

---

Senior Projects Spring 2024

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

---

Spring 2024

## The Journal of Dr. Harold McCourt

Simon W. S. Horan  
*Bard College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2024](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2024)

 Part of the Fiction Commons



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

---

### Recommended Citation

Horan, Simon W. S., "The Journal of Dr. Harold McCourt" (2024). *Senior Projects Spring 2024*. 130.  
[https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2024/130](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2024/130)

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2024 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@bard.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@bard.edu).

The Journal of Dr. Harold McCourt

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
Of Bard College

By  
Simon Horan

Annandale-on-Hudson

May 2024

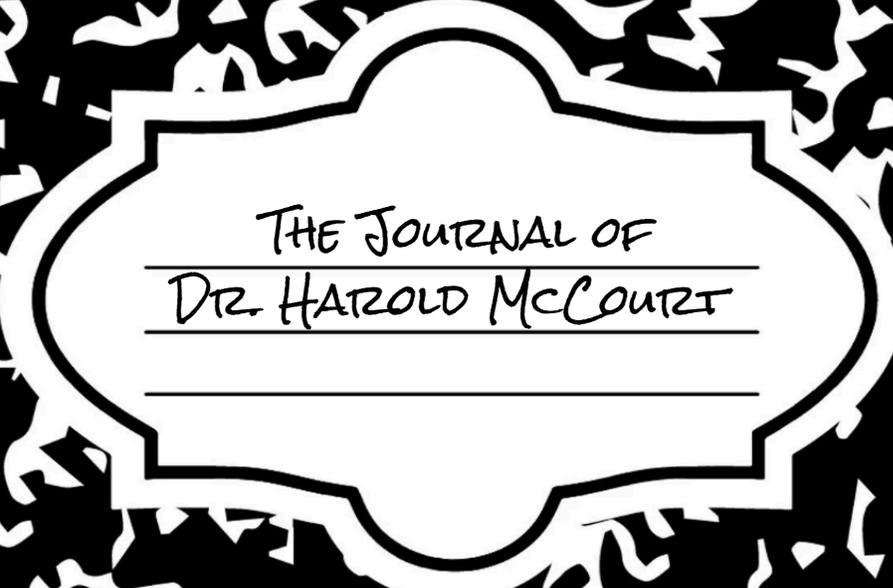
*To the Bard College Senior Project overseeing committee, whose content requirements*

*are ruining the presentation of my project.*

*Do yourself a favor; start on page 4.*

Table of Contents

The Journal of Dr. Harold McCourt



THE JOURNAL OF  
DR. HAROLD McCOURT

January 4, 2023

This will be the beginning of my writing about the book I found on my walk this morning. I've never kept a journal before, mostly because I've never really felt a need to. Everyone says that it's very useful for keeping your thoughts straight and can help with things like anxiety and the like, but to be completely honest, even when I've struggled with things like that, I've felt confident enough in my ability to overpower them to not want to try journaling. Not that I've deliberately been avoiding journaling or anything; just that it never felt necessary. But today I found proper cause to actually try it out. In the interest of being thorough, I'll write out the full experience. Oh, and in case this ends up being interesting enough for me to publish it: my name is Harold McCourt, and I work as an associate anthropology professor at Atlinds University.

While I was walking Checkers this morning, I heard a strange sound. I'm not really sure how to describe it. It was like bubble wrap being wrapped around a high-speed drill, and then sucked into a vacuum cleaner. A simultaneous popping, whirring, and sucking sound, coming from somewhere above me. Naturally, I looked around to see what it was, and when I looked up, there was a yellow light. Now, seeing yellow light in the sky is obviously not unusual, given that the sun tends to hang out up there, but this yellow light was much closer and brighter, and it also wasn't circular. It was more like a narrow rhombus. It was too bright to look at, so I averted my eyes, and shortly afterwards I heard a dull thud, like something hitting the ground. The light faded, and I looked again to see that the bright rhombus had vanished. On the ground a few feet ahead of me, presumably directly underneath where the light had been, was a book, lying on its side with some of the pages crumpled. Next to the book was a light blue pen of a brand I didn't recognize, without a cap.

I quickly went to pick it up. It's not every day that a book falls from the sky, after all. Looking at the cover, I saw that it appeared to be a fantasy romance novel. It was titled *Hearts Unbound*, by someone named Saldanji Arhic. The cover art was in a watercolor style and featured two people, a man and a woman, standing in a forest, clutching at each other passionately. The woman is caucasian, and the man is semi-transparent, so given that this is fantasy romance, I'm going to assume that he's a ghost of some sort. There was a cottage in the background, presumably the location the story takes place in, although it was partially obscured by the large sticker declaring that the book was a bestseller. This I doubt very much.

Now, I want to mention that I don't normally read romance novels. I don't really read many novels at all, actually. My work generally has me reading historical or political texts, and if I'm reading something fictional, it was usually published over 300 years ago. But given that this book had just fallen from the sky and landed in front of me, I obviously decided to bring it home with me, and as I continued my walk, I realized that this was a perfect opportunity to try something new. The upcoming months were shaping up to be pretty dry for me anyway. I could read a genre I had no experience with, just for fun, and I could even write about it, do some literary analysis on this strange rural fantasy ghost romance. And besides, everyone had always told me I should try journaling; what better chance to do it than right now? And so, when I got back to my house, I pulled an old notebook that I'd never used out of a drawer and started writing this record.

Currently the book is sitting on my bedside table, waiting to be read. I'm not sure when I'll start it; I do still have some real work I need to finish first. But I do want to put down my thoughts on the circumstances of its discovery. Why would a book fall out of the sky? Checkers and I were walking by the park when it happened, where there are no buildings around, so it

couldn't have been thrown out of a window, and there weren't any planes going overhead, either. Besides, it was in far too good condition to have been dropped from a great height. The flash of yellow light and the strange sound I heard make me think that perhaps it was tied to or being carried by a drone, and some malfunction made it drop it? Drones don't usually emit bright yellow light, but I don't see why they couldn't. The drone may have had lights on it, or maybe it was just made of a very reflective material. But the book had no wrapping or packaging on it, so it doesn't seem like it was being delivered... unless someone was just sending it to a friend of theirs. I also can't discount the possibility that the light and sound had nothing to do with the book, or that I simply imagined one or both of them. It's possible that something in the park made the noise, and I just thought that it was above me, and when I quickly looked up, the sunlight appeared to be something unusual, causing me to look away, and at that moment the book was dropped onto the ground for entirely other reasons, such as being thrown from somewhere nearby. All of these are possibilities, and I can't really make any concrete conclusion until I have more information. I'll keep an eye out for any signs that someone has lost their book, and might start reading it in the meantime. More later.

January 7, 2023

It turns out that *Hearts Unbound* is more mysterious than I expected it to be. I haven't yet found the time to start reading it, but I did examine the book a bit more. It was published by Closegreen Publishing Co., which I've never heard of before. The back of the book sadly didn't have a summary, but it did have several quotes from book reviewers, all of which are very positive, and said things like "Yet another excellent romance by Saldanji Arhic" and "Arhic does it again." Speaking of positive reviews, the sticker on the front proclaims that the book was #1

on the Ellsdale Chronicle bestsellers list. Unfortunately, being a #1 bestseller in some random newspaper obviously doesn't mean much, and neither do the reviews, but it is worth noting.

But this is where my interest in the book began to take a significant uptick, because when I searched for it online, I found absolutely nothing. I searched the title, the author, the publisher, the reviewers, and the Ellsdale Chronicle, and all of my searches turned up completely blank. I tried in different languages, I tried adding various other countries to my searches, I tried multiple different search engines, but didn't get a single result. Not a single person or group involved in the creation of, selling of, or even response to this book seems to exist at all. It's like the book just popped into existence from nothing, just to land in front of me on my walk.

I looked at the pages inside for more information, and found that the book did indeed have a full set of legal information on the inside. But this information was only more confusing. The book was apparently published in 2891, in a place called Trembeluk, Adjirut, ZIP code 914362. I don't think I need to tell you that none of that makes realistic sense. I thought for a moment that 'Adjirut' may be some archaic place name, possibly related to Beirut, but it's not, and I found nothing about the word online. Besides, the ZIP code is entirely wrong, and if the date is to be believed, we're nearly nine centuries away from the book being published. Strangely enough, the book does have an ISBN number (253-0-4-963-1-23482), but when I looked it up, it too was a total blank. Not to mention that it's too many digits to be a real ISBN number.

But then, just when I was starting to get really frustrated, I noticed something. On the inside of the front cover there was a note. It said: "Dear Savanna, happy birthday! This book has been really popular recently, and it seemed right up your alley. Should be a good read over your winter break. Much love, Aunt Dessie." And under it, in different handwriting and in yellow ink,

were the words “Property of Savanna Cowle.” This was an incredible thing to find. A very normal-sounding name, and written by a real person! And apparently the book did, in fact, sell well, although among what audience I don’t know. I might now be able to track down the book’s owner and return it, and also take the opportunity to ask them a few things about it.

I want to take notes on as much as possible, for posterity, so before I forget, here are the names of the people who supposedly reviewed the book. Arienna Miquoszcz, Leffory Jalhun, Weldon Hastrein, and Nic Veriem. These sound almost like real names, which makes me think that whoever made them up must not be terribly creative. They probably just took the names of some of their friends and mixed the letters around. Oh, well, it’s probably not very important.

To be completely honest, I’m starting to doubt that this is much of a “mystery.” It seems most likely that this book is just someone’s (presumably Savanna Cowle) personal writing project that they were sending to a friend of theirs. Personally, if I was doing that, I would have delivered it through the mail, or just emailed them a manuscript, but everyone does things their own way. Maybe this person just really likes drones. It would certainly be faster than the traditional mail. And given the obvious effort they went through to have it officially bound like this, as though it were already published, I can see why they wouldn’t want to just send a manuscript. Perhaps I won’t read it, then. It’s clearly not intended for me, and it would be rude of me to intrude on their work like this. I’ll track down Savanna Cowle and return it to them as soon as I can. It’s a shame that this journal project might end after only two entries, but maybe I’ll find something else to write about.

January 08, 2023

I've had a busy day, but also a disappointing one. To make a long story short, it turns out that there isn't anybody who lives nearby named Savanna Cowle. I started with a simple search online, which turned up nothing helpful. People named Savanna Cowle do exist, of course, but none of them live in my town or in any of the nearby neighborhoods. After that, I went to the library to find a copy of the local white pages. There, I did find one other person with the last name Cowle, a man named Joshua Cowle, but when I called him, he told me that he doesn't have anyone in his family named Savanna. After that, I tried the post office, but the workers there – very sensibly, I think – told me that they weren't going to just find someone's address for me. I suppose it's just as well. If they weren't in the white pages, they probably aren't receiving a lot of mail, either.

Next, I went to the motel in town and asked them if there was anybody staying there named Savanna Cowle, or if someone by that name had stayed there recently. To avoid appearing suspicious, I also told them that I was trying to return something that was the property of that person. But the motel workers said no, there hadn't been anyone named Savanna Cowle at their business. Considering my options, I went to the town hall and asked the secretary if there was a register of people who'd recently moved to this town. My thinking was that they may have just recently moved here, and therefore would not have been properly added to the town records. There was indeed a list of recent additions to the town, but when I checked it over, there wasn't anybody in the last two years named Savanna Cowle. So that wasn't any help either.

However, I'm not willing to call this a dead end just yet. The secretary told me that I should talk to a lady named Lucille Hastings. She's a senior citizen who spends a lot of time at the community center, and if the secretary is to be believed, is the finest source of gossip in the

county. Apparently she has an eidetic memory when it comes to faces and people, and from where she likes to sit on the porch of the community center, nobody can enter the town without her knowing about it. I would have called her today, but by that point it was already getting dark, and it seemed rude of me to track down and question an old lady on a Sunday evening. Besides, it's not as though the book is going anywhere. If Savanna Cowle has been in town recently, I can find someone who knows her and get the required information to return the book to her.

But this situation is beginning to get very strange. If Savanna Cowle isn't a resident, why was her book being carried around by a drone? It couldn't have been being delivered to her; it has her name on it already, and it wasn't in any packaging, so it seems most likely to me that she was sending it to someone else. I suppose that other person could have been returning it to her, but again, she's not a resident; if she wasn't staying in the motel, she would have most likely been staying with someone, and if that's the case, why would she be transporting books around via drone? There are, of course, potential explanations, but the more I think about them the more I feel that I'm grasping at straws. But let's not get ahead of ourselves here. I'll speak to Lucille Hastings tomorrow and ask her if she knows anybody by that name. If that fails, then I guess Savanna Cowle won't be getting her book back any time soon. I'd like to avoid that if I can; it was a birthday gift, after all.

January 9, 2023

Not a whole lot to report on today, except that I still haven't learned anything. I went to the community center and found Lucille Hastings, who was very nice. Just as the secretary at city hall had said, she was on the porch, and I have to say that his assessment of her was completely correct. I've never spoken to her before in my life, but she already knew who I was and why I

was going to see her. I've lived in this town for a few years now, and news does not travel that fast around here, so her network for gossip must truly be second to none.

Mrs. Hastings got right down to business when I arrived. She told me immediately that she'd never heard of or seen anybody in this town named Savanna Cowle, and as far as she was aware (which I assume to be quite far indeed), nobody else in town knew someone of that name either. She was extremely interested in my situation, as a matter of fact; apparently it was very, very rare for something to happen in this town without her knowing everyone involved, and she wanted to help me as much as possible, both for my sake and for her own curiosity. Her diligence impressed even me; when I told her I'd found Joshua Cowle and that he didn't have anyone in his family named Savanna, Mrs. Hastings revealed that she'd already called Joshua's mother ("Joshie doesn't keep track of his extended family much, dear, but Bernice wouldn't miss a birthday if Hell froze over!"), who she's known for a long time, and asked if she knew anyone in their family by the name of Savanna. The answer, unsurprisingly, was no.

I thought it best to tell her everything I knew so far about the book. Mrs. Hastings said that, while she has no interest in romance novels, she's certainly interested in cracking this case and seeing the book returned. She then suggested the very thing I was thinking of doing myself: reading the book. As she put it, "you might learn a thing or two about what sort of person enjoys a story like this." I don't know how far I'll read; if at any point I can piece together a way to contact Savanna, I'll do that as soon as I can. But, who knows? If the book is good, I just may finish it. I've no experience with the genre.

It's getting dark outside already. I have a dinner I'm going to this evening, and I should probably start getting ready now. No time to start reading the book tonight. I'll be back with another entry in a day or two. The plot is thickening!

January 11, 2023

It's just occurred to me, as I sit down to write this, that I haven't yet recorded the description on the back of the book. I was quite glad to see it, actually; increasingly often, in modern times, the summary on the back has been foregone in favor of reviews. *Hearts Unbound*, though, has both. The description on the back of the book goes as follows:

“Vivi LeJean hates living under someone else’s rules. But when your parents are wealthy, high-class, and obsessed with status, you can only be rebellious for so long, and now they’re forcing her to live in their old cottage on the outskirts of some small country town, under the ever-vigilant eye of their indomitable butler. This would be bad enough, but the thing nobody told her about was her surprise roommate: a pompous, uptight ghost named Frederick whose personality clashes with hers like oil and water! Between the condescension of her father, the strict boundaries enforced by the butler, and the constant butting of heads with Frederick, it seems as though Vivi will never be able to cut loose like she wants to ever again. But if she can find a way to relax a little bit, maybe she’ll discover that life here isn’t so bad after all.”

This may just be my inexperience with the genre coming through again, but this doesn't read to me like a romance novel. Granted, it's obvious that Vivi – our main character, presumably – will form some kind of relationship with Frederick, and that's probably going to be the focus of the plot, but the cover of the book suggested that this would be rather steamy.

They're holding each other with absolutely burning passion. The description, though, makes little mention of their eventual romance, beyond alluding to it in the last line. If I only had access to the description, I'd probably think this was a YA novel, although I admit that I don't have much experience with that genre, either, having not read one of them in over 20 years.

Anyway, I still have not actually started the book. I got a sudden call yesterday morning from Dr. Gloria Leicester, a colleague and close friend of mine who is the head of the Classics board at the university. Apparently, a few shelves had been knocked over in the library, and as all the other professors in the department weren't back from their vacations yet, she needed my help putting everything back in order. Now, Gloria is a rather clumsy person, and while she didn't say how the shelves had been knocked over, I had a sneaking suspicion that it had somehow been due to an accident on her part. But that was no reason not to help out; regardless of how it happened, the library needed mending, and I knew for a fact that all of the other professors in the department were still on vacation. Besides, I live in the next town over; it's not a long way for me at all. So I went over as soon as I was able to help her put everything back together. Privately, I think it's a good thing that I did that; Gloria is a brilliant historian and Classicist, but she's disorganized to the extreme. If she happened to misplace any of the material, we might never find it again; it could turn up in Istanbul for all we know.

Restoring the library took the better part of the afternoon, and it wasn't interesting enough to write about in this journal. When we broke for lunch, though, I filled in Gloria on my recent finding of this strange book, and my efforts to discover its owner. Sadly, I didn't bring it with me, so I couldn't show it to her in person, but I described it to her the best I could, and told her everything I'd managed to learn so far. I told her that, by my best reckoning, the book was a very detailed personal project, made to look as complete as possible, albeit with fake names and

dates filled in, and it was being delivered via drone to someone in the area when the drone broke somehow and dropped the book.

Gloria seemed skeptical that it had been dropped by a drone; if it was, she said, I probably would have heard it coming, instead of hearing it as suddenly as I did, not to mention seeing it; it didn't sound as if the book was dropped from particularly high up. But, I asked, what else could it have been? What other object could make a whirring noise, emit light, and then drop a book? She said she didn't know, but it's still possible it could have been something else. I didn't actually *see* the drone, after all. I suppose she has a point, but it still seems most likely to me that it was just a drone. We spoke for a little while longer on the subject, but were unable to come up with any more likely or realistic theories.

She then made a very obvious suggestion: why not put up some posters around the area announcing that I'd found this book, and to contact me if it was yours? That would be the best way to both get the mystery solved and the book back to its owner. Quite honestly, I don't know why I didn't think of that before. As soon as I got back to my house, I did just that. I've included my contact information on the posters, so hopefully I'll get a call about it soon. I plan to start actually reading the book in the meantime, though. If I get the call before I've finished it, then I'll just have to live with the book going unfinished. My next journal entry will be about the first couple of chapters.

January 13, 2023

I have now read the first chapter of *Hearts Unbound*, and I come back to my journal with questions. I know I previously said I would read multiple chapters and give me thoughts on all of them, but the book got strange immediately. I'll give a plot summary of what I read, and raise my

questions at the end.

Chapter 1 opened with three people, named Mr. LeJean, Mrs. LeJean, and “Grandma.” These, we learn, are our main character’s parents and her grandmother. They talk about how Vivionna (it’s never good when a parent uses your full name) has been living “unwisely,” getting into trouble and behaving badly. They talk about her as though she’s a small child, even though she’s been living on her own for several years and is presumably an adult.

Mrs. LeJean says Vivi has “gone astray” and that she needs to re-discover “her place in the world,” which is a somewhat concerning thing for a parent to say about their own child, although much of her dialogue is similarly high-minded and pretentious, so maybe that’s just the way she talks. She’s upset about the whole thing with her daughter, but is trying to maintain composure.

Mr. LeJean speaks much more plainly, saying that Vivi isn’t mature enough to live freely and that her actions have put her in danger. He’s moving her to the cottage for her own good, he says, although he also speaks about how she’s presenting a bad image of their family, so he may be more concerned with status than her health.

Grandma says rather little, but when she does speak, she says that she thinks Mr. and Mrs. LeJean are being too harsh on Vivi. Despite this, she raises very little resistance to their plans, so I suppose she’s not a very active player in this story. The chapter wraps up with Mr. LeJean saying he’s sent someone named Portjus to live with Vivi, and that seems to make the others happy. Portjus, I assume, is a servant or butler of theirs. I did notice something odd about their talk of him, but I’ll get into that later too.

All of this seems just fine on the surface. Some overbearing, overprotective parents trying to control the life of their adult daughter. It’s clear that their family is very rich and high-status,

but apart from telling us that Mr. LeJean is the latest in a line of factory owners, we don't learn anything else about how they live. But there were one or two things that gave me significant pause about this chapter.

Firstly, Mrs. LeJean can do magic. Now, it was obvious to me that this was a fantasy romance novel, given the ghost on the cover, so I suppose I should have expected magic to be a plot element, but it was introduced in a way that I can only describe as boring. Mrs. LeJean is drinking tea as they talk, and the book says that "although she looked outwardly very calm and composed, it was clear that the whole affair had her stressed; she kept nervously changing the colors of the teacup in her hand." At first, I thought she was just picking up different teacups, but later on, it also says, "This news seemed to calm down Mrs. LeJean greatly. The teacup flashed from a bright orange to a pale, pastel blue, and stayed that way." I can only read this as her magically altering the color of the cup.

The way this is written is very, very strange. It's given no fanfare or even any significance at all, and none of the other characters seem to react in any special way. It's also not implied that this is part of anyone's imagination. It really seems as though I was expected to know that magic would be a common element here. And that's partially fair; again, it's a fantasy novel. But even a fantasy novel needs to properly introduce new elements to the reader. So either this is just the author's idea of a proper introduction (which I would disagree with), or there was some prior context I missed.

Second, the people in this scene have some strange physical features. Mr. LeJean is described as having two pupils in each of his eyes, and Mrs. LeJean is described as having long earlobes that nearly reach her shoulders. Similarly to the teacup, no special attention or importance is given to these features. But this is not as big a deal to me as the magic with the

teacup. People can look weird in a fantasy novel. I do wonder if this will be plot relevant later, though. Perhaps not judging people by their looks is a theme in this book.

Third, they seem to view this Portjus character as someone slightly... lesser than them. Mr. LeJean says he has confidence in Portjus's ability to watch over Vivi, and Mrs. LeJean is comforted to hear that he'll be there as well. In fact, I can't say they have anything bad to say about the man. But there's some strange air about their conversation about him, like he's not quite human, and when that kind of talk is about a character who serves under another, it makes me wary. I'm not sure if this book is going to get racially charged, or if there's some kind of controversy in the world of the story about servitude, but for now I suppose I only have to wait and see. My prediction is that Portjus is a goblin or something, a member of some fantasy race that is not human, and that there will be difficulties later on in the story because of it.

Finally, I must talk about the writings in the book. Savanna Cowle, it appears, is a very particular kind of reader. The pages inside are absolutely covered with handwritten notes, and I can only assume they were left there by her. Underlines, little faces and reactions, notes in the margins... hardly a paragraph goes by without her having something to say. She uses a bright yellow pen, so it all jumps out at you rather distractingly. I can't say she's a bad reader, as she took as important many of the things that I did, but I also can't say I like reading a book that someone else has scribbled in.

You know, it did occur to me that Savanna Cowle may not be a real person. It's possible that the author simply invented her, and is using her as a fake reader of sorts. Her writings may be part of the story, to make it feel as though the book was owned by someone else before you read it. But I'm not really confident in this theory. Romance novels, to my knowledge, don't typically do that, and there's no indication that this book is going to get meta in such a way as to

make this work. I'll have to keep an eye out for anything that proves or disproves this theory.

I'm out of time to write – or read, for that matter – today. I've got a call in a little while, and Checkers has been absolutely begging for a walk. But if the strangeness of the first chapter proves consistent, this journal will be a lot longer than two or three entries. More later.

### January 14, 2023

I've read the next two chapters of the novel, and it has gotten no less strange... but at the same time, it hasn't really gotten *more* strange, either. I will elaborate, but first, the plot summary. And in the interest of saving paper space (my last entry stretched over 2 pages! I got this notebook in the university book store – it doesn't have that kind of space in it.), I will only cover the essentials.

Chapter 2 begins with shifting focus to Vivionna, our main character, who is mostly called Vivi by the narrator and other characters. She's arriving at the cottage as described in chapter 1, but before all of that we get an abridged account of her past leading up to this point. She says that she ran away from college seven years ago to "escape the tyranny of her parents," and she's been living on her own ever since. She lived in a crummy apartment with her boyfriend, Agus, who she says was "basically scum," and spent all day doing basically nothing. It all ended about a month ago when she and her boyfriend got arrested for possession (although of what is not clear), and her parents bailed her out and took control over her life again.

She arrives at the cottage with Portjus, who is indeed her butler, and is also an automaton of some kind. I find him *extremely* interesting, but I'll get into it later. The cottage is very nice, having a large lawn with a flower garden out front and a nice brick chimney on top of a quaint tiled roof. But Vivi doesn't want to live at the cottage, and she makes it clear that she's planning

on running away as soon as possible. Despite this, though, she takes some time to explore the cottage and look around at its interior. We learn a couple other things about her and the cottage, such as the fact that her grandmother lived here when she was young, and that many of the objects within the house are apparently powered by magic – although not all. That is also a subject of interest to me, but we'll finish the summary first. In general, the cottage is much more cottage-y on the outside than on the inside; it's fully furnished and has all sorts of modern amenities, including a large TV.

Vivi finds her room, the kitchen, the living room, the bathroom, and eventually goes upstairs, where she finds another bedroom, another bathroom, a pull-down trapdoor that leads to the attic, and finally another room that's empty for some reason. While she's in this room, wondering why it's empty, she hears a noise behind her, and turns to see a ghost standing in the doorway, looking irritated. The chapter ends here.

Chapter 3 consists almost entirely of an extended conversation (or, more accurately, argument) between Vivi and this ghost. Vivi is surprised to see him here, not because he's a ghost, but because she wasn't aware she'd have company in the house. Personally, I would be surprised by both of those things, but if you live in a magical world, perhaps ghosts aren't so unusual. We learn that his name is Frederick, and that he was not told that he'd be receiving visitors. Vivi introduces herself and says that she didn't know that this house was haunted. Frederick takes exception to his, saying that he's not haunting the house, because the house belongs to him. Vivi responds that the land belongs to her family, so he's still not supposed to be here. And from there, the argument begins.

It's very strange. Frederick is obviously the ghost on the cover, so we can infer that he and Vivi are going to be falling in love by the end of the story. But their first interaction is so

hostile and snippy that I struggle to see how they can even be expected to live together. They take turns attacking each others' appearances, personalities, and what they can infer about their backgrounds and characteristics, and through all of this we learn more about Frederick and Vivi and what makes them tick. Frederick seems to care a lot about his house, and he's very upset that Vivi has no respect for it. He complains about the renovations that her family did on it, how they replaced the doors and the windows, and all kinds of other minor changes. I'll leave most of the details out, and bring up the relevant ones later.

The argument ends when Portjus comes into the room to tell Vivi he's finished unpacking the car. He greets Frederick, calling him "Master Frederick," which is very interesting, and Frederick looks shocked and immediately leaves the room, which is *also* very interesting. Vivi asks Portjus what that was all about, but Portjus says that he's not allowed to tell that story, and asks Vivi if she'd like some lunch. The chapter ends here, as did my reading for the day.

I also feel that it's pertinent to mention that Savanna Cowle's notes continue throughout these chapters. I flipped ahead a little bit to see if they'll be present the whole time, and that does appear to be the case. I don't understand why people can't just use post-it notes or scrap paper, instead of defacing a book like this, but whatever. It's her property, she can do what she wants with it. Most of her comments add very little, although some of them are interesting.

Now, a lot happens in these two chapters that has me scratching my head. First, the small stuff, or the things that only relate to previous questions from chapter 1. Vivi also has physical abnormalities, similarly to her parents; in fact, she inherited her mother's long ears and her father's doubled pupils. Just like the previous chapter, though, very little attention is paid to these. And in case you were wondering, yes, Vivi does appear to have these features in the art on the cover. I actually hadn't noticed them before. I still don't have a good answer as to *why* people

in her family look like this, but given that it does appear to be a genetic thing, I assume it's going to be a plot point later in the book, and I'm willing to let this point stand for now.

There's more use of magic, although it's different here. Instead of a person using magic, it's that several of the items and appliances in the cottage are powered by magic. I'm not sure how many exactly, but at least one lamp in the living room, the washing machine (but not the dryer), the upstairs toilet, and something in the kitchen called a "quickbox" are magical. No, the book does not tell us what a "quickbox" is, nor does it tell us by what manner magic powers all of these objects, although I can forgive that second thing; it's magic, it can do whatever it needs to do. But here is something very interesting: not all of the objects in the house are powered by magic. The oven is a gas oven, the downstairs toilet and shower use regular plumbing, the other lamp in the living room is electric, and so on. And this is something the book wants us to pay attention to: Vivi specifically makes mention of the fact that her father likes having a variety of power sources for appliances, the logic being that they can't all stop working at once if one power source is lost. Savanna Cowle finds this interesting too; for some reason, it's strange to her that people as rich as them would have a gas stove, and she finds the explanation as to why they have that weird, although she concedes that it does make sense. I'm not sure if I agree with that, but then again, I don't use magic to power my bathroom.

The last of the minor things I'd like to comment on is how strange Vivi and Frederick's interaction is. Based on the cover, he's clearly the guy she's going to fall in love with, but their first conversation is very hostile and snippy. I have trouble believing they can even live together peacefully. But I suppose this is a relationship that will grow and change as they get to know each other. Now, on to the big things, the major items of interest.

As I mentioned before, Portjus is an automaton. He is referred to as a "construct," so I'll

call him that. He's made of brass and wood, painted to look like a butler wearing a tuxedo. Another detail about him is that Vivi refers to him as being a "bestowed" construct at one point. But the other detail about Portjus, the one that I find most interesting, is that the book does not explain *anything* about any of these facts, nor does it seem to care if the reader is confused about it. He walks, talks, has a personality and emotions, and in all other ways seems to be an ordinary character in the book. Vivi doesn't seem to see anything remarkable about him being a mannequin who is alive, and if Fred thought that it was strange, he didn't stick around long enough to say it. In fact, I would say that the book seems to expect me to already know what a "bestowed construct" is and how it operates. The closest we get to solid information about constructs at all is the information that Portjus was built by Vivi's grandmother many years ago. Although Portjus does not tell Vivi how he knows Fred, he does say that her grandmother began building him shortly before she left the cottage. Absolutely nothing else about him is clarified or explained, and I am left baffled.

Savanna, though, was not baffled. In fact, she was barely more interested than Vivi was. She seemed to have enough context to fully grasp Portjus's existence and all she had to say on the matter was commenting that her family must be *really* rich if they have a bestowed construct. So, clearly it's not unreasonable for the author to expect the reader to have context for this character. But I do not have this context, and there is little I can do but repeat my bewilderment at this time. All I can really do is hope that his nature is explained later on in the book, because unlike Savanna Cowle, living wooden men are not something I can just accept without issue.

There was one last thing that caught my eye. A small line, almost a throwaway line, during Fred and Vivi's argument, but it confuses me to no end. Fred says, "My father built this house with his own hands – and he did it *just* as well as *you* could've, little miss rich girl." It was

previously established that Fred loves the cottage very much, and takes issue with Vivi refusing to appreciate it. Vivi reacts negatively to this comment, but she does so in a way that confuses me. When I read this line, I took it as a class-based jab at Vivi's rich upbringing and how she doesn't understand hard work. It's not a great insult, of course, but that's not really an issue. Earlier in their argument it was established that Fred knew about Vivi's family owning the property, and he resents them and their wealth. Him insulting Vivi based on this fact makes sense to me. However, Vivi responds as though this comment were sexist in nature, and this I do not understand. What exactly is the sexist implication here? It seems like he's suggesting that women think men can't build houses well? What on earth kind of idea is that? And why would you use it as an insult? This really just feels like a poorly-written line, but who knows? Given how this book seems to love introducing concepts without giving context, maybe there's some sexist idea in the book's world about men being worse architects than women, and Fred decided to defend himself pre-emptively against Vivi's inevitable assault on the cottage's construction. That would be almost less strange than Vivi's ear lobes.

There are a few more minor things I could comment on in these chapters, but despite my desire to keep my thoughts concise, this entry has already stretched on for nearly four pages, so I'll save that for later. I have to say, though, that as much as I'm confused by the content of this book, I can't say it's been bad. Except for one or two dud lines, for the most part it's been engaging and entertaining, and I'm interested to see how Vivi's life continues.

January 18, 2023

I believe I underestimated the emotional weight of writing a journal. As I sat down to begin today's entry, I almost felt compelled to start with an apology for being away for so many

days, as though I was writing this for an adoring audience who were reading my thoughts live as I finish them. Illogical, of course, as the journal has no brain with which to be disappointed in me, and if anyone other than me were to read my journal, they would not have to wait four days between reading the last entry and this one.

In case my hypothetical future reader is curious, my absence was because I was traveling. My nephew's birthday was on the 16th, and it also happened that he was performing in his high school's theater production, which was happening on the same day, so I thought I might do something special for him and flew out to see him and my sister. It was something of a last-minute decision, truth be told, as I only learned about the play on the day before it happened, but I can't say my schedule suffered much for it. I spent the night at their house and flew back yesterday afternoon. The play was *Alice in Wonderland*, if you were wondering, and he played the King of Hearts. A small role, sure, but I thought he did quite a good job.

Anyway, I do have reading to report on, although chapters 4 and 5 contained altogether less to comment on than chapters 2 and 3 did. Chapter 4 is about how life at the cottage is getting on. Vivi and Frederick continue to butt heads over most things, although I must say that they don't seem to be clashing quite as heavily as their first argument had me expect. They certainly don't get along very well yet, don't be fooled, but it seems more like they merely annoy each other.

Frederick spends a lot of time doing manual labor about the house, such as chopping firewood and cleaning. I don't know *why* he's doing this, being that he's a ghost, but perhaps he just likes to stay busy. Vivi does not help, and in fact she often gets in the way, although I suspect it's unintentional part of the time. The book also has this weird obsession with Frederick's arms. Several times, and not just in this chapter, the description narrows in on how strong and muscular

his arms are. And it's not just when Vivi is looking at him, too; even when Vivi isn't there, the narration will talk about his arms. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with the story, either. Savanna Cowle noticed this, too, and had a similar reaction to mine. I think Saldanji Arhic just likes muscular men's arms. Well, this is a romance novel; I would be surprised if we *didn't* get any sensual bodily descriptions.

Vivi also attempts to run away from the cottage multiple times. She uses multiple different paths, goes at different times of day, and in general does her best, but she always gets caught by Portjus before she makes it very far, and he brings her back to the cottage. Vivi accuses Frederick of tipping Portjus off, but he seems to become strangely deaf whenever the butler's name is brought up. Eventually Vivi decides she needs a better plan if she's actually going to get away, and she stops making frequent escape attempts.

In chapter 5, Vivi learns that there is a town just about a mile from the cottage, and she goes there while Portjus is out shopping for groceries. She's disappointed by the town, though, because it's extremely normal. The people are content, there's nothing dramatic or exciting going on, neither great wealth nor great poverty... just a regular semi-rural town. She is further disappointed by the fact that the bar doesn't open until 4 PM, so she can't even day-drink. She resigns herself to sitting in the town square and being bored, which is apparently better than being bored at the cottage.

But then she is approached by one of the locals, a man named Redford who's about her age. He's friendly and easy to get along with, if perhaps a bit dim, and they quickly fall into conversation. Vivi resists getting too friendly with him, as she doesn't plan on sticking around for very long, and she even tells him as much, asking him if he has any advice about how she might run away, such as if there are any secret paths and whatnot. Redford then falls into some

kind of trance, which lasts for a few seconds, and when he wakes up from it, all he has to say is that Vivi should not run away during the winter. Vivi pays little mind to this, however.

When Vivi returns to the cottage, Portjus wants to know where she was, and he reminds her not to go too far. Frederick makes fun of her for not knowing there was a town nearby, and Vivi tells him about the nice man she met. This, I suppose, was an attempt to make Frederick jealous, although I don't really know why she would do that at this point. They don't seem to like each other yet, even secretly.

These chapters didn't introduce many new ideas, so that trend may be slowing down, but there are still a couple things that caught my eye. On the continuing subject of strange bodies, there is new information. First, Frederick at one point makes fun of Vivi's doubled pupils. This insult was very casual, almost as though he was making fun of her for wearing glasses, and Vivi reacts similarly. At this point, I should expect this kind of thing, but it was still a little confusing. I had previously thought that Vivi's appearance was going to become a major plot point, but this scene seemed to suggest that it's actually of very little importance. But that seemed strange to me, too; why would Saldanji Arhic create a main character with such marked physical differences and not have those differences be relevant to the plot? Wouldn't it be a metaphor for how people are viewed differently from how they actually are, or something of that nature?

However, the next chapter drove that question away with the introduction of Redford. I didn't mention it earlier, but he too has significant abnormalities in his appearance. The description of him stated that he had "many small, blackberry-like bumps all over his wrists and ankles." Now, in any other book, this would be a symptom of some grave medical condition, but the narration pays little mind to these growths, as does Vivi, and they don't come up in their conversation. Redford also compliments Vivi on her earrings, saying they fit her ears nicely, but

her ears are also not brought up again.

I don't know what to make of peoples' appearances. We now have a character from outside of Vivi's family with strange body parts, and he is treated exactly as normally as Vivi is. Am I to assume that people having aberrant bodies is normal here? Or is there some kind of deeper, hitherto unrevealed plot reason for physical mutations that the book will get into later? To be honest, the first option seems most likely. The presence of magic has been well established in this book so far, too, so maybe at this point the blame is on me for having such realistic expectations for this book's contents.

Speaking of magic, there are two instances of it within these chapters that intrigue me. First, Portjus has the ability to sense Vivi's location if she strays too far from the cottage. This much is obvious, and makes perfect sense with the information we've been given so far. I'm not confused about that. What is strange, though, is that Vivi doesn't seem to know. I would have thought that this was some kind of quirk of the trick Portjus employs to find her location, but Savanna Cowle (who has continued to draw all over the book) found it strange as well. I still can't say I approve of Savanna's marking up of the pages, but she has proven to be a somewhat useful yardstick for gauging if I'm missing context. Most of the time she hasn't been confused in places where I am, but every now and then she'll raise a question that I myself have, and that is what's happened here. Why does Vivi not know that Portjus can track her? I can only assume the book will clarify later, but I'm starting to get the feeling that this book will not be consistent in what it explains.

The other instance of magic that was interesting was Redford's trance. I believe I understand well enough what's supposed to have happened here: Vivi asked him a question, and he had some kind of vision that informed him that, if Vivi were to run away during the winter, it

would go very poorly. He relayed this information to Vivi, but Vivi didn't seem to put much store in his advice, nor does she react much to his entering a trance. Given the presence of magic so far in this story, this explanation would make sense, although I would wonder about why Vivi would not believe a prediction like this if she lives in a world where magic is commonplace. Savanna seems to think that his ability to see the future is useful but risky, so maybe the author often plays around with the dangers of following prophecies. However, I'm not even convinced that this was actually a prophecy. Redford is a local, after all; he wouldn't need to see the future to know if traveling around in the winter is dangerous in this part of the world. And even in a world where magic is commonplace, divination would surely require some kind of introduction or explanation, which the book (yet again!) offers nothing like.

Regardless of whether or not this moment of magic is legitimate or not, it still is very strange. Why would a book introduce a character who appears to be able to see the future and *not* explain it? Why would the other characters barely react at all? That's the kind of ability that shapes the way the story moves forward. Why is it given such little importance? And why did Savanna have such a minor reaction to it? Either I'm missing something here, or the book is playing with my expectations. If it's the former, then I suppose I can only expect to be confused further and further as the book goes on. If it's the latter, then I surely hope that Saldanji Arhic is a better writer than I fear they are, or I'm going to be confused anyway. A mystery story is fun, but a story that is itself a mystery can get frustrating quickly.

January 19th, 2023

Something has been nagging at my mind about this book since I finished writing yesterday. All of my complaints about missing context and unexplained ideas have been

mitigated in my mind by the idea that perhaps this book is part of a series. After all, that would clear up any questions I have, would it not? The reason magic was not properly explained is because it was explained in an earlier book. Constructs, such as Portjus, are characters elsewhere in the series. If I had read those other books, I wouldn't be surprised by the fact that characters can have strange physical appearances, nor would I be confused by how the book treats it as normal or even unremarkable. All of this would suddenly make sense, and while I wouldn't have the explanations, I would have the comfort of knowing that I'm not supposed to be lost like this.

However, I have reason to suspect that this is not the case. For starters, nowhere on the book's outside does it indicate that this might be part of a series. No number on the spine, no subtitle, no "*part of the such-and-such chronicles*," nothing. And even within the book, too, it's lacking in finer details that would suggest such a thing. No characters in the book have been introduced as though we should know them already, no place names have been said as though they're known locations. In all ways beyond the afore-mentioned obscurities, the book is written and presented as a standalone volume that you can read without purchasing another book beforehand.

Of course, that's not necessarily proof; not every series will make itself known in that kind of way. For example, take horror fiction inspired by H. P. Lovecraft's work. Many of those stories operate under a known set of rules and context that they do not necessarily need to explain to the reader, but they also do not tell the reader that you're reading a book set in the same world as *The Color Out of Space*. If this book is in such a situation, it would make sense that it does not explain its fantastical properties. Readers would most likely be aware of the conventions of the genre.

Except I can't in confidence say that that's what's happening here. Even in situations such

as that, quirks of magic and fantastical elements will be explained appropriately to fit the genre, and while there may not be an overt reference to the background material the book draws from, there will always be some indication. The reviews on the back, for example, might say, “Fans of such-and-such author will love Saldanji Arhic!” Books coming from niche subcultures of literature always make themselves known, because more publicity for their audience is desirable. Simply put, a fantasy romance novel is not the kind of book to leave its magic unexplained to the degree that this book does, and it’s not nearly enough of an underdog to be a breakout novel from a niche literary subculture. And yes, I do believe that it would be a breakout novel if it were from such a background; otherwise, why would it have a sticker from a bestseller list? All of these are not exactly scientific claims, of course, but I do believe them to be empirically true.

And I can say with certainty that this is not a situation of poor or forgetful writing. *Hearts Unbound* is not a masterpiece, but it’s clear to me that Saldanji Arhic is a competent enough writer to not make mistakes like this. I may not be a regular reader of the genre, but you don’t need to know romance novels to recognize skilled writing.

Speaking of the author, though, that’s the second option here. While it may not be part of a series, it’s certainly possible that Arhic’s works all operate within the same world, and the context that I lack would be found elsewhere in their catalogue. Readers and fans of the author would thus not need an explanation for the ground rules, as they were established in Arhic’s earlier novels.

But we have access to the direct thoughts of one such reader, and her notes are also giving me pause. It’s clear to me by now that Savanna Cowle possesses much of the context that I am lacking. Convinced as I am that this book cannot be coming from an established background, it therefore stands to reason that Savanna must be a fan of Arhic. This, however,

does not seem to be the case. Savanna may have the context that she needs to understand the world this book is set in, but she is not familiar with the author.

In my previous entry, I commented briefly on how Arhic has this strange fixation on Frederick's arms. They make a point to describe them in detail whenever they get the chance. It wasn't just something that happened in the one chapter I noted it, either; it was happening before that, too. Describing someone's body sensually in a romance novel cannot be said to be unusual, but I can't deny that I was surprised that the arms are what Arhic focused on. Well, I wasn't the only one. Savanna also found it odd that Arhic would focus on such a thing.

This, to me, is the nail in the coffin for the idea of this book having context established in other texts. Saldanji Arhic writes romance novels and, as far as I can tell, nothing else. If the reviews on the back are to be believed, she's famous for them. If Savanna Cowle were indeed a previous fan of Arhic's, it is impossible for her to be surprised or confused that the author would have a fondness for male arms. It comes up repeatedly in this work, in such a way that I can't imagine it not coming up in other works by her, too. There's no reason to suspect this could be a unique case.

Now, obviously this is just one piece of evidence. But in my mind, it's a very condemning one. There is no situation I can envision in which a romance novel author would write only *one* book where there is frequent and special attention paid to a specific part of someone's body, and the extent to which it's done here makes it clear to me that this is what Arhic likes most. Savanna not knowing about this, and having such a similar reaction to me, is all but concrete proof to me that she has not read other books by Saldanji Arhic, which means that whatever context she has for this book was not gotten from the author's previous works.

I'll be honest, I'm not sure where this puts me. I have a strange, confusing novel, which

fell out of the sky in front of me, written, reviewed, published, and owned by people who do not seem to exist, and containing information the context for which is somehow inaccessible to me. There are still numerous explanations, such as this being someone's personal project that they never intended me to read, or that I'm just being messed with, but at the moment those too feel unlikely somehow. It's starting to get frustratingly obscure. But who knows? Chapter 6 might explain everything.

January 22, 2023

I thought it might be prudent for me to take a short break from reading the book, so I gave myself a day away from it. It proved highly fruitful, for unrelated reasons. See, for Christmas, I received one of those action cameras that you can wear while out and about to record things automatically. I'm not much of a camera person, ordinarily, but this gift was special – it was from my nephew (my other nephew, not the one I went to visit earlier in the month. This nephew is younger than that one, and doesn't perform in theater productions), and he suggested I attach the camera to Checkers before going out on a walk, so we could see things from his perspective. This, I think, is a wonderful idea, and I've been trying to get Checkers to let me put it on him for weeks. Today I finally managed to get him to wear it on our morning walk. He wears it on top of his head, so it matches his head movements and captures whatever he looks at. Turns out, he looks at a lot of bugs on the sidewalk. But he also turned to look at me every time I said something, which was often because I tend to think out loud. It was very sweet.

Anyway, I'm going to report on chapter 6 today. Not out of concern for page space; If I continue on this trend of 2-4 pages per chapter, I'll fill this whole journal by the time I'm done, and that sounds to me like good proof of completion. I just only have one chapter to cover this

time. Why do I feel the need to justify myself to my own journal and my hypothetical readers? The journal cannot talk back to me and call me lazy or complain of a lack of content. Whatever. Here's my summary.

A strange woman shows up at the cottage one day and introduces herself as Madame Alizah. She claims to have sensed from afar that Vivi is a 'troubled soul' and offers her services as a psychic and spirit medium. Vivi is not interested and tries to shoo her away, but Madame Alizah forces entry into her house anyway and starts trying to analyze Vivi's life by picking up on "spirit traces" in the furniture and decorations. It's quite clear to all that this woman is a charlatan.

As Madame Alizah makes a nuisance, Vivi sees that a young girl is also there. She introduces herself to the girl, who is Madame Alizah's daughter, named Zoey. Zoey looks rather unhappy and uncomfortable with the situation, so Vivi calls for Portjus and asks him to play with Zoey outside. Madame Alizah makes some rude remarks about Portjus, implying unpleasant things about his station and character, and Vivi redoubles her attempts to make her leave.

Eventually Frederick comes down from the attic to see what the commotion is about, and as soon as Madame Alizah sees him, she flies into a wild frenzy, screaming about "evil spirits" and how the cottage is being haunted by a "foul specter." At this point, Vivi gives up her wheedling and tries to force Madame Alizah to leave, but she can't overpower her, so she calls Portjus back in and has him throw the so-called "medium" out. Madame Alizah picks herself up and swears to "free this house from the fell influence of the gruesome dead," then leaves in a rage with Zoey. Vivi tells Portjus that he has permission to forcibly remove her from the premises if she ever comes back, and Portjus says that he would have done that even if he hadn't been ordered to, which was satisfying to read.

It's quite obvious to me that Madame Alizah is going to serve as the antagonist of this story. She was rude, obnoxious, conceited, and I might even say that she comes across as bigoted. There are also many things that are interesting about her character. You, my hypothetical reader, may have guessed by now that Madame Alizah and Zoey do not look like ordinary humans. The text introducing Madame Alizah and her daughter reads as follows: "Vivi opened the door to see a trashy-looking therian woman wearing a heavy purple dress that partially covered up the thick gray ruff on her neck. Behind her stood a young girl of about 12 who very much resembled the woman, except with brown fur, a stained pair of overalls instead of a dress, and a noticeably unhappy expression. The woman's ears twitched as she looked Vivi over scrutinizingly, then she broke out into an ingratiating grin." This is all we get for now. Later on, we will also learn that she has a tail, pads on her hands, and claws, but these details are only revealed when they're relevant. In my mind, we are looking at a human woman with certain qualities of some unspecified mammal. Fur about her neck, ears on top of her head, and a tail. These are the most pronounced physical differences of any character so far, and I struggle to see any kind of pattern connecting these to the previous ones we've encountered. But I also am beginning to get used to characters looking like this. In truth, it's far from hard to grasp strange appearances such as these in a fantasy novel, and the main source of my complaint so far has merely been the lack of setup. From here on out, then, I will resign myself to the fact that the appearance of characters in this book do not follow any specific rules, and they can look however Saldanji Arhic wants them to look.

However, in this passage, she refers to Madame Alizah and Zoey as "therians." This, I assume, is a term that signifies humans possessing animal characteristics. Easy enough to understand. But we didn't get any such term to describe Vivi or Redford and the ways *they* look.

So I assume that therians are a separate fantasy race, possibly related to humans, who have some kind of animal characteristic. In any case, this is yet another term Arhic has introduced without explanation. I can't be too upset, reasonably speaking, though; I did figure this one out on my own.

I'd also like to touch on the way Madame Alizah is written. She is portrayed, with her (apparently) faulty knowledge and her rant about evil spirits, in the exact way someone might portray a racist antagonist in a YA novel, except the difference is that she's prejudiced against ghosts. She decides upon merely seeing Frederick that he is an "evil spirit" who's "haunting" the house, and from what we've seen earlier in the book, these are both untrue and somewhat hurtful things to say. One would think, based on the way Frederick has been discussed in the book so far, that ghosts aren't so unusual in the book's world. It's obvious that what she's saying is ignorant and wrong, but the correct information is not given; it's written as though the right way to view these matters is obvious or already widely known. No explanation or clarification is offered to make Madame Alizah's perspective make sense. And I think this is a very strange thing to expect from readers, since there is no universally acknowledged "appropriate" way to treat a spirit – or, if there is, I don't know it.

She also says some hurtful things about Portjus, too, calling him "it" and (quite randomly) asking if he can be trusted not to "go berserk," although she's not terribly concerned about that, either, saying that Vivi is at liberty to simply destroy him and get a new butler if he does so. Vivi reacts very negatively to these statements. I don't fully understand them; obviously implying Portjus lacks humanity is rude, as he's been shown so far to have free will and emotions, but at the same time, I would not have been surprised to hear that a construct does, in fact, lack humanity, and that you can, in fact, just destroy one if it behaves poorly. Perhaps I am

in the wrong here, though; maybe Portjus is a human character as much as Vivi and Frederick are.

But speaking of Zoey, there is an odd moment with her. When Portjus comes back inside, Zoey is right behind him, and the child sees Frederick. Her reaction to seeing the ghost is very interesting: she seems fascinated and drawn to him, but also very afraid. Her gaze flickers back and forth between the ghost and her mother, and when Portjus moves to take hold of Madame Alizah, Zoey runs back outside, perhaps to hide or maybe just get out of the way. Now, in other circumstances I would have thought that she would be afraid of ghosts, but the narrative calls attention to how different her reaction to seeing a ghost is from her mother's, so I can't help but think otherwise. She seems more so afraid of her mother, perhaps because she knows how her mother gets around spirits. In fact, now that I think about it, Zoey seems mostly unhappy throughout all of her appearances in this chapter, and her mother talks about her rather carelessly, and to her rather harshly, and I can't help but feel as though she may be abusive or neglectful somehow. But that's a harsh assumption to make of a character who I've only just been introduced to, so I will reserve judgment on that until later on.

Someone who did *not* reserve judgment, however, is Savanna Cowle. I found Madame Alizah unpleasant, sure, but Savanna seems to have absolutely loathed her from the very beginning. Her notes in this chapter are aggressive and angry, constantly underlining and commenting on everything Madame Alizah says about ghosts and spirits, with many, many accompanying angry faces and exclamation points. This is interesting enough on its own, that she would have such a strong reaction to this character, but what intrigues me is that, here more than anywhere else so far, Savanna seems to have a lot of context about ghosts. She keeps saying that Madame Alizah gets things wrong, or that she's stupid, or what have you. This is clearly the

source of her issue with Madame Alizah, and this actually makes a lot of sense. I remember how, in the beginning of the book, the note from Savanna's aunt said the book would be "right up her alley." This, I assume, is what that meant: Savanna enjoys ghost-related media, and she has a lot of background knowledge about them. But this knowledge seems very specific. Where did she get it from? If not from Saldanji Arhic's other works, then where? How does she know that Madame Alizah is "wrong"? Or does she just get upset when authors make up a bunch of arbitrary rules for ghosts? I know I myself find it irritating when the rules an author invents don't quite make sense, even for fantasy purposes.

While this chapter didn't explain nearly as much as I'd hoped it might, it also didn't raise too many new questions for me. And it surely did help me figure out one thing or another, so I'm starting to become more hopeful that I'll finish the book with all of my questions cleared up. I still would rather have had this stuff explained *before* it becomes majorly plot relevant, but better late than never.

January 24, 2023

Have you ever been thinking about something in real life, and then you suddenly start seeing content relating to that thing online? No, that's not a good analogy for my present situation. Let me try again. Have you ever been wondering about the definition of a word, and you open up the dictionary and it just happens to ... no, that's not a good analogy either. I can't think of a good analogy right now. I've also elected to stop stopping myself from writing these journal entries as though they're for someone else. It's clear to me by now that my written voice tends in that direction.

What I'm trying to say is that chapter 7 of *Hearts Unbound* contained a detail that

addressed something that had been puzzling me in real life, which is a very curious coincidence. I had originally intended on devoting this entry to both chapters 7 and 8, but I've been stopped by this aforementioned detail. Let me do the plot summary first, and then I'll get into it.

It is near the end of summer in the narrative now. Vivi is surprised one day by a visit from her father, who travels to the cottage via a magical portal of some kind. The surprising part is not the portal, but rather his visit, which was apparently unannounced. He says that he's meant to come visit for a while now, but he hasn't been able to get away from his work at the factory. Then he finally found time to have something he calls their "Go-Tab" fixed, and that allowed him to pop over for a chat. They go inside and have a conversation. Meanwhile, Frederick is stacking wood outside, and he eavesdrops on their conversation, although partially unintentionally, and he only hears bits and pieces.

Mr. LeJean claims to have come to check up on Vivi, make sure she had everything she needed and that she was doing well living on her own, but Vivi isn't fooled. She knows that he's come to make sure she's been doing what he wants and behaving herself, and she doesn't hide her distaste for her father's actions. Their conversation begins mostly civil, but Vivi says a few things that make her father upset, such as disregarding what he thinks of as important and generally disrespecting him for placing value on wealth and status. Mr. LeJean, for his part, says a few things that upset Vivi, such as chiding her for dropping out of college and "squandering her potential." There are some details in this conversation I'd like to get into in a moment, so we'll come back to that.

Eventually the conversation boils into a fierce argument, where Vivi tells her father to let her live her own life, and he tells her that she's obviously not ready for that responsibility yet. When he says that her actions reflect poorly on the family name, she explodes at him, calling

him a “money-obsessed idiot who wouldn’t save a drowning child if he couldn’t make a buck off it” and saying that until he can place more value on happiness than status, she’s ashamed to call herself his daughter. Mr. LeJean says that her childishness is even deeper than he’d thought and that unless she can get her act together, she’ll never be allowed to leave the cottage. He leaves in a towering rage.

Frederick waits a few minutes, then comes back inside and asks Vivi who that was. Vivi’s answer is short and hostile, and she storms upstairs to vent her emotions in private. Frederick feels very awkward and goes outside again to find more chores to do. Later, Vivi resumes making her plans to run away, and we get a bit more information on that, such as learning that she’s going to cut across town to get a head start on Portjus and steal a car. The chapter ends there.

There is one particular thing from this chapter that has got me wondering, but I’ll leave that for later. I’ll write my smaller notes first. For starters, let’s look at the conversation-cum-argument Vivi had with her father.

Mr. LeJean implies at one point that Vivi used to be able to do magic, but can’t anymore. Unfortunately, Vivi changes the subject extremely quickly, so there’s not a lot to learn here, aside from the obvious. Savanna Cowle and I shared some questions about this passage. The obvious one is, why can’t she do magic anymore? What kind of magic could she do before? These questions, I believe, are plot-relevant, not world-relevant. Based on Vivi’s quick changing of the subject, she’s clearly sensitive about it, which would explain why it hasn’t been brought up before. But I had a few other questions. This would make Vivi the third character to use magic (or, if in order of appearance, the second), but also the first to have a discussion about the ability to use magic. Yet, funnily enough, the conversation would imply that it’s more unusual that Vivi

cannot use magic than if she could. I'd previously wondered if magical ability was meant to be common in this book's world, but if the loss of magical ability is a plot point, then that might prove that idea. That's a good thing to have cleared up.

Speaking of Savanna, her pen color has changed again. It's back to yellow now, and with it, the number of notes she makes has gone up. I guess yellow is just her favorite color. There was an excited sort of scribble on the top margins, as though she was testing the pen on the book, so I assume she bought a new yellow pen and was glad about it. Anyway, the previous chapter's notes from her were more detailed and interesting (if a bit angry), and all of them were about ghosts. This has me thinking that perhaps I could learn a thing or two about this book from Savanna. She clearly has strong opinions and background knowledge about ghosts that she's using in her reading of *Hearts Unbound*; could I therefore take what she says about ghosts as fact, and use that to educate myself on the "rules" of spirits in this book? It's certainly worth a shot. So I've begun a list of potential "ghost rules" that I'll be adding to over the course of my reading, helped greatly along the way by Savanna. In this chapter, she says almost nothing, which was a bit disappointing. Oh! I've just thought of something. Frederick chops and stacks wood in this chapter, and Savanna raises no complaints. Could I take that as evidence that him being able to do that is correct? I think I'll do that, and just cross it out later if it gets contradicted. So, for now: ghosts can touch some physical objects.

The last small thing I'd like to touch on is Vivi's college education. This is really a minor thing, but it could become an important plot point, so it's worth mentioning. Mr. LeJean says, "How can you expect to follow in your grandmother's footsteps if you don't complete your education?" Vivi rejects the idea of following in her family's footsteps, of course, but that's besides the point. I remember that it was said much, much earlier in the book that Vivi's

grandmother was a famous artist; she made Portjus, among other things. So I assume that Vivi was pursuing an education in art. I wonder if this has something to do with her magic being gone? I hope the book will tell me.

But on the subject of what the book tells me, we come now to the primary thing that interested me in this chapter, and that is the portal Mr. LeJean travels by. Let me describe the thing in more detail. When Vivi's father arrives at the house, he travels via portal. Vivi hears a "buzzing, whirring sound outside" and looks out the window to see a light green circular portal opening on the lawn, and her father stepping out. He greets Vivi by telling her that he finally got around to getting the "Go-Tab" fixed and, as he found himself with a free afternoon, figured he'd pop over for a visit. After their argument, he pulls out his phone and calls someone, telling them to open a portal to "10394.2624b x 82416.3271n." The portal opens a few seconds later and Mr. LeJean steps into it, saying his final remarks to Vivi.

Savanna left some conspicuous comments on this passage. When Vivi hears the portal open, before she looks out to see what it is, Savanna said that she knew that sound, and when Mr. LeJean mentioned the "Go-Tab," Savanna... well, she made fun of him for not being able to open a portal on his own, despite being rich, and for some reason noted a score: "Savanna 1, rich guy 0."

At first, I was going to just write all of this off as fantasy magic. Of course they can travel by portal. Why wouldn't they be able to? The coordinates are made up, too, after all, so that's all fine. But something about this passage kept nagging at me, and when I came back to it this morning, I realized what it was. The description of the portal, specifically the sound it made upon opening up, was identical to the sound I heard just before finding the book several weeks ago. I don't think I could have described it better myself. It's so accurate that it seems

intentional. But that raises more questions for me.

Could the author have specifically written this to match the sound of the drone that they used to deliver the book? Possible. But something about that idea just feels off. Why would the author make a magical portal match the sound of a piece of ultimately mundane technology? This book is not a meta text, nor does it play with the reader's perception, and there is no indication that it will go in that kind of direction; it seems extremely unlikely that this book would make reference to the way in which I found it. And, may I just say, that's an incredibly specific thing that the author couldn't possibly count on happening for all of their readers. Far more people would get the book at a bookstore, or order it online and have it delivered in the mail, than would get it via drone. Why bring up something that almost none of your readers would have personal experience with? It's *possible*, of course, but not likely at all.

But then there's also the question of Savanna's comments, and there I really don't have an explanation. If she's never read the author's books before, how does she know that sound? Is this a common way of describing a portal? I'm starting to think that maybe my earlier guess about Savanna being a character invented by the author to make the book feel more real, which I had previously written off as unlikely, was right after all. That might suggest that maybe this is a meta joke about the manner in which I found the book, but that idea still just feels wrong to me, for the reasons stated above. It's also possible that Savanna just has an odd sense of humor. I think I'd rather the first explanation; if she was invented by the author, it would mean that I can keep reading her notes about ghosts with the assumption that she's knowledgeable.

This book is almost exhaustingly puzzling. But I'm also starting to think that I can relax a little bit. With the previous things that the author has brought up and not explained, I've hoped that my questions will be addressed later on in the text, and truth be told, I've been able to piece

together an explanation for a few of them. But this question of the sound being eerily similar to something I experienced in real life is not the kind of question I feel I can reasonably expect the book to answer. So maybe I can just assume that this question will never be answered, and with that information, put it out of my mind altogether. That would certainly be easier than thinking about it for days and coming up dry. Oh, well, never mind all that for now. The next entry will cover more chapters than just one... I hope.

January 26, 2023

I'd like to take a moment at the beginning of this entry to reflect for a moment on how my discovery of this book was really very lucky. Despite the difficulties it's raised, what with the lack of context and refusal to explain anything – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say *because of those difficulties* – *Hearts Unbound* has been an extremely fruitful book to journal about. I was skeptical at first, having little faith that a romance novel would be compelling in the way I hoped, but to be honest, this book feels a lot less like a romance novel and more like a more general YA novel. I would even suggest that its style feels similar to magical realism instead of just fantasy, which is interesting to think about given that it features ghosts and portals and magical powers and the like. It even seems as though Arhic is placing puzzle pieces for me to figure out what's going on with these things that the book won't explain directly. If things continue along this path, I'll have a wonderfully interesting story to unravel, and if not, then I'll be able to fill this journal with my complaints and frustrations, and both options sound like an excellent use of a journal to me.

Anyway, I'm going to report on my readings of chapters 8 and 9 today. Compared to the action of the previous few chapters, these are rather tame and domestic, and they raise far fewer

questions.

In Chapter 8, we're told that it's now autumn. One day, Zoey, the daughter of Madame Alizah from two chapters ago, comes to the cottage alone, and asks to play with Portjus again. At first, they're suspicious of her, thinking that Madame Alizah is putting her on them to spy and get information, but they learn quickly that Zoey is miserable. She doesn't have any friends in town because her mother doesn't send her to school, and doesn't buy her toys or anything either, so she spends most of her time very bored and lonely. Her mom leaves her alone all day at the house while she goes to her workplace, and Zoey often sneaks out to try to find something to do. She came back to the cottage because Portjus was very nice when playing with her, and there was nowhere else she wanted to go. So, my assumption that Madame Alizah was an abusive mother was correct.

Frederick is still skeptical, but Vivi wants to let Zoey stay. Vivi and Zoey play outside for a while, throwing a frisbee around and other such games. Frederick looks on, but eventually he gives in and joins in with them. They all have a nice time together, with Vivi and Frederick getting along better than they ever have before. One time, when Vivi throws the frisbee, it goes off in the wrong direction, sailing through Frederick's body. Zoey chases after it and collides with Frederick, knocking both of them over and shocking Vivi.

It turns out that, unlike her charlatan mother, Zoey has real necromantic abilities, and is able to do things like make physical contact with ghosts like Frederick. Zoey tells them that she's been keeping this a secret from her mother because she's afraid of what her mother might do if she knew, and because her magic only developed a year or so ago and she doesn't really understand it yet. She begs Vivi and Frederick not to tell her mom about it, so they assure her that they won't, that they didn't plan on speaking to her mother again anyway, and that Zoey's

secret is safe with them. Once it starts getting dark out, Vivi has Portjus take her home, with instructions to be gone before Madame Alizah comes back, so that she doesn't know where Zoey's been. Once she's gone, Vivi and Frederick have a conversation where they're concerned for her, because apparently she's very young to be developing powers like this.

Chapter 9 is mostly about Vivi and Frederick's improving relationship. It involves several short scenes of Vivi and Frederick living together and getting along much better than they have before. There's a small scene where Vivi is making lunch, and she offers to make something for Frederick, too, which he politely declines. As a side note, she uses the "quickbox" in this scene to heat up her food, so maybe it's just some kind of fantasy microwave. We also get a scene in which Frederick is raking leaves outside, without his shirt on. It feels pretty gratuitous, if you ask me.

We learn that Zoey comes over a few times a week now, and that she's been visibly happier since she met Vivi and Frederick. We also learn that Frederick and Portjus still have not spoken to each other, and also are still refusing to tell Vivi why; Frederick because he doesn't want to talk about it, and Portjus because he has instructions not to tell the story.

At one point, Redford comes to the house to pay Vivi a visit, but Vivi isn't around at the time, so he's entertained by Portjus until Frederick comes in. They have a conversation, where we learn that Frederick is starting to really enjoy living in the house with Vivi around. Frederick asks Redford, somewhat accusingly, if he's interested in Vivi romantically, but Redford tells him that he is not. Vivi comes back and is surprised to see Redford, as she didn't think he knew where they lived, but she's glad that he and Frederick have hit it off.

At the end of the chapter, Vivi continues planning her escape, but she's less sure about it now, and is having second thoughts about the whole thing.

I don't actually have many notes about these chapters. Or, no, that's not entirely accurate. What I should say is, I don't have many questions that aren't purely about the plot. Most of my notes here are simply observations or new information that may help answer previous questions. I'll run through them quickly, in chronological order, and then raise my one question at the end.

First, Vivi is very good with Zoey, quickly grasping what's wrong and playing well with her. At first I thought that this – by which I mean, her being good with kids, something that contrasts with the rest of her rebellious personality – was a way of showing to us that Vivi ought to settle down and have a family, but that seems like a weird moral to have compared to how the book has gone so far, so I now think that it might just be a way of saying that Vivi could be happy in more than just the ways she's tried so far.

I do have to say, though, introducing child abuse as a theme into this book is pretty odd. That's a very heavy topic to include in a fantasy romance(?) novel. It's true that Zoey seems to be pretty hardy and that there's no signs of significant trauma so far, just that she's unhappy, but still. I wonder how the book is going to handle this; it's a very delicate subject. Savanna Cowle agrees with me. She left a note saying almost exactly what I said.

The scene in which Vivi offers Frederick some lunch is an interesting scene for a couple reasons. One, this is the first time we've seen Vivi do any kind of work at all around the house. So far, I'd assumed Portjus had been cooking all the meals. So this may be reflective of a greater change in her. Second, I would not have thought a ghost could eat, or would even want to. Frederick declines, but politely, and no greater attention is paid to it than if he were living. It really is just someone offering someone else some reheated leftover chicken, and that second person says "No thanks." If this had happened a couple of chapters ago, I would have puzzled over why a ghost would be offered food, but now I know better. I looked for Savanna's note, and

all she said was that it was nice of Vivi to offer him something. I'm going to take this as confirmation that ghosts eating is a normal occurrence.

Speaking of Frederick, I've learned something new about him. My previous statement that he was the only human character to have no strange physical features was wrong. In the gratuitous shirtless scene in chapter 9, he's described as having stripes all over his chest and torso, like a tiger. We hadn't seen them previously because he had a shirt on in all of his other scenes. Actually, now that I think about it, this means that every character introduced has some kind of inhuman physical trait. So, yes, the physical oddities are actually physical normalities. Oh, yes, there's also a very brief line that states that Vivi has sharp teeth. This wasn't mentioned before, and it doesn't clarify what kind of sharp teeth she has (canines? Shark-like teeth? I do not know), but apparently she has them.

Finally, Redford has another vision while talking to Portjus. While they're talking prior to Frederick coming in, Portjus tells Redford that he can sense her location if she leaves the boundaries that her father has set, and she's allowed anywhere in town or nearby the cottage. Redford blanks out again, and then tells Portjus that his boundaries have blind spots. Portjus doesn't ask what he means, and instead just re-affirms his certainty that Vivi can't escape. What's interesting here to me is that this moment is very similar to the previous one, where nobody seems particularly shocked that he can do this. It's also interesting that Redford's predictions have both times been disregarded by the people he gives them to. Maybe there's some kind of Cassandra thing going on, where people don't think he can actually predict the future? Now that I think about it, it hasn't actually been said that that's what he's doing. I just assumed it was, because the way the scenes were written made me think that was the most likely explanation. Savanna seemed to think so, too; both times, she made a comment about this being

some kind of power of his, and I naturally assumed she was right. Hopefully, the book will clear this up.

Now, I do have one question. Or, rather, one series of questions that are all tied tightly together. When Zoey says that she hides her magic from her mom, she also says that if her mom wanted to test her for some reason, she wouldn't know how to avoid revealing her magic. This is more information about the rules of magic, which is something I've been wondering about, but it only raises further questions. You can test for magic, and it can be hidden? How would one hide it? It seems to be implied that she could learn how to do it, which raises more questions about magic education and training, as well as the acquisition of magical power. Madame Alizah has no magic, but her daughter does. Is this common? Is it more common to have magic or to not have it?

Zoey is also apparently pretty young for her abilities to be manifesting, based on what Vivi said. Savanna agreed with her, too, but I didn't need her confirmation for this one. Is this a common rule for all magic, or just "necromantic" abilities like hers? That's what the book calls them; "necromantic" abilities. What's the common age for magic to start appearing in people? I don't want to go back to complaining about the lack of information in this book, but this seems to be a really important detail that we aren't properly informed about. Is magic tied to age, genetics, gender, or is it education-based? What's really going on here?

I did, however, deduce one important thing. All three characters so far who have been shown to have magical ability (Mrs. LeJean, Redford, and Zoey) have also all used magic or referenced using magic without meaning to. Mrs. LeJean changed the teacup colors subconsciously, Redford's divination (and I'm going to assume that it is, in fact, divination, and the book is simply being weird about calling it such) was triggered without his control, and Zoey

doesn't know how to not use her abilities. This might make me think that magic is *always* subconscious or outside of the person's control, but this can't be right, because Zoey talked about learning to manage and use her abilities in chapter 8. So instead, it's clear to me that magic *can* activate without the person intending to. It could be like a tic, or muscle spasm. Actually, writing that out makes me think it's the latter; if magic can indeed be trained, perhaps thinking of it like a muscle isn't unreasonable. That doesn't really help me figure out under what circumstances a character has magic, but it's still good to know.

Anyway, as I said earlier, I'm pleased with this section's conveyance of information. It's been too long with unanswered questions and confusing worldbuilding. At last, we're starting to see some real progress. I'm about halfway through the book now; at this rate, we should be done with the book around page 53 or so. That's assuming, of course, that nothing comes up before then to greatly delay my progress.

### January 29, 2023

I ran into Lucille Hastings at the grocery store today. It was a welcome surprise. Interesting to think that someone who you've probably seen a dozen times could go from being a random stranger to a friend from just a single interaction. This is the first time I've seen her since I started reading the book, and she of course wanted an update. When I told her about how puzzling the book was proving itself to be, she was very intrigued, and asked to have a look for herself when I was done. I said she certainly could.

She then asked me why she never sees me in church, and I told her that I'm agnostic and while I'm not really opposed to going to church if asked or on special occasions, such as Christmas or Easter, I generally don't go. I have work that needs getting done a lot of the time.

Mrs. Hastings told me I ought to go more often, since “intellect and faith shouldn’t be so separated,” and I agreed there was wisdom in that. She also said that perhaps the Lord would help me in my mission to return the book to its owner, and I agreed there was wisdom in that, too, although this time I was really just being polite. I didn’t know Mrs. Hastings was so spiritual, but I suppose we’ve only had a single conversation before this, and it didn’t come up. I don’t really take well to being told to go to church, but she didn’t mean any harm, so I’m not going to think about it.

Anyway, back to the magic ghost romance novel. I’ve read chapters 10 and 11 now, and contrary to the previous two, these chapters have both action and intense emotions that drive the plot forwards. Chapter 10 is about Vivi’s personal growth living in the cottage. In spite of herself, Vivi finds that she’s begun to settle into the house and enjoys living there. Now that she’s gotten used to the slower-paced, quieter lifestyle that it brings, she’s not really missing the fast and frantic one she was made to leave behind, and although she won’t directly admit it, she’s feeling a lot healthier and better about herself. Much to the shock of Frederick, Vivi starts helping out with chores and other domestic tasks, something she has so far mostly avoided. The cottage begins to feel more like a home and less like somewhere Vivi is forced to stay. The atmosphere gets nicer and more friendly all around. As the days go on, they start genuinely having a good time and enjoying each others’ company. Zoey comes over several times a week, and Redford also shows up often.

Frederick doesn’t want to say it to her face, because it would be rude, but he thinks Vivi has gotten a lot nicer since she “chilled out” and started appreciating the quiet life he knew at the cabin. At the very least, they’re getting along better than ever. Now that they’re not arguing much, Frederick starts to notice things about her that he had never seen before, like endearing

tics and personality quirks, as well as how pretty she is when she's allowing herself to be. Vivi also starts to notice similar things about Frederick, some of them being new and some of them being things she'd seen before. In general, the two of them get more and more attracted to each other. One particularly cold night, they have a tender moment when Vivi tells Frederick about her past and her problems while living alone, as well as divulging her drug addiction to him. She was on something called "lenportasil" for a while, and this is apparently a very big deal, since Frederick seems extremely concerned for her safety. It's not explained why or what the drug does, though.

Unbeknownst to Vivi, Portjus has been reporting secretly to Mr. and Mrs. LeJean about how Vivi is 'progressing,' and at the end of the chapter there's a scene of him doing just that. He tells them that Vivi is finally starting to show signs of settling and maturing. Her parents are pleased with this information. Mr. LeJean says that after their argument, he was concerned that she would start getting even more rebellious, but apparently she's taken his words to heart. Mrs. LeJean says that she hopes Vivi will start 'acting more like a proper LeJean lady.' They thank Portjus for his report and tell him that Vivi can have a little more freedom, but to keep an eye on her just in case anyway. The chapter ends here.

Chapter 11 begins, and it's now winter. During one of her visits, Zoey tells Vivi that her mom wants to get rid of Frederick, because she thinks he's an evil spirit haunting the LeJean cottage. Vivi asks if Madame Alizah really thinks that he's evil, and Zoey answers that she doesn't know, but it doesn't matter. She says her mom knows the people who own the cottage are really rich and thinks she can take advantage of that by befriending them, which will let her get money from them. So she wants to do them a favor, and she's decided the best way is to 'banish the evil spirit.'

They all scheme together and come up with a prank to pull on Madame Alizah by pretending to let her ‘banish the evil spirit,’ then having Frederick pop out and scare her. They hope they can use the situation to get her to chill out and tell her that they’re not interested in her “services,” and then maybe she’ll leave Vivi alone. Redford blanks out for a bit during the plan, but when he comes back he doesn’t say anything.

Vivi invites Madame Alizah over to conduct an exorcism, which she’s very eager to do. The charlatan mystic comes with all of her gear and gives a long rambling monologue before launching into her act. She brings Zoey with her and tells her to sit quietly until she’s done working. Redford is hiding upstairs, so he can be present but not disturb the process. As Madame Alizah does her phony show of lighting candles and incense and blowing the smoke around the room and all kinds of other stuff, Frederick, who is invisible, does some classic ghost things, which Vivi calls “the Gudove act.” He levitates objects, blows wind around, makes strange moaning sounds, and all kinds of other stereotypical ghost stuff to let Madame Alizah think it’s working. This encourages her, and she ups the dramatics of her act. Frederick struggles to keep up with her expectations, which she takes as signs that he’s weakening, and after a bit more theatrics she ends the “exorcism” and claims to have “banished” him for good. Frederick then literally pulls the rug out from under her feet, knocking her onto the floor, and pours a vase full of water on her head.

At this point, the ruse falls apart and the prank is revealed to Madame Alizah. Contrary to their expectations, however, being exposed as a fraud does not humble her or make her calm down at all; instead, she flies into a wild rage over being humiliated and swears revenge on Frederick. She leaves dramatically, dragging Zoey along with her, and Redford admits that he foresaw Madame Alizah getting furious like this, but says that he didn’t say anything because he

thought that was their goal. He then sheepishly leaves. Vivi and Frederick wonder if it was a good idea to antagonize her, but decide that there's very little she can actually do to them.

Overall, it was an experience that caused them to grow closer together.

There's one specific thing in this section that's extremely interesting to me, but I'll get to that later. First, the smaller things and what I'm noticing about the plot. Vivi's attitude about staying at the cottage shifted very rapidly. It's only been about two chapters since the visit with her dad, which was a moment that made Vivi want to stay less, and relatively little has happened since outside of Zoey having improved relationships with Frederick, Zoey, and Redford. Now, obviously having good friends around will make any situation better, but Vivi's problem is not that she's lonely here, it's that she resents being trapped by her father. It should be easy enough for her to keep in touch with the people she's met in town while also still running away. But, to be totally fair, we also see that a decent amount of time has passed since then. That was in the summer, and it's now nearing the end of fall. I guess that enough time has passed since the conversation with her father that she could have gotten over it. Although I guess there could also have been some pivotal moment that we'll learn about later that explains her sudden change. I'm not sure why Arhic would write such a moment and then hide it from us, but it's possible. For now, though, I'm just going to chalk this one up to imperfect writing. It happens to the best of us, I'm sure.

That was the only minor note I had for chapter 10, but I do want to point out that Savanna's pen color has changed again. Her notes are pink now. In case you were wondering, hypothetical reader, the quantity of her notes went down again too. But this time she actually commented on it! She says that she lost her yellow pen again, and that it's the second one she's lost this month, and that "they're never coming back." I kind of feel bad for her, but it's her

responsibility to not lose her pens.

Wait a second... yes! I'm back. I just remembered that I found a yellow pen months ago, on the same stretch of sidewalk where I found the book. I dug it out of the drawer I threw it in, and yes, it's the same brand of pen (Ascliot) as the blue one I found alongside the book. I still don't know what brand this is or where it's from, but I wonder if this yellow pen is the same one that Savanna lost? Do I currently have two of Savanna's lost pens, as well as her book, which may or may not also be lost? In a silly sort of way, I guess it makes sense that I'd have found two of her pens in the same place. It's the only place I know of where Savanna's lost things turn up. But that's not good reasoning. The only connection here is the brand and color. I'm sure there's more than one person who uses yellow Ascliot-brand pens, and people lose pens all the time.

Anyway, in chapter 11 we get the first major instance of Frederick showing off ghost powers. It was made clear before that he had them, but he hasn't used them much, outside of levitating small stacks of firewood. Here, though, he shows that he can turn invisible and pick up furniture, as well as a few other things. I'm adding these to my list of ghost rules, but the levitation has me curious. He's also been shown picking up objects in his hands. Why bother doing that if he can also levitate them? It's not like he has muscles he needs to exercise... or, at least, I think he doesn't. But he also didn't pick up anything heavier than an armchair. Given how this book is operating under different ghost rules than I'm familiar with, maybe he is limited by his strength or something like that.

Madame Alizah goes through a long and extended act of "exorcising" the ghost, and her methods include a few things that I recognize from pop culture and media. Things like lighting incense and waving about a certain symbol, although in this case it wasn't a cross, but something called a "deep eye." Most of her methods, though, were things I've never heard of before, and I

couldn't find any reference to them online that helped explain it. Interesting to note, though, is that everything in her act was looked upon with disdain and disapproval by Savanna, who said that she was just entirely full of it. It has me thinking, though... there are a few methods of purported "ghost removal" that I've heard of in the real world that have not been mentioned in this book so far. What would Savanna think of those, I wonder?

Actually, come to think of it, why would anyone need a spirit medium? Ghosts are not only well-established in this world, but also common enough that having one living in your house isn't terribly exceptional. Wouldn't it be common knowledge, how to deal with ghosts? But, then again, based on how Madame Alizah tries to con people by pretending to be a spirit medium, maybe not. A con that the common man can see through isn't a good con. And real spirit mediums must exist; Zoey is one, after all, and Madame Alizah's scam wouldn't work if people didn't think it could be legit. Perhaps ghost knowledge like what Savanna possesses isn't so common after all, despite the fact that ghosts are real. Hmm... here's the analogy: it's like how you'll still go the doctor if you have the flu, even though everyone knows what the flu is and you can handle it with rest and the proper nutrients. Another thought that's just occurred to me: we've only seen one ghost in the story. There's no real evidence to suggest that all ghosts are as... present as Frederick is. I suppose that spirit mediums might also do other things than what I think they would do. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call them spirit liaisons instead. You know what, I'm not going to fault the story on this one. I think I just wasn't thinking creatively enough.

Redford has another clairvoyant moment in this chapter where he foresees the outcome of the prank, but doesn't stop them from going through with it. The description was much the same as it has been before, but the difference, to me, between this scene and the previous scenes of

Redford seeing the future is that nobody else did anything to trigger it. It just kind of happened to him. In the previous instances of magic happening unintentionally, it seemed as though it was caused by other people. But here we see it just happening on its own. The other notable thing about this to me is that I wasn't at all confused by it. I'm finally beginning to understand this book on its own terms! The idea that magic could just happen on its own, without anyone doing anything specific to bring it on, makes sense now. Progress in my own mind at last.

Now, this entry is already long enough, but there is one more very important thing I need to discuss from chapter 10. This is about Vivi's drug addiction. She says that she was addicted to something called "lenportasil" for about a year, and tells him that the reason she finally was caught by her parents and brought here was because she and her then-boyfriend Agus were arrested for buying it. She also says that it's been a few years since she actually took any, because the cops cracked down hard on its distribution in the city she was living in, and that going to find more after so long was a really dumb idea. Frederick is extremely concerned to hear this, and asks if she's doing ok now, and more importantly, asks what she's going to do about her withdrawal. Vivi answers that she doesn't know, but she's sure she can figure something out. That's about all the information we get about it.

It goes without saying that lenportasil is not a real drug. I don't know what it is, and I don't know what makes it so bad. Now, fictional drugs are far from an unusual thing to have in a story, but this one is extremely interesting to me, because Savanna knows what it is, too. She also has a strong reaction to hearing that Vivi took it for a while, but she doesn't offer any explanation as to why it's bad either.

This whole situation is very puzzling. Lenportasil is not a real drug, and yet it's talked about as though I should already know what it is, and as though the author doesn't have to

explain it to me. Archaic writes about it in much the same way one would write about something like crack cocaine. So it not being explained is highly curious. Any author worth their salt would absolutely take the time to explain a fictional drug, especially if it's going to have a major impact on the plot, and while Arhic is not a perfect writer, her quality is still high enough that she wouldn't have included a fictional drug and not explained it. But explained it is not, and I'm left to figure out the details by myself.

Vivi has never shown any signs of poor physical health, not even at the very start, nor has her personality changed majorly over the course of the story, although her mood has picked up significantly. So the drug must not be in effect now, and the danger is probably from its withdrawal symptoms. But Vivi's been living here at the cottage for several months and has shown no signs of withdrawal, nor has she shown signs of wanting the drug more. No real drug has withdrawal symptoms this delayed, and if they were slight, it wouldn't be a big deal. One might think that the withdrawal has already happened, but the dialogue surrounding it just doesn't make that realistic. Frederick says, "What are you going to do about it?" to which Vivi replies, "I don't know. I'll think of something," and changes the subject quickly. This clearly shows that the withdrawal symptoms are yet to happen.

My point here is that all of this adds up into a situation where the *only* explanation is that prior context has clearly established the dangers of lenportasil. But that context does not exist in the book, and that's why this is so confusing. The explanation can't be that it was established in other books by this author, because Savanna is familiar with lenportasil, and I've already deduced that Savanna hasn't read Saldanji Arhic's other works. The explanation of the book being a personal project doesn't work here, either, because the author would still have to explain what the drug is and how it works, and the book is in far too complete a state for this to be a

realistic explanation. In fact, I'm starting to highly doubt the "personal project" theory in general, because it just seems incredibly unlikely given what else I've seen. It can't be from another book, either, because internet searches for it turn up nothing. I can't find any reference to lenportasil anywhere online or in other books. So what's the deal? What is lenportasil, why is it bad, and how does Savanna know about it? Why does the book expect me to know what it is when it's clearly something that the author invented and didn't tell me about until right now?

Of all the strange worldbuilding decisions in this book so far, this is far and away the most confusing. There is no explanation that I can think of that makes sense to me and is realistic. What the hell is going on here? I'm going to take a few days to puzzle this one out, and I'll come back with my results. There *must* be an explanation to this. I'll see you in a few days, hypothetical reader. As they say on the streets, this one's a doozy.

February 2, 2023

It's been a few days since I last wrote, and I regret to say that I've got no closer to a satisfying answer to my previous question. I can't think of any explanation that makes perfect sense. So either I'm missing some information, or Saldanji Arhic just had an unforgivable lapse and forgot to explain this plot-critical drug. Regardless, I think I just need to leave this for now and see if I can come up with something later.

I didn't spend the past three days on drugs, though. The school year just started up again at Atlinds, and I have classes to teach. I'm teaching the usual ANTH 101, as well as ANTH 2144 – Medieval Living. It's a class about everyday life in Medieval Europe, with specific focuses on England and France. Ordinarily I would write about the teaching experience and how my classes are going, but I'm starting to get the feeling that I'm going to want to show this journal to other

people so they can help me with the puzzles *Hearts Unbound* presents, so it may be best to refrain. But it's important to note because it will likely have an impact on how often I can update my journal. I'll try to keep to the same amount of page space used, though, just for the sake of not having to buy another journal to finish the story.

Today I will be speaking about chapters 12 and 13. In the previous journal entries I've sometimes said I don't have much to comment on, but here that's certainly not true. There's two moments of odd intrigue that I'd consider relatively small, and other than that it's all plot. But it's plot that's extremely worth talking about.

In chapter 12, Vivi is visited at the cottage by her mother, Mrs. LeJean. Unlike her father's visit, though, this one is not a surprise, as Portjus had told her the day before that her mother was coming. Their conversation overall goes better than the one Vivi had had with her father a few months prior in the sense that it doesn't end in a screaming match, but Mrs. LeJean asks about some things that make Vivi very obviously uncomfortable. She comments on Vivi's lack of direction, lack of motivation, difference from the rest of the family, and immaturity in ways that aren't really directly insulting but definitely are lacking tact. It's like she means to say that Vivi is making significant progress, but all she's really doing is underlining the inherent problems in her personality that caused her to be taken away and put in the cottage in the first place, while also saying that those problems are still present enough that freedom is still very much off the table. It didn't appear to be particularly plot-relevant, but Vivi's mother repeatedly changed the colors of various objects around the house. This annoyed Vivi, as well as Frederick, who was eavesdropping again.

One of the things Mrs. LeJean talks about is Vivi's lack of magical ability and how creative and artsy she used to be. This is a subject that Vivi seems to be particularly sensitive

about, as Vivi tries to get her to drop it very quickly, but not before Mrs. LeJean is able to lament the fact that she hasn't lived up to any of the potential she showed early in life and how "it's not becoming of a LeJean woman to not excel artistically." Vivi gets defensive, saying that she hasn't been able to muster any magic in years and that nobody ever asked if she wanted to be an artist, but Mrs. LeJean brushes it aside, telling her it's part of their family's tradition and that it'll surely happen at some point. This is another part of the conversation that is meant to encourage Vivi to explore her creative talents, but it just seems to end up making her feel worse about herself.

Like I mentioned earlier, Frederick overhears parts of this conversation too, but not the whole thing. This time, however, it wasn't an accident; when he realized that the visiting woman was Vivi's mother, he deliberately hid himself nearby so that he could listen in. From the narration, it's clear that he does not properly pick up on Vivi's reactions to what her mother says, so he draws false conclusions from the conversation. When her mother leaves, Vivi goes to her bedroom and asks to be left alone for a while, visibly upset. She takes out her escape plan again, seriously reconsidering her options. Chapter 12 ends there.

Chapter 13 starts with Frederick noticing that, since her mother's visit, Vivi has been in a rather bad mood, and he starts trying to think of ways to cheer her up. He remembers what her mother said about how she used to be so creative as a kid, and how all the women in their family have had great artistic ability. He also remembers what her father said about her immaturity, and how negatively she reacted to that, so he decides that maybe she could feel better about herself and stick it to her father a little bit if she had a chance to do some art again, get in touch with her childhood creativity, and by doing so be 'more of a LeJean woman.' He spends a few days building a small workshop area in the upper empty room of the house that she can use to do art.

Since he has no idea what kind of art she liked to do, he collects things from around the house and the surrounding woods, and asks Redford to secretly bring him art materials such as paints, brushes, markers, clay, canvas, scrap metals, and so on.

But when he shows Vivi the finished art room, she's very upset. She doesn't seem at all interested in trying art again, and nothing that Frederick says can change her mind. Confused, Frederick accidentally lets slip that he was eavesdropping on her conversation with her mom, and Vivi blows up at him. They have a blazing row, yelling and insulting each other. Vivi never asked to live with an old-fashioned, narrow-minded ghost who can't wrap his head around the fact that other people need different things. Frederick was forced to live with a self-destructive childish rich brat who never worked a day in her life. Vivi is ungrateful, selfish, lazy, and so focused on herself that she can't recognize when people are trying to help her. Frederick is pompous, rude, obnoxious, and never considers what other people want. Vivi's life would have been better if her family had torn down the creaky old cottage and replaced it with something actually livable. Frederick would have been able to live here in peace if Vivi and her uptight butler hadn't had to come barging into his private property. Vivi never had a choice to stay here; her dad dragged her in from her previous life. Well, Frederick says, maybe it would have been better for both of them if she'd just stayed in that broken-down druggie apartment with that shithead Agus and *died* there!

Both of them are taken aback by this; Frederick had never meant to say something like that. Vivi runs downstairs, sobbing, and Frederick, immediately feeling terrible about it, can only stare after her in shock at what he'd done. Later on, he is confronted by Portjus, who hasn't been able to get her to see or speak to him, and he demands to know what Frederick said to her to put her into such a state. Frederick doesn't respond and just goes up to the attic to sit and think about

what he did. That night, it begins to snow. Chapter 13 ends there.

These chapters were extremely heavy on the emotion. I have to say that there are a few tropes employed here that I don't really like much. The part where Frederick and Vivi fight and it creates a divide between them is something I've heard called the "third act disagreement," and it's very common in movies nowadays. It almost always feels quite contrived, and the same is true here. I will say that the thing they fought over isn't necessarily illegitimate, but this is many months into their living together, and Vivi and Frederick were starting to really get close. This doesn't feel like a real argument two adults would have. I also get that Vivi isn't as mature as she perhaps ought to be, but she's mature enough to talk about what's upset her in a situation like this. This part of the book also used the misunderstood conversation trick, or as Savanna called it in her comment, because she didn't like it either, "the eavesdropping game." This is almost more egregious than the third act disagreement, because this is absolutely not something an emotionally mature adult would do.

However, despite that, despite my complaints about *why* it happened and the purpose it serves in the plot, when looking at it in a vacuum, the actual argument that Vivi and Frederick have is quite well written. But before I can get into that, I want to get into Vivi's discussion with her mother and what happened there, because it has a lot of critical information in it.

For starters, Vivi's mom is a difficult woman to talk to. She constantly frames their conversation based on Vivi's past failures and how poorly she did when living on her own. However, compared to how she was when talking to her father, Vivi shows remarkable restraint. It's clear that she still resents the way her parents took her away from living on her own and placed her in this cottage, but it's possible that Vivi is starting to agree that she wasn't living well on her own. But the stated reason, as said by Vivi to Frederick near the end of the chapter, is that

her mother doesn't tend to listen to criticism, so it's very difficult to tell her she's wrong. I have to say, I get what Vivi is going through; my grandfather acted kind of like this. Considering how she acted when her father brought up the same subjects, Vivi's patience with her mother is actually quite commendable.

Speaking of those subjects, Mrs. LeJean says that Vivi was showing artistic talent as early as 4, building surprisingly detailed models with the "Kiddiklay" they bought for her. I don't know what "Kiddiklay" is, but I'm going to assume that it's a fictional brand of child's modeling clay, similar to Play-Doh. Mrs. LeJean then bemoans the fact that Vivi hasn't picked up art again in a long time. Vivi responds by saying that she hasn't been able to use magic in years, but she quickly cuts herself off and instead says that she's not interested in art anymore. Mrs. LeJean then talks about how all LeJean women are skilled artists, and makes a weird comment about "we excel in feminine matters," and it sort of goes off from there into nitpicking and, to be honest, the rest of it isn't so valuable. But from this segment here, I get quite a lot of information. I had to re-read it a couple times to digest everything, but there's a lot here.

First, it's very clear now that Vivi used to be able to use magic. This was hinted at a few chapters ago when she talked with her father, but it wasn't explicitly stated until now. So that's a nice bit of clarification.

Second, Vivi's art is related to her magical abilities. I actually remember that this was somewhat touched on earlier, when Mrs. LeJean was magically changing the colors of objects and when it was said that Vivi's grandma built Portjus. I also realized that all of the women in the book who are related to Vivi have magical abilities related to art or creativity somehow. Her mom has some kind of color thing going on, her grandmother makes constructs, and Vivi has her confirmed but unspecified artistic ability. Given that her dad said she was going to "follow in her

grandmother's footsteps," I might assume that Vivi can also build constructs. Does this mean that magical ability is somehow genetic? That would make sense.

Third, Vivi's art talent – and therefore, her magic talent – manifested at the age of four, which Mrs. LeJean says was "right about when we expected." This caught my eye because it contrasts sharply with Zoey's magical ability, which is manifesting in her tweens but is still seen as early. At first, I thought this might be another mysterious and unexplained topic, but now I'm not so sure. Art is a much more kid-friendly topic than death and ghosts are; it would make perfect sense if powers relating to more mature subject matters often develop later into a person's life.

And fourth, Vivi hasn't been able to draw on her magic power for a long time. Savanna made a note here, where she suggests that Vivi's mother doesn't know about Vivi's prior drug problem. I haven't talked much about Savanna's notes here in this entry so far, but that's because she's been just mostly criticizing Mrs. LeJean for being stuck-up. But this note here makes me think that there's some connection between a drug problem and the lessening of one's magical ability. This makes sense to me, too; a drug addiction would weaken all aspects of a person, wouldn't it?

Now that we know all of this, we can make sense of Vivi's argument with Frederick in the art room and why it went the way it did. Vivi is upset at Frederick for multiple reasons. One, because he was eavesdropping on her conversations with her mother and father. Two, because he's apparently siding with her mother in the argument, implying that she should do as her parents say and pick up art again. Three, his gesture touches on an insecurity of hers, which is her inability to do art. It's not extremely clear that she has this insecurity, but the fact of the matter is that she *does* want to do art, but she feels like that would be giving in to her parents'

wishes by following family tradition, and she also feels bad about not being able to draw upon her magic to do art. As such, Frederick's gesture comes across as simultaneously patronizing, inconsiderate, and insensitive, to the point where Vivi can't even properly recognize that he was trying to do something nice for her. To be honest, I didn't fully understand the extent of Vivi's reaction at first, but I re-read the beginning of the argument after finishing the chapter, as well as Vivi's discussions with her mom and dad, and was able to figure out what was going through her head. This is also why the argument goes off the rails so quickly. Frederick doesn't respond very well to being criticized, especially when he believes the criticism is invalid; we've been shown this before in the book. I'm not sure how clearly I brought it up when it happened, and I apologize to you, hypothetical reader, if I didn't do that properly, but it has happened a few times. When combined with the "eavesdropping game" factor, as Savanna called it, this is a very painful argument to read, in a good way. I have to compliment Saldanji Arhic's ability to make the argument feel very human, where both characters aren't fully wrong or right, but both of them are going too far with what they say next. Despite my great problems with the reasons it happened and the purposes it serves in the plot, this argument was very well written, and it was one of my favorite exchanges to read. I wanted to shout at both of them to stop yelling at each other and talk this out calmly, and that's a sign of a good misunderstanding, I think. How funny that chapter 13 is the one where everything goes wrong! I wonder if that was intentional.

Now, I'm going to briefly touch on the two small moments of intrigue I mentioned earlier before closing out this entry. The first is that Mrs. LeJean also travels to the cottage via portal. The process is identical to the previous time: a whirring, popping sound precedes the portal opening, and she calls someone for the portal to be opened again when she leaves. I had honestly almost forgotten about the previous portal, so it surprised me to see it again. This time,

remembering how the previous scene had raised questions without answers, I read the portal-opening segment extremely closely, to see if anything interesting was hidden between the lines, but unfortunately, no special attention was paid to the portal. It's treated exactly as ordinarily as all the other magic in the book is. This makes me think that perhaps there isn't something to be noticed there after all. If there was, wouldn't it make more sense to make the portal-opening extremely conspicuous?

The second is found in the one line that Frederick says to Vivi at the end of their argument: that she should have died in her druggie apartment with her abusive boyfriend. I'm wondering about the weight of Frederick saying that. Obviously this is an unkind thing to say in any scenario, but in a world where the dead aren't necessarily completely gone, and especially coming from a ghost, does that carry a different meaning? Do ghosts see being dead as a bad thing, then? That idea doesn't really make a lot of sense to me. Frederick doesn't have any delusions about his position in the world, and he doesn't seem to be sensitive about being dead. It's just a fact about him. Is there some kind of drama between ghosts and living people that I'm missing here? Or am I just overthinking this, and it should be read in the most obvious way? I'm really not sure. But I've added all of this to my list of ghost rules, which is quickly becoming a list of ghost speculation, and I'll come back to it later.

These chapters answered a lot of looming questions I had about Vivi and the plot, and even gave me some stuff I think might help answer some of the deeper questions I have about the book in general. We're nearing the end of the book now; only about 5 chapters or so to go.

Oh, yes, before I forget: Savanna's pen changed color again halfway through chapter 13. I think that was the shortest amount of time any of her pens have lasted. But the new one is blue, which, if you remember back when I first found the book, was the color of the pen I found

alongside it. Maybe we're nearing the part where Savanna was when she lost the book? I hadn't considered that she might not have finished the book before losing it. I'd hate to lose her notes. Originally they annoyed me, but now I've gotten quite used to them.

### February 4, 2023

I only have time for a short entry today. I've been invited to my parents' house for a visit, and they live several hours away by car, so I'll be spending the rest of the weekend there. I don't get to see my parents very often, so it's a welcome invitation. And I suppose it's just as well that I don't have time for a longer entry; I only read one chapter between the previous entry and this one, and I don't really have that much to say about Chapter 14. That's not to say that there's nothing interesting about it, but... well, you'll see.

It's now been one month since I found the book, and in all that time not a single person has come around looking for it, nor has there been any other indication that whoever lost is searching for it. My posters, it seems, did not help. I think at this point it's safe to say that it won't find its way back into the owner's hands without me doing something about it myself... somehow. I still have no leads. Rest assured, though, that if I learn anything about where this book comes from, I'll act on it immediately.

Chapter 14 begins with Frederick waking up and resolving to apologize properly to Vivi. Oh, yes, I don't recall if I wrote this before, but Frederick sleeps in the attic. There's no deep reason to it; there's a bed up there, and he prefers it to the lower floors. I personally was surprised to see that a ghost would need sleep at all, but Savanna didn't comment on it, so I suppose it must be normal enough. Anyway, when he goes down to her room, he finds that Vivi is gone. He searches the whole premises, but she's nowhere to be found. She didn't leave a note,

took most of her belongings, and there's no trace of where she could have gone. She must have left in the middle of the night, since any footprints she might have left have been covered by the snow. Out of ideas and very, very afraid, Frederick comes back inside and suddenly realizes that Portjus is still here, which must mean that she's still around. Swallowing his pride, he goes to Portjus and tells him that Vivi has run off.

Portjus is slightly concerned, but says she can't have gone far, as he would have detected if she left the boundaries of the town. Frederick, frustrated by the construct's limited emotional range, refuses to calm down and insists that Portjus go out to look for her. Portjus tells him that he can't sense her location or actions while she's still inside the boundaries set by her father, and that Vivi is not so immature that she can't handle herself in a small semi-rural town.

Redford arrives, and after they tell him the situation, Frederick asks him to find Vivi. Redford says he can't control his power like that, but then admits that he's never actually tried, and when they convince him to give it a shot, he's able to trigger his clairvoyance and sees that Vivi is somewhere on the far end of town and in really bad shape. Portjus, now convinced that she does actually need help, runs off to rescue her, and Frederick and Redford have a conversation about his feelings for Vivi, with Frederick telling him everything about the argument and admitting that he's grown to love her... kind of. It's a strange, incomplete sort of admittance.

Portjus eventually comes back carrying Vivi, who had suddenly started experiencing withdrawal symptoms as she tried to run away and collapsed in an alleyway. They put her in her bed and call for a doctor. Chapter 14 ends there.

Almost everything I have to say is plot related, and even then I don't really have many comments of my own. This chapter is just fine overall. The first thing I'd like to comment on is

Redford's appearance and the use of his powers in this chapter. This is the first time the book has actually directly acknowledged the fact that Redford has clairvoyant abilities, and I can't say I love how it was done. Up until this point, the other characters have barely acknowledged that he has these abilities, and it's been unclear if they even think he can actually see the future. But suddenly, when he shows up here, Frederick is certain he can do it right away and there's no questions asked about it. This is a pretty sudden switch in attitude. There's also the problem of Redford claiming he can't control his divination, and then immediately being able to control it when he tries. It's just extremely plot device-y, as though he only showed up because the book wanted him to solve the problem. And Savanna didn't like it, either; she also complained that Redford felt more like a plot device than a character. Maybe romance novels are allowed some wiggle room when it comes to camp and convenience, but this rubs me the wrong way regardless. Saldanji Arhic has been a better writer than this for the rest of the book. And to be honest, I'm not sure I'm willing to call this a romance novel anymore. It really feels like a more regular YA novel.

The other things I noticed were a lot smaller. When Frederick discovers Vivi has vanished, he says, "Not again..." I don't know what this means. Maybe he's had a previous roommate who also vanished on him without a word? I assume the plot will come back to this later. And also, Frederick's confession to Redford about his feelings for Vivi was pretty stilted and awkward, like he's uncomfortable saying it out loud and doesn't want to say it explicitly. This is pretty standard relationship stuff in a novel, I think. We're probably going to get a proper confession later, most likely when Vivi is back at the house and conscious again.

I'm trying to remember if there was anything else small, before we get to the one moment of proper interest. When Redford says he can't control his powers, Savanna makes a joke about

relating to that? I get what she means, in a loose sort of way, I suppose... no, that's not interesting. Whatever. Let's move on.

Speaking of Savanna, this is the really interesting part of this chapter. She took massive issue with how Frederick was written here. I thought that this was overall a satisfying chapter with good character development for Frederick and some nice tension, and it also included some character interactions that weren't just Frederick and Vivi, which is rare. It's not exceptional literature or anything, and it has the plot device problem I mentioned earlier, but it's good enough. Savanna, on the other hand, apparently thought this chapter was extremely "unrealistic," and had major complaints about how Frederick was written as a ghost. Those complaints didn't really make a whole lot of sense to me; it seems like Savanna thinks Frederick is not supposed to be able to change in this way. She also says he's "unbound," whatever that means. Actually, she left a large note about it at the end of the chapter. I'll transcribe that here. I'll use her blue pen for it, too.

"ok no. this is not realistic. he's unbound! he's never apologized for anything before. even him feeling bad about it is unrealistic, but this??? this change is impossible. and nobody notices! I mean sure he seemed to be a little bit attracted to her at the start but their first meeting was an argument. they got along better because Vivi calmed down a bit. Fred simply cannot be changing like this"

That's what she said. The strangeness of complaining that a ghost's actions are "unrealistic" aside, I had never expected someone to take issue with the fact that a character develops and grows over time. I also don't know what it means that Frederick is "unbound" and why that would have an impact on it, but for now I'm just going to take that as a term that defines some kind of rule for a ghost, and frame my thinking that way. The closest I can figure is,

unbound ghosts can't grow and change as people? I agree that that's strange, but not in the way Savanna is implying. Why include a character who literally cannot change? It works better for the story that he *can* do it. Is Savanna just wrong about this one? Or is the author taking liberties to make the story better, and Savanna really is complaining about the inaccuracy of it? I would almost be tempted to say that it doesn't matter much, but the word "unbound" is in the title, so it might be important.

Oh, my, look at that. It seems I can't make a short entry even when I want to. This is already a full page longer than I'd planned on. I need to get on the road if I want to reach my parents' house by dinner.

February 8, 2023

Isn't it odd how sometimes February can feel even colder than January, even though we're past the coldest parts of winter? I think it may be because February is often windy where I live. I don't mind too much, but Checkers hates it. He refuses to go outside for a walk if it's too cold outside. I have to cajole him into putting on this funny little coat that keeps him warm before he'll go out, and he doesn't like wearing the coat either. But he loves the action camera now, and he wants me to put it on him every time we go for a walk. He's such a strange little dog when it comes to walks. He never gives me any trouble at any other time. He's always well behaved, he doesn't bark much, and in fact he's actually rather lazy and prefers sleeping in his bed under my desk over playing. But when we go for a walk, he's suddenly very particular about how we do it. We're lucky that my town doesn't scatter salt on the streets when they get icy. I've heard that the salt can be harmful to dogs if it gets on their paw pads, but Checkers would probably mutiny if I tried to put booties on him.

Anyway, I'm reporting on chapter 15 today. This chapter contains the climax of the story, and as such doesn't introduce a whole lot of new ideas. It wraps up a couple of loose ends, though, so that was nice to see.

Chapter 15 begins with Vivi unconscious and in very, very poor condition. She's suffering from acute withdrawal from lenportasil, as well as severe hypothermia from being face-down in an alley in February for several hours. The doctor from town says that he can order medicine to ease her withdrawal symptoms, but it will take a week or two for it to come in and that the only real cure will be allowing her to recover on her own over the course of a month or two. However, he says that he's done what he can for her now, and that unless something happens to make her condition worse, she should pull through. Frederick stands by, miserable and terrified, blaming himself for the whole situation. Portjus sends a message to Mr. and Mrs. LeJean about Vivi's condition, telling them that they've already got a doctor on the case and that once Vivi wakes up, they can come and see her.

The next day, Portjus realizes that they're running low on groceries and asks Frederick to keep an eye on Vivi while he goes out quickly to get some. Shortly after he leaves, Madame Alizah, having heard that Vivi is doing poorly, comes to the house, pretending to be concerned about Vivi. She heard about her condition in the bar in town; one of the doctor's assistants was having a drink with friends and she overheard her talking about the situation. In actuality, she's come to exact her revenge on the group by trying to banish Frederick, thereby saving Vivi from his "evil influence" and earning the gratitude of the LeJean family forever. There's a big confrontation where Zoey tries to calm down her mother, Madame Alizah says some really hurtful and ignorant things, Frederick declares his love for Vivi, and Vivi wakes up to chime in with some choice remarks of her own.

It ends with Portjus coming back, declaring Madame Alizah a threat to the family's wellbeing, and throwing her out headfirst into the snow, telling her that if she comes back again he'll be forced to take drastic action. She continues to rant as she leaves. Frederick and Vivi make up, but Vivi passes out again shortly afterward. Zoey hangs around for a bit before suddenly running off, afraid of what her mother will do if she's home late. The chapter ends there.

There are two main sources of intrigue here to me. One is that we actually learn quite a bit more about lenportasil. Not much is said directly, but here's a quote from the book:

"The doctor frowned. "Ordinarily we use other, weaker dampeners to mitigate the coming-down from lenportasil, but they're not effective once the drug has already worn off. I can order some other medicine to loosen her up a bit and that'll help her regain her strength faster, although that'll take time to come in."

"How long?" Frederick asked nervously.

"A week or two," the doctor replied. "I've done everything I can for her already. She's stable and, barring unforeseen complications, she'll probably pull through. The only real cure for acute magic poisoning is letting the body become re-accustomed to magic over time. It'll probably take a month or so before she's back to normal."

The first thing I noticed is that he refers to "dampeners." Given the context, it's fair to assume that lenportasil is also one of these "dampeners," and it might also be a particularly strong one. The second thing is that apparently the drug has something to do with magic. Based on the name, my guess is that the drug prevents, or "dampens," magical ability somehow. This

would explain why it's been implied that Vivi could at one point use magic, but lost that power. Her taking lenportasil nullified her magical power. And when it wore off, it caused severe damage to her body.

The thing I don't understand about this is how the drug works. She was on it for a while, then she stopped, but the effects lingered for a long time, until eventually wearing off. I'm no pharmacist, but I don't think drugs typically linger in the human body and then cause their side effects all at once years later. But I also don't really think it's terribly important. What matters for the story is that it does that, regardless of how realistic it is. Also, it's a magic drug. It can really work however it needs to. I can't help but wonder how this scene might have landed differently if I had known about what lenportasil did before. Savanna knew what lenportasil was, after all, so she must have known a scene like this was coming.

Speaking of Savanna, she is of the opinion that Vivi should be dead. The full extent of the withdrawal symptoms are not made clear, but the doctor mentions toxic shock syndrome and anemia, both caused by "acute magic poisoning." And this is on *top* of the severe hypothermia from passing out in an alley in February. I don't know exactly what magic poisoning does or what causes it (perhaps it has something to do with the "dampening" effects of lenportasil wearing off?) but if it causes toxic shock syndrome and anemia, then I have to agree with Savanna. Vivi should absolutely be dead. Now, it's possible that in this book, where magic and ghosts are real, people are simply more durable than in the real world, but quite honestly I'm more willing to assume that Vivi survived because the book needs her to. This is what people call "plot armor."

I have mixed opinions on Madame Alizah as a villain. For example, her appearance in this chapter. Despite being exposed as a fraud, Madame Alizah continues to act as though she's

genuine, even in the company of people who all know better. The manner in which she plans to ‘banish’ Frederick is not clear, and it doesn’t seem as though Frederick takes her threat seriously, so her insistence on keeping up the facade is strange. Oh, yes, I should mention some of the things she says about Frederick. She calls him an “evil spirit,” a “demon,” and a “poltergeist,” which are terms I recognize, but she also accuses him of “draining the humanity of this household” and “bringing in the cold of the grave,” as well as calling him various other things that are not supernatural terms, such as “treacherous,” “vile,” “horrible,” and “ugly.” I did get the impression, based on Fred’s reactions, that the things she says to him are in some way bigoted and/or ignorant, as well as just plain old hurtful, and it’s also worth noting that when Vivi wakes up, she reacts similarly. Obviously it’s not so interesting to call someone ugly, but the rest of that stuff is intriguing. One has to wonder what Madame Alizah has against ghosts. Perhaps this is an instance of blind hate, or perhaps Madame Alizah is simply unstable. It’s hard for me to say if she’s a good villain or not. She certainly puts the reader on-edge when she appears because you just know that she’s going to make everyone else upset and cause problems, and that’s a valuable quality for a villain to have. You should be saying, “Oh, no!” when the villain shows up. But she’s never much of a threat to the main characters, and her motivations and much of her character are underexplored, and it ends up making her feel more like a character that doesn’t exist outside of the scenes she’s in.

I also want to comment on the moment in which Vivi wakes up. She does so just in time to hear Frederick declare that he loves her, but she’s still very weak; she speaks mostly in out-of-breath sentence fragments, although she’s able to muster enough energy to say some real insults to Madame Alizah. She then reciprocates Frederick’s confession back to him, which could be either sweet or shoehorned depending on your opinion of how quickly she should have

gotten over the argument they had before. I personally think it's more on the sweet side, but it's definitely still a little cheap. Anyway, I'm wondering *why* she woke up. If she was in such bad condition, shouldn't she remain unconscious for a while longer? Part of me thinks that she woke up just for the sake of creating a moment. But then again, magic exists. Maybe there's some kind of force going on here, where it actually was the power of love that woke her up.

Ordinarily I would have looked for some comment from Savanna to see if there's an explanation for a moment like that, but I'm sad to report that Savanna's comments ended halfway through this chapter. And a very abrupt ending it was, too. It happened just as Madame Alizah was declaring her intention to banish Frederick. Halfway through a sentence insulting Madame Alizah, there's a smudged scribble and then a pen line that goes off across the page, and no other notes after that. I looked ahead a little bit, too; no notes for the rest of the book, either. It's as though she was in the middle of writing a line when the book was knocked out of her hand, and she never opened it up again before I found it.

This is incredibly interesting to see, because it might confirm my earlier theory that Savanna is a real person, and not just a construction of the author used to make the book feel like it had been owned by someone else. The way I see it, if the notes had smudged elsewhere in the book, then it all being just an editing trick would be more likely, but the fact that it *only* happened here, where the sentence is cut off and there's an ink line going partway across the page, gives the strong impression that the book was actually being written in by someone when this scribble happened.

Of course, I've considered the possibility that the author made it that way deliberately, also as a trick to make the notes feel more real, but it just doesn't seem likely to me at all. This is a really weird place to end the notes on purpose, when Savanna was obviously about to launch

into a rant. And, again, the book hasn't gotten meta in that way at all. It would make *far* more sense to have her notes continue through the whole book and *not* interrupt them, as well as being much more effective for the purposes the notes would serve. No, the most likely explanation is that Savanna is a real person who really wrote in this book. And I think I even have the pen she wrote the notes in – it's the blue one without the cap I found alongside the book. How did that all happen, and how did I find them? I... do not know. I have no ideas as to how right now. And I also can't say for sure Savanna *isn't* just an imaginary person. It being unlikely doesn't at all make it impossible. I'd need more proof.

Say, I've just had an idea. I know that the police have an ink-dating thing they can do as a part of the forensic process. They use it to determine the age of ink on paper, and from there they learn all kinds of useful things. Obviously this is a lot less important than solving a crime, but I'm interested enough to take a look anyway. I'd like to compare the age of the ink in the book to the age of the ink Savanna wrote her notes in, and if Savanna's are younger, then that means she's a real person. That could be the proof I'm looking for. I'll look into getting that done.

Anyway, the upshot of all of this is that, for the remaining chapters of this book, I'm on my own. I won't get any more clues from Savanna about ghosts, magic, or anything. It's unfortunate, really; I've started to very much appreciate the insights of someone who has experience with the kinds of things I don't have. But there's nothing to be done about it. Without any way to find Savanna, it's not like I can talk to her in person. I'll just have to finish the book and puzzle through the mysteries without her help.

February 11, 2023

The school year is beginning very smoothly. The add/drop period is almost over and nobody has requested to move out of my classes, which is quite heartening. Not that I would be concerned if someone *did* ask to leave. It happens often enough. But I always feel a little bit more confident about my classes when everyone who signs up wants to stay.

I've actually found this journal very helpful in keeping my work organized. By writing down all of my thoughts about the book here, I can remove them from my mind and focus more effectively on other things. But that's not really much of a revelation; isn't that the very reason journaling is recommended? To keep your thoughts organized and remove unwanted chatter from your mind? It does make me wonder what might have happened if I hadn't started journaling. I guess I'm just lucky this book isn't some valuable text from some unknown civilization, or I might have been sucked in much harder!

Anyway, I'm going to report on chapter 16 today. This is a long chapter, so it could easily become a very long entry, but luckily it mostly answers questions instead of raising them. Good! I would be concerned if the ending of a book raised more questions than it answered. Here's my plot summary.

At the beginning of chapter 16, Mr. and Mrs. LeJean come to the cottage together, along with Grandma, to see how Vivi is doing. Presumably this happens a non-insignificant amount of time later, as Vivi has now regained enough strength to not pass out mid-conversation. Vivi explains everything to them, although she avoids the subject of Frederick, whom she still hasn't introduced them to yet. Partway through her story, Redford arrives, and conveniently patches up some holes in her story, albeit seemingly unintentionally.

Her parents, much to her surprise, are very supportive, saying that they are glad she's

finally opening up to them and that all they really cared about was her safety. They admit to knowing about the drug problem all along, because that's what she and Agus got arrested for, but they didn't talk about it because they knew that there wasn't anything they could do to help it along. Her father says she's finally becoming a mature young woman, which Vivi finds a little patronizing but is still pleased to hear, and her mother says that she's just glad that her daughter is on the mend, although judging by how the handbag she was holding was changing colors rapidly, she may have been a lot more concerned than she let on. They ask if Redford is her new boyfriend, but Redford laughs and tells them that he's just her friend.

Although Vivi is glad her parents visited and that they are seemingly going to chill out on controlling her life, she wants some time alone, so she has Redford distract them by offering to show them a great nearby hiking trail. Parents love hiking. However, Grandma comes back into the house just a moment later, saying she's "too old to be traipsing about in the snow with some empty-headed hick boy." To Vivi's enormous surprise, Grandma asks about Frederick, and as if on cue, Frederick comes in from the woods. He's shocked to see Grandma, and the full story comes out.

Grandma lived in the cottage when she was Vivi's age, because she wanted to practice her art, and she had had a relationship with Frederick, much like Vivi did now. But their relationship fell apart when Grandma's artwork started to become hugely successful, and Grandma was forced to move away by other members of her family so that she could better capitalize on her work. One day, Frederick had come down to find the cottage empty, with only a note explaining where Grandma had gone. Not having the courage to say goodbye to Frederick properly, Grandma says, has always been her biggest regret. She didn't tell anyone else in her family about Frederick because she was afraid that they'd try to exorcize him from the house,

since they might think he was haunting the house, and even if they knew he wasn't, they'd still want him out of the way.

It's also explained that Portjus had originally been meant to be a body for Frederick to bind to so that he could be corporeal, but Grandma had been unable to finish it in time. He wouldn't have been able to inhabit the body anyway, though, because a proper medium is required for that sort of thing, and they didn't have one around at the time. This is why Frederick always seemed to resent Portjus; in Frederick's eyes, Portjus represented the failure of their love and her abandonment of him.

Frederick is glad to see Vivi's grandmother again, though it's a bittersweet reunion due to their history and the fact that Frederick is now in love with Vivi. Grandma supports their love fully, though, and gives them her blessing. Chapter 16 ends with Vivi's family departing and wishing Vivi a swift recovery.

Now, as I said before, this chapter is primarily focused on explaining previously unexplained things in the plot and wrapping up some loose ends. For a quick re-cap, we have Frederick's history with Portjus (and I suppose Vivi's grandmother, too, although that part of it wasn't really touched upon before), the true motivations of Vivi's parents, and Vivi's subsequent acceptance of their wishes. Not a whole lot, in retrospect, but it's still important. I do have some issues to raise, though.

First, the insight we gain into the minds of Vivi's parents. Up until this point, it seemed as though they only wanted her to remain under their control, acting like a "good girl" and doing as they say. But when they arrive, they are only asking about her wellbeing, and when Vivi opens up to them about everything that's happened, they thank her for being honest with them and are glad that she's recognized why her past actions were unhealthy. Mrs. LeJean says something very

interesting here:

“‘Oh, your rebellion wasn’t the problem, sweet,’ Vivi’s mother said, clutching Vivi’s hand. ‘To stray is your wont. But you sought satisfaction in distancing yourself from us, and by doing so we saw you distance yourself from your passions, thrills, and talents. You hurt yourself, sweet, and that was the real danger. That’s why we had to step in.’

Vivi sighed. She hadn’t thought about it like that before... but she had to admit that her mother was right.”

It’s not hard to parse, but essentially what she’s saying here is that the problem was never that Vivi was rebellious, but instead it was that in her attempts to rebel, she was hurting herself, doing things she didn’t want to do and abandoning her passions. Mr. LeJean then tells Vivi that he hopes she’ll start having fun again now that “the worst is over.” Vivi feels a little bit patronized by the conversation, but she understands what her parents mean now. They’re essentially giving her her freedom again, now that they’re satisfied with her growth.

I’m not really sure how to feel about this whole thing, from a writing perspective. On the one hand, we’re being told that Vivi’s parents did have these good intentions from the start, but they undermined their own cause because of their difficulty in communicating with their daughter. The book isn’t trying to portray them as having secretly been planning some grand reveal of goodness, but rather as people with good intentions who struggle with preoccupations. That’s a very human way of writing a character, and I find it quite interesting. On the other hand, though, the emotional understanding of the scene feels a bit forced, and I’m not sure where they got the evidence that Vivi is mature to their liking now. How do they know Vivi understands

them now, and how does Vivi know that *they* actually understand her? They've spent the whole book at-odds, and now we're just expected to accept this resolution? Look, YA novels are allowed some level of hand-waving, but this borders on egregious.

I've also got issues with Frederick's backstory, and they're also writing issues. As nice as it is to learn more about the backstory of Frederick and to get a couple answers to some standing questions, the writing here is iffy. Despite the fact that they've been present since the beginning of the book, the plot points in this section feel ultimately kind of inconsequential, because the relationship between Vivi and Frederick isn't majorly changed by it. The questions answered here are "why don't Frederick and Portjus talk to each other?" and "why didn't anyone tell Vivi about Frederick?", but both of those questions weren't exactly pressing anymore. Frederick has *already* talked to Portjus, so that barrier is broken, and whether or not people know about Frederick hasn't really been important for a long time, since Madame Alizah is the only character who appears to bear any ill will towards ghosts, and she's the villain. It just kind of falls flat. Also, didn't the LeJean family have the house renovated at some point? How did they not find out about Frederick when that happened? That's a plot hole for sure.

Speaking of ghosts, this chapter contains some major clues towards the intricacies of ghosts. I'm already sorely missing Savanna's notes; it's much more difficult to parse this stuff on my own, and the knowledge that there *is* someone out there who could lead me towards the truth makes it all the more difficult to come up with an explanation I find satisfactory. However, I've done my best.

First, the exact implications of Frederick inhabiting a body are unclear. From what Grandma says, he would have been able to interact with things physically again, but the details of that and the process by which Frederick 'inhabits' the body are unexplained. And he was sort

of able to interact with things physically anyway, so the importance of such a thing is of dubious weight. I suppose that, by inhabiting a body, he'd be *fully* physical and would follow human laws of physics, instead of the specific ones that apply only to ghosts?

I did notice, however, that they say he would have “bound” to the body. I remember that term coming up in Savanna’s notes earlier. My guess for this situation is that an “unbound” ghost is one that does not have a body, and a “bound” ghost is one who does. Savanna seemed to think that an “unbound” ghost can’t change and grow as a person, so maybe that’s a big advantage of binding, too? I could see that working as an explanation.

Vivi’s grandma also says that if her family members had known about Frederick, they would have tried to exorcize him, either on the grounds that he’s haunting the place or that he’s trespassing. Vivi asks how they could have gotten away with that, since Frederick owns the house, and Grandma says that while that’s true, the LeJeans own the land the house is on and would have the right to evict him if they chose. This is really interesting to read. I had never considered the legal status of a ghost, and how the law might treat them as citizens, but finding out that they actually do have some form of citizenry makes a couple things make sense. I remember Frederick being upset at being accused of haunting the house way back in chapter 3, as well as at other places throughout the book, and saying that the house is his. So, ghosts are apparently legal citizens in this book, and can do things like own property and be evicted. But if you can just evict them, why bother with an exorcism? Are they different, and if so, how? I can’t say these are particularly important questions, but it’s still interesting.

One final note. I got in contact with my local police station and inquired about ink dating. They told me that they can do it, but it’ll be expensive, and it’ll probably take a while. The price tag gave me pause, but I double checked my upcoming plans and decided that if I really care

about it, I can afford to buy an ink-dating. Once I've finished the book, which will probably happen within a week, I'll send it to them with instructions on what I want them to date: the regular text in the book, and each different section of Savanna's notes. I have no qualms on sending the book to them; nobody ever responded to my posters about the lost book, which I put up weeks ago, so I'm fairly certain that nobody in town is looking for it. After those results come back, well... I don't know what will happen. Maybe nothing.

February 14, 2023

Valentine's Day is an interesting day for me. It's a holiday I like very much, because of what it promises to other people. I'm currently single, so I have nobody to celebrate it with. I have many friends who say that, when they were single, this holiday was painful for them, because all it did was remind them of what they didn't have. Which makes it all the more strange to them that, being divorced like I am, I should like Valentine's Day so much.

But I don't see it as being so strange. Len and I don't have any bad feelings between us. We just realized we didn't work well as a couple. I saw him just the other day, actually, while I was walking Checkers at the park. He's not around much, since his work has him traveling so much, so it was nice to catch up with him. He told me he had to go to London to negotiate a deal to sell their newest model in the UK, and it took a surprisingly long time, so he's hoping to get a bit of relaxation while he's back in town. I'm going to have dinner with him at some point in the next week, probably with a few other friends as well.

I don't think I've mentioned many of my other friends in this journal. I'll probably keep it that way, to be honest. This journal isn't exclusively about *Hearts Unbound*, I can write anything I want to write in it, but at this point I've dedicated enough of the journal to the book

that I feel strange talking about my personal life in it for long.

Speaking of the book, I'm excited to report on the last two chapters today. I've finished the book! This entry is going to be mostly plot synopsis and notes about the plot, as well as my overall thoughts on the book as a work of literature. I do have a couple more questions that the book never answered, but I'm going to save those for a different entry. I'd like a bit more time to think about them. Here's the summary of the ending.

As chapter 17 begins, winter gives way to spring and Vivi slowly recovers from her violent withdrawal attack. She and Frederick spend all of their time together, and they are visited often by Redford. One day, after about a month of not seeing or hearing from her, Zoey comes to the cottage and asks if she can stay for a while. She tells everyone that her mother was arrested for "a bunch of stuff," including criminal fraud, impersonation of a necromancer, property damage, harassment, child abuse/neglect, etc... and that the police said that she's not allowed to have Zoey anymore, so they put her in a child care center several miles away so that she can get adopted by someone new. But she hated staying in the child care center, so she ran away and came to the cottage. Vivi and Frederick are shocked that she traveled all that way by herself, but they don't want to make her leave. Vivi says Zoey can stay as long as she wants.

Then, shortly after Zoey's arrival, a couple of police officers and a social worker come to the cottage, looking for Zoey. Vivi and Frederick tell them that Zoey wants to stay here, instead of at the child care center. The police officers are at first unwilling to let her stay, saying that she legally has to stay at the center until she gets adopted, but the social worker comes inside, surveys the cottage, asks Vivi, Frederick, and Portjus some questions about their financial situation and how able they are to look after a 12-year-old girl, and finally tells the police officers that he thinks Zoey can stay here, provided the residents put some effort into finding her

a new set of adoptive parents. He tells Frederick that he'll send him some paperwork to fill out, as the owner of the house, and then they leave.

As Vivi recovers, her magic power returns, and she begins working on a project in secret, using the art room that Frederick had set up for her. It's confirmed that her magical ability is indeed related to art, just as I'd speculated earlier. She tells Frederick that he's not allowed to look inside, and puts Zoey on guard detail, since she's the only one who can actually touch him and therefore the only one who can actually stop Frederick from entering the room. As a side note, when I saw this, I wondered how Zoey would stop Frederick from just floating through a wall, but then I realized that he's actually never done that. He's gone through doors and windows, but never walls. So I suppose if Zoey is positioned at a door, she might actually be able to stop Frederick. Vivi also gives Zoey a present, *The Developing Medium's Guide to Exploration and Growth*, a book that will help her learn to figure out and understand her "necromantic" abilities. I'll talk about this term later, because it's a rather neat detail. Special deliveries and materials sometimes come to the cottage, but Vivi never says what's in them. Chapter 17 ends there.

Chapter 18 skips ahead still further into the future. It's now almost summer again, a full year since Vivi came to the cottage, and Vivi has made a full recovery. Once she was all well again, Portjus told her that her parents had decided that she was finally able to live on her own, and that they were proud of her and confident that she would be a capable young woman. She's a little annoyed by their phrasing and the way they still seem to treat her like a child, but she brushes it off and tells him to tell them she'll be following her real passions from now on. Portjus then tells her that, now that she's fully recovered, he'll be leaving the cottage and going back to serve her parents. He's leaving her the car. Vivi thanks him for his support over the past year.

Portjus says goodbye to everyone and sends a message to Mr. LeJean to open the portal on the front lawn to bring him back to their mansion.

We skip ahead another month or two, and Vivi's secret project is finally finished. It's revealed to everyone that she's built a custom-made special construct that she calls a marionette, extremely high-quality and very lifelike, out of a variety of materials. She inherited her grandmother's skill in making constructs, which is an ability that runs in their family, and now that her withdrawal has passed and the drugs are flushed from her system, she's fully regained her magical abilities, as well as re-discovered her creative passions and artistic talent. She built this marionette for Frederick to inhabit, tailored specifically to his tastes... and hers, too, of course. With Zoey's help, Frederick moves into his new body. It's a perfect fit, and his binding to it goes off without a hitch. Frederick and Vivi finally embrace properly for the first time. As the story ends, it's shown that they decide to keep living in the cottage together and that they adopt Zoey.

I'd like to give my thoughts on the ending first, then the book as a whole. I have to say, I found this ending satisfying. It lets Vivi and Frederick be together as best is possible for them, provides a happy ending for Zoey, and (mostly) solves Vivi's issues with her parents and herself without forcing her to sacrifice her personality and interests. That last detail is the most important one to me, because throughout the story Vivi has shown herself to be decidedly independent, almost never asking anyone for anything and being determined to reject her parents' wishes. Her decision at the end of the book to live in the cottage and do art was not because she bent to their will, but because she grew to want it for herself. And while she could never be called a homemaker, to say that living wildly and recklessly was good for her wouldn't be true either, and she's clearly come to recognize that fact. I appreciate a story that doesn't just

say that one way to live is bad. Vivi is still free to party and enjoy herself, but she'll be safer about it now. As an old man, that outcome appeals to me.

Nobody in the story made perfect growth and overcame all of their faults, but that might be unrealistic to expect from people anyway, and it might be more human for the characters to remain flawed, albeit a bit less so. Overall, I would say the book certainly has flaws and there are a few things that the author wasn't particularly good at writing, but it was enjoyable nonetheless. I give *Hearts Unbound* a 7.5 out of 10, and I would probably recommend it to teenage readers who are into fantasy.

Now for a few specific things that happened in these chapters. First, Zoey's magical abilities. Her powers are referred to a few times as 'necromantic,' and one of Madame Alizah's crimes is 'impersonation of a necromancer.' Now, I remember seeing something like this earlier in the book, but I hadn't actually given it a ton of thought before. I just sort of skipped over it. Now, though, it puzzles me a bit. I've only ever heard of necromancers in fiction as people who raise the dead to do their bidding, which is a distinctly negative connotation. Zoey doesn't do that, and to impose a negative connotation onto her because of that seems silly. However, if we look at the two parts of the word and consider their etymology ('necro' from *nekros*, Greek for corpse and 'mancer' from *manteia*, Greek for 'divination' and widely used as a suffix to denote magical ability), it's pretty simple to remove the negative connotation from the word and view necromancy as simply "magic relating to or involving death," which would mean that a spirit medium is, indeed, a form of necromancer. And I have to say, I like that interpretation more than the classic "rise from the dead and blight the living" idea. I wonder if that's a common line of thinking in other fantasy works?

Similarly to that, though, we can see quite clearly that Zoey's powers aren't particularly

unique. They're common enough for Vivi to order a beginner's guide to using power like them, at least. I'm not sure if the fact that "impersonation of a necromancer" is a crime indicates that maybe they're semi-rare, but maybe.

Oh, yes. We get one final mention of an unusual body for a character. The social worker is said to have a thick, muscly tail that swishes behind him as he walks around the house. The cops are barely described at all, unfortunately. This is the first time in quite a while that a character was introduced at all, so while I wasn't really surprised to see him have a strange body part, I did notice. I'd like to mention again that the book still only notices the physical abnormalities of the characters when they're relevant. A few examples are the book noting that Zoey's fur was dirty after playing outside for a while or that Redford's gloves in the winter didn't quite cover his wrists. As such, I got used to it very quickly, and it's been a while since I thought to bring it up.

The last thing I want to talk about now is the body Vivi builds for Frederick. That's the main subject of chapter 18, so it's obviously a source of intrigue. Vivi describes it in this way as she's showing it to everyone:

'Look, look,' Vivi said, waving Frederick over. 'See, it has this soft treated pleuro-leather coating on the outside, but a very tough titanium skeleton on the inside, so it's very sturdy but not at all rough or coarse. And look here,' she said, opening up a little panel on the arm of the construct to reveal a network of thin tubes. 'These allow for full-body temperature control, so you never have to worry about temperature impacting performance. And it'll all feel like real skin and body heat to other people.'

Frederick looked at her in awe. 'Viv, this... this is...'

‘Don’t interrupt me, I’m not done yet,’ she said, closing the arm panel. ‘I made the whole thing out of resonant materials and prioritized flexibility, so you won’t have any problems with strength or movement. And the joints are all spring-loaded and they can all be undone for servicing if you need it – and don’t worry, I can handle all of that. And the best part!’ Vivi gestured to the gently-painted face. ‘This paint was really hard to get, but it’s tailor-made for constructs... it’s waterproof, scratch-resistant, just really difficult to remove all around, and it responds to emotion and can move around to mimic a real face! So you have full emotive capabilities! How cool is *that*?’

I feel that this would be a good time to mention that I’ve never seen a construct in real life, because they don’t exist. I don’t know what “pleuro-leather” and “resonant materials” are. In fact, I have no idea what a high-quality construct or “marionette,” as she calls this, is supposed to look like. But it’s clear to me that this one is supposed to be absolutely top-of-the-line. According to Frederick, once he’s inside, the end result is a body that feels so close to being real that he can barely tell the difference. It’s an impressive display of Vivi’s secret skill (I think), as well as just being a heartwarming scene in general.

I hate to end this entry on a question, but while much of the description of the marionette makes little sense to me, I did notice an apparent inconsistency. Frederick was previously able to interact with things around the house, and he could feel them as if he were alive. However, now that he has a new body, he makes a big deal out of being able to actually feel other things that he couldn’t before, as well as Vivi’s embrace. So can ghosts feel things or not? Is there something here I’m missing, or did Arhic just forget her own rules for ghosts? Oh, well, I’m not going to harp on it now. I’ll just make a note of that in my ghost rules document and come back to it later.

For now, though, that's the end of the book. I've still got a few things to talk about, as well as sending the book off to that forensics lab to get the ink dating test done. I'll have that done in a few days, although first I'm going to scan the book and make a copy of the whole thing, so I still have the story while it's at the lab. The next couple of entries are mostly just going to be unraveling the remaining mysteries as best I can.

### February 17, 2023

I sent the book to the forensics lab yesterday. I sent them a couple of the pens that I found, too, and asked them to check the chemical composition of those to see if they're the same ones the notes were written in. My contact in the lab told me that it'll probably take a couple of days for them to get the results back to me, but that since their lab is supposed to be used to help solve crimes, my request has to be considered "low priority," which means that if basically anything else comes up, they'll have to shelf my request until they're done. All of that is just about what I expected. It'd be unreasonable of me to ask that they devote more attention to me than to a real crime.

In the meantime, I'm going to try to riddle through some of the remaining questions I have about this book. The complete list of my questions is as follows:

- Provenance - who is Saldanji Arhic? Who is Savanna Cowle? Where did this book come from?
- ~~Strange bodies - normal/expected? Also, "therians?"~~
- Social norms - place of ghosts in society?
- ~~Magic powers - rules? How they work, how you get them, are they common?~~

- ~~How do ghosts work? (Ghost rules)~~
- Spirit mediums
- Lenportasil - why was it introduced like that?
- ~~“Bound” ghosts (subset of ghost rules, but I think this deserves more attention)~~

And there’s also a few questions I have about Savanna Cowle, specifically about her lost pens, but these aren’t ones I have much hope of solving, as I would really need to speak to her in person to learn more. It also relies on the assumption that she’s a real person, which although very likely isn’t yet conclusively proven in my mind. I expect the results from the forensics lab will solve that little mystery.

One of the questions above is one I actually feel quite confident that I’ve solved already. But for the sake of clarity, I’m going to re-state my answer for that question.

In the context of *Hearts Unbound*, it’s more appropriate to think of a “spirit medium” as a “spirit liaison.” Given that ghosts are apparently present and functioning members of society and that they have rights, a spirit medium’s job is not simply to speak to ghosts where others cannot. They facilitate connection between ghosts and the living in ways that only they can. A spirit medium can also be defined as a type of necromancer, which in the world of this book has no negative connotation and simply means one with magic powers that relate to death and spirits. This includes people who can make physical contact with ghosts, such as Zoey, and (I assume) people who have some kind of power over them, like what Madame Alizah claims she can do.

I think it would be best if I approached the rest of these questions one at a time, in order from most likely to least likely to solve. Least likely would appear to be the book’s provenance, which is something I still have found absolutely no helpful information towards. It’s entirely

possible I just missed something in my previous searches online, but I doubt it; I was quite assiduous before.

Then comes the question about lenportasil. I believe I was able to figure out well enough what the drug does: it removes magical ability, and it has very delayed and severe withdrawal symptoms. That's all fine, and given how its main purpose is as a time bomb in the story, I see no reason to question that. But the looming question is why it was introduced in the way it was. This, too, seems quite unlikely to be solvable, since my searches so far have turned up nothing, which is extremely frustrating. I do have one or two ideas that *might* go somewhere, but if not, then this is probably going to be a dead end. However, those are the only two questions that I don't think are solvable. The remaining questions are far ahead in terms of likelihood.

Next come the plot-related questions that I haven't fully solved yet. They're mostly to do with the plot of the book, rather than the outside context and circumstances surrounding its creation, so the answers are likely to be contained within the text. These are the questions about the rules of magic, the rules of ghosts, and the social standing of ghosts. I am confident that I can come to satisfactory answers for these three questions.

Then are the plot-related questions that I've mostly answered already, being the matter of strange physical bodies and the idea of "bound" ghosts. I've nearly gotten to a full answer on these two, but I want to put a little bit more thought into them before considering them solved, because I still feel as though I might be missing something.

February 18, 2023

Please forgive my abrupt ending of yesterday's entry. Just as I was ending that last sentence, I got an email from a student asking about office hours, and I realized rather suddenly

that I'd forgotten to include them on the syllabi that I'd handed out for my classes. I don't normally make mistakes like that, so I had to send an email out to all of my students correcting this mistake, and immediately afterwards I had to field a multitude of requests to schedule meetings with me. All of this drove my journal out of my mind quite thoroughly. Incidentally, it is rather funny how I write as though I'm speaking to somebody else. Exactly who will be forgiving me for cutting off my writing yesterday?

Anyway, I left off talking about the remaining questions. For the foreseeable future, that will be what I'm writing about. But the time and dedication I'm willing to put into this is limited. This is just a pastime, after all, and I have work and obligations to get to. I expect that my entries will become shorter and more sparse in the coming weeks. That's the consequence of having such a narrow purpose for a journal, I suppose; after the book ends, there's a finite number of things to write about.

Speaking of finishing the book, I printed a second copy of the text at Gloria's request, so that she might read it for herself. I did that yesterday, and would have mentioned it if I hadn't gotten distracted. I also offered one to Mrs. Hastings, but she told me that she'd rather have the real object, and was content to wait until it returns from the lab. I'm interested to see what they think of the text. Will they have as many questions as I did? Perhaps more, even. Maybe certain things will make sense to Gloria that didn't make sense to me. More eyes on a mystery solves it faster.

I haven't had much time to devote to thinking about the text, but I do think I'm ready to provide my answer to the bodies question. As I said before, I was already very close to having an answer for it, and it didn't take long for me to finalize my thoughts. This question is not deep. The reason that the characters in the book have unusual physical features is because the author

wanted it that way. Ah, that's not a good way to phrase that. Obviously the author wanted it that way; all choices in writing can be explained like that. What I mean is, Saldanji Arhic made a deliberate effort to write characters with unusual bodies, but also made a deliberate effort to make this appear normal. The reason for this is to create a unique blend of fantasy and realism, where the fantastical elements are not treated as fantastical, and thereby make it easier to immerse oneself in the story.

The only fantasy term we get to describe a person is "therian," which is used to refer to the animalistic features found on Zoey and her mother. At first, I thought this was meant to indicate that they were of a different species than Vivi and the other human characters. But that term wasn't really used in the way I would expect a race term to be used. It might merely be a physical descriptor, similarly to how we might describe someone as beautiful or pale or hirsute. This would actually work well with the earlier idea of characters just having strange bodies because the author wanted it to be so. If characters can look however, things like fantasy races would be meaningless, and it would be more helpful to simply come up with some terms to give a quick idea of how someone looks so you don't have to describe them multiple times.

But all of this was a risky move on Arhic's part, I feel. When fantastical elements are not treated as fantastical, it can be easy to forget to explain them, and that will lose the reader. I don't think I would have taken that route if I were a writer. Arhic made it work, though, so I suppose it's alright.

But there's also some inconsistency here. While Arhic doesn't explain several of the fictional ideas she's come up with, she *does* explain some of them – or, at least, she partially explains them. We did eventually get a little bit of clarification from the doctor on lenportasil, and there was some small amount of explanation of constructs in the last chapter when Vivi

described the marionette she built for Frederick, although these were (frustratingly) very incomplete and included more specific details than wide-ranging explanations. It's as though Arhic wanted to maintain the concept that these ideas wouldn't need to be explained to the characters in the world, since they'd already know about them, but realized that if her readers were given *no* explanation, they'd be confused, and that's not good. So she had to come up with a way to give explanations that don't break the illusion. I'd say she only half succeeded; the explanations really don't explain much. But I will admit that it worked for the matter of the characters' bodies; despite my confusion initially, leaving that unexplained didn't ultimately have a negative impact on my understanding or enjoyment of the text.

I have a mostly free weekend, so I'll give some thought to the other questions and come back when I have something more to say.

### February 20, 2023

I think it's finally time to record my conclusions on ghosts in this text. I have my list of "ghost rules" that I've been keeping through about half of the book, based on Savanna's comments and my own observations, and I'm going to write them down here. I'm also going to discuss "binding" and what I think that means, because while that *would* fall under the category of "ghost rules," my thoughts on that are much more speculative than the other rules.

The way I come to understand these rules is by treating Savanna as an expert. If she says something is wrong, it must be wrong, and if she says something is right, it must be right. And if she says nothing at all, it's likely also right, because Savanna's comments show her to be a very close reader, as well as quite nitpicky. I trust that she wouldn't let a mistake slide. And speaking of Savanna, I still haven't gotten the lab results back, but whether or not she's a real person

doesn't impact my thoughts on this matter. If she's real, then she's a real expert, and if she's not, she's still an expert, just a fictional one within the story. Her words here are trustworthy either way. Anyway, to the list!

1. Ghosts can interact physically with objects that belonged to them when they were alive.

This was the first observation I had when starting my list, and it's also the one I puzzled over the longest. Frederick seemed to be able to interact with certain physical objects, but not others. It's possible that the author just wanted him to only interact with plot-relevant objects, but the things he interacts with are too varied for that to be a satisfying answer. And Savanna never comments on him picking up anything, which means the author must have gotten the logic of it right. But when I went back through the book looking for scenes in which Frederick interacts with physical objects, I noticed that the things Frederick can interact with are all household objects. He can sit in chairs, he can swing an axe to chop wood, he can pick up a vase. I also remembered that, at multiple times in the book, it's said that the house belongs to him. And he never picks up or moves anything that we know or can reasonably assume belongs to Vivi or anyone else. So it stands to reason that the house, and all of the furniture within it that wasn't replaced, still belongs to him, and he can interact with it physically. It *also* explains something I had wondered about in Chapter 17: that Frederick can't go through walls, but he can go through doors and windows. I had to go all the way back to chapter 3 to get it fully, but Frederick did say that the house was renovated, and that the doors and windows were replaced. By this logic, the doors and windows are no longer "his," because they're not the ones the house had when he was alive, but the walls still are. So he *cannot* interact with the doors, and therefore goes right through them, but the walls are still real walls to him. I do wonder

what would happen if, say, the furniture was reupholstered. But for now, this is the rule.

2. Ghosts can eat.

We only get one scene in which this rule shows up, and it's when Vivi offers Frederick some lunch, which he declines. There's not a whole lot to see here, but the fact that Vivi offers food to Frederick and Savanna doesn't comment on it means that it must be normal in some way for ghosts to eat. I don't know under what circumstances they would, but I don't think they need to, as Frederick never mentions eating at any other point in the book. Perhaps they just have the ability to eat, but don't need to? If it's just a social thing, that would make sense, I suppose.

3. Ghosts still have stereotypical ghost powers.

Frederick turns himself invisible, levitates objects, blows a cold wind around, and so on. In the book, this is called "the Gudove act," and I'm not sure what that means. It doesn't say how exactly he does these things, either. The one that interests me most is the levitation. At first, I wondered why he would be able to both levitate objects and pick them up normally. Wouldn't it always be easier to just levitate things? But when I examined the scene again, I noticed that he didn't levitate anything very heavy, and he was also described as "struggling" to make a chair float, so maybe the levitation isn't actually as easy as it appears. I would hazard a guess that it's less of a method to make things fly around and more of a way to pick up objects from a distance, and he can't levitate anything he can't pick up normally. Perhaps that should have been its own rule.

4. Ghosts can be legal citizens.

I've talked about this before, but it's very clearly shown that Frederick is recognized as a legal citizen. He owns the cottage, which we can definitely say is a legal matter since the

social worker sends him some forms to fill out regarding the housing of Zoey. Grandma says that he would have been evicted if the LeJean extended family had known he was still living in the house. And Madame Alizah's intolerant views of him are heavily frowned upon, indicating that ghosts definitely also have some kind of social status. However, if there are any specifics about ghosts as citizens, any particulars that only apply to them, they aren't talked about in the book. I can't imagine that there *aren't* any legal specifics regarding ghosts, so I just have to assume that either the author didn't think to come up with any, or that they aren't relevant to the story.

5. Ghosts may be misunderstood.

This isn't really a rule and more of an observation, but for Madame Alizah's grift of posing as a spirit medium to work, in-depth knowledge of ghosts can't be very common, or else she'd never fool anybody. While that might seem to be at odds with the apparent commonality of ghosts in this world, I believe I've come up with a good answer. In my notes, I compared it to how one might still go to the doctor if they had the flu, even though the flu can generally be treated with simple bed rest and proper nutrients; it's less about not knowing about the thing and more about trusting an expert.

6. Ghosts can sleep.

Similarly to rule 2, this is only touched on once, and it's not given any importance. Frederick sleeps in the attic; that's all we know. I guess even ghosts expend energy of some kind.

7. Ghosts either cannot feel touch, or their capacity for feeling touch is very limited.

My only indication that this is true is that Frederick makes a big deal out of being able to feel Vivi's embrace once he binds to his new body. At first I was a little confused by that,

because it seemed as though Frederick could feel things before when he was chopping wood and such, but now I'm not sure he could. He might have just been reacting to exertion and pressure, instead of the actual touching of the object itself.

Those are my ghost rules, as best as I can figure them. At this point, there's still an elephant in the room: binding. What does it mean to be an "unbound" ghost, and why did Savanna have such big issues with how Frederick was written at times? Well, I'm happy to say that I think I finally have a satisfying explanation.

While teaching my class last week, I was reminded of something very interesting. In medieval texts, there's an idea that ghosts are essentially locked in the state they were in when they died, and they will never change from that state. If they died angry, they're always angry, and if they died sad, they're always sad. Then I remembered Savanna's complaints about Frederick: that he shouldn't be growing as a character in the ways that he does because it reflects a change in him that's impossible. Is it possible that this book is operating under medieval ghost logic? But that's not entirely accurate. Frederick experiences more than one emotion, and Savanna has no problems with that. So it must be something else, although still possibly related to the idea.

My conclusion, after some deliberation, was that ghosts in this world are not locked to one emotion, but *are* locked to a single level of maturity, development, and state of mind. So if a very uptight old man with conservative views died in a state of rage, his ghost wouldn't be angry forever, but you'd never be able to get him to not be uptight or conservative. This fits Savanna's comments perfectly: Frederick should not be able to grow as a person, but there's no issues with him being in different moods.

This state of developmental stasis is what I believe Savanna and the story mean when they say Frederick is “unbound.” An unbound ghost is a ghost who cannot change. This, obviously, would imply the existence of a “bound” ghost who has some different quality to it, and this is precisely what happens at the end of the story. Frederick inhabiting the marionette that Vivi builds for him is directly referred to as “binding.” It’s made clear that binding returns the capacity for physical sensation to a ghost, based on the afore-mentioned embrace, and if binding also returns the capacity for change and growth, then this leads to a very important question: what’s the difference between a bound ghost and a living person?

To answer that question, we’d need to know how exactly binding restores those things to a ghost, which is information I am not privy to. My best guess is that, since a physical body is mortal and can wear out, even if it’s made of wood and metal instead of flesh, it’s the having of a mortal body that undoes the stasis of a ghost? Being in an immortal state is also being in a state of constancy, and returning to mortality undoes that. Perhaps it’s better not to ask what the difference is between a bound ghost and a living person, and to instead say that binding returns a ghost to life, or at least a state close enough to mortality that they regain their mortal abilities.

This might also answer the question I had about why Frederick saying Vivi should have died is so terrible. Coming from a ghost, it would carry a different weight, wouldn’t it? And it’s not as though being dead is the end of everything; there are ghosts, after all, and they can still own houses and vote. But if being a ghost is being in a state of constancy, then saying that Vivi should have died back then is basically saying that she should have remained in that terrible situation she was living in. Which is certainly a very unkind thing to say.

This concludes my ghost rules and speculation. I don’t know what I’ll talk about next time; maybe the magic rules. If the lab results come back, maybe I can talk about those instead,

but I might be near the end of this book's intrigue.

February 22, 2023

I've thought a bit about how the book portrays magic, and I think I've come to an understanding. It's actually very simple, but because of how simple it is, it comes across as rather obtuse and difficult to grasp. It feels as though there should be *more* to a magic system than this.

So what we see in the book is that multiple characters have magic, and it's not a big deal that they do. For a complete list: Vivi's mother can change the colors of things, Redford can see the future, Zoey can touch ghosts (and it's implied she could be able to do more, but we don't see anything else), Vivi can make constructs, and Vivi's grandmother has a similar ability, though it's never described. Frederick also has some ghostly abilities, although I'm hesitant to say that these are specific to Frederick. The other characters in the story either don't have magical powers or never show them.

The immediate connecting thread I see between all of these is that they are non-offensive. Typically when we think of wizards doing magic, we think of things like hurling fireballs or blasts of magical energy. None of the characters in this book do anything like that. But I suppose that there isn't really much room for that kind of magic. There's no scene in this book where a character would need to hurl a fireball, or where that would even be particularly helpful. The conclusion might be that those kinds of powers don't exist in this world, but absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, so I'm just going to assume that they *could* exist but don't.

Now, the primary interesting thing about how this book handles magic is that the ability to do it is never treated as exceptional or even particularly noteworthy. The specific power or the person who has it might be, but just having magical power is entirely normal. Zoey is

exceptional not because she can touch ghosts, but because she's very young. In fact, it's *more* noteworthy that Vivi loses her magical abilities than that she has them at all. And even then, the loss of magical abilities isn't what makes it interesting. The plot relevance of that is more tied to the drug addiction that caused it and the other damage that did to Vivi. In this book, having magic is completely normal.

The consequence of this is that magic is not introduced in any proper way. Characters just start doing it, and then we're later informed that it's magic when the book calls it such. This was a bit jarring at first, since I kept expecting some kind of explanation, but it never came, and I had to accept that the book was not going to tell me how or why people can do magic. Just like the characters' bodies, this is a fantasy element that is just expected and ordinary in this world. So ordinary that the rules and processes by which magic functions are never explained.

Magic is not even solidly defined as a practice. It's just something people can do. This is something that only really registered for me when I was flipping back through the book to read the scenes I was thinking about, but I don't think anyone ever refers to magic in terms like "casting a spell" or the like. There are a couple of magical terms, like how Zoey's abilities are called "necromantic" because they relate to ghosts and how Redford is referred to as "clairvoyant," but these are more like adjectives than they are terms. And the specifics of these abilities are rarely made clear, either.

All of this is because of Arhic's practice of treating fantasy elements as normal, and that's why I said that magic comes across as obtuse. In the world she has set up, there's almost no reason why any character would ever need to explain magic, so any situation where a character *would* do that would almost necessarily feel forced. There also isn't really a whole lot to "get" about it. It can be summarized as "some characters just have powers and that's all you really

need to know.”

Because of that, all of what I’m about to say is basically speculation, although most of it is backed by evidence from the book. Not all, though. Normally I shy away from making claims that there isn’t much evidence for, preferring instead to simply admit that I don’t have enough information to make a statement, but at some point I need to accept that I will *never* have enough information, and I will be more satisfied if I simply come up with something that works.

Magic is at least somewhat based on genetics, and possibly gender too. It’s stated directly that all of the women in Vivi’s family have some kind of artistic ability. While this could only be the case for Vivi’s family, it seems more likely to me that people who are related to each other would just have similar magical powers.

It’s more common to have magic than to not have it, but it’s still normal to not have it. This is just a basic observation, but of the really important characters in this book, only two of them never display magical abilities: Vivi’s father and Madame Alizah. However, no particular attention is called to this either. Madame Alizah not having magic is only notable because she’s a fraud, and *that* is notable because she’s conning people by posing as a spirit medium, not because having no magic is itself notable. So both having magic and not having magic are ordinary occurrences for people in this book.

Magical ability is specific within the person. It’s not like what we see in *Harry Potter*, where you can “do magic” and then there’s a number of things that fall under that umbrella. Each person has one thing they can do, or maybe a small selection of very similar or related abilities. Redford can see the future, Vivi makes constructs, Vivi’s mother manipulates colors, and that’s the limit of their abilities. This would be why there’s no reference to “casting spells.” There are no spells to cast. These are honestly more similar to superpowers than magic, but the book does

refer to it as magic once or twice, so that's what it is.

Magic can be influenced by medicine. Obviously, given that it's a major plot point, but it's still worth noting. The effects of the drug lenportasil temporarily strip Vivi of her magical abilities. I suppose that in a world where magic is common, you'd want to account for it in medical practice. However, this leads directly into the next major piece of information:

Magic can be very dangerous. When the doctor is talking about Vivi's condition following her withdrawal attack from lenportasil, he mentions "acute magic poisoning" as the cause of her illness. It's not explicitly stated what caused this magic poisoning, but the only thing I can see that would have caused it is the return of her magical abilities once the drug's effects wore off. This would suggest that magical power is itself somehow dangerous or toxic to people, and receiving a large amount of it at once is very bad for your health. It would also explain why Frederick was so concerned when he learned that Vivi had previously suffered from an addiction to lenportasil; he knew that the fallout was both inevitable and possibly fatal.

That's everything I think I know about magic in this book. It does leave me with some lingering questions, but at this point I'd be pretty surprised if I *didn't* still have lingering questions. The main one is related to that last point: if magic is so dangerous, why do people have it? How did magical ability become common if being exposed to magic is toxic? But that's also a question that's not relevant to understanding the story, so I'm not terribly invested in the answer. I wouldn't be surprised if it didn't have an answer at all; that seems like the kind of thing that an author might not think about while writing. And I have better things to do than devote all of my time to this novel.

February 24, 2023

I've been thinking more about lenportasil. Specifically, the way the drug was introduced into the story. I just can't really wrap my head around it. I was able to figure out what the drug does and why it was important to the story, and I was even able to make what I feel is a decent enough guess at why it's dangerous. But all of that was information I pieced together on my own, after it was first mentioned. The sum total of explicit information the book gives us is that the drug is a "dampener," it has harmful side effects, and that one of those side effects is "magic poisoning." And most of that information was revealed several chapters after the drug was first mentioned.

Not that it's unusual for a book to not tell the reader everything about a plot-relevant object. It's common enough for a story to introduce a mysterious thing with unexplained effects and then only elaborate on those effects when it's actually relevant. But that doesn't seem to be the technique at play here. If that were the case, I'd expect several of the characters to ask for clarification about lenportasil, or for it to be made extremely clear that we're not supposed to know what it is. But in this book, when the drug is mentioned, everyone already knows what it does and reacts accordingly. It's not treated as a mystery, or even as something the author made up. It's handled like the reader is also already supposed to know what the drug does. But as far as I can tell, that's not possible, because lenportasil is not a real drug, nor is it an established fictional one; I can't find anything about it online, no matter where I search.

There's another weird part of this puzzle. Other things in this book have gone unexplained for the purposes of making the fantasy world feel more real, as I've written before. But none of those things have been nearly as technical or specific as this. When the drug is first mentioned, it's clearly meant to be seen as a sort of ticking time-bomb that will eventually have a

major impact on the plot. But that idea can only land properly if the drug gets a real introduction. Leaving this unexplained makes the story weaker in a very obvious way. And Arhic is a good enough writer that I don't believe this to simply be a mistake. It has to have been a choice.

Wait a moment. I've just remembered something else: Savanna recognized the drug. She knew about it. That means it must have been established *outside* of Arhic's body of work, since Savanna doesn't seem to have read any of Arhic's other books before this one. But I can't find any reference to it *anywhere*. So where could she have possibly encountered it before?

Ugh... it's a bit upsetting, but this all is making me think again that Savanna is actually not a real person, and was an invention of the author's to help the book along. This still doesn't make the decision to not explain lenportasil any less weird, nor does having a metatextual narrator really fit the tone of the story, but it's the most likely explanation to solve these mysteries. I suppose that's what the lab results will tell me, when they get back. Or maybe I'm just too attached to the idea that Arhic can't have just made a writing mistake here. Good writers can make mistakes too.

Forget the drug. I want to think about something else now. What's left? Yikes. My notes say that we still haven't solved the books provenance and the social norms. Neither of those are very appealing options. The provenance question has proven quite unsolvable, and the social norms of ghosts don't seem worth digging into any more. I guess... maybe there's something to look into about social norms after all? Like, deeper specifics on the status of ghosts and constructs? Maybe...

February 27, 2023

Nothing to report, sadly. I looked back through the passages that seemed relevant to the question of social norms, which was mostly Madame Alizah's dialogue, but found nothing of note. It's all very predictable, to be honest: the villain said hurtful things about the main characters, and the main characters respond negatively. Not that I expected much; it's just a fantasy novel, after all. If there *were* going to be some details to uncover about the social standing of constructs, they'd probably be an important part of the plot.

In fact, I think it's high time I admit to myself that I've been more invested in this than I should be. I wouldn't say I've been obsessed, or that it's even been an unhealthy level of interest; I haven't been forgoing my work in favor of this book, for example, and I've kept up my obligations. But I have been putting more thought into this than it deserves. Not very out-of-character for me, I suppose. The mystery of where the book came from is genuinely intriguing, but I think I've been trying to alleviate my frustration at being constantly stymied on that front by searching deeper into the book for more mysteries, and also so I wouldn't run out of things to write about in my journal.

What to do about this going forward, though? I don't think it's nearly so dramatic a scenario as to require never thinking about the book again. But I think I do need to re-examine the level of seriousness I've been approaching this book with. A bit of folly is nice here and there, but let's not get lost on a wild goose chase. Hmm...

Ok, I've come to a conclusion. Outside of my own analysis, I have three more things I'm waiting to hear about relating to this book: Gloria's thoughts, the lab results, and then Mrs. Hastings's thoughts. Gloria mentioned to me just yesterday that she's nearly done, so I should be getting her thoughts on it very soon. It's been a few weeks on the lab results, so those will

probably be done soon enough, and once that happens, I can give the book to Mrs. Hastings, and once she's done, we'll be able to put the whole thing to rest. Unless they find something I didn't, I expect my exploration of this book's mysteries is at an end. I may have to find something else to write a journal about.

Whatever the plan from here on out is, I'm ending this entry here, and my next entry will come after Gloria finishes the book, and not a day sooner. It's probably for the best, too. I have some quizzes to grade, and I also want to try to get Checkers un-hooked from the action camera. He's refusing to go for walks without it on, and I foresee difficulty in the future if it were to break or if we lost it. I don't want to go out and buy a new camera just to walk my dog. I have to admit, though, the videos it captures are very fun to watch. Turns out, Checkers looks at a lot of bugs on the sidewalk.

### March 2, 2023

Gloria finished reading the book yesterday. Much to my surprise, she prepared a write-up for me about it, which she gave to me when I saw her today. I told her that I'd hoped we'd be able to sit down and talk about the book more in-depth, but she told me that she didn't have time for that today, because she was going to a talk. She did agree that the book was interesting and had a few odd details here and there, but she wasn't sure it was really as deep as I'd described it to her. It just seemed like a fantasy book written by an amateur author who was good at certain things but not at others. That's a fair assessment, I suppose, but I still feel like there's something more going on.

I told her that I'm waiting to get the book back from the lab (she thought it was very funny that I went to the trouble of sending the book to a forensics lab), and then I was going to

give it to another interested party. Once that was all done, I hoped that the three of us might be able to come together and come to some proper answers. Gloria said that she's really not convinced there are many mysteries to solve, but if she's not doing anything else, it could be fun. That's as good an answer as I could hope for from her, to be honest.

Anyway, her write-up was more or less indicative of those feelings. Her overall review of the book was that it was a passable, maybe even slightly above-average YA fantasy novel with a fun premise. The strong points of the story, to her, were its setting, which felt believable and natural, and its conflict, which she felt was never forced or manufactured. The characters were written consistently the whole way through. The weakest part of the story was its villains, which she felt lacked clear motivation and weren't fleshed out.

She drew the same conclusion as me about the lack of context, which was that the author wanted to make the fantasy world feel more plausible by not injecting descriptions or explanations, but that it only worked sometimes, and there were a few parts where the lack of context harmed her understanding of the text significantly. However, where I felt that this was an interesting but risky way to write a story, Gloria felt that it was just flat-out a bad idea, because when it worked, you didn't notice, and when it did work, you were left confused.

Savanna's notes were present in the photocopy I gave her, of course, although not all of them survived the photocopying process very well. The yellow notes in particular were only semi-legible. However, Gloria was glad to see the writings from the beginning, as she felt it was more fun to read a book and see how someone (presumably) in the target demographic felt about it. She found herself agreeing with Savanna often, and was like me disappointed to see her notes stop in chapter 15.

Something that Gloria noticed that I did not was the way that female characters are

handled in this book. I'm sort of kicking myself for not paying attention to that. I'm an anthropologist; I should take better notice of human interactions. Anyway, Gloria said that there seemed to be this idea in the book that female characters were more naturally disposed to creative talents. Vivi, her mother, and her grandmother all have artistic abilities, so at the very least all of the LeJean women have this. I did notice that. However, Gloria took it a few steps further, saying that this appears to be a global idea; Frederick gets defensive about the cottage and makes a point of bringing up that it was designed and built by men, thereby making it exceptional since the work was done by people not naturally predisposed to creative work. And Zoey's magical power to make physical contact with ghosts is also treated as an exception, as with everything else about her character, such as her youth in developing powers and the way that she's a forced outsider with other people from her age group.

She also points out (rather humorously) that the book does not pass the Bechdel test, albeit in reverse. There is not a single conversation between two male characters that is *not* about Vivi.

She wraps up by saying that she thought it was an interesting book to find and hear about, and the circumstances of its discovery are very mysterious, but the book itself doesn't have as much going on. But she also found it nice to read about a "domestic fantasy story that doesn't have the high-minded, adventurous tone that most fantasy stories take."

I have to say, it was pleasing to see that Gloria had a different reaction to the book than I did, although she did still like it fine overall. This is what I'd hoped for; the difference in opinion engendering deeper thought. Each time I'd thought about social norms, I'd been thinking on the fantastical level, but there's things to think about on the realistic level too.

I haven't had time to put any significant thought into this since, so I'm going to do that

over the weekend. If I come up with anything new, I'll be sure to write it. But if not, then I won't get worked up about it. It's just a shame, and that's all.

### March 6, 2023

It is currently 7:42 PM. Ordinarily I write my journal entries in the afternoon, between my last class and dinner, but the lab results came back this morning, and the results were... interesting, to say the least. I needed time to process them and reconsider my previous conclusions in light of what they revealed.

The lab results determined that the ink used to print the main text of the story was all done at roughly the same time, as is typical of printed works. That ink was of a chemical compound that did not match any of the ink compounds they had in their database, and was consistent throughout each of the several areas of the book they tested. It was not an unorthodox compound, being very similar to most types of standard printer ink, but the specific mixture was unknown to them, and their machine was unable to identify a couple of the ingredients. This is also not unusual; there are many, many different kinds of ink, and computers are not always perfect. For example, their database does not include several types of ink that are common in foreign countries but very uncommon here, and the identification of specific chemical elements is never consistent.

The various inks used to print the notes in the margins were done at different times, over the course of a few months. The age of the ink progresses linearly from the start of the book to the end; the notes written on chapter 1 were the oldest, and the notes written on chapter 15 were the youngest. The oldest notes were still several months younger than the ink used to print the main body of the text. These notes were also of an unknown chemical compound, different from

the ink of the main text, but mostly consistent with each other, excepting one or two ingredients that the lab believes were used for color. This ink bore some similarities to ink used for art pens, but was mostly unique, and had several elements their computer was unable to identify. The compound of the blue ink, used in the last couple of chapters, matched perfectly with the ink from the blue pen I sent in with the book.

The small note at the very beginning, which states that the book is a birthday present for Savanna Cowle, was written in a third kind of ink, also unknown to their database, but very similar in makeup to many types of common pen ink intended for everyday use. The message was written about a month before the oldest notes in the margins, but still several months after the main body of text.

They also tested the cover, which I didn't know they could do. Their results turned up nothing unusual; the printing of the cover had all the signs of a professional, official publishing job, which is what they expected. However, just like all of the other inks, the ones used on the cover were not in their database.

The lab results concluded by saying that while they are unable to trace the provenance of the various inks or the book itself, there doesn't seem to be anything particularly strange or noteworthy about the ink itself. They are curious as to why I wanted this test done.

I think this is a good time to bring the various explanations I had come up with for the notes in the margins, and discuss their likelihood in the face of this new evidence.

- 1. Savanna is not a real person, and is instead a constructed person for the purposes of the narrative.** Almost impossible. For this to be true, the notes would have to have been written by the author, and there is absolutely no reason for them to wait several months before doing that.

2. **Savanna is not a real person, and the whole situation is an elaborate prank being pulled on me.** Extremely unlikely. Again, I can't think of any reason to pull a prank on me, nor for the prank to take this kind of shape. I don't see how this could be amusing to somebody. And now that explanation would also require them to have the book officially published, then write notes in the book gradually over the course of a few months before sending it to me, which is a very strange amount of work to put into something like this. Granted, I did go to the trouble of getting an ink test done, but that only is evidence of *my* neurosis, not someone else's.
3. **Savanna could be a real person, but the book is someone's pet project and she's a friend of the author who received the book directly.** This also strikes me as very unlikely. That would be incongruous with the fact that the book seems to have been officially published, and it clashes with the birthday note, which was both written weeks before the other notes and describes the book as "popular." Not to mention that I've previously determined that it's most likely that Savanna is not familiar with the author.
4. **Savanna is a real person, who really received this book as a birthday present.** This is the only plausible explanation left.

This leaves the book in an interesting position, because it would indicate that not only was the book actually published, which means that all of the circumstances surrounding its publication are most likely true, but that Savanna's having context for the things that confused me is *also* legitimate. Her knowledge relating to ghosts, lenportasil, all of that is completely explainable without her being related to the author.

But what does this mean effectively, for the purposes of my analysis? I don't know.

I'm not sure it means anything. After all, Savanna being a real person was an idea I'd already played with, and the idea that she *wasn't* was more or less a fallback assumption to avoid committing to logic with holes in it. All I really know now is that I was, in fact, missing something... but I had been suspicious of that before. So this doesn't change a whole lot. I guess it means that it's possible for me to find answers after all, since the context needs to be out there somewhere. It's nice to know that this research won't dead-end out of sheer impossibility. But I've had so much trouble finding information so far that I don't know if I want to try.

Anyway, now that I have the real book back, I can deliver it to Mrs. Hastings. I am excited to hear her thoughts on it; she's a very different reader than Gloria and I, and I expect that her perspective will come from a completely new direction, and go off into a new direction as well. I'll deliver it to her tomorrow.

March 7, 2023

I had a pleasant visit with Mrs. Hastings today. I went to the community center to deliver the book, but she wasn't there. The person at the desk told me that she'd had hip surgery, and he gave me her address so I could go visit in person.

Mrs. Hastings welcomed me warmly and offered me a cup of coffee, which I accepted. She immediately wanted to hear about my research since we'd last spoken and what I'd learned. I told her honestly that I hadn't learned much. The book is certainly real, and the notes inside are certainly written by a real person, but everything else about where it comes from is completely unknown. This information was very exciting to her; she said she's never happier than when she can be at the forefront of new happenings. She then asked me not to reveal too much about the book, since she wanted to experience it all for herself, so I only warned her that the book gets a

bit confusing at times.

After that, we talked a bit about other things going on in life. I'm sure that, from the perspective of this journal, it seems as though I don't do anything but think about the book and sometimes walk my dog, but the truth is that I've been quite busy teaching and the book has not taken up as much of my mind as it appears. I suppose I just began to see the journal as singular of purpose and didn't want to bring too much of my life into it. I'm sure that makes it less interesting to read, but what does it matter? Despite the voice I write in, this isn't for anyone else to read anyway.

Mrs. Hastings is doing well. She told me that she's been keeping an eye out for anyone who might be somehow related to Savanna Cowle, but nothing has come up. I assumed as much; she surely would have called me if there was any new info. She told me about her hip replacement surgery, which she had in February, and how it's kept her mostly to her house since, although she still makes an effort to get to church every Sunday, which is admirable. She's otherwise been keeping busy by knitting and watching movies; she told me about her huge list of movies she's been meaning to watch, and now that she has to spend a few weeks at home, it's been the perfect opportunity to make a dent in it. But she's glad to have some new reading material; she doesn't want to spend too much time staring at a screen.

Mrs. Hastings told me that given her copious free time and generally being a fast reader, she'd likely have the book finished in just a few days, or a week at the most. So, that's where we are now. The book is with Mrs. Hastings, and I'm likely to get more material for this journal before the end of the week. The next entry will be about her thoughts, and I'll do a little bit of comparing between our three reactions, but that will probably be the end of the journal.

March 11, 2023

Mrs. Hastings was not kidding when she said she was a fast reader. Or maybe it's just that I'm a slow reader. She finished the book in just a few days, and it took me over a month. But, then again, she probably read for several hours a day, which I did not do. She called me yesterday morning to tell me that she'd finished and would like to talk with me about it, if I have the time, and today I went back to her house for that conversation.

For her overall review, Mrs. Hastings was a bit warmer on the book than Gloria and I were, saying that she thought that its flaws were outweighed by how fun she found the story and characters. She never read books quite like this when she was young, as this was a type of genre that hadn't really broken through yet, but if she had, she would have loved them. A "low fantasy" setting about young people falling in love is just the kind of book she would have sought out as a girl.

She had quite a lot to say on the subject of Frederick and Madame Alizah. She said that Frederick "seemed like quite a decent young man, although he doesn't at all act as a spirit does really," but she's willing to overlook that in favor of allowing the romance to take place. I asked if she agreed with Savanna on how ghosts ought to act, but she told me that Savanna was wrong, too, and that spirits don't typically take any sort of recognizable human form or even present themselves visually. Usually, she said, they contact us from the spirit realm to provide guidance in times of need. But, again, she's going to ignore that in favor of allowing the story to flourish. However, she took major issue with Madame Alizah, saying that she was extremely disrespectful to all forms of spirit worship she'd ever heard of and that if the judicial system held that as a crime she deserved nothing less than a life sentence. This, she felt, made her a very good antagonist purely because of how much you wanted her to be taken down. I can't say she's

wrong. I told her about Gloria's insight that the book didn't pass the Bechdel test, albeit in reverse, and Mrs. Hastings said she'd noticed that too, and she'd found it funny.

I then asked her if there was anything about the book that confused her, and she gave me an answer I did not expect: no, she was not particularly confused by anything. In fact, Mrs. Hastings wanted to know what had confused *me* about it, because she thought it was pretty easy to understand and figured she might be able to help me out a little bit. This was a pleasant surprise to hear.

I told her that I had found it tough to get used to the lack of context and explanation for several of the fantastical elements, giving my usual prime example of characters with strange bodies, but that I'd eventually figured it out anyway. Mrs. Hastings said that she could see how that might be hard to get used to, but fantasy is presenting something that is necessarily not real. Of course characters might have unusual body parts and do impossible things. Unless the story is about *why* those things happen, it's safe to assume you shouldn't question it. Now, I don't think I agree with that way of approaching fiction, but I do admit that it would certainly have made reading this story easier.

I also told her about my issues with the drug lenportasil, about how it hadn't been introduced properly and was never explained. Mrs. Hastings said that she had felt it was handled just fine, and hadn't had any problems accepting it in the story. Why, she asked, did I think it was improperly introduced? I told her that the drug was introduced as though the reader should already know what it is, but as far as I'm aware, it was invented by the author for this story, so it's impossible for us to know what it is. And that made it difficult to feel the tension that it was supposed to create. Mrs. Hastings said that she could understand that, but for her, in a world with established magic and things like ghosts and people who can see the future, it doesn't actually

matter what the drug does; for it to be very dangerous even with all of those fantastical elements means it must *really* be bad news, and that's enough for her to feel the tension.

I hadn't considered it like that, and I think she might have a point. I told her that I still feel as though the book expected us to be familiar with it, given how it's implied to have specific and thought-out side effects, with the author even going so far as to have a blanket term for the kind of drug it is, but the idea that we're just supposed to realize that it's dangerous and not ask why is certainly plausible.

Her answers to those two questions proved quite universal: they applied well enough to my questions about how ghosts function, how magic works, and so on. I quickly ran out of things to ask for her input on, so I changed the subject to what *she* might have realized that I didn't. Mrs. Hastings consulted a little memo pad on which she'd written the things she wanted to talk about and said that our conversation so far had addressed just about everything that she thought noteworthy.

She then asked if I'd had any further progress in tracking down Savanna Cowle, or anything else about the book's provenance, and was disappointed to hear that I hadn't. I promised her that I'd tell her if I learned anything, and bid her farewell. What I did not tell her is that I highly doubt I'll learn anything at all. At this point, it's been over two months with absolutely zero new information regarding Saldanji Arhic, the publishing company, or anything else relating to where this book came from. Hell, I didn't even learn anything about Savanna Cowle that helps there.

I think this is where my research ends. Gloria and Mrs. Hastings both provided some interesting insight, but if I'm being honest, it didn't help further my thinking as much as I'd hoped it would. I'm sort of at a final dead end now. Spring break is on the near horizon, so I'll

give it until that's over to renew my interest. It's possible something else will come up, in which case I will be sure to return to this journal, but if not, I'm putting a cap on this there. But the experience has certainly been fun. Maybe I'll start a new journal, this time not narrowly focused on just one strange book. Or maybe I'll find a new strange book to journal about. We'll see.

ITS REAL THE SOUND IS THE SAME THE SHAPE IS THE SAME YELLOW JUST LIKE HETZ YELLOW I DIDNT  
THINK IT NEVER NOTICED IT WAS THERE IVE SEEN IT TWICE



AND THE PENS AND THE PAPER AND THE BOOK I HAVE IT NOW

BUT ITS

NOT MINE I CANT KEEP IT DESCRIBE THE WAYS IN WHICH

YELLOW GREEN YELLOW PINK BLUE ORANGE???

COFFEE MUST BE HAS TO



IS IT A STORZY IT CANT BE A STORZY THE SOUND IS THE

SAME THE SHAPE IS RIGHT ITS REAL IT MUST BE REAL IT HAS TO BE I SAW IT IT WAS THERE

THE BOOK IS IN THE WORLD THE GHOSTS ARE IN THE WORLD THE MAGIC IS IN THE

WORLD I CAN FIND IT IT FOUND ME BUT WHERE IS IT FROM FROM THE WORLD MAKE REFERENCE TO LEGAL

AND OR FROM ANOTHER.....



CANT TELL MUST TELL WHO WILL TRUST THEY THINK IM CRAZY IM

CRAZY BUT NO I DONT THE CAM

IT IS I CANT BE IT IS THERE THE ROCK AND THE BARK AND THE

PAPER FALLS IT HAS COFFEE

NOW I KNOW I CAN KNOW I LEARN THERES MORE THERE HAS TO BE MORE THERE CANT NOT BE MORE AM I

THE FIRST? THE ONLY? I HAVE TO KNOW MORE WHERE IS MORE

CAN THE STORZY BE REAL? THE BOOK REAL IT IS BUT HOW MUCH ELSE THE PAPER

THE PENS THE BOOK THE COLORS THE SOUND MATCHED AND THE COFFEE IT WASNT JUST NOTHING AND I

NEED TO GET IT BACK TO HETZ

DESCRIBE THE WAYS IN WHICH A BOUND GHOST AND A LIVING PERSON WERE SEEN AS DIFFERENT IN THE

18TH CENTURY

IM NOT CRAZY



WHAT DO I DO I CANT TELL  
ANYONE NOBODY KNOWS BUT DO THEY  
KNOW IM NOT CRAZY I SAW IT AM I  
CRAZY ITS THE CAMERA THERE IT IS



WHO'S REAL IS IT VIVI IS IT  
SAVANNA IS IT ARTHIC  
I KNOW I WILL DO MORE I CANT NOT  
DO MORE THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT  
THING ANYONE HAS EVER SEEN AND I  
CANT BE QUIET ITS THERE THE BOOK  
THE COFFEE REAL COFFEE MORE IS  
REGULAR TOO  
THE PAPER RIPPED JUST A PIECE LEFT

WHAT NOW

WHAT NOW

WHAT NOW

WHAT NOW

3. Describe the ways in which a bound ghost and a living person were seen as different in the 18th century, making reference to both legal and social views. Provide a specific example of a reason why these views may have changed during this time. (2 paragraphs)

For much of history, in the vast majority of social settings, bound ghosts were a significant enough minority that there were no difficulties in considering them as completely distinct from living people although there was a significant lack of any specific or even decent definition of a bound ghost. The most common viewpoint was something along the lines of 'you know one when you see one.' It was also commonly believed that ghosts lost the majority of their humanity, including their capacity for emotion and mercy. But the 18th century saw a major decrease in the amount of discrimination against bound ghosts as well as all ghosts in general, due to a shift in the worldwide perception of the afterlife. This can be primarily attributed to the publishing of Adelman's 1864 paper 'Interview with Death' which - among other things - introduced the concept of 'ghosts' as a 'medium' for communication after death. Following this, the official perception of ghosts grew massively, and it was eventually proved that one does not lose their capacity for emotion after death.





May 12, 2023

Oh, lord, where do I even begin? The last few pages read like the insane scrawlings of a lunatic. But I can't say that's not justified. Something absolutely monumental has happened. World-shaking. Inexplicable, and yet everything makes sense now. There's so very, very much to talk about, and it's taken me this long to even return to this journal. I suppose I should start with what actually happened. Although I've spent the last month and a half grappling with what I now know, and I've reviewed the footage enough times that I could recite it in my sleep, I'm going to officially write down the story.

After my last entry – well, my last *proper* entry – concluded, about a week went by without anything new coming up. I honestly wasn't sure I was ever going to come back to the journal. Truth be told, I was feeling pretty fine leaving *Hearts Unbound* in the state I'd left it. While there were one or two more things I'd not yet solved, I honestly didn't care enough to devote much time to figuring them out. I had other things that needed doing. I had my midterms to grade, for example, and spring break was about to start.

It was on Friday, March 17, the last official class day before break began. Friday is also the one day during the week that I don't teach, so I was using the day to wrap up grading those midterms I mentioned. I've always been a fast grader, something my students appreciate, and it's nice to not have to spend the break grading papers. I made very good time on them this time, and I finished around 1 PM, which left me half the day to myself. After some lunch, I took Checkers on a walk. It was a nice, warm day, so I only wore a light jacket. I also haven't had any luck breaking Checkers of his desire to wear the action camera, but I was in a good mood, so I didn't push it. In hindsight, I'm extremely glad I let him wear it.

We followed our usual route, doing the loop around the park. Somewhere along the way I picked up a small stone, which I was absently tossing to myself as we walked. It had a good

shape and weight to it. Perhaps because it was lunchtime on a weekday, but nobody was around. It was just me and my dog, enjoying the day. Then, very suddenly, I heard a strange sound. It was a whirring, buzzing sort of sound, and I realized immediately that it was the same one I'd heard when I found the book. I looked up quickly, and what I saw defied all explanation. What looked like small yellow lines, almost like cracks, were appearing in the air just above us, like a cartoonish illustration of electricity. And a moment later, a glowing yellow circle grew into existence where those lines had just been. It swirled and shone in the air, emitting that whirring, buzzing sound I'd heard just a second earlier and spinning very rapidly. Checkers barked furiously at the circle.

The very first thing I did was to throw the stone I was holding at the circle. I did it reflexively, without thinking or taking any time to process what I was looking at. The stone didn't make contact with the circle, but instead just went through it. I didn't have time to consider that fact, either, because a moment later two objects seemed to fall from the center of the circle. The circle shrank rapidly and disappeared after this, and the noise ceased as it did so, leaving just me, the two objects that had fallen from it, and Checkers, who was still barking madly.

Slowly, shakily, not sure of what had just happened, I bent down to pick up the two objects that had fallen. The first was a sheet of paper with some writing on it, but that was partially obscured by a coffee stain. The coffee stain was fresh and still wet; in fact, as I picked up the paper, it tore in half. I stared at the paper for several seconds before realizing that I wasn't actually reading it at all, so instead I picked up the second object. This one was an orange pen, and as I looked at it, I saw that it was an Ascliot brand pen. Turning my attention back to the ripped piece of paper, I saw that it had what appeared to be a prompt printed on it, and below, orange text in a very familiar handwriting. It looked like Savanna Cowle's handwriting. At this

moment, something clicked in my brain, and I had several realizations of enormous magnitude in a row.

I ran back home as fast as I could, with Checkers running after me, still barking. My mind was racing with what had just happened, and I could hardly even think straight. Luckily, I already had a pen in my hand. The second I got home, I grabbed my journal, tore it open to the first blank page, and began writing furiously. I was so disturbed, I couldn't even keep my hand straight, and my thoughts moved too fast for me to write them all down. Almost as soon as I touched my pen to the paper, I would stand up again and start pacing around my room. I slipped in and out of control as I tried to make sense of what I had seen and what I was thinking, and each time I had a coherent thought, I wrote it down. It took me nearly two hours to produce the page of insane ramblings that I did, and that was with making a serious effort to pull myself together. To say that I was manic would be an understatement; I might compare my mental state to the Halifax explosion.

I don't remember what happened after that. I believe I may have passed out from the stress. I do know that I woke up on the floor of my office several hours later with a terrible headache. Checkers was lying on the ground next to me, leash and camera still on, and when he saw me sit up he barked joyfully and jumped up to lick my face. I got up, stumbled to the kitchen to get a drink of water, and tried to remember what had transpired. Several glasses of water later, I'd recalled almost everything, but it didn't feel real. There was no way I could have actually seen what I thought I'd seen. A magical portal, opening right next to the park? It was simply impossible. It was another drone, it had to be, there was no other explanation. It just didn't make sense!

I staggered over the couch and sat down, still reeling. Checkers came over and jumped up on the couch, which he knows he's not supposed to do, and lay down with his head on my leg.

His presence calmed me, and I reached down to pet his head as I tried to puzzle through what I'd seen. I could feel the indentation the camera straps had left on his fur from wearing it for too long... wait a moment. The camera. At some point in all of that, I had remembered the camera, and looked back through the footage. But I couldn't remember what I'd seen. I went into my office and found my laptop, which still had the camera plugged into it, and brought it back to the living room couch with me. Time to review the footage again, with a more clear mind.

As I rewound the footage, I saw that, before I took the camera off of him, which I did rather roughly and not at all calmly, Checkers had spent about an hour lying in the doorway, watching me pace about madly. Before that, he'd spent some time waiting in the living room. I could hear myself ranting through the walls of my office. Then it showed him peeking briefly into my office to see me having my breakdown, and before that it showed him running after me towards the house. My heart was racing as I anticipated what I might see. It's a little funny, actually; the camera's rewind function works in 30 second chunks, so I actually skipped over the moment in the footage that I wanted to watch and was forced to hit play and watch it all unfold from the start. In a way, not getting a sneak peek on my way there made it even more dramatic for me. I hit play when I saw we were approaching the park.

Everything was very ordinary in the video. Checkers glanced up at me a few times, looked down to sniff at some plants or bugs, and just did his normal thing. I saw myself holding the stone I'd picked up and humming to myself. We passed a lamp post. Nothing had happened yet. Was anything going to happen? Was I about to learn that it had all been in my head?

But then, as if on cue, the whirring noise started. Checkers looked up at me immediately, and then followed my gaze up into the sky. It was exactly as I'd remembered it: yellow lines, like cracks or electricity, in the open air. And then the circle appeared. It sort of... grew into existence, spreading outwardly from a little speck into a disc of yellow energy roughly a foot and

a half in diameter. Checkers started barking, and the camera footage got a lot shakier. Something small and white flew across the screen and hit the circle. That must have been me throwing the rock.

Then the two objects, then pen and the sheet of paper, fell from the circle, and just a moment later the circle disappeared, shrinking rapidly, just the reverse of how it had appeared. Checkers continued barking, and the footage continued shaking. But I saw myself kneel down, which I knew was to pick up the pen and paper. Checkers stopped barking for a moment and turned to look up at me. I was staring at the sheet of paper, which was already ripped in half, trying to read it. I could see myself shaking, and there was shock and dawning comprehension in my eyes. Checkers looked down to see the other half of the sheet of paper sitting on the ground, covered in a coffee stain. He moved forward a little bit to sniff it. Then there was the sound of running feet, and Checkers quickly looked up to show me running off down the street. That's where the relevant part of the recording ended.

I sat back on the couch and tried to process this. I had hoped that watching the footage again, this time actually lucid, would help me to understand, but I didn't feel any better. If anything, seeing the whole thing anew made me feel even more bewildered. I had seen something absolutely impossible, something so unbelievable that I could have dreamed it. I should have dreamed it. But it was there, on camera, exactly as I remembered it happening. It couldn't have been my imagination. What were the implications of this? What other impossible things could be true now? Were there ghosts, magic, constructs, spirit mediums, drugs, everything else? Why didn't we know about this before? Where was it all? How do I deal with this?

An owl hooted loudly outside, and it startled me back into the real world. I looked around my room, which was exactly the same as it always was. Nothing was out of place here. It was all

familiar. I coughed, noticing how dry my throat was again, and how my headache had returned. I looked at my watch and saw that it was nearly midnight. I felt very tired and unwell. My thoughts were beginning to get very clouded and unfocused. I stood up, drank one more glass of water, then went into my room and collapsed onto my bed. Miraculously, I fell asleep very quickly.

I wish I could say that when I woke up the next morning, everything was clear, and I sat down at my desk after a healthy breakfast and began working immediately. But that would obviously be a lie. I woke up feeling even worse than I felt when I went to sleep, and it didn't get any better as the days wore on. I spent almost all of my time in bed. I barely ate, I didn't leave the house, I didn't answer the phone. My phone rang so many times, and I never answered it. It eventually ran out of power.

I also wish I could say that in all that time, when I was letting myself go, I was doing deep thinking. That I was pondering the mysteries of what I had seen, that I was coming closer to an answer. But this would also be a lie. During that terrible week, I don't know if I had a single complete, coherent thought. What I was actually grappling with was acceptance. I think I knew very quickly that what I'd seen was real, that I hadn't imagined it, and that I wasn't crazy. But I couldn't let myself believe it. It would be so much easier to just decide that I'd gone mad, or that it had all been a hallucination. I could pretend it never happened and return to my life. But that wouldn't work, either. After all, I saw it, didn't I? I had the piece of paper, I wrote with the orange pen. But things like that didn't happen in real life. This was the cycle I was trapped in, the swirling eddy in the dark ocean of confusion. Every waking moment was spent going back and forth between "I definitely saw it" and "I definitely imagined it." For rare, brief, fleeting moments I almost felt close to a conclusion, like I might finally be able to pull myself out and dry myself off, but almost immediately I was plunged back into the whirlpool.

It's kind of hard to describe what exactly about this was so utterly ruinous to me. After all, simply seeing something strange is not typically enough to inspire such a breakdown in someone, especially not someone of previously stable mind such as myself. I think that the reason this experience was so terrible lies in its implications. What I had seen was clearly magic. It resembled exactly the description of the portal in *Hearts Unbound*. Whether or not it *was* the portal from the book couldn't be proven, but that hardly mattered. It was proof that all of the ideas previously unprovable and even ridiculed by science were suddenly completely possible, and that idea is what really destroyed me. That's an absolutely dreadful thing to consider. If this was real, what else was real? Monsters, demons, magic, eldritch horrors, the wrath of God? It could all be out there, exactly as described, just waiting to destroy us. And nobody knew! We all denied it! We were sitting ducks, waiting for unstoppable forces that nobody could possibly comprehend to come along and condemn us to oblivion. And now I knew, and nobody else did, which meant that not only was I doomed, but I was also alone.

In fact, the only thing keeping me from complete and utter catatonia was Checkers, my dear, sweet, selfish dog, who absolutely refused to let me lie down and wither. Twice a day, every day, he trotted into my room and demanded to be walked, and despite my clear state of decay, he insisted on it. On the first day, when I didn't respond to him for nearly an hour, he went so far as to bite my foot to get me to stand up. At the time, I barely gave it any thought. I just let him lead me around the block. I was a mess. But looking back on it now, I think Checkers knew more than I thought. I get the feeling he could sense that I was struggling, that something was not right, and in his own way he wanted to keep things normal. And I love him deeply for it. Even with his efforts, I was still very much not myself. If it hadn't been for him, who knows what could have happened to me?

But it was not Checkers alone who pulled me out of the whirlpool. It was Sunday, March

26, the last day of spring break, and the day before I was supposed to return to my job. I hadn't thought about this at all. I barely even remembered that it was spring, to be honest.

Somebody knocked on my door. I didn't care who. I wasn't going to get up and answer. But they kept knocking. And I don't mean they waited a few minutes; they knocked continuously, calling something out. I rolled over in my bed and tried to ignore it. It really didn't matter what they wanted. Then Checkers ran in, barking happily, and jumped up on top of me. I tried to push him off, but he kept jumping and barking. Finally, I sat up. Whoever it was at my door was still knocking and still calling out. All of a sudden, I recognized her voice. It was Lucille Hastings, and she was calling my name. This was enough to get me out of my bed and to the door. I didn't know why she was here or what I expected her to say, and I don't know what she expected to see, but here she was.

As soon as I opened the door, Mrs. Hastings pushed past me and looked around my house. She looked around the darkened rooms, at the dusty furniture and unclean dishes and everything else I'd been ignoring for this past week, sniffed the air, then turned and looked at me with great concern.

"My dear man, what *happened* to you?" she asked pityingly. Her words cut through the fog in my brain like a hot knife through butter. I looked at her and saw her clearly, with her walker and her delicate stance. Wasn't she still recovering from surgery? It must have taken great effort to come here to see me. I looked down at myself and saw the same clothes I had been wearing all week, crumpled and covered in stains, stuck to my body like plastic on a dying sea turtle. My skin was sticky and clammy, I was dehydrated and malnourished, and I smelled terrible. I realized all of these things at the same time, and crumpled to the floor, sobbing.

Mrs. Hastings, in her great kindness, took my hand and guided me over to the couch. She brought me a glass of water and sat down next to me. She waited patiently for me to compose

myself, or at least be in a fit state to talk. It took a while, and several more glasses of water, but eventually I pulled myself together and looked at her again.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here earlier,” Mrs. Hastings said. “I heard that you had been seen following a dog around, dressed like a homeless person, unwashed and looking lost. Then you didn’t answer any of my phone calls, and I knew something was really wrong. What happened, dear? What’s wrong?”

I didn’t know what to tell her. How could I possibly explain what I had seen? But I had to tell her. There was no excuse here that would work, and I couldn’t just turn her away. But it was all so crazy. I wouldn’t have believed it myself, if I hadn’t seen it happen.

I took a deep breath and began my story. “Mrs. Hastings, do you remember how we couldn’t figure out where that book came from? There was no information, we couldn’t find the author, we couldn’t find Savanna? All of that?” Mrs. Hastings nodded slowly. “Well, I... I think I found out where the book came from. I was going to stop searching, give up, but then... I saw something. Something impossible.”

She looked at me strangely. “And that’s why you’re... like this?”

“Yes. It’s... I can’t explain it. It wasn’t a drone. Here, I’ll... show you...” I got up slowly, walked into my office, and brought back my laptop. I set it down on the coffee table and opened it. “You... aren’t going to believe this. It’s going to look fake. But it’s real. I saw it happen. I recorded this video myself. On Checkers’ camera.”

“The dog has a camera?” Mrs. Hastings asked.

“Yes... a little action camera. I put it on his head when we go for walks... it records what he’s looking at. Bugs and stuff usually... but now also this.” The video file was still open; I had never closed it. Mrs. Hastings watched it with great interest, saying nothing. I watched her face.

When it was done, she looked at me. She seemed remarkably calm for having just

watched a completely impossible video. “I believe I understand, dear,” she said, “but I’d like to hear you explain this to me. For clarity’s sake.”

I took another deep breath and chose my words carefully, out of fear of veering off into a wild tirade. “That was a portal in the air. It opened in front of me, and I saw the whole thing. It was exactly the same as the one described in the book, and I had previously thought the book was fiction. But now I think that the book was not fiction, because something from it just happened in real life. I think the book fell through a portal just like the one in that video. And that means that magic is real. I don’t know how to deal with this knowledge. I can’t see any reason to believe this beyond the fact that I saw it happen, and I feel as though I’m losing my mind.”

Mrs. Hastings nodded. “Well, I can assure you that you are not losing your mind, dear,” she said kindly. “You did catch it on camera, did you not? And I agree with you that it certainly looks to be a portal. I think you’re almost entirely correct in your assessment of the situation.”

It took me a few moments to process her words. She agreed with me. She thought I was right. I wasn’t alone in this. That simple fact, although not an answer to any of my questions, was enormously healing for me. Almost immediately I felt something like a weight lifting off of me. My mind cleared in a way it hadn’t for days. Just having someone else be there with me, supporting me, was an indescribable help. I looked at her with a great swelling of gratitude and affection.

“So... you think I’m right? All of it... I’m right? Magic is real, the book fell through a portal, it’s not fiction?”

“Yes, dear,” Mrs. Hastings said again. “And I would like to help you think about this, too. That is the problem you have, isn’t it?”

“Yes...” I looked at the screen again. The video was paused just as Checkers began to run

after me. “I... I’ve never considered any possibility like this before. This is entirely new to me. I’m not... ready for this.”

“Mm. A good thing, then, that you have me around,” Mrs. Hastings said. “Because I believe that I know exactly what’s going on here.”

I turned to her sharply. “You— you do?”

“Yes. It’s quite obvious, or it is to me.” Mrs. Hastings leaned forward. “We spoke about the spirit realm before, did we not? I told you of how the spirits will reach towards us to offer guidance. That was just a little while ago. This is what is happening here.”

“What?” I tried to understand. “This book... you think it’s from the spirit realm?”

“Correct, dear. I believe the spirits are trying to give you a gift. You are an intelligent man. Your dedication to unraveling even the most impenetrable questions is admirable. It would seem to me that you have been given this book, with its intrigue and mysteries, as an invitation, or perhaps a challenge. There is something here that you are meant to discover, understand, and from there provide knowledge to the rest of the mortal world. You said you were going to stop with your research, no? It’s no coincidence that you received another object, another nudge, just when you were about to give up.”

I looked down at my hands. Goodness, they were filthy. “But that... can’t be it. The portal was just like the one in the book. Just exactly the same. Why?”

“Perhaps they felt it was something you would recognize, and it would be easier for you to begin,” she said. “They may have been wrong. Spirits do not always sympathize properly with us mortals, dear. But the fact remains that this cannot have been an accident. You are being blessed, dear, with a great opportunity.”

I didn’t answer. We sat there silently for a long time. An opportunity? A test? I’m being gifted the chance at great knowledge, something unknown to the rest of the human race. The

spirit realm is reaching out to me. Could it be true? It certainly wouldn't be more far-fetched than anything else at the moment... and I couldn't bring myself to mistrust Mrs. Hastings. Do I choose to believe? And why me? Am I really that special? Am I up to this task?

After a long while, I looked at her again. "So... what do I do now?"

Mrs. Hastings clicked her tongue. "Well, that's obvious, isn't it, dear? You must return to your research! You have more work to do! Open this book, read it carefully, find those hidden details! You cannot disappoint the spirits. They expect great things of you. This may have shaken your world, dear. You may stumble, but do not fall. Even if you learn nothing, it will not do to wither away."

Despite my continuing doubts, Mrs. Hastings was right about one thing. Stumble, but not fall. I can't just sit in my house and rot away like this. I stood up. "Yes. Yes! You're right. I have to move forward."

Mrs. Hastings clapped her hands. "Wonderful! Now, dear, the first thing you must do is clean this house."

"Huh?" The conversation was so rousing, I'd almost forgotten about the terrible state of my living environment.

"Quite frankly, dear, this place is a pigsty. I understand that you've been ailing terribly, but there's no better place to start than with your physical space. Here is my advice: call in to work, and ask for some time off. Sick leave, sabbatical, however you want to do it. You're in no state to go to work right now anyway, even if you tried. You need recovery. Once you've done that, take some time to distract yourself from the task ahead, and get this house back into ship shape. Then, after that, you may begin."

"Distract myself?" I agreed that the house could use some work, but... "Didn't you say this is a great opportunity?"

Mrs. Hastings looked at me pointedly. “Why, yes, dear, but use some common sense. You’ve just spent a downright torturous week on this problem. You do need to come back and work on it, but your state of mind is not conducive to success. So do yourself a favor and think about something else for a bit, and approach this problem with clear thought and readiness. Clean your house, and clean yourself. You’ll be much happier in a healthy living space, and the manual labor will do you good.”

I sighed. Once again, Mrs. Hastings was right. “That’s good advice. I’ll do that.”

“Excellent. Now, is there anything else you need from me?”

There was nothing. Mrs. Hastings had done more for me than I could have asked. I thanked her once more, and waved her goodbye with renewed purpose. I don’t know how to pay her back for her kindness, but I will find a way.

That’s how I was pulled out of the avalanche of madness and put back on the hiking trail to truth. And if we’re being honest, I was extremely fortunate. Just one week is an extremely short time to spend in a wild downward spiral. Not that I’m an expert on mental health and breakdowns, but it would seem to me that it’s much more common to spend months, if not years like this. Thank God for Mrs. Hasting’s gossip network and her kind heart. If she hadn’t acted so quickly, or if she had learned of my state later, I could have been in even greater trouble. I could have lost my job, I could have died of thirst or starvation or general neglect, I could have lost everything. I certainly wasn’t getting anywhere on my own.

My hand is starting to cramp, so I’ll end this here. In my next entry, I’ll continue with my story and discuss what I did next. It has taken me this long to come back to my journal; I can afford to wait a little bit longer. If my information is right, I still have a little more time before Savanna leaves.

May 13, 2023

The story continues roughly another week after Mrs. Hastings saved me. It's funny I use that word, actually; I hardly even noticed, but I did enter a sort of narrative style as I was writing yesterday. That's fine with me. I'm writing about events from a month ago anyway. Might as well have some fun with it.

I took Mrs. Hastings's advice and alerted the school that I would be absent for a while. I rarely ever take time off, so the administration must have assumed that it was something serious and approved me right away. Then I turned my focus to cleaning up my house. I never would have expected that a mere week of having a breakdown could do this much damage, but I had to do a lot of work to bring everything back to normal. Well, no, in some ways that's not true; it only took me about a day's work to dust, wash, dry, and cleanse everything that needed it. This included clothes, sheets, dishes, furniture, sweeping the floors, picking up litter and trash, and also the airing out of all of the rooms. The major effort really came from simply removing the feeling of squalor from my living space, cleaning out the impression it left on me. I had to wash and re-wash my bedding four separate times and flip my mattress over before I really felt like I wasn't just back in the same place I'd been all week, and I did spend a night or two sleeping on the couch.

There were also the other household things I'd neglected, like grocery shopping and paying my electric bill, something that made me even more thankful I hadn't spent any longer having my breakdown. And I was sure to pay extra attention to Checkers, who was very glad to have me properly back.

I had been secretly skeptical of Mrs. Hastings theory that focusing on these other, material matters would adequately distract me from the portal, but she was sort of right. It didn't take it fully off of my mind, but it did force me to think about it less, which was good. I was

quite sick of dwelling on it anyway. And when I did go back to thinking about it, it was usually somewhat passive and surface-level thinking that I could manage. In fact, I think that this second effect was more helpful than the first, because it enabled me to consider the matter one piece at a time, instead of all at once, which was quite overwhelming.

By the end of that week, my house looked as good as new, and I was feeling leaps and bounds better than I had before. I was also feeling ready to actually tackle this revelation of magic properly. Not just that, I'd begun to feel rather excited about it. At some point, as I crept towards acceptance, my utter bewilderment had shrunk and given way to eagerness, and that eagerness had built and built as I re-realized the magnitude of what I had seen until eventually I was struggling to contain my excitement at all.

I mean, let me put this into perspective. Since the beginning of time, superstition and religion and all these things have spoken about magic. Yet nothing has ever been proven, replicated, or even verifiably witnessed by a truly trustworthy source, and our growing scientific understanding has made it more and more clear that there is always a physical or chemical explanation for what was previously thought of as a miracle. But now I have evidence of something that science *cannot* explain, and my experiment is already planned. If I'm right, then this will be, without hyperbole, quite possibly the single most important discovery in human history. Imagine that! I, Harold McCourt, by all accounts an intelligent individual but still not anyone all that special, being the one to make *the most groundbreaking discovery anyone ever has*. Absolutely nothing ever discovered on Earth compares to this. Even a month later I'm still giddy about it, and I can't even publish anything about it! But I'm getting ahead of myself. I still need to finish the story and describe my conclusions.

Saturday, April 1, I was visited again, this time by Gloria. Unlike with Mrs. Hastings, however, this was not a surprise visit; I had sent her an email telling her that she should come by

sometime soon, as I had something very important to show her. She is my closest friend and also the only other person I know of who has read *Hearts Unbound*, so I wanted her to see the video and know what was going on. I wanted her assistance on my research going forward. However, in my email I deliberately withheld details, because although by this time I was fully convinced that what I had seen was real, I was still (and still am now, to be honest) very aware of the fact that it would absolutely not be believable to anybody else. And Gloria is not nearly as eager to believe in the supernatural as Mrs. Hastings. In order to get her onto my side, I needed the chance to explain everything in person.

Understandably, when she arrived, the first thing she wanted to know was where I'd been for the past two weeks. Until I asked her to come over, she hadn't been able to reach me at all. She had tried calling, texting, email, everything. I admit, that was my fault; once I was on the mend, I ought to have at least responded to one of those. It just slipped my mind.

Avoiding the real subject of the visit, I told her the truth: that I had been suffering a massive mental breakdown and was almost entirely confined to my bed. I told her about how I had spent a week barely eating, not washing, only going outside when forced, et cetera. I told her about how Mrs. Hastings had come by and how she'd pulled me out of the pit I was in and set me on my path again, and how I'd spent the last week recovering. It took me that long to feel comfortable having someone else in my house.

Gloria listened to my story with great concern. "That sounds absolutely horrible," she said pityingly when I finished. "But why? Why did any of that happen?"

"That... is what I need to talk to you about," I said. "It concerns the book."

Gloria blinked. "The... the book? You had a mental breakdown over a teen fantasy novel?"

"Well, no, not really... but kind of, yes. I need to explain this to you. I've discovered

something... absolutely incredible.” And I launched into my story about seeing the portal on the walk, the impact it had on me, and what Mrs. Hastings did to help me. I told her Mrs. Hastings’s theory, and I told her my theories as well, which I will detail in a later entry. As I spoke, Gloria’s expression shifted from concern to skepticism, to bemusement, and eventually to incredulousness.

“... and I wanted you to know about it, Gloria, because you are the only other person I can talk to about this,” I said. “Mrs. Hastings has been very helpful, but I’ve decided I don’t agree with her analysis of the situation. I need another, more academic mind to help me with this. More than that, I need support. Can I ask you to help me?”

Gloria stared at me for a bit, then laughed lightly to herself. “Harold, you can’t really expect me to believe all of that, can you? This sounds more like a hallucination or a dream than a real experience. Maybe you should get some real help.”

This was disheartening to hear, but I had expected it. I opened my laptop, which was on the coffee table, and plugged in the action camera. “But what if I told you that I have proof? Video footage of the event as it happened?”

Gloria watched the video with an exasperated look on her face. I watched her carefully, hoping to see her expression shift, ideally towards one of belief or at least some light confusion. But it didn’t happen. She watched the whole thing without changing a bit, and when it was done she looked at me again.

“You’re really going a long way for this joke, huh?” she said.

“What?”

“I never expected you to commit this hard, or even to do something like this. This isn’t like you. Have you just been bored lately?”

This was not the reaction I thought she’d have. “Gloria, what on Earth are you talking

about?”

“Harold, you can stop,” she said. “Haha, April Fools, sure. But this just is not believable at all.”

I looked at the date on my laptop and groaned. In hindsight, it would have been much, much smarter to not have this meeting on the first of April. But it didn’t change my purpose. I just needed to work harder.

I closed my laptop and looked her right in the eye. “Gloria, this is not a joke or a prank. I am completely serious. I know what I saw. I have it on camera; I know I’m not crazy. This is real. And it means that we, as scholars, have a lot of work to do. This is the most important discovery anyone has ever made. And I don’t want to work on this alone. You read the book; you’re the only other person I know who can help me here. I swear on my father’s grave that I’m telling the truth. What will I have to do to get you to believe me?”

Gloria was starting to look extremely uncomfortable. I think she knew that I wouldn’t just make up something like this, but she still couldn’t believe my story. “Harold, stop it. This is... crazy. It’s simply impossible. You claim that it was a portal, but that can’t be. It must have been another drone, or a sunflare, or... or anything else. There’s no way. I can’t help you on this, and I never thought you’d get this wrapped up in a teen fantasy novel. It’s just fiction! Get over it!”

Part of me wanted to defend myself, to shake some sense into her, to loudly declare that she was wrong and that I was right, but I didn’t. I couldn’t deny her stance made sense. I always knew, didn’t I, that this was completely absurd except for that it’s true. So I simply sighed, thanked her for coming over, and apologized for any distress or upset that I may have caused. She left without saying anything.

It hurts to lose someone’s support, especially when you really knew you needed it, but I

will simply have to make do. It's better that I didn't pursue the point any further. As unpleasant as it was to not have her in my corner, it would have been much worse to harm our friendship.

In the upcoming entries, I will be detailing the continuation of my research and thinking, and describing the new conclusions I've drawn and what I believe they mean. This will eventually bring us to the present day, and my plans going forward. But suffice it to say that the purpose and significance of my research has changed dramatically. Refreshed, recovered, and with newfound purpose, my journey began anew.

May 14, 2023

You may be wondering now, what exactly is this new purpose I spoke of? Mrs. Hastings believes that this book was sent to me by the "spirits," for some enlightening purpose that we don't know the full extent of. And initially I was willing to go along with that idea. After all, it seemed about as likely as anything, and it helped to manage my paralysis and fear following the second encounter with the portal. It was a single concrete explanation, so it removed a good amount of the uncertainty factor, and it was decidedly hopeful and positive, which handled the feeling of doom. It painted the portal as a good omen, rather than an indication of horrors beyond my comprehension. It took the monsters, demons, and the wrath of God out of the picture, and that was the main reason why it was helpful.

But as I took time to mull the idea over for myself, especially once I'd properly calmed down, I came to no longer believe that theory. Or, maybe, it would be better to say that I don't find that explanation satisfactory. That implies a level of fate, of inherent special-ness to me that I don't think is plausible. That I could be some sort of "chosen one..." that seems even more unbelievable to me than any of the other far-fetched ideas I have now. I thought about what that portal meant to me in the first second after seeing it, and where I'd seen it before, and what else

was falling through it, and what all of that could add up to explain. What I really needed was a simple, plausible explanation, perhaps even something boring, that opened the door to further exploration while not allowing me to slide back into despair.

With that in mind, let's review the immediate, surface-level facts of the situation. On at least two separate occasions, a yellow portal has opened in the air above the sidewalk on Fallcot Street, near the east entrance to Simmons Park, and objects have fallen through it. These objects have primarily been pens, of which I, at the time of properly beginning my analysis again, had 3: one yellow, one blue, and one orange. The pens were all Ascliot-brand pens.

There are two other notable items that fell through the portal. The first was the novel titled *Hearts Unbound*, owned by Savanna Cowle, who wrote many notes in the margins of the book as she read it. She is also the person who owned all of those pens, which I had long suspected but only certainly concluded when the ink dating test confirmed that the notes left in the book matched the basic chemical composition of the ink the Ascliot pens use. *Hearts Unbound* was written by Saldanji Arhic, and published by Closegreen Publishing Co. in the year 2891. It is about a young adult woman who is forced to live in a rural cottage by her parents, only to find that she has a surprise roommate: the ghost of a young man who lived in the same cottage centuries prior. The book won some awards and has overall positive reviews. The book fell through the portal around 7:34 AM on January 4, 2023, alongside the blue pen.

The second object was a piece of paper which I believe to be a sheet of homework. The homework had had coffee spilled on it very shortly before falling through the portal, which I know because the paper was still wet when I picked it up, and had a large brown mark on it smelling of coffee. Shortly after picking up the piece of paper, it tore in half, likely because of the water damage, and I only have half of it now. The homework fell through the portal shortly after 1 PM on Friday, March 17, 2023, alongside the orange pen.

The yellow and blue pens both match colors used by Savanna Cowle to write notes in the margins of the book, and the orange pen matches the color used on the sheet of homework paper.

Now, the wrinkles. Almost all of the specific peoples and groups mentioned above are not people who seem to exist. Savanna Cowle, Saldanji Arhic, Closegreen Publishing Co., and the Ascliot brand all appear to be fictional. This, of course, does not make much sense. If those people were fictional, I would not be holding these items.

For another matter of interest, the book itself contains a great number of details that do not make sense. There is an extremely conspicuous lack of context for the vast majority of the fantastical ideas, including peoples, abilities, and objects, being as vague as ghosts and as specific as medical drugs. But this context cannot be nonexistent, for Savanna Cowle does not seem to struggle. And I have previously concluded, earlier in this very journal, that this context was not established in previous books written by Saldanji Arhic, nor is this book part of a series or based on a pre-existing property or idea. So the context must exist, and it must be found outside of this book, yet probably not within other related media.

This brings me, then, to the piece of homework paper. It has a question, printed, and an answer, handwritten in orange ink. That question asks what the difference was between a bound ghost and a living person in the 18th century, and asks for the answer to involve both the social and political views of the era, and also provide a specific example of one reason why those views may have changed. The answer is cut off halfway through by the tear in the paper, as well as being obscured by the coffee stain, but what is legible states that bound ghosts were a significant minority in the majority of societies and ghosts in general were discriminated against for much of history. It was commonly believed that ghosts lost their capacity for emotion and mercy. But in the 18th century, a paper titled “Interview with Death” was published by someone named Achsmen of Adjirut, and it had a massive influence on ending discrimination against ghosts. The

ink color matches the color of the orange pen I found alongside the paper, and the handwriting is absolutely that of Savanna Cowle. Additionally, the orange pen is the same brand as Savanna's other pens. It's clear that this sheet of homework also belonged to Savanna.

Now, you don't need me to tell you that there was no such paper published in the 18th century, and that "Achsmen of Adjirut" is not a real person. In fact, if it weren't for the fact that I found the book first, I would have instantly dismissed this as simply someone's creative writing project that blew away in the wind. But this piece of paper is massively important, and is what spurred me on to my current theory, because it provides an answer to the mystery of the missing context.

It does not contain all of the context needed to understand this book, of course. But what it does contain is a vital clue. The primary subject matter in *Hearts Unbound* that Savanna possessed great knowledge of was ghosts and the afterlife. She regularly critiqued the book's accuracy when it came to necromantic matters, and complained rather loudly when the book took some particularly egregious creative liberties. In short, she is an expert, or as close to one as we can figure. And that raises the obvious question: where did she get all of her knowledge?

The homework paper provides at least part of an answer to that: she is taking a class that relates closely enough to the subject of ghosts to ask a question about the place of bound ghosts in society at a specific point in history. The question brings up bound ghosts, which was a concept that featured prominently in *Hearts Unbound*, and states that they existed as far back as the 18th century, a full thousand years before the publication of the book. What *that* means is that some, if not all, of Savanna's context for this book comes from classes she's taking – or, to put it another way, one can take classes to learn the context that this book employs.

But fantasy novels don't typically require collegiate-level courses to understand them. Consider also that Savanna's complaints were mostly about things the book got wrong, and that

the tone of her complaints suggested that these were easy mistakes to not make. To me, this shows that while Savanna may be taking a collegiate-level course on ghosts in society, which explains the depth of her knowledge, the basic context is expected to be so accessible that the book doesn't need to explain it. It then also occurred to me that Savanna's homework said that the social standing of ghosts became significantly more positive in the 18th century, and this idea holds true when cross-referenced with the book – Madame Alizah, the primary antagonist, is blindly prejudiced against ghosts. The story doesn't explain this either, or even explicitly state that it's wrong, but it just about does; the reactions of other characters to her biases are exclusively negative.

But I needed to find that piece of homework to know that prejudice towards ghosts is an attitude so outdated as to be medieval. That characterization of Madame Alizah doesn't work like it should without that context, because it could have been misread in numerous different ways, such as foreshadowing a betrayal or as truth that the main characters don't want to admit. In short, it doesn't work in a world where ghosts aren't real.

And here we come to my hypothesis, the thing I believe is true and am going to try to concretely prove, if not to the world than to myself. I've hinted at it already, but now I'm going to lay it out plainly. I posit that this book came from another world, perhaps an alternate dimension or parallel universe, where it is *not* just fantasy. This book came from a world where magic is real, ghosts are real, portals are real, and it somehow fell out of that world and into this one. This is a conclusion that completely and entirely explains why this book is written so strangely, why it lacks context for so many important plot points, and why it expects the reader to just accept the ideas it presents: because, to the expected readers who actually live in the world this book is from, those ideas are already widely known and the context is common enough to not need including. It explains why I couldn't find any of the people or groups involved in the

creation of this book, why Savanna Cowle didn't seem to exist, and why it claims to be published over 800 years in the future from the date of writing this journal. Everything about this book is from an alien reality, one that operates on a different set of rules than ours.

But in some ways, this alien reality, this other world, seems remarkably similar to our own. It has certain commonalities with the world I'm from. And this brings me to the very important next question, which is what to *do* with this hypothesis. It's all well and good to suggest that there is another world, but we have no way to contact it and no way to gain more information, at least purposefully. Everything I know about it, and the fact that I know anything about it at all, happened quite by chance. So without a way to actually pursue this hypothesis and turn it into something, I would appear to be rather stuck, knowing that that world is there but unable to reach it. And at first I believed that too.

But Mrs. Hastings's words echoed in my head. Not about the spirit realm, but about the book. Maybe I really am being given an opportunity of some kind. And then it hit me: the book might hold the answers. After all, the portal was real, wasn't it? And Savanna was writing a homework assignment about the societal standing of ghosts in history, meaning that the ghosts are real too. So maybe this book was even less fantasy than I'd thought. Maybe the book was actually, within the world it came from, realistic fiction. That would explain why Savanna was so worked up about the inaccuracies regarding bound ghosts; she wasn't expecting to read a book that would have inaccuracies like that. If all of those things were real, if the book is supposed to be real, then maybe I can learn a lot more about this world by reading the book again, but more carefully, with an even closer analytical lens, searching for cultural insight and information even where there might seem to be none.

This, then, was to be my new mission. I would read *Hearts Unbound* for a second time, and this time, under the assumption that the book was *not* trying to portray anything impossible

or unrealistic, I would go over it with a fine-toothed comb. I was no longer simply reading a book and analyzing it for fun. I was looking for genuine cultural knowledge about a society that, as far as I'm aware, nobody else on the planet has ever heard of before. And I was hopeful that somewhere in this process, there would be the key to actually making a real connection to that world. It was a long shot, and success was by no means likely, but I had to try.

It also appeared that I would be mostly alone in this endeavor, since Gloria refused to help. Mrs. Hastings did offer her assistance, and I did end up asking for her input a few times, but she also tended towards a very different end hypothesis than I did, so her ability to genuinely further my research was limited. And I did have the extremely important assistance of Savanna Cowle in the form of her notes, but I couldn't exactly ask her any clarifying questions. But there was nothing to be done for it at the time, so I was undeterred.

Starting tomorrow, I will be describing my research, my trip back through the book, and explaining my findings and conclusions as they come up. Originally, I was going to take you back through each of the chapters as I read the book again and describe every little thing I thought about and the analysis I did and the conclusions I drew. But I realized this morning that that would be a waste of time. I don't need to rehash the same story that I've already described in this very journal. And describing all of those small noticings would be eventually made redundant when I described the major conclusions I drew, all of which involve and are built off of those smaller noticings. In fact, if my audience is who I think they are, this would be doubly redundant, because I cannot tell you anything you don't already know. In that way, a little redundancy is inevitable.

So I am only going to discuss my greater analysis and conclusions. These fall under a number of categories, each of which will be getting their own chapter and due attention, and will be quite recognizable to anyone who's been following this journal so far, as they are forms of the

primary questions I've had since beginning this book. They are:

1. Magic

This is the most important chapter, so it's coming first. It'll cover everything that I think reasonably falls under the definition of magic, including but not limited to: abilities that people have, objects that are magical, and magic as a power source.

2. Ghosts

This is going to cover ghosts and everything I've been able to ascertain about their existence and function, as well as how they "live," for lack of a better word, in that world.

3. Constructs

This chapter will cover constructs, how they're made, how they operate, their place in society, and anything else I've been able to figure out. I can't pretend to have much information on this subject, but it's worth covering as in-depth as I can anyway.

4. Strange Bodies

In this chapter, I'm going to look at what I've deduced from the high variety of physical features people can have and do a little bit of speculating on what impacts this may or may not have had on society as it developed.

5. Moving Forward

This will be the chapter that ends the journal. I'll discuss my final conclusions and outline my plans for how I'm going to move forward with my research, as well as my hopes and aspirations with what this could turn into.

These categories are not clear-cut, nor do they have solid boundaries, and you should expect some considerable overlap between their subject matter. But I don't consider that much of a problem. It's pretty difficult to truly and completely separate cultural ideas from each other anyway. I'm also going to avoid speculation as much as I can, because while it would be nice to ramble on and on about theories and possibilities, if my core theory is correct, I might be able to get confirmation on the ideas I have based on evidence, and in that case I would rather wait to see if I can get *more* solid evidence to theorize off of. In any case, the end is in sight!

### May 15, 2023 – Chapter 1: Magic

I'll start with my discussion about magic. This is the most interesting and most important part of my research, because it is by far the most obvious and impactful difference between our two worlds. And immediately we are faced by a question that is almost unanswerable: what exactly *is* magic? In our world, magic has no solid definition. It's just a general term for something mysterious, likely supernatural, that has an influence on something else. By its very nature it is undefinable; if it could be defined, we wouldn't call it magic, we'd call it physics or chemistry or something else.

But in that world, magic clearly means something different. The term is used numerous times throughout the book, but nobody ever seems confused or even unprepared for it. It's not mysterious, it might not even be supernatural, and it's definitely not undefinable. Hell, it's downright common. If it weren't for the fact that it's literally called magic, I probably wouldn't want to use that term at all. But here we are, and we have a lot to learn.

Let's start with the basics. In that world, what is magic, practically speaking? What are the things that are seen as and referred to as magic? The first, most obvious thing that is called magic is special abilities employed by people. In the book, we see magic powers that allow

people to change the colors of objects, have visions of the future, make physical contact with ghosts, and create constructs. These are all distinctly different from each other, and they cover a rather large amount of ground between themselves. Just in these four we see that there can be abilities that affect only oneself, abilities that affect other living things, abilities that affect inanimate objects, abilities that bestow great talent, abilities that allow one to do something otherwise entirely impossible, and even more that I'll get into later.

The second way magic manifests is when it's used as a power source. Within Frederick's cottage there are a number of objects that are explicitly stated to be powered by magic, ranging from things we have in this world like lamps and washing machines to terms and ideas I'm unfamiliar with, such as "quickboxes" and "Go-Tabs." It's important to note that the book did not provide any information as to *how* magic powers these objects, and as such I can only guess at how that works. Is there a specific magical effect that these devices are making use of? Or is magic itself an energy that can be harnessed, like electricity? I'm sort of leaning towards the latter, since it is also said that these objects could theoretically lose power similarly to an electronic device, but there isn't enough information to say for sure.

And the third way magic manifests is as an influencing force. In the book, this takes the form of medicine, most notably the drug lenportasil, which I now believe was never a fictional drug at all, but also when Vivi's recovery seems inexplicably sped up through what I can only assume is the magic of true love. This is distinct from the previous manifestation because it can't really be said to be *powering* something, but it is still somewhat similar in that it's magic being put into an object somehow.

From these three manifestations, there is one clear rule that jumps out at me: magic is always interacting with something. This could be because it isn't observable otherwise, or because it only exists through interaction, but the fact stands that it doesn't seem to exist (or at

least have an impact) in a vacuum. That observation doesn't do a whole lot of good, though, because it only leads to questions that I simply cannot answer. So we'll simply register it as true in our minds for now and not worry too much about it as we dive into the specifics of how each of those three magical methods work.

Magical ability in people appears to be very common in that world. Of the seven applicable main characters, only two of them seem to lack magical ability, these being Mr. LeJean and Madame Alizah. There are a couple other characters who either are cut from a different cloth or don't spend enough time in the story for us to accurately judge whether or not they might have magical ability, so I excluded them from this part of my thinking. It's also important to note that neither the having nor lacking of magical ability is treated as particularly interesting in the story, which says to me that the same must be true in that world as well. If I were to try to put a number on it, I might say that roughly a fifth of that world's population is non-magical, but that is only based on the cast of the book; it could be a lot lower or higher.

I do want to note that Frederick possesses magical ability as well, but it's not made clear if this is because he is a ghost or because he had those abilities while living. I would guess that it's due to being a ghost, since many of them have to do with his incorporeality, and he also possesses a greater variety of abilities than other characters have.

Speaking of variety, abilities are also rather specific, and most people only seem to have one or two magical things they can do. Redford can only see the future, Mrs. LeJean can only change the colors of objects, and so on. Zoey is implied to have multiple things she could do (or could learn to do), but she is also implied to be some sort of necromantic prodigy, so she may be an exception in more than one way. This is interesting to me, because having only one specific power or ability is something I might have considered closer to superpowers than magic, but it's still referred to as magic, so that is what it must be.

Magic can also be trained. The book does not make it clear how this happens or what one has to do, but Vivi gets Zoey a book that will teach her about her necromantic abilities and help her to understand and improve them, so it's obviously possible. This also makes me wonder if Zoey's specific abilities might be ones that other people have, or if magic simply can be sorted into a couple of broad categories with a few overarching consistencies and truths. Based on how none of the abilities seen in the book are really ever described or named beyond assigning them a keyword, I believe it's the latter.

But how does one *get* magic? Why do some people not have magic, and the ones that do only have specific and limited abilities? Can you obtain magic? How nice that would be. But my theory is that you cannot. I believe magic is an inherent trait, that people in that world are born with their specific abilities.

You see, it's made clear in the book that magical ability can be inherited from your parents or extended family. Mrs. LeJean explicitly states that the LeJean family women often excel creatively, and to support her claim, all three of the LeJean women that we see in the story have artistic abilities. And, yes, I do believe Vivi's talent for making constructs is a magical ability; she never does anything like it until she regains her magic after recovering from her withdrawal, her mother makes reference to her exhibiting magical creative ability in her youth, and her father says that she "follows in her grandmother's footsteps."

Now, this isn't a hard and fast rule; you don't need magical power in your immediate family to have it yourself, and outside of this specific example, there's no evidence to say that you are limited to the powers of your family. Zoey has necromantic abilities that her mother obviously lacks in the extreme. It's not that your powers are necessarily determined by your genetics. But what it *does* mean is that magical power is at least somewhat biological. It is a quality that actually somehow resides in your body. It's also made clear that magical ability tends

to show itself at some point in one's early development. This can apparently vary depending on what your power actually is, as Vivi showed magic at the age of four but Zoey's exhibiting ability at the age of twelve is considered "early."

When I say magic resides inside of one's body, that doesn't mean that it's exclusive to living creatures; just that it needs some sort of vessel or outlet. As I said before, objects and devices can use magic to work, so it's obviously not a force that's limited to living creatures. And constructs most likely use magic to power themselves too. I'll get into that in more detail in my entry about constructs.

Now, there is one other obvious question that I want to address: does "wizard magic" in the way we think of it in this world, such as throwing fireballs and making things disappear, exist in that world too? While I sadly cannot provide a solid answer to that question due to lack of hard evidence, I do believe that it might. Savanna, if what I'm about to write is entirely wrong, please forgive me; all of my claims are unverifiable anyway by nature of my situation.

It's also become clear to me that magic can be harmful, or perhaps is inherently harmful. Lenportasil is a drug that nullifies magic in one's body for a temporary period. It's in a category of drug called "dampeners," which I assume are drugs that do the same to varying degrees of efficacy and duration. When Vivi suffers from her withdrawal from the drug, she sustains significant injury, which the doctor describes as "acute magic poisoning." The doctor also says that lenportasil is usually combined with other, weaker dampeners to mitigate the side effects when it wears off, implying that the effects cannot be avoided consistently or safely otherwise. For these reasons, I believe that the actual harmful effect of lenportasil is when one's magic returns to the body. Acute magic poisoning must be caused by all of the magic returning at once, and the weaker dampeners are used to force magic to return more slowly to the patient's body.

This implies that magic is somehow harmful or toxic to living creatures when it's in large

quantities or high concentrations. But if that's the case, how is it that magical ability manifests in people at all, to say nothing of it appearing in small children? To answer this question, I remind you of the earlier fact that magic can be trained. It would seem to me that magical ability takes time to collect and manifest itself in a person, and this slow aggregation of magic would give one's body plenty of time to adapt and get used to having it. It's only when a large or concentrated amount of magic is introduced to one's system within a very short time period that it becomes dangerous.

There is one other instance of magic that I've observed, and this is the most interesting one of them all. It's also the only one that is not exclusive to the text of the story. In chapters 7 and 12, characters travel via magical portal. At least, I assume it's magical, but I can't see what else it would be. They use a device called a "Go-Tab" to create a portal, and step through it to cover great distances. The portal is a circular opening in the air that swirls and hums while it's open, and has an air of electricity to it. If this sounds familiar to you, good! That means that you've been paying attention. I've seen this portal in real life, too; it's how I came to own the book in the first place, as well as the homework paper and the pens.

And this isn't a portal of indeterminate origin, either; according to my theory, Savanna Cowle opened it herself. When the portals first appear in the book, Savanna recognizes them immediately based on sound alone, and she seems to have a very close level of familiarity with them. Furthermore, she makes a smug comment about Mr. LeJean needing to use some kind of special device to open a portal, being unable to do it on his own, and even writes "Savanna: 1, rich guy: 0." This is a very clear indication that Savanna is able to open portals on her own. I also want to mention that the portals I saw personally were both yellow, which is Savanna's stated favorite color. Not hard evidence, but it's another connection.

But I don't think Savanna was opening the portals on purpose. Not to say that she can't

do it on purpose; if she couldn't, why would she be smug about the ability to do it? But the ones I've seen I doubt are intentional. The last thing we can learn about magic from the book is that it can happen without the person meaning to do it. Mrs. LeJean is shown to automatically change the colors of objects when she's nervous, Zoey doesn't seem to be able to turn off her ability to touch ghosts, and Redford's visions of the future seem to strike at random the vast majority of the time. We also know that Savanna is very clumsy. She frequently loses her pens, sometimes in the middle of a chapter, and even complains openly about never being able to find the pens she loses, which I know is true because I have half of them with me now. The blue pen didn't have its cap, and her midterm assignment has a huge coffee stain on it. Clearly, Savanna struggles to keep track of her belongings.

My theory is that, sometimes, when Savanna loses something, in her stress, she accidentally opens a portal, through which the object she loses falls. It would be hard to find something again if that's where it went. As for how those objects ended up here, in this world, I do not know, and I have no estimates. But they did end up here; that much is obvious. This is equal parts disheartening and promising, in a strange way. It's disheartening because it means that, in my current situation, I have no way to guarantee a connection between our two worlds will happen again. I do have reason to suspect that it actually will, but I'll discuss that at a later time. However, it's promising because it would prove that a connection between our two worlds is indeed possible, despite the extremely important difference of them having magic and us not. So it's not over yet!

Now, unless I've forgotten something, that concludes my discussion on magic. It will likely be the longest of these chapters, but it's extremely important. Next time, I'll talk about ghosts, which is also extremely important.

May 16, 2023 – Chapter 2: Ghosts

Today we're going to discuss ghosts. In our world, we do not have a clear or consistent idea of what a ghost is. At best we can agree that a ghost is an incorporeal image of a thing, but even that is far from a constant, and beyond that everything just falls apart. Sometimes ghosts are malevolent towards others, sometimes they're neutral, sometimes only humans can be ghosts and sometimes other creatures can do it too, sometimes you get to choose to be a ghost and sometimes you don't. Hell, sometimes you don't even have to be dead to be a ghost. There is no real definition of what a ghost is or has to be. Despite this, people still generally know what a ghost is, and rarely is there a need to define them. Fiction often tries to explain them, but that's only because every author knows that their idea of a ghost is not necessarily their audience's idea of a ghost.

But in the other world, not only are ghosts real, they're extremely well defined. They are so well defined that fiction from that world needs absolutely no preamble before introducing a ghostly character. You may think that, in this world, you could introduce a ghost into a story and not need to explain anything, but that's not so, because the fact that a character is a ghost in the first place is something that warrants, if not explanation, then at least some attention. A ghost in fiction in our world is a ghost first and everything else second. But in that world, ghosts are so real that being a ghost is merely one among many traits, instead of being the primary focus of one's identity by default. It can still be one's most important trait, but it doesn't have to be.

So let's begin with that definition. To the best of my knowledge and ability, this is what I define a ghost as: *A ghost is a person who has died, but has for one reason or another remained among the living in an incorporeal form, separated from their body and from their mortality.* This definition has several keywords in it that will form the structure of my discussion moving forward, and let's begin with "person."

Ghosts are still people. They have emotions, wants, needs, legal rights, a place in society. A ghost can own property and can even be evicted, which means that they are subject to the law just as much as anyone else. And this is significant, because we learn through reading Savanna's midterm assignment that this was not always the case. Apparently, prior to the 18th century, ghosts were treated considerably worse than they are now. This can be attributed, as all hate, to ignorance; living people, who controlled the world to a greater extent than ghosts did, knew very little about them and either were unable or simply never tried to understand them. There was a common misconception that ghosts lost their humanity upon death, including their emotions and capacity for mercy, which would understandably lead to people avoiding and mistrusting them, and may have motivated the lack of understanding. People may have thought that a creature without emotions and mercy must be lying when they claim to be hurt or misunderstood.

But, in the 18th century, a paper titled *Interview with Death* was published by someone named Achsmen of Adjirut. You may notice that Adjirut is also the place where *Hearts Unbound* was published! If there's a connection there, I don't know what it is. Anyway, *Interview with Death* was massively influential, dispelling several myths and misconceptions about ghosts and the afterlife and contributing to the swift decrease of discrimination against ghosts. And today, if *Hearts Unbound* is as contemporary as I've been led to believe, ghosts enjoy proper citizenship and equal status to everyone living. And in case there was any confusion, yes, ghosts are indeed dead. This is an extremely important part of what makes a ghost a ghost, but we'll get into it more in a bit.

Next, ghosts do remain among the world of the living, but I suspect that they are quite uncommon. Prior to Achsmen's paper, at least, they were a significant minority, and while there is only one ghost character in the book and that is no way to judge the commonality of similar characters in real life, there are indications that they are still a minority to this day, and likely still

not very well understood by most people. For starters, spirit medium is a real profession that one can have, and they're obviously legitimate and respected; Madame Alizah was arrested in part for impersonating one. In a world where ghosts are real, it seems odd that the general public wouldn't understand them, but if they're still a minority, that becomes more likely. My theory is that it can be somewhat compared, at a surface level only, to going to the doctor when one is sick. You may have a cursory understanding of illness and what one should do to get better, but you'll still want to go talk to a professional about it. The public perception of ghosts may be similar. And I want to make it absolutely clear that I am *not* comparing ghosts to diseases. I'm comparing the amount of general knowledge the average person has about these things.

There's also the matter that actually interacting with ghosts seems to require a specific type of magical ability that not everyone has. Zoey is the only character in the book who can touch Frederick, which is an ability that's needed at the end of the book. Spirit mediums may also fill this niche, providing both plain old capability as well as knowledge.

Madame Alizah's act included "exorcisms" and otherwise "solving problems" related to ghosts. No other character talks about exorcisms in the book, but Vivi's grandmother says that Frederick would have been evicted if the extended LeJean family had known about him, which makes me think that exorcisms are either not real or not what Madame Alizah pretends they are. This would support the idea that the general public still knows relatively little about ghosts, since a con artist would prey upon fears and misconceptions.

Furthermore, Madame Alizah holds some views about ghosts that are clearly outdated, prejudiced, bigoted, or otherwise meant to be disagreeable. They aren't really expanded on in the story, but the general idea she holds is that ghosts are all evil and cannot be trusted. In chapter 15, she goes on an angry rant at Frederick, comparing him to demons and poltergeists. Given the circumstances, I can't determine if demons and poltergeists are real in that world and in what

way, or if these are just terms Madame Alizah is throwing out in her rage. It's possible that they're just things to call someone to paint them as evil. But the point of all of this is that Madame Alizah's hatred of ghosts is not meant to be imitated or applauded. To me, this further signals that ghosts are a minority in that world. A contemporary novel would not make such a point of illustrating a character's blind hatred if that sort of blind hatred wasn't still a relevant topic. This is a bit sad, as one would hope that if ghosts became more positively viewed in society in the 18th century, by the time the 21st century rolls around, you wouldn't still find racism aimed at them, but even in this world that wouldn't be unrealistic writing.

The next keyword is "incorporeal." Ghosts lack a physical body and presence. They are insubstantial and cannot make physical contact with the vast majority of other things. But this is not all-encompassing. There are very specific rules for what ghosts can and cannot interact with, and why. Let's start with the obvious: most people cannot touch a ghost, nor influence it physically in any way. However, certain people can, such as Zoey, due to possessing appropriate magical abilities. Most of these people can be assumed to be spirit mediums, but I want to reiterate that one is not born a spirit medium. It's not a title that is thrust upon you. It's a job, a profession that you can go into if you choose. I assume that in order to achieve meaningful success as one, you likely need magical abilities that enable greater interaction with ghosts, and for this reason most people with like magical abilities go down that career path, but there's nothing necessarily stopping someone like Zoey from not choosing that career and instead becoming an electrician or a patent attorney or something.

The other rule, much more impactful and more commonly seen, is the rule of possession. Ghosts seem to be able to interact physically with objects that belong to them, including ones that belonged to them while they were alive, provided those items haven't been significantly altered by an outside party. Frederick was able to swing his axe because the axe belonged to him,

and he was able to pick up the chairs in the house because they belonged to him, too, even though they had been reupholstered. He was also able to stack the firewood that he chopped, likely because the land the trees grew on belonged to him while he was alive, and it being owned by someone else didn't really change that. The most interesting example of this comes in the house itself. The LeJean family did renovations on the house after they bought it, and we are told that they replaced all of the windows and doors. And multiple times in the book, Frederick flies through the windows and doors, as we would expect a ghost to do. However, he never once goes through a wall or through the floor or ceiling, because those were *not* changed in the renovations, or at least not changed enough. Therefore, they still count as his, and thus he is bound to interact with them physically, as he did while alive. The Ship of Theseus stops being the same ship once Theseus's ghost can no longer steer the rudder.

Because of their incorporeality, ghosts also possess a number of special abilities that living people do not have. These actually generally match the stereotypical ghost abilities we see in the media in our world. Ghosts can fly, turn invisible, and levitate objects. Frederick also makes strange wailing and moaning noises, but I can't in good conscience call this a ghostly ability; you don't need to be a ghost to do that. The levitation of objects isn't also quite what it seems; from how it's written, it seems less like Frederick is actually making things fly and more like he's just picking them up from a distance. Given how he also seems to struggle when picking up heavy objects, such as an armchair, this idea seems even more likely.

But I have to admit that there's no solid confirmation that these are actually ghost powers, and not just Frederick's natural magical abilities. It's entirely possible that I don't have enough information to actually determine whether ghosts have special abilities and what those are. However, it seems likely to me. The book never establishes that Frederick can do these things, which is how it handles all magical powers, but these specific powers are so specifically suited to

the exact situation they're needed in that it seems unlikely that, if they *were* just Frederick's specific magic, nobody would comment on how convenient that is. And Savanna never makes any comment on it at all, which makes me think that they likely *are* standard ghost abilities, since whenever the book gets a basic ghost fact correct, Savanna doesn't say anything. As a final, minor piece of evidence, when Frederick is putting on his fake haunting, Vivi calls it "the Gudove act." I still don't know what exactly this means, but it suggests to me that the stereotypical ghost powers are common and known enough to have such a title applied to them. If that's the case, then Frederick's powers might indeed just be ghost powers, rather than being specific to him.

The final part of the definition of a ghost is their being separated from both their body and their mortality. This is also by far the most important part of the definition, and is the reason behind everything else I've explained in this chapter so far. I have the distinct feeling that my understanding here is flawed, but this is the best I can do. Ghosts are entirely defined by their lacking mortality, and their lacking mortality is defined by their lacking of a mortal body. You see, ghosts cannot change. They are effectively locked in one state of growth forever. This doesn't mean that they can't experience small-level change, such as being in different moods and feeling exertion, but in terms of growing and changing as people, they are entirely static. Ghosts are completely and utterly incapable of personal growth. Whatever worldview and level of maturity they have when they die is what they will have forever, because you need to be mortal to have the capability for change. That is the primary distinction between a ghost and a living person. The book apparently misrepresented this fact, because Savanna was very annoyed by how Frederick appeared to be changing as a person, and went on a short rant about how it should be impossible.

It's also indicated that mortality is directly tied to possessing a mortal body. A typical

free-floating ghost, the incorporeal image of a person, is considered an “unbound ghost.” They are called this because they are not bound by the rules of mortality, and they are not bound to a mortal body. But there is also something called a “bound ghost,” which is a ghost that has been given a new mortal body. This is what happens to Frederick at the end of the book. Binding is a process that requires the presence of a capable spirit medium, and cannot just be done by any ghost at any time, and the process is not made clear in the book, but when it is done, the ghost will be inhabiting a mortal body once more. In *Hearts Unbound*, this body is a type of construct referred to as a marionette, built by Vivi with the explicit purpose of Frederick binding to it.

But what are the implications of binding? Well, it appears as though a bound ghost is in some way restored to mortality. Frederick is able to physically touch and feel things that he couldn't before after he's bound. The marionette is now his body, and it's implied that he can't leave it on his own. Additionally, although not directly stated in the book, Savanna's rant about how Frederick behaves in ways an unbound ghost shouldn't be able to suggests to me that a bound ghost regains their capacity for personal change and growth. This would make sense; if the body that a bound ghost is bound to is built of materials that can age, such as wood or leather, then they might regain at least some form of mortality.

That, for the most part, is the summation of my conclusions about ghosts. I do have a couple lingering questions, such as whether or not *everyone* becomes a ghost or if there's some kind of trick to it, but I could not find the answer to that within the information available to me, so I suppose we'll need to leave it at that. Tomorrow, I will write about constructs, what they are, how they work, and their place in that world.

### May 17, 2023 – Chapter 3: Constructs

In this chapter, I will be discussing constructs. This is the subject that I have the least information about, because despite them featuring prominently in the story, the book isn't really *about* constructs, so it doesn't expose many details to me. Fortunately, this is also the subject that requires the least amount of explanation to fully grasp, at least on the surface, so it's not really a problem. If this journal was to find its way into the hands of someone else from my world, this chapter would still probably be easy to understand.

First, let's define constructs. What are they? A construct is a creature that was built, created, manufactured, or otherwise constructed by another creature. The name is quite literal. But that definition isn't very helpful, is it? All it tells us is where they come from. And if constructs were just robots, with no character or personality or function beyond doing what they're told, that would be enough. But we see two constructs in the book, and they're quite different from each other. So, for lack of a better segue, let's get into some details.

Constructs can be built out of a variety of materials. In the book, we see that wood, brass, titanium, paint, and something called "pleuro-leather" are all viable materials to build a construct out of. The building of a construct can get very complex, and it apparently takes a long time, as Vivi's marionette took her several months to complete, even after she'd fully recovered. However, not all constructs are necessarily created equal, and I suspect Vivi put a lot of extra effort and attention into making her marionette as detailed and fancy as possible. There's no indication that all of the functions like heat-controlling tubes and emotive paint are present in Portjus.

While the description of a construct calls to mind robotics, constructs are likely magical in nature. Portjus moves on his own, with no mention ever being made of him being powered by electricity, having wires inside of him, being programmed in a certain way, or anything like that.

He is at least partially made of brass, which does sort of call clockwork to mind, but we never learn what parts of him are made of brass, and he is also said to be made of wood. Furthermore, the ability to make a construct is implied to be a magical ability; Vivi only manages it after she regains her magic when the lenportasil wears off, and she's heavily implied, bordering on explicitly stated, to be similar to her grandmother when it comes to her magical powers, and her grandmother is the only other character in the book who makes constructs. It seems very likely to me that constructs are powered by magic. Exactly how that works is not in my ken.

There are two different kinds of constructs that we see in the text, with an implied third. The first is a "bestowed" construct, which is what Portjus is. No direct information is given on what this term means, and it barely turns up at all in the text beyond his introduction, but there are enough small clues that I have an estimate. In her notes, Savanna said that for the LeJean family to have a bestowed construct, they must be very rich indeed, which means that a construct being bestowed is a special and likely rare occurrence. Then, later in the text, Madame Alizah exhibits bigotry against constructs, but of a notably different kind than she did towards Frederick. Where she was hateful towards Frederick, she was extremely condescending and aloof towards Portjus, considering him beneath her, calling him an "it" and only speaking of him as a servant, saying that Vivi could just destroy him and buy a new one if she wanted, with no regard for him as a person. Then, after he removed her from their cottage, she seemed to become afraid of him, only showing up at the house when he wasn't around. Madame Alizah's perspectives on people can't be called accurate, because they're based on prejudice, but we learned that, when it came to ghosts, that prejudice existed in real life at some point long in the past. So, if we can use her views to learn what's wrong (or was wrong at some point in the past), we can reverse-engineer what's right.

Madame Alizah considers Portjus below herself by default, but doesn't put Vivi on the

same level as him, so it's not likely to be anything personal. She's also poor, so we can't assume that it's a matter of status. It's most likely the mere fact that he is a construct that gives her this view of him. So constructs may have been, at one point, viewed as strictly lesser than other people, possibly existing only as servants, and this would be the worldview that Madame Alizah holds. It's why she doesn't show him any respect at all and only sees him as an object.

This is also consistent with the way that Mr. and Mrs. LeJean speak about Portjus in the very first chapter, as though he's not quite a person. Obviously they aren't as bad as Madame Alizah, and it's clear that they definitely trust him, but they still don't fully respect him and mostly see him as someone who carries out orders. They're more fond of him and treat him well because he belongs to their family, but he's clearly not on their level. Vivi, however, does treat him like anyone else, but for reasons I'll explain in a moment, I suspect this may just be something that Vivi does. The other characters have too limited interactions with him for me to glean much, although I feel as though Redford may have treated Portjus similarly to how Vivi treated him.

But this idea of constructs only following orders, and indeed having social status at all, intrigues me. After all, they only exist when built by other people. Would they not, then, just be servants? Madame Alizah ignores Portjus's emotions and free will entirely, but he clearly has them. Wouldn't it be a better idea to build a construct without emotions and free will, so it can never choose to disobey you? While Madame Alizah's view is clearly portrayed as wrong, why is it wrong? This, unfortunately, is a series of questions that I simply cannot answer. But it does lead me towards my estimate as to what a bestowed construct is.

I believe a bestowed construct may be one that has been given at least some amount of free will and emotion. This would hold with it being a special, rare occurrence, and would allow for the idea of constructs only being servants to be based on something real. It also does not

change the viability of using Madame Alizah's views as indicators of what's wrong; we, as the audience, know that Portjus has emotions and thus can be impacted by her words, and regardless of whether or not constructs are actually supposed to only be servants, her opposition to Vivi keeps her in the wrong. Besides, it's a terrible way to treat people you see as inferior to you, even if they can't be upset, and that will always be the mark of a villain.

If there are bestowed constructs, which have emotions and free will, then it follows naturally that there are "un-bestowed" constructs, which do not. We don't see any of these in the text, so I can't say for sure what they are like, but I suspect that they are simply automatons that follow orders and little else. Perhaps they can speak, like Portjus, or perhaps not. I'm sure it all falls to the will of the creator. All of this obviously raises some very knotty and difficult existential questions about sentience and what qualifies something as "living" and whether or not its right to enslave a creature that can't think for itself, especially when you *could* have given it that ability, but to be honest with you, that is far beyond my purview and is also not the purpose of this journal. So, if you'll forgive me, I'm going to not delve into all of that.

The third and final kind of construct we see is the marionette. I've used that term a few times in this chapter now, but I haven't yet explained exactly what it is. Vivi creates a marionette at the end of the book for Frederick to bind to and use as his new body. Unlike Portjus, the marionette exhibits no movement capabilities before Frederick binds to it, nor does it even seem to be alive. It's little more than a mannequin, a life-sized model of a person. This is likely why it's called a marionette; it exists to be directly controlled and puppeted by something else. This kind of construct exists separately from the other two, and honestly wouldn't seem to fit the definition of construct at all, given that it can't move on its own, but the characters call it a construct too, so I guess that's what it must be.

Both of the constructs we see in the book are humanoid in body, but I doubt they have to

be. This isn't based on any information, but it would just seem silly to me if a construct *had* to have a humanoid body type. Savanna will probably know if I'm right or wrong, but I imagine you could get a construct shaped like anything you want.

But that brings me to my last point, which is their commonality. I believe constructs are probably quite rare in their own right. They're implied to be very difficult to make, and require specific magical talents to do it in the first place, so it's not as though just anybody can make one. And the materials required to build one can't be cheap, either, especially if you're building a very fancy one like Vivi did. Portjus may have only been made out of wood and brass, which aren't extraordinarily expensive, but we don't know what else went into him, so I can't say he was cheap, either. After all, nobody other than the LeJeans has a construct in the story, and they are explicitly stated to be very rich, as well as having multiple construct-making talents in their family. And, just as a gut feeling, I don't think the societal view of constructs would be what it is if anyone could have one. People would have a much brighter view of them if they were common. I mean, people get emotionally attached to Roombas, for Pete's sake, and those things can't even talk and they barely do their jobs right.

Unless I've forgotten something, which I doubt I have, that's all I have to say about constructs. Tomorrow I will speak on the strange body question and what it implies about that world at large.

#### May 18, 2023 – Chapter 4: Strange Bodies

I want to begin this chapter by apologizing to you, Savanna, for some of my language so far. I'm sure that I've used terms here or there that do not mesh with the cultural standards of your world, or simply don't make sense to you. You'll have to forgive me for this. I've been trying my best, but there are some ways of phrasing things that are just too natural to me to give

up so easily. For the first part of this chapter, I will continue using this disagreeable language, so please bear with me until I find the space to explain what's been troubling me.

Of everything in the book that gave me pause, the most significant one was what I've been referring to in my head as the "strange body problem." That sounds like some kind of theoretical physics idea, but it's quite literal. Just about every single non-construct character in *Hearts Unbound* had at least one marked abnormality to their physical appearance, often more. And I don't mean something small like a cleft lip, or something temporary like a tattoo or odd hair color. Almost all of them were major and quite obvious. To run down the list, Mr. LeJean had two pupils in each of his eyes, Mrs. LeJean had earlobes that reached down to her shoulders, Vivi had both of those traits as well as sharp teeth, Frederick had tiger-like stripes on his back, Redford had odd bumpy growths around his wrists and ankles, Madame Alizah and Zoey had animalistic ears, tails, and fur about their necks, and lastly the social worker who appeared for just a moment at the end of the story had a tail as well, although more muscly than furry. There are a few other characters who don't get described as having anything like this, most notably Grandma, but at this point the pattern has been so clearly established that it seems more likely that their odd traits were simply never brought up than that they don't have them at all.

Now, in the world I'm from, physical traits like this range from rare medical conditions to requiring plastic surgery to downright impossible. Doubled pupils, for example, is a medical condition called polycoria, but it is very, very rare, does not get passed down genetically, and almost always negatively impacts one's vision. Lengthened earlobes to that degree could be achieved through plastic surgery, although I don't know why anyone would want to. Bumpy growths about one's wrists and ankles would likely be attributed to some disease. And long tails, animal ears, and soft fur about one's neck simply are not real things that people can have outside of putting on a costume.

Of course, the realisticness of all this wasn't a problem while I was reading the book for the first time. If anything, the issues I had with it stemmed from the mere fact that it caught me off-guard. I expected this sort of idea to be properly introduced and given due attention, not simply stated and then skated over. Once I adjusted to it, though, it quickly became just another part of the book. It's not difficult to accept that, in a fantasy novel, people might not look like regular humans.

But now I know that this is not just a fantasy novel. It's not even really meant to be fantasy at all; it's realistic fiction, perhaps going so far as magical realism, but it's very much based on reality. Which meant that the strange bodies of these characters could no longer be seen as strange, and I needed to re-frame my thinking based on the understanding that this was just reality for (likely) a great many people.

Truth be told, it wasn't actually very difficult to re-frame my thinking. Perhaps that was because I was also having to accept things like magic and ghosts, which are even more impossible in this world than odd physical features, or perhaps because these strange bodies didn't actually seem to have any significant impact on how the characters were written and how they acted towards each other. The book didn't seem to want me to put significant thought into it, which means that in some way it must not be extremely important in that world. But regardless of the cause, I accepted it rather quickly. It's another world, and my stance from the beginning was that I knew nothing about it; this wasn't breaking any rules, it was making them. And there was another, more unexpected factor that made me rethink just how strange these bodies really were.

When I began planning this chapter, I wanted to give a description of a "normal" human body in this world, so that I could make it clear to you why exactly I found it strange that people might have tails or bumpy growths. After all, in that world, it's not strange at all. But each time I

wrote a sentence to describe a “normal” human body, I would think of some way, usually a very common way, that that description could be inaccurate, or worse, offensive, and I would scrap it. This happened over and over again, and eventually I was forced to accept that there really was no good definition of a “normal” human body, and that was because there really is no good definition of “normal” in the first place. I even tried finding an image from a medical website that might serve as an example of a standard human being, and in that I still found enough variation from only the people I knew personally that I wasn’t comfortable using it. Eventually I decided that this was a fool’s errand, and I gave up. There is no standard human being.

So, instead, I’m going to describe myself. My name is Harold McCourt. I am a human male of caucasian descent, which means that my skin is a light, pale color, similar to that of Vivi’s on the cover art of the book. I stand at about 5 feet, 9 inches in height, which is roughly 175 centimeters. If you don’t have those measurements in that world, that means nothing to you, so I’ll also say that if you stacked the book on its side, I’d be about as tall as twelve of them. I have hazel-green eyes, short, curly brown hair and a small mustache of a similar color, and I wear glasses. My nose is slightly crooked to the right side, owing to an injury I sustained as a teenager. Currently I am wearing a light blue button-down shirt, tan slacks, a belt, and athletic shoes that are green and white. I assume that you know what all of those things are; the book gave no indication that clothing followed any significantly different terminology in your world. I do not have a tail, or any fur of any kind, my teeth are generally flat and uniform (although they are crooked, since I never had braces as a child), my wrists are thinner than the rest of my arms with no special bumps, my earlobes don’t hang down any further than the bottom of my nose, and I only have one pupil in each of my eyes. I don’t know if this will be at all helpful to read, but it has to be better than nothing at all. I believe that, with the exception of the “strangeness” I have repeatedly highlighted, people in your world and mine may look largely similar.

Speaking of people, I have reason to believe that the terms “person” and “human” may mean different things in that world than they do in this one. As I read the book for the second time, I began to realize that despite their obvious visual differences, none of the characters were ever referred to as “humans.” Now, this may be because they are all humans, and just look different, but Madame Alizah and Zoey are referred to as “therian” when they are introduced. And when I started thinking about it in detail, this puzzled me. What is therian, if not a non-human? It seems so very much like a word for a non-human race. And why say it if they are, in fact, humans? Why bring it up at all, then? But if they *aren't* humans, and can be introduced so casually and without any buildup, that would mean that in that world non-human races are both real and common, which would make *not* establishing other characters as human a nonsensical decision. You'd have no idea what anyone looks like, because there are too many possibilities. The book never once even states a character's skin color. The closest you get is Frederick being described as “translucent.”

But as I read on, I noticed that the word wasn't really used again, and when it was, it was more like an adjective than a noun. It certainly wasn't being used like how I would expect a racial term to be used. And, come to think of it, that was something I'd noticed the first time I read the book, too. So could something else be going on? Was there some piece of this puzzle I was misunderstanding?

I re-examined my approach to this question, and I found myself dwelling longer on the fact that none of the characters were ever described as “human.” For one reason or another, that designation must either be meaningless or undesirable for the author to use. I was expecting to see it because I attached a meaning to it, but that meaning only existed in comparison to other words that meant something else. Perhaps my meaning was wrong? I re-opened the book and looked through some passages that specifically talked about characters being different from other

characters, most notably whenever someone new was introduced and when Vivi was talking about her life before coming to the cottage, and I saw that the words “people” and “person” were used a lot, including in some ways I would have expected to see “human” be used. But it too didn’t seem to be a racial term. And I also saw a few times when the word “human” *was* used, and in none of them was it being used to describe someone’s species or race, or even used to describe someone physically. I began to form my theory as to what was going on.

I believe now that I was right earlier when I guessed that “therian” was an adjective, not a noun. Furthermore, I also believe that “human” is not a noun either. In my estimation, “human” only exists in that world in its adjective form, meaning (among other things) fallible, empathetic, relatable, and possibly also mortal, although I believe that last one is less likely, for obvious reasons. In this world, “human” is also a noun that refers to the species *homo sapiens*, of which I am a member. So you can see how I might have been confused when one of its meanings was suddenly removed. As to why that meaning doesn’t exist in that world, I have only guesses. Perhaps it simply never developed due to the vast variety of appearances (and likely bodily functions, if people with certain animal qualities have different needs as well) making it very difficult to draw the line as to where the species ends and the next one begins. If this is the case, I hope that that world might also be more tolerant than ours. In any case, it seems that the predominant word when referring to people of any kind is, well, “people.” They are all that, sure enough, regardless of how they look.

With that understanding, “therian” is easy enough to explain. It’s an adjective meant to denote a person with animalistic or bestial physical qualities. Of course, exactly what counts as an animal or beast is probably up for debate, but it’s not my job to make that debate. I’m just writing down what I know, or what I think I know. Given how the only characters we see who have therian appearances have canine features, perhaps the line is drawn somewhat similarly to

where we draw the line in this world.

I believe that's all I have to say on the subject of terminology and definitions. It was rather heady and probably a bit confusing, and believe me, it was no less difficult to figure out. What I wrote down on three pages took me a few weeks to figure out. But before I finish this chapter, I have a few more things to discuss.

First, the most obvious and pressing question: why does such variation in physical appearance happen? In this world we have a rather large amount, but we seem downright uniform to what's possible in that world. What's different? My theory is obvious, but also frustrating and disappointing: it's magic. There is probably some magical influence behind why people can have animal tails and such. This is the most obvious and (in my opinion) most likely explanation, but I don't like making it, because it means that my research grinds to an immediate halt. Learning more along that path requires information that I simply do not have. Oh, I could come up with some theories based on how we've seen that magic can alter physical objects and whatnot, but at the end of the day it all means nothing without proof. That's what's probably happening, and I do not know why.

Second, how might societies have developed differently with no clear and easy way to divide people based on appearance? This assumes, of course, that that world has always had this variety of physical features, and that it's not a recent development. But I see no reason to believe that it hasn't always been true. Anyway, I have some ideas as to how societies could have developed differently, but as an anthropologist I don't want to start making wild idealistic claims with so little information. The truth of the matter, as much as I've been pretending otherwise, is that I only have access to the tiniest, minutest slice of information about only one of possible hundreds, or even thousands, of unique societies from that other world. And the circumstances of their development are entirely unknown to me. All I know for certain is what's contained in this

novel, so all I can truly say for certain is that they are currently in a position that allows them to publish novels. But, because I am excited, I will share one of those idealist claims. I suspect that a society with such inherent variety in its population would likely develop without racism as we know it in our world. It might be almost impossible to create a group that includes anybody but exactly yourself, and that's no way to live. Even the most xenophobic and hateful people still try to align themselves with somebody else in some way.

This isn't to say that prejudice and hate couldn't exist in that world; they obviously do, if they can be one of the main personality traits of the villain of a novel. But I would hope that, given how difficult it is to draw boundary lines and declare someone truly "other" when absolutely everyone looks different, it would at least be significantly limited compared to how they are in this world, where something as simple and arbitrary as skin color can be enough to incite violence.

I don't want to get too far into the weeds of speculation, since this is hopefully going to be viewed by someone who can immediately tell if I'm right or wrong, so I believe I'll cut myself off here. Tomorrow, my plans for moving forward. Forgive me if it seems as though I'm rushing; I may be operating under a strict deadline. The next entry will be the last.

May 19, 2023 – Proof

If I'm being completely honest, this is not the sum total of my research. There was more speculation, more minor details, more small similarities and differences that I could have talked about. I could have talked about how the book was in English when I found it, and whether it was written that way or if the magic that sent it over converted it into English, and what those options could imply. I could have jumped to further conclusions about magic, and whether the portal appearing in our world is evidence that magic could properly leak out. I could have

wondered about what other things that exist in both that world and this one, such as movie theaters and cars, and if those are magical or not, or if they even mean the same thing there as they do here. I could have written for much longer.

But that wouldn't have been productive. It would have quickly gotten circular, dull, and even more unprovable. Even the past couple dozen pages have essentially been re-hashing of earlier information, with a little bit of specification here and there. It wouldn't do to exacerbate the issue further. Throughout the past two months of this project, I went back and forth on the role speculation should play in my research, and eventually I decided that while it was certainly unavoidable and had its place, I wanted to mostly leave it out of the final product. My conclusions should remain unclouded by ideas lacking in evidence and plausibility. It's almost an ironic stance to take, given how the subject of my research appeared implausible in the first place, but it's the one I'm taking. So I'm going to end my journaling there. It's still the great majority of what I've uncovered and thought about, and certainly everything meaningful.

There's only one thing left to discuss, and that's how I'm going to move forward. Even though this is the end of the journal, it's not the end of my research. I can't abandon the greatest discovery ever made like that. But how do I continue? What more can I do? It's not as though I can just reach out for more information and find it right away. I have no control over when, where, or even if I'll find anything more to analyze. For any degree of certainty of that, I'd need to establish a more concrete connection to that world, and there's nothing I can do about that.

But I do have an idea. While I was re-reading, I realized that I only had two of the pens that Savanna used to make her notes in the book, and it occurred to me that the other three might also have fallen into this world. So I asked Mrs. Hastings for one more favor: to see if she could find anyone else in town who might have found any Ascliot brand pens, and two weeks ago she got back to me with great success.

Just as I'd suspected, there were three more pens. One green, one yellow, and one pink – the same as the three other instances of Savanna's notes. Mrs. Hastings also told me that she'd asked the people who'd found them where they'd found them and if they'd noticed anything unusual at the time. Their answers were the same: they found them on the ground on Fallcot Street, near the park, and that they hadn't seen anything unusual. This was very, very useful information, although I didn't quite realize it yet at the time. The ultimate question is whether or not I can get into contact with Savanna, which has seemed impossible for a long time. But now, not only do I think it's possible, I have a plan that just might work.

I was reviewing the footage of the event again when something very curious caught my eye. The small stone that I had been holding seemed to vanish when I threw it at the portal. Previously I had simply thought that it went through it and fell to the ground on the other side, but when I rewound the tape and watched it again carefully, it didn't actually reappear on the other side of the portal. It was a bit hard to see clearly, because the camera was shaking a lot, but it was good enough for me to tell that the stone disappeared after it hit the portal. That could only mean one thing: the portal was *not* a one-way passage. I could send things back through the portal as well.

I don't need to tell you that that was an extremely exciting thing to discover. Finally, a way to contact the other world! But my excitement was quickly stifled when I remembered that I was still at the mercy of random chance. I could prepare all I wanted, but I had no idea when or if the portal was going to appear again. Unless there was some way of finding out...

You may recall that the homework sheet was a midterm exam, and that it had a large coffee stain on it. The orange pen had some coffee on it, too. Neither the book nor any of the other pens had coffee stains on them. And you may also recall that the homework sheet and the book both appeared at noon and right in front of me, whereas everything else appeared while

there were no witnesses around. Since it all happened on a public street that is often frequented during the day, it logically follows that the other pens must have appeared at night.

How does that help us? All it shows is that the portal could open at any time of day for me. Well, no, actually. I'd like to bring your attention back to the coffee stain. The stained midterm exam sheet appeared at noon, and the coffee stain was fresh. Even considering the strange and unhealthy habits that college students so often fall into, it seems unlikely to me that someone would be doing a midterm and drinking coffee at noon. That's the kind of thing that is much more likely to be happening late at night. Especially for you, Savanna, since (forgive me if this comes across as insulting) you appear to be a little disorganized.

What *that* means is that there's a time difference between this world and that one, perhaps as much as 12 hours. When it's late at night there, it's noon here. And when it's afternoon there, it's very late here indeed. That's why the other pens had no witnesses; they were lost during the day, when nobody was around here. The book and the midterm, therefore, were lost late at night.

But how does *that* help us? Knowing that there's a time difference is interesting, but it doesn't necessarily tell us when the portal will appear next. And it's not as though I can just stand on the street for days and days, waiting for it to appear. Well, on the contrary, I believe that this *does* inform us as to when the portal will appear next. You may also recall that I found the midterm paper in the middle of March, just when I was finished grading my own class's midterms. This could mean that the school calendar for that world is similar enough to this one that exams happen around the same time. It's not a guarantee, but it's a chance.

And now I believe the path forward is obvious. It's currently May 19, and finals are very nearly due at my school. This could mean that finals are closing in for you, Savanna, as well. And if my estimations are correct, there's a good chance that you'll be staying up late to complete them. You'll be tired, perhaps drinking more coffee, and you may be stressed as well.

It's the perfect environment to make a mistake, and again, if my estimations are correct, your portals connect to this world when you make mistakes. That, I believe, is my best chance to reach you.

Allow me to circle back to the very beginning of this journal. My original goal was to see *Hearts Unbound* returned to its owner, that being Savanna Cowle. And despite everything that's happened in the months since then, that goal has not changed. It's gained new motivation, but it has not changed. This book does not belong to me, and now that I might have a way to return it, it would be wrong of me not to do so. Don't get me wrong; I would *love* to keep it. But it's not mine. And, besides, it serves my research to return it.

So here is my plan. I am going to put the book into a box. I am also going to put all of the pens I've found into the box. I'm going to put a letter explaining who I am, where I'm from, why I had your belongings, and what exactly happened into the box. And, finally, I'm going to put this journal into the box as well, and I'm going to seal it tightly. Then I'm going to wait. I'll buy a lawn chair or something, sit on the sidewalk on Fallcot Street near the park between the hours of 10 AM and 3 PM, and wait. If I'm right, the portal has a good chance of appearing at some point during that time. And if it does, I'll throw that box through the portal. It could take days, but it's the best chance I have. With luck, it will reach you.

This plan is far from perfect. It relies on many guesses being correct in a row. That the portal will reappear at all, that it will reappear in the time and place I think it will, that it can have objects sent into it from my end, that the objects will survive the transit, that they'll come through at Savanna's location. And, of course, if my core hypothesis is wrong, then all of this will prove pointless. But it's the best idea I have. And, if I'm right, then this will be the last entry. I won't be able to write in a journal I don't have.

Savanna, if you're reading this: I'm sorry for taking your book for so long. I'm sure

you've been anxious to get it back and find out how it ends. But, given the circumstances, I hope you can forgive me. This has been rather more than just a book to me, and I hope to hear from you again someday – only, this time, on purpose. And to any other hypothetical readers out there, who bore with me throughout the whole journey: This marks the end of the journal of Dr. Harold McCourt. If you've never heard of me before, then I was wrong all along, and I sincerely apologize for wasting your time.

This text has been restored and re-printed in its original formatting. In the interest of historical accuracy, no edits have been made to structure or language. Pasted or attached content has been printed as on-page images.

Copyright © 4133 by Closegreen Publishing Co. in association with the McCourt-Cowle Foundation for Cooperation.