

---

Senior Projects Fall 2019

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

---

Fall 2019

## Tulpa

William Charles Squier  
Bard College, ws6836@bard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_f2019](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_f2019)



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), and the [Fiction Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Squier, William Charles, "Tulpa" (2019). *Senior Projects Fall 2019*. 45.  
[https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_f2019/45](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_f2019/45)

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@bard.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@bard.edu).

Tulpa

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Language and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
William “Chase” Squier

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
December 2019



## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Dinaw Mengestu, for his advice throughout this project. Without him I would've spent much of my senior year flailing about. I would also like to thank Professor Susan Rogers for guiding me through my first few years at Bard and within the Written Arts Department.

Another acknowledgement goes to my parents for sending me to Bard, as I would not have written this story otherwise, and for not insisting that they read my project every second.

Finally, I would like to thank the late Professor Bill Mullen. It was worth coming to Bard just to have the chance to meet him.. I wish he was here to read this story. May he rest in peace.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Beginning.....	2



## Introduction

“Tulpa” began with my interest in odd internet communities, and how such communities affect those who are socially isolated. In the age of the internet, the influence of such communities cannot be overstated. Vulnerable people seek answers, and the internet is so vast that where they end up in pursuit of those answers is almost random. I myself was drawn into the “Red Pill” community of pickup artists in high school when I felt I had nowhere else to go. I was close to going down a rather misogynistic path, and I only got out of it because I found support in the real people around me. I think that is why I feel empathy at some level for people who spout some of the craziest ideas online, incels (involuntary celibates) being a prime example. Their toxic ideas are numerous, the most extreme of which involve advocating for government provided girlfriends, and numerous mass shooters have been linked to the incel community. I bring this up not to excuse or condone these mindsets and actions, but to point out what loneliness can lead to, especially nowadays. I look at these groups, at their racist and misogynistic coping mechanisms, and I wonder why it had to turn out that way. I wonder how many of those people could’ve been saved from their current position if they had someone pull them out of the rabbit hole before they went too deep. I wonder what it would take to save them now. “Tulpa” is about a less hateful, but no less strange internet community. The websites mentioned are real, and if this story piques your interest in such topics, I would recommend looking into some of these sites, if only to see what ideas are brewing there.

At the time, I would've said that the only reason I ever tried to make a tulpa that summer was because I was in New Hampshire. I'd been born there, and was thus apparently fated to return every year, shipped from Manhattan. In my mind, I had been sent to a wasteland.

New Hampshire was not a wasteland, and it wasn't as if I didn't know how to enjoy the outside world. I had plenty of experience milking the summer countryside for whatever entertainment value it had. Hiking, swimming, the barehanded catch and release of nearby frogs, toads and salamanders, or even a walk up the forested hill behind my father's house were all viable modes of entertainment. At some point, however, it had all stopped being fun in and of itself. After that, I had to convince myself to go outdoors when I didn't have to.

It was, looking back, painfully green, a concentrated shot of nature that kept me immunized against being a "city boy". The few friends that took the time to visit me in those days were constantly lashing out at spiderwebs, recoiling at the mushy brownish-green algae that dared to touch their feet while they swam, and covering their eyes when they happened upon the tragedy of a pregnant bullfrog being eaten by a northern water snake. No wonder that they never lasted more than one visit, since they would first have to deal with me shoving whatever they found currently most unpleasant in their face only to then have to work around my emotional fragility in any other situation. I was a stuttering mess back then, always struggling to hold back tears when anything resembling an insult came my way. Unlike my friends, who seemed satisfied either by the imaginary world they made indoors or by the discovery of pre-existing worlds in the woods, I felt the need to constantly combine the two. Thus, anyone who was willing to dive to the bottom of a murky pond and scoop up mud with me was



unwilling to then pretend the mud had some alchemic properties, and those who were willing to pretend had no interest in dirtying themselves. The one child who had done both with me applied mud to his skin pretending it was a salve that could fix any wound and heal any disease, only to go home with a full body rash he'd scratched at until he bled.

At the tender age of nineteen, I'd been sentenced to exile in New Hampshire because I couldn't be trusted to live in Manhattan alone while my mom was gone. I had pushed the boundaries of what I could get away with until I overstepped them, leaving a stray used condom in the open, or a baggie of weed on my mother's desk (my fault not because I was the one who left it there, but because I gave my friend enough credit to assume that he wouldn't do something so stupid). I had failed to procure a job in the city of any kind, despite the insistence from my mother that she would gladly do most of the work on my application if I would just start my damn resume.

The day before I left, I'd spent the night at my friend Jay's apartment in the upper west side. Max opened the door, giving me his trademark lazy smile.

"What's good my dude?" he said, ushering me into the hazy room. Everyone had gathered around the large flatscreen tv to watch some gory cartoon.

"Eli-boy, you come here and smoke this shit," Zac said, waving a blunt he'd just rolled in my direction.

"Ah geez," I said, grinning as I joined Zac on the balcony.

We sparked up and stared out at the collection of little yards below us. The roof below was covered in the ends of blunts and joints.

"You out tomorrow?" Zac said, handing me the blunt. I took a sickly sweet inhale.

“Yup. Carpentry time,” I said, handing the blunt back to him.

“That blows,” he said, taking a hit.

“Just tell your mom what’s up,” Max said, joining us on the balcony.

“That’s not gonna work,” I said.

“Nah, you do it like this,” Max said, switching to a falsetto voice, ““Mom, I’m putting my foot down. I don’t wanna go to New Hampshire and you can’t make me.””

“That would never work. Maybe for your parents, but not mine.”

“True,” Zac said, absentmindedly twirling one of his dreadlocks, “Eli’s mom’s all business.”

“Then have her pay for your ticket down here,” Max said.

“Not happening if I have a job,” I said.

Max shrugged, and the conversation drifted to his new squat PR. I liked that about my friends. With nothing more they could do or say, they moved on.

The rest of the night was a blur, and soon I was on the subway home. I had five hours to clean and pack. My apartment was a cold and empty museum, with feminist art that I barely looked at anymore covering and sticking out from the walls. As I haphazardly threw my clothes into my suitcase, I realized that my choice to stay an extra day had cost me ten hours of work, and another five to account for the taxi from the train to my dad’s house. Fifteen hours of work to see my friends for all of three hours, and I hadn’t even started working.

When the taxi turned right onto the sloped street, I pointed to the large house and barn with peeling white paint and told him to drop me off there. I could see that both my father’s truck

and his sedan were parked in the driveway, which meant he was home. I paid the taxi driver and unloaded my luggage onto the dirt driveway. Nothing had changed much, save for the much depleted woodpile from a particularly cold winter. I'd be splitting and stacking wood soon on the weekends.

I looked around for Miggs and Piccolo, who were hiding under the sedan and truck respectively, their black and brown striped tails flicking in slight agitation.

"You cats!" I said, shaking my fist at the pair, who pretended to ignore me.

I walked to the door and hopped onto the makeshift granite step.

"Knock knock!" I shouted at the door.

A few moments later, my dad emerged, feigning shock at my presence.

"Well hi there."

I gave him a hug. He looked much the same since I'd last seen him. Same tan, same grey hair, same wrinkled face, same wire rimmed glasses that doubled as safety goggles, same permanent upward curl of the right side of his lip. It gave his resting face a Dick Cheney sneer, making the kind aura he gave off all the more powerful.

Martina hobbled out from the bedroom, her whiplike tail wagging so that her whole body wiggled back and forth. I bent over to rub her ears. She was a compact great dane, though at thirteen years old there was no way she could be purebred.

I stepped inside, taking in the comfortable messiness of the house. My mother constantly chastised me back in Manhattan for my messy room, in no small part because guests had to walk through it to use my bathroom, but here I was reminded that such a tendency for disorder was built into me.

“Did you say hi to the Yuukatz brothers?”

“I did. They ignored me.”

My dad leaned out the door.

“You cats!” he said, shaking his fist before closing the door.

“Thai food for dinner?” he asked.

“We have a Thai restaurant here now?”

“We do now. Owner’s a great guy. I’ve been eating there at least once a week.”

Hardly a surprise there. No one in town had a nose for ethnic food like my dad did, nor did anyone aggressively support such businesses like he did. Of the six non-white people I’d met in New Hampshire, he’d been friends with all of them, as if he was trying to single-handedly offset any sense of unwelcome they might have felt from the recent rise in MAGA hat wearing individuals.

I took my suitcase upstairs and returned to the kitchen to pick out an order.

“Should I get dumplings or spring rolls?” I asked.

“Screw it, get both. Lotta rocks need moving at the site, so you’ll need all the food you can get,” my dad said before throwing his head back and laughing his patented supervillain laugh.

Life almost immediately assumed a tired routine. I would wake up, drive with my dad to work, work for a four hour shift, pick up lunch at the general store, eat, work until my dad said

“Well, I’m done,” and drive home. I allowed myself to melt into the couch every day after work, searching the internet on my laptop for anything that might hold my attention. After eight hours of crawling around under a rickity lakehouse, removing a never ending sea of stones, hauling oddly shaped and hard-to-hold trash to a dumpster, all while my dad clapped and yelled to “pick up the pace”, how could I do anything other than passively enjoy whatever was placed in front of me? Was I to make friends with the kids at the local lake club, where Jews had only recently had been allowed to join? How about the kids in my neighborhood, the ones that had moved to different states the moment they could? I knew that I could find someone somewhere if I put in the time, but I didn’t think it was worth it. So I made no contact, no attempt, and May turned to June.

My daily walk with Martina only solidified my bitterness at my exile. I’d walk past my neighbor’s house, a hoarder, and have to look at what he’d done to his doberman. Chained to a dog house behind a fence covered with warnings about his violent nature, growling, barking, and lunging at passers by because they flaunted their freedom in front of him. My dad had warned me against any unnecessary interaction with Kirk, the doberman’s owner, so I couldn’t even offer to walk him. He’d be moving away soon, seeing as he’d pissed away his inheritance. He’d probably put the dog down too, now that he’d made it into something that no one would want to try to love.

It was in that fog that I stumbled upon /x/, a board in the infamous 4chan dedicated to “the paranormal, spooky pictures and conspiracy theories.” It had been a collection of stories about “skinwalkers”, creatures that steal the skin of a human and try to lure their former friends into the woods alone, that caught my interest. I had little interest in conspiracy theories, and I had

no reason to believe any of the claims made on the website about ghosts, succubi, skinwalkers, or gods. But the skinwalker stories took place in the woods, which in my mind magnified the possibility that some unknown malevolence would find me, considering New Hampshire is almost entirely forested. After discovering them at the start of a rainy weekend, I read through those stories for two days straight, noting all the little patterns and changes each author made to the mythos. When I ran out of stories, bleary eyed at two in the morning on a monday, I felt a hunger for more of the same, and began perusing the other threads regularly, and it was there that I first came across the idea of a tulpa. Those threads were made for people who were already in the know and didn't do much to explain to a newcomer what a tulpa was. By its most secular definition, a tulpa was nothing more than a forced hallucination, an imaginary being that you spend so much time making real that you no longer have to actively think about them to make them exist. Despite my aforementioned disbelief in most of what /x/ had to offer, I noted that tulpas could be explained by non-paranormal means. It wasn't unheard of to hallucinate, whether willingly from drugs or unwillingly from some sort of mental illness. It made sense to me that you could manipulate your own perceptions, and I didn't know enough to dispute it. Meditation had been accredited for stranger accomplishments.

At any other time, I would've dismissed the concept as pseudo-science, and left it at that. In the land of exile, however, where my flesh and blood options for friendship were limited and/or unappealing, an imaginary friend seemed reasonable and not at all pathetic. So I moved from /x/ to r/Tulpas on reddit, and was greeted with much the same strangeness as I'd found on 4chan. But there were some posts, some users, who gave me a glimpse into what having a tulpa would be as a functional addition into one's life. A friend, but of a special sort, the kind of friend

that, unhindered by manners and a desire to deny the truth for the sake of short term comfort, would clean the rot out of its host's brain. In the short term, a tulpa would be a companion, but in the long term, it would be a living moral compass. I was easily swayed to do the right thing for myself, whether it be eating healthy or getting work done, but someone needed to be there in order to do the swaying. If this worked, if this was real, I might never have to be out here in the middle of nowhere again.

So I accepted that I would have to be lumped in with people who wanted to fuck their imaginary friends for the sake of my own sanity, that I was aiming to be something most people weren't. A month into my summer vacation, I began the process of creating my very own tulpa.

I learned that it took something like a hundred hours on average to create a fully fledged tulpa, results varying between individuals. Moving from the extensive glossary and FAQs to actual posts people made about their tulpa based endeavors revealed that the forum was populated by a distinct flavor of person. Few people asking about making a tulpa was in a great place. Some had no friends, some had a tough family life, and a good amount admitted to a degree of instability, emotionally or otherwise.

For a lot of the newer community members, it seemed like they were all role playing without agreed upon rules. Newbies claimed to have created a completely independent tulpa in just a few days. This same big headed belief led to hosts insisting that their tulpas had additional supernatural capabilities, like psychic control over water or clairvoyance. I considered those oddities separate from the claim that a tulpa could fly, because at least that ability came from a

tulpa not actually being grounded in the laws of reality. I could never figure out why exactly potential hosts felt any need at all to come of as special on an anonymous website. No one would ever see their tulpa unless the host knew how to draw (as many did), and a user writing a comment in italics claiming to be a tulpa was as legitimate as any “genuine” tulpa.

Then, of course, there was the strangeness that latched on to any semi-anonymous community. The most common questions being asked were “how do I make a tulpa that looks like X cartoon character?” (ponies being the most common) followed by the unsettling “Can I/How can I have sex with my tulpa?” Sexualization of a given idea is somewhat inevitable on the internet, considering the internet was where “rule 34” was born, a law of the universe that says “if it exists, there’s porn of it.” It was no different here, but it was distinctly unsettling to think of someone creating a sentient being for the purpose of sex, a being that didn’t even have the hope of escape as a physical slave would. Whenever the sex question arose, most users would say that since the desire for sex was part of the host’s mind, it would a part of the tulpa’s as well, so they would both want to have whatever intercourse a real and imagined being could have.

Some posters suggested using an imaginary friend you used to have as a template for a tulpa, since it is already more real than something made from the ground up as an adult. With that in mind, I had two options. One was the rotund green haired boy who lived in the trees of Tompkins Square Park, who I use to routinely blame for yanking back my pull-back toy trains until the spring mechanism broke, as well as emptying out my mother’s most expensive french shampoo. I decided against making an imaginary scapegoat more real than it had to be, and instead went with my second option. I’d always had an obsession with the “evil” version of a character I’d seen often in cartoons growing up, and had made one up for myself. “Umbra”, as I



proudly named him at age thirteen, had black hair, grey skin, wore flaming skull t-shirts, and had spooky blood-red eyes.

As embarrassing as that is to admit, Umbra, forever stuck with that name, ended up being a positive influence early in my high school career. After something highly traumatic, like not being invited to play frisbee or rejection from a girl, I'd imagine Umbra sitting next to me. I'd tell him what was wrong, and he'd tell me what I didn't want to hear.

“Why don't people wanna hang out with me?” I'd ask.

“Because you can't read social cues and you keep referencing the same jokes from Saturday Night Live that stopped being funny a year ago,” he'd reply.


I became obsessed with making Umbra real. I followed the instructions on the forum as closely as I could, “forcing” him, as it was called. I would imagine him, in as much detail as possible, standing beside me whenever I could. I would say whatever came to mind, and imagine his reply, saying it under my breath. Usually I did this throughout my day, to get used to multitasking, and other times I would sit cross legged on my bedroom floor room, eyes closed, and visualize any minor details of his I could think of. I spent hours solidifying in my mind how sharp his incisors were, the different shades of red his eyes would be at different light levels, the size and shape of his genitals, the way his center parted hair puffed up at the front to hid his tiny off yellow horns, the fact that his fingers were half an inch longer than mine, and the way they would grow and become clawlike on the rare occasion he was truly enraged. I thought of his reaction to every strange thought I had, like how he'd rather be degloved than be stabbed in the eye. I even argued with myself on his behalf about whether longer or shorter haired women were

more attractive (unkempt pixie cuts were his ideal), and we managed to agree that we would be open to dating a girl with no legs as long as she was still athletic.

It was incredibly liberating to allow myself that freedom. The freedom to make him, at least visually, as I wanted him to be. No one but me would see him. No one would comment on his design, or think that I was trying to be validated. I didn't have to tone him down for other's sensibilities. Still, something in me fought back against his form, arguing that he was distinctly uncool, painfully edgy, and that I was a loser for even considering this whole endeavor. Eventually, though, that part of me started to dissipate, just as a rigid body fights back against stretching until it is finally limber.

Despite the extensive guides on the forum, I still had some personal questions. I ended up posting a few times, mostly about how much you should try to shape your tulpa's personality and how much freedom it should have. Said posts were mostly ignored, save for one in which I requested to speak with someone's tulpa. No less than ten minutes later, I received a message from a user named "Jimjam".

Jimjam: hooooooooiiiiii :3 names kiki, n imma tulpa! i saw ur posts about wantin 2 talk to a tulpa, so here i am(-^▽^-)! im super excited cuz i dont have any friends besides the hostie \ (● 'Ɔ' ●) / but now ur here! party time amirite C (©\_www\_©) ʘ? idk how 2 party tho since i cant do dem dur druggies but we can have fun n e way(。 ☺ ☺。 )! maybe when ur tulpa is ready (born? lol idk) we

can all hang out UwU \*gasps\* double date? Jk jk i dont date strangerdangers\* n e way  
hmu and ill answer alllllllllll ur questiones! ★~(◡◡)

And now a translation: Greetings. My name is Kiki, and I am a tulpa. I saw your posts about your desire to have a legitimate conversation with a tulpa, so here I am to assist in this endeavor. I have no friends besides my benevolent host, but that's changed now that I've made your acquaintance. A celebration is in order, wouldn't you say? Alas, I don't know how to participate in normal celebratory drug ingestion, seeing as I lack a digestive tract and blood stream, but we can have fun without intoxicants. Perhaps when your tulpa is formed, or birthed from your mind (whatever you would like to call the event), we can all get together, hosts and tulpas alike. Perhaps a double date. I jest, forgive me. I know the danger of prematurely trusting and courting those unknown to me. That said, contact me at your discretion and I will answer any and all questions you may have.

I saw the message and promptly ignored it. I won't go so far to say that "Kiki's" writing made me want to die, but it did cut a piece of my soul away. That message just about confirmed for me that I no longer needed the forum anymore when I noticed something a bit off. Most posts, no matter the content, were filled with positive or at least civil discussion. Skeptics and naysayers were never met with hostility, and in fact were met with the kind of respect I didn't know existed on the internet. But in every thread, and I mean every thread, there was a deleted comment with other people complaining about what had been said. "Fuck off", "Not this guy again", "Why haven't you been banned yet?", "Why're you trying to freak people out?", "You're the reason there are horror stories about us."

Curious, I made a post asking about it. I only got two responses, one being “He’s just a troll. Ignore him.” The other was more in-depth. A user by the name of ‘EonWinters’ a moderator and one of the aforementioned semi-believable users. “You’re talking about Barbell. He was a bit of a novelty. He was really inquisitive for a while, and seemed genuinely interested in making a tulpa. But then he started posting weird cryptic comments. Creepy ones, like he was trying to scare people. He’d hijack whole threads with that shit, asking if he could send his tulpa after people, or have it guard against intruders even when he wasn’t there. He’d post links to tulpa horror stories that obviously aren’t true, about tulpas turning on their owners, or becoming deformed, shrieking banshees that couldn’t be gotten rid of. So we eventually just banned him and any of his throwaway accounts. He made tulpas sound evil, and we don’t need that kind of attitude around here.”

EonWinters offered to give me Barbell’s username in a message right after he posted that, saying that if I wanted some answers it might be best to go to the source. Turns out the name Barbell came from his actual username, “||-----||”, which I have no idea how to pronounce, so I’ll refer to him as Barbell from here on. I messaged him pretty quickly after I got his info.

Me: Hey, I’ve been looking into the tulpa community and I was told you were posting some weird stuff that got you banned. Mind if I ask why you did that?

Barbell: theyre just afraid of the truth.

Me: And what truth would that be?

Barbell: do you have a dog? Me: Yes. Why do you ask? Barbell: what kind?

Me: a great dane.

Barbell: is he your friend?

Me: she is, yeah.

Barbell: but hes a guard too

Me: she's a little too old for that, but yeah, I guess.

Barbell: tulpas are the same. Protectors, guardians, warriors. They dont want you to know these things. Stuff like the amalgamation. its too powerful, and no one can do anything about it. Its like how the government covers up alien sightings even though theres proof. Or how the globalists deny the jewish conspiracy and the flat earth

Me: I think we're done here.

Barbell: look up alexandra david neel if you want the truth. Bet your library has a copy

Thankfully, he stopped messaging me after that. Despite being the same bullshit I'd seen before, Barbell's words made me want to cover my neck with my hands, just to be sure that nothing was crawling on me. I cursed, wishing Martina was with me, if just to distract me, but she was off with with some family friends for a couple weeks due to repeatedly visiting the neighbors of the house we were working on and rooting through their garbage. She'd be highly offended if she was left home, so we decided to send her somewhere fun until the aforementioned neighbors stopped tempting her with delicious trash.

Out of reflex, because it had become a reflex at this point, I wondered what Umbra would think of someone like that, as a tulpa. If Barbell had his own tulpa, he was almost certainly not taking good care of it if he was labeling it a warrior. I'd feel sympathy for such a being, but Umbra would be empathetic, and feel fear, wouldn't he?

As I made that connection, I felt a shock of foreign emotion along with whispered babbling. Fear, anger, and disgust all popped up at once, but it wasn't as if I could feel them. It was more that I felt the weight, the impression of such feelings up against me. The babbling continued, until I spoke out loud.

"Umbra?" The feeling vanished, as did the babbling. I was alone. For a moment, I'd felt Umbra's fear. That had created a pressure in my mind, but it had been pleasant, much like the weight of numerous blankets on top of you on a cold night. It was normal, according to the many guides on the site, to hear your tulpa vocalize in some form after you'd forced them long enough. I had hoped it would be on a happier note, but he'd made himself known. This was real, and I was on the right track. I had proof now, personal proof, at the very least. I thought about it more, and came to the conclusion that Umbra had spoken to me because I'd pinpointed an emotion he'd have. I'd thought about him enough that I could guess how he'd feel without making it up. The whole process was akin to learning a language. At first, every new concept requires a new word or phrase, but eventually, you build up enough vocabulary and structure to build a complex sentence without outside influence. It was a good sign, but if the analogy to language held true, it would mean I wouldn't be able to get away with simple ideas about Umbra's person anymore. I'd have to keep it complicated, to keep him stimulated.

"Pick up the pace!" My dad yelled from across the yard of the construction site with two booming claps. My body jolted as if I'd been slapped in the face, and I all but ran to throw the rusted nail filled two-by-four and dirty insulation into the dumpster. Fuck you too dad, I thought I wasn't even walking that slowly. I regretted the thought the moment it popped into my head. I had been in the middle of a one sided conversation with Umbra, specifically how he would go

about suggesting that Denny, my dad's excavator operator, should break his proud family tradition of not sending his kid to college, since I sure as hell didn't have an answer. Even as I told myself that the anger that had flared up in my was unfounded, my head was assaulted with a torrent of butts. "But I'm tired (it was barely ten am), but my back hurts from duck walking twenty pound stones out from underneath the house, but he's being a dick I was totally walking at a reasonable pace." My dad was paying me good money for my grunt work, so he was completely within his right to be annoyed at my slow movements, because of course I'd been moving like a slug. Forcing Umbra was essentially an intense day dream, and something frowned upon in construction for health and productivity reasons. My dad pointed at the top floor of the house we were working on and told me to go sort the reclaimed boards by length, and to remove any nails I found. Thank god, I thought, something easy. Despite it being a furnace up there, a little alone time was all I needed to survive the work day here. "Once you're done up there, do some sweeping until Denny gets here. We have to rip out the old foundation before we can put in anything new." I saluted and said "Yessir", but as I power-walked away, a strange voice filled my head.

*Fffugyuudayh.*

"Beg pardon?" I said to the inside of the house. The voice spoke again, clearer this time.

*Fukyuudah.*

Oh no, I thought, just as the voice spoke again.

*Fuck you dad.*

"No no," I said, panicking slightly, "bad tulpa. You haven't even been born, you can't have daddy issues."

*Fuck you dad?*

“Thank you dad,” I said out loud.

*Fuck you—*

“Thank you dad. He’s paying me more than I deserve, and he doesn’t bother me to do anything else once we get home besides cook. And guess what, according to him, that’s gonna help me get laid, so repeat after me: Thank. You. Dad.”

*...Tan...kyuudah?*

I repeated this exchange as I walked up the stairs up to the stuffy top floor until I got a strangely inflected, but otherwise passable *Thank you dad*.

“Good job, Umbra,” I said to myself, imagining myself patting his head, maneuvering around his little horns. Unprompted, that image of him began to purr. I smiled to myself. He was cuter than a demon child had any right to be. As his voice faded, my vision began to go dark. Lightheaded, I fell onto the wall to prevent myself from collapsing entirely. I took a few deep breaths, and my vision eventually cleared, but I was left with a splitting headache. I’d read that this was a sign of successful forcing, but considering it came after Umbra’s first words, it had lost most of its impact as an achievement. I tried sorting the boards as I’d been told, but between my excitement at Umbra’s growth and my headache, I couldn’t even focus on something as simple as that.

I walked back downstairs to where my dad was working the table saw. I waited for him to finish, and when he noticed me, his expression went from that of an annoyed boss to concerned father in an instant. “What’s up? Feelin’ puny?”

“Just a headache. Got any ibuprofen?”



“In the truck. You sure you’re alright? I can take you home.”

Fuck that, I thought. I wasn’t going to cost him any extra time. “I’ll be fine.”

“Drink some water and sit down for a bit.”

I nodded and walked to the truck, swallowing more ibuprofen than necessary and sucking down a full bottle of water. It was hot and tasted like plastic, but it helped nonetheless. I thought about Umbra’s first words, guilt pressing me into the ground. I hadn’t been careful. Hadn’t been in control. Umbra was an emotional sponge, and I was making absorb parts of me I didn’t want him to have. All these years I’d assumed I hadn’t inherited my dad’s anger, but I had merely buried it, and now Umbra had unearthed it. “Thank you dad,” I said quietly, before adding “Thank you mom.” Umbra made no response. Gratitude, it seemed, was not loud enough for him to hear.

in an effort to distract myself from my failings as a host, I searched Alexandra David-Néel’s name online when we finally went home . As it turns out, Alexandra David-Néel was not a conspiracy theorist as I had assumed, but an explorer who, among many other things, managed to sneak into Tibet in the early twentieth century, and wrote a couple books about her experiences with the monks there, and the mystical nature of their abilities. One of the phenomena mentioned was the idea of the tulpa, from a book she wrote in 1923 called *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*. Before I could go past the first article written about her, my internet cut out. I could hear my dad yelling “Oh hell and death” from his desk. Nothing upsets a man like interrupting his ritual browsing of train forums. Unfortunately, I had to stop reading there, since my reception was too shoddy to look up anything on my phone. At this point, however, my

interest was piqued, so I decided to visit the library for a hard copy of that book, or at least wif of some sort.

The library was empty when I arrived sweaty and drunk off exhaustion from biking all the way to town, save for the one librarian on duty. She was a little wide eyed when I came in, and even more so when I went to her to ask about Alexandra David-Néel. She seem surprised someone was looking for books at all.

I'd thought it'd be in some musty section of the library, but as it turned out, the book was still in print. The librarian pointed me in the right direction. I thanked her and went to pick out the book before settling in the reading section, which hadn't changed much since I first visited at age five.

The first thing that stuck out to me was the insistence that tulpas could affect the world around them, which was entirely unlike what I'd read on the tulpa forum. No one had insisted that tulpas physically existed. Rather, they had practiced manifesting and talking to their tulpa so much that they did it automatically. In David-Néel's account, however, it was not only possible for tulpas to be seen by someone other than their host, it was downright common. To list a few experiences, David-Néel claimed that a lama had invited her into his tent for tea, only for "a flimsy veil of mist...to open before it [the tent], like a curtain that is slowly pulled aside." When she went in, the lama had disappeared. When she reported it to cook what had happened, he told her that the Lama had only passed through to relay a message, and had left right after. When she saw the lama again, she told him what had happened, and he just laughed. David-Néel even

claimed that he used this trick again later, disappearing from sight when the two of them were walking across a flat expansive plain.

Another account detailed how David-Néel dreamed of Wangdu, one of her companions, returning with food and other supplies loaded on a caravan, wearing a foreign sun hat he hadn't owned beforehand. When she woke up, her other servants reported seeing Wangdu walking up to their camp. Lo and behold, he was wearing the sun hat she had dreamed he wore, though he was without the caravan. They all assumed he had simply walked ahead of the caravan, and when he disappeared behind a seven foot tall chorten (a religious monument that symbolizes the Buddha's presence), they assumed he was resting from the trip. After a while, David-Néel sent two servants to look for him, only to find that he was gone. At dusk, Wangdu appeared again, this time with the caravan and the same hat she had dreamed about and seen earlier. Questioning Wangdu revealed that he had stayed with the caravan the whole trip, and that they had started their trip too far away to arrive any earlier than dusk. David-Néel claimed that Wangdu had created the tulpa mid trip, anxious that he would be late, or not make it in time at all.

She also made her own tulpa as an experiment, locking herself away to visualize a fat, jolly monk. After three months, she could see him without trying. Then others began to see him, and David-Néel started to feel his touch, like his robe brushing past her, or his hands on her shoulders. Eventually, he began to change, becoming lean and mean-looking, acting on its own. When a herdsman saw the monk in her tent, he was real enough for him to just assume that a Lama had come to visit. Upon hearing this, David-Néel ended the experiment and went about dissolving her belief in her tulpas existence. While his conjuration had taken three months, un-imagining him took six. Attached to someone else's living body, they cannot be drowned or

shot. They can only be starved of attention, their body losing form as their host forgets the details of their being, until they revert to their former state, whatever that was.

I wondered for a moment if I was taking this too lightly. I was no lama creating a tulpa as meditation practice, nor was I an explorer seeking to test if such a supernatural ability was real. I was just some lonely idiot with a short attention span. A tulpa never leaves. It lives with you. What would happen if I lost interest? Would Umbra's existence already be a fact of life at that point? Or would Umbra wilt from lack of attention the same way he would if I'd be actively trying to cut him out of me?

Then there was the uncomfortable pattern of tulpas leaving their creator's control completely. Such an occurrence was usually a sign of clumsiness on the creator, resulting in angry spectres running around the plains causing chaos. Some tulpas reportedly stuck around after their creator died, for better or worse. David-Néel claimed that a lama had shown his face to a crowd of hundreds of onlookers, blessed a temple and then vanished, which was accredited to a tulpa he'd made for just that occasion, seeing as he was dead before the ceremony.

After I finished reading all the sections that mentioned tulpas, I put the book back where I'd found it, chewing on what I'd read. The speed at which a tulpa manifested seemed to vary within David-Néel's accounts, with Wangdu's doppelganger manifesting in a single day, and David-Néel's own tulpa taking three months to form. Assuming it's true, then maybe the appearance and personality played a role in the length of time it took to manifest. David-Néel's tulpa had been unlike her, thus taking a longer time to make real. I gave myself a pat on the back, since, if I was right, that would mean Umbra take less than three months to manifest.

I'd forgotten when exactly I'd started imagining Umbra, but it had to have been at least a month. Still, I didn't quite believe the reports of tulpas being seen by others. Those could be easily made up. I did, however, believe David-Néel's report that a tulpa could go bad. A tulpa isn't a new person, after all, but more of a rearrangement of their host. Everyone's got some maliciousness in them, so maybe giving them a certain personality more easily brings out what was already there.

Despite my reading, I'd found no mention of "the amalgamation" that Barbell had mentioned. Looking it up online didn't help either, only defining the term and explaining how it worked between corporations.

I put those thoughts aside as I cursed my inclined path home. When I arrived, the wife was back, and I was greeted with another message from Jimjam.

Jimjam: She really does want to talk.

I softened a little, mostly because it was a relief to see fairly normal writing.

Me: I'm down to talk. Could you just tell her that it's really hard to read her writing style?

Jimjam: Sure

Jimjam: hiiiiiiiiiiii. sorry my writing is hard to read :( its just fun to write like that uwu

Me: It's ok. An individual word here and there is fine, it's just hard to read as a whole.

Jimjam: Okie!

I was still a little uncomfortable with what I'd gotten myself into, but even this brief exchange brought about some insight. Everyone writes differently when communicating, digitally or otherwise. What would Umbra say to this, and how would he write it?

"I wouldn't respond at all, actually. I'd just mash "block" until it all went away," a disinterested voice said next to me.

I turned and saw Umbra, just as I'd imagined him, arms crossed, looking down his nose at my phone. I squinted at him for a moment, then slowly moved my arm towards him until it was in his chest.

"Please don't do that. It gives me minor existential angst," he said, not moving.

I retracted my hand, apologizing. I began to walk around him, looking at the details of his clothes and skin.

"You look kinda... drawn? Or like an animation," I said scratching my cheek.

"It's probably not worth the processing power to imagine every pore and fiber," he responded.

I nodded, and asked "So, can you fly or...?"

"Did you ever imagine me flying?" he said.

"No," I said.

"There's your answer," he said.

"Truly intriguing," I said in a high pitched voice, stroking my non-existent goatee.

"WHAT WAS THAT?" my dad yelled from upstairs.

"NOTHING JUST WATCHING A VIDEO," I yelled back.

I ushered Umbra into the living room and shut the door. I splayed out on the sofa, looking back at my phone.

“Are you really so starved for attention that you’re talking to a girl on the internet that someone else made up?” he said, following me and squatting in an armchair with his elbows resting on his knees, a pose I had never imagined him in.

“It might be interesting,” I said.

“You know what’s interesting? Talking with a figment of your imagination that seems to possess free will that is literally right in front of you,” he said, “the one you spent a good month on at least.”

“Mayhaps we are jealous?”

“Mayhaps it says more about you than me that you, if I am indeed jealous, imagined me to be that way,” Umbra said.

“Fine. You can talk to her, and if she stops responding, then so be it,” I said, holding the phone out to him.

He looked at it, held his hand out, and watched straight faced as it fell through his fingers.

“Right,” I said, stretching my arm out to grab my phone, “I’ll have to get used to that.”

I looked down and saw I had another message from Kiki.

Jimjim: hows ur tulpa going???! Need any advice :3??

“All you,” I said.

“Tell her that I’m going to swallow a battery if she keeps typing like that,” Umbra said.

I typed and sent his message out, feeling a little bad.

“Stop feeling bad over there,” Umbra said.

“Isn’t that a little much?”

“Not if she leaves you alone. Then you can focus on literally anything else,” Umbra said.

We looked at the subsequent reply.

Jimjam: lol a battery? Omg is your tulpa a robot!?! Thats so cool!

“Holy shit,” Umbra said.

“That’s what you get for being roundabout.”

“I just…” Umbra said, trailing off after putting his face in his hands.

Jimjam: have him do an introduction :D

“It’s good to have tulpa friends. Dictate a self intro,” I said.

“Do you really want to be the parent who makes their child hang out with the kid who chews with her mouth open and smells like cheese?”

“Where’d you get all this bitterness?” I asked. “What part of me embittered you so much?”

“You gave me red demon eyes and grey skin,” Umbra said, “ I’m a spanish dictionary away from being named ‘Shadow’, and we’re stuck here because you’re too lazy to get yourself a real job. Are you really surprised that I’m “bitter”?”

“You two would be a great match. She’s so saccharine that she doesn’t even think you’re trying to be mean to her,” I said, trying to poke his stomach, and continuing even when my finger went through him.

“That attitude is exactly why you’re in this position.”



“C’mon, maybe you can have a date via astral projection.”

“Fine, I’ll talk to her,” he said, coming over to the sofa and sitting down next to me. He placed his hands on mine.

“What’re you doing?”

“I’m going to type with your hands.”

“Gotcha. By all means,” I said.

Possession was a fairly common topic on the tulpa forum, though it sounded somewhat ominous. All it was, apparently, was allowing your tulpa to move some part of your body for you. I waited, and I felt a bit of tensing in my fingers as his hands sunk into mine, but didn’t move otherwise.

“You’re resisting me,” he said, frowning.

“False, I’m completely relaxed,” I said, “Maybe you need to practice more.”

“Fuck you and your practice,” Umbra said as a sensation not unlike being hit in the knee by a doctor went through my hand. My fingers moved on their own, but I had a feeling I could stop them at any time.

Me: Hello. I am Umbra. I am not a robot. Thus, my reference to swallowing a battery implied suicide. I am trying to say that based off our limited interaction, I dislike you greatly.

Jimjam: oooooo ur a feisty one! Put up ur dukes! ☹(↖↗)☹

Me: Do not call me feisty. I am not feisty.

Jimjam: do you need a hug?

Me: I need no such thing you kitchen wench.

Jimjam: r u calling me a tool?(>Q<)

Me: Are you joking or are you illiterate?

Just then I heard my dad come down the stairs. His footsteps went to the kitchen, and I could hear him grabbing a beer from the fridge. He then entered the living room and sat down on his designated TV chair, which was more a chair shaped pillow than anything.

“How’re the trains?” I asked.

“Old. Same as ever,” he said, turning on the TV and flipping to the Red Sox game. He looked over at my still moving fingers.

“You don’t even need to look at it anymore?”

“My hands are possessed,” I said “by my imaginary friend.”

“How’s he with texting girls?”

I looked at the most recent exchange.

Me: I don’t know what a tsundere is, but I know I am not one.

Jimjam: its an anime thing it means ur hot n cold! so the meaner you are on the outside, the sweeter you are on the inside. So i just gotta get to dat der sweetness =\_ ( > 人 < )\_\*☆

Me: Does your degeneracy know no bounds?

“He’s awful,” I said “and it’s beautiful.”

“As long as you think its funny,” my dad said.

“Dad,” I said in the tone of voice that’d warn him I was about to ask him something weird, “do you remember the tupla thing I told you about?”

“The hallucinated tibetan imaginary friend thing?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I remember.”

“Would you believe me if I said I’d managed to make one?”

“Probably,” he said, “Not much else for you to do here.”

“Good to know,” I said.

“Were you being serious about your imaginary friend texting a girl?”

“Yep,” I said.

“So he’s just... hanging around?”

“Yep,” I repeated.

“Well,” he said, “just don’t talk to him in public. You’ll get funny looks.”

With that, he went back to watching the game. Umbra was waving his hand in front of my face, but I decided to go upstairs to talk to him, despite my dad’s nonchalance.

“You’re so fussy,” I said.

“You stopped checking your phone, so I couldn’t formulate a response.”

“Right, you probably can’t see it if I can’t.”

“Exactly. Now check your phone, I’m not done tearing this girl apart.”

I did as he asked, reading more of his conversation.

Jimjam: oooooo big words. Can i call you galaxy brain?

Me: You may not.

Jimjam: its a compliment (\*  $\geq \nabla \leq$ )

Me: You're mocking my diction.

Jimjam: noooooooooooooo im not i pwomise

Me: THAT WORD IS NOT SPELLED WITH A *W* YOU CRETIN.

Jimjam: jus tryna be cute :'(

Me: Purposefully incorrect grammar and spelling is the opposite of cute.

Jimjam: im sowwy. I mean, I'm sorry.

"She's really trying," I said.

"Not hard enough," Umbra said, face pinched.

"I guess you're right. No use talking to her. We can just talk to each other, right?" I said, slowly putting my phone in my pocket as I stared him down.

Umbra puffed out his cheeks keeping eye contact with me like a guy trying desperately to not look down a girl's low cut top.

"In fact, I'll just block her. She's such a nuisance, right?"

I took my phone out again, languishing in each input. Umbra's eyes were starting to bulge to an almost cartoonish degree.

"I think she responded, but it's probably annoying, so I won't look."

"You've made your point."

"Made a point? Me?" I said innocently, my finger circling around the block button.

Umbra sat down and sunk his hands into mine, and I relented.

"It's really hard to imagine you going rogue when you get flustered talking to a girl online."

“Why would I go rogue?” he said, not looking at me.

“Dunno. Alexandra David-Néel said her tulpa started getting all mean faced and weird. Started appearing in front of other people. She never said why, as far as I can tell.”

“What would a tulpa gain from that?” he asked.

“Independence, I guess. David-Néel’s tulpa were spiritual things, so I guess they had more physical agency.”

“Perhaps. I don’t feel very spiritual. I’m entirely connected to your perception. That’s why I can’t see your phone when you’re not looking.”

“You were able to respond to her before without me looking,” I pointed out.

“Only because you’re so addicted to your phone that you keep looking at it without realizing you’re doing it.”

I nodded. Not long ago, I’d been fairly certain, even while imagining Umbra, that this was all a crock of shit. When he appeared, though, it seemed so normal to me after a month spent visualizing him, even as he displayed traits I hadn’t specifically imagined him having. He was a saltier sailor than intended, that was for certain.

“What would you do if I tried to make you do something you didn’t want to do?”

“Like what?” he said.

“Tried to have sex with you.”

He didn’t look up at me, but he did stop typing.

“I don’t know what I’d do. Can’t really fight back, right?”

“You could try to control my hands like you are now,”

“You let me do that. I couldn’t do anything if you weren’t relaxed.

“This got morbid very quickly.”

“Indeed,” he said, “why’d you do that?”

“I was thinking about how many people said they’d had sex with their tulpa. It was a lot more widespread than I thought it’d be. But seeing you, y’know, exist, I can’t imagine doing that.”

“You didn’t imagine me for that purpose, so it makes sense.”

He went back to typing for a bit.

“You think Kiki has hooked up with her hostie-wostie?”

My hand jerked upwards and loosened its grip on my phone, launching it straight into my left eye before it fell to the ground.

“FUCK!” I yelled.

“YOU ALRIGHT UP THERE?”

“JUST BEING ASSAULTED BY MY IMAGINARY FRIEND.”

“DO I NEED TO CALL THE IMAGINARY POLICE?”

“NOT YET. I’LL KEEP YOU UPDATED.”

I pressed my palm into my eye, looking at Umbra with the other.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly, “Sorry. Sorry.”

“She’s got her hooks deep into you my dude.”

“It was just an uncomfortable question!”

“You’ve known her for fifteen minutes.”

“I’ve only been alive for twenty.”

“That’s up for debate. I’m still gonna ask her, as retribution.”

“No, you'll weird her out.”

I stared at him, confused.

“You called her a cretin and said you wanted to kill yourself when you saw how she wrote,” I said, “and you think asking about her sex life is crossing the line?”

“That was... yeah, that sounds bad when you say it out loud.”

I picked up the phone to type in “So Kiki how’s your sex life?” when I saw I’d received another message from Barbell, of all people. I’d completely forgotten about him, with his vaguely ominous messages.

Barbell: tulpa nightmare fuel

I sent him a question mark, but got no response.

“Tulpa nightmare fuel?” Umbra asked, trying to get me to go back to the conversation with Kiki.

“I’ve seen it on the tulpa forum before,” I said, “it’s usually pictures, stories or ideas that are meant to scare tulpas specifically.”

“Huh,” he said, “very interesting,” he said, uninterested.

“Think this has anything to do with the “amalgamation” he mentioned before?”

Umbra looked over the previous messages.

“Sounds nightmarish,” he said.

“How do you mean?”

“An amalgamation is a combination of entities,” he said, “so in the context of tulpas, wouldn’t that mean its a bunch of tulpas combined together?”

“Like a fusion?”

“Not really. That implies that there’s a cohesive whole. The word amalgamation makes me think of being trapped in a ball of flesh,” he said, pinching the skin of his arm, “or whatever it is we have.”

“Gross,” I said.

“Indeed. It’s probably a risk for those lunatics who make multiple tulpas. If the lines between their personalities blurs...” he said, trailing off.

“Why would he say to beware it, though? A ball of imaginary flesh isn’t all that threatening, just unsettling. It’s not like I have multiple tulpas, either.”

“He’s the one that introduced you to Alexandra David-Néel, right? Maybe he thinks its a spiritual thing, like she said. If something like that could detach from its host, I’d be pretty damn wary of it.”

“Fair enough,” I said.

“Most likely, he’s roleplaying. That’s what everyone on that forum does.”

“Me included?” I said, smirking at him.

“Especially you,” he said, staring at me.

“Maybe I’ll roleplay that I have a sweeter tulpa,” I said.

“Go for it,” Umbra said, acting as if I didn’t notice him moving my fingers.

“Oh yeah, weren’t we going to get some personal info on Ms. Kiki?”

“Elijah no” he said.

“Elijah YES,” I said.



Me: So Kiki how's your sex life?

Jimjam: w-wuh? (◦\_◦\_◦\_◦)

Me: Reveal to me thine carnal conquests

Jimjam: i dont have any?? (◦>\_<◦)

“STOP” Umbra said, “I DO NOT TYPE LIKE THAT.”

I responded with my best super villain laugh.

Umbra began waving his hand in front of my eyes, while he tried to take control of my typing hand with the other. Quite an experience, actually, to have your view blocked by something not there.

“Calm down,” I said, “I’m trying to tell her how you’re made of raw sexual energy.”

“Is this why you conjured me? To torture me? Is that why I’m here? Just to suffer?”

“Alright, jeez,” I said, allowing him to reclaim the phone.

Me: My apologies, that was my host causing conflict.

Jimjam: oooooooooo okie. That makes sense. My hostie likes to tease me 2. She's such a meanie sometimes (;'|| ∞ ∩ || ∞ `). Still love her tho

I stared at the message.

“What?” Umbra said, eyebrow raised.

“I totally thought her host was a dude.”

“Really? Why?” Umbra asked.

“She struck me as someone who was made up by a guy whose never actually talked to girl.”

“Well, you were wrong,” he said.

I was in the process of formulating a witty comeback when I felt my eyelids grow heavy.

“Tell your gal friend that your hostie is lame and needs to go beddy-bye,” I said.

“It’s ten,” Umbra said, obviously peeved.

“Yeah, and I’m tired,” I said, “Whatcha gonna do about it?”

Umbra’s response was to get all pouty, which was really something else, considering the grey skin and red eyes.

“Don’t be like that,” I said, “She’ll be there in the morning.”

He grumbled, and went about typing his good night message.

Me: I must go. My host has to sleep. What a silly fleshling.

Jimjam: lmao fleshling. I should use that 1. tell em gnight 4 me!

Me: Will do.

Jimjam: glad you dont have to talk to me anymore? (||| ◡ ◡ .)

I stared at the screen expectantly, but Umbra had stopped typing.

“What’s the hold up?” I asked.

“I don’t know what to say,” he said flatly.

I went to put a hand on his shoulder, only for it fall through him and land at my side.

Ignoring that, I racked my brain for texting advice.

“You could tell her that, despite how you’ve been acting, you actually enjoy talking to her.”

“I can’t do that!” he said, staring at me wide eyed.

“Why not? She’d send you happy emoticons for days,” I said.

“But she’ll know I like talking to her,” he said.

“You absolute fool!” I said, pointing at him, “You admitted it! You have no other option now.”

Umbra’s hands went to his mouth.

“Fuck,” he said, his voice not even slightly muffled.

“My dude, it's not a marriage proposal. It’s just telling her that this isn’t a one sided thing. Do you want her to reread the conversation and think that you think she’s a nuisance?”

“No,” he said, “I don’t.”

He looked like a recently scolded puppy. He stayed like that for a few seconds before I started snapping my fingers in his face.

“No moping. Be honest with her so I can go to bed.”

He grumbled, and slowly typed out a message. He stopped before sending it.

“On second thought, that’s a little too-”

“Fuck you. SEND,” I said, reasserting control over my thumb and sending the message without reading it.

Me: I like talking to you. I don’t do it because I have to. Also I’m sorry about what I said before. That was cruel. I was just nervous since I’d only just been fully formed. I’d like to talk more later, if you’re willing.

Umbra turned his head toward me with wide eyes, deliberately taking much longer than needed. I kept a straight face, but I was fighting back laughter.

“Oh look,” I said, “A response.”

Upon hearing that news, Umbra flung himself face down onto my bed, and slowly began to melt. I mean, seriously melting. Into a liquid. It was really unsettling honestly, but if you have no physical form, you might as well melt when you feel like melting.

“Want me to read it out loud?” I said.

“No,” he said in a long, drawn out moan.

“Really? Surprised emoticon” I said in a cutesy voice, “I thought you hated me! I told you you were sweet on the-”

“Stop,” Umbra said in a rising intonation as part of him dripped to the floor.

“Alright, I will,” I said, “I’ll just tell her that I was the one who sent that, and that you totally hate/ her. Really crush her soul.”

Umbra reformed instantly and turned back to me.

“Don’t you dare,” he said.

I snorted and offered my hands to him, still holding the phone.

“You’re adorable,” I said.

He assumed control of my hands, grumbling.

Jimjam: Rly????? owO I thought u hated me! I told u u were sweet on the inside! I feel all warm and fuzzy ( \* ● □ ● \* )

Me: Good talk later bye.

Umbra slammed my phone down screen first, breathing heavily.

“Good work champ,” I said, “You were honest about your feelings for the first time in your life.”

“You’re not funny,” he said as I began to disrobe for bed.

“You’re very welcome,” I said, turning off the lights.

I crawled into bed, pulling the blanket on top of me despite the summer heat.

“Where do you go when I sleep?” I said into the darkness.

“I don’t know,” Umbra said, “I’ll tell you in the morning.”

I tried to tell him good night, but I ended up passed out.

As it turned out, Umbra wandered about in my dreams, which were such a mess that he couldn’t remember much of what he saw, save for “exploding vegetables with human faces.” He only relayed this bit of information when were already on the way to work, so there wasn’t much I could say in response. It seems he didn’t expect me to talk to him at all during work, and stayed silent until I was at risk of bashing my head on a crooked door frame or stepping on a rusty nail. He was surprisingly mature at work, save for when he disappeared for a moment, only to reappear underneath the excavator as it was dumping out a load of dirt. My heart stopped for a moment, only for him to reappear behind me with shiteating grin on his face.

I realized I’d have to keep him entertained if I didn’t want him to do this every time Dennis was using the excavator, so I went about establishing a “wonderland,” as it was called,

for him to hang around in when he didn't want to be in the real world. I always assumed it'd have to be some big affair, but Umbra specifically requested a small room with a bed, a couple chairs and a tv. Apparently he wanted to watch my previous daydreams. "Reruns" he called them.

I tried to get in contact with Kiki's host directly, not because I was desperate for female attention or anything, but because I was genuinely interested in what kind of girl would make Kiki. She certainly didn't type like her, so wasn't just copying her own writing style. Kiki quickly told me to stop, and I did so without a fight

I put up a front of not reading her and Umbra's exchanges, but with the setup being what it was, I had no choice but to read everything Kiki and he said to one another. In an effort to make things a little more personalized, I made a separate account for Umbra that he'd tend to whenever I was daydreaming.

"This is getting dangerously close to the way some people will set up social media for their pets," I'd told him.

"I'm not a pet," he said in a serious voice, pawing at my hand for control of the phone.

One night, after not saying much to me all day, he shot a message to Kiki that read

ThisisUmbra: I'm worried about tomorrow.

Jimjam: (≧д≦ ヌ) Ufufufu? Whys dat.

Umbra spent some time sifting through a number of emoticons that was offered in the Japanese keyboard of my phone before replying

ThisisUmbra: —(T\_T)→

Jimjam: Yeah  $\bigcirc(\geq \nabla \leq)\bigcirc!$  I mean o no! I mean im surprised that expression was so fitting lol and glad you sent it but O NO why this face?

ThisisUmbra: Do you like stuff?

Jimjam: yeah! All kinds!

ThisisUmbra: and people?

Jimjam: them too lol

ThisisUmbra: even though you can't touch them or see them?

Jimjam: hrmy hrm hrm. Is sum1 havin a grass is greener typa day?

ThisisUmbra: no.

Jimjam: hooohoo. Sum1 is spicy 2day. 2 grump 4 me.

ThisisUmbra: sorry.

Jimjam: didn't even finish silly

ThisisUmbra: sorry

Jimjam: well don't get all apologetic haha.

Jimjam: grass is greener day i bet

Jimjam: I always get grumpy when I have those days

Jimjam: ur like ooo i'll never eat ice cream! And that sux! Having no body sux  
aggghhhh and then you FLIP OUT like ooooooooooooo

ThisisUmbra: its not about ice cream, and im not flipping out

Jimjam: its always about ice cream. Whatever sweet thing you think you're missing out  
on

ThisisUmbra: >:(

ThisisUmbra: You make it sound so trivial

Jimjam: noooooooooooooooooo nonono :(

Jimjam: im saying i get it!

ThisisUmbra: :(

Jimjam: ur a tulpa! It happens is all lol

Jimjam: i didnt mean to cut you off or anything i just wanted to say that i get it

Jimjam: but have you ever tried

Jimjam: being hungry?

ThisisUmbra: how did we get here?

Jimjam: we were talking about your grass is greener thing

Jimjam: and then

ThisisUmbra: its not my thing. You just decided that it was.

Jimjam: oh

Jimjam: OOO

Jimjam: OMG NO

Jimjam: you know that thing where your brain just assumes something happened and  
move forward thinking it happened but it never did and now you look stupid?

Jimjam: i did that before you even said what you were upset about!

Jimjam: im sowwy. Im wistening now!



Umbra clicked my phone asleep and threw it to the side in a huff. He desynchronized his hands from mine and lay next to me on the bed. He'd said nothing to me this whole time. In fact, he'd been silent the whole day, brooding. I'd given him about 3 "what's wrong, bud?" and 1 "if you need anything, I'm listening" talking-tos, after which he nodded, thanked me with a smile, then went back to sitting like the Thinker, save for his fist which was firmly pressed to his lips. He'd kept that up until he'd grabbed the phone.

"Aren't you being a princess about this?" I asked.

"What?" he said, flaring, turning towards me

"You're throwing my phone around like a sad twelve year old," I said, putting the emphasis on *my* "because a girl who seems very interested in your well being fell over herself trying to comfort you."

He narrowed his eyes at me. I, however, had reacquired my phone and was scrolling through it, and was thus too busy to meet his glare.

"That's what mother does," he said after a while.

"Beg pardon?" I said, shutting off the phone.

"You summarize things to make me look like I'm making a big deal out of nothing," he said.

With a newfound respect for my mother, I said "Perhaps that would be an insult if you weren't, in fact, making a big deal out of nothing."

Umbra began to splutter, mostly saying "but" a number of times, though never actually starting a sentence. I stared at him while until he trailed off.

"What's going on my man?" I asked.

He grunted.

“My dude,” I said, winding myself up for a dad rant, the way my dad had often done for me, “you know I’m not trying to hurt you in any way. I usually leave you to your own devices but this” I said, shaking my phone, “I cannot abide.”

“What?” he said, turning away, “Is this knave being rude when he talks to the gentle lady folk? Does that displease milord?”

“Oh fuck off with that. I’m not saying to be nice to her because she has an imaginary vagina.”

“Then, pray tell, what is the problem?” Umbra asked.

“You, stupid, when you sent a text to a girl who likes you that says “I’m worried about tomorrow” and then get all huffy when she doesn’t immediately do things the way you wanted. It’s rude. She’s meeting you more than halfway.”

Saying nothing, I unlocked my phone, and looked at the new messages from Kiki.

Jimjam: Umbra?

Jimjam: I’m really sorry.

I waited, still looking at the messages. Umbra began to squirm. It seemed there was a certain amount of seriousness he could feel in the shift from “im sowwy” to “I’m really sorry”,

I began typing out a message to Kiki, watching Umbra out of the corner of my eye. He looked like he felt every letter I typed, but made no indication that he would do anything about.

Reading it over, I paused, then deleted it. I logged back into my account and messaged Kiki from there.

Me: Greetings Kiki and Kiki's host. I'm messaging on behalf of Umbra. He'll be going to sleep early, it seems, which is why he didn't respond to you, Kiki.

Jimjam: Did I make him mad?

Me: No, he was already mad or upset about something already. He won't tell me what it is, though.

I looked over at Umbra.

Me: But he knows what's happening as I type, right?

Jimjam: yup! kinda like a movie thats playing in the background. You get used to listening in while doing your own thing pretty quickly though.

Me: doesn't that make this incredibly passive aggressive?

I read that last text out loud, before saying, "Will you just tell me what's wrong?"

Umbra turned towards me in a rather dramatic fashion, his lips and jaw positioned in such a way that it looked like he was going to spit at me instead of speak. His face turned from righteous indignation to confusion, however, when he processed what I said. Soon after he deflated, and I guessed that I'd robbed him of the pleasure of saying I never asked him how he felt.

"I just want to go to sleep," he said after a moment.

"Me too," I said. Perhaps, despite not having a body, he'd picked up my tendency to fall asleep when stressed. I suddenly felt frustrated with Umbra, like I had been building a shelf with no instructions for hours with no progress.

“What am I supposed to do with you?” I said.

Umbra froze. He sat up and swung his legs over the bed, hunching over and interlacing his fingers.

“I dunno,” he said, twiddling his thumbs.

“How am I supposed to treat you? Like a child that I’m raising? Like an adult who lives in my head? What does it mean to interact with you at all?”

“Dunno,” he said.

“Look, Umbra. My guy. My dude. This is not me attacking you. But I’m confused.”

“What about?”

“You appear to me as a fully formed person. But you came from me. So when you do something I don’t want my person, lets say, participating in, what does it mean? What am I supposed to do when you make things unpleasant for people over text? Do I let Umbra the person conduct his business as he pleases, or do I cut that habit off right at the knees because Umbra the tulpa is an extension of Eli the human, and Eli the human will not have that? I need the rules, Umbra. I just need to know what to do and I’ll do it.”

“Why is the creator asking the creation what the rules are for its treatment?” Umbra asked.

I shook my head, opening up my phone to Umbra’s and Kiki’s conversation. I looked at the last two messages she sent.

Jimjam: Umbra?

Jimjam: I’m sorry.

I sighed. “Look, in all honesty, I love the little conversations you two have. It makes me feel warm and a little queasy. I try really hard not to comment because I don't want you to feel like I'm judging everything you do while you talk to her. I want it to continue unfiltered to the end of time. But you're being cruel, man. Can't you just get over yourself for a second?”

“I can figure things out for myself,” Umbra said, “I don't need to be made to do it.”

I threw my hands up. “Thank god. Up to you then. Night,” I said, turning off the light.

“Night,” he said, before vanishing into his wonderland.

I awoke the next morning to the sound of a large truck pulling into the driveway, followed by deep, frantic barking. Remembering today was the day Jacky would drop off Martina, I quickly got dressed and headed downstairs to say hi.

I stopped in the living room, casually eavesdropping on their conversation in the driveway

“She was the queen over on the farm. Everyone over there loved her,” Jacky said “even the horses.”

“No trouble then?”

“Had a bit of a kerfuffle with a boxer puppy,” Jacky said, “and she still doesn't get that she's a granny now.”

I could hear my dad making reassuring noises, and even though I couldn't see them I knew Martina was leaning against my dad's legs, giving him a mournful look.

I stood there for a moment. I wanted to see Jacky before she left, but there was something about the way she talked when I wasn't around that I enjoyed. When I joined in, it was a father

and son talking to a family friend, but when I wasn't it felt much more like an alternate universe in which I did not exist and Jacky was his child. She'd almost become his apprentice at one point, only to quit when she got the opportunity to run her own farm.

I eventually worked up the nerve to go outside and say hi, though it wasn't much more than that. She was in the middle of her customary excited wiggle when her attention snapped to something behind me. She began to bark her signature heavy "bu-WUFF", and I turned to find Umbra standing about ten feet from us.

"Oh hush, there's nothing there" my dad told her before turning to Jacky and asking "would you like some coffee before you head out?"

Jacky nodded and they went into the kitchen, but Martina continued to stare at Umbra and he at her. I called Martina and she complied after a few repeats of her name.

"How is the mother unit?" my dad said, futzing about with the coffee machine, something I'd never actually seen him do since he got up so much earlier than me.

"Broke her neck," Jacky said nonchalantly.

"What!?" we both said.

Jacky waved her hand as us to calm us down.

"She's fine, she's not dead. No nervedamage. Should be up and on her feet in a few months."

My dad and I settled down, though still a bit uneasy. As my dad finished making Jacky her coffee and handed it to her, he asked "How'd it happen?"

“She wanted to make a surprise visit. Certainly was surprising when she crashed her car on the way to visit us,” Jacky said, sipping her coffee “But at least the three border collies she was driving with were unharmed.

My dad exhaled through his nose.

“Seems like her,” my dad said, making a phone with his thumb and pinky and putting it to his head, “Hello, Jacky? I’m in the hospital. You’ll take care of the dogs while I recover, right?”

“Pretty much how she asked, actually,” Jacky said. “Except she’s also insisting that she be discharged from the hospital early so we can take care of her and the dogs.”

I watched her sip at her coffee, holding it in both hands. Jacky was one of those people who always seemed to be working with everything they hand with no thought for a break, so it was strange to see her so slow. I wanted to say something but I held back. Most of what I knew about Jacky had been second hand knowledge, and I felt that despite knowing her for half my life, I hadn’t earned the right to talk about her to her face.

Once Jacky had finished her coffee, she put it in the sink and hugged me, my dad, and Martina goodbye. Martina, however, was agitated, staring at Umbra wherever he was. When Jacky finally left, she began to growl.

“What are you fussing about?” my dad said, rubbing Martina’s ear, though she made no response.

I beckoned Umbra outside, and watched Martina follow him, keeping her distance. She began to bark, though it looked like she was barking at me, and not him.

“C’mon now, you’re being silly. You like him,” my dad said.

“Dad,” I said, “she’s not barking at me.”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“She’s barking at my tulpa.”

“Eli,” my dad said, “she’s not barking at your imaginary friend. ”

“Pick a spot in the yard, and I’ll have him stand there,” I said, “and if she doesn’t react, I’ll drop this and get some meds or something,”

“Alright,” he said, pointing to the center of the yard, “the picnic table, then”

I nodded at Umbra, and he nodded back before walking to the picnic table. Martina’s eyes followed, and she kept barking at him until he reached the table and sat down. She’d calmed down a bit, but she was still locked on his position.

“That’s... a little freaky, I’ll admit,” he said.

“You’re telling me,” I said.

“Have it walk toward her,” my dad said, obviously still suspicious.

I wasn’t fond of the idea, since Umbra seemed to genuinely scare Martina, but I nodded at Umbra, and he did as my dad asked. Martina began barking even louder, and when Umbra was within five feet of her, she stopped barking and began growling with bared teeth.

My dad blew air out of his cheeks, eyes wide, and looked at me. I looked back grimacing.

“Well,” my dad said, “that’s... something.”

I beckoned Umbra over to me to get him away from Martina.

“He never got any reaction from the Yuukatz,” I said, “I thought that was proof enough that he wasn’t actually there.”



“I’m gonna go take a nap,” my dad said, “we’ll discuss this once I’m back. Feeling a little light headed.”

“By all means,” I said, “I’ll walk Martina. She probably needs it.”

“Yeah. That’d be good,” he said, apparently happy to keep the subject at hand mundane.

I watched him head back inside before heading inside myself, returning with ample dogs treats.

“I sure hope she’s suspicious of you as a stranger,” I said flatly, “and not as-”

“An enemy?” Umbra said, cutting me off.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Do you think I’m gonna go evil?” he asked, his voice wavering a little more than usual.

“No,” I said, “you already look evil, so how could you get more evil? With bigger devil horns?”

Umbra chuckled, then got extra serious and frowned when he realized I was referencing Kiki’s preference in men (“i love tattoos/horns! Ugggh they make me melt :p”)

“Anyway,” I said, “Martina should get used to you if I show my approval of you. And by bribing her, of course.”

I called the still-wary Martina over, asking her if she wanted a treat in a high pitched voice. She meandered over, gluttony overpowering fear. I gave her a treat, saying “see, he’s not that scary.”

I motioned for Umbra to possess my hands and feed her. He did so, hiding his nervousness, and offered a treat. She sniffed our shared hands, contemplated it, and sniffed

again. She reminded me of myself taking multiple whiffs of clothes I was unsure if I'd washed or not. Eventually, she accepted the treat.

“Progress,” I said.

We repeated the process a few times until she took the treats without hemming and hawing.

“Try to get her to sit,” I said.

Umbra gave the command, and Martina wiggled a little, but didn't sit.

“I don't think she can hear me,” Umbra said.

“No, she heard you,” I said, “You just gotta argue a bit when she's stubborn like this.”

“Argue?” he asked.

“Yeah, just repeat yourself with different inflections,” I said.

After a bit of a tug of war, with Umbra saying “sit” at varying volume levels and frustration levels, and Martina wiggling, whining and sitting back slightly before standing up again, she eventually lowered her butt to the ground.

“Give her the treat and praise her,” I said.

Umbra gave a weak “good girl” and handed the treat to Martina, who accepted it happily.

“Your praise game is weak my dude,” I said, “You gotta put your back into it.”

I pocketed the treats and demonstrated how one praises a big dog, or at least my big dog, a process that involved a lot of petting, ear scratching, belly and asking “who's a good girl? Are you? Are you good?”

“I thought she was old. Aren't you being too rough?”

“She'd let me know if that were the case. Just give it a try.”

Umbra tried to do they same with my hands, albeit with much less confidence. Martina reacted about the same as she had with me, tongue lolling out as she pressed up against my legs.

“See? Easy,” I said, “You’ve got her seal of approval. No evil transformation for you.”

“Yeah,” he said, voice slightly strained “I’m glad.”

He turned away from me, and I could swear could hear sniffing sounds.

“You, uh... you alright there?” I asked.

Umbra didn’t say anything, only squatting down, hands over his face. I could feel a wave of foreign yet familiar emotions wash over me, and I began to tear up too. Of course, I thought. Of course he’s crying. Umbra was just a rearrangement of my own inner being. He wasn’t just like me, but he was like me enough, enough to have a love for dogs.

I’d once had a nightmare that I’d turned into a vampire, and for all the benefits that came with, and the horrors that it entailed, the worst part was watching all the dogs I’d known in my life growl and bark at me as something unrecognizable and monstrous. To be unable to touch them was bad enough, but facing that rejection was even worse. Umbra had assumed he’d never be able to touch a dog, and once he’d dealt with that (albeit brief) bombshell, he’d been treated like a monster by something he had no choice but to love. Her approval just broke him down completely.

“Hey,” I said, “let’s walk her up the hill.”

“Sounds good,” he said, wiping at his face before standing up again like nothing had happened.

We walked up into the forest behind my house, a slope that lead upward to a clearing with various power lines and moss, spreading out, calling Martina one at a time so that she

walked back and forth between us. I really didn't know what to say, and apparently, neither did Umbra.

“Was last night about—”

“Yes,” Umbra said.

I nodded.

“I should've realized,” I said

“Nah,” he said, “You didn't even consciously remember she was coming.”

“Sneaky,” I said.

I thought about how I'd have to go about mediating a conversation between my dad and Umbra. I guess I'd have to say “he says X” a lot, which sounded like a pain. How typical of me, I thought. I have proof that an imaginary being exists in the real world at some level, and all I can think about is how annoying that will be. No wonder I was sent here every summer. If I couldn't muster the resolve to act as an interpreter for a possibly supernatural being, how was I supposed to get a job without resorting to nepotism?

As we approached the yard again, I was pulled from my self denigrating thoughts by a figure he was sitting on the picnic table in the middle of our back yard, looking up at the house. He turned to me.

He was a tall man hunched over man, somehow able to wear a slightly worn black and red striped flannel over a gray t-shirt in the summer heat, his jeans stretched to the limit by legs forced to grow large by supporting his massive beer gut. Martina let out a few booming barks at his movement, but went silent when I shushed her.

We stared at each other for a few seconds. It was certainly Kirk, just based off his behavior, but I realized that I'd never actually seen the man in person.

"Move" Umbra said, and I started moving towards my door, nodding at Kirk along the way. He didn't move, but continued to stare at me.

"Are you looking for my dad?" I asked as I opened the door.

Kirk stayed silent. Part of me wondered if his infamy was rooted in an inability to interact socially. I stepped inside and walked into the living room.

"Dad, Kirk's standing out in the yard. He didn't say anything when I talked to him.

My dad sighed, muted the Red Sox game he was watching, and stood up. He walked to the kitchen and looked out the window. Kirk was still standing in the same spot.

My dad opened the door and took a step outside.

"Can I help you?" He asked in an obviously annoyed tone.

Kirk looked at him, gave a lazy smile, and walked off.

"Something's up with him. Probably on something," my dad said.

"Does he normally just walk into the yard like that?"

"Yep. He's more talkative, usually. Tries to be the tough guy. That's what the bat's for."

He said, motioning to a metal bat I used to play with all the time as a kid.

"That's for Kirk?"

He nodded.

"Huh," I said. I'd always assumed that the bat had taken up residence behind the radiator because it hadn't been moved since one of us left it there. It hadn't occurred to me that my hippy dad would be using it for self defense.

“Father seems to have a contained capacity for violence,” Umbra said, “It makes me feel safe.”

I nodded in agreement. Beware the nice ones, I thought.

I retreated upstairs to my bedroom and closed the door. I checked my phone, marvelling at how full my college email had gotten without me checking it.

“You should check that,” Umbra said.

I grunted. Umbra lowered his eyelids, then took control of my hands and opened the app.

“That’s dirty,” I said.

“Unchecked emails can indicate rotting and yet unsolved problems,” he said.

I grunted again, and began scrolling through my inbox. It was unremarkable up until I came across a starred email from my literature professor that just said “ESSAY”.

Umbra whistled. I stared at the capitalized word, my dad’s footsteps as he climbed up the creaking stairs.

“Fuck me,” I said, “That sounds like a problem for future Eli.”

“Or you could deal with it now, like an adult.”

My dad peeked into my room.

“Just got a call from Ceecee. Apparently we have dinner at Topside in an hour and we both forgot about it.”

“Oh really now?” I said, raising my eyebrows in Umbra’s direction.

“I mean, we don’t HAVE to go,” my dad said.

“Oh come on. You have to make one appearance this summer or the aunties will start asking me if you’re doing alright.”

He nodded, looking a bit disappointed.

“Showers and nice shirts it is then,” he said before he disappeared into his room.

“Strange how you suddenly become concerned about your father’s social life when there’s work to be done.”

“There’s always work to be done, but there are not always parties with non-bachelor food. Besides, you haven’t met the aunties yet,” Umbra said.

“I’ll look forward to that, then,” he said before vanishing from sight.

Topside is the source of a number of happy childhoods, mine included. Located up a winding dirt road, it consists of four homes surrounding a pond, all of which sits on the side of a mountain, as the name implies. My mother and some of her friends were part of a select group that was allowed to use it during certain parts of the summer, which meant one part of one sprawling house was partially filled once a week.

These get-togethers were usually dinner parties, and these dinner parties were acts of love. In this case, that meant one person, my godmother, Ceecee, was in charge of everything from start to finish, save for steak. When we arrived, Ceecee was busy salting slices of zucchini as my mother’s two pugs watched her intently. We were first to arrive.

“Knock knock!” my dad said, sending the pugs into a wiggling, tail wagging frenzy.

“You’re here!” Ceecee exclaimed, as if our arrival was a pleasant surprise.

“Against all odds,” my dad said, handing over a bottle of wine he bought some time that day.

I gave Ceecee a hug, which she returned, keeping her chef’s hands off my clothes.

“There’s wine, crackers and cheese at the bar, so help yourself,” she said, “we’ve also got non-alcoholic beer, gluten free beer, rum, tonic, gin and whatever else I forget we have.

Everyone’s running late, surprise surprise, but then who am I to talk?”

“Thank you kindly,” I said, picking up Bentley, the fatter of the two pugs. Umbra appeared next to me as if on cue, arms crossed to show he was still pouting. Bentley’s eyes bugged out in surprise as she sniffed the stranger.

“Whatcha smelling sweetie?” Ceecee said in the baby voice she almost always used with the pugs.

“His imaginary friend, I assume,” my dad said, sitting next to Umbra.

“Is it Bouncy?” Ceecee asked, “Your mother and I were just talking about him.

“Nah, different friend,” I said, “this one is less of a delinquent.”

“I thought he was going stir crazy for a bit,” my dad said, “but now he’s got two dogs hallucinating.”

“Oh shit,” Ceecee said, sliding into her pre dinner panic, switching her attention to a pot that was overboiling.

“We’ve got a strapping young man here who is ready, willing and able to help,” my dad said.

“Perfect! Can you handle the steaks then?” she said, pointing to a plate piled with raw thick cut sirloin steaks, “I already warmed up the grill.”



I nodded and put Bentley down, causing Umbra to let out a disappointed noise. I brought the steaks outside to the grill and began laying them out, my free hand fishing my phone out of my pocket.

“I wonder if they’d let me handle the steaks if they knew I was just googling how to do it.”

Umbra grunted.

“I wonder if you’d be here if you cared about your grades at all,” Umbra said.

“Let’s not get into that while we’re here, ok?” I said, “can’t write much at a dinner party.”

“Which is exactly why you shouldn’t have come.”

“Well, too late. Calm down and enjoy the sunset,” I said.

Umbra sighed and squatted down, looking out at the horizon though. I checked the time before doing the same, hooking my index fingers on the wooden railing to steady myself as I’d done countless times before. Umbra poked a finger in between one of the square spaces of the fencing installed some years back to prevent small children from falling fifteen feet into the brambles below. He started to make figure eight motions with his middle finger, watching it pass through the metal.

After a few minutes, I flipped the steaks, set a timer and went inside. My dad and Ceecee were speaking quietly in the kitchen. I walked to the kitchen entrance but stopped just before rounding the corner.

“Ted, I can’t believe that. Part of me wants to call her right now and tell her how wrong it is for her to do this!” Ceecee said.

“Please don’t. It won’t help,” my dad said, sighing.

“But she can’t do that. You did the work she asked for, she can’t just not pay you.”

“Yes, but she decided that she wanted more, and me saying no meant meant the whole project was incomplete. So no pay.”

“Call the police. That’s illegal.”

“I’m not calling the police, Ceecee.”

“Then why won’t you let me talk to her?”

“That’s scorched earth, Ceecee. I’d like to avoid that if possible, but if it comes to that, I can handle it myself.”

“But she comes here! I’ve made her dinner! I talked with her about you and Eli two months ago! You said this has been going on for how long?”

“I sent the invoice in a month ago, but she only started making a fuss about custom cabinets a week ago.”

“It’s just not right. It’d be like if I hired Jack to design my new apartment, had dinner at his house and then just refused to pay him! I mean, it’s unthinkable!”

There was a pause, which allowed me to place the scene in my head. My dad was closest to me, a beer in his right hand, leaning against the counter, most likely trying to figure out how to respond. There was a future dad rap stewing in this conversation as well. Ceecee was moving from one corner of the kitchen to another, the sound of her footsteps mismatched on account of her prosthetic foot. She was most likely switching between putting the finishing touches on dinner and looking at my dad as she waited for him to speak, wearing the same serious, concerned look for each task.

“Your alarm is going to go off in ten seconds,” Umbra said in my ear. I quickly tiptoed back outside, taking care not to slam the screen door. The alarm went off just as I realized the grill was smoking more than it should. I opened the lid and the flames almost reached my face they were so high. Quickly shutting the lid, I bent over to turn off the gas, but doing so didn’t make a noticeable difference in smoke output.

“The steaks,” Umbra said simply.

“Oh shit,” I said, opening the grill back up to salvage the steaks. They were only minorly charred, so no big loss there.

I walked inside and calmly said, “Dad, can you come here for a sec? I need steak advice,” beckoning him frantically when Ceecee wasn’t looking.

“Grills on fire,” I said when he arrived to assess the situation.

“I can see that. Everything's off, I assume?”

“I think so,” I said, no longer confident in my ability to operate any part of a grill.

“I’ll handle it. Go talk to Ceecee,” he said before quietly over enunciating the words “she doesn’t need to know.”

I went to take the artistically charred steaks inside, but I wasn’t five steps inside before I bumped into Ceecee, on her way to check on the steaks herself.

“Those look a little burnt,” she said, before shrieking “Do you think they’re over— Oh my god the grill is on fire!”

I cursed under my breath as Ceecee ran outside. I followed, steaks in tow.

“Everything’s under control!” my dad said, rummaging around underneath the grill.

“Ted what if the house catches on fire!?”

“It won’t, because I’ve found the culprit,” my dad said, pulling out an aluminum drip tray that was still on fire. “Drip tray hadn’t been cleaned in a while.”

“Oh!” Ceecee said, relaxing all at once, “god, I feel so stupid. I should’ve checked. That’s just never happened before.”

She took the steaks from me and looked at them sadly.

“I hope they’re not ruined,” she said as if they’d been dropped on the ground.

“The fire started when they were almost done cooking. The charr is just extra flavor,” I said.

Ceecee nodded, said “we’ll see”, and walked back into the kitchen.

My dad leaned backwards, resting one hand over the other on his pelvis, his lips scrunched up in thought.

“When I was in boarding school, I met a kid who came from an insanely rich family. A mansion, servants for everyone, the whole shebang. The morning after we moved in, he woke up and asked, ‘where’s the man?’”

““The man?”” I asked.

“The man who had dressed him every morning.”

My dad showed me the drip tray.

“See how its almost full? It ain’t supposed to be like that,” he said, over enunciating his last sentence. He put the tray on the railing more forcefully than seemed appropriate.

“You’re supposed to check at least once a year, but you can rep. But that’s only if you’ve used it all year. So let’s say you only need to check this particular grill once every four years.

With that in mind,” he said, watching the still inflamed, “how many years do you think it took to get to this point?”

“I honestly have no idea,” I said.

“Too many,” he said.

“It’s my fault too. I should’ve checked.”

“Trust in allah, but tie your camel,” he said.

I squinted at him, though Umbra beside me was nodding approvingly.

“When someone tells you they prepped the grill, believe them wholeheartedly. Then check anyway.”

By the time we safely disposed of the flaming grease and scrapped the grill, Ceecee had laid out a wonderful buffet in front of the numerous late arriving guests, many of who were commenting on the steaks, which Ceecee had cut so that they appeared purposely burnt.

“Who made these?” my squeaky voiced aunty Tulip said, “the charr is so artistic!”

“Eli did!” Ceecee said, “I’m so scatterbrained that I started a grease fire, but Ted got it figured out, and Eli saved the steaks. I forget what it’s like to have two strong men around for help.

“I’ve always said you should be a chef, Eli” Tulip said, as we took our plates of steak, corn, smashed potatoes, “You’re just so talented.”

I received many compliments for flipping over slabs of meat a whole two times, but I no one said much of anything to my dad about keeping the house up.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. I don’t think father needs to be complimented everytime he wipes himself,” Umbra said.

“Yes, but they could at least acknowledge that he kept this hundred year old wooden house standing,” I said when I thought no one was in earshot.

“Why would they? Everyone here grew up here in some way. It’s always been here, and it feels like it always will. So saving it doesn’t justify a reward. It just puts you at zero.”

My dad, meanwhile was busy telling anyone that would listen that I could get dogs to move around the room with my imaginary friend. He tried to have me demonstrate my ability with the two pugs begging under the table, but the aunties wanted to know why I had an imaginary friend in the first place.

“I’m just too busy for one,” Ceecee said after I assured everyone I wasn’t schizophrenic, “and I have a hard enough dealing with my brain as it is.”

“Are you getting laid at all?” Andy said, grinning at me.

“Here?” I said as Tulip and Ceecee covered their ears, “No.”

“Well, if you do, don’t mention the imaginary friend.”

“It’s called a tulpa, actually. It’s a Tibetan religious---”

“You made an imaginary friend and joined a cult?” Andy said, “I thought you were a good boy. Having you been doing crack too?”

“That’s a New Yorker for There’s no crack in New Hampshire. It’s all heroin here.”

With that, the conversation turned to the horrors of the opioid epidemic. Native New Hampshireites were going on about how it was a tragedy, how many friends and nieces and

nephews had been lost to it. It was one of those dinner party conversations that always played out the same way, to the point that it didn't matter who was speaking, didn't matter who had "never seen anything like it."

Umbra tapped my shoulder and pointed to my dad, who was sitting next to me, frowning at his dinner.

"It tastes better if you actually put it in your mouth," I said.

He smiled, but didn't say anything.

"Something wrong?" I asked, feeling a bit apprehensive.

"Yeah. Just thinking," he said, taking a bite of steak.

"I feel like I'll need an oxycotin for this headache," said Hanna Meadows, the current Topside matriarch, rubbing her temples before turning in my direction. "For anyone who doesn't know, I'm allergic to cellphone radiation. So either put your cellphone in that big iron pot in the kitchen, or put it on airplane mode."

I looked over at my dad, who was chewing on his upper lip. He appeared to be wondering what putting his cellphone in a pot would accomplish, or what airplane mode was. Everyone else at the table assured her that they had done as she'd asked, and I made sure to cover for my dad.

Much like the way I had tugged at my mother's arms when I was tired of walking around another art gallery, my dad poked me once we'd brought our plates to the sink and asked if I was ready to go. It sounded much more like a plea than a question, so we said our goodbyes, washed a few dishes and hugged Ceecee goodbye.

“It was an excellent dinner, Ceecee. Thanks for having me.”

“It was so good seeing you Ted. You should come to Topside more often,” she said, her face red with stress that was almost done with.

I motioned for Umbra to step into me, and hugged Ceecee again, which seemed to make both of them very happy for entirely different reasons.

When we got in the car, my dad slammed his hand on the steering wheel and sighed.

“What’s up?” I said. I wasn’t as scared of his anger as I had been as a child, but the instinct to stay quiet was still there.

“No one cared about the crack epidemic when that started. No one talked about it, not even in passing. No one cares that all the little towns with all the poor people were dying before anyone was talking about an “opioid crisis”. No one cares that there are people who have quietly been taking three different opioids at once for years so they can keep doing physical labor while their bodies fall apart, because they can’t afford to recover. Christ, my body is breaking down, and I’m the boss. I get to leave when this thing acts up,” he said, gesturing to his right bicep that he’d torn years ago.

I didn’t say anything, and neither did Umbra.

“I need to get out of this place,” he said after a moment.

“Yeah. You do.”

He started up the car and we drove home in silence.