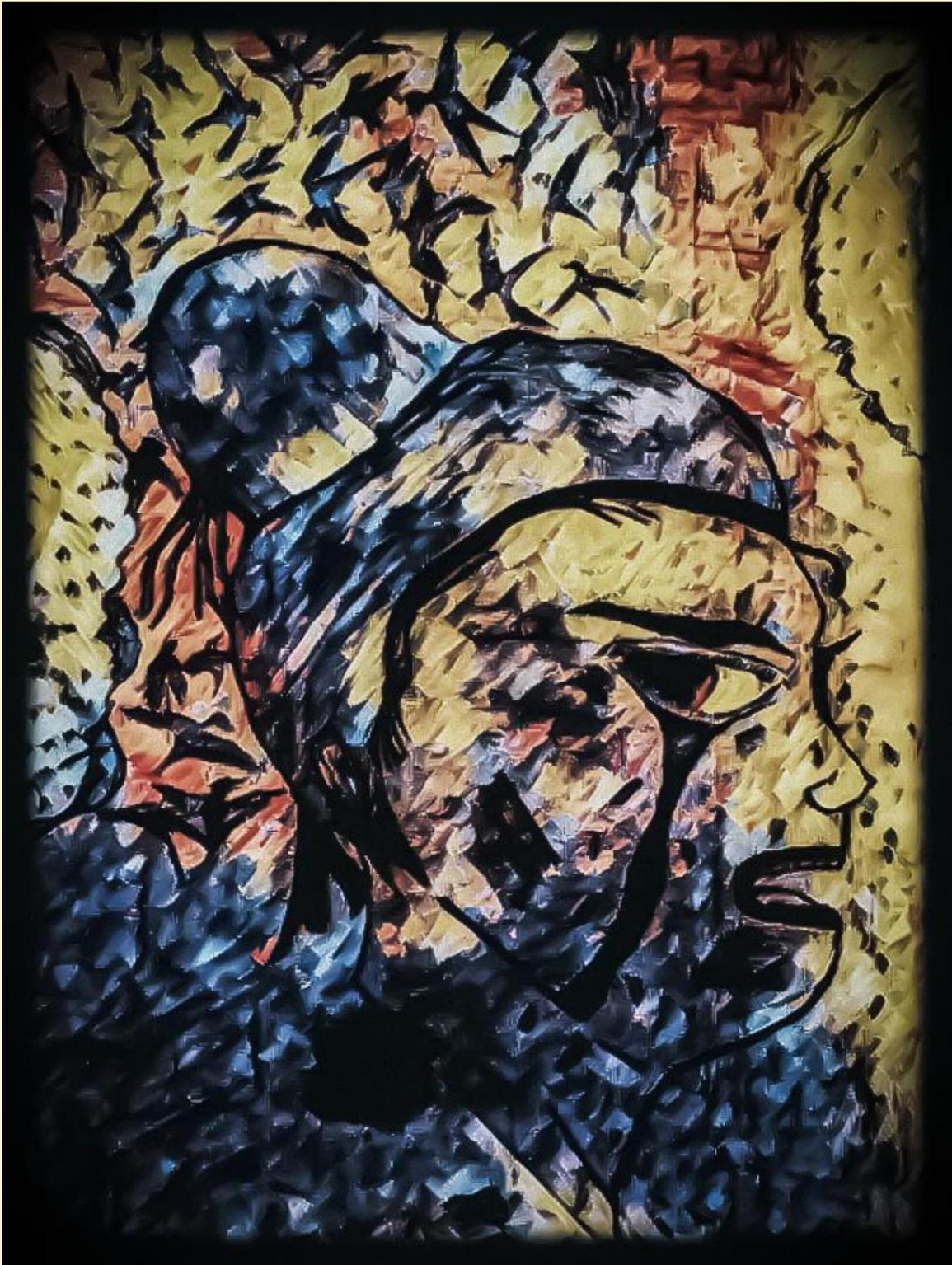


A COUP OF OWLS



Issue 5

Max Turner – Publisher
Rhiannon Wood – Editor in Chief
Dr. Sarah Boyd – Editor

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Cover Image – ‘Birds of Prey’ by Moses Ojo

Moses Ojo is a young Nigerian art enthusiast who uses his mind as a vista for making captivating arts while using his brushes and watercolours, thereby speaking reality through his arts and crafts to his viewers.

Instagram [@_mojoart](https://www.instagram.com/_mojoart)

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Published by A Coup of Owls

Foreword

Page 5

he would swallow me whole if he didn't want to be swallowed by Isabelle Ryan Page 7

Comfort... and indulging in strange appetites.

Isabelle Ryan is a UK-based writer of horror fiction with queer themes. Isabelle's work has previously appeared in Cosmic Horror Monthly and Not Deer Magazine, with a piece forthcoming in Gutslut Press. You can find Isabelle on Twitter [@Ph4ntomR3q](#).

Normal by Steph Amir Page 8

A first date.

Steph Amir has a background in public policy and research and is currently a Writeability Fellow at Writers Victoria. Her creative work has been published internationally in print and online; most recently in Snowflake Magazine, Ghost Girls, Phantom Kangaroo and Burrow. She lives in Melbourne, Australia, and tweets from [@steph_kaymir](#).

Two Inches by A. Webster Page 9

Trimming hair or memories?

A. Webster is a screenwriter, novelist and short story writer whose edgy and often satirical style strives to push audiences out of their comfort zones so they can connect with their deepest emotions. In addition to writing, she is a full-time pharmacist. She lives in Oregon with her husband, daughter, two cats and one dog.

Firebird by Bayveen O'Connell Page 13

A phoenix in wartime.

Bayveen O'Connell is an Irish writer who has words in Reckon Review, Maryland Literary Review, Fractured Lit, Janus Literary, The Forge, Bending Genres and others. She came third in the Janus Literary Spring Story Prize 2021, and received a Best Microfiction nomination in 2019. Bayveen is inspired by travel, history, art and myth.

Somehow Different by Miriam H. Harrison

Page 14

In the light of the full moon, Anna glimpses the world of possibilities that exists beyond the limits of her assumptions.

Writing from the boreal forests and abandoned mines of Northern Ontario, Miriam H. Harrison writes poetry and short fiction that vary between the eerie, the dreary, and the cheery. She is a member of the Horror Writers Association and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association.

<http://Miriamhharrison.wordpress.com>

In The Sight of This Charming Nowhere by Cinnamaldeide

Page 17

Nathan saw nothing wrong with sparing money whenever he could, even if his pragmatism led him towards sinister paths.

Cinnamaldeide doesn't bite, more like she politely chews with her mouth closed. An amateur photographer and calligrapher in her spare time, she writes for fun and for despair.

<https://cinnamaldeide.carrd.co/>

Foreword -

Last issue, I wrote about the weird, the strange, the different, the otherwise *other* of the submissions we get. We're pleased to say that, this issue, we got weirder, stranger, more different and more other. We grinned slightly maniacal grins. We decided that leaning into the weird (a phrase coined by our lovely publisher) would be a good direction for us. Why? Because we need more weird in the universe. Voices from people who don't always get heard, voices from those who have been dismissed, from those who aren't telling the story in the 'right' way. This is what makes all our authors so important and so wonderful. Weird is the gateway to understanding.

When I was a kid, I loved the weird. One of my favourite books was about a group of children who go up into space, crash their rocket and die. Which is where the story starts to get really interesting. Our heroine travels through eternity, following a saxophone-playing astronaut as he weaves his way through space, time, and life. This book stayed with me; I still have a treasured, dog-eared copy.

Even when I was young, perhaps especially then, I knew that stories of the weird and the other spoke to me and what they had to say was important. They helped me understand that my way of looking at the world, what my dad called 'quirky' (still trying to figure out if he meant that as an insult or not...), wasn't bad; it wasn't something I had to change or work through. The lens of the strange lets us explore all those nooks and crannies of our brains that are otherwise in the dark. The parts that can see magic.

Being in this vast, strange forest has reminded me that staying connected to the strange is important. In this modern world, we have lost something. We can explain so much that the fantastical seems even further away than before. We see with prescription lenses, scientific knowledge and understanding. We no longer look with blurry-eyed wonder at the world around us. That's why ghost stories, horror and tales of the unexpected are so thrilling. They take us down some dark, winding paths, and as much as some may leave us in the forest to fend for ourselves, more often than not, they lead us out to the rising sun and warmth on our faces.

So, maybe you want to trim away your memories as a hairdresser cuts off your split ends. Or flirt with danger by revealing yourself to the unknown, hoping for desire to burn brightly in the dark, abandoned places of your mind. Maybe under a full moon, you'll see everything you knew about yourself and realise, much like Socrates, that you know far less

than you thought. Perhaps for you, it's the microcosm rather than the macrocosm where your terror lies, and the offer of a hand is your nightmare made flesh-crawlingly real. Or your appetites are not easily shared except in the shining, blood-drenched night. Maybe you are a phoenix who wasn't made to burn brightly but instead find salvation in the dust whence we came. Or perhaps birds surround your wide-eyed stare, knowledge burning in your eyes, lips parted in a spell. Whatever variety of strange you may be, there will always be a place in our forest for you. If you're unsure, if you feel a little slither of trepidation down your spine, fear not. Take our winged hand and trust that the darkness always has a path to the light...

Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief

he would swallow me whole if he didn't want to be swallowed

by Isabelle Ryan

Content Warnings: Blood, horror, cannibalism.

Not your thing? Skip to page 8 for the next story.

He never moves beyond a toddler's exploration: what's worth his time, what doesn't please his teeth or tongue; considering the mouthfeel of the world. He contemplates my earlobes, the swoop of my collarbones, the dent in my top lip, and I endure it gladly. Then his eyes glint. I stroke his spine as warm blood spills. His razorblade mouth saws, unfastens. Then, wiping his sweet mouth, he watches as the gaping scarlet hole, yet dripping, knits itself together. Left behind: a whitish mark, to join the others in a detailed map of all the times I have been eaten.

Normal

by Steph Amir

Content Warnings: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Not your thing? Skip to page 9 for the next story.

Kate knows that germs can't really jump off walls, tables, or other people, landing on her sleeve then seeping through her shirt, onto her skin, multiplying to spread down to her hands and across her face, risking infection, illness, hospitalisation, death, so she'd never finish writing her book and who would look after her cat? But germs can't jump off tables, so she needs to ignore her OCD, and act normal, and sit down, and *don't touch anything*, and just say...

'Hi, I'm Kate.'

Her Tinder date looks up and smiles.

'Hi! I'm Riley.'

Riley stands to shake Kate's hand.

Two Inches

by A. Webster

Content Warnings: Childhood memories of emotional abuse, false accusations of drug use.

Not your thing? Skip to page 13 for the next story.

Her hands disappeared into coarse, straw-textured coils – long, manicured nails gently scratching the young woman’s scalp as she separated the hair into sections.

‘You’re new around here,’ the beautician said, grabbing a fistful of hair.

The young woman’s gaze dropped into her lap while she fiddled with the black cape that surrounded her. By the time she mustered a reluctant nod, the beautician had already placed a claw clip and moved on to separating the next section.

Bubblegum popped and slid between a gap in the beautician’s teeth. ‘Welcome to town.’ She worried the young woman’s split ends and fairy knots between her fingers. ‘What would you like done?’

The young woman shrugged.

While the beautician waited for an answer, she turned away and slid shears halfway into her apron pocket, leaving the handle easily accessible. The sun glinted off the top of them, causing the young woman to squint. ‘Trim a couple inches. I guess.’

The beautician leaned down; a sugary waft of pineapple-banana breath permeated the young woman’s nostrils. ‘Would you like your memories done too?’ she asked with a voice so soft it barely tickled the young woman’s ear.

With her knuckles, the young woman wiped the moisture of welling tears off the bags beneath her eyes. She nodded.

*

Sweat moistened the sheets beneath the young woman’s back as she fanned herself. Annoyed by the pool of her own secretions, she sat up. She reached for a glass on her nightstand, still

containing a residue of pulpy liquid that barely covered the bottom. She swirled it and set it down. She tiptoed to her bedroom door and leaned against it – hoping for silence. Instead, she heard her mother stomping towards the kitchen, followed by the crash of several dishes being flung against the wall.

She returned to the glass, tapping the upturned bottom as the sludge slowly slipped into her mouth.

Desperately thirsty, she creaked the door open. Then the yelling began. Not at her this time. At nothing. At life.

Carefully, she pressed the door so it only made a small click as it latched shut, sealing her inside her room.

Once again, she turned the glass to her lips. She lapped furiously at the remaining morsels, cleaning the sides of the glass with her tongue and fingers until there was nothing left.

Then she waited, hidden in her room until it seemed safe enough to venture downstairs.

She was wrong.

It wasn't safe.

She was never safe.

The beautician observed the scene unfolding like a spectre in the young woman's consciousness.

Once she had seen enough, her delicate hands made quick work, piecing fragments of porcelain back together. The pads of her fingers repaired cracks like glue, her grasp firing like a kiln until each dish ascended into the cabinet of fine china.

The beautician smiled as she watched the now-peaceful domestic scene.

Unperturbed, the young woman poured juice from the refrigerator as she had intended when she entered. And her mother left the kitchen with composure, carrying an unfractured plate in hand.

But the memory sensed the shift and became angrier and stronger, searching for alternate pathways to preserve itself in its original, jagged, traumatising form. Newly formed neural connections snaked around the beautician's fingers, lighting up the young woman's brain like a summer storm.

The beautician's smile sublimated into a frown, like ice in an inferno. She watched neurones creep around the young woman's brain like a vine, snagging emotions from other

memories as fuel for their fury. The tendrils gathered the bleakest, most soul-crushing sentiments as fodder, until suddenly—

The air filled with the venomous screech of a mother's loathing, a viper's tongue flicking false accusations at her daughter. Her hands snatched a fistful of the salt the beautician had seen her defile the countertops and floor with moments before. She held the crystals up to her daughter and asked, 'Why are you leaving your meth all over the house?'

The young woman sulked away from her mother and acknowledged her through gritted teeth. 'I already told you, I'm not doing meth.'

A burbling volcano of rage erupted, furious at her daughter's audacity. She ripped open cabinet doors with enough force to separate them from their hinges.

Crack.

As the screws splintered from the wall, the memory transformed into a supernatural maelstrom of raw emotions, wholly detached from the physical reality of past events.

The beginnings of the memory had hummed through the beautician's fingers like electricity, but with this cosmic shift, shocks stung her hands. To gain a moment of reprieve, she returned to trimming the young woman's hair, but only until the neuropathy dissipated. Then she steeled herself to plunge her hands back into the abyss.

Cabinet doors clattered off one another, with dishware hailing down from above. The fine china shattered, one after another, after another. Until there was no more. The vortex of destruction continued until the kitchen lay in ruins. And with a final cacophonous crescendo, the mother splashed juice in the young woman's face before slamming the glass onto the ground and stomping it into fragments.

The young woman stood silently, dripping awe and juice, devoid of shock.

The voltage of electricity still coursed through the beautician's hands and intensified in step with the mother's outbursts. Still, she slid her nails between the synapses and preened each neurone, one by one.

Anguish tore at her skin, causing it to split and bleed. She drew a long breath, only then realizing she'd swallowed her gum, and exhaled across the backs of her hands to soothe them. Sweat beaded as she worked through the pain. She wiped her brow with shaky fingertips and dried them on her apron.

Finally, she found what she needed.

Cowering in the corner. Covered in the cobwebs of disremembrance. Of repression – the young woman's complete denial that such a memory could exist among the others. The beautician found a recollection of a different tenor.

A gentle hug of motherly love.

It wasn't much, but it would do.

She polished the memory with her thumb. Then continued her pruning.

*

The young woman must have dozed off at some point. She woke with a jolt to thousands of tiny fragments of hair dancing on the floor. The chair spun to face the mirror, and the young woman met her own gaze, then looked beyond into her mind's eye. She searched but couldn't find why she'd left home in the first place. There was only a memory of her mother's embrace as they stood in a faraway driveway. Her mother had fought back tears and wished her well. But she hadn't returned the emotion.

She watched, perplexed, as her former self responded to her mother's grief by getting in her car and driving away.

With a blink, her eyes returned to focus. She slowly reached her hand to touch her downy coils, now cropped close to her head.

Expressionless, she turned to face the beautician.

'I said two inches.'

Firebird

by Bayveen O'Connell

Content Warnings: Visceral injuries.

Not your thing? Skip to page 14 for the next story.

On the horizon, a wicked, thickening mushroom cloud blooms. Propeller engines growl away into the distance.

On the ground, I look for my eyes, I feel for my skin. I cannot hear my ears melting nor smell the crackling of my flesh as it recedes.

This vacuum of heat brings my thirst, summons un-forecast rain. I gape my loosened jaw and swallow, but the droplets swim a river of death through me, set me burning from within. Smoke spirals through every sinew. My hair comes away like loose feathers, and I do not rise from the flames inside me. I do not rise.

Somehow Different

by Miriam H. Harrison

Content Warnings: None

Not your thing? Skip to page 17 for the next story.

They met at the pond. There, in the light of the full moon, Anna looked into the water and saw herself, somehow different. *A trick of the light*, she thought. But try as she might, she could not understand the change, subtle yet certain.

so strange she said aloud
to see myself
not quite myself
I feel
something uncanny waits

something uncanny waits her reflection confirmed
I feel
not quite myself
to see myself
so strange

Had her reflection truly spoken? Anna doubted herself. All around her, the night was silent. Yet in the water, her reflection studied her. She saw her confusion reflected there in the moonlight – much the same, yet different. She had heard before of witchcraft and trickery in the light of the full moon. She had also heard of lunacy. But which frightened her more: magic or madness?

as tricksters she said
the moonlight and water

*confuse me, cast
spells of uncertainty
perhaps*

Her reflection pondered.

*perhaps it said
spells of uncertainty
confuse me, cast
the moonlight and water
as tricksters*

They considered each other, considered possibilities. It was strange for Anna to think that some other self lived there in the moonlit pond. Stranger still to think that – to her reflection – she was a mystery to be solved.

*am I strange? she asked
I wonder
I look at you
in the water
while I am here
on land
to me, you are
strange*

*strange her reflection said
to me, you are
on land
while I am here
in the water
I look at you
I wonder
am I strange?*

Anna realised how little she knew. She had never questioned the inevitability of her life on land. She had dreamed so many dreams, but always with her feet set firmly on the ground. She had never stopped to wonder if there was more to dream, elsewhere.

*I wish I knew what it is like she said
living there, in your world
I wonder how it feels to be always
in water
no longer spending all my days
on land
imagine what else waits
where you are
I wish I could be there*

The eyes of her reflection gazed back, bright and earnest.

*I wish I could be there that self replied
where you are
imagine what else waits
on land
no longer spending all my days
in water
I wonder how it feels to be always
living there, in your world
I wish I knew what it is like*

When at last the moon set, she left, not quite as she came. There was no more strangeness around her. The path twisted in its usual curves around the trees and rocks. Everything around her was as it had ever been. Only she seemed out of place. The same, yet somehow different.

In The Sight of This Charming Nowhere

by Cinnamaldeide

Content Warnings: Sex work, masturbation, voyeurism.

Not your thing? Then this is the end.

There was some comfort to be found in the deep recesses of a notoriously disreputable forest, Nathan assumed, particularly if somebody had bothered to build a small, comfortable cabin in the middle of it for their own peace of mind.

Leaves covering the tough pathway, vines climbing the external walls. Practically eaten by the surrounding vegetation. Seeing it for the first time, Nathan fell a little bit in love with the quiet place.

Given his past experiences, the young man expected an apathetic tenant to greet him by its rustic porch upon his arrival. He preferred to settle payments and final arrangements in person beforehand instead of procrastinating until the last minute, yet silence and utter desolation engulfed the pleasant clearing. The hut unreservedly beckoned him inside to find shelter.

After ensuring his presence was unattended to, and unlikely to be anything else anytime soon, Nathan took the initiative to see himself in. He found a rusted key and an unmarked letter stuck under the undusted mat and didn't waste time opening it.

A single line in plain, unremarkable handwriting interspersed the creamy white paper.

*May your unblinking eyes find nourishment
in the sight of this charming nowhere.*

Undated, cryptically unsigned.

'Auspicious,' Nathan whispered to himself. His idle comment, soon to be lost in the sound of dancing branches and rustling foliage, went unanswered.

He'd never really fancied poetry, found it slightly empty to the ears.

Nathan was fundamentally pragmatic. He saw a rusted lock and assumed the only key in sight, which currently resided in the palm of his hand, would match. In the case that it didn't, he'd bother formulating strategies.

But it did, in fact, fit.

The squeaking door opened to an unlit foyer, windows barred and unmoving, and stale air assaulted his lungs as Nathan headed inside. Long time since the last occupant ventilated, he guessed. It was possible those quarters hadn't taken a deep breath in years.

The worn-out rucksack on his shoulders found a seat right beside the threshold, and the lights were switched on without further delay.

The domestic interior nicely complemented the exterior of his temporary residence. A ruined wreck in dire need of a thorough polishing, which basically fulfilled Nathan's ideal of a beautiful location, not considering the lack of comfort amenities and food sources within a mile radius. He could do without social boundaries, but the absence of running water and limited wi-fi significantly narrowed his time of autonomy.

He proceeded unpacking. Rooms were unlocked and aired, the fireplace was checked and supplied with a lively flame, the table set for one. Nathan arranged his belongings and fixed a light lunch while his attentive eyes considered suitable spots for his technical equipment. There were adjustments to be done, he reasoned, but that didn't deter him.

Rolling up his sleeves and throwing outside the crumbs he'd produced for local birds and ever-persistent ants to feast upon, Nathan told himself it was finally time to set the stage.

*

When Nathan was young and foolishly ambitious, his more naive self had undertaken academic studies to become a professional photographer. Back then, he had aspired to frame breathtaking portraits and landscapes, pictures that would inspire admiration and wonder, filled with meaning and magical atmospheres.

He had seen art capable of that with his own eyes. Despite his arid soul, a gorgeous lady with piercing eyes had managed to resonate with his unfeeling heart.

However, despite such ambitions, Nathan couldn't boast a strong artistic sensibility. On the contrary, as previously stated, his poetic vein ran quite dry, although certain pieces were indeed capable of getting underneath his rough skin. He still seized the opportunity to capture the rippled surface of a quiet lake or the warm tones of a sporadic crepuscule,

champagne pink and Princeton orange, but his main subject of late had been none other than himself.

After an untoward mishap with his previous boyfriend, who admittedly sported a rather obsessional interest in webcams and, occasionally, recording devices, Nathan had been surprised to learn that his body had obtained a certain success among a very specific public. That was surprising, considering that his body was not particularly muscular, not particularly fetching, not particularly flexible, not particularly *anything* from his perspective.

The aforementioned boyfriend hadn't appreciated his almost immediate choice to pursue a career in the production of amateurish pornography. But Mark never got to reap the benefits of a fairly devoted audience, eager to provide for a higher-resolution camera with tripod, annual subscriptions to the most advanced graphic programs, sophisticated instruments to record, conserve and easily promote his material, and even for expensive changes of scenery to further aestheticize his solo performances.

Nathan didn't trust easily. Seeking a partner to aid him with lights and locations had never interested him, so he spent a significant amount of time and energy thereon. His spectators seemed to understand and respect that.

In return for their support, Nathan had devised a brief transfer out of his stark apartment, relieved that the setting he had selected and proposed met with his audience's approval.

True to his plan, Nathan had tinkered with cosmetics and angulations for most of the afternoon, including a modest portion of the gorgeous view from the window, bare trees and low clouds to contrast with the warmer inside. He had then spread himself on a scratchy carpet, gently reclining on soft cushions and surrounded with warm blankets in front of the crackling fire as his digital camera filmed his slow, indulgent performance.

He had prepared the set to livestream his sensorial experience in pixels and low decibels, settled with his unshaven face out of focus and his hands in the spotlight, undivided attention on his own teasing and fondling. Nathan sighed at the strokes of his unhurried hands and tickles on his pert nipples, which betrayed the cold still lingering in the small room. He played with his groomed pubic hair, followed with his lithe pelvis every shift and every caress his erotic imagination conjured.

He had deliberately removed the vocal component, uttering close to no words during his shows. He had learned to favour a detached, mysterious attitude towards his numerous viewers, substantially limiting the interface to prevent it becoming the most daunting, time-consuming part of his job.

Nathan would seldom address the audience, carefully selecting the singular individuals with whom he deemed safe to engage, whose comments actually received an answer. His approach sometimes caused frustration but allowed him to concentrate on, well, the main task at hand.

Over the years, Nathan had finalised a technique to condition his mind into an induced state of relaxation while recording. It quietened his mind of external impressions, so tactile stimuli were his sole requirement to achieve and maintain an erection. He could revel in memories of his past liaisons if required, but the knowledge that his pleasure and his technical skills had been enough to feed him actually sufficed most days and nights.

Like anyone else, Nathan endeavoured to profit not only financially from his occupation. He certainly enjoyed climaxing repeatedly for a living, making good use of abundant lubricant, his own wrist and various toys, even if distraction left him vulnerable, but there was also professional pride to be gained. He concentrated on his work, thank you very much, which was why it took him a while to realise the sudden movement reflected in the window was an anomaly rather than fruit of his fervid fantasy.

Conflicting feelings stirred in him, but Nathan concentrated on finishing off what his patrons would be paying for, coming onto his contracted belly and panting with deliberate leisure, before turning off his filming equipment, cleaning himself and putting on some clothes.

He felt light-headed, but Nathan paced toward the kitchen in search of an adequate weapon to brandish.

Business before pleasure, of course, but safety was paramount.

*

‘You superstitious, son?’ Nathan had been asked right after he disclosed his intended destination, a little cabin on top of a desolate hill.

He had made his mandatory stop at the local grocery store to replenish his stocks of perishables before delving into the remote forest, and the ominous, grim owner had been in the mood to chatter. ‘No one ever wanders near the ol’ shack up there,’ she had said. ‘Unless they’re looking for a creepy story to tell.’

Nathan had shrugged at that. ‘Not particularly, ma’am,’ he had answered. ‘Just wanted someplace cheap to stay for a couple days.’

His response had elicited an arched eyebrow, which quickly reverted into an apprehensive look. Nathan had managed to fend off her kind-hearted offer to take *an actual crucifix* with him without laughing in her face, civilly refraining from observing that he might have been, in fact, the most blasphemous creature in the neighbourhood for all he knew before he'd been able to leave with his purchase in tow.

Small towns had their own appeal, Nathan conceded. He could find the altruistic burst endearing, even if the gesture had likely been dictated by an underlying urge to assuage her conscience in case something did happen to the young stranger.

He hadn't needed the metal cross, certainly wasn't regretting its absence when he opened the creaking door of his accommodation wielding a veritable meat cleaver. Whether his manual dexterity would prove sufficient to put it to good use or not, Nathan firmly believed it would achieve better results than any religious token.

Waiting for him outside, the afternoon's chill breeze had turned into a cold, strong wind, and darkness coated the landscape like a thick blanket. Dark clouds loomed over the creaking roof of his minute mansion, announcing an incoming storm would soon trouble his wireless connection.

He contemplated the striking view, yearned to capture its details on something more durable than his own retinas, then his attention was drawn by the wooden floor, still adorned with scattered scraps of his previous meal.

Unexpected, Nathan thought. Natural elements should have cleansed the spoils already.

Eventually, his eyes tired of aimlessly scrutinising the shadows behind low shrubs and large trunks, and his arm grew weary of holding the heavy knife, not to mention his skin was beginning to crawl because of his state of partial undress.

Returning inside, Nathan decided to dismiss his doubts altogether. He might have been wrong, might have mistaken a waving branch for an intent gaze taking in his naked form. Then his look lowered to the spot reserved for his ragged bag.

Which was empty, disturbingly so.

His disapproving frown didn't begin to cover his unease at that.

*

According to Nathan's estimations, two days should have been a reasonable period of time to produce a fair share of exploitable material. Before the theft, Nathan had planned to

dismantle the set and prepare for departure in the late afternoon of the second day, perhaps the third if the weather persisted in its hindering.

The disappearance of his rucksack changed things.

His second-hand bag had been great company to him, perhaps even to the point that Nathan might claim an emotional attachment had been established over the years. It wasn't valuable in itself, not as its content had been, but Nathan was outright upset about the loss.

Curiously enough, his technological devices had been left untouched.

A saner person would have considered searching for a temporary replacement for his admittedly unremarkable bag, if not leaving the creepy place in a hurry. Instead, Nathan thought about the restricted group amidst his viewers that got particularly annoyed over his silent treatment, disregarding his strategic passivity and enigmatic responses.

They were the most generous when Nathan offered to perform private performances but also the most temperamental if not handled with care. Some could become petty.

It occurred to Nathan that, if his timid voyeur and alleged thief had been drawn to his pliant form in the warm light of a roaring fire and wanted to prolong his stay, an agreement could be reached.

Worth the hassle, Nathan decided.

The following morning, he was poised to deliver a memorable show.

Blindfolded, he positioned himself on hands and knees, legs parted before the wide window, ass inviting, tilted upwards. Lube within reach.

He started even slower than he normally would, just running his fingers on his bare flanks with the softest touch he was capable of, then pressed his palm to his thigh with intent, goosebumps already covering his skin. He arched his back and exposed his shoulders in a wanton display.

His chest received some attention as well, a real treat in which he seldom indulged. His paying spectators favoured the nether regions of his body, but in that moment, he felt whimsical and uninhibited, ready to resort to his entire repertoire to seduce a bystander of unknown tastes.

When a pleasant flush spread across his nape, Nathan wet his middle and index fingers with his tongue and proceeded to give himself a gentle, deliberate fingering. He circled around the pucker before inserting just the very tip of the first rough digit, then courted his own entrance to loosen it for the second. He resorted to lubricant when his saliva dried, then played with himself some more, as he would for a patient, appreciative lover.

He didn't resist long before enjoying a more thorough approach. Long-awaited anal stimulation felt like a little blessing after all the teasing. He felt different, less awkward. His hands were given complete freedom of motion, no restraints due to the location of his webcam.

When he deemed himself satisfied with his deed, he paid attention to his penis as well, took his time to fondle and stroke. He let the copious pre-come coating its length dribble on the carpet, replicating the mess his audience so often complimented, not worrying about angles and technicalities for a moment.

He was *enjoying* himself. The thought of a lone observer drinking in the sight of his pleasure with covetous eyes, behind his blindfold, kept Nathan going for a long while.

*

By the third day of indigo sky and rumbling thunder in the distance, a beautiful, bright sun greeted Nathan at dawn.

He was rested and sated, invigorated by business and pleasure, entirely spent in his languor. The quiet sounds of birds and rustling branches eased his lethargic awakening as he stirred in wrinkled sheets and thick comforters. Inspired, Nathan even picked up his camera and took a picture of the wooden ceiling above his head. He would have lingered further, even tried to fall back asleep, but his caffeine craving prevailed.

As Nathan walked down the corridor barefoot, he noticed with satisfaction a familiar bag was loosely leaning on the wall right beside the threshold. He smiled at the sight.

The rest of the day elapsed rather uneventfully. Nathan entertained his audience with his impressions on the whole experience, lamenting the unpleasant weather but altogether satisfied with his isolated cabin in the middle of a dangerous, disreputable forest. Then he expressed his gratitude towards the funders of his journey with one last performance, including the brand-new vibrating dildo to further lift their spirits.

Business matters settled, Nathan moved to packing and cleansing, methodically wrapping every lens with steady hands and rearranging the furniture to its initial disposition. By the evening, the cabin looked like Nathan had never crossed through the front door, just *cleaner*.

He almost regretted not having more time to spend in the secluded hut; the love-at-first-sight had yet to wane. Before leaving, he sought the letter that had welcomed him at his arrival and decided to add some lines to the cryptic sentence in the middle of it.

Given his limited time, his addition was rather simple.

May yours be sated until my return.

He put it back where he'd found it, under the mat with the key, and hoped that his performance had been payment enough for his short stay.