

DARK REFLECTIONS

BY
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Chapter 1

Break them all and let the shadows fall.

The things you need to know; the three things, things which occupy my mind. Here they are, laid bare, like a cadaver on a gurney; their truth waiting for you to behold. I am no storyteller, but my story is one you should know, for ignorance of my tale could cost you your life. So here I lie exposed, open to your post-mortem, awaiting incision.

The first thing of three: the world is lost to me.

All that I once knew of the world has gone, slipped away right before my eyes. Well, before my eyes but out of my sight. I could not see it pass from where I sit, but it passed all the same. I recall the world as it was, but only vaguely, only in snippets, faint moments in time. I recall a smell, a flash of naked breast, a taste of wine. But memory fades and slips away as light fades from view behind a drawn curtain. So many memories gone, lost forever. But I know who I am, or should I say, what I am. I even remember the night I became what I am; a night so full of promise, the air thick with intention, the feeling more intense than any before or since. But who I am, that is almost a comical notion. I don't remember who I am, or who I was, only the name attached to the sentiment. I was known as Cornelius Jacob Mifflin. A proud name, and I came from a proud heritage. My father was a merchant, and well regarded. He was a serious man and had no time for flapdoodle, bunkum or poppycock. Yes, that is a memory I recall, the sharp sting of his cane on my legs. My mother worked hard, but grew old before her time. She was a woman of stern values with no time for joviality. On reflection, my childhood could have been more pleasant. But I remember bread, the smell of a fresh cooked loaf, and that first taste of soft warm delight. I also remember water. I think there was a river near where I lived growing up. But it may not have been a river, it might have been a lake, or maybe a pond. Perhaps I just remember looking at myself in a trough. I recall the face staring back at me, ripples gently running through it, the water deep and dark like obsidian. That face was so young, so pure, and untainted by the thorns of life. What becomes of innocence? It is lost like a precious coin fallen through a grate, and once gone,

gone forever, never to return. My innocence was stolen by a man. Not in the way you are thinking, but in a manner far worse. The innocence taken from me is not something that can be restored by a head doctor. I could not drink wine to make myself forget, nor could I seek consolation in the arms of love. I could not escape into my work or cry the corruption away in tears of absolution.

The second thing of three: hunger is my need.

Being trapped here in this interminable prison for so long I can think of only one thing... the hunger. Time may pass, but the hunger only grows; larger and larger until it consumes my very existence and I can think of nothing else. The pain is absurd. I did not think that God could have invented such pain, but then, God did not have me in mind when he created such things. Most pain comes from the presence of something, but my pain comes from absence. Mine is a pain of nothing: nothing in my belly, nothing in my veins. This is how I lust. Not for flesh, but what lies underneath. I would give it all, my very life, for just a few drops of that quickening nectar. I have known pain in my life, I endured much anguish. This was a new and unwelcome sensation. Forsaking all established limits, this was a desire that delved deeper into my endurance than any other. Oh, the pain, the excruciating affliction. Just to think of satiating my desire causes torment to my core. I recall the first time I felt the need, but only just. It was night I think, it must have been. I was in a forest, surrounded by the smell of pine and I felt the cramp in my belly for the first time. It was unlike any hurt I had known before, a laceration of my essence. It dropped me to my knees, and I craved. I recall flashes: running through the forest, tripping and falling, seeing the light of a distant house, and finally satisfaction. The god of my stomach had been appeased. And that was my drive, constantly, daily, to worship at the altar of my gut god, my gastric deity. I would offer up sacrifice such that the incense would rise to the heavens. I was a pilgrim, nay an angel, but not the good kind. The hunger was love, or at least a kind of love. But love is truly a kind word for what it is. Veritably it is lust, although lust in its truest form, more honest than the lust of carnality. Say what you will of lust, but one truth has grasped me more than any other during my time here: lust is stronger than love.

The last thing of the three: my love is all for thee

When I said I could think of only one thing, I was being false. There was one other solitary notion which captured my mind during this sentence of condemnation, one thing which distracted me from the need inside. It was she. I watched her for years. Right from when she was a little girl. I think she must have been about four years old when they first took me into her room, and I've watched her day and night ever since. At first, her innocence reminded me of my own, something I had long forgotten. To watch her play, on her frilly pink bedspread, the walls covered in unicorns and stars, the endless tea parties, the tiresome dressing and undressing of dolls. At first it was tedium, but soon a distraction, my window into life, all I would ever see again. In time I felt something, something other than hunger. Could it be, did a heart of flesh still beat within this chest? And then I felt it, recognised it, like a lost friend; affection. I felt genuine fondness for this girl. Time passed and she grew. The picture I saw changed; she had become a young woman. I treasured her as if she was my own daughter. I grew proud of her achievements and I spoke to her, but she could never hear. More time slipped from my fingers and as I drew breath she became a woman, with all of the captivating allure associated with their kind. She beguiled me and I was enamoured with her sensuality, I was ensnared by her beauty. I have watched her and loved her. Yes, I suppose I do love her. It has been so long that I have forgotten love. The recesses of my soul are like dusty corners, but this is what it felt like I recall, vaguely. It is not important. The feeling is all that is important and the feeling seduces me and reduces me. It makes me feel once more like I am a man, a simple man of flesh. Such illusions are but frivolous contrivances of course, but I have time for such things... all that time, and more.

My malady, my vital affliction, is to always crave, to always feel torn between the desires of two worlds. Cogito Ergo Doleo - I think therefore I suffer. The pain of my punishment is splitting. It divides me from limb to lips, separating marrow and muscle. If I could die it would bring true relief. To watch my spirit soar out of its mortal cage would be unashamed bliss. To close my eyes for the last time on this world, to draw one last breath and say farewell to dreadful creation. I am cursed to linger, to dwell ever more in this despicable facet, in this despicable form. But my new home has rendered me formless, existing in an unknown plane. I cast no shadow and see no light. Hope has abandoned me and my condemnation is constricting, my penitentiary cramped. I am pinched, shrunk and squeezed in every direction. I do not fear dying here, I fear living here in the long and dreary march to

eternity. Tedium is my mentor, and monotony my friend. How long can one endure this? My limits have been tested along with my sanity. And through my lust my woe is multiplied. I suffer not once but twice, a perpetual double helping of despair. My doom awaits a gentle reprise, when coldness wraps this suffering clay. Thoughts of destruction and calamity bounce across the walls of my skull like an eternal epitaph. Verses and prose of memories long faded; the exposition of a younger man. These words linger like a shadow in the distant recollections of my mind, sending a shiver down my spine. They are at once beautiful and brutal, their cruelty hidden behind a handsome disguise like the veil on a grieving widow's head. My soul, or what is left of it, weeps in terrible hopeless travail. The place of my condemnation is a limbo; an empty space void of all feeling and sensation. My sentence passed by fate, from the will of the gods. These spirits must hate me so. In my self-pity I cry: I do not deserve this, I was no worse than any other. My mistakes were as genuine as the saints, but I did not fall upon the good favour of a deity. No heavenly countenance was cast upon my sorrowful face. I sunk lower than the depths of the sea, flailing at the waves of injustice to set me free. Where is my life boat, my rescuer? No saviour avails himself to me. Cursed am I, excommunicated from all favour, doomed to a pit of vipers, to the infernal lapping of hellfire's flames. This confounded blight is reprehensible in my viewing. In former guises I was the one who decided the fate of others, who held life in the palm of my hand. Now I am the desperate orphan crawling the filthy streets to beg for scraps, and so I sit and wait, trembling in sorrow at my desperate fate.

Chapter 2

In her room I watch her all day long. I have no other choice. She was young, so very small, and her life was dull, at least to me. The tedious mind of an infant is something with which only a parent can relish engagement. She bored me to my bones. I was cursed to watch a frame of life and this was the picture with which I was stuck. What a hex! For an age I observed the monotonous comings and goings: her mother cleaning, picking up toys and clothes from the floor; she herself, sitting on her bed talking inanely to dolls, and her father reading her bedtime stories. I barely paid attention during these early years. I had a window into tedium, but *omnium eorum principia parva sunt* – The beginnings of all things are small. In time she came of schooling age and I was able to observe her feeble, early attempts at writing. She drew pictures on the floor with the skill of an imbecile. But she sang, and that brought me some delight. It had been so long since I had heard the tiny, sweet voice of a young girl singing. It had a soothing quality. She misbehaved like all children of that age, and the tantrums I could do without. But she also made me smile, and even laugh occasionally. Her mind was like a boat of jesters afloat upon a windy sea. It would travel from one crazy place to the next in an instant.

But I was privy to some precious moments, like an intruder witnessing treasures that should not belong to me. She was potty trained, not my proudest moment, but her mother and father were certainly delighted. I saw her learn to read, sitting upon her frilly bedspread, fleshy little fingers grasping at pages; her parents guiding her finger, pulling funny faces as they helped her pronounce words. This was far different from my childhood. When I mispronounced words my mother would wrap me across the knuckles with a rattan cane. It seemed that the education of children was much changed. My observation over the years of watching her and her parents interact is that all sense of discipline and rapport had been lost in society. That is, of course, presuming that this family was typical. They allowed her freedoms that would never have passed in my time. Children were to be seen and not heard, always polite, quiet and unobtrusive. The children that I witnessed in her room, including Jenny herself at times, were boisterous, insolent and vulgar. But the parents did not correct them; they were rarely scolded for their behaviour. Did these simpletons think that the

youngsters would discipline themselves? Children are wild beasts that need to be tamed. Any cretin can see that a child left without correction will roam about making of themselves a ninny. In my youth, I was forever being castigated for the smallest of transgressions: a loud and firm rebuke for passing gas, a slap across the wrist for taking an apple without permission, or a severe beating for quarrelling with my siblings. But what I observed here was a brazen disregard for authority. These children scratched, screamed and belched. They acted like mutton heads, flaunting their contempt for the rules without etiquette or dignity. But their misconduct was rewarded with indifference. Every infringement, every misdeed overlooked with callous detachment. I do not know whose trespasses were worse, the children, or the parents who failed to admonish them. In my youth I undertook some misdeeds, but I was clever enough to conceal what I could from my elders. Most of the time I got away with my offences, however the instance that stays in my mind, and has done for many centuries, occurred when I was twelve years old. I was fooling about with my brother on a chilly morning in early winter. My father was burning leaves in a bonfire and we were helping him. We were bored and began a harmless scuffle, a fake fracas. We were laughing and pushing one another. But when I pushed him his foot hit a rock in the paddock and he stumbled, falling into the fire. I had never felt so frightened in my life. I rushed to pull him out, as he screamed and struggled. I could smell his burning flesh and hair, his scalded skin bubbled like water in a boiling pot. My father's face turned white, like a ghost. He froze momentarily, aghast at the state of his eldest offspring. Together we dragged him, kicking and squealing like a pig to the slaughter, down to the river where we soaked him until his screams abated. He was never the same after that day, burned and scarred on his arm, neck and face. His ear was deformed and he would never grow hair again on the left side of his head. For that error in judgement I was berated, whipped and left without food. My father never looked upon me the same way again. I was permanently chastened for this infringement, seated under a perpetual cloud of damnation. It was certainly an accident, and my brother never blamed me, but I could not forgive myself. I had been the cause of his disfigurement, he would never look the same again, never be the same again. After the accident his eyes turned downward, cast in humiliation. He had once been popular, the centre of attention, but his popularity waned and he became a loner. In time my father's heir became a merchant, following in his footsteps. He never married though, at least not to my knowledge. I lost touch after I left home at the age of sixteen.

As she outgrew infancy and became a proper girl, my interest developed. The wild, primal surge of the early years was replaced with a more refined and elegant bearing. I watched her read for hours, sitting on her bed. She brushed her hair, spoke to herself quietly, dressed dolls and hosted tea parties for them. It was my theatre, my daily entertainment. She took her dolls out to a café, for a walk in the park, to dinner with her husband. She kissed them good night and reprimanded them for their behaviour. Where she got this from I do not know. But in honesty I only saw what went on in this room, maybe she was punished away from here, downstairs in the parlour. But to my reckoning she was not, and that is the only evidence I have. Perhaps deep down she understood chastisement for impertinence, something that had been lacking from her own youth. Maybe it was a part of us, or should I say a part of you, for I am no longer one of you. Perhaps the knowledge of such things exists deep down inside our marrow. Do people know such things before they are born? Is it possible that the decency or wickedness of a person is determined at birth and has little to do with nurturing? Is virtue buried deep in your soul, regardless of how you are treated in your life? This is one for the philosophers. But I have seen virtue abandon men, like the charcoaled faces of workers escaping a collapsed mine. People I knew with temperance growing up, cast into a sea of vice. A boy I knew at school, incorruptible by all accounting, grew to become a respected lawyer. Later I learned that he was given to lechery, a secret he had kept for many years. His depravity was unrestrained, pleasuring himself whilst sitting on a spike and being flagellated by a debauchorous whore. A girl that I knew who was so quiet that one was barely aware of her presence in a room became the unfortunate wife of a man given to drunkenness and cruelty. It is reported that he would beat her and their children with regularity. It seems that this treatment drove her to madness and one night she rose from her slumber, took a carving knife from the kitchen and stabbed him repeatedly until the bedsheets were scarlet. Some say that she should have been excused of this crime due to her maltreatment, but the judge did not see it that way and she hung in September. Was she twisted by her suffering or did the darkness always exist in her?

I see the darkness, always. It abides within every one, and none are innocent. People make excuses for their wrongdoing, there is always a reason. But I see past that, deep inside your being. And when I linger there, within the caverns of your soul, I see the void; the very blackness that will one day shroud your mortal spirit. When death ushers you into the netherworld, it will return you to the source of who you are. For despite the pretence of righteousness the heart of all men is wicked. Corruption belies your outward façade, a mask

of prudence, a masquerade of morality. Your charade is in contempt of your creator, his penetrating eye sears through your nefarious guise. Upon you this censure I place, that you are false! Your existence is an infringement upon creation. Your hubris as you strut about, consuming everything and proclaiming yourselves at the apex of the world. But you are oblivious to the fact that you have an unseen predator. As you consume the world and strip its skin, laying its frail flesh bare, we are watching. Ever in anger, with furious judgement, I am. But I have pity, in a way; for if I seek the source of this problem I must place it, with care, at the feet of your creator. You stand accused of many things, but if the wellspring of your corruption lies within your heart, who placed it there? You cannot create yourself, just as I cannot create myself and was in like fashion created by a being of malevolent intent. If you do not learn evil then it must always have been present. I cannot blame the cake for being sour or the pie for being salty. No, the fault lies with the baker. If the table is crooked the carpenter is to blame. So the true scourge, the hub of all foul deeds, the bosom of corruption, is the creator himself. You are a victim of his malfeasance, just as am I. You were poorly made, defective, just as I am askew for this world; ill-fitting like a pair of shoes too small for one's feet.

Against the odds she seemed happy, the benefit of a child, unaware of the world ahead. My realm was a sphere of anguish. My empty spirit lingered far beyond time, like an unwanted dinner guest. I indulged my misfortune like a drunken man sitting at a bar. I cloaked myself in torment. My mind was ever drawn to the darkness. Misery became my preoccupation and I immersed myself in affliction. I became my own personal martyr, constantly sacrificing myself at the altar of despair. I was almost lost in madness, taken forever by folly. But into this well of my torture was thrown a lifeline. It was her, Jenny, that little girl. She laughed, smiled and hummed. These were expressions I had not heard in an age. They carried me away, in brief moments of bliss. These were forgotten feelings, now alien to me in my state of being. But I experienced them through her. She became not only my window into the humdrum episodes of everyday life; she became my window into emotion, simple human feelings. These sensations, long forgotten, stirred again within my soul. Through watching her so intently I absorbed something within her and I too felt again.

Chapter 3

In the mirror is truth. It does not lie or soften the blow. It shows only what it sees, without prejudice. It holds no deceit and does not tarry to reveal verity. There are no secrets inside. No secrets but one - my shallow existence. I am the flicker of the unknown staring back. Do you know who you really are, who truly stares back at you in the glass? The reflection tells the truth but is that what you see? Or do you see something else? A spectre, a creation of your mind meant to ease the pain of who you really are. I see vanity all around me; the subtle glimpses, the vain pride of raised chins, the long intent stares hunting for spots and wrinkles. My world is encased in your pride. I cannot escape the firm grip of your ego. The great philosophers of ancient Greece created a catechism of proverbs. The Delphic maxims inscribed on the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo are the apex of the philosophies of human civilisation. Amongst them is a profound saying which was used frequently by Socrates. *Temet nosce* - Know thyself. This pithy dictum is all the more important because of its desperate absence from the human psyche. I have gazed into a thousand faces and none have known themselves. Particularly in those final moments, when all reason escapes and only naked truth is left behind. So few know who they are, what drives them. They underestimate or overestimate themselves. They believe deceitful teachings and live their lives according to doctrines of falsehood. They mislead themselves in every imaginable way, betraying all evidence to serve their wretched ego and follow the ghosts of their mind. Their own shadow knows them better than they do themselves. In this respect the mirror gives them no advantage. They see the surface, or an interpretation thereof, but nothing underneath. It is as if they were an empty husk, a shell without succulent albumin inside. Aeschylus spoke the myth of Prometheus who cried out of the injustice that he suffered at the hand of the Olympian gods. But another demigod, Oceanus, came to him and cautioned that he should know himself. Oceanus admonished Prometheus for speaking ill of the gods who decide his fate and warned that he should know his place in the great order of things. It is indeed a blessing to know where one sits under the sky. I know my place in the accursed mystery. Do you? In my wanderings about the earth I have discovered that humans understand themselves very little. They do not appreciate their position in the order of the stars or the location of their link on the food chain. But despite all absence of self-awareness they stare, you stare,

deep into the looking glass. But be careful how you stare, for if you gaze too long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.

I can see you, but you can't see me. It's not that you aren't looking; it's just that you can't see. If you knew how close I was it would send a shiver down your spine. I am lurking behind your vanity, every time you look, every time you pride in conceit, I am there. Ever watching, ever lusting, I am. Waiting to take your essence, reaching out but finding no purchase, I am. Frustration my closest friend, for that which I desire most is within arm's reach but I can never taste its fruit. If you could only see my maw, smacking my lips at the thought of your flesh, you would run in horror. For I am horror, I am the bad man of nightmares: Grendel, Jotun, Samael, Shedu, Nergal, the one they use to scare children. I have seen these things you call movies, and the asinine portrayals within. The truth is far worse, if only I could let the truth out; let it out to play, just a little. But yet you stare, always looking with shallow glance or deep gaze. Be careful how you stare, for if you gaze too long into the abyss, I will gaze also into you.

When you stare into the mirror do you know what you see? Is it only your reflection or is there something else? Is there a second image behind the first, a refraction of light staring back? Beyond the figure you see, the impression of self, are you missing something? Is there a reticent effigy behind as you gaze into a glass darkly? The eye is the mirror of the soul. But can you see my soul, an enigmatic echo of a life, long past? When you stare, I stare back. When you glance I am in the corner of your eye. When you look too long I sit in anticipation scrutinising my quarry. My kind are foreigners, pilgrims in this world; a world not designed for our purposes. But we have adapted, made it work for us. Many myths of us have been recorded in tomes, passed down through lore. But one in particular is false beyond reckoning. They say that we cast no reflection, that our image is empty in the face of the looking glass. But this banal fable is far from the truth. The reality is a hundred times worse, at least for us. When we look upon a mirror it catches our essence, we are snared like a rabbit in a trap. We are imbibed by the reflective dungeon, body, soul and spirit. The source of your vanity becomes our prison. And there we stay, for all eternity. As long as the glass is sound we are shackled inside. This is the terror of our kind, second only to the blazing inferno set in the daylight sky. This was the warning they gave amongst our kind. This was our bogey man or old wives tale. But unlike the insipid fairy tales of humankind it was no toothless threat, it was a promise of hell. That is why many of my kind never ventured indoors. They set up dens

near roadsides hoping to catch weary travellers or took residence in graveyards or abandoned mines near villages where they could feed. Wandering into human homes was always a hazard, one misplaced look and your hunting days were over.

The first mirrors were pools, streams and lakes. The first constructed reflecting devices were made from polished stone or obsidian. These date back some six thousand years. The next development was polished copper which was used by ancient Egyptians. This was also where the first use of ornamentation to embellish the edge of the mirror was employed. Several civilisations from South and Central America primarily used polished stone. The ancient Mesopotamians used polished metal and so did the early Chinese. The latter created a concoction called speculum which combined tin and copper to create a highly reflective surface. These early designs were of no danger to my kind, and while staring into such a device was, apparently, an unpleasant experience, they could not capture us clearly. These items were also very rare as they were expensive. It was around the time when the apostles first penned the Gospels that the first mirrors made of metal backed glass were produced in Lebanon. The Romans produced a cruder version from lead backed blown glass. The popularity of glass mirrors rose several hundred years later and their use became widespread across Europe and Asia. These were devastating times for my predecessors. When the first of us were imprisoned rumours spread amongst our communities of the impending Armageddon. Had humans grown wise to us? Was this a devious scheme to entrap us? Were our days numbered just as Daniel had uttered to Belshazzar after he had caroused using golden vessels from the temple of the house of God? In the fourteenth century glass blowing methods improved leading to the creation of convex mirrors. This expanded their popularity enormously. Glass alone is a poor reflector and requires a coating in order to become a successful mirror. Typically these metallic coatings are of silver, gold or chrome. During the European Renaissance mirrors were coated with a tin and mercury amalgam. In the sixteenth century, as their production reached a peak, the beautiful city of Venice became the manufacturing hub of these evil devices. During this time it was one of the safest places in Europe. Our kind would not pass within a thousand furlongs of the doomed floating city. It was a foul German creature named Justus von Liebig who created the silver glass mirror in the early nineteenth century. Using silver nitrate the manufacturing process enabled the production of these horrid devices on a mass scale. Until this time mirrors were expensive and only purchased by the wealthy. We typically avoided affluent households and thus were safe from their deadly gaze. Now these vile contraptions were lining the walls of houses far

and wide. This was a plague on our kind, a reckoning unparalleled since our mysterious origins. There is a superstition amongst humans that mirrors capture the souls of the dead, perhaps this is true. For a long while in your history there was a quaint practice. After the death of a loved one all of the mirrors in a house would be covered as it was believed that they would capture the soul of the departed person, binding them forever to this unholy firmament. The spirit of the deceased would become a ghost and haunt the abode of their passing. There was another superstition also closely linked to the truth. It was believed that if a mirror in a house fell from a wall that it was a sign that someone was going to die. If one of us was trapped inside that was almost certainly true.

It was the year eighteen hundred and thirty-nine that I stepped unawares into this room, the chamber of my gloom. It was an unsuspecting night, an evening like any other. Reflecting back, if I could have stayed in that evening, if I could have ignored the urge, then everything would be different. If I could reorder the steps of time I would give a million heartbeats to do so. That is, if I had any to give. But regret is a lonely friend and I am resolved to my fate. After the first hundred years of regret it grows tiresome, entering the second century of remorse is pure tedium. I ventured forth from my lair, a modest house on the edge of the city. I lived alone. Over the years I discovered that many of my kind grew petty and somewhat feral when they lived in groups. “A clutch is the path to dependence” my mentor would say. So I travelled alone. This night I recall, particularly the full glow of the moon, sitting bold, the dominant orb in the starless sky. I saw it through clusters of trees, swinging gently under the autumn breeze. I moved with eager anticipation, the quarry I sought was a woman I had watched for many days. Tonight was to be a special occasion, a five-star dining experience. I stood by a tree in a park across from her house. It was one in a row of many cramped side-by-side. Identical two story apartments, nicely kept, well painted but small. She lived alone, and had few visitors. I watched for a time to see if she had company. It seemed that we would be undisturbed this evening. We would have an intimate night dining in. As I watched, the urge grew. I licked my lips in anticipation of the sweet ichor. The time came, the path was clear and I moved swiftly through her gate and to her door. The light was on and she was awake so I would need to take care. I did not want her to panic and raise an alarm. I should really have waited until her lantern dimmed and the house went dark. But the thirst was creeping, and once awoken it would not slumber until sated. I was over eager and that is always a danger in our trade. We could not afford to make mistakes; the punishment was heavy should we slip up. But in this heat of passion hunger was my mistress and reason, merely my wife. Lust was

always going to win this contest. I tested the door but it was locked with key. Scrutinising the house I noticed a window on the second floor which was opened a sliver. I checked that no eyes were upon me and climbed the wall quickly making my furtive entrance. This room was darkened, a boudoir. It was laced with finery and the sweet and sickly odour of perfume hung in the air. There was a dresser to one side with a large oval mirror in its centre, I made note not to look. I heard footsteps on the stairway as it creaked and groaned under load. I moved to the corner of the room where I would be concealed when the door opened. When she closed the door to adorn herself for her dreamy sleep I would strike and deliver to her dreams of eternity. The door squeaked open concealing my guile. She closed it behind her and moved towards the bed. I remained unseen, and I should have paid attention to the awkward angle of her elbow, but my hunger overwhelmed my perception. I crept towards her hoping to take her from behind and capture her in a final intimate embrace. But a floorboard creaked under my weight and she turned in fright just as I was upon her. She let out a timid squeal and I felt a sharp piercing in my belly. I looked down to see a long kitchen knife buried deep in my torso. In her rapid turning towards me, I had fallen upon the blade. I pushed back to unsheathe myself and she let go the handle stepping back and unleashing a zealous scream. I urgently snatched at the blade and in shifting my weight slipped upon a satin nightgown which was strewn upon the carpet. I lost my footing and went to the floor in a most clumsy manner. I clawed at the blade, finally releasing it, but the woman had dashed for the door, and made it past my grasp. I turned on the ground to make a move for her and slid again upon the slick material. I admit that this was less adroit than I was aiming for. I found my feet and lunged towards her, but in stepping up I had become disoriented. Instead of the woman I had lunged towards another figure, my own reflection in the looking glass. With my hands resting upon the hard grain of the wood I gazed upwards and caught my alter ego staring back at me. There I was, my true self. The opaque turned transparent and the luminous went murky, like a vague memory. The world drifted into a dark cloud and I was no longer standing on the floor of her room. I had fallen victim to the devil's gaze and was now interred in this two-dimensional jail which I call home.

Semper Idem – Always the same. For me life is always the same. I sit in limbo, a thread between two worlds. Like a forgotten bookmark in a dusty text left too long on a shelf. I am a remnant of a bygone age, a treasure hidden in a chamber that will never be discovered. My doom is to watch time pass; to sit very still in one place, never to move, until my joints and sinews seize. To atrophy to rot to rust like an unused tool. My anatomy is squeezed, reformed

against my will. Fate has rendered me a master contortionist. I am silent, only I can hear my wailing. Only I can interpret the mysteries that I utter into unknown spaces. I am the orator and the audience. But I hear what is said on the other side, not crisply, but as through a thin wall, voices pinched and shallow. I look upon a world of which I am not a part; a distant watcher like God beyond the sky. I desire to speak and be heard like a normal man. But instead I sit alone. Thirsting and watching, scraping and scratching. Desperately clawing at glass I am. My torment is your vanity and the only barrier between you and my satisfaction is a thin piece of glass. And thus I cry “break them all.”

Chapter 4

She stood in front of me a lot during those years, those awkward years. Pulling faces, painting her face with ghastly hues trying too soon to look like a woman. Why do they do it? The girl craves to be a woman but the woman craves to be a girl once more. Adolescents believe that adulthood will be their salvation. But on arrival they are filled with disappointment, and the more time passes disappointment turns to despair. Time is the burden of the mortal and age, the curse. For me, time is also a burden, but not the lack of it, only the endless ramble into the face of oblivion. Knowing no end, time loses all meaning and each interval is measured only from meal to meal. She obsessed about her body, incessantly pinching at the flesh around her stomach, always looking over her shoulder to regard her behind with a dirty sneer. I felt sad. Despite the large amount of time which she spent gazing upon her reflection she could not see what I saw. Her gaze was set only upon her flaws, and she could not see past it to the beauty beyond. If I had tears I would have cried. She tried to exercise to overcome the delusions of her mind. I watched star jumps and sit ups, running on the spot; her little face going red, plump with luscious blood. In her absence I pondered her rationale. Of course, vanity is a vice common to womankind, but what drove her to such disappointment with her appearance? She had a world to discover, the freedom to walk the streets and gaze upon the stars, a freedom that I would never have again. If I were at such liberty to roam freely, I would not waste my precious time obsessing over my image. I have spent centuries witnessing the human life-cycle, and without fail the young grow old and die. They wither like paper turning to ash. Their demise is inevitable and their lives so fleeting. They should never waste time on vanity or pride. I lamented the time that I wasted on my own conceit. I should have been breathing the cool morning air, smelling the scent of pine. But instead, I pursued education, commerce and self-importance as though they meant something. Like all humans I chased the dreams of others, mistaking them for my own; chasing them with unmatched urgency. I ran headlong into my own demise, hotly pursuing my impending doom. And my thoughts returned to her, constantly, wondering about her life, not just her actions, but her inner life, the life of her mind. What did she think about, what thoughts floated through her head in those absent moments? Did she, could she, have any awareness of my presence? Could she feel the pierce of my gaze through the delicate plane?

At first she put on makeup about as well as a horse would. But as time passed she honed her skills like an artisan perfecting his craft. The range of powders and lotions available to an adolescent girl is bewildering. Her dresser was covered with bottles and containers of all shapes, colours and sizes. She spent hours covering herself in oils and painting her lovely youthful face until it was barely recognisable. In my day only whores did this, shrouding their pockmarked faces to hide their shame. Godly women would not let an ounce of toxic, lead-filled powder touch their pristine alabaster skin. This was indeed an age of vanity where honour and integrity had lost all meaning. But she was just a girl, a child really, a victim of this age. I saw her reading these flimsy books, adorned with coloured pictures. To bring the image alive on paper, as though it were real life was an amazement to behold. What wondrous invention had allowed such a marvel? But these flimsy, glossy books were the source of much distress. With titles like *Girlfriend*, *Cosmo Girl* and *Teen Vogue* their headlines were appalling: Get the best body by the first day of school, How far must a girl go to get his attention, Tricks to get sexy hair, The secret to being a great kisser, Flirt your way to a date, Hallway make-out sessions: dos and don'ts. What had society become? Was this some plan by a devious bordello mistress to turn all young women into prostitutes? She sat for hours on her bed thumbing through the pages, listening to ghastly music. This was sound more than music, with a repetitive thumping beat that pounded into my brain giving me a thunderous headache. The words were also repetitive with lines being repeated over and over again like the squawking of a disturbed bluejay. I never once heard the uplifting movements of Bach, Handel or Vivaldi. Had chamber music died along with my own hopes and dreams?

These were the years in which I became embarrassed watching her. As she grew and blossomed she developed into that awkward period between adolescence and womanhood. I shielded my eyes in shame as she undressed, as though I was protecting her virtue. But admittedly, I occasionally peaked, out of curiosity more than lust. I watched hairstyles change and her body take form. Gone were the pretty bright dresses covered in flowers and butterflies. The new fashion was for women to wear men's trousers. And many were made from an unusual material that I had never seen before. It came in various shades of blue, spotted with small metal domes and stitched with gold thread. At first I wondered what she was doing that would take her out of a dress and into such practical wear. Was she working on a farm, or in the field perhaps picking ears of corn? Eventually I dismissed those ideas.

Her hands were by all means too soft for a labourer and she never came back dirty. Her clothes were always clean except for the occasional spot of blood. I deduced that this must be a new fashion for the idle rich. Other than exercise, I never saw her sweating or in a state of grubbiness. No, she must have been a lady from a well-to-do family, although the fashions had changed and not to my taste. Her schooling carried right into her teenage years, indicating a family of some wealth. But other than this her pursuits were indolent. She was no doubt being groomed as the wife of a gentleman to serve as the lady of a large homestead, overseeing a staff of servants and slaves. But admittedly, I saw no slaves in this household, at least not in her room. No dusky faces changing bedlinen or emptying chamber pots. Perhaps they were not permitted in this part of the house, or perhaps her father was one of those rare gentlemen who did not keep slaves on principle. On that matter, her father neither spoke nor dressed like a gentleman. His English was far too common, and I must admit that the entire affair was confusing for me. The world had clearly changed much, and the comforting formalities of my day had slipped into disfavour. Jenny spoke to her father in an increasingly disrespectful manner. I was oft surprised that he did not put her across his knee or take to her with a switch. Rather, he patiently endured her seething comments with the fortitude of a saint. Perhaps he was a godly man, not given to violence, who sought like the son of God to win people over with his passivity. These were strategies that never appeared effectual to me. Her mother on the other hand could be a firebrand and the two of them were ceaselessly enveloped in a venom coated exchange of words, some of which are too shocking to mention here. While I was appalled with her disregard for the fifth commandment I admired her salt, to stand up for herself. Indeed, she hardly ever backed down from a quarrel with her mother. Her free-spirited nature was endearing. They argued over school, friends, curfews and the way that she dressed. On this latter note I had to side with her mother. She had a fierce spirit, a quick mind and a sharp tongue. If she had been born a man she may have made a cunning attorney.

One of the most distressing things that I observed is when she brought into her room a small reflective slate. This unnatural device could play music. It appeared to have buttons of some kind that she incessantly pressed with her thumbs at breakneck speed. It glowed; pictures and words shone out from its daemonic innards. She even spoke into it, holding it to her ear or laying it flat on a table or bedspread. She communed with spirits from another plane. I heard their voices myself, coming from this accursed box of wizardry. Was it bewitched with devilry? Was my sweet little princess truly in league with Satan? Had she

enchanted some form of necromancy to communicate with the departed? When the disgust passed I began to wonder, could she communicate with me in my shallow existence beyond the pale? I called to her, attempting to seize the attention of the spirits in the box. Perhaps they would listen to me and grant me an audience. I tried yelling numbers at the box. I had seen her pressing digits on its shimmering phantasmal surface. But to no avail, my attempts were fruitless. Whatever channel these spirits were tuned into was inaccessible to me. After a while I gave up, as I had given up on all other things. In time I grasped the fact that she was merely talking with other people, her friends. They were not discussing satanic rituals, baking fetuses into loaves of bread for unholy communion or possessing the bodies of the witless. The conversations were of a far more dull nature. This device it appeared, that she referred to as her 'phone,' was merely a way of speaking with those not present, not those dispossessed of a soul.

Kate had plump arms. She wore a teddy bear blue shirt with short sleeves and I remember those chubby little piglet arms poking out. The kind of arms you just want to pinch, like a compulsion. She was loud, she shouted every sentence like a deaf mute, or someone impaired by a cannon blast. She was playing with Jenny in the room and I was watching. At first they were sitting on her bed looking at a picture book and speaking nonsense. Then they became excited, jumping around, squealing and laughing. Jenny began jumping on her bed and giggling like the little girl she was. Soon Kate joined her and the pair of them were jumping with greater hysteria. Suddenly Kate lost her footing and the stout little piglet fell to the floor with a thump. I chuckled, and so did they. Laughing like hyenas around a fresh kill they excitedly returned to their play. This time they were bouncing a small furry green ball, it was called a tennis ball if I recall correctly. They were bouncing the ball back and forward to each other and teasing one another about boys that they liked. This continued for some minutes, and then an over enthusiastic bounce went astray. It hit the mirror. For a moment the world warped. It pulsed in ripples with space in between. Within those margins I felt room for my body to move. Shoulders, elbows and hands flexed. My crushing planar existence stretched, expanding and contracting. Now hips and knees moved, ever so slightly, releasing a century of cramp, creating play in my transparent reality. Light and sound vibrated revealing a spectrum of luminous and tonal possibility that I had long forgotten. And then the waves of reality shortened and disappeared, returning me to my shallow grave; my long home, my tomb, a mere quarter inch thick. I screamed then, a scream of silence. It echoed about my chamber, but in no rooms beyond. That moment, those few seconds of hope

only dampened my dreams further. To know that freedom was so close, less than the breadth of a finger away, only further reinforced my despair. After tasting this iota of freedom, no larger than a dot above an i, I watched intently, eagerly, to see if it would happen again. Perhaps in their excited state they would throw harder and my prison would break, or even just crack. Could I slip from a crack? To that I did not know the answer. How thick was a mortal spirit? And an immortal one like mine; was it thicker? Could it pass through a fissure in glass?

What would I say if my prison did break and I burst forth into their world? “Excuse me, surprise, ta-da?” It was daylight out, where would I hide? But even in the light of the deadly sun I would gladly take my freedom. To burn in a cinder, to fry like an egg under the rays of the merciless star, would be preferable to carrying on like this. One more moment of glory; to burn like a Costan flare and exit the world with a triumphant bang. But both girls were subdued by this experience. They made faces at each other with pouted lips and wide eyes. They bounced the ball some more, but with far less vigour clearly afraid of breaking the fair side of my home. Seven years bad luck! That’s what it would be for them. That saying is a funny one and more related to my kind than you may think. Its true origins were hidden by the ancients long ago, during the reign of the Roman Empire. Mortal histories will tell you that the mirror is the pathway to the gods, that your reflection is an embodiment of your soul. In breaking one you also sever your connection with the divine, and your soul is rent from your body, floating adrift in a sea of anguish. In a practice similar to scrying, catoptomancy is a method of attempting to divine the future from a mirror. The speculari would place the mirror in such a way as to capture the reflection of a substance like waves or moonbeams, these shapes were then interpreted to provide answers to perplexing questions or the prediction of future events. If broken during one of these divining sessions it meant imminent death for the one seeking truth. It is all ridiculous of course, an act of deception placed in the minds of primitive people by forerunners of my kind to conceal the truth. The idea that breaking a mirror can bring bad luck is a common superstition. The Romans believed that it takes seven years for the body to renew itself and thus breaking the connection with the divine would result in seven years of trauma. The Russian belief is actually closer to the truth. In this cold and heartless part of the world they believe that breaking a mirror releases evil spirits which will haunt a person in revenge. The true origins of this saying are intimately connected with my kind. Of course by now you know that we have a tainted connection with mirrors. When broken, the breaker would often become the first victim of our ferocious

hunger, leaving them cracked and lifeless on the floor. And naturally, mirrors are found where our prey is found, so finding habitation close to the food source is a natural act. This would often result in an extended period of feeding amidst the community, and hence seven years bad luck. Seven years is only indicative, we would rarely stay in one place for that long. It is likely more closely related to the religious connection with the number seven. Seven has no special meaning to us, we simply stay as long as the food is available, and as long as we can remain unseen.

Vivamus, Moriendum Est – Let us live, since we must die. To watch a mortal in the ascension of their life is a rare and beautiful thing. But the peak arrives too soon and nought but twenty years into existence they begin to deteriorate, commencing the slow decay to the grave. In my time I had forgotten the glory of youth, the wonder of these early years where life was so full of promise. Much that I had forgotten was revived. And I began the journey inward to my own memories. My youth was relived through hers, a gift to my mind. The apocalypse of my narrow existence could be remedied in brief moments by glimpses of her. Her life reflected my own; her new memories echoing my former ones. She became my reflection.

In this time she grew, as people do. Not remaining unchanged like myself; statuesque in my eternal melancholy. She was my theatre, and only those that entered this space became the players that populated my pantomime. It was a stark show with little to entertain. So I found myself creating games, counting the small peculiarities that made up her life. I mastered her mannerisms, foibles and idiosyncrasies. Like the deity I counted every hair upon her head. I could tell you her hopes and dreams, the names of her toys and the secrets she spoke to empty walls. But the walls were not barren as she believed; I was there, always there, always watching; the unseen doorway of her secrets passing to the ears of the immortal. Forever captured were her mysteries. I laughed and pondered at the desires of her delicate heart. I witnessed every private act and saw things that a gentleman ought not. But the days had long passed since I was a gentle soul. Nobility had slipped from me; in the madness it was lost. In the omission of all valour I did only what I could. The only option which availed itself... I observed. And in my intent gaze time did pass beyond reckoning. Ever watching, ever waiting, I am. Her life became my only amusement, my only window, my only obsession. She was all I had.

Chapter 5

Arteries carry blood from the heart at much higher pressure than veins which carry blood back to the heart. Thus arteries are larger. The carotid artery runs along each side of the trachea, this is an excellent source of high-volume sustenance. Bites here can drain a subject quickly. The femoral artery runs along the inside of the leg, and although much more difficult to get to, and requiring situational awareness or a great deal of set up, it is the width of a finger, and when punctured will drain the life force from a subject in minutes. There are four jugular veins in the neck, and while fine for a short snack you will grow weary trying to subdue, let alone kill a victim at this source. Amateurs frequently misfire and hit these while the victim flails and yells. But blood from the veins is not oxygenated and has a flatter less rich taste. The luscious oxygen-rich blood of the arteries is the true prize. The brachial artery sits at the front of the upper arm running lengthwise down the bicep. It can be accessed from the inner arm near the elbow. The radial and ulnar arteries run along the length of the forearm and can be accessed at the wrist. The popliteal artery is located at the back of the knee and is a deeply positioned channel, so not the easiest source.

Much like the lion or wolf we instinctively attack the neck. This precipitates a psychological paralysis which causes the subject to become more passive. Instinctively they want to pull away, but in doing so their delicate tissue stretches like leather being tanned on a frame. This only serves to hasten their demise. The internal jugular vein runs in the carotid sheath paired with the carotid artery. For the skilled practitioner, it is possible to pierce this also, limiting the blood flow to and from the brain and rendering the subject somewhat witless. But also there is the haze: a method of washing over the victim's consciousness with a cloud that dulls their senses and makes them slip from reality as though observing a scene from afar or caught in the midst of a dream. Amateurs of my kind all begin with the more elegant processes of sensually nipping at the neck. But ultimately need drives us and all elegance slips away. The meal is more easily subdued when its soul is ripped from the world. To tear the rib cage open and reveal the succulent innards within is certainly more messy, but also more effective. The thirst also brings with it an irrepressible rage and thrusts such urgent need upon us. To wit the renting of limb from limb yields much satisfaction. The aorta sits

uncomfortably behind the breastplate and just above the heart, but it is a full inch in diameter, and if you can get to it the victim can be killed rapidly. It is the polestar of life essence, the source of the Nile.

We can both smell the prey and sense the heat coming from them. On drawing close it is like witnessing a fresh pitcher of water after many days in the desert. Dew sitting heavily on its surface, drops spilling down its curved neck. There is a sensual lust also, like spending the first night with a lover. When very close, the skin radiates as though it were speaking to us. Come closer, touch me, like the soft touch of grass between fingers on a sticky summer day. We are sensitive to the fluid and can feel the artery pulsing, divining the heat like aroma rising from a hot cooked meal. It takes just a few minutes to drain a pint of blood.

It goes without saying that we work in private away from prying eyes. Your eyes were not meant to see what we do. And if they did, torches and pitchforks. We are an insular folk preferring to humbly walk our path in the cracks between your world. The prey is sweetest when they are unaware, when taken by surprise. The look in your glossy eye when you first realise your fate, is singular. Only in that one moment can we behold your sacred tribute. Witness that precious gift given once only, and only to us. This is the moment; this is your moment, the moment of your death. The tension before; holding you so tight, clamping down on your epithelium, and then the release, the slackening, the breath outwards. This is when we are closest, so close, so intimate. We are there with you, there for you, right at the end. Like the gatekeeper, the ferryman to transport you from one side to the other. From the world you know to the one beyond. Light into darkness, warmth into coldness, presence into nothingness. The beautiful void awaits you, to nurture you like a mother, there forever.

Mundus vult decipi, ergo decipiatur - the world wants to be deceived, so let it be deceived. Under the cool shade of reason we do not exist; simply the formulations of your tender minds from the dark recesses of your imagination. We are stories concocted to excite and scare. Only children lie awake at night fearing us, and this is the essence of our chicanery. We exist in the spaces between your imagination and reality. Like smoke we appear and linger for only a moment. Did I just see? What was that? Only a figment of your imagination, visual trickery. This you tell yourself, society has trained you, taught to look the other way, to not believe what you see, what you think you see, what you fear. And we like it

that way, this is the treachery of the haze: an artifice for your mind. I watch and wait, I move with haste, I strike unseen. Swift and full of guile, I am.

The origins of my kind are a mystery. In modern times we are equated with a disease, ironically so. In many ways we are a disease. Porphyria is a disease of the blood which results in sensitivity to sunlight causing rashes on the skin. In folklore sufferers of this disease tried treating themselves by drinking blood. We are happy for the existence of such foolish explanations, may they perpetuate and thrive. Some believe our mother to be Lilith, the first wife of Adam. Created from the very clay that formed him she refused to serve the first man and forsook him. She is believed to be a demon, a succubus who thrusts herself upon the engorged flesh of unwilling men. She imbibes the blood of infants or even consumes them from the envy of her own barrenness. But in my transformation I have never suckled at the teat of a mother, nor known her warmth. If, as legends say she is barren then how could she birth us into the world? No, I do not believe this myth, and nor do any of my kind. Even older than the Hebrew Lilith is Lamashtu, a Mesopotamian creation. She would watch pregnant women give birth and then snatch away the newborn to consume its ichor. There are also stories of revenants, reanimated humans who hunt the living for blood. These stories appear to hold only a shadow of truth. They are cursory fairytales reflecting only an ounce of terrible veracity.

The cold truth is that we are an aberration, an accident of the world, the next generation of life, not dependent upon drawing breath. I have heard of Darwin's evolution: a bold claim and one that would have received much condemnation in my time roaming the earth. His explanation, removing a God, makes much sense to me. In my time I have seen neither grace nor mercy. I watch the wolf consume the sheep. It is the natural order of things, the way nature intended. It fits, and is fitting that my kind evolved. And in this way we are just like you. But we are the next step, just as Neanderthals died off when Homo sapiens prospered we too must carve a path into the next episode of history. It is the way of the world for the strong to consume the weak. And we have taken this command more literally than any that have gone before us. In the night we come, bringing history to pass. Nature has authored us onto its page to bring a reckoning for your sins. It makes you wonder, if there is a God then he made me also. And if so, for what purpose? Is he sick of you, does he wish to wipe you from the face of the earth as he failed to do in the flood. Or perhaps he just hates you and wants to see you suffer. This would not surprise me. The world is not a place of nurturing, it is not a

nursery for human beings, it is a slaughterhouse in which one beast is the scourge of another. The strong survive and the frail die. God it seems has a nasty streak. Perhaps he enjoys watching the struggle, relishes seeing the life slip from the weary. Did he, like a small boy, create us all for his own cruel amusement? Am I the instrument of his vengeance, the tool of your suffering? The most authentic story which I have heard is a rumour spread only amongst our kind. In the infancy of creation dark angels came to earth, defying the will of God. They seduced, ravished and imprisoned earthly women as their wives. Mankind was defiled in God's sight. From this unholy union we were born to the world, the sons that should not have been. Cursed to roam the earth for all days; world without end. A gasping, forlorn foetus I am. But this is pure conjecture, probably as much fable as any other account.

So many myths about us have passed through the zeitgeist. But they are only slivers of the story, sectioned together to create a greater myth than reality. Do we all have pointed faces and ears, shallow cheeks and scaly skin? Not by any means. Do we have but four fangs resting in an otherwise empty mouth? Not at all! We cannot hide our appearance using spells, we are not magicians or illusionists. Our only tool to diminish your mind is the haze. But we are pallid, that trait we all share. And we are likewise infertile, having no fluid in our empty shells. We live forever, pale like porcelain dolls, skin flawless and never tainted. Our lifeless body is cold, requiring neither oxygen nor food. Our only need is for you, what lies beneath. And even that is not really a need, more a desire. We will not die without your life force in our bellies, but we will not really live either. For a life lived in pain is no life at all. We need you like an opium addict needs a pipe, we lust and desire, selling all for a taste. Your special gift, your gift to the world, is the beautiful fluid that runs through your veins, like ambrosia, a gift from the gods. This is my vice. We do not have circulation problems and we are not host to any disease. But we react poorly to certain substances. Garlic does not bother me, nor Mercury, Ashwood or Hawthorn. But silver burns like a furnace and oak can pierce our skin. Our true enemy, the thing we all dread is the blazing sun. Its fire will extinguish our soul. It is to us as we are to you. When we slip from wakefulness and the apparitions of the night appear, it ends with a sunrise and we wake with a start. Our toenails and fingernails do not grow, for we do not change. We are immutable like God. We are as statues forever, marvellous to behold, perfect in our marmoreal form. Our power is immense; we can tear through your flesh like a wild bear. We need neither claws nor talons to do this. Do we have restraint? Perhaps, we could drain enough to let you live, but once the fury takes over terminating the act mid flow seems senseless, untenable. Would a fat man stop halfway

through his desert? I think not. Do lovers stop mid act? A sentence requires a period, a mountain requires a peak and the act of coitus requires a climax. To do so would be most unsatisfying, and leave questions to be begged.

Our sight is good. We operate only at night and our vision reflects this. Like most predators we are highly sensitive to movement. But we also smell our prey, sensing blood in the air as a shark would in water. All of our senses are heightened so that we live at the apex of existence on the crest of a wave between night and day. Myths may lead you to believe that we cannot cross a body of flowing water. This is untrue. Blood of course is what we crave, and what makes us stronger. However, if one of us should eat normal food our body would reject it and we would become ill, sometimes violently. I have no pulse, as you would suspect. My heart sits still within the cavern of my chest. Stories may tell you that our kind can change into the form of a wolf or bat. I only wish this were true. To fly on a draft of air would be freedom indeed. To take the form of a mist would be an interesting sensation, where do they come up with these ideas?

It is true that we are stronger and faster than weakly humans. But not to the extent you portray. I can overpower any man and my haste is unmatched when freshly fed. We do not have mind powers to control your thoughts or hypnotise you. I cannot manipulate your dreams. The haze follows us about like an unruly pet, its power latching to you when we draw close. I cannot turn invisible and I have no way to protect myself from the killing sun. I laugh in mockery at stories that we can control weather and animals. Most animals treat us as predators, barking, chirping or trumpeting an alarm. My true face is not beguiling. I do not win your favour with charm, but brute force. I wrestle the life from you with clawed hand and fanged mouth. I cannot turn your tears into diamonds. If you kill my maker I will not die but I feel his presence always, as though he is close, breathing over my shoulder.

Some say that I cannot enter a portal into your home without invitation. But verily, if you saw my deathly pallor, and my gaping maw would you invite me into your home? No, we always cross your threshold as an uninvited guest; a lion in the parlour, a jackal in your chamber. A sickly morbid curse I am. What of sleeping in coffins? It is not a necessity, rather a luxury. For us it is five-star accommodation. Really it is a matter of practicality. A wooden lid shields us from sunlight, and so we sleep easy in our pale rest. The alternative is to cover ourselves somehow so that the piercing rays do not penetrate. Oft you will find us under

layers of sheets and blankets. The truest rest is a room without windows. The stories of our kind frequenting graveyards are sadly true. Crypts and tombs are peaceful places, devoid of pestilent sunlight. The mirror which I call home provides little luxury and protection from its rays. They cannot penetrate the reflective surface and thus burn my delicate flesh. But they are ever discomfiting, like standing on the edge of a precipice, staring into the face of the void. I am not bothered by garlic, nightshade or juniper. Crucifixes are of no concern to me and I am not burned by holy water. Fire on the other hand is a contemptuous worry. It is our Achilles heel, and a source of much fear. It should go without saying, but like most beasts, if my head is separated from my neck that is the end of things. I would be ushered into the void like any other.

Stories of our procreation abound; how someone is transformed into one of us. Some say that we create fledglings to leave a legacy; that we have long bloodlines of loyal followers. I ridicule this notion; we desire neither family nor love. Indeed, we have no love to give should it be asked for. No affection to return to the eyes of a dotting lover. We do not let humans feed from our essence to be transformed. No witches spell will make you one of us. Our own memory of the event, by most accounting, is that we survived a brutal assault. We lingered when we should have perished. We endured. The truth is that even we do not know, when one of us turns from life into whatever it is that we have, it is by accident alone. There is no method, no rhyme or reason. We do not create progeny or desire to have offspring to do our bidding. Perhaps it is more about what is in you than what is in us. Maybe you carry a disease or some genetic abnormality that interacts with our piercing. But there is one certainty. A man dies before becoming one of us. He passes beyond the pale and into the blackness of the world unknown. In the midst of the forever silence he is reborn to the earth, accursed with new life, becoming a foundation stone of creation. I am truly born again, but mine is a legacy I would not willingly pass to another. I desire my prey but I do not hate them. I do not despise them enough to will my fate upon them. I was not meant to be, and you were not meant to be what I have become. Better you remain food and slip into the faithful twilight.