but wonder if it isn't a general sense of nosiness on his part. Still, I listen and write. I try not to pass judgment even when the crux of my impending story seems to hinge entirely on hearsay.

Albert Gunnison:

My wife and I are neighbors to the Elsleys. Drew grew up in Sascha. His wife, Drina, was from around here too. They started dating in high school. Most kids grow up and leave. They go to Aberdeen or Brookings, Watertown, even Sioux Falls. They don't stay. Sascha's not big enough for them, but the Elsleys were different. Drew always said he loved growing up here far away from city life. He and Drina were both religious types. I saw them at the Saturday 7:30 mass every week for years. Their only kid, Annie, was baptized at St. Michaels. Beautiful girl. I never quite knew why they decided to stay. A young couple like them could have gone anywhere. They were young and in love. They could have showed Annie the world. I tend to think Drew was a little old fashioned though. People who live in small towns know there's a certain safety and community that comes with growing up in places like Sascha. I'll bet Drew thought he was doing little Annie a favor by staying.

Eric Wassenhove:

Albert Gunnison is a small man, 80 years old or so. I am barely to my makeshift office when he shows up for an unprompted interview. His clothes smell musty, like they have been sitting in storage for too long. He brings his wife, Lenore, with him—though he insists they interview separately. She waits outside the open door while he speaks then enters when he is out of things to say. On a few occasions, it seems like Albert loses his train of thought, and from the other room, Lenore prompts him back to the story.

Lenore Gunnison:

Drew changed a few years back. Drina got cancer, died. Poor gal. Took her awful quick. Don't think little Annie even remembered her. For a girl to grow up without a mother, shame. Anyway, Drew, it's not like he suddenly became a Godless man. Quite the opposite. Somehow got his hands on a key to the church—if you believe the town gossip. Drew began to spend all the hours he wanted praying there rather than the normal hours St. Michaels was open. He'd bring Annie with him, stay there all night sometimes. He also became strange. He aged. The grief was all over his face. Made long, permanent lines on his forehead and at the corners of his eyes. He always looked like he was a moment away from crying.

Albert Gunnison:

We were never particularly close, me and Drew. Friendly, but not friends. That make sense? But when Drina passed, it was almost like he was suspicious of me. He looked at me sideways when I'd be out in my garden. He didn't want me talking to Annie. Told me that once. Kept her inside a lot. You guys in the cities may not get this,

but people ‘round here aren’t like that. Kids here wander into their neighbor’s yards. No need for them to be scared. Parents trust each other—even if it’s been a long time since me and Lenore had kids of our own around the house. I forgave Drew for a while, but when it kept up years after Drina wasn’t around, I was less patient. We eventually just stopped talking to one another altogether.

Eric Wassenhove:

Aside from Joe and the Gunnisons, I find one of the more cooperative people in town working within the Sheriff’s office. When I initially call Deputy Will Huntington—who played a large part in the investigation of Annie’s case—he says he isn’t interested in coming to the church to speak with me. If I want to speak to him in an official capacity, he says, I should come to his place of work. I accept his invitation a few days after my arrival in Sascha. He takes me to a little used interrogation room—which looks a lot like extra storage for the office. Much of the room is filled by a long, wooden table, but it also is home to a slew of cleaning supplies, a mop sink, and an old oven that is clearly no longer in use.

Deputy Huntington is obviously wary of talking to me. Over the course of our conversations, it is clear to me just how much work he has put into stopping the rumor mill surrounding this case. Now, he finds out there is some coastal journalist here to further investigate Annie’s death? Let’s just say I understand his hesitancy. Still, if I am to report on this story with some degree of objectivity, I need to speak with him. Among the various rumors swirling around town, his account is one that actually carries weight. At most, a small handful of people in town know what actually happened to Annie, and Deputy Huntington is one of them.

Sheriff's Deputy Will Huntington:

I'm not going to tell you any different than the official story, so I'm not really sure why you're asking. We got a call early in the morning, 'round seven. It's Drew Elsley. He says his daughter is missing, so I hop in my cruiser and head there. Sheriff Harris can't be reached. He's not often up and moving before nine, ten o'clock. He's an old man who doesn't move quite so quickly as he did a few decades ago. To be fair, we don't get a lot of calls, especially not emergencies. So, it's just me on the scene that morning. From my perspective, doesn't look like anyone has been inside the Elsley home. No footprints in the snow outside. It's like Annie vanished. And I'm looking over the area, trying to cover as much space as I can on my own. I'm there, freezing my ass off for close to an hour when I hear a woman's scream come from off in the distance. I run in that direction as fast as one can through a half foot of snow. And it's still snowing. Wind's kicked up too, so I can't see too well. Everything's all white around me. I'm running from backyard to backyard. Eventually, I hear sobbing, and I see a shadow crouched over a heap of snow. As I get closer. I see Gretch Wilson huddled beside a tiny girl. They're both covered in red. Everything is red, red and white.

Eric Wassenhove:

Gretchen Wilson, understandably, declined my request for an interview. I assume her account is similar to the official police report, but it is difficult to know for certain. Her silence in the time since Annie's death, I think, has played a large part in the rumors that circulate around town. It seems like everyone who walks into my office during my time in Sascha is certain that they know what happened that night. They enter the dingy

church basement, speaking with such confidence that it's difficult not to take their words at face value. However, many of their stories are wildly different from one another. And everyone in town claims that their story was relayed to them directly from Gretchen. This seems to be the common tactic for establishing credibility. I have relayed a few testimonies below, but I urge anyone reading to take them with a grain of salt. Sascha is a small community. Gossip at Patsy's Cafe is akin to Netflix for a lot of people who live here. So, while the people in town have a self-proclaimed sense of moral superiority, that apparently excludes the practice of stretching the truth.

Kyle Alderson:

Gretch is a distant cousin on my mom's side of the family, but we're a tight knit sort of family. So, me and Gretch are friendly, and we talked quite a bit about what happened that night. She was pretty shaken up from what she saw. A blizzard kicked up that morning, so she said things were hazy. It's basically a white out, and Gretch looks out her back window like a person does on snowy mornings. The trees are rocking and thrashing about. Her old house groans against the wind. She says she wonders if she will have to work that day. And, as she is thinking about that, she sees a figure shuffling near the creek in her backyard. The figure looks to be a man, a large man, no, a huge man. He's carrying something she says, slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. And he shuffles a few steps, and he stops, balancing the thing on his shoulder. He crouches to the ground and brushes away his footsteps in the snow.

Needless to say, it's weird, you know, what he's doing, so Gretch, she puts on her boots and a coat, prepared to go outside to see if he's okay. We've got lots of drunks

around here, and they get confused sometimes. Sometimes they freeze trying to get home from a binge. When she gets to the back door, he's only moved a few steps. It takes time to cover tracks like that. Anyway, Gretch, she opens the door and walks out onto her porch. She calls out to him. She says, "Hey!" you know, just to get his attention, but it spooks him. He drops the thing he's carrying and starts running up the creek. Smart, really, running through water doesn't leave footprints. Gretch thinks it's weird, and she goes to see what he dropped. When she gets close, she sees pajamas dyed red, sized small, a tuft of messy hair, snow dyed red. By now, she knows what she's looking at. She turns this something over, and it's a little girl, split open like a piñata.

Deputy Huntington:

Oh, fuck, don't listen to Alderson. He's related to Gretch, sure, but barely. You want the truth, check the police report. Might not be as juicy as what Allen has to say, but at least it ain't fiction. I should know. I was there every bit as much as Gretch. That morning, she's looking out back of her house. She sees a dog digging into a snow heap, a neighborhood dog, Michael Gentry's dog. Gentry doesn't have a fence. Barely has a pot to piss in. So, he lets his dog out, and the damned thing pretty much goes wherever the hell it wants. Kills. Fucks. You know, normal dog stuff. And just a month or so before, this dog had ripped a rabbit to shreds on Gretch's property. She had to clean up all the innards on her own. Not wanting to do that again, she put on boots and a coat and went out back to scare him away. Only, when she does, she sees he's left bloody footprints. And so, she goes to check out what he's gotten into this time. The rest, well, that's probably not so different from what Alderson said. I'll spare the details because, frankly, I don't like thinking about them much when I can help it.

Garrett Kruntje:

Everyone in this town is full of it. They're so wrapped up in what's "logical" that they completely ignore what they think is "illogical." I talked to Father Gary awhile back, and he believes there are all sorts of evil and unexplainable things around here. It only takes a minute for a person to drop their guard, and these things can overtake them. Ask anyone, people go missing, people die all the time in and around Sascha. A lot of the time, it's the elements that get to them, but sometimes, I think, it's something else. Several people swear they have seen a creature roaming around Sascha. And these are several people who don't run in the same circles. They all say the same thing. It's about seven feet tall, covered in thick gray hair, with razor sharp teeth. They say they all saw it at night and during big storms. Now, I can't give you any real evidence, but I can tell you this: I'd met Michael Gentry's dog dozens of times. Banjo's his name. One time, he made his way into the Kwik Mart, and before anyone could catch him, he tore into several packages of ground beef. He looked scary with blood dripping from his mouth, but when we finally cornered him, we realized he wasn't anything more than a teddy bear. Sure, he's a little wild, but I'd be more afraid of getting mauled by a house cat. No way Banjo killed Annie. No way.

Eric Wassenhove:

I could go on. Some of the stories are mixes between the ones I've relayed above. Each seems to have its own unique detail, like the town has been playing an elaborate game of telephone for the better part of the last year. That said, while the culprit changes from story to story, every person in town agrees when it comes to Annie. She was sweet,

innocent, small stature—even for a five-year-old. She had this big imagination and this big smile. Her death, to everyone around was something of a collective trauma. I'm no psychiatrist, but I would venture a guess that all of these stories come from a feeling of mutual responsibility. Everyone here wants to make sense of what happened. But unfortunately, Annie's story has more questions than answers, so it seems that people have filled in blanks with tall tales that, in all likelihood, have altered public perception of what actually happened to her. Still, despite this, the official story remains consistent with the original police report.

Deputy Huntington:

Well, I called an ambulance even though it was clear Annie was already gone. I know that's the first thing I did. And I went against my better judgment. I didn't follow the animal tracks leading from Annie's body, not right away. I figured it would be wrong to leave Gretch there like that. She was in some sort of state. Sobbing. She had blood all over her coat and hands. I think she tried to resuscitate the poor girl. So, I did what any gentleman would do. I took her inside. I held her hand. We just sat there in the quiet. The only sound was the wind practically rocking her house on its foundation. That and, of course, the occasional sniffle from Gretch as she tried to control her emotions. When the ambulance got to the house, I figured I was okay to investigate. Only then, the tracks were buried in the snow. No evidence. We eventually got Gretch's story which told us about Gentry's dog. That's all we had to go off of. So, the next day, we went to Gentry's trailer just outside of town to tell him what had to be done.

Michael Gentry:

Deputy Huntington's a good man. Knows I been to the Pen a few years back. Only he never treated me bad for it. Never suspected me of nothing. More'n I can say for the other pigs that work 'round here. So, when he's at my door in the morning, I let'm in. He says he knows Banjo's a good dog. Then, says he knows Banjo just done a bad thing. He says he knows Banjo didn't mean to hurt her, but he knows everyone 'round here's gonna get justice. Says maybe it's best if I just settle things myself. Then, he looks at the gun mounted on my wall.

Deputy Huntington:

Mike, you know, he has his stories. I went there to tell him what we suspected, but by that time, the dog had already run away. We never caught the damned thing. Cold probably got him at some point. Happens to a lot of outdoor pets here. As far as I'm concerned, that means little Annie's case is solved, even if it's technically still an open investigation. We at the Sheriff's office got our eyes peeled for Banjo if he ever shows up, but we aren't holding our breath. Deaths like Annie's will never not be tragic, but we have few resources. We aren't in the business of chasing ghosts and monsters—even if that sounds more exciting than an average day in uniform.

Eric Wassenhove:

And that, if you believe the police, is that. But Sascha is home to an admittedly smaller faction of people that are adamant that Annie's death remains unsolved. To them, Annie's story is the latest in a series of escalating crimes. Hers is a story of corruption

and nepotism, a reminder of the persistent rot that exists in towns where people look out for their own.

I'll say this: this group's accusations are compelling. It's the stuff of true crime podcasts and noir detective films. That said, I can't help but question the credibility of their arguments. Several of the individuals—even Joe, at times—have struck me as less than trustworthy. Most of them seem, perhaps, too anxious to speak to a journalist such as myself, too quick to point to smoke without evidence of a fire.

Joe Garry:

Yeah, there's the version the police tell you, that Annie, a five-year-old girl, climbed out her bedroom window all on her own—no one telling her to do so or anything, just a free-thinking little girl acting years beyond her age. Then, that girl just happened to be attacked by a dog that never hurt no one in its life. And *then*, that dog just happened to disappear, so the dog's body is not actually present for police to investigate. Yet, everyone is so sure that the dog did it—without any evidence to support that notion other than the official police report. Open and shut case, right?

Well, let me tell you a different story. Do you know Sheriff Harris? Nice guy, little older than me. Well, he's got this kid, Robert, who everyone just calls Bert. Bert was in grade school with my son way back when they were boys. Sheriff Harris is a widower, so he was always responsible for Bert on his own. Had to cook for him. Had to take him to school. Had to clean up his messes.

Garrett Kruntje:

Sure, everyone knows Bert. He's an odd guy. Huge. If I had to guess, I'd say he must be about 6'9, 6'10 and well over three hundred pounds. He's not fat either, just a big, strong man. He's bearded, and he's got these long, tangled locks. He still comes into the grocery with the Sheriff, so I see him pretty close to every week. I always say hi to him, but he doesn't ever say anything back. I'm not sure if he's dangerous. I've never seen any signs of him being violent. I have heard stories though. It's a small town. Frankly, you'd be hard pressed not to hear them.

Joe Garry:

I don't believe all the superstitious hoopla about Bert. Sure, he's a big kid, and the Sheriff's this little, white-haired guy. You couldn't find a random passerby that'd think they are related. So, people talk. They make up tall tales, saying Bert was actually dropped on the doorstep of the Harris household years ago, that his real dad is the devil himself—or at least some degenerate down in the State Pen. None of that's real I don't suspect. But that doesn't mean Bert is free of homegrown demons.

For instance, he is the only kid I know of that was expelled from Sascha High. My son always said he was a strange boy, mostly kept to himself. Didn't get in much trouble 'cept for the time a teacher caught him pleasuring himself out on the playground back in the 5th grade. That was a "slap on the wrist" kind of issue though. Bert was little then, with eyes almost too big for his face. Cute kid. Harmless. But, in his teen years, he started to grow. Got hair all over his body. Put on muscle on top of muscle. Suddenly he wasn't cute anymore.

Susan Dancler:

Yeah, I was a few years younger than Bert. I think he was a junior when I was a freshman. Or maybe he was a senior. I'm not sure. He wasn't at the school for very long when I was because of what happened. I was in the high school gym for PE class. Every day, we had these warmups to do: running laps, skipping rope, stretches, and the like. And so, I'm running alongside Tammy LaPointe in circles around the gym. We're gossiping about some boy in class, Jerry Arch, who I think we both had a crush on. It's just your average day. But then we hear a scream from the girl's locker room. We all stop what we're doing because, well, what else do kids do when they hear something like that? This girl, Dee, comes running from the locker room and into the gym. She has tears all over her face, and it looks like a chunk of her hair's ripped out. Her shirt's torn as well from the collar down near her belly button, and her bra is mangled, wires sticking out and everything. She has a hand covering her otherwise bare breast. And she runs to the other side of the gym looking over her shoulder, almost tripping over her feet. She's so scared. Scared like I've never seen before. By now, we're all in a panic, looking toward the locker room. The teacher, Mr. Hall, has gone to the girl to see what is wrong. The girl just points to the door where the hulking Bert Harris is now standing, a fistful of hair still in his hand.

Joe Garry:

The girl ends up being okay. Shaken up? Sure, but physically she just has a few bumps and bruises. Lucky she was able to get away from Bert, or who knows what would have happened. Bert's obviously expelled, and the girl's family wants to press charges

against him. But, strangely, they don't. Word is that Sheriff Harris paid them a visit after the attack, that he played on their emotions so to say. Bert was, after all, the only person Sheriff Harris had left after his wife passed. I imagine he said he'd make sure his kid never hurt anyone again. He's a cop, a professional when it comes to enforcing the law. If anyone could keep Bert under control, it's him. And, in an official capacity, he did a good job. To my knowledge, Bert was never caught hurting anyone in the years since.

But here's where the story gets weird. That girl Bert attacked back in high school? She went by the name Dee because she didn't much care for the name her parents gave her, Drina. She went on to marry her high school sweetheart, Drew Elsley. That's right. The girl Bert attacked those years ago was little Annie's mother. And, if you believe the stories, Bert wasn't finished with Drina. He had this thing for her that he never quite let go.

Albert Gunnison:

I know for a fact that Drina Elsley still had problems with Bert Harris as an adult. There's this creek that runs through the backyard of our houses, the same one near where Annie was found that morning. Anyway, there's trees growing on either side of the water. If you wanted to, you could hide in those trees, and no one living in the nearby houses could see you. Or, at least, that'd be true if you were a normal sized person. I know Drina walked out of the back of her house more than once with a phone in her hand. And she'd be shoutin' that Bert better get his ass out of her backyard before the police show up. Only, it was always just Sheriff Harris that came to the house. He'd search the wooded creek and visit the houses nearby to remind people to keep their doors locked. Of course,

he never found any sign anyone had been there. That was that. He couldn't arrest a shadow in the trees. That's what he told the Elsleys. I know Drina was scared, and she talked to Drew about moving somewhere else. But then she got sick.

Lenore Gunnison:

You know, me and Al went to Drina's funeral. It was a sad one. She was young, too young. Annie though wasn't too bothered. I suspect she was too young to really understand what was going on. She must've been, I dunno, three at the time? Drew was trying to get her to sit still next to him during the service, but she always was a squirrely one. When Drew decided he didn't have the gumption to keep her in her seat, she got up and ran to the back of the church. Figures. That's where they'd have rolls and coffee after mass on Sundays. I'm sure she thought she could sneak one with no one seeing. Well, she's back there, and it's a good thing. Drew is able to grieve in quiet. But then Annie starts talking in the back room the way kids her age do, you know? It's like they don't have any control over their voices. So, she's holding this loud conversation that everyone can hear. It's cute when you first think about it. But now, I don't know that it is. I, for the life of me, I can't figure out who she was talking to. Everyone she knew was in the church that day. But, before too long she's quiet again, and by the time any of us went back there, whoever it was—if there was ever anyone there at all—was gone.

Kyle Alderson:

Look, I know what the Sheriff and Deputy Huntington say. I know the official story. I know what Gretch says now. Heck, she even tells me she misspoke the first time

she told me the story. But I also know what she told me near the time she found Annie, and it's much different than what she says now. I promise I'm not lying. What reason would I have to lie? She said it wasn't a dog. She said it was a man. I don't know why her story changed. Maybe she was lying to me to begin with and thought better of it? Maybe it was something else. I'm not saying it's anything suspect. I just think it's worth questioning again.

Deputy Huntington:

For fuck's sake, Eric. Why in God's name do you want to know about Bert Harris. He did a bad thing in the past, sure. And, yeah, he's a wanderer. Likes to walk all over town. Some people see him places where he is legally allowed to be, and they panic. I can't say for sure if he ever visited the Elsleys, but I suppose it's possible. If he did, there wasn't a police report filed. You know, it's not Bert's fault he's so big. Were he a little man, a handsome man, I don't think people would have so much trouble with him. But he's a big kid, a simple kid. Likes to hunt and walk and spend time outdoors. Nothing wrong with that.

And you've looked at the police file. I'm sure you've seen the pictures. Annie Elsley, God rest her soul, was mauled. She'd been partially eaten. Her insides were outside her body. I say I don't want to talk about it because it's the worst thing I've ever seen. It's something a human wouldn't do, especially someone with no official record of doing anything wrong. I know it's not a grabby story, but all signs point to her being attacked by an animal. You know why that is, Eric? Because that's exactly what happened. It wasn't some work of evil. A little girl decided to go outside and found

herself in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's horrific and sad and random, but people need to find a way to let it go.

Joe Garry:

Look, all I'm saying is there should be more doubt in peoples' minds. I don't know that Bert did anything. No one does. But ask yourself this: is it more likely a little girl climbs out her window on her own, or is it more likely she was coaxed by someone? Maybe someone she had seen out her window before? If it was Gentry's dog, why the conflicting reports from people who know Gretch Wilson? Why doesn't Huntington pursue Banjo after he's sure Annie is dead, and an ambulance is on its way? Why not at least investigate other possibilities? I said before that I don't know, but that doesn't mean I don't have my suspicions. One thing I know for sure is that Sheriff Harris has protected Bert for a long time. Maybe he's still protecting him?

Garrett Kruntje:

I like to think of myself as sort of a philosophical type. That's what I studied at the U before I dropped out. So, I like to think that my truth and someone else's truth aren't always the same. A book I read called that idea relativism. Some folks I talked to think they've seen a creature wandering about town. Now, I don't really believe in monsters myself, but who am I to say that they are wrong? Could be what I think is a monster and what someone else sees as a monster are different. Can a man be feral and wild like a dog? I suspect so. Can he do horrible, unspeakable things? Sure. Does that

make him a monster? Well, I think it's certainly possible, but I'd imagine that would depend on who you ask.

Eric Wassenhove:

I'm sitting in my room at the Sascha Inn, listening to recordings of things I've heard around town. My bed smells like cigarettes—which really isn't surprising given that the woman working the front desk noted that was a perk of all the rooms here. The walls are wood-paneled. Some of the paneling has begun to come loose, almost bubbling underneath the surface as tired, ages-old adhesive wears off. There is a TV in the room, one of those boxy ones that was probably last replaced in the 90s, and it isn't hooked up to cable. Near the bathroom sink are two washcloths. One is pristine, white, ready for everyday use. The other is stained black with grease. A note nearby says that it's meant for cleaning guns during pheasant season. It's not exactly the Ritz Carlton. It's barely even a Super 8, honestly.

I guess I just wanted to tell you about it because I want you to see this town in all of its glory. Sascha's a different sort of place, stuck in a different era, a timeless era, a mishmash of the past several decades as if no one had ever bothered with a full remodel. Some of this, I suspect, is because Sascha is small. Money is limited. If your establishment is falling into ruin, so be it. If people don't like it, where else are they going to go? It's not like Sascha has more than one restaurant or gas station or motel that people can choose to patronize. But some small part of me wonders if there isn't more to it than that. Maybe no one ever remodels anything because people don't like change. I haven't talked to anyone that didn't grow up here. Most of them think that, despite its

faults, Sascha is a wonderful place to live. Anyone who doesn't like the town the way that it is, I imagine, has already left.

I realize I must sound a lot like a metropolitan author stepping all over the beauty of a simple small-town life. I assure you that is not my intent. I understand the appeal. It's quiet here. Despite the stale smell of tobacco permanently wafting from my sheets, I can't tell you the last time I have slept as well as I have the past few weeks. I can walk to get groceries. I haven't had to get in my car once since I got here. That said, I think a certain danger exists in this sort of simplicity. In avoiding change for so long, people here have allowed it to deteriorate. Take that how you will.

My point is this: I came here to learn something about myself. Maybe I had become too concerned with the marketability of my work. Maybe Joe was right. Maybe flyover country is filled with this different class of people, wholesome and genuine in the way city people are not. Maybe they really are the "salt of the Earth," but we don't talk about them because their stories are less profitable. I spent my own money to come here. I invested my own time in this case. While I haven't broken any new ground when it comes to Annie or Bert or Michael Gentry's dog, I have affirmed my beliefs about myself, about this place. The people here are not better than back home. Yes, I profit from writing about death. The people in my stories—Annie included—should still be alive. That I make money from their passing is morally questionable, to say the least. I know that. I have long known that. But the people in Sascha aren't any better—even if they go to church far more often. I have spent hours racking my brain as to why people here have been so quick to talk about Annie's death yet so slow to move for any semblance of real change. I tend to wonder if their motivations are not so different from

my own. They may not make money from tragedy, but they clearly rely on these stories for some other form of sustenance: maybe misbegotten purpose, maybe basic entertainment value. The more I think on it, I am genuinely not surprised Drew Elsley has refused to speak with me even if I may be able to help solve his daughter's case. He's been surrounded by vultures since the day Annie died. To him, I must seem like just another buzzard circling from overhead.

Tomorrow, I intend to leave Sascha. I don't figure I'll come back anytime soon. Maybe it's because I know when a trail has gone cold. Maybe I think the police got it right the first time. Regardless, I'd prefer not to stir up controversy without concrete evidence to back it up. I will tell you this: for my final interview, I was able to sit down with Sheriff Harris. His house is a little more than two blocks from the Sascha Inn. It's big in comparison with many of the other houses here. It has a detached garage below a second story guest house. I'm told that's where Bert lives. While it is large in size, much of the Sheriff's house has fallen into disrepair. Some of the siding is falling off. Paint has begun to come off in strips. A few shingles have fallen from the roof, and a few others appear to be coming loose. Sheriff Harris is an old man with, perhaps, too many years on the job. He's, no doubt, past due for retirement, but something keeps him here. Something keeps him in uniform—even if it takes him substantially longer to put on every morning.

Naturally, he has his own ideas about the case. He's heard the rumors that it had something to do with Bert, and as an officer of the law, he seems to understand their logic. As a parent, though, he doesn't appreciate the suggestion. Though he is never

openly unkind to me, I can tell this is not the kind of thing he enjoys talking about on his day off.

Sheriff Harris:

I'll try to keep this simple. I get that people are stuck on Annie's death. It's grief, I think. We don't have many young people around here anymore. Most folks down at St. Michael's look closer to my age than Annie's. So, when someone like her who's small and innocent, when someone like her goes, it's not like when one of us "gray-hairs" does. It's like this vision of a future Sascha, one in the hands of our children or our grandchildren, has been yanked from our hands. And there's nothing we can do about it. I think it's natural that people start pointing fingers. People don't think I hear them talk about me and my boy, but I do. I hear the things they call me, the things they call him. It's not fair, frankly. I'm better equipped to handle it than most. You don't last this long as Sheriff without thick skin.

Eric Wassenhove:

Harris speaks slowly, almost like he's reading from a prepared statement. I can tell he's thought about this a lot and that he's resolute in his opinions. When I give him an "out" so to speak, an opportunity to address the swirling rumors regarding his son in more specific terms, he sputters to an extent. It's almost like he's too passionate to be clear headed.

Sheriff Harris:

Well, Bert's just gonna be Bert. People don't know him like I do. He's a curious boy. That's all. He likes to watch people, to see what they do in their lives. Sometimes they see him looking at them, and they assume the worst. Not his fault, you know? As for Drina, I think she saw Bert's ghost following her ever since that one day. I have no reason to believe he was stalking her or little Annie. I suppose he could have been, but I don't have evidence to suggest he was. Gotta rely on the evidence. It's the only way in my line of work. And, that morning, the one where Annie was attacked, Bert, he was at home. He was at home, and I was at home. No way he could have done it. Just no way. Like I said, it's all people jumping to conclusions.

Eric Wassenhove:

We go back and forth on that subject for a while. I press the old Sheriff who, to his credit, remains affable—though somewhat scattered. I think, after several minutes, he's well aware that I am grasping for some monumental admission, some punchy ending to my story. At which point, he is less charitable toward me, more suspicious of my intentions. When it is clear he is not about to give me an exciting conclusion, we exchange goodbyes, and I head for the front door. As I step outside, I run into Bert. He looks every bit as big as everyone told me, maybe even bigger. And, despite the cold, he isn't wearing a shirt. I don't think he actually needs one much of the time though. His chest, arms, and back were covered in curly, graying hair. I nod in his direction, and in the smallest, mousy voice, he responds with a curt hello. What I am shocked by in that moment is how big his eyes are, like a puppy's: innocent, dumb, unassuming. In my

mind, I had built up this picture of him as this menacing, cruel figure, but at least in this particular moment, he doesn't look that way at all, not really. As I am leaving, I assume he has just returned to the house from hunting. He is holding a skinned rabbit. He had blood on his hands.

RAINY NIGHTS LIKE THESE

I want you to picture yourself in a rainstorm, my boy. You're 17 years old, and you find yourself on a country road on the outskirts of some rinky-dink town. You're trying to get home, but the sky has opened like floodgates. You're disoriented from lightning flashing, flashing, flashing and thunder booming like bass drums. You're far from any real city lights, and the clouds have obscured the moon entirely. It's dark. It's so very dark. You have on a jacket that was marketed as 'water resistant,' but even it is soaked through. Your t-shirt underneath suctions to your chest, and your work shoes squish with each step you take. It's a spring storm—entirely different from one in the summer months. The rain tonight is cold. Your body is sore from trembling. You can see your breath, and the ground below begins to slick with ice. You aren't much further than twenty minutes from home, but you genuinely aren't sure you can make it that long. Your father had promised you a ride, but he isn't answering his phone. No doubt, he is snoring loudly on the couch, a bottle of tequila cradled between his legs. He's a man who'd prefer to live in his memories because the present just hurts too damn much. He's forgotten you before. If you survive tonight, he'll certainly forget you again.

You consider giving up, letting the elements take you like they have countless people throughout time. But then, headlights illuminate the road in front of you. They are bright, glorious, blinding like God appearing to Saul. They belong to a beater, a rusty Oldsmobile, not unlike most other cars you see in your neck of the woods, not unlike the one you've dreamed of buying for yourself. It approaches swiftly, but you don't turn around. You don't wave your hands or beg for help from the side of the road. You're too cautious for that. You've heard of people disappearing on empty country roads. But, still,

the car slows as it gets closer. It rolls next to you at your pace as you continue toward home. The window rolls down to reveal a man, a stranger.

He says something like, “Hey, ain’t you so-and-so’s kid.”

You turn and give a curt nod, but you don’t stop. The driver goes on about how he knows your ‘pappy,’ how he owns the bar in town. He says he bought his car with your father’s February bar bill. He laughs. Some of his teeth are missing. The others are brown. Even in the dark, you can see that. Then, he just looks at you for a while, and he asks the question he has been waiting to ask: “What’re you doing out here alone on a night like this?”

You tell him you are going home. He points to the horizon and says, “Just up the way?”

You nod, and he pulls his car in front of you. He parks and throws open the passenger door. It’s getting colder, darker. The rain begins to fall even harder. And, he says, “Hop in. I’ll take you the rest of the way.” It’s not a request. Some part of you imagines you are getting in that car whether you like it or not, so you accept the offer. You get in. The smell of old beer makes you feel ill. The driver smiles at you again, and the car lurches forward.

My boy, I want you to picture yourself in this rainstorm. Picture yourself alone and cold and scared. Picture yourself helpless in the eyes of some strange man, the facade of decision when his car door opens. Picture it. Only then will you understand why so many faceless youths go missing on roads outside towns like Sascha and why so few of them ever turn up again.

MODERN VAMPIRES

December 18th

During northern winters, the sun never quite reaches its highest point. It almost moves horizontally across the sky so that shadows appear long for the entirety of a day. Dawn and dusk are nearly indiscernible because they are only hours apart. Northern winters are dark early and often. They are cold and gloomy even in the absence of clouds. Sure, it snows sometimes, and for a few days, the countryside brightens under a cover of undisturbed white. But it is not long though before the temperature drops well below freezing. The wind kicks up, and snow turns dark, dirty, hard like ice.

Allison Murray stared into these conditions from behind her car windshield as she first returned to her hometown, Sascha, South Dakota. She had left for school in the Twin Cities only a few months prior. Her new metropolitan home, while similarly cold, contained a certain heat, a certain liveliness not present in the countryside. Allison shifted in her seat, stiff from hours of driving. Dmitri, her boyfriend of the past few months, laid on the floor of the back seat, covered entirely by a reflective blanket. There wasn't much sun to speak of, especially after noon, but Dmitri couldn't tolerate any of it. He had this strange condition that had become common within major American cities. Dmitri had contracted it during a one night stand a little more than a year ago. That was the most common method of transmission—though it could be transmitted through any other exchange of bodily fluids: sex, needles, biting. While not exactly life-threatening, the condition—known commonly as Sundowners' Disease—was accompanied by several symptoms which made normal living difficult: odd dietary habits, sensitivity to sunlight, and impulsive behavior—to name a few. For this reason, people in less evolved places

called guys like Dmitri “vampires.” For instance, when news first broke about the spread of this mysterious condition, the locals in Sascha conjured wild tales of evil, bloodthirsty monsters. They all began to stock up on holy water and crucifixes. Each resident, it seemed, had at least one wooden stake hidden within their home. It should be noted, though, that all of these precautions were beyond ridiculous. Despite all of the hullabaloo among the residents of Sascha, people with Dmitri’s condition were human, of course. Vampires don’t exist. Allison knew that even if the smaller minds in her own town did not.

By the time Allison’s car pulled up to the Murray family household, the sun had fully set. She thanked the Lord for small mercies. Her mother, Laurel, sat on the porch, awaiting the return of her baby girl. Allison’s father, Karl, was on his Lay-Z-Boy recliner watching the news—no doubt a program on the degradation of American values. To this point, Allison was unsure of the welcome she and Dmitri would receive from either of her parents. She had obviously told them about Dmitri and his condition. She had to. How else could she explain his nocturnal lifestyle? When she had last spoken to them, her mother had responded warmly, but Allison knew that was her default setting. She simply didn’t know how to be confrontational. It was a quality that had been completely bleached from her DNA. Her father, Karl, was repulsed by the kind of boy her daughter had chosen to bring home. Of course, he never said that to her directly, but he had this bad habit of whispering obscenities loudly under his breath whenever he disapproved of her actions. He had, of course, heard about people like Dmitri on the news: “The scourge of city life. God’s punishment for immoral acts. The embodiment of sin,” his favorite newscaster had called them. In his mind, no boy could possibly be good enough for his

daughter, unless, of course, that boy was Christ himself. Certainly, no vampire trash from the city would meet that standard.

When Allison wheeled her suitcase up the walkway to the house, her mother rushed to greet her. Laurel pulled her daughter into a warm hug. She kissed Allison on both cheeks then embraced her once more. Laurel had always been affectionate when it came to her only daughter; however, since Allison had moved away, Laurel felt a glaring void in her life that no one could fill. Now in Allison's presence again, Laurel felt the need to be close to her, to feel their heartbeats synchronize.

When Laurel released her daughter, she turned to the young man who stood nearby. She thought him an odd-looking person. Allison had told her that he was a bit older—in his mid-twenties—however, he had a remarkably youthful look about him. He was thinner than she imagined and taller too, though he slouched rather substantially. His skin was free of wrinkles, and he was ghostly pale, without even the slightest hint of blush on his cheeks. "And you must be Dmitri!" Laurel said. She reached toward him and squeezed his shoulder tentatively. "Alli has told us so much about you. Come in. Come in." Laurel grabbed the suitcase from her daughter's hand and began to head into the house.

Once Allison and Dmitri had settled—her in her old bedroom upstairs and him on the couch in the basement—the family sat for dinner. And, not long afterward, everyone retired to their respective sleeping chambers: Laurel in the bedroom next to Allison's and Karl on the living room recliner. Not everyone, though, was so anxious to sleep. Dmitri spent his days in bed while others were active, so he often found himself restless when the sun went down. As a result, he spent a lot of his waking hours alone in thought.

During times like these, his mind wandered. It filled with strange thoughts, with passionate sexual fantasies. They were waking dreams in which he had strange, beast-like powers, an insatiable appetite, an uncontrollable stamina. These thoughts were so real, so present that he sometimes felt he couldn't control himself. On this particular night, against what he supposed was his diminutive, better judgment, he rose from the couch and made his way to the main floor. He snuck by Karl and up the stairs toward Allison's room. His feet were so quiet, his breathing so utterly silent, that a superstitious onlooker might swear that he was levitating, that he wasn't drawing breath at all. But, of course, that would be ridiculous.

"Can I come in?" He whispered into Allison's door, which was cracked open just the slightest bit. He nudged the door open further and entered. Allison was awake, waiting to see if he would visit. She smiled and waved him in.

December 19th

Sunday, the Lord's Day. Allison had been up late and now, had awoken early. Of course, Dmitri had retired to the basement sometime while she slept, satiated. Sex had become something less of a monumental thing for her. She hadn't been a virgin since she was 17, but she had learned from an early age that discretion was the best practice here in Sascha. People here looked at a girl differently when they knew she was active. She had seen it happen with other girls in her class. So, when she decided she was ready, she approached a boy in her class named Garrett, who she thought would be gentle and quiet about their affair. And, he had been. They explored each other curiously that first time, and in their subsequent meetups, they gained confidence and practice. She learned to tell him the things she wanted, and he learned to last longer than a few minutes. Things

proceeded that way for much of their senior year, quietly. The two of them weren't quite a couple, not in public anyway, but there was something unspoken between them. Then, they graduated and went to their separate colleges. They didn't break up, not really. He had never been her boyfriend in the first place, nor had she been his girlfriend. Not long after, she met Dmitri, and that was that.

Dmitri was experienced, learned, metropolitan. To him, sex was something that just happened between people, as inane as a conversation. He and Allison had slept together on their first date and on pretty much every date since. That, Allison thought, had been fine for the first month or so. After all, Dmitri's impulsive nature made him unpredictable, exploratory, fun in the ways that Garrett didn't know how to be. However, she now wondered if they had the capacity to move beyond physical affection. After all, though they always used protection, in each nightly rendezvous, she risked contracting Dmitri's condition. Lately, she had wondered if it would be worth doing so for someone with whom she had little connection.

Allison tried to shake these thoughts from her mind as she climbed out from under the covers and walked to the vanity. Without much thought to the contrary, she began to prepare herself for Mass—a known expectation in her parents' house. Her reflection in the mirror informed her that Dmitri hadn't shown an ounce of restraint the night before. He had this bad habit of kissing, sucking, biting on her neck when they were in the throes of passion. Last night, he had left a crimson splotch the size of a half-dollar. Make up wouldn't cover it, she figured. It usually didn't, so she grabbed a green bandana that she often wore in her hair and tied it like a kerchief around her neck. A temporary fix, but maybe she could get through the week without her father seeing.

Karl was the protective sort, the punitive sort, vengeful and unreasonable. He was a religious man, but he wasn't without his temper. He had been raised in the mold of his own father, a Sascha man through and through. A father, in Karl's mind, was responsible for the moral wellbeing of his family. He was like the captain of a ship. It was up to him to chart a course, to ensure no member of his crew was led astray. In the event that his ship was damaged at sea, God forbid, Karl would sink with it into the icy abyss. It was a job for a real man, a man of conviction, one willing to bark orders and level punishment when necessary. To him, the moral failings of his wife and daughter reflected his inability to govern. In this way, he couldn't afford to be lenient. The stakes were simply too high. He figured, as many men in Sascha did, that love within family was unconditional. Respect and fear, however, had to be earned. And so, on Sundays, he marched around the house with the demeanor of a drill sergeant, barking orders, hurrying his family along. Laurel and Allison would go to church every week as long as they lived under his roof. Whether they were sick or apathetic or disinterested, they would go.

That particular Sunday, Father Gary lectured his congregation about living an ideal life in the eyes of the Lord. He said that the holiday season was the perfect time for everyone in Sascha to break with their sinful ways. He said casting off old habits required diligence and focus but that the rewards would be plenty in the afterlife. Though Allison tried to dissociate herself from the priest's suggestions, she still felt the chafe of Dmitri's unshaven face on her chest and neck. The places where he had touched her the night before, suddenly stung with guilt. She wanted so badly to leave behind these archaic and controlling influences on her life, but some part of her couldn't shake the weight of Catholic authority. She figured her own upbringing had conditioned her to feel this way

after she had done something so patently forbidden, but perhaps she genuinely felt the light of divine intervention, God telling her to avoid her ongoing sins of the flesh.

December 20th

Dmitri didn't eat much of anything during his time in Sascha. For one, he had adjusted his diet so that he was more or less a vegetarian at this point—not for any moral reason, though. He just found that his condition rendered some food inedible. It was funny, he thought, that a town surrounded by farmland on all sides depended so thoroughly on processed, canned foods. Meat wasn't the only food that disagreed with his stomach, though. Pungent dishes often caused his stomach problems as well. Garlic, for instance, now made him violently ill. He even became irritable when he so much as walked by an Italian eatery. So, when Laurel heaped a mound of spaghetti and marinara onto his plate a few days after their arrival, his stomach began to churn loudly. None of the Murrays seemed to notice though. Allison had just told her father that she didn't want to be a nurse anymore, that she now wanted to pursue a women's studies major. Karl's face had turned red at the suggestion.

"Women's studies?" he asked. "What do they teach? How to properly burn a bra." He had heard of "new age women" and "feminists" on his television programs. Certainly, his little girl hadn't become the liberated type, the type to attack the bedrock of American society, right? "What do you think about all this? You really want to be married to a feminist?" he asked Dmitri, almost certain that no man could want such a thing.

"I dunno," Dmitri responded, honestly. He didn't know that he and Allison were to be married. He wasn't entirely sure they were anything more substantial than a casual

fling. Girls, he figured, dated all sorts of guys in college. He just figured he represented the first in a line of men she would eventually bring home to meet her parents. He also didn't quite know what feminism was. Sure, he posed as a feminist at bars when trying to bring women home, but it wasn't something he had put much thought into.

"Dunno, huh?" Karl continued. "Laurel, you hear your daughter?"

"Karl, dear, she can be whatever she wants," Laurel said with confidence. In all honesty, though, she hadn't paid much attention to the conversation. She was a woman with a rare and untapped imagination. In another world she could have been a famous author or a painter, a brilliant artistic mind. She frequently lost herself in vivid imagery, in fantastical movie scenes which were infinitely more entertaining than her reality. For the longest time, Laurel had never been a sexually adventurous person. She figured it wasn't her place to question the kind of love that Karl gave her. Then, one day, she had an epiphany, an awakening like a dam rupturing. Ever since, she had difficulty paying attention to any given moment for longer than a few minutes. If she wasn't actively speaking, in all likelihood she was imagining herself in the arms of a man. She had a particularly bad habit of imagining Father Gary, Sascha's resident priest, folded into all sorts of sexual positions—even though he was more than two decades her senior. At Mass that Sunday, she had imagined herself coiled around Father Gary like a snake, mating like wild beasts in the jungle. Now at dinner, she pictured the two of them kissing so passionately that their teeth scraped against one another.

Karl squinted in her direction, now. He had never liked it when she contradicted him. It wasn't her place. A couple united in marriage should be equally yoked, he thought, united in body, mind, spirit. Without a word, he aggressively excused himself to

the kitchen. Laurel also pushed herself from the table and moved to start clearing dishes. Her mind had moved to another man, James Beacom, who had died in a farming accident the year before. Together, they were reenacting her favorite scene from *Ghost*.

December 21st

People all around the region knew the lone bar in Sascha, the Duck, as something of a hot spot. Here, the townsfolk had tequila on Fridays and whiskey on Saturdays. Then, they'd visit St. Michaels for wine on Sundays. The bartender, Tom, had a reputation for serving drinks to whomever was tall enough to see over the bar. For that reason, many nights—and especially on weekends—Sascha would nearly double in population as various underage patrons poured in from the surrounding towns. So, it is, perhaps, not surprising that this is where Dmitri and Allison found themselves on an otherwise sleepy small-town night.

Allison, who mostly abstained from drinking, now found herself excited at the prospect of imbibing some cheap booze. She hadn't seen some of her closest friends since she had left Sascha in the fall. Carrie, Allison's closest confidant, had planned to go to school in the Cities as well, but then, her boyfriend at the time, Greg, had gotten her pregnant in the fall of their senior year. Now they were married with a kid. No time for school. Barely enough time to sneak away to the bar one night a week.

Initially intoxicated by each other's presence, the Sascha High grads shared round after round after round. Meanwhile, Dmitri mostly drank water. To him, the conversation seemed to be all inside jokes and anecdotes. In his mind, Allison seemed decidedly less complex when around these particular people. To him, she had always been a city girl, a metropolitan figure born in the wrong place. She had come across as a person with big

ideas, with forward thoughts, a unique taste in arts and culture. Now, he thought maybe he had been mistaken, as if his lust for her had clouded his better judgment. He eventually took himself to the bar to order another pitcher of beer for the table. And, when he found the conversation with the bartender, Tom, more inviting, he ultimately stayed, assuming that Allison wouldn't notice his absence.

When, it was eventually time to head home. Allison, Carrie, and Greg made their farewells. They hung on one another for support after an evening of considerable drinking. Then, they went their separate ways, stumbling in opposite directions down the empty streets of town. On their way back to the Murray household, Allison initially swerved playfully from one side of the street to the other, but when she noticed Dmitri's more somber demeanor, she stopped, self-conscious that he was silently judging her.

"Noticed you were talking to Tom quite a bit," Allison slurred, trying her best to fill the silence between them.

"Yeah, nice guy."

"You know he likes to get little girls drunk," Allison continued, reckless, uncontrolled words spilling from her mouth without her consent. "He has a reputation, you know. Not sure I'd want to hang around with him if I were you."

"If you say so," Dmitri said, grabbing her hand. He quickened their pace, hoping to minimize their conversation. He had liked Tom after all. They had been able to talk with one another, as in truly talk. No forced pleasantries, no drawn-out pauses. It felt natural, like conversing with an old friend.

"Hey, D?" Allison started again after a moment of silence, her tone noticeably different than moments before. Unbeknownst to Dmitri, she talked this way when she had a nagging question festering inside her.

"Yeah?" Dmitri responded.

"Are we for real?" she asked. By now, she had wrestled her hand free of his and had stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Their relationship had been filled with parties and hook ups and indiscretions. It had been a honeymoon for the both of them, but now that they were far away from the city lights, something had changed. It was only now that Allison felt courageous enough to mention it.

"What do you mean?" Dmitri tried to grab her hand again.

"Are we real—I mean—as a couple?" she asked again, doing her best to evade his grasp.

"Jesus, Alli, what kind of question is that?" he swiped for her again.

"No, wait. I just—we don't talk. I was thinking about it, and I can't remember a time we had a serious conversation, just us, you know?"

"I dunno, Alli. Can we talk tomorrow when you're more—you know?" Dmitri fumbled for the right words. "It's freezing, and you're drunk," he said. He swiped for Allison's hand one more time—to which she finally responded in open frustration.

"I said stop!" Allison flailed to evade his grasp, and in doing so, her fist caught Dmitri across the face. At this point, the whites of his eyes turned red, and his pupils dilated. He grabbed at Allison's coat, and in her attempt to avoid him, she fell backward into the street. She landed flat on her back; her head hit the gravel underneath her with a crunch. The world around her swirled. The trees and homes nearby mocked her while

Dmitri stood overhead, a suddenly violent presence in her eyes. His teeth had morphed into fangs. His face twisted into an animalistic snarl, so Allison did what anyone might when in the presence of a monster. She pushed herself to her feet again and began to run in the opposite direction of her parents' home. She ran the way one does when being chased.

"Alli, wait!" Dmitri called after her, but she was gone, her footsteps echoing down the abandoned street. Even if he could catch her, he figured, she wouldn't likely go anywhere with him at this point. Defeated, full of regret, he returned to the bar. He knew he couldn't very well sleep at the Murray household if Allison wasn't there. Luckily, even after legal bar close, the Duck remained open. Tom was still serving drinks to eager patrons. Dmitri was thankful for that small mercy because, suddenly, he had a craving for whiskey.

December 22nd

Allison awoke to the screaming cries of Carrie and Greg's baby. Her head felt tight, almost swollen. Last night's alcohol still crawled through her blood stream. She lay next to a toilet in an unfamiliar bathroom. Her phone—which was on the floor nearby—told her that she had two unread messages. One was from Dmitri, apologizing. "I really fucked up," it said. The other was from Carrie. Apparently, someone had seen Dmitri leave the Duck with a strange girl. Carrie had taken it upon herself to relay that message, adding, "I just thought you should know."

Carrie agreed to give Allison a ride home after some more bickering with Greg. Nothing was more than a few blocks away in Sascha, but Allison didn't much feel like walking. Carrie's car, though, smelled like stale cigarettes. Allison struggled for the

whole of the ride home to stop the world outside from spinning. She put her hands on the dash to stabilize herself. She stared at her feet. Her mouth welled with saliva. She knew what was coming.

"Alli, please don't. Not in the car," Carrie begged.

"Drive faster," Allison responded.

The short time spent between houses felt eternal, and when Allison spilled from the vehicle into her parents' yard, she wretched instantly, all booze and bile. Ignoring her parents entirely, she made her way up to her room—or more accurately the adjoining bathroom. And, for much of the afternoon that is where she slept and heaved and cried—not for Dmitri though. She didn't have the wherewithal to even think about him, what he had done and with whom. No, she cried like one does when begging for death.

Dmitri felt a different sort of sick when he awoke that same morning. His nighttime companion had left the blinds open, and the rays of the sun had begun to burn his skin. It wasn't a spontaneous combustion like in those silly vampire films. Dmitri's symptoms were more like an intense sunburn, accompanied by boils and blisters. Today he also felt nauseous, exhausted, dehydrated, guilty—though those were more likely the result of his actions the night before. He crawled from the bed and began to close the shades. The girl in the room with him stirred ever so slightly. She hadn't dressed herself after their foray, neither of them had. He sluggishly moved to find his scattered clothes from around the room: underwear, a sweater, tattered skinny jeans.

A clock on the bedside table told Dmitri the time: just past eleven in the morning. Best to let the woman sleep as long as possible, he thought. He dreaded having to ask if he could "hang out" at her place until the sun went down. So, Dmitri crawled back into

bed, silently, trying not to move the mattress in any capacity. He pulled the blanket up over his companion's shoulder, right up to the marks he had left on her neck.

That evening, Dmitri had a tough time finding his way back to the Murray household. To him, all these houses looked the same, all dilapidated, all crumbling. Each had broken and missing shingles from harsh weather. Each saw its paint chip in more than a few places. Eventually, though, he found the house. He saw Allison's car parked out front, and he saw his own belongings packed and waiting for him on the front porch. He thought about trying to reason with Allison, about asking if he could stay, but he worried, for the time being, that it would only make things worse. Instead, he grabbed his suitcase and wheeled it to the Duck. He thought if anyone would take him in until he figured out a way back to the Cities, it would be Tom.

December 23rd

Allison felt better the following day—physically at the very least. Some part of her felt dirty even after a shower, like she had a stubborn grime clinging to her. She could still feel Dmitri's body rubbing against hers, his lips on her neck, his sweat in her pores. She thought of him and the things they did. She thought of him doing those things with someone else. It hurt but not necessarily because she was broken-hearted. She had often questioned the longevity of their relationship anyway. Still, she was bothered by the fact that Dmitri could do these things with just anyone. It made her feel replaceable, like he had kept her around to nourish some unfulfilled need. It was for this reason that Allison visited Sascha's lone grocery store, the Kwik Mart. Garrett had worked the register there throughout high school. His parents owned the business, so he was something of a mainstay: stocking shelves, cleaning, ringing up groceries. Allison now hoped that he had

come home for break, that he might be working shifts at the store to make a few bucks for his return to school.

When she entered the store and saw Garrett standing behind the counter, she abandoned any pretense of the reason she was there. She approached him directly, spoke with him bluntly, and within fifteen minutes he was "on break." He led Allison out back to where he had parked his truck, and the heat between the two of them soon filled the vehicle. He unbuttoned his pants and pulled them to his ankles, and she took off her shirt. He fumbled with the clasp of her bra, and she undid the bandana that was still around her neck. "I've missed you," he said, but Allison didn't say anything back. He tried to climb on top of her, but her legs were bent at ninety degrees, and his non-slip shoes pressed against the car door. The angle was all wrong, so she climbed on top, ready to do what they had done many times before. That was, of course, until he saw the marks Dmitri had left on her neck days before. "What the fuck are those?" he asked, his voice dripping in disgust.

In a matter of moments, they were dressing themselves again. "Look, I'm sorry, okay?" Garrett said, trying desperately to backtrack.

"I have a boyfriend, Garrett. I'm not sure what you expected."

"I guess I wasn't sure either."

"We had sex dozens of times, and we weren't even together. Not really, anyway," Allison responded. By now, she was mostly dressed. She pulled the bandana from under Garrett and tied it back around her neck.

"I just thought you'd be a little more hesitant to jump into bed with someone else," Garrett realized too late the cruelty in his comment, but before he had the chance to apologize, Allison had exited the vehicle.

On her walk home, Allison's mind filled with venom for the various men she had known: her father, Dmitri, Garrett, even people like Tom and Greg and Father Gary. She resented them all. To her, they were broken and backwards people. To her, their lives, their respective means of satisfaction relied on others. They latched onto people and used them for fulfillment. As she approached the house, she couldn't help but wonder what they would be if they weren't able to sustain themselves on the blood of those around them. Would they whither? Would they shrivel up and die like leeches without a host?

December 24th

Christmas Eve was a day for feasting in the Murray household. Laurel prepared a dinner of roast beef and mashed potatoes, green beans and yams and stuffing. She did these things without the help of Karl or Allison—the latter of whom had spent the entirety of the evening in her room. Laurel, though, was not one to complain. She had been conditioned to cook large meals on behalf of her family as her mother had done before. It was as much a part of the holiday tradition as opening presents. The Murrays celebrated as they did on Christmas Eve because Christmas Day was about the Lord, according to Karl. That meant it was a day to be spent in reverence. It was not about presents or food or sports. In fact, Karl insisted that, from the time after Christmas Eve dinner until Communion the following morning, the family should fast in preparation to receive the Eucharist.

"Alli, dinner time!" Laurel called up the stairs after she had arranged the dining room table. She had raised her voice intentionally so as to wake Karl who had, for the last few hours, been asleep on his chair. He stood slowly and shuffled to the table. He began immediately helping himself to the food that Laurel had dutifully arranged. He was so singularly focused that he didn't notice Allison seat herself across from him. If he had, he would have noticed that his daughter had dressed herself rather formally for their holiday dinner. She had on a black dress, a cocktail dress—low in the neck, sleeveless, extending to the knee. It had a small cutout that revealed a fraction of her stomach just above her belly button. Not necessarily revealing, but perhaps risqué by conservative standards. It was her favorite article of clothing, but she hadn't planned on wearing it while in Sascha. She wasn't even sure why she had packed it.

"Oh my, Allie. Don't you look nice!" Laurel put an arm around her daughter as she came back from the kitchen where she had already started her post-dinner cleaning. It was only then that Karl looked up from his plate in Allison's direction. He didn't really notice what she was wearing as much as he noticed what she was not. Absent from her neck was the bandana that had been a mainstay in her recent attire. The marks on her exposed neck were dark, more the purple of a bruise than the red of blood.

"What are those?" Karl asked, though he needed no explanation.

"Oh, these?" Allison questioned. She shrugged, innocently, a coy smile stretching across her face.

Karl's reaction was not what she expected. He didn't actually say anything in return. He just stared at her, his gaze shifting back and forth from her neck to her eyes. He formed countless thoughts that he wanted to say aloud, but some part of him couldn't

put them into words. After a prolonged silence, he just let out a sound that was something between a laugh and a shriek. He tossed his plate full of food on the table, grabbed his coat, and made for the door. Without much in the way of notice, he was gone into the night.

It was only now that Allison began to help herself to the food her mother had prepared. Laurel was still in shock, confused at the scene that had unfolded before her. She looked to her daughter, to the marks on her neck. Some part of her, she thought, felt something unfamiliar, perhaps a cautious pride? "Karl?" she called toward the door. She started to follow after him, but she stopped when she heard Allison's pleading voice from behind her.

"Mom?" she said. "It's okay. Let him be."

Laurel turned back to the table, then glanced at the door one more time. After a short pause for consideration, she walked back to the table. She pulled her chair close to Allison's.

"Merry Christmas, Mom," Allison said, gripping her mother's hand.

"Merry Christmas, Dear," Laurel responded with the faintest hint of a smile.

December 25th

Allison didn't sleep much that night. Lying there restless in her bed, she decided it best to leave before the sun came up. She had outgrown this place. That was obvious to her now. The previous night with her mother had been nice, but her father would return soon. Things would return to their normal state. She saw no way around it. After all, her father had generations of precedent on his side.

Allison messaged Dmitri telling him to pack his things. Some part of her knew she couldn't just leave him in Sascha. She hadn't suddenly forgotten what he had done, but she wasn't petty. She pulled her car in front of the Duck which, even at five in the morning on Christmas Day, was somehow open and serving drinks. She walked in to find Tom behind the counter, and her father seated at the bar. He looked like he was about to tip out of his seat, and he probably would have if he didn't have such a firm grip of the counter in front of him. From his appearance, Allison assumed that he had walked here directly after leaving home the night before. Dmitri was waiting in the corner, flipping through the records on the jukebox. Other than the whine of a warped Bob Dylan song that Allison didn't know, the Duck sat entirely silent. Karl squinted in her direction as she entered, trying to make sense of the blurred shapes around him, but he immediately returned his attention to his double whiskey. That was fine, Allison thought. To her, he was a man who hadn't spent enough time in silence, thinking about the ways of the world.

"D, come on, let's go," she said, startling Dmitri from his trancelike state. He turned and began to wheel his suitcase in her direction. He stopped next to the bar, however, and gave Tom a hug. Then, he put a hand on Karl's shoulder and thanked him for his hospitality.

"Get your fucking hand off me," Karl responded without looking up. He slugged the rest of his whiskey and motioned to Tom to pour another.

For a moment, Allison looked at the three men and wondered if, under different circumstances, they would be different people entirely. Would her father be in a punk rock band? Would Tom be a world traveler? Could Dmitri be a priest? Maybe, had each

of them been born somewhere else, had different parents, lived in different eras, they would be strangers to one another and to themselves.

"Ready?" Dmitri asked as he reached the door.

"Yeah," Allison said. "Bye, Daddy," she called to the drunken man at the bar. Then, she and Dmitri loaded their belongings into the trunk of her car and left.

Not long after, Laurel awoke to a quiet house. Karl had not come home yet. She half expected to find him in his chair, sleeping off his anger from the night before. On the kitchen table she found a note in Allison's handwriting. As she read it, she couldn't help but feel conflicting emotions. She had missed her daughter over the course of the past months and knew she would miss her again. Yet, some part of her felt happy for the person she was allowed to be when away from this place.

Karl shuffled into the house as she read. He smelled as if he had found the bottom of a bottle. He began to stumble up the stairs, but then he stopped and turned to Laurel, steadying himself on the railing. "C'mon. Time to get ready for Mass," he said. Then, he continued up to the bedroom.

"Be right there," she called after him. She folded up the letter and walked to the kitchen. She tucked it away in a junk drawer until she could find a better place for it. Then, she wiped away the tears that had formed in the corners of her eyes and began to ready herself for the Lord's Day.

Allison and Dmitri had been on the road about an hour when the sun started to peek upward from the horizon. Allison grabbed her sunglasses from the dashboard and put them on. The next few hours would likely be unbearably bright.

"Hey, Alli?" Dmitri called from under his blanket in the backseat.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "For everything."

"I know," she said.

"What's this mean for us?" he asked after a moment's pause. His voice was filled with fear, with desperation. It was vastly different from what she was used to. He had always seemed so confident, so powerful when they were together, when he held her body against his.

Allison didn't respond. She didn't really know the right words, so she turned on the radio to fill the silence of the car. A muffled voice sounded from the speakers, a jockey from some nearby town talking about the destruction of the nuclear family. The sun was gaining strength now as it continued to rise. As the light touched Allison's skin more forcefully, she felt its caress warming her, burning her pale skin.

[1]AFTERWORD

In his first preface to his novel *The Castle of Otranto,* Horace Walpole seeks to distance himself from his written work by posing as a mere translator of the story, which he explains is a discovered Italian text written sometime between 1095 and 1243 (Walpole 5). He justifies his choice to write anonymously within the publication of his second edition, stating that the "diffidence of his own abilities, and the novelty of the attempt, were his sole inducements to assume that disguise" (9). His instincts in this creative decision seem to have been at least somewhat astute. After all, his writing challenged literary trends of the time which focused primarily on "realistic fiction" that sought to address contemporary concerns in a predominantly Protestant England (Davison 23). By contrast, *The Castle of Otranto* is set during the Middle Ages within a foreign, predominantly Catholic nation. Additionally, its content features no shortage of supernatural and, at times, ridiculous imagery. For this reason, *The Castle of Otranto* was not above scrutiny in the years following its publication. Many critics of the time, for instance, vilified Gothic novels in general "as vulgar, due to their frequently macabre subject-matter [and] reputed immorality" (Davison 2).

However, despite the extent to which Walpole's novel was lambasted by literary minds, it was nothing short of a roaring success commercially. It did, after all, introduce the world to a new form of writing which—in the decades to come—would be among the most popular in England. By at least one estimate, one third of all published novels around the turn of the nineteenth century were Gothic romances (Davison 2).

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[1] This afterword is primarily focused on setting *Middle American Gothic* within the larger Gothic genre. Thus, it does not make any mention the literature I used to inspire form and structure within my works. These works are, however, listed within the bibliography below.

Additionally, his style of Gothic writing would eventually give rise to a closely related literary movement in the United States—one championed by the likes of Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Charles Brockden Brown. And, while the works of authors such as William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor are not Gothic in precisely the same sense, their twentieth century texts continued to rely on many of the atmospheric tropes popularized by the likes of Walpole. In this way, what was once a niche, experimental genre became a mainstay within the literary world thanks in part to the early popularity of Gothic romances.

I mention this brief history because my own work, *Middle American Gothic*, is heavily influenced by Gothic writing of the past. Yet, when viewing my collection side-by-side with the likes of *Otranto*, one would be hard pressed to say they exist within the same genre of writing. This, however, is not to say that my collection lacks a distinct sense of Gothicism. Though my work reflects the ways in which Gothic writing has changed since the eighteenth century, it also contains several of the qualities which originally defined the genre. Over the course of the following afterword, I hope to establish commonalities between the different eras of Gothic literature. Then, by dissecting *Middle American Gothic*, I intend to show the ways in which my writing embraces the essence of Gothicism as well as the ways in which it challenges the genre.

1. Gothic Atmosphere

Given Gothic literature's long history, most of the genre's tropes have been retreaded at length over the past centuries. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these tropes is "an aesthetic of ruin" and "a fascination with deterioration and decay" (Groom *xv*). *The Castle of Otranto* for instance is set largely within "a haunted and collapsing castle" in a

Catholic dominated country; meanwhile, the story's Medieval timeframe opens its characters to plotlines centered around "sudden death, incest, and lust" (Groom *xxiv*). In this setting, Walpole establishes not only a physically crumbling atmosphere but also a cast of morally decaying characters. This basic tenet is present within many Gothic novels of the time both in England and the United States. In addition, setting these stories in the past—or, at the very least, within the deteriorating infrastructure of the past—has allowed for authors to retrospectively examine the sins of bygone generations. Though this trend of using atmosphere to comment on morality is common across the genre, it is particularly obvious within Edgar Allen Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." Here, the ruinous Usher estate threatens to collapse due to having "rotted for long years… with no disturbance from the breath of the external air" (Poe 751). Likewise, Poe hints that the remaining Ushers living within the estate, Roderick and Madeline, are sickly and frail as a result of generations of incestuous lineage—or a lack of metaphorical "external air" (750). While this is just a singular example, many Gothic authors similarly utilized atmosphere to create obvious connections between their ruinous settings and the sins of their characters.

This use of atmosphere to reflect immorality is perhaps the most defined commonality between the different offshoots of Gothic literature over the past centuries. Not only is it present within the Gothic Romantic movement, but it is also a prevalent part of the twentieth century Southern Gothic movement as well. Within the works of this particular sect of Gothicism, however, "The remote country house supplants the grim castle featured in many British Gothic [works]" (Fisher 146). That said, even without traditional Gothic architecture, authors of this particular subgenre continued to

incorporate decaying settings which mirror the degenerate ideologies of their characters. William Faulkner, for instance, sets "A Rose for Emily" in Jefferson, Mississippi—a town whose pre-civil war era homes are largely "obliterated" by "garages and cotton gins" (Faulkner 1009). The only exception to this shift toward modernity is a singular "stubborn," "coquettish," and "decay[ing]" home belonging to the titular character Emily Grierson. Given this setting—a crumbling relic of the past within the larger modernizing south—it is fitting that, like his English predecessors, Faulkner should write Grierson as a character so single mindedly devoted to the past that she sleeps next to the decaying corpse of her husband long after his death (1015).

In *Middle American Gothic*, I attempt to utilize atmosphere in much the same way as my Gothic predecessors. However, I decided against focusing on a singular castle, monastery, or estate as the setting of my collection. I, rather, opted to convey the whole of a Midwestern town, Sascha, with a ruinous aesthetic. I did so because I wanted to convey the whole of Sascha as a place stuck in the past—both in terms of its prevailing political leanings and its infrastructure. Like my writing inspirations within the genre, I wanted to use my setting to mirror regressive belief, but I desired to do so in a way that encapsulated the prevalence of regression within rural America. In order to do that, I felt that I needed to focus on the decay that exists across the entirety of Sascha rather than within individual homes and characters.

For this reason, I have included some degree of Gothic atmosphere within each of my major stories. In "Stop By On Your Way Out," the farmhouse which serves as the setting of the story is an obviously decaying structure. The outside of the home is bleak, the sun consistently is "masked behind a haze of dirt," and the surrounding land is devoid

of life. The plants around the home “wither,” and the ground “cracks.” The home itself is “battered” by the elements resulting in “stripping paint” across its exterior. It is a place that has stood too long amid hard conditions and is deteriorating as a result. The inside of the home is in similar disrepair. The basement, for instance, serves as the most prominently Gothic setting in the story. It is described as smelling of “rot, like the humidity…[is] digesting the…forgotten memories stored within." The main floor is not without its own Gothic qualities—even if they are less apparent. For instance, the picture frames “caked in dust” mirror the disrepair of the rest of the house. They also happen to depict scenes from Jones’ marriage to his second wife—a marriage which has long since dissolved.

Similar to the Usher household, the farmhouse within this story mirrors its aging owner, Harold Jones. Like his home, Jones has begun to deteriorate immeasurably. At various points during the final day of his life, Jones is described as “shaky” and discolored as a result of his “literal back-breaking work.” Thus, similar to his farmhouse, he has also begun to decline physically as a result of years working amid the harsh elements. Likewise, the physical remnants of Jones’ long life—those stored in boxes within the basement—have fallen into ruin much in the same way Jones’ memories have deteriorated with age. That he ultimately dies digging through molding boxes for a photo of his ex-wife represents a desperate attempt to cling to elusive and fleeting memories—those which have begun to disappear as Jones ages. Jones’ death also happens to coincide with the destruction of his home and belongings. The last time Jones is mentioned, he is described as “gone for good, his body and belongings one with the dirt.” His physical body and the remnants of his home are literally one in the same when the story ends.

The other two major works in my collection thus far, while similarly atmospheric in some respects, lack the distinct Gothic setting of "Stop By On Your Way Out." Still, each momentarily conveys Sascha as a town stuck in the past and defined by its own disrepair. For instance, Eric Wassenhove's first introduction to Sascha in "In Wolf's Clothing" is Joe Garry's home. Here, we see plastic covered furniture and a television playing "The Lawrence Welk Show." Both details are reminders not only of the town's aging population but also of the ways Sascha has fallen out of style. Later, Wassenhove's motel room is defined by its stench of cigarettes, its 90s television, and its wood paneling. These images together define the town as stuck in a "mish-mash" of bygone eras. "Modern Vampires," likewise, contains some sparse atmospheric description. For one, the opening paragraph of the story paints a bleak portrait of northern winters which are "dark early and often" and are "hard like ice." Later, Sascha's homes are described as indistinguishable from one another in that they are "all dilapidated [and] crumbling." Each home also has "broken and missing shingles" and chipped paint "in more than a few places." These images in mind, within both of the latter stories, I convey the whole of Sascha as bleak, ruinous, and aged—both in its physical presence and in the attitudes of its inhabitants.

In these two stories, however, I do not use a single structure to mirror an individual character. Instead, I use the appearance of the town to represent the whole of a population unwilling to change its outdated attitudes. "In Wolf's Clothing" functions as a reminder of the decomposition that accompanies complacency. I emphasize the outdated physical aspects of Sascha to demonstrate the obvious need for change within the town. Annie Elsley's death—while not confirmed as murder—remains a mystery, and the

different members in town are unwilling to challenge the status quo enough to find a solution. The corruption and nepotism within the Sheriff's office should be enough to move people beyond gossip, but ultimately, residents do little else than spread rumors among themselves. The fact that they do not strive for any meaningful change, like the cluttered motel room, represents a place committed to maintaining the ways of the past. Wassenhove suggests as much in his assertion that no one has bothered to remodel because "[they] don't like change." While Wassenhove is quick to point out the perks of simple living, he also notes how complacency lends itself to deterioration.

I similarly incorporate a Gothic atmosphere in "Modern Vampires" to mirror the prevailing ideology of Sascha; however, here, I utilize my setting to critique conservative views on women and sexuality. Missing shingles, warped records, and outdated entertainment reflect the ways in which the town refuses to move into the modern world. We see this also within the regressive, patriarchal views common in Sascha's hyper-conservative circles. Allison, herself, laments these ideologies which have restricted her in her formative years, noting that they belong to "broken and backwards people." Like the "indistinguishable" houses in town, attitudes regarding sexuality are uniform among the various male characters. Their ideologies are stuck in past generations and are badly in need of renovation in the minds of forward-thinking individuals, such as Allison. Thus, while *Middle American Gothic* is not set within a crumbling castle or a forgotten monastery, each of its stories still reflect the decaying aesthetic of traditional Gothicism. Additionally, the atmosphere within Sascha continues to reflect the sins of its inhabitants.

2. The Supernatural and the Grotesque

One noteworthy successor to Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* is Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron*. Though Reeve acknowledges the similarities between her and Walpole's writing, she is obviously aware of *Otranto*'s detestable reputation, seeing as she is quick to state its shortcomings as a novel. Because of *Otranto*'s unfathomable imagery, Reeve notes, instead of attention, [the novel] excites laughter" (Reeve). She indicates that, to be taken seriously, a Gothic novel must contain "sufficient degree of the marvelous, to excite the attention; enough of the manners of real life, to give an air of probability to the work; and enough of the pathetic, to engage the heart in its behalf." In order to exemplify these criteria, Reeve notes, "we can conceive, and allow of, the appearance of a ghost" but something such as *Otranto*'s image of an animated helmet falling from the sky is less terrifying than it is comical. Though Reeve may not have intended to do so, this critique of Walpole's formative Gothic text began to establish norms for including supernatural elements in Romantic writing.

As Reeve describes, supernatural elements, if kept within the realm of plausibility, are capable of terrifying prospective audiences. Though that may seem counterproductive to some, the notion of terror within writing, according to Edmund Burke, is actually a source of the "sublime." He explains that the use of the supernatural in writing is "delightful" because a "certain distance" exists between the reader and the characters within the novel. While actual threats of pain and death are unpleasant, he reasons that readers may find a certain excitement in confronting them through the buffer of fiction (Burke). Burke's theory, perhaps, best explains why so many popular Gothic novels of the time leaned upon supernatural plot devices. Emily Brontë, for instance,

reanimates the spirit of Catherine Earnshaw in her novel *Wuthering Heights* (23-24). In *Wieland*, Charles Brockden Brown's villainous Carwin uses biloquism to precisely mimic his protagonist, Catherine's, voice (30-31, 41-42). In each case, the author intends to excite the reader by playing upon their real-life fears—such as death or false accusation. For this reason, both of these stories, according to Burke, provoke the sublime because they are terrifying in plausible ways.

In my own Gothic collection, I intend to similarly play upon the present-day fears of my audience. That said, unlike my predecessors, my stories are noticeably devoid of the supernatural. They, rather, derive terror from that which is rationally explainable. Within the story "Stop by On Your Way Out," for instance, Al is actually tormented by the notion that he cannot find the ghost of his deceased partner. In the words of the story, he is actually "haunted by the realization that Jones [is] gone for good." I note that, after Al rids himself of Jones' belongings, his memory of the old man fades. Try as he might, Al cannot remember if Jones smoked Pall Malls, Mavericks, or Newports. Additionally, he starts to forget little details about his partner such as the direction in which Jones had parted his hair. Because of this, I note that Al would have "welcomed" the presence of Jones' ghost. Without his partner, Al is now alone in the world—which, to him, is an utterly horrifying realization. In this way, I invoke terror through a completely rational and common fear: the finality of death. By not relying at all upon the implausible, my readers do not need to suspend their disbelief. The distinct absence of ghosts within the story reminds them of a foreboding possibility about death, that it may be permanent and all-encompassing. Therefore, though not traditionally Gothic, my story, "Stop by On

Your Way Out," embodies the same semblance of terror intended within staples of the genre.

The interstitial stories within my collection also wink at the possibility of the supernatural, but again, I clarify that none of these short works contain real ghosts or monsters. In each of these stories, supernatural elements are obviously and intentionally relegated to a grandfather's bedtime stories. I have indicated this through the way he addresses his grandson as "My boy" in each of the interstitials. In this way, all occurrences of the supernatural within the stories—such as Esther Allen's ghost—are explainable because they are the fabrications of a known storyteller. The grandson, himself, acknowledges as much when he notes that his grandfather "went to his grave spinning the same old lies." That said, despite a distinct lack of anything truly supernatural, like the other major works of this collection, these interstitials draw their terror from that which is plausible, such as a lack of personal fulfillment, the permanence of death, and the threat of physical violence.

Additionally, within "Modern Vampires" and "In Wolf's Clothing," I nod to the supernatural in the ways that play upon the tropes of classic monster stories. That said, I attempt to derive terror through the actions of ordinary people rather than anything otherworldly. Bert Harris, for instance, is intended to resemble a "wolfman." His "chest, arms, and back [are] covered in curly, graying hair." Even his eyes are noted as "like a puppy's: innocent, dumb, unassuming." Additionally, one member of town attributes Bert's alleged crime to a "creature roaming around Sascha," one "covered in thick gray hair, with razor sharp teeth." Finally, the official police report blames Annie Elsley's death on a common dog attack because "she'd been partially eaten." These details

considered, it is still clear within the story that Bert is, as Deputy Huntington suggests, just “a big kid, a simple kid” –thus dispelling any notion of the supernatural. However, despite a lack of anything inexplicable, Bert’s presence—alongside the Sheriff’s distinct unwillingness to curb his behaviors—represents a source of terror to the Elsleys. Though he is not a wolfman, Bert hunts Drina Elsley for years, and the power mechanisms in town do little to protect her. When she dies, Bert, supposedly, moves to stalking Annie. Thus, even if Bert is not a literal monster, his presence and, moreover his lack of legal repercussions, reflect the prominent “boys will be boys” attitude in the present-day United States—the same attitude which protects predators while commonly subjecting women to harm.

Likewise, “Modern Vampires” mirrors traditional vampire stories in many ways. On one hand, Dmitri has many of the traditional qualities of a vampire: “odd dietary habits, sensitivity to sunlight, and impulsive behavior.” In his first introduction, he is depicted lying under a reflective blanket in the back seat of his girlfriend’s car to avoid the sun. He also happens to have a “bad habit of kissing, sucking, [and] biting… when… in the throes of passion.” I also include small details such as his sensitivity to garlic that make him more plausibly seem like a vampire. Despite this, I persistently indicate that Dmitri is a normal person and that anyone who suggests otherwise is utterly ridiculous. I also note that portrayals of vampires who “spontaneously combust” when exposed to sunlight are the subject of “silly vampire films” which are not grounded in the reality of the story.

Like “In Wolf’s Clothing,” “Modern Vampires” derives its terror not from actual monsters but, rather, from common people living within Sascha. While I make a

concerted effort to state that Dmitri is a normal human, I actually liken several Sascha residents to vampires. Throughout the story, we see the various male characters exhibit patterns of sexual manipulation and physical control over the women in their lives. In one instance, Laurel feels unable to voice her sexual desires to her religiously zealous, patriarchal husband. Likewise, Allison, a sexually active woman, feels that she must hide the fact that she has sex from the men in her hometown—even those who are also sexually active. When considering the likes of her father, Dmitri, Garrett, and several others, Allison likens the ways they restrict the women to the actions of parasites, stating "their respective means of satisfaction relie[s] on others. They [latch] onto people and [use] them for fulfillment." She then wonders "what they would be if they weren't able to sustain themselves on the blood of those around them." In this way, while I do not incorporate the supernatural into my story, I still characterize the men of Sascha as terrors within their community. Though they never openly admit it, they subconsciously view women as beings to be used for their own satisfaction. Because of this, they feel no remorse in using manipulation, control, and power as tools to achieve their own selfish desires—as vampires are known to do.

This noted, because they do not threaten physical pain toward female characters in the story, one could reasonably attest that the men in "Modern Vampires" do not represent Burke's notion of subliminal terror. After all, I think it is a stretch to say Allison or Laurel face the physical threat of death at any point in the story. However, I do think Allison, at the very least, fears death in some form—though it is something closer to a death of her idealized self. I take time in my story to introduce Laurel as a "woman with a rare and untapped imagination" whose sexual desires are wasted with a man like

Karl. She is also a character who is dominated by her husband sexually, spiritually, and physically. Thus, while Allison views her mother lovingly, she also regards her as a shackled woman. For Allison, who views herself as liberated, the threat of being controlled by "broken and backwards men," by leeches or vampires, represents a sort of death to her idealized self. Because this threat of "death" comes at the hands of the story's figurative monsters, I contend that "Modern Vampires" still incorporates a sense of supernatural terror common within the early years of the genre.

3. Gothic Characters

My final attempt in incorporating Gothic tropes into *Middle American Gothic* is through established character archetypes. In particular, I was interested in characterizing my villains within my stories similar to tyrants common in early Gothic literature. For context, this character trend was established alongside the "persecuted heroine, who risks incarceration in the domestic sphere" (Davison 84-85). This traditionally female archetype, according to Carol Margaret Davison, was created by writers to criticize restrictions that women faced within the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In their struggles for independence from their oppressors, these heroines traditionally challenged a "middle-class patriarchy… attempting to put women, quite literally, in their place" (86). The face of this middle-class patriarchy often took the form of a male tyrant within Gothic stories, usually a man who sought to control traditionally virtuous women both physically and sexually.

This oppressor-oppressed relationship was common within early Gothic works. For instance, in her novel *The Romance of the Forest,* Ann Radcliffe's protagonist Adeline is captured by the villainous Marquis de Montalt, who subsequently attempts to

force Adeline into marriage (Radcliffe 160-161). Likewise, Walpole's protagonist in *Otranto*, Isabella, is nearly forced into marriage with Manfred, the father of her deceased fiancé (24). Additionally, though his control is not sexual in nature, Carwin, in Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, uses his biloquism to control and manipulate the story's female protagonist. In doing so, like other villains in the genre, he systematically isolates her from her friends and family. Though the oppressor- oppressed, heroine-tyrant relationship is not present in all Gothic texts, it is common enough to be considered, at the very least, a staple-device within the genre.

For this reason, I had the concept of Gothic tyrants in mind when I was writing my collection. In fact, I wrote tyrants into each of my stories in some form. I wanted to convey Sascha as a town that, because of its system of beliefs, is filled with oppressors. Among the most obvious of these tyrants is Harold Jones, who, in "Stop By On Your Way Out," is described as physically and sexually dominant over his partner Al—something he is unable to do within his past marriages. Jones, however, knows Al's pronounced social insecurities. Like tyrants in the aforementioned Gothic novels, Jones asserts power within his domain, using Al's vulnerability as a pretense to satiate his sexual desires. Though at various points, I indicate a complexity, a softness within Jones, when it comes to his relationship with Al, he is never "romantic." Rather, Jones uses his companion for needs "he [can] no longer convince women to fulfill." Simultaneously, he is physically abusive with Al—doling out "slaps" and "kicks" at will toward a man who feels unable to retaliate because he has a distinct lack of power in the relationship.

In my stories "In Wolf's Clothing" and "Modern Vampires" I decided to focus less on a single tyrant. As I mentioned previously, my goal in this collection is not to

speak to isolated acts of oppression but, rather, to speak to the ways in which a body of people can be tyrannical because of their mutual belief system. I derived this idea from Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Across his vignettes, he characterizes each person in Winesburg as "grotesque" as a result of taking "truths to himself" and trying "to live his life by [them]" (4). He weaves this notion of grotesquery by way of strict adherence to truth throughout his works and criticizes Winesburg and its residents as a result. I, similarly, conveyed tyranny through the ways in which Sascha's residents are rooted within their own habits and beliefs.

For this reason, "In Wolf's Clothing" does not have a singular tyrant in the traditional Gothic sense. However, I did create the population of Sascha as a group with control over Annie Elsley's story. Rather than use this power responsibly, they continue to abuse the narrative surrounding Annie's death. In Eric Wassenhove's words, "they clearly rely on these stories for some other form of sustenance: maybe misbegotten purpose, maybe basic entertainment value." Rather than moving to make any meaningful progress in Annie's case, they gossip and spread rumors among one another to quell their own boredom. These abuses become so prevalent among the townspeople that Drew Elsley is notably disenchanted by the notion of discussing his own daughter's case. As Eric states, "He's been surrounded by vultures since the day Annie died. To him, I must seem like just another buzzard circling from overhead." Thus, while the story does not have a traditionally oppressed heroine, the various people in town still oppress the Elsley family through their control and manipulation of Annie's story.

My characters in "Modern Vampires" are more obviously tyrannical. As a collective, various townsfolk use their conservative leanings to justify sexual control over

women within Sascha. Like the residents of Winesburg, the men of Sascha feel emboldened in controlling the women around them because their beliefs are rooted in conservative, religious truth. I intended to show this manner of tyranny within each character and collectively in the town as a means to convey how oppression occurs within individual relationships and within larger communities. The most obvious individual example of a tyrant within the story is Karl Murray. His image of himself as a captain whose responsibilities include "govern[ing]" the "moral failings" of his wife and daughter is particularly telling. He has also cultivated an environment within the home that has restricted Laurel from "question[ing] the kind of love [he gives] her." He even barbs at the notion of Laurel disagreeing with him because, in his mind, they are to be "equally yoked." These occurrences show that he views women around him as secondary citizens who exist to serve him and to bend to his will as a man. In this way, he, as an individual, is a tyrant through and through.

I begin to speak to the larger tyranny of the town in the ways we see some of Karl's same qualities in less defined characters such as Garrett and Father Gary. Garrett, for instance, is perturbed by the notion of Allison having sex with her boyfriend—despite not being against sex entirely. That he seeks to control Allison's body absent any sort of agreement surrounding monogamy in their relationship shows his indoctrination into Sascha's larger patriarchal belief system. Father Gary, likewise, lectures his congregation to "break with their sinful ways" with the promise of "rewards… in the afterlife." Given the subjectivity of "sin," we see yet another man within Sascha—a father, of sorts—using his position of authority to control the actions of those around him.

In each case, we see male characters restricting others based upon conservative notions of morality. Thus, as is the case with Karl, their adherence to this subjective idea of truth has turned them into individual tyrants. That noted, their collective ideology—one that the larger town seems to share—is tyrannical as well. We see this in the ways people in Sascha willingly submit to archaic ideologies surrounding sex and marriage. For instance, Carrie, despite her desire to attend university, remains in Sascha because she gets pregnant prior to graduating high school. The fact that she is subsequently married represents an aged ideology restricts sex to wedded couples. In other words, because she is pregnant and sexually active, she must marry to abide the conservative norms of the town. We also see Allison, who is the story's best example of a Gothic heroine, unable to bear staying in Sascha any longer. In her mind, the whole of the town, like her father, is "restrictive, like wearing ill-fitting clothing." She, therefore, realizes that she must distance herself from this societal tyranny if she is to find any semblance of personal satisfaction in life. For this reason, she must not only distance herself from the likes of Karl, Garrett, and Father Gary, but she must also leave Sascha, entirely. Like Carrie, if Allison is to stay, she must restrict her desires based on the outdated morals of the town.

4. Conclusion

As demonstrated throughout the course of this Afterword, *Middle American Gothic* may not align perfectly with eighteenth and nineteenth century Gothic texts. The stories within are free of the ghosts, monsters, and animated corpses that originally defined the genre, so much so, in fact, that I go out of the way to call such images unrealistic and ridiculous. In this regard, *Middle American Gothic* actually challenges the

norms of Gothicism—siding more with the stark realism of Southern Gothicism than anything from the Romantic period. That being said, I wrote my collection with classic Gothic texts in mind. Despite its differences, I view *Middle American Gothic* as a continuation of the genre. It is a noteworthy distortion of past texts, sure, but it contains many of the qualities that so endeared Gothicism to its original audiences. That my writing is not a mirror image of my inspiration, I think, reflects that our surroundings, our tyrants, our oppression, and even our concepts of fear have changed over the past centuries.

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