SHORT STORIES OF THE DARK COSMIC, BIZARRE, AND THE FANTASTIC.



INTO THE



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Find out more at: konnlavery.com

AUTHOR MESSAGE

Into the Macrocosm is part of an on-going universe creation housing many stories. The large-scale expansion spans across genres and varying literary styles. Most of the short stories in this book have been previously published in some form. They have been revised from their original state, enhancing the narration and reinforcing the expanding macrocosm.

PREVIOUS STORY PUBLICATIONS

Crusaders: Featured in Constellate Publishing ZINE, May 2019, originally edited by Ellen Michelle.

Mr. Super: Originally a featured live reading on Author Assist Radio Show Sept 13, 2019.

Inspirer: A new story.

All remaining short stories were previously published on the blog at konnlavery.com from 2018 – 2020 as part of the regular monthly short story feature.

THANK YOU

The conception of the monthly short stories on my blog was dual purposed. They provided readers with strange new worlds every month and ultimately let me compile them into a collection. Every story has allowed exploration of the human condition and improving upon my craft. They have drastically enhanced my writing from when I first started in May 2018 with *Runner*.

I'd like to thank you all who have been reading the short stories on the blog, newsletter, or listening to the audio versions online over the past couple of years. I adore the comments. *Into the Macrocosm* is for you, hence the second person overarching narrative with Malpherities. New short stories continue to be featured on konnlavery.com, in the newsletter, and in audio, exploring more of this strange universe. So, thank you again.

I'd also like to thank my mother, Brenda Lavery, for the countless years of love and support. Thank you, Lindsey Molyneaux, for encouraging me and listening to my earlier drafts – letting these stories thrive. Thank you to my brother, Kyle Lavery, for the many years of feedback. Thank you to my editor, Robin Schroffel, for continually providing tremendous insight into the written word. Lastly, but not least, thank you to my family, readers, and friends. You all have helped nurture this growing macrocosm.

Now, let's see where it will take us next!

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SYNOPSIS

Explore a strange universe where time and space blur. Being dead or alive no longer matters as the afterlife and the real world intertwine. A talking goat head, sleep paralysis, genetic freaks, killers, and celestial beings are just a handful of the weird found in this growing macrocosm.

Observe through the lives of 22 souls as the Nameless One attempts to discover the lost memories of how they died. A ghoulish companion in the mysterious Midway aids in the search, where one can witness any time, at any place, for clues. Yet, they're not alone in this postdeath realm. Even in death, danger lurks, and it is not too fond of visitors.

Award-winning author Konn Lavery's Into the Macrocosm dives into an on-going large-scale story expansion. The short story collection magnifies on previous connecting suspicions found in his horror novel *Seed Me*, thriller *YEGman*, and the dark fantasy series *Mental Damnation*. These interconnected tales bring them all under one, obscure, unsettling, cosmos.

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INTO THE MACROCOSM BY KONN LAVERY

01

WELCOME TO THE MIDWAY

An explosion. Wait . . . no. A car crash? Stabbed, or hanged? The details are muddled and are impossible to recall. You've moved so far away from the living. Everything is cold. So cold, right after the brief moment of shock. The one thought that passes through your shutting-down mind is, *I'm dead.* At this moment, your brain floods with a blast of chemicals. It is trying to cope with the fact that the body is indeed turning off forever. Life doesn't end, though. You're now seeing that the flesh isn't you, as you experience weightlessness. The chill. The dark. An abstract sense of space, yet you have no body. Time is entirely still as the world fades away.

Linear thoughts are becoming more mangled. You try to pass a statement through your mind, tempted to ask, *What is this?* But ultimately, you feel no need to do so as dozens of expressions run through you. These ideas aren't made up of the linear form of language, giving them more flexibility and potency.

Love. Peace.

Warmth. Wait a minute. Warm—that's a refreshing change from the iciness of death.

Light.

An array of post-death colours blast by you, moving in waves outward, intricately overlayed with geometric patterns. The more closely you look at them, the more you discover tinier designs within them, continuing endlessly. The rays themselves are so vibrant you wonder if you could ever explain them. Your vision is seeing more within the spectrum of light than any human eye could. So many colours! In a strange sense, despite being so far away from everything and everyone that matters, you feel at home. It's as if everything is going to be okay. Your consciousness has risen, broadening your understanding of life, the universe, and how everything so closely connects on a molecular level. The warm feeling is inviting, overpowering, and it pushes everything else aside as you experience the euphoria.

Call it Heaven, Nirvana—whatever human-bound word you choose matters not.

Life after death. Beautiful.

What's that? There's a black spot in the centre of the colour array. Strange. It's growing. Even without a body, you feel a harsh vibration, like an earthquake. Disturbance. The black spot pulls apart, ripping the colours like fabric. It spins as it tears even more space, twisting around and around, sucking the colours into the unknown. Deep purple and blue smoke seeps from the centre of this new blackness. The rumbling you feel shifts into a sucking force, pulling you into the unknown. You can't control yourself, helpless, being pulled into the black as all colours twist into thin lines until they're nothing.

The welcoming feelings of peace, home, and oneness are foggy. You are stuck on this horror roller coaster of darkness, descending deeper into the abyss with no way out. The expanding consciousness is closing. The oneness you felt is gone as the regular, direct, word-based thoughts of your mind return. It's as if you are alive once more. The black-and-blue spirals seem to go on forever. Lightning, purple clouds, and loud crackling are all around in this strange vortex. You swear you can see faces in the storm. Hands of lost souls reach upward, trying to pull you in.

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01 WELCOME TO THE MIDWAY

New—or familiar, depending on how you look at it—senses come to you in the form of a body. Smell: rotten. Taste: stale. Touch: bitter breeze. Sound: groans of death. Vision: unfathomable. The spiral comes to an end with a loud thundering *BOOM*, pushing the clouds away, bringing the haunting ghost hands with it. You fall a few feet onto a rocky grey surface with a heavy thud, nose-first.

Nose first. A nose . . . *yours*. The body has returned to you. It's healthier, at prime age. You're able to push yourself up with arms and stand upright. The form is familiar, but so much better, making you wonder how this could be. You must be alive; otherwise, you wouldn't have a body. Perhaps this is some strange form of reincarnation. If it is, we humans got it all wrong because this grey landscape is no part of Earth. You gaze out into the scene of nothing, reinforcing your thoughts. Everything fades to blackness beyond the edges of a strange oval-shaped plateau. The dark goes on forever, just below the not-so-ordinary sky. That black-and-blue vortex of spiralling faces is directly above. The damned vacuum that pulled you from euphoria is now hovering overhead, mocking you.

"How unexpected," a growly, reverbing voice echoes. The voice is doubled, like two beings talking simultaneously. It comes from the dark, all around, and it is impossible to pinpoint the origins.

You want to respond, but are petrified. Everything is beyond confusing. One moment you were alive, and now you're here, in some form of life after death.

"No mortal ends up falling into *and* out of Death's Vortex," the voice continues. "This may even be a first."

Lightning and thunder erupt from above, catching you off-guard. You take a step back, walking into a light blue smoke channelling below your feet. You move. It follows, growing larger. You try to shake it off as it spirals up your limbs. Maybe swatting will work. Nope, your hand goes right through it, and you hit yourself in the junk. It looks like you can feel pain again, too.

The animated fog swirls away from your lower region and into open space. Dark blue-and-black smoke follows, appearing from the unknown as the elements clash together, moving through and around each other. They compress and mould into a torso, lean arms, and a skull with an extended muzzle; sharp teeth, white eyes, and tentaclelike black hair form. The being's inner core contains the bright blue vapour, while the other smoke transforms into a translucent outer layer, like the white of an egg. Even without pupils in the glowing white eyes, the being is undoubtedly looking right at you. There are no legs. It floats effortlessly from the dissipating smoke below, endlessly channelling from the body. The tentacle-like hair flows up and down in a zero-gravity state, unlike your body, which is clearly bound by gravity.

"Well?" the being says, folding its arms, exposing the crosses scarred on his wrists.

You are speechless, uncertain how to reply, and you say, "Am I dead?"

The being laughs. "Am I dead?" it repeats. "I'm guessing you were a comedian in your past life."

"I . . ." You pause, thinking about the question. Were you a comedian? Now you're uncertain. You try and think back to the jobs you've had. Blank. Nothing. There is a giant gap in your knowledge. This is disturbing. You try and recall anything else about your past. Loved ones. Your first kiss. Family. Places you've been. The food you like. All of it—gone. You've forgotten every memory and everything you knew. Yet, you're *you*. You know it.

"I..." You look down at your hands. Yes, those are yours. "I don't remember... anything?"

"No, you wouldn't," the being says.

"What do you mean? I know I had a life. I was there."

"Yet you can't recall a single memory."

The thought annoys you. Lacking memory is frustrating. It's there, like a dream fading away while waking up, leaving you with nothing but vague feelings. "What is happening to me?"

"You are dead. You got that right. So keep observing your surroundings."

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Dead. The being confirms it. You had a life, one that has slipped from your memories. A brief moment of sadness washes over you, for all the things you cherished in life are now gone. You can't recall any of them, no matter how important they once were. You want to freak out and scream in horror. Your lungs tighten as you forget to breathe. Your hands are shaking. Energy hums through you as you're about to have a conniption.

The being speaks, pulling you back into the moment. "What interests me is how did you end up here?" the being asks, coming closer to you, only an arm's reach apart.

"This . . . this can't be. I'm dead?"

"Yes, we just discussed that."

You rub your fingers together, feeling the texture and pressure of your skin. "How?"

The being extends one of its long claws, poking your forehead. It hurts. The skin is punctured. "That is what makes you a fascinating anomaly."

You touch the pierced spot on your head. There's a small bead of blood. You can feel pain; you have to be alive.

"I'll ask again," the being says. "How did you end up here?"

You scratch your head, trying to breathe calmly. "I don't know. There were colours, brightness and—"

The being interrupts you. "Yes, yes. Home. Warmth. Broadening of the mind. All that typical nonsense that you experience when you die. Every mortal feels it. I want to know what was different, because that was supposed to continue until you've become one with it."

"I was supposed to?"

"Yet you were pulled into and out of Death's Vortex."

"Death's Vortex?" you ask.

"Yes." The being points above. "An endless spiral moving inward; the resting bed for souls once they've lived out all their needed lives."

"Those are souls . . . people?" You take another look at the vortex above, examining the wraith-like faces coming and going through the spirals. You'd think they would be in fear, but their expressions are neutral. Those hands are still trying to reach for you.

"Observant," the being says.

"What happened?" you ask. "Who are you?"

"I should really have a welcome brochure," the being mumbles to itself. "Even if I did, you're no normal case. Your soul's trajectory was interrupted."

"What? Who would do that?"

"Might not be a who but a *what*," the being says.

"Okay, so, what did it? Where are my memories?" you ask.

"Gone. Perhaps it is related to how you died, or your soul was in mid-transition of entering its next life, which would have erased them. Memories are always wiped when your next life begins. Let's see if there's any drop of knowledge in that primitive brain of yours. Answer me this: were you practicing any forms of magic?"

"I don't think so."

"Dark arts?"

"Not sure what the difference is."

"Quantum experiment? Particle smashing? Wave manipulation? Deal with a demon?"

"No. No. No. I can't remember anything."

"Most interesting." The being strokes its long jaw, staring at you, not blinking.

Many questions run through your mind. Where are you? What happened to your memories? Who are you? What is the meaning of all this? They spin around in your head until you finally blurt one out, saying, "What's your name?"

The being breaks from its thoughts and introduces itself. "I am Malpherities. Seeing how useless you are, you probably don't know yours."

"No, I can't say I do," you reply.

"All right, then we'll call you the Nameless One."

"That doesn't have a ring to it," you say.

"Come up with a better name then," Malpherities says.

At the moment, you can't. It's tough to think of a new name when

you're completely flustered with not knowing anything about yourself. So, you say, "We'll work on it. Anyway, what are you?"

"I am a ghoul, a being birthed of Death's Vortex. Unlike your carbonbased life, I come from the nether."

"The nether?"

"Here, where we are. I'm one of many ghouls. We're the conscious state of Death's Vortex, expressed through individual entities."

"What? This just gets more confusing."

"Let me explain in a way you'll understand. What period were you alive in?" Malpherities asks.

"I don't know."

"Of course, useless. All right, judging by how you talk, you probably were alive during some technological advancements. I am a piece of a *hive mind*. A projection of a larger consciousness with a twist of my own. Do you know what the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are? In human religion, Christianity?"

"I think so."

"Think of me like that. All three are one, yet each has their own personality, or ego, if you will."

"Okay, so if you're this Death's Vortex, can you take me out of here?"

"If only it were that simple. You see, you're now encased in a body again. You have flesh. I could kill you if you'd like; that would work."

The thought passes through your mind. Considering you died once and don't remember how, dying doesn't seem too bad. Then again, experiencing the pain at the moment doesn't sound appealing. You scratch your head, unsure what to say.

Malpherities raises his claw. "But you'd be thrown into Death's Vortex. It's a magnet for souls when you're here. You won't go back to the soothing colours that will transcend you into a new life."

"Reincarnation?" you ask.

"Quick learner."

"Fair enough. What is 'here,' anyway? You said 'the nether.'"

The ghoul hovers away, presuming you will follow. So, you do. With each step you take, the darkness moves away from you. The vortex above behaves like a spotlight, beaming directly over you and the ghoul.

"Here is the Midway," Malpherities says.

"Like purgatory?" you ask.

"You do have some knowledge in that brain of yours, after all. But no. Purgatory is a simplified explanation mortals have come up with for multiple realms you can end up in post-death."

"Dimensions?"

"Sort of. Not overly relevant right now. Dimensions make things too complicated. What we're interested in is knowing what happened to you."

"What about realms?" you ask.

"You're mortal; therefore, you're from the mortal realm. It's simple," Malpherities says.

The two of you reach the edge of the oval plateau.

"What else is in this realm?" you ask, looking out into the vast darkness.

"Don't bother. This plateau is all that matters," Malpherities says, hovering towards a stone spiral staircase off to the side, leading down. Over the edge is a vast black sea thousands of feet below. The water is so still, it almost looks like a mirror. One can only wonder what lies beyond, if anything. You stare at the ocean for a moment and shake your head, realizing you'd best follow Malpherities until you have some grasp of what is happening. You hurry to catch up to the ghoul, following him down the stairs and into a vast cavern where large stalactites hang from the dome-like ceiling, covered in condensation. The sandy ground inclines to the centre of the cave, where a matted black pedestal rests, topped with a smooth golden bowl. Droplets fall from the large stalactite directly above, dripping into the dish. The distance of the droplets' fall is so precise that nothing splashes outside of the bowl.

Malpherities moves up the hill and to the bowl, saying, "Come. We must find out why you're here. If you did something in your mortal days to pierce through the soul's natural passage, that is an

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extraordinary power that is unfathomable."

"I'd have to be pretty smart to be the first to do that."

"You would, which seems unlikely. I propose it is a series of events that managed to jolt you from your soul's trajectory. A freak scenario of the cosmos, if you will. Or, someone else has unlocked an exceptional power."

"I did see the center tear apart before coming here."

"Interesting, and it brings you here," Malpherities says.

"The Midway," you say.

"Correct. The Midway was built by us ghouls, to allow us to phase in and out of space-time."

"Space-time?"

Malpherities sighs. "You are a puddle of uselessness, aren't you? We aren't going to have a science crash course. Time and space are interchangeable. We ghouls shift through them, letting us feast on the dead, bathe ourselves in the dying."

"So, you're like the Grim Reaper?"

Malpherities snorts. "Grim Reaper. No, I'm not."

"Sounds like you are," you say.

"I am only an observer of death; it feeds my life force. Despite being connected to the larger hive mind, we ghouls possess our own personalities. I, for one, relish in schadenfreude."

You reach the shrine beside Malpherities, who is standing directly beside the golden bowl. The ghoul looks into it. "For your overly simplified thinking," he explains, "this Midway lets the users enter and leave periods. You can exist within the space, or simply observe through the mind of another."

You lean over the bowl, looking into the black liquid that sits peacefully within. How strange, for you just saw a droplet land inside. It seems like there are more otherworldly mysteries to be discovered. You point at the bowl and ask, "Through this bowl?"

"Exactly. Dunking your head right in will send you into a specific time and a precise space. Depending on the potency, you may be a spectral, like a ghost, or a fully-formed being. Sprinkle a few droplets over your eyes, and you'll be an observer."

"An observer?"

"Well, we can adjust where and when you end up observing. This will aid us in trying to figure out how you died, when you died, and who you are. These answers will give us a sense of how you ended up here."

"And you want to help me?"

"Whatever means that got you here disrupted a delicate balance for souls. I for one, don't want any more of you showing up in the Midway. Or if someone did do this, they may be a threat. This place is for us ghouls, not mortals or anyone else."

You look around the cavern, unsure about this whole bowl concept. The space is large, and the cavern descends deeper into darkness. At the edge of shadows, you see another sandy hill with a matte red pedestal and a golden bowl resting on it. "What about that bowl?" you ask.

"Again, we don't need to get into dimensions. Everything gets . . . sticky," Malpherities says.

"What if something from another dimension did this to me?"

"Let's start with the practical, shall we?"

"And there's no way you can put me back to that peaceful state?" you ask.

"No, unfortunately not. Your soul is here now. Death's Vortex awaits."

"But this bowl sends you to different places?"

"Yes," Malpherities says.

"So I could just dive into it and live a new life, forget all of this?"

"You could, but you're inexperienced and have no knowledge of controlling the Midway. You could end up in a torture chamber, or maybe on a planet filled with flesh-eating man-rabbits, nibbling away at you."

"Gross."

"Very. Let me control the bowl." Malpherities dips one claw into the black liquid, scooping up a small amount. He uses his other two claws to rub the fluid around his palm, gently poking it. It's unclear what he is doing. Maybe he is adjusting that space-time thing he talked about. Malpherities stops, then rises above you. "Open your eyes," he commands.

"What?" You take a step back.

"We're going to find out what happened to you. This will let you observe another's life. We'll shift between time and space to find out who you are."

"You're just going to make me observe someone's life? Will I feel anything?"

"You will. You'll experience everything the other soul does, as an observer. We'll throw you into a person's experience, letting us gather any sort of clue that will spark your memory, if there is any. A simple process of illumination."

"How many times are we going to do this?" you ask, looking up at the ghoul. A droplet of the black liquid dangles from the tip of his claw, soon to fall on you.

"Hopefully, not many. Human minds are frail." Malpherities taps his claw, forcing the droplet to separate. It falls directly into your eye, followed by a couple more drops in the same socket. You close your eyes, feeling a sting, now a burning sensation. You try to rub them, but it makes the pain worse.

"This hurts!" you shout.

"Embrace it. Let go of yourself," Malpherities says, his voice fading. "Accept the passing and become the witness of another."

Your eyes fly open. The cave, the shrine, and the ghoul begin to dissolve into white. Weightlessness returns to you. This time, it's different, for there is no cold or warmth. You're losing your thoughts as you enter a trance—an observer of another place and time.

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INTO THE MACROCOSM BY KONN LAVERY

GOAT WISDOM

GOAT WISDOM

IN HELL

Today was one of those days at school. A day you wish you could just stay in bed because the teachers breathe down your neck about everything you do, and the other normie-kids talk about the stupid music they like and the lame TV shows they watch. Not to mention you see your crush hitting it off with her new boyfriend—the quarterback of the football team. Honestly, a day like this is a typical day at school. I can't ever recall a good one. Oh well. Cheers to the best times of my life.

I fiddle with my pencil, carving the sharp lead into the wooden desktop, following the grain, and leaving behind a trail of graphite. It is a mundane, pointless activity that I like to do while I am in the classroom. Carving is better than listening to Mr. Patton ramble on about physics. Where am I even going to use this stuff? I don't want to be some sort of Einstein. Apparently, we're supposed to take all types of sciences in grade ten, so we can decide where we want to go. I know where I want to go: cloud nine.

"I want you all to turn to page twenty-seven," says Mr. Patton. "Read the assignment. You can do the first portion for the rest of the class and the second half when you're home."

The whole class—about thirty kids—pull out their pencils, turn to the page, and begin reading. Some of the keeners in the front are the quickest, probably because they are following along with Mr. Patton. Nerds. I just flip open to a random page to look like I am paying attention.

"Hey man," whispers the boy next to me.

I turn to look at the kid, Marcus, one of my good pals. For the first time today, I notice his Goat Lord T-shirt—a kick-ass death metal band we enjoy. They're raunchy and forward-thinking. My favourite track is them warning us of Y2K; it's going to shut down the whole world! How metal is that? Marcus and I actually have the same shirt and make sure we don't wear it on the same day. He can wear his on Wednesdays. I wear mine on Tuesdays. The last time we matched shirts, the jokes about us being a couple were aplenty. Now we avoid that risk of embarrassment. What girl is going to show interest if they think Marcus and I are dating?

"Yeah?" I ask.

"You want to get out of here when we're done class?" he asks.

"Damn right, I do," I say.

"Word. You got some green in your locker?" Marcus lowers his voice. "Sure do," I say with a grin. "We should get Felicia in on this too."

"You just want to try and stick your hands down her pants," Marcus says.

I tighten the grip on the pencil. Marcus's words irritate me because they are right. He's a good friend and is entitled to remind me when I am doing something stupid. I just don't want to hear it. I can't understand why she would go for someone like Don. I suppose being the quarterback makes you cool, despite being a complete dud. Don't even get me started on his goofy horse-face. "Well," I say, "if I run into Felicia, I will talk to her. If I don't, we can just head to the ravine."

"Sure, whatever you say," Marcus says. "As long as she is cool with my music."

"Totally, she's into metal."

"Yeah, the mainstream pussy-ass stuff," he mumbles while staring down at his book.

Confusion paints his face as he reads the text—probably similar to my expression throughout the class. Neither of us is interested in physics. Gotta love that forced education system. We're not going to use any of this shit when we graduate. For the rest of the period, we stare at our assignments, pretending to work. Marcus is trying while I'm doodling around the edges of the paper. Unfortunately, Mr. Patton watches everyone like a hawk, waiting to strike his prey. He loves catching students misbehaving and making them an example in front of the rest of the class. That's why we pretend to work. Later, we can pay off one of the smarter kids to help us with our assignment. Smart kids like drugs, too.

Eventually, the heavens hear our agony, and the bell rings. Finally. That class could not have ended soon enough.

GATHERING THE GOODS

Marcus and I pack up our things and hurry out of the classroom. We have our exit strategy on routine and are often the first ones to leave, despite being in the back of the room. Today we're slow, splitting when we exit the doorway. Our lockers are in opposite wings of the school. It's kind of a bummer, but we always know where to meet up when ditching school. Physics is dull, but the next period is social sciences. God no.

I hurry through the hall to get to my locker. My route while leaving physics class takes me right past Felicia's locker. She has math during this period. On most days, I can see her making out with Don. That buck-toothed ass always has his hands groping her body. The rage I feel comes from jealousy. Truthfully, all I want to do is fondle her up and down. Just like every other day, she's at her locker. Lucky for me, Don isn't here. It looks like Felicia can have some fun.

I slow my pace to a relaxed stride. Damn, her red hair is hot. I approach Felicia as she fumbles through her locker. I gather my cool attitude and nod at her, saying, "Hey, sup?"

"Hey!" Felicia jumps, smiling at me. There it is, that deadly smile of an angel, pushing her right cheek higher. An expression that freezes even the most willful of boys. The snake-bite piercings just add to the rock-and-roll charm. She has a way with her grin, and maybe her whole mouth—I'd love to find out. Either way, I sometimes wonder if she is friendly to everyone, or if she actually likes me. We've known each other since junior high. My feelings for her have just multiplied over the years. Probably something to do with teenage hormones.

"Marcus and I are going to the ravine to have some dope. You want in?" I ask.

"Fly!" Felicia shuts her locker and adjusts her backpack. "We bouncing now?"

"Yep, going to meet Marcus just out by the east wing."

"Think we have some time to grab Don?" Felicia asks.

"Uh, as if," I say. "Doesn't he have to go slap some boy-ass on the football field?" I smile to make sure she knows I'm joking.

Felicia giggles and brushes her red hair aside, exposing her pale neck. I want to kiss it. She says, "So how was Mr. Patton? Is he still running that dictatorship of a classroom?"

"You betcha," I say as the two of us walk. She's close. I can smell that gentle aroma, a mixture of freshly washed hair and her natural feminine scent. We brush shoulders. Oh man, I'd better not get a boner. "How about you?" I ask.

"Oh, you know, math is math. The teacher is clowning, but I don't mind it. I just can't wait to get the hell out of here."

"Two more years," I say.

Felicia and I reach my locker, where I snag the small jar that

GOAT WISDOM

contains the joint. I always try to reduce the smell by hiding it inside a glass container with a cork. The method isn't perfect, but as long as I keep it at the bottom of my backpack, no one knows. With the joint obtained, Felicia and I leave my locker and head for the east wing. We chat during the walk about the same stuff we usually do: movies, music, and video games. Time is a blur with this girl.

BLOW THIS POP STAND

Felicia and I exit the school, finding Marcus outside, leaning against the brick wall of the building. He perks up, saying, "There you are, fart-knocker."

The words are obviously directed towards me. Marcus is not too fond of Felicia. He sees how this girl has me wrapped around her finger—whether she knows it or not. Plus, Marcus is kind of a purist when it comes to music. If someone doesn't fit within his criteria of taste, they aren't cool enough to hang. He probably tolerates Felicia just because I like her a lot. Again, he's a good friend.

"Yeah, man," I say. "I was just grabbing my stuff."

"No duh," Marcus says, heading over and walking with us.

"I'm so glad you guys can get your hands on weed," Felicia says. "My dad would kill me if he knew I was into this."

"Mine too," I say. "I just don't give a fuck."

The three of us laugh while walking across the grass. Felicia's eyes stray to the football field. The team is training together in their deep blue uniforms. Their coach directs them to perform specific tasks that never look fun. But I know Felicia isn't thinking about that. She is trying to see if Don is there. That douche. I wonder if his dick resembles a horse like his face does. That'd explain why Felicia can stand his ugliness.

Eventually, the path takes us to the fence at the end of the school property, right beside the river valley, down a dirt path mostly worn down by students over the years. It isn't paved or covered in gravel, which makes roots stick out everywhere. The bumps and ditches are whack with roots sticking up every which way, muddy patches, and steep dips, making us pay close attention to where we step as we descend deep into the ravine. We find our familiar spot, just off the beaten path. It's difficult to see due to the thick foliage and dense trees, making it a perfect crib for getting high.

CLOUD NINE

CSecluded enough?" Felicia asks.

"Well, we don't want to get caught," Marcus says as he pulls out his portable mini boombox from his backpack.

"This is the usual spot Marcus and I go to start trippin'," I say while taking the glass container and a lighter out of my backpack.

Felicia plays with her hair. "Boy, I feel special." She smiles. That deadly smile. It catches me, and I can't look away. The moment lasts forever. Her green eyes. Those lips.

FUCK YOUR WHORE MOUTH!!!

The lyrics blare from the mini boom box, metal music shooting me back to reality. I look away from the girl. Damn it, Marcus! Oh well, at least he put his Goat Lord CD on. I hadn't even realized how long I'd been staring at Felicia. Strangely enough, she was gazing back at me. She still is. Wicked. I have goosebumps. She's into me, I think. Oh, how I would love to make some kind of move on her.

Felicia leaves her trance and looks at the boom box. "What is this?" she asks. She seems a bit annoyed.

"Goat Lord," Marcus says with pride, sitting down beside us.

I take the joint out of the glass container with a rush of confidence. With a flick of the lighter, I bring the joint to my lips and take a puff, embracing that sweet taste of green. The pungent marijuana cloud fills my lungs and the air around us. I pass the joint to Felicia. She inhales the green and exhales slowly, letting the smoke ease its way out of her mouth. "That's smooth," Felicia says, passing the joint to Marcus.

"The best," Marcus says while taking the joint.

We continue to pass the weed around, embracing the wonderfulness of the drug. Each puff we have increases the weed's effect on our systems. We laugh, joke, chat about school, complain how stupid our parents are, and so on until there is nothing left of the joint. At this point, all three of us are feeling pretty blitzed. Each of us gazes off into different directions, submerged in the blaring double kick drums, shredding guitars, and demonic growls of Goat Lord. Felicia begins to play with her hair while using a stick to draw in the dirt. Marcus is lying on his back, looking up at the leaves. His head rests on his hands. He has a funny smile on his face that doesn't go away. That's what makes weed so awesome—it always puts you in a good mood.

As for me, I'm trying not to stare at Felicia. Man, she is so hot.

My mind wanders from the girl and into bigger-picture stuff, like what is the purpose of school? Society forces the youth to work so hard at pointless subjects. They want us to learn things we don't care about. We barely even know ourselves, and we are trying to understand how particles move? What is *x*, anyway? It's ridiculous. The other part of my mind gets sucked back into the Felicia fantasy. She sits close to me. I'm not sure if it's the weed, or if she is leaning a little closer. It's a bit hard to tell while high.

"KISS HER," comes a whisper.

I look around, trying to see where the voice had come from. It had to be Marcus. The voice was raspy and male.

"DO IT NOW," the voice says.

The voice is coming from Marcus's direction, yet his lips aren't moving. Where is it coming from?

"KISS FELICIA," the voice says again. This time I can see that the sound is coming from the Goat Lord T-shirt Marcus wears. The animal's mouth moves as it speaks.

No way. This is the most intense trip I have ever had on weed. That goat is talking to me.

"KISS HER NOW, OR YOU WILL REGRET YOUR ACTIONS ALWAYS,"

the goat says. The illustration of the goat looks directly at me while talking. The mouth moves as if it were human.

I'm not a fool; I know that T-shirts can't talk, let alone give pretty good advice. Even though I know it is the drug talking, I like what the goat has to say. Just look at Felicia. Her red hair, green eyes, smooth legs, that ass . . . everything about her. The goat is a reflection of my deepest desires coming to the forefront, confronting me. All I want to do is take Felicia into my arms and start playing suck-face. It's all I ever wanted to do. From what I can tell, she is into me, too, despite being with horse-face.

I lean in slowly towards the girl and pause. A moment of clarity hits me: if I kiss Felicia, what would that mean? Felicia is seeing Don, and things seem to be going well with them. I'm already not in the football team's good books. How much more difficult could they make my life? At the core of my relationship with Felicia, I am her friend. I genuinely care about her. What if she isn't giving me hints, and I did kiss her? She would feel betrayed and creeped out, and Don would kick my ass. I should step off.

"DO IT NOW!" the commanding voice of the goat illustration booms. "DO IT NOW, BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE."

I freeze. This is a dilemma I never thought I would have to experience. On the one hand, the girl I want is right beside me—getting questionably close. On the other hand, I can't tell if this is all just the weed. After all, I'm getting advice from a talking goat drawing on a Tshirt.

"YOU MUST," the goat says.

"No!" I say.

My shout catches the attention of Felicia and Marcus. Hell, I startled myself too. The sudden sound throws us off, killing the good weedvibe. Felicia scoots away from me while Marcus stands up, brushing the dirt and grass from the back of his shirt.

"What time is it?" Felicia asks.

"Probably getting close to the end of the period," Marcus says, pressing stop on the boom box.

I stare at Marcus's T-shirt, my eyes fixated on the static goat illustration. The eyes are as lifeless as they were before the weed. Its mouth doesn't move, and there are no voices. Damn it.

REGRET

I get up and scratch my neck, feeling nervous about the fact that I shouted out a word to my friends who have no context to the situation. I know I must look like a total weirdo.

"Smoke much, man?" Marcus says with a grin.

"Word. Shit, I had some whack thoughts," I say. "I'm wondering if that thing was laced with something else."

"Worked wonders for me," Felicia says.

"I doubt it's laced," Marcus says. "I think you just tripped some serious balls."

Felicia giggles. I blush, wanting to tell my friends about the ridiculous experience I just had with the auditory hallucination. The rational part of me says no. It is a stupid story, and it might weird Felicia out. Maybe I can tell Marcus later. For now, this stays with me. With that, the three of us exit the ravine and return up the path to the school property. We walk across the grass until we near the football field, where the team is just finishing up their training routine.

One football player notices us, and he steps away from the group, waving. Right away, I know it is Don, the goofy horse-face of a douche. Felicia waves at the boy. He jogs— Sorry, he trots towards us as Felicia hurries to him, leaving me with Marcus.

"There goes your girl," Marcus says.

"Dope," I say with zero enthusiasm. There really isn't much else to say. Felicia has the most popular guy in school for her boyfriend. I am just her stoner buddy, watching in disgust as she and Don embrace one another. Her arms wrap around his neck. His hands firmly grip her hips. The two of them make out disgustingly with tongue and all. I just can't look at it anymore.

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"Man, she was such a flirt with you today, hey?" Marcus says.

I didn't need to hear that. I sigh, saying, "Let's get something to eat."

The goat had been right. In that doped-up state of existence, I'd heard words of wisdom from an unlikely source. Instead of listening to the strange goat's words, I froze. I wasn't bold. I took a coward's way out. With a clear head, I recall the scene in the ravine: Felicia's knees nearly touching mine; she played with her hair while leaning towards me, brushing it aside so I could see her pale, smooth neck. She was just too shy to make a move—just like me. The goat was the clarity, trying to guide me into something that could have been hella fly. The goat wisdom that I had not listened to. I should have never doubted the Goat Lord.



INTO THE MACROCOSM BY KONN LAVERY

02

ightness.

Fading.

Darkness. Cool air. The tingling of fine sand between your bare feet amplifies. The senses of the flesh—all are returning as you regain conscious thoughts. The stinging feeling in your eyes is now gone. Your head is groggy as you rub off the crusties from your eyelids. They're black. The liquid from the golden bowl. The path of the observer is gone. You're you once more, in the Midway.

"You're back," Malpherities says, hovering beside you.

"Yeah," you say, blinking a few times. You take a breath, realizing you're in control again. The passiveness of the observer has melted away. "It was like a dream," you say. "I could watch and feel, but I couldn't do anything."

"Yes, as is the role of the observer, watching the ego play out."

"What?"

Malpherities lowers to your level. "Do not overthink it. Tell me, Nameless One, what did you see? What did you *feel*?"

"I was some young kid, a teenager," you say. "A boy."

"Yes, you may have been a boy in your past life. Maybe not."

You pat your body. "What do you mean? I'm me."

"This body you have now isn't you, as you learned while flying through the colours before coming here. This body you have now is just an accumulation of what you're familiar with."

"I'm familiar with this body? It feels better than I have ever felt."

"Have you ever noticed how everyone sees themselves differently in the mirror? Or how your voice sounds different in your head compared to any form of recording?"

"Yeah," you say.

"Your mind and ego play an important role in how you perceive yourself. They manipulate and distort the real you. So this body you have now isn't accurate to the version you had while you were alive."

"Great. So I could be anyone?"

"Yes, which makes this a challenge. Judging by how disconnected you seem with this teenage boy, I'm going to guess you weren't him at the moment of death. Tell me, what else did you experience?" Malpherities asks.

You scratch your head, trying to recall all of the details. "It was maybe the mid-nineties. They talked about Y2K. I had a crush on a girl. It was all I could think about. Jealousy. Angst. Rebelliousness."

"Did these things feel familiar to you?" Malpherities asks.

"No, not really. I didn't die, either. Was I supposed to?"

"Not all experiences will be death-based. We want to find strong memories that will jolt your mind. The Midway lets me detect powerful emotions expressed by mortals while they're alive. Dying is a strong one, so it pierces through space-time, letting us ghouls sense it. Other emotions can do the same. Whatever you experienced while observing this teen's life was profound."

"I guess," you reply. "He just got high and was worried about getting a boner."

"Huh, well. . . Adolescents tend to make a big deal about nothing due to their immaturity."

"He was pretty focused on his queer jokes, too," you say.

"As teenage boys are. You said the nineties?"

"Yeah," you say.

"Interesting. Your comment there may have given us a clue." Malpherities strokes his jaw, looking at you like you're just a puzzle game.

"What do you mean?" you ask.

Malpherities soars up to the bowl again. "With that type of observation, you may come from a more progressive time."

The clue is small, but it gives you a slight feeling of hope. Malpherities is quick, and perhaps the two of you will be able to figure out what happened faster than you first anticipated. You walk up to the bowl and lean closer to it. "Are we going again?" you ask.

"Yes." Malpherities dips his claw into the black liquid, causing it to ripple. "Open your eye."

"Where are we going this time?" you ask, stepping back from the bowl.

Malpherities hovers above you. "Far from the previous time." He taps his claw, causing a droplet of black to fall onto your eyeball.

The cool liquid has a slight sting but it's nowhere near as intense as the first experience had been. You're building resilience. With a deep breath, you blink a couple of times. Each motion coats your eye with the liquid. The cave begins to fade once more, leaving you in whiteness.

Thoughts go. Lightness.