
A Bard's Folktale: Roaming Cadenza

Aramis Barron

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To Mrs. Madeline Thompson, and every teacher whose lessons do
not end at the classroom.

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Introduction

Remember the glory days? Back when you used to get all nervous when that special someone came rollin' around? Or when all eyes were on you 'cause you were just that awesome? Hell, remember the first time you ever fell in love? Just curious.

Anyway, hey, how's it going? Name's G. That's what the people I like call me, anyway. Figure if you're listening to me, must mean you've got some interest in a tale or two, huh? Or at least found yourself a little lost along the way. But it's all good; I think I can whip up a pretty good story for ya, but I'm telling you right now I ain't makin' any promises on a happy ending. This is a pretty long story, so I don't think I'll be able to get through all of it in one go. Let's call this the first part.

Anyway, this is a story that always comes to mind for me. It's the one about a few friends of mine who went on a road trip a while back, right after graduation. Seemed simple enough for sure. They were just out messing around trying to have some fun, but damn those dudes didn't have the slightest clue of the mess they'd be getting themselves into. Other than the usual sex, drugs, and rock & roll, anyway.

Well, don't let me ruin it for you. Let's get started.

1. Ace Deuce

“They always say, ‘Today is the beginning of the rest of your life,’ but I guess that doesn’t really say much for everything I’ve done up until now, does it?”

– The Diary of Alma Grey

Ann Arbor, Michigan

Ann Arbor. Full of trees, as the name might suggest. A fine mix of city and nature, yet not wholly one or the other. The sun shone bright and cheery on the early June day, with its sky an ever-expanding blue. Only a few clouds drifted through the troposphere. Birds sang and chirped their choruses throughout the schoolyard, without much care or attention. The place itself was an average sort of school, made of red brick and a severe lack of parking for its students, though they always somehow managed to make room.

The arrival of the first buses indicated seven twenty in the morning, and only some of the students had started to arrive. Among them were Charisma Roberts and Alma Grey, the latter cruising elegantly in the passenger side of her best friend’s ride. It was early for them to be there, but Charisma, more commonly referred to as Cris, was excited. They had already graduated, but many of the seniors still had work to finish up before their transcripts were complete. Cris had come to catch up and say goodbye to her friends.

She parked her car and waited for their friends to arrive as she looked over to Alma. Her best friend and partner in crime, Alma was only slightly shorter than Cris, but more bubbly with fuller curves and less inhibition. Alma was the older of the two, having just passed her eighteenth birthday. Her mid-length disarray of sun-warmed hair contrasted her naturally tanned skin—a testament to her fiery nature. Her luminous hazel eyes found no trouble in lighting up an entire room. Breaking out of her trance, Cris returned Alma's smile as they got out of the car.

Some of their friends walked by, and the two casually worked their way into the group. Unfortunately, there weren't a whole lot of places to walk to, and they would hardly want to be seen wandering around school this early in the day. They loitered about idly, but after a short while, headed into the building to find more entertaining things to do. Eventually the first bell of the day rang.

It was at about this same time that Konrad Lehane, stuck in traffic and enjoying the ska punk ballads of *We Are the Union*, was finally en route to school. Dirty blond hair with jaded green eyes, Kody's boyish figure may have done him justice for a man only seventeen years of age. He wore his medium build and average height like a snugly fit suit.

He rested his head against the window and sighed, looking at the long stream of cars lined up on the bridge. He knew he wouldn't make it to his first class on time, but he was proud he could at least say he'd tried.

Even so, it made little difference since he still didn't have much hope of arriving before the end of his first class. The perfect excuse he'd been saving up all semester would go to waste if he didn't hurry. Whether it would be his fault, or a result of the parking situation, was another story. His train of thought moved along with the realization there's always second hour.

Reaching the school, he drove through the parking lot searching in vain for an open spot. His rusty station wagon eventually ended up down the road in a nearby townhouse community. He dragged his feet on his way back to school, still in no particular hurry.

With no real desire to get to class, He spent a good fifteen minutes enjoying the warm summer sun baking his skin as he strolled along. A well of regret rose in his stomach, knowing he'd soon be rid of a lovely morning in exchange for a bland, only mildly entertaining classroom. The injustices of the educational system were too great, denying children the simple beauty and freedoms of nature and youth so soon after spring blossomed.

He considered whether his opinion might be swayed by his hatred for sitting around in class when he could be outside with a notebook.

He arrived at the school building and trudged into his second hour only a few minutes late. Cris's expression caught his gaze. He did his best to avoid it. Her amber eyes called out to him, emitting a charismatic warmth, indicating for him to join her. Her smile drew him in. She brushed mahogany tresses aside as she waited for him, revealing light freckles decorating her lean, athletic frame. Though it was impossible to tell if she was aware of it, she always reminded him of textbook jailbait.

Kody knew if he took a seat next to her a scolding would be in order. With no other seat open, however, he began the march of shame. The cold stare of his classmates penetrated from all sides as their teacher stopped the lesson, watching him pretend he was invisible as he slinked over to his seat. He saw Mrs. T. pick up the phone on her desk, and all the students knew what was coming next.

"Hold the phone, Kody! Before we continue with the lesson, please share with us what delightful story you have for today." The teacher's voice caught him off guard.

"My mom didn't want me going to school today. I know, I know...I couldn't believe it either. I tried to convince her I needed to go, but it was no use. She was like, 'You need to quit being so mature and responsible all the time!' So I ended up having to wait until she left the house so I could sneak out. If you could do me a huge favor, Mrs. T., please don't tell her I snuck out to go to school today, on skip day of all days. She'd be very disappointed with me," he replied, smug and pleased he'd got a chance to use his excuse after all.

His teacher grinned.

"I won't say anything about it, Kody. Now if you could take a seat and get out your textbook, we're on page 273," she finished.

Kody relaxed in his seat and pulled out some books to appease his teacher.

"Busted," Cris whispered, smirking.

"Hey, you know how it works. Mr. Sunshine says good morning, I say good night," he quietly replied.

"Maybe if someone would actually wake up when his alarm went off, it wouldn't be such a problem," she chided him. "Today's the big day, and you still get up late? What, were you up all night messing around or something? You should've had your stuff packed days ago!"

"I'm not a girl, Cris; I don't have lots of bags of useless crap. I just didn't feel like getting up. I like my sleep, really."

"I didn't think guys needed beauty rest," she countered. "Did you at least call Glenn?"

"I haven't even had breakfast; I had to rush just to get out the door in time."

"How'd that work out for you?" she cut in, sarcastically.

"Oh, hey, look, we're learning! I'm gonna pay attention now, to someone that's glad I'm here!"

"Oh, really? Where?" He shot Cris a dirty look.

"I'm just messing with you. I'll call him after class and find you third hour, okay?" she teased as she turned back to the front.

Kody opened his notebook, leaning it against the desk to make it appear as though he were taking notes. Although Kody paying attention in class seemed suspicious, he appeared so diligent in his task even Cris gave him the benefit of a doubt. As the lecture drifted on, so did Kody's imagination as he jotted down the various verses that traversed his head.

"What should I write about today?" Kody thought aloud, trying to narrow his focus into something a little more cohesive. He began drawing in the margin of the page, hoping he might sketch out some kind of inspiration.

"Guess I'll just let it flow."

He began to write. He thought of the flowers he had seen on his walk to the school, and drew one in the margin. He kept staring.

The flowers, their shimmering leaves share the joyful dance of the green throughout the field, careless to the fact they are bound in chains of sand and stone. They drink bountifully of the water that hails them, and shudder; sharing anticipation as their oppressors flee. They remain undercover in their bed of soil, thick as thieves and grateful for their reprieve, swaying ever so gleefully in the moistened plot, enjoying their sweet refreshment under a light morning haze.

He continued to write.

Raining mist abash, crimson embers alight, their retreat no longer a safe haven. That which was no longer is, thus it feeds off the dispassionate green for a chance to breathe. The ash is unsettled and time has no place. As the flame burns away, the flight of its last waning wisp...

He finished.

“It always comes out so depressing—even now,” he muttered to himself.

Cris overheard him. “Hm? Kody, are you okay? You seem a little down,” she whispered.

“What?” Kody looked up. “Are you watching me?” He had a smug grin.

“Why, should I be?” Cris challenged him.

“You know, it’s amazing. I’m hearing voices and yet I’m not Joan of Arc!” All eyes were drawn back to the front of the class, to the teacher who was now waiting politely for Cris.

“Sorry, we’re good, Mrs. T.!” Cris’s cheeks turned red.

“I hope so,” Mrs. T. said. “I realize you all have taken your finals already, but there is still plenty to learn. Life in itself is a lesson.” Mrs. T. continued on, shooting a kind but authoritative glance in Cris’s direction.

“You got it!”

Cris put on her award-winning smile to ensure the incident was quickly forgotten. Kody shuffled through his notebook, pretending to find some reference materials.

“Oh, no, mister. You aren’t getting out of it that easy.” Cris was onto him.

“What? I just don’t really get all these literary devices,” he responded, trying to sound convincing.

“You seem to have a lot of notes for someone who doesn’t understand them,” she glanced at his notebook.

“There’s a difference between taking notes and understanding them.”

“Really? Can I see them then? Maybe I can help you out.”

“I don’t think you’d want to, it’s just a bunch of scribbling. Mostly bored doodles, really.”

“Then you wouldn’t mind, right?” she pressed on.

“I guess not.”

He reluctantly slid the notebook to the side of the desk, watching her pick it up. He managed to control his nerves enough to keep pretending to focus on the lecture. That is, until he caught a glimpse of Alma looking over Cris’s shoulder.

As he not so subtly watched them, he could see the look of surprise on Cris’s face as Alma whispered to her, but was relieved by the sound of the bell ringing out his reprieve.

"Hey, look at that! Class went by fast today! Gotta hurry to third hour! Trying out this new thing where I get to class early, by which I mean on time, so let me know how it goes with Glenn!" Kody rushed out of the room.

"He's a little stranger than usual today, don'tcha think?" Alma inquired.

Cris nodded, still holding his notebook as they both headed out of the classroom.

"Goodbye, Charisma! Goodbye, Alma! Both of you have a wonderful day!" Mrs. T. called out to them as they left.

"Bye, Mrs. T."

"See ya later!"

Mrs. T. watched them go as she prepared for her next class. They continued down the hall.

"So, it's really over between you two, huh?" Cris turned her head to Alma as they walked.

"Yeah, let's just say it wasn't working for me," Alma said.

"How come? It seemed like you two were doing pretty well."

"Eh...I don't really want to talk about it. Hey, that Kody's notebook?" Alma noticed Cris was carrying it.

"Yeah, he rushed off so fast I didn't have a chance to give it back to him."

"Huh...hey, can I see it?"

"Sure."

Cris handed her the notebook. Alma looked it over, seemingly unaware Cris had stopped to wait for her.

"Hey, I gotta get off to class, but I'll make sure I get this back to him!" Alma called out as she headed off down the hallway.

"Alm, wait! We have the same third hour!" Cris shouted, trying to stop her, but she was already gone.

Cris continued down the adjoining hallway, debating whether she should attend her third hour, considering her grades were already set. Most of the seniors who were there attended only because their parents made them go, or because they honestly had nothing better to do. For her, all she wanted was to see her friends one last time before summer. The more she thought about it, though, the more she found she had already seen the few people she really wanted to.

She headed out to the practice building, behind the main body of the school. She sometimes passed her mornings there since classes weren't held

in the building until after lunch. She checked the back door, knowing it would be open because the lock was busted and the school faculty was simply too lazy or cheap to fix it. As she entered, she found the normally occupied auditorium empty. Usually there was at least a slacker or two catching a good nap. She had also walked in on couples on more than one occasion.

She pulled the door shut behind her as she wandered around backstage. She loved playing around behind the curtains, pretending that maybe she could be an actress, or a rare well-behaved teen idol of some sort. Once, she had imagined herself a princess, and that she was wandering through a dark maze looking for her prince. Unfortunately, all she had found was two girls getting high, which quickly brought her back to reality.

Still, she loved hanging out on the stage. She had grown accustomed to it when she tried acting in the theater club, even though the club itself didn't suit her. Singing for her own personal amusement was more her style.

Cris made her way through the heavy curtains, coming up to the front of the stage looking out into an empty auditorium. She paced back and forth, trying to determine where the center was, and found what she thought to be a good approximation of it. She looked down to see a black X marked by electrical tape and remembered that this was the spot. She prepared herself by clearing her throat as she tried to think of a song to sing. She had a select few she always hummed to herself, but this was a golden opportunity and she didn't want to waste it.

She pulled out her small mp3 player and shuffled through some songs until she found one she could work with. She grabbed a small bottle of water out of her bag and took a sip. She did a little curtsey and took a deep breath into her diaphragm as she prepared to perform.

She started out slowly, singing the first few lines from the Magnetic Fields' "Book of Love" until the sound of clapping from the balcony of the auditorium startled her.

"Lovely performance, pet, truly inspiring." Cris heard a confident, somewhat accented male voice as she noticed a man applauding from the balcony.

"Who's up there?" Cris was more embarrassed than alarmed.

"Just me. A bit surprising, I must say; I never would've expected something like that from you. I suppose it makes sense, though. The little sister of Emma Roberts has a voice on her after all."

"Daron?"

"Of course."

"What're you doing here?"

"Waitin' on me, probably."

Cris recognized Geroge as he walked out from behind the curtain, guitar case slung across his back. He stood larger, both wider and taller than her, scruffy dark hair covering his scruffy dark face.

"Geroge? Oh, are the Bards rehearsing?"

"Nah. Well, sorta. But since dickhead and Tits McGee are MIA, we're just chillin'. Keep goin', though, sounds like you're puttin' on a better show than we do."

"You weren't supposed to hear that." Cris blushed.

"Damn. Guess we should consider ourselves lucky, eh, D?"

"Suppose we should, G." Daron made himself comfortable on the balcony.

"Guess I'm not gonna convince you to join the band anytime soon, huh princess? We could definitely use a female lead. The Bards could work a whole new sound."

"Sorry, I'm not really interested. What about Jence though?"

"Jeany? Girl can rock a keyboard in ways I can't even understand, I'll give her that. But she's a bit lacking in the vocal talent department."

"Plus...she isn't exactly eye candy," Daron contributed.

"Hey, D., a little respect. Besides, that girl has far more impressive skills than you could ever dream of." Geroge, now redirecting his attention to Cris, said, "Anyway, can I interest you in some tickets to tonight's show?"

"I actually have other plans. Thanks for offering, though."

Cris slowly started making her way offstage as she decided she had worn out her unanticipated welcome.

"Gotcha. Well, if you change your mind, let us know. We're puttin' on a special show tonight. You're more than welcome. We'll hook you up Bard style." Geroge threw on his heart-melting smile as Cris made her way out.

"Thanks, I'll remember that. See you guys and good luck with the show!" Cris grabbed her bag and slipped out the back, the same way she came in.

"Damn, man, that's one hot *chica*, no?" Geroge took center stage, positioning himself in various places, getting a feel for the environment while he waited for Daron to make his way down.

"I wouldn't say no."

"Dude, you wouldn't say no to her cardboard cutout."

“No, I wouldn’t. But neither would you.”

“I’d consider it. If nothing else, a man should at least pretend to have principles in the absence of actual character. Might help him develop one someday, ya’ know?”

“Could be. Although I do have standards. I just wouldn’t say no to Charisma Roberts.”

“Not many men alive would, my friend, not many men would.” Geroge patted Daron on the back as he finally arrived on the stage, chuckling to himself and heading back outside to haul in some more equipment.

* * *

Alma had hit the jackpot and wasn’t going to squander such a rich opportunity. She wasn’t interested in what Kody was doing—much—but as long she had his notebook she may as well take a glimpse of what was going on inside. Her conscience tingled just a little, but such opportunities were rare. It’d be a shame to let it go to waste. She found her way inside a nearby bathroom and camped out in one of the stalls.

She thumbed through the notebook, finding a lot of unimpressive doodles and drawings. Various quotes and quirky expressions lay sprawled across the pages. She found a sketch of some kind of small animal, and couldn’t figure out what it was supposed to be. There was a caption that read Combustible Duck, but maybe she’d be better off not trying to figure it out.

“Let’s see, what do we have here? ‘He gave us light first and the sun two days later. God: the bad play-write – J. Joyce.’ What is this?”

Alma wasn’t sure what kind of stuff Kody was writing down or why, but at the very least she was determined to find out if he wrote anything about her. After all, it wasn’t snooping since she was trying to understand him better, doing him a favor, really. Leafing through the pages, she eventually found something of interest. She thumbed across a passage entitled “My Fox”. “I’m tired of paying for yesterday,” it read.

So I’ll tell you what. Meet me by the pier tonight. If you’re still interested, then we’ll work it out. Tonight, I’m gonna swim away. The only question remaining is will I find you on that distant shore when I arrive? Don’t come just to compliment me, or to see if I made it. Come only if you

plan on staying. This will be my new home. If you are not my fox, then you are my snake. Though both do a bit of mercy.

As she finished reading, a small tightness grew in Alma's chest. Was it anger or compassion? It didn't matter. She figured he'd been fine; after all, he seemed okay in class. "So do I..." she thought as she closed the book. She sat for a moment, playing with the hem of her dress. Blowing hair out of her face, she needed to figure out a good way to blow off some steam. She stuffed the notebook in her bag and pulled out her phone, sending a text message to a friend as she started heading toward the gym.

She opened the stall door and looked herself over in the mirror. She had only a light coat of makeup on and wore a black floral dress with a button-up top that was a little tight around the chest. Her blue jeans showed just underneath the hemline. She unbuttoned the top two buttons of her dress, giving herself a little more to work with without exposing too much. She took her time walking to the gym, knowing that her "friend" would already be waiting.

She arrived at the gym with no one in sight. She stopped for a moment to watch a basketball game that looked like it had just started, debating whether she should stay for that instead. She checked out some of the guys practicing, recognizing a few, and licked her lips. This could be a worthwhile endeavor, with very lucrative prospects. She started getting into the game and was ready to walk in when she heard her name coming from one of the empty side hallways. She decided to check it out.

"Hey, Alms. How's it goin', sweet thing?" She instantly realized who it was.

"Hey, Thad, how've you been?"

"Busy as always. Sam's been riding my ass hard the last few days."

"That literally?" she smirked.

"I wish. She wants to make summer plans and all this shit, but I ain't tryin' to hear that. I just wanna chill for a bit."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. So you and Sam still together?"

"Man, I don't even know anymore."

Alma tilted her head, about as convinced as Thad was convincing.

"Huh, I hope that works out for you."

"What about you and that weird emo poet kid?"

"Kody? He's not weird or anything. We just weren't really seeing eye to eye, I guess."

“Huh, that’s a shame. I know how hard that can be.”

“Do you now?” Alma’s lips perched back.

“I surely do.”

“Funny, ‘cause you don’t seem to be looking at my eyes.” She called him out.

“So? Can I help it if a hot young thing is standing right in front of me, looking all luscious?”

“I’m luscious now, huh?”

“Like an apple.”

“Did you just call me an apple?” She cocked an eyebrow.

Thaddeus leaned in to kiss her. She didn’t expect it, but she wasn’t all together surprised.

“Hey, what about Sam?” she said, stopping him.

“What about Sam?”

He leaned in once again, this time pinning her against the wall. She didn’t resist. He kissed her, and she found herself kissed—a small amount of comfort and relief in it. She broke it off.

“Thaddeus, I don’t know about this...”

“What’s there to know? Nothing we ain’t done before.”

“I know, but still. . . I just. . .”

“Oh. . . I gotcha. Don’t like a crowd.”

Thaddeus grabbed her hand and led her down the hall into one of the open offices as they made their way inside.

“Thad, this isn’t what I meant.”

“Funny, ‘cause you texted me. And we both know what that means. ‘Sides, I don’t see you lookin’ to leave. Or maybe you wish it was your little poet boy?”

She looked away.

“Don’t worry, sweet cheeks, it’s just like ridin’ a bike. A very fine, well-tuned bike.”

She took a deep breath. There might be more than a little truth in his words. But she had left *him*, and decided to be here now. The awkward combination of shame and comforting familiarity both came creeping back along her spine. She couldn’t tell which was the stronger. Thad paid little attention to her as his hands roamed freely. The tension built as she searched for an answer. Her body took over.

“Close the door.” She kept quiet.

She thought briefly that maybe she should do something different, but it was her choices that had brought her this far, and she had always made it through. She was abandoned to circumstance, a victim of fate. Whatever happened to her wasn't her fault—it was just another page in the story of her days. She was just along for the ride.

2. Ill-Lit

“Even when he smiled, Glenn always seemed sad. They say there just isn’t any pleasing some people, but I honestly don’t believe that. I think everyone is capable of happiness, and I aim to prove it.”

– The Journal of Charisma Roberts

“Y-yet another dream; will I ever be rid of t-these?” Glenn Redcliffe lay there for a moment, staring at the ceiling. It was only when he sat up in his bed that he realized he was covered in sweat.

“This c-certainly can’t be good...”

He pondered his options before crawling out of bed and looking out the window. The light hurt his eyes. He stepped away from the curtains, letting them conceal the window and shroud the room in darkness once more. He could barely make out the shapes of the quietly messy room as he stumbled about. He found his way into the living room and stood there for a moment, scratching his head. He glanced around: shirts lying on the floor, nearly all long sleeves; the sink filled with dishes; and his small kitchen table cluttered with books and other assorted papers. He shrugged.

Every window remained draped with heavy curtains, preventing any more than small rays of light from shining through. He lived alone in a small apartment, leaving ample room for his large bookshelves and scattered notes. A dingy t-shirt hung off his lanky frame, barely concealing the patches decorating his old cargo pants. His shaggy, mud colored hair resembled the dim echoes reverberating behind his glasses as he brushed

loose strands aside. Today was his twenty-third birthday and he sat at home, alone as usual.

He flicked on a dim light in the ill-lit living room. There was a bowl on the counter, filled with half-eaten dry cereal. Glenn opened the refrigerator and pulled out a cold gallon of milk only slightly past its expiration date. He looked it over and took a strong whiff. He poured it into the bowl anyway and placed the nearly empty carton back into its specifically designated location within the even emptier fridge.

The apartment was silent, a place so bereft of sound he could hear the distinct fizz of milk interacting with cereal. He sat down at the disorganized table, brushing aside a spot for his breakfast, carelessly knocking several objects onto the floor. Maybe he should've been careful—perhaps there might've been something important amid all of that clutter, but he doubted it. He ate, ignoring insomnia's weary grasp on his body. He adjusted his glasses and cleaned the crusties from his eyes.

"If this k-keeps up, I'm never g-going to get any better." He leaned back in his chair, tilting it off the ground as his thoughts drifted to more relevant matters.

"What am I d-doing getting involved with a bunch of c-children?" he mumbled aloud.

He began to doze off as he ate. His head bobbed forward, the momentum bringing his chair back down to ground as he caught himself just before hitting the table. An annoying ringing sound chirped out from amid the mess. Half-startled and half-asleep, he regained his posture and began searching for the phone. He found his way to the floor and scrambled through the various medication bottles and papers until he finally found the receiver. He pressed a few different buttons until he heard it connect.

"Mm...h-hello?" he spoke into the phone, holding back a yawn.

"Glenn? Hey. How are you?" a female voice replied, leaving him mystified until he recognized who it was.

"Oh...Charisma! What's the matter?" he woke up a little.

"Nothing, I'm fine. Just checking up on you."

"Me? I'm the same, f-fine, just a bit t-tired is all." Glenn's stutter became more pronounced.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes...so what did you n-need?"

"I wanted to see if you needed help packing. I got all my stuff done earlier, so I figured maybe you could use some help."

“Yes...I’ve, uh...b-been working on that.” The uncertain wavering in his voice betrayed him.

“I figured as much.” Cris’s dry sarcasm came through clearly. “So once Kody and I get our stuff together, we’ll come over and help you pack. Just sort out what you need, and we’ll take care of the rest, okay?”

“Are you sure? S-seems like a lot of work for both of you to d-do on my behalf.”

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

“All right...thank you, C-Charisma.”

“Glenn, relax. And I’ve told you a hundred times already...call me Cris, okay? Cris.”

“R-right. Sorry, I’ve some business to attend to before you both arrive. B-besides, aren’t you in school? You’ll be late for class.”

“Heh...it’s no big deal. It’s just math.”

“If you insist. In any case, I’ll talk to you later Charisma—Er...C-Cris. Goodbye.”

“Bye Gle—”

He hung up before she had a chance to finish.

Glenn set the phone down and remained on the floor a while longer. The world started feeling lighter, less connected. He clutched his head as he felt like the room was beginning to spin. Unwelcomed as this sensation was, it was not unfamiliar. He doubled over in pain. He started taking slow, deep breaths, trying to calm himself.

He held his sides, gradually recovering, though not fully recomposing himself. Reality seemed less...real; he stared blankly at the phone, almost as if he expected it to ring again with pleasant news, or at least something that interested him. He was convinced it was bound to happen, though he knew this to be a lie. It was always a lie.

He remained focused on the phone when he got that funny all-too-familiar feeling in his belly right before he passed gas. He jumped, scaring himself, though he scarcely even noticed.

He sighed, deceived by the phone yet again. He staggered, making his way back to the table and eating a few bites of his cereal. Having lost his appetite, he stood there in place, noticing little, with even less passing through his mind.

He felt a small gag in his throat and doubled over once again, now hunched over on the ground as the contents of his stomach liberated and revealed themselves. He was no longer bothered by this and continued to

heave, waiting for this session to end. Eventually, there was nothing left, and he was able to breathe.

He looked down in wonder at the unamusing creation he had brought forth. He recognized small bits of cereal and little else. The wretched stench began to foul the stagnant air, and only the light breeze of a fan behind him recirculating the vile odor in the background made any difference.

He grabbed some of the papers resting on the ground next to him and used them to clean up what he could of his mess. He trashed the papers and scrubbed the carpet with a washcloth, making sure to spray plenty of air freshener and being grateful for the fact that his landlord's horrible taste in rug colors actually happened to coincide with the former contents of his stomach's. Though he tried for several minutes, his best effort proved useless, and he wandered back toward his bedroom.

He searched in the dark for his nightstand and reached for some pills. It didn't matter to him which they were, though he knew by shape and texture exactly which ones he had grabbed. He fumbled around a bit more and found a glass of water from the night before. He swallowed the pills half-heartedly while taking another sip from the glass, before collapsing onto his bed.

He hated staring at the ceiling. It was too dark to accurately define anything, yet he was certain he could always make out the image of the monsters lining it. He could make out an eye here, claws there, and of course, always the teeth. Always the teeth. He could barely tell if he was watching them, or if they were watching him.

He sometimes imagined that he was in the ceiling, observing a pitiable man feigning his way through life, toward death. He wondered why he dragged on, either indecisive or watching this grotesque display; why he didn't take initiative and expedite the process or end it altogether he had no idea. He had no respect for such a false character in either case.

His thoughts became less coherent while his rationale depreciated into simple amusements and pleasures at any inane notion still cogent within him. The medication began to kick in. Drowsiness overcame him, and he finally began falling into what he was sure would be a restless sleep.

3. Cinematic Buffet

“You only live once, right? Guess there’s no way to know that for sure, but it’s a good excuse to do whatever the hell I want before I get too old to do it.”

– The Notebook of Kody Lehane

Cris sat in the bleachers outside, enjoying the sunny pre-afternoon. She still had a bit of time to kill until nightfall. The longer she sat there, watching geese roam around on the soccer field, the more agitated she became; something was off, and she couldn’t let it go. She was certain that something greater was going on, that both Kody and Glenn were keeping something from her. They didn’t seem like themselves, and she was determined to find out what was going on.

Despite that, it was too pretty a day to let petty issues distract her from what she needed to accomplish. She got up, watching the wayward birds waddle off as she left and made her way toward the parking lot. She strode across the paved blacktop of the road when she recognized her partner in crime waiting by their getaway mobile.

“So...what’cha thinkin’ about?” Alma asked, donning unfashionably large shades.

“Other than how much those look like my missing pair of sunglasses?” Alma made her innocent pouty face. “Nothing...” Cris looked away.

“Cris.”

“Just not really up for talking about it right now.”

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