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Solitude

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Solitude

Author Bio

Jared Richardson is a junior Cinema and Media Studies and German Studies double major. He grew up in Vermont--also referred to frequently as South Canada--and plans to work in the film industry.

Solitude

Franklin awoke on a small, well-kept cot that was clean and uncomfortable. He sat up at the edge of the bed, crossing both hands and reaching forward and cracking his neck. The room stank of mothballs camouflaged by a sickening combination of orange and lemon. He straightened his back and stood up, immediately turning to tuck the sheets underneath the mattress, smoothing away the creases. His fingers were frail, archaic in spite of his youth, and wrought with arthritis.

Stepping into the bathroom with a thunderous yawn that rang throughout the corridors, Franklin scratched away a speck in the lower-right corner of the mirror with a short fingernail. Reaching for a toothbrush long overused, he topped the bristles with a pea-sized speck of paste. He counted in his head for each stroke, switching from bottom to front after sixty seconds precisely. He ran the water for three seconds, wetting a comb and carefully parting his dense chestnut hair. His beard was similarly haggard, but as well-kept as a pair of office scissors allowed. He looked into his own hazel eyes. His sister had always made fun of his big nose. Franklin blinked and walked into the compact kitchen.

Grim fluorescent lights flickered on as he entered, whimpering with a dull electric hiss. The room was tiny, barely high enough to hold his almost six-foot frame. Grasping a spotless non-stick pan, he twirled it in his hand, whistling "*Imagine*" as he popped open a can of baked beans and imitation egg he had left out the previous night. The table behind him was already set, with one chair looking at an iron door sealed down the edge by locks. Franklin sprayed the pan with fake butter, lighting the burner with a match and starting the omelette. A vase without water stood next to him, the crimson roses glaringly plastic in the luminescence. He frowned, longing for actual, living plants, but they had died weeks after isolation began.

Franklin flipped the omelette in the pan: no spatula needed. He had taught himself many little tricks over time. His father could always do that in mornings while he and Evie would cheer in wonder. Then his father would smirk and toss it onto a plate, coated in cheese even though Franklin was lactose intolerant. Then he would wink and mention that they would make sure their mother could blame the farts on the dog; Franklin had a fatal weakness for cheese.

He smirked at that memory, filling the other half of the pan with baked beans. In place of the full can, this ration ended up being a quarter. With ribs jutting out enough to count, he focused instead on survival rather than the blackhole of hunger encircling his stomach. In front of the chair sat his plate. Franklin was setting up his feast alone yet again. He pulled up, his appetite quivering as he folded his napkin onto his lap and slowly cut the eggs into pieces. Franklin always ate in parts, counterclockwise from one part of the dish to the next. The sound of a fork scraping against the porcelain rang out at a high pitch.

After licking the plate clean, Franklin set the dishes into a filled sink. As they sank, an unnaturally metallic thud filled the chamber. At first, Franklin

thought perhaps he had misheard, but then the noise repeated. Three times, desperate, but not from the kitchen whatsoever. He turned toward the source, eyes wide as he realized that the rapid, successive, crashing knocks were coming from outside of the door.

“Oh god, oh fuck, help me! Help me!” a woman called loudly. Franklin barely heard the voice, the hammering against steel boring deeply into his skull as he fell to the ground, covering his ears with mangled hands. His heart could not decide whether to race or to shatter. Loud breathing met with the desperate cries, as he did his best to inch closer to the gate.

“H-hello?” Franklin jumped at his own voice like a deer at a gunshot. It had been around two years and four months since he had heard himself speak. It still contained a familiar English twang, something he kept even as his father’s own accent vanished. He did his best to claw his way up to the small glass panel at eye-level, closing one as he struggled to still himself. A young woman who looked incredibly like Evie cowered outside, frantically turning back and forth as though something pursued her with bloodlust. Her green shirt was tinged with crimson and her skin—normally lighter—was dusted with debris. Her hair was chopped off almost entirely. Her fingernails had even started to chip away as she pounded with desperation.

“Oh my—fuck me, let me in! Let me in, let me in please!” she pleaded with animalistic desire.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“What the fuck does that matter?! Let me in, come on! Show some fucking humanity!”

“How can I know that you aren’t armed? You may as well bloody rip me apart!”

“Why would I—what?! You fucking bastard, you’re killing me right now! Let me in, please!”

Franklin felt as though his heart were about to detonate. He strived to see another person and to actually have a friend. The eternal silence of the bunker had grown deafening as monotony clawed at his soul. It stopped being an issue of survival and began to be more of a question: was it worth it?

“Show me your waist.”

“I don’t— “

“That wasn’t a *fucking* question!”

The severity of his voice caught her by surprise, so she backed up and lifted her shirt and spun around. He caught a shining piece of metal at her hip; the friendly onyx glint of a handgun that Franklin had grown all too familiar with. He frowned at her. “Throw the gun aside.”

“No!” she practically laughed. “Why would I even think about that?”

“Look, miss,” he sighed. “What’s your name?”

“Alexis.”

“Franklin,” he muttered. “Look, this place you see here? This is mine. I don’t know who you killed to find it, but it’s not a bloody hotel. It’s salvation. I make the rules.”

“Rules that’ll get me slaughtered. How do I know that you’re not bat-shit yourself?”

“You don’t know what I am, but I’m not the one who’s knocking.” He

coughed heavily; years of silence had thrown his throat into a chaotic mess.

"I'm keeping the gun."

"Then I'm keeping to myself." He frowned as he saw her grow enraged. She turned her back on the door, throwing a tight fist into a tree without acknowledging any anguish whatsoever. "Who's after you?" Franklin asked.

"What do you care? It may as well be you, you fucking bastard. You're feeding me to them on a goddamned golden platter." She stepped away and pressed her back to the door, the gun in her hand but clearly for comfort rather than for use. Franklin frowned.

"Look, Alexis, you've gotta understand that I need to look out for my own first."

"What the fuck do you think I am, some psychopath?"

"I don't know, and that's almost scarier." She paused, the barrel of the pistol lowering slightly, and her ears perked up. She turned to acknowledge him further. "Look, I had a family before all of this too. A dad, a mum, a sister."

"What happened to them?" Alexis asked. Franklin sighed loudly, a soft tear welling in the corner of his eye.

"Well, mum was in the military... Dad tried to go find her, left me in charge of Evie."

"Evie?"

"My sister."

"What happened to her?"

"...Doesn't matter. Truth is, I'm all that's left in here." He paused, pondering what he could say next. "Time has taught me that I need to be careful with whom I can trust. Especially those of you out there. I need some sort of proof that you and your lot won't slaughter me if I unlock this door."

"I don't have a 'lot'; it's just me," Alexis sighed. She turned back toward the door, scratching at dried blood over her eye. "Four years ago when all of the shit hit the fan, I had a family who tried to keep me safe too. It didn't work; I fucked up, they fucked up. I'm the only one left now."

"I'm sorry."

"Aren't we all." Alexis scoffed, slowly replacing her weapon in its holster. "Look, you can't trust me, alright? You can't trust anyone right now. It's just your decision whether or not you want to let me in."

"I'm very aware," Franklin chuckled. "You don't have any mates out there waiting to take over?"

"I already said I didn't... but no. Nobody."

"Alright, give me just a moment and I'll unlock this." Franklin sighed. "I'm grabbing my gun first."

"Okay, please hurry!" Alexis pleaded. He watched as she withdrew her own weapon, scanning the darkening horizon for any forms. Franklin pulled back, seeing the one door he no longer went into. He had debated welding it shut, but could not bring himself to. He inhaled sharply, rushing inside of the enclosed living space.

On the coffee table was a silver handgun, the clip missing two bullets. The awful beige carpeting still reeked of bleach and the radio had shattered to pieces, recklessly stuffed into the corner. Two single, thin holes were poorly sealed in the sofa. Franklin was careful to shut off all of his senses and empathy,

fumbling with the weapon as he grappled with himself. As quickly as he could, he returned to the door, finally noticing a frantic, emphatic knocking.

“Franklin! Franklin, open the fucking door. They’re coming!”

He dashed to the locks on the side, dropping the gun and pulling them aside one by one. His joints could not support it and he felt them cramp. Each bolt made him recoil more. He stumbled over each more and more. The knocking continued, in tune with frantic gunfire. Desperate cries became frenzied and violent. Franklin practically heard her knuckles shatter on impact with the steel door.

“There’s too many! I can’t—fucking fuck!” He heard a finger crack as he grasped a padlock.

“Hang on!”

“They’re coming!” He cursed to himself, flexing his hand into a fist and relaxing it.

“Alexis, I’m almost there!”

“Please! Please, Franklin, please!”

“Just a bit longer!”

“I can’t, I—” She was cut off in the middle of a breath. The sound of severing steel broke through the middle of a sentence. A torrent of liquid splattered against the hard exterior of the bunker. Franklin thought he could make out a faint prayer for some god mixed with urgent tears. A few footsteps followed and the appeal grew.

“Oh god, please! Please!” Franklin did his best to dull his senses. “I can’t, no, please! I’ll do anything, please!” A slow, silly giggle began to evolve into a satanic cackle. Franklin sighed and began to seal the door again. The laughter bore into his brain, crushing all other senses and thoughts. He became slow and methodical as the amusement became a howl, intermingled with spilling blood and blunt strikes.

Eventually, Franklin had managed to close the door entirely. He had no desire to look outside. He realized that he was shivering even though it was still humid inside. At some point, he had practically bit through his tongue. Noticing the taste of blood, he vomited into the sink. When he eventually recovered, he noted the resumed knocking.

Instead of quick and hurried, this time it was deliberate. Rhythmically, one beat followed the next with about two seconds in-between. After a moment, a second fist joined in the sardonic melody, the force and violence mounting. Then the laughter resumed, as though what had just transpired were a comedy. It seemed to double and triple in time with the collisions against the door as a chorus barraged his home. The door seemed to even quiver with each growing attack. All at once, as though with a conductor’s stroke, the laughter ended.

In keeping with the rhythm, one vile voice rang out. It was disgusting, as though it spoke with too much liquid in its mouth. It did not resemble anything human, rather a heinous beast. Each word was emphasized and elongated as though the speaker relished in each syllable. “Little pig, lit-tle pig, let us in.”

Franklin turned away from the door and walked back to his bedroom. The choir of animals continued. “Lit-tle pig, lit-tle pig, let us in!”

He began to desperately hum as tears welled up in his eyes. He climbed into his cot and wrapped the covers around himself. They became his shelter for at

least the moment. “Lit-tle pig, lit-tle pig, let us in!”

He frantically dried his tears and began to sing to himself. He always used to sing to Evie to calm her down when this place became too much for her. “Imagine there’s no countries... it isn’t hard... to do... Nothing to kill or...” He practically choked on the next word. “Die... for...”

“*Lit-tle pig, lit-tle pig, let us in!*”

“You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one.” The tempo escalated. “I hope someday you’ll wake up—”

“Oh, is this your sister out here?” Franklin froze. “We don’t use guns, no. Quick is bad. Slow... mmmmm. Why’d you do it? Want a little home to yourself? Shame too, she was so young. Come on piggy. *Let. Us. In.*”

He finally got up and reached the door to his bedroom, sliding it closed. Franklin could still make out the voices and everything that they said echoed in his mind as he drifted slowly off to sleep. He hoped that the nightmares would let him be tonight. Inside, he knew they would not.

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Stepping into the bathroom with a thunderous yawn that rang throughout the corridors, he looked into his own red eyes. He could count the veins and arteries in the whites. For a time, he did just that. He remembered the handgun on the kitchen floor, knowing how easy it must be to pull one trigger and escape forever. Maybe he could finally figure out where his parents had gone. Maybe he could return to a normal life. Maybe Evie would accept his apology. Maybe she would understand how hard surviving is.

Reaching for a toothbrush long overused, he topped the bristles with a pea-sized speck of paste. He counted in his head for each stroke, switching from bottom to front after sixty seconds precisely. He ran the water for three seconds, wetting a comb and carefully parting his dense chestnut hair. His beard was similarly haggard, but as well kept as a pair of office scissors allowed. His sister had always made fun of his big nose.