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RE:*LEAPT INTO RAIN*, A STORY AND DISQUISITION.

by

Lukas H. Norment

A Creative Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree in Honors
(Civil Engineering)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2024

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ABSTRACT

Re:*Leapt Into Rain* is a mystery novella written by a Civil Engineering major detailing a murder that occurs during a writer's retreat. Alongside the murder, a story about the desire for fame and recognition in a world where the common man is forgotten is told in the mind of a young writer as he investigates the crime. The preceding disquisition goes into the conception of the murder plot, creation of characters, and the process of writing the story. In addition, the author provides a brief overview of the evolution of mystery writing, pays respect to his inspirations, and reflects on the various methods used by authors to create fulfilling mysteries.

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DISQUISITION

PLANNING THE THESIS

As a civil engineering major, writing a mystery was something out of my comfort zone, but something I had always wanted to try. I always have ideas for stories inside my head. I get inspired easily and watching or reading something often makes me want to make my own pieces of art. For a previous Honors class, I had the opportunity to create a series of 3 micro stories that took place in my fictional universe, but otherwise I often lack the initiative to start writing.

The story I came up with was not a story thought up beforehand. When deciding to take on a creative thesis, I quickly came up with the idea of a murder mystery short story. This gave me a lot of literary conventions to build off, and I thought the process of making my own mystery puzzle would be fun. I decided to make my story in the style of classic detective stories like those of Agatha Christie, because while the style has had recent spikes in popularity due to movies like *Knives Out* and the online revitalization of *Columbo*'s popularity, I still feel as if the genre is underappreciated. I wanted to pay tribute to the authors I enjoyed.

Before even meeting with advisor Dr. Brophy, I had to lay out what I wanted to do myself. Immediately I wondered if I should put the story into my established universe that only existed within my head and in a single Honors assignment. The setting is paramount for a mystery story, and I thought that a fictional universe could come off as weird or take a reader out of the story. In this story the fictional setting would have no bearing on the plot, so I never explicitly mentioned the story taking place in another

universe. However, outside a few cultural references like Eric Satie, nothing in the story explicitly clarifies when or where the story takes place, so it often becomes hard to say if my story takes place on Earth or in my universe, so everyone wins.

I also had to decide the main theme of the story. I wanted to make the mystery solving engaging, but I wanted to present the reader with more than surface level storytelling. In my initial storyboard I created later, I literally wrote,

“I am not certain that I can create the world’s most interesting mystery on its own, I intend to endow my story with what I think is a strong theme, or at least parallel, that supports the action of the plot with something to think about afterwards, even if it’s only for a few minutes.”

Creating this theme was the most important part of story planning, as the plot and characters would revolve around that concept. The idea I created was that the main character should not be the one to solve the mystery. He would get ideas in his head that he could really solve it and prove himself important. By not solving the mystery, the main character would lose this chance at gaining fame.

The next few plot points I created were of great importance and affected the story immensely, but they all came to me naturally. I needed a reason for why the main character would assume the role of detective in the face of a real murder, so I made the main character a mystery writer who would confuse fiction and the gravity of reality. Why a writer at the scene of a murder? Well, he must have been invited as part of some group. Why were they invited? Some stereotypical suspicious old man invited them. And finally, I created the gimmick that each writer would be named as the genre they write.

When it comes to the minute details of stories, I can often rack my head on what to write, and I experienced those multiple times while writing my thesis, but as I

mentioned, I feel as if I can create basic story outlines with ease. Still, I had many influences I was already pulling from.

I never plagiarize others, but I do a little feel bad when I know I'm using an idea from another author. My main inspiration for this story would have to be the first book of the *Zaregoto* series by Nisio Isin. It was the author's first book, and acts as an interesting mystery while also setting the foundations for a longer series. It served as both conscious and subconscious inspiration in my story. In my opinion, I was inspired most by the *Zaregoto* protagonist failing to solve the murder. In my story I changed the execution but used the same concept. In *Zaregoto*, the main character solves the murder, correctly determines the culprits, and has them sent to jail. Only in the book's final chapter does a character explain to him a few months later that while he guessed the culprits correctly, the motives he gave were entirely incorrect, and there was a whole another layer of complexity he never realized.

In my story Mystery is proved wrong immediately, and thus gets no credit for solving the murder. The murder cases and the characters in each story are distinct, but I feel like I am wearing my inspiration in plain sight. There are other similarities, but not all of them were direct inspirations. The protagonist of *Zaregoto*, like Mystery, is unnamed. I merely did not want to think up names for every character and thought it was a cool gimmick.

STORYBOARDING

As a showcase of my writing ability, I submitted a page and a half of prose to Dr. Brophy before our first meeting. I wrote an early prototype of the scene where all the writers meet Yadana for the first time. The writers are all unnamed, and only Yadana is given the spotlight to talk. I always intended him to have an intense and explosive aura, but compared to this prototype, he ended up becoming more calmed in the full story, so when he does explode into anger it is more impactful.

The next step was for me to fully storyboard out the characters and story, scene by scene. I often write without a physical outline, but a mystery short story must be densely plotted to properly lay out clues for the readers while establishing the characters, so both me and Dr. Brophy agreed that a storyboard would be the best approach.

I knew there would be another person in the room solving the murder, but I needed to formalize their character. I decided that they needed to be the opposite of the reserved Mystery, so I created Horror as a stranger, more extroverted character. Eccentric detectives are a staple of the traditional style of mystery, and I wanted her to embody that archetype to a degree. I made her a horror author because I realized when reading Christie's *And Then There Were None* and *Watching Screams* that the lines between horror fiction and mystery fiction can be blurred. There's not much difference in trying to figure out who Ghostface is than there is trying to figure out who U. N. Owen is. So that became another way Horror parallels Mystery.

Mystery plays a faux detective to Horror's real detective. I quickly also realized that I wanted a third person in the room to help solve the mystery. If I had two characters taking the lead as detectives, I needed someone to play the Watson archetype who is

always asking questions, so I created Poetry. The two detectives are mostly the brainy type, so the third person would be the rough and strong type. I thought it would be ironic if he was a gruff and tough guy, but wrote something traditionally delicate like poetry, like Ernest Hemmingway. In my original storyboard, he was younger than he ended up being in the final draft.

I wanted enough potential culprits, so the main characters didn't have a 50-50 percent chance of guessing the culprit correctly. However, I knew these characters would not receive as much development, since half of the story either takes place in Mystery's head or in the lounge, with just the main three. Still, I wanted to give the side characters some notable traits. Unlike the main three, where I based their genre on their personalities, I built the side characters from their genre up. I decided that the victim of the crime should be True Crime and made her emblematic of the stereotypical true crime podcast host. As an aside, while true investigative reporting on macabre subjects is often important and can be entertaining, some recent true crime youtubers and podcast hosts have been slowly whittling away at the informativeness in favor of sensationalism, and I'm not a fan. So, I guess you could say that killing off someone who participates in that culture in my fictional crime story as some sort of commentary.

Romance is likely the most understated (or even forgettable) character in the story, and I knew this would be the case. I based her off the standard "romance for moms" type authors like Danielle Steel or Colleen Hoover. So, she became an older lady who sort of infantilizes the younger Mystery a bit in their interactions. I feared that her limited interactions with the plot would make readers not consider her a possible culprit,

but there are entertaining stories where the culprit has a small presence in the plot so I thought it would be fine.

I was planning to create a locked room mystery. Many murder mystery stories contain complex modi operandi, but locked rooms are the apex of this. They are presented as an impossible crime, only being solved by extensive lateral thinking. It's a type of crime that is not committed in the real world. In other words, it's a fantasy. That's what inspired me to make the culprit a fantasy author.

It's harder than you might think to create the murderer of your story. Death, in mystery fiction, is prevalent everywhere, and you become desensitized to it. People only commit murder when they are pushed to the brink. None of the writers knew each other beforehand, outside of Yadana and Poetry, and the murder happened on the night of the arrival. A traditional motive could not exist, so I had to create a murderer without a motive, so Fantasy became a lunatic who carries out a murder-suicide deathwish. It would only be until I started writing the full story that I would fully grasp what I wanted to do with Fantasy, but I knew I had to make him the direct foil to Mystery. If Mystery wanted fame from solving the murder, then I needed Fantasy to want fame from murder.

The initial storyboard I created in November is still accurate to how the scenes play out in the final version, albeit many of the scenes were expanded. The biggest changes occurred in the solving of the mystery. Despite being the focus of a mystery, I was drawing a near complete blank for how to create it. The point was to create a scenario where two explanations of events were possible, one that Mystery would come up with, and the correct answer that the real detective would deduce. This was difficult, and the modus operandi of the murder was not finalized until I was in the midst of

writing the particular scene. Something that always stayed consistent was the supposed murder weapon. In a mystery about authors, the obvious choice for a murder weapon would be a book. I was also inspired by the song aptly called *Did you know? Grimoires Double as Blunt Weapons* by Kishida Kyoudan & the Akeboshi Rockets.

Speaking of inspirations, even though I wanted to avoid making names for the characters, I ended up making names for most of the characters. Most of these names have direct references or inspirations I would like to explain here:

Karasu Island: Karasu is the Japanese word for Crow, and I used it because I was listening to the song *Karasu Wind* by O-Life Japan at the time.

Ted Yadana: Ted was randomly chosen, but Yadana was taken directly from the song titled *Ningente Yadana (Humans are Disgusting)* by the youtuber Dennoko-P, with Yadana being the word for disgusting. I thought it was a fitting name for someone who is outright antagonistic, and I think the song may have come on while I was writing.

Lorelei Publishing: The name Lorelei comes from the name Mystia Lorelei from *Touhou Project* and I used it because the name sounded suitably fancy for a fancy publisher. *Touhou* has used Agatha Christie characters as name inspirations multiple times, so I felt it was fitting to use some *Touhou* names as inspiration for a mystery.

Arthur Denpragon: He's a strong guy who's mastered the pen, so I did an extremely simple rearrangement of Arthur Pendragon, the full name of King Arthur.

Lloyd Twin: Fantasy was our bad guy, so I tried to come up with a baddish sounding name, although it has no direct inspiration. I may have chosen Twin to represent how he was a foil to Mystery, but that might be giving myself too much credit

AVOIDING POTENTIAL LOGIC ERRORS

I ended up creating names for most of the characters, but I was committed to keeping at least Mystery and Horror anonymous until the end. But as Dr. Brophy brought up to me in meetings, this felt unrealistic. Tone was everything. I wanted to have a mostly realistic tone to my story, but even as a premise, calling other human beings by labels rather than names feels wrong, and in a serious situation like a murder playing along with those fake names could take the reader out of the story. Dr. Brophy also pointed out another problem I was ignoring: if I was planning on having this story take place close to contemporary times, I needed to consider the existence of cell phones, and relatedly modern police would be delayed for a whole night if a murder was reported.

First, I confronted the problem of the names. I realized I would have to reveal one of the main three's names to ground the scene while also finding a reason to keep the other two under the fake names. I settled on the sensible Poetry revealing his name and wrote that Horror and Mystery would keep themselves anonymous to keep their real names out of the news. I know that police testimonies and new reports do not work like that in reality, but it was the best reasoning that I had.

For the phones, I decided that the world took place in a vague 90's-ish time period. Getting around phones is something every mystery author needs to consider. Nowadays, everyone has a smartphone, which means they always have a GPS, camera, and microphone at all times. Not to mention other technology, like CCTV systems, can certainly complicate writing contemporary mysteries, which is why I feel many choose the route of writing a period piece. I am aware that while mobile phones were rare in the early 90's many people did own pagers, but I forgo mentioning them in my story. While

certainly not contemporary, the 90's are still modern, and I would have to figure out a reason for the police to not be called on a landline, as they would keep my amateur detectives from investigating the scene. I lacked a reasonable explanation, but I decided to start writing and worry about it later.

THE RULES OF THE MYSTERY TRADE

Before describing the process of writing, I think I should discuss my thoughts on the “rules of mysteries,” and some of my inspirations for good mysteries.

There have been several mystery authors that have tried to create “rules” for writing mysteries. John Dickson Carr in his mystery novel *The Hollow Man* has characters discuss at length the possible methods of creating a locked room, and Seishi Yokomizo’s *The Honjin Murders* has the main character separate locked rooms into two categories, one being performed with a complex fantastical device and the other being “natural” or possible using the layout of the room, but I think Ronald Knox’s “10 Commandments of Detective Fiction” are seen as the most universal set of guidelines. These rules were created in 1929, and thus contain some outdated and offensive terms, (Rule 5 is “no Chinamen must figure in the story” which means that the culprit cannot be a mysterious evil foreigner but the language is of course outdated and offensive) but I still think that following, or breaking, these rules can create interesting stories. For example, following these rules, it should be somewhat obvious that Mystery is not the main detective, as all his thoughts are relayed viewer, and the true detective, Horror, is the one Mystery is viewing from a reader level perspective.

However, following a set of literary rules perfectly is boring. The murder mystery genre has existed for a long time, with many scholars attributing Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* as the first one, written nearly 90 years prior to Knox’s Laws in 1841. As I mentioned, many murder mysteries build off similar narrative foundations, and this could lead to readers getting used to the various tricks authors employ, which

leads to something of an arms race where the writers are becoming more unconventional to beat the ever more genre savvy readers.

Meta elements being used in mystery novels to fool these readers started appearing. Christie's third Hercule Poirot novel published in 1926, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* has characters comment about how similar the events of the story are to a mystery novel, and comment on how ridiculous that is. Written before Knox's Rules were put to paper, it takes advantage of what would become the 9th rule, stating the "Watson" or point of view character cannot conceal information. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the point of view character is revealed to be the murderer, and he omitted incriminating details from the reader. At the end of the book the character directly points out the times where the book alluded to this, and how readers would likely still not suspect him because he was the narrator.

The "golden age" of crime novels is usually said to be somewhere between the 1920s and 1950s, or in other words, when Agatha Christie was at her height of popularity. Of course, mystery novels are being consistently written, but they have shifted their focus from extravagant private detectives came grounded, relatable police detectives. Sensibilities change over time, and nothing stays popular forever. Speaking in the realm of movies, you can sense a distinct shift in culture from the 50s to the 60s to the 70s, especially in American cinema. Everything seemed to get grittier and more somber, often a representation of the average person's discontent with the state of the world during that time, from civil rights to the Vietnam War. In this serious time, detectives like Miss Marple and Sherlock Holmes were unlikely to thrive.

There were exceptions, most notably Columbo, whose peak in popularity occurred during the time period just described as being more serious. As a show *Columbo* defied many of the conventions of mystery novels, as each episode shows you the murder at the beginning (there's nothing to solve!), Columbo himself acts as the quintessential quirky detective, while also serving the police force. This showed that there was still a market for characters like this, but even so, there was never truly another "golden age" of mysteries. At least not in the west.

In the 1980s several Japanese writers created influential mystery novels that helped revitalize the genre in the country, although many of these books remain untranslated. This would launch the Shin-Honkaku mystery movement, with "Shin-Honkaku" directly translating to "new orthodox." This movement created a new generation of mystery writers in Japan, including Nisio Isin, writer of the *Zaregoto* series. If I had to define the movement in one word, it would be "weird." Even the titles were stranger, such as 2006's 900-page *Disco Detective Wednesdayyy* by Otarō Maijo, which's contents include time travel, quantum physics and much more. Many of the stories from this movement contain complex and decidedly *un*-orthodox solutions, many of which I cannot imagine readers being able to deduce the first time around. In some sense, the enjoyment no longer comes from trying to solve the mystery alongside the characters but witnessing the process of solving itself.

THE WRITING PROCESS

Soon after starting writing, I realized that the proposed 30-page length was wildly underestimated. While originally planned to be a short story, I discovered that under conventional categorization, it became a novella, with its word count being over 17,500 words. It is likely possible to fit my mystery into a fulfilling and compelling 30 pages, like many authors have done before me, but I lacked the technical skill to do so. So to compensate, I needed to extend the length of the story so I could touch upon everything I wanted to.

I wrote the story in chronological order, starting at the beginning and ending at the end, with occasional edits to previous chapters after reviewing them with Dr. Brophy. If I jumped around to different chapters I could contradict myself or create inconsistent characters, which can be fatal when writing mysteries. By writing it chronologically I felt as if I was approaching the situation at the same rate as the characters; when Mystery was nervous arriving on the island for the first time, I was nervous to present my writing to editors for the first time. This did lead to the first few chapters having noticeably clunkier writing when compared to the final chapters, but in editing I tried to make the style consistent.

This shows how much I believe that my writing skills improved drastically over the course of writing. When I was writing for myself, I never wrote anything as big as this, and did not have any editors giving me advice. Dr. Brophy gave me many tips in our biweekly meetings, telling me to generally maintain the pattern of “long sentence, short sentence,” with this tip in particular being one of the most helpful. However, a lot of

improvement on my part came simply from continuing to write and becoming more confident.

Character writing was interesting. Horror was a character I found easy to write, the same with Poetry, but I had to be writing Mystery constantly. I would have had an easier time writing if I wrote from a third person perspective, but since I knew I wanted to focus on the psychology of the main character, first person narration was necessary. As a tradeoff, all the prose needed to be from Mystery's perspective, and it took a few chapters to align myself with his personality and reactions. I find it fascinating that even when you create a character, you might not have a complete picture of how they would react in a scenario, and much like a real person, the more time you spend with those characters the greater the handle you have on their personalities.

With the characters who would not be present in the lounge to solve the murder, I did not have much time to utilize these characters before they were either killed or separated from the main group. Many rewrites were conducted on Chapter 3 to adjust how everyone interacts. It was hard to give signs that Fantasy would be the murderer without making it too obvious by making him speak too much, or too introspectively compared to the other side characters. I was working with a very small suspect list if you excluded Mystery, Horror, and Poetry, so I feared that any character having extra time in the limelight would make it too obvious. To help make the mystery more compelling I needed to make figuring out the motive as compelling as determining the culprit.

THINKING ON THE FLY

When I started writing, I left several elements of the plot undecided so I could deal with them later, and later eventually became the present. The first thing I had to decide was why the police would not immediately show up to the island. I needed them to stay away, because my characters were all amateur sleuths, and would not be allowed to investigate. There are methods mysteries use to get around this problem, with cutting the phone lines being most common. I thought it too derivative, and with how little time he had to carry out the murder, I thought that Fantasy learning where to cut the phone lines and doing so without being seen felt like I was pushing my believability.

I decided to take a basic approach. If I did not want the police to arrive, then they would not be called. I wrote Yadana's estate as large with many unused rooms, but what if this was a trick. I did not go into the specifics in the story, but I imagined that these rooms could have been used for illegal smuggling of some kind. Therefore, Yadana would want to keep the police away so he could try to cover it up. My explanation worked, as not only did it lend itself to an explanation for why the police would not show up, it added a layer of complexity to the potential motive. I had Mystery explain it in detail in the story, but having the possibility that the murder was not committed out of malice towards True Crime but rather to implicate Yadana changed how I handled the rest of the mystery.

Chapter 5 is the most expanded section of the entire story. While I always planned for Mystery to go back to his room to decide his next moves, I did not expect the scene to get that psychological, but I am quite pleased with how it came out. Books are the best medium to do deep dives into main characters' psyches, and many of my favorite pieces

of literature do this extensively, including many of those in the Shin-Honkaku movement, so I was inspired to write a monologue for Mystery.

One thing I wanted to manage in that chapter was making sure I did not make Mystery look like a self-insert. Of course, some of his character comes from me, like his age and how he wrote a mystery despite having a STEM background, but his personality is an exaggerated version of mine, at most. He comments on things as my proxy, like mentioning his writing process tried to compensate for a lackluster central mystery, but many of the more extreme depressive or nihilistic thoughts are exaggerations of ones I've had rather than ones I have currently.

CREATING A MYSTERY

It was foolish, starting a narrative revolving around a mystery I myself had not yet solved, but that just goes to show that my priorities were set on the interactions between the main three characters and Mystery's psyche. In the brainstorming stage, I drew the room layout of the lounge where the murder takes place, as diagrams of the murder scenes are quite common in mystery novels, which helped me plan the murder to an invaluable extent. The difference between locked room murders and other murders in mystery novels is that locked room murders are more about the method than anything. You can write a compelling mystery about somebody who gets stabbed in the back in an open room just as fine as writing about someone being stabbed in locked room, but the locked room is going to require a lot more explanation. Starting with a locked room as the foundation for my first mystery may have been a mistake. I am not dissatisfied with the finished product, but it still feels messy, with both the wrong and correct conclusions given by the characters not feeling as strong as they could be.

This messiness could be majorly detracting to a mystery if I wanted the mystery to be solvable by the reader. However, I never intended this to be the case. Consider it synergy between the reader and the characters. Mystery had no chance of figuring out the mystery, and neither did the reader. I purposely made the correct conclusion drawn by Horror unsatisfying and out of nowhere. And based on my initial reviews of the book by my committee, I seemed to succeed in the unsatisfying aspect. While using purposeful dissatisfaction is debatable in itself, I am happy with the way I executed it.

It's not that I don't enjoy stories where you try to solve the murder alongside the characters. In fact, that is one of my favorite parts of mysteries. Video games like the *Ace*

Attorney and *Danganronpa* series are based around the idea of literally playing as the detective and making deductions yourself after examining testimonies and evidence. When these games are at the peak of their writing and you figure out the culprit of a case, it creates some of the most satisfying moments in gaming. I did not want this story to feel satisfying. Some stories, including those found in *Ace Attorney* make a solution not feel satisfying by making the reader wish it *wasn't* true. Having a well-liked character be the culprit is a way to make a reader feel bad despite figuring out who the murderer is, but Fantasy is not a well-liked character. He's revealed to not even have a compelling motivation, but rather an immensely shallow and deprived reason of wanting to go out in a blaze of glory who created a locked room in what was basically a botched suicide jump. When compared to Mystery's previous statements of wanting fame and recognition, Fantasy's motive makes the theme go full circle.

THE TRUE DETECTIVE AND HER ENDING

Horror, a character whose importance to the narrative is immense, yet I have written little about so far. As stated, she fulfilled the role of the quirkier, traditional detective, and like many detectives of that type, very little time of the story is spent trying to fully understand her motives or thought processes. Despite being such an important character, I deliberately keep descriptions of her appearance brief, to heighten her mysteriousness compared to the other characters. Her distinctive red jacket is described more than her.

But she is not a detective, she is a Horror author, and I wanted to use that angle to showcase her more macabre traits. She has a jovial personality before the murder that becomes slightly off-putting when she seems unperturbed by the murder, acts mysterious, and guides Mystery as if she knew the conclusion the entire time. In the same vein, some of her deductions seem to be merely guesses on her part, rather than a detective's logical arguments, a rejection of one of Knox's Laws.

I did not want to end the story immediately after the mystery was solved. I needed to explore the aftermath of the events in Mystery's psyche, so I would write two more chapters. Neither chapter was in the storyboard, and I wrote them as I went. I will be honest; part of these chapters exists to leave the ending open and give a possible direction if I ever wanted to use the characters again. Mystery would need to have a reason to meet Horror again, so she had to have a mysterious exit from his life.

The final chapter is my most experimental and personal most polarizing chapter. Throughout the novella I made it clear that Mystery was looking back on the events in some kind of memoir, so it was natural that he would end the memoir commenting on his

present. The title was created at this point as well, with the “Re:” meaning Mystery is reflecting on the events that transpired because he wrote the story *Leapt Into Rain*. I also acted as if merely edited the story and Mystery is the real person who wrote it, although his name is redacted.

I felt that the newspaper segment was well done. That was the only part of the final two chapters which I planned beforehand. I knew that I needed a medium to show that Fantasy got the fame that he wanted, and a news report felt like the best way to show that. I am more divided on Mystery’s monologue. I wanted to create a mystical or fantastical element to Mystery’s search for Horror, but at the same time I did not want it to sound romantically motivated. I am a firm believer that just because the two main characters are opposite genders, it doesn’t mean they must get together. As it stands, I am not sure if I was able to communicate the true emotions I wanted to convey, as I felt somewhat weird writing the more tender parts of the chapter. Still, I cannot imagine any other way that I would write the ending.

CONCLUSION

I finished a story, and one much longer than I thought I was capable of at that. I do not know how many more stories I will be able to create in the future. I feel more confident in my writing than ever, but without deadlines and editors staring over my back for new drafts, I do not know if I will have the motivation to put everything in my head onto paper. Nevertheless, the story I *did* write is one that I am proud of. I feel like my lack of technical skill prevented me from conveying every idea that I wanted to express, and I know it does not stand up to the writing of students from more qualified disciplines, but I am happy with it. On the off chance that I do write more often, I may, as I mentioned, continue the story of some of the characters in this story, but they would likely appear as side characters somewhere else rather than a direct sequel. That is just how I like to do things.

As for *Re:Leapt into Rain*, I am very thankful towards my advisor and all committee members who agreed to coach and give me feedback on the whole thing, even if I left many committee members in the dark about the project for months at a time. It has been fun, and I will love to be able to show friends and family something I have made and am proud of.

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CREATIVE WORK

Re:*Leapt into Rain*

By []

Edited by Lukas Norment

I

There were 6 tags laid on the table. “Fantasy,” “Horror,” “Romance,” “Poetry,” “Crime,” and “Mystery.” On each plain white tag was a genre printed with equally plain text. For a moment confusion spread through our group, but we quickly realized the purpose of these tags. Grabbing the tag labeled Mystery, I attached it to my overcoat and boarded the yacht with the five others.

We were asked to stay quiet until we reached the island. Before even departing the dock, I could feel my fears being confirmed. The strange cards, traveling by yacht to an island, and now the ritual-esque silence, it all emanated an aura of self-importance from those running it. When my acceptance letter came inviting me to the writer’s getaway, I didn’t want to let my prejudices get the best of me just because the trip was hosted by a rich old man secluded on a private island. To me that setup reeked of eccentricity, not to mention it felt cliché to a mystery writer like me. After a bit of research, I found out that the host, Ted Yadana was legitimate and this could reap major benefits for the participants, so I supposed I had to bear with it for the time being. I could see similar thoughts running through the other members of the group as they leaned back in their seats and the boat started out from the harbor.

In the dimly lit cabin of the ship, I examined the others more thoroughly. It wasn’t as if the harbor was crowded on a day like that, but I did not want to falsely assume that the few people standing idly were waiting for the same boat. The group aboard the boat seemed diverse; three women and three men, varying in age. I could immediately tell I was the only college student present, much to my dismay.

The only other person who seemed around my age was the woman sitting across from me, likely because she was sporting a stylish red leather jacket. The jacket exuded youth that clashed with the attire of the others. She seemed groggy, trying to take a nap as the boat bobbed up and down, but when I glanced at her face, she flickered open her eyes to meet mine and waved hello. I was a tad startled, but I managed a meek wave back, which prompted a small smile from her. She then tried to return to the futile effort of napping as the boat continued to sway. I looked for her tag but couldn’t find it on her. She must have not put it on yet.

Outside remnants of a tropical storm would be passing through soon, and the sky was already a dark grey to reflect this, with looming clouds like concrete walls making the sky a depressing sight to behold.

I wish I had the opportunity to take a nap, but seasickness prevented me. The departure time was at 10:00am, but since I tried to save money by not buying a hotel room for the night, I had to wake up at 6:30 to drive down to the harbor. Combine that with my general nervousness towards the trip along with the gloomy atmosphere, and the result was me feeling completely spent before the day even began.

The other writers looked to be expressing the same opinion. A woman wearing a fancy white dress was also trying to rest, but her head kept sliding off the headrest and waking her up. Watching her repeat this sequence several times made me pity her. Through the dim cabin I could see that her nametag read *True Crime*. Well, that's what it said *now*. The "True" was written messily in the corner of the card above "Crime." She must have thought that crime was too broad of a genre and edited it to fit her specialty. I wondered if I should edit my tag to "detective mystery" but felt like the difference was trivial.

A writer with black, wide-framed glasses and equally black hair was fiddling with his watch. He also seemed younger, but his business attire and his glasses gave him a professional writer look. His hair was slicked back and gleamed slightly, even in the dark cabin. His tag read *Fantasy*. Out of all the writers present, he looked like he was taking this the most seriously. I could see determination in his eyes.

The next writer was an older man, who was not trying to sleep, but instead had his arms crossed in front of him. His age, combined with the suspenders connected to his dress pants gave me the immediate impression of "farmer," even though I knew his true profession was the same as the others as evidenced by his nametag that read *Poetry*.

The last writer I looked at was a woman with a darker complexion, who despite looking a bit tired, had a look of content anticipation on her face. Her tag read *Romance*. Like the woman in the red coat, she greeted me nonverbally when I looked at her with a slight bow.

I, like many of the others, had dressed myself in what I deemed business casual. I was wearing a white undershirt with a gray dress coat on top, the kind which you don't button. I had taken the coat from my dad's closet, and as a result, the fit was slightly off, being tight in the shoulders.

After a little more than 45 minutes, the boat pulled into a small dock attached to the island. From the window I saw that the surrounding coast was extremely rocky, with many spires of rock sticking above the water. The island's mansion was also nowhere in sight; instead a steep rock face could be seen at the end of the small beach. We had a climb ahead of us.

"Welcome to Karasu Island. Mr. Yadana appreciates your attendance despite the weather."

A stocky butler-type greeted us as we stepped onto the dock. He was older, probably in his 50s, and was wearing a dark green dress coat. I always imagined butlers wearing a standard black and white suit, so the unique color choice intrigued me, albeit maybe not in a good way. Our group exchanged a few quiet thank-yous before following the butler as he headed down the dock towards the beach. Romance, as I would come to call her, tried to start a conversation with the butler, but was quietly shut down. I noticed that he carried with him a hefty scent of cologne. Heavy winds pelted us as we walked onto the small beach, and I could tell from the wetness in the air that rain would be arriving very soon. I just hoped it would not fall before we reached the estate.

At the point where the rocky beach ended, stone stairs were carved out of the steep face. The construction of these stairs must have taken a considerable amount of time and effort, but their work was far from perfect. The steps were taller than normal and needed to be wider to accommodate larger feet. Some of the stairs were so thin that you had to turn your foot sideways just to fit the whole thing on. The butler seemed to have no qualms with the steps, as he climbed with relative ease. I had to feel pity for the man at that point, he likely had to climb up and down these stairs regularly.

As I began the climb, I questioned Poetry's abilities to climb the steps. He was the older man, and now that we were out of the boat's dank cabin he looked even older, with a receding hairline of white and labyrinth of wrinkles on his tanned face. I feared that he might collapse and hurt himself trying to keep up with the rest of us. In the end however, Poetry outpaced me on the

stairs, and when I was struggling to get my breath back at the top, it looked as if the older man had recovered just fine. Romance, the other older member of the group, did end up needing to take a few rests on the stairs. It felt awkward watching from the top as the bespectacled writer, Fantasy, helped her up.

I saw that the woman with the red coat was finally wearing her tag. It read *Horror*.

Once we all reached the top, the butler paused and presented the mansion with dramatic gravitas. It likely worked on Fantasy and Romance, as they had only just made it up the rock face, but for those of us who had made the climb a while ago, the surprise and awe had been ruined. Against the dark gray sky laid a dark mansion adorned in deep green paint. I now understood that the butler's overcoat was meant to match this shade of green. In front of the mansion was a marble fountain with water spouting out of a statue of a man holding a large hourglass. It looked as if the water was spouting from a crack in the side.

"Welcome to the Yadana estate," said the butler in a jovial tone.

He then led us through the large double doors and into the mansion. It had just started to rain.

II

The butler hastened us through the foyer, not even stopping to let us admire the mahogany wood furnishings throughout the room or the various paintings that looked ever so slightly familiar displayed on the walls. The mahogany was set against mint green paint, reminding me of mint chocolate chip ice cream. True Crime let out quiet sounds of amazement as she scanned the mansion interior. We marched up the wide, ornately detailed main staircase to the second floor and headed for the west wing. Aside from the butler, no other staff greeted us. The subtle scent of cleaning equipment and bleach in the air and the general quiet gave off the feeling of sterility, as if the mansion was some sort of hospital. The mansion felt like it was missing something. I felt a place with this level of grandeur emanating from each wall should have a constant stream of classical music playing through the halls; being left with only the sounds of footsteps and a distant patter of rain on the roof made the tour feel incredibly somber.

The butler came to a door at the far end of the hall, and quickly knocked twice before slowly opening it and politely gesturing us in.

“My apologies for the long walk. Mr. Yadana will see you now.”

Fantasy moved towards the entrance first. He stepped towards the door with a confident and dignified air, but upon stepping into the room, seemed to freeze in his tracks. Romance, following behind, reacted the same way. The two nearly ran into each other. I could not imagine what would make them respond in such a way as I started to walk towards the door. I am afraid to admit that I reacted the same way as the others as I first got a good look into the office.

In contrast to the magnitude of the estate seen so far, Yadana’s office was quaint. It still had an expensive wooden office desk and an impressive window adorning the side of the room, as a virtue of being situated at the end of the west wing, but even so the room was immensely claustrophobic. There could not have been much more than 4 feet from the doorframe to the edge of Yadana’s desk. At the back end of the office were large filing cabinets painted a utilitarian gray that clashed stylistically with everything I’d seen so far. To the right of the desk was a small bookshelf, filled with titles you’d recognize anywhere if I mentioned their names.

But the décor was not the reason behind our sudden stop. No, that was because of the man in the room. Sitting at his desk, not moving a bit to greet us, he was staring directly into our eyes as we came into view. No smile on his face, no frown either. He was clearly getting on in his years, but his bright blue eyes belied his age, bright enough to be clearly seen through his small glasses perched on his nose. He only scanned each of us for a moment, but his stare didn't feel like he was simply examining us, but rather sizing each of us up visually, like a boxer before a fight. That is why we froze.

After all of us filed into the room, the butler closed the door without needing a prompt from Yadana, sealing us off from the rest of the mansion. A second later, Yadana's face lit up into a smile and he burst up from his seat. He rushed around the table to shake our hands in the cramped space between desk and door.

"It looks like everyone made it, I'm glad. I thought at least one of you would get scared off and play hooky!" Yadana said, before launching into a creaky laugh aimed at no one in particular. I wondered for a moment if he really was trying to scare us off. There would be no logic behind doing that, but I would come to learn that it was hard to separate the theatrical and the serious with Yadana.

After giving strong handshakes to each of us, Yadana paced back behind his desk, placed his hands on top of it, as if to hold himself up. He gave off a completely different feeling now. If the feeling he gave off before was like a boxer sizing up his opponent, then he now felt like a grandfather greeting his kids on a holiday. As he was shaking our hands, he looked at True Crime's tag.

"Oh, would you look at that," Yadana said, "True crime is a much more fitting term for your work, I should apologize."

"No you don't need to apologize, its just a bit of ingenuity on my part," replied True Crime with a giggle, breaking the spell of silence we had been under since boarding the boat.

Yadana returned to standing behind his desk and addressed us once more.

"As you should already know, I am Ted Yadana, founder and executive editor of Lorelei Publishing. If you did research into my company before coming here, you should know we're the

publisher of 3 Nobel Prize winners in the last 2 decades. Did I mention that in the letter sent to you all?”

“It was included,” Yadana’s question was answered by Horror. I noticed that she was moving something small around in her right hand as she talked.

“Ah, good. Well then, as you know, I am hosting this two-week retreat here on Karasu Island. However, despite claiming myself as host, I will be taking my leave tomorrow morning for a week of business and will not be able to monitor your progress. However, as the focus of this retreat is for you to collaborate with your fellow writers and develop your skills, I hope my absence will not impede you. Of course, I am also leaving a small crew to take care of you while I am gone.

“This group is smaller than what I usually gather for a getaway, but this was intentional. Your group is comprised of writers published and unpublished. The youngest here is only 20 years old, isn’t that right Mystery?”

I was thrown off guard at being referred to directly, even if it was via my newfound title of “Mystery.” I suspected it when I first laid eyes on the group, but I hoped somewhere deep down that someone with a similar level of experience would be here too, but here I was outed as the runt of the litter in front of everyone. Even if it was for only a second, I became the focus of everyone’s attention and felt my stomach drop a little. As a result, I could only manage to stare blankly back at Yadana without affirming his statement. I thought I was able to see a tinge of irritation seep into his expression because of my silence.

“Not only are you diverse in your level of experience, but if you’ve paid attention, you should have noticed that each writer represents a different genre, based on what was submitted as part of the application. Diversity brings new ideas to the table, or so my HR department says.” He laughed to himself again.

“Well, I believe it too. If you bring a bunch of poets together on a retreat, they will only talk about poetry, but if you bring say, a horror writer and a poet together, well, I believe much more interesting discussions will arise. No offense to you and your poetry friends of course,” he gestured to Poetry.

“No harm done,” he responded. His voice held the characteristic sound of a smoker, or at least a former one. Unlike when I was singled out, he seemed ready to answer Yadana, as if he’d seen this script before.

“I do have a question though. The diversity element, I’m all ears for that, but these ‘nametags’ you’re having us wear... No way you’re telling us to refer to the others exclusively by their genre, for a whole 2 weeks of living together?”

“That is what I intend, although I recognize that you could reveal your names to each other in private.” I swore I saw Yadana’s forehead twitch again.

“To me, it feels a tad pretentious,” Romance, who looked like she could be anywhere from her late twenties to her early forties, spoke against Yadana next.

“It is not without reason.” Yadana sat back down into his chair, regressing into the pose he was in when we entered the room, elbows on the table with hands intertwined in front of his face. The light from his desk lamp reflected off his glasses, the resulting glare obscured his eyes from us.

“When you sent in your drafts to Lorelei and by proxy, to me, I made a conscious effort to avoid your names, your age, or your known history. At the time, nothing mattered other than the words on the page. This was done to eliminate all excess. Lorelei has a history of publishing known, often foreign-in-translation, authors of high caliber. The media has said we publish ‘literature’ rather than ‘entertainment.’ This aspect of Lorelei will never change. We do, however, understand the market. As much as it pains me to say, the divide between what the literary world wants and what the general consumer wants has only continued to grow. The era where the common man reads Melville is over. Our authors may win awards, but the truth is we make less money than similarly sized competitors. So, I conceded to the board to expand our publishing repertoire, but make no mistake, I have no plans to dilute our usual output with slop made for the lowest common denominator. That is the only reason someone writing about true crime, or romance, or even poetry these days would end up in front of me. To me, this is merely an experiment. An experiment to see if you are truly worth Lorelei’s time, as well as mine.”

A silence. It felt as if Yadana paused so we could reflect on our actions, our sin of questioning his absolute authority. Just as sudden as his anger was his switch back into the jolly Yadana who greeted us, looking shocked at the solemn atmosphere of the room.

“That being said, I did truly see something in each of your submissions. Some of them may have been rough, far too rough to be published, but I am certain that this workshop will prove to me that you truly are worthy of being published by us. And even if you aren’t, this will still look great on any résumé, will it not?”

The third laugh of the day sounded out as he rose from his desk once more.

“I fear I might have said too much; all of you look so nervous now. Even you Poetry! Luckily, I have a reception of sorts set up in the east lounge, so you can relax and get to know your fellow writers better. You will have plenty of time later, so there’s no need to start writing immediately after you have come all this way. Edward will guide you.”

The butler from earlier was quick to open the door. Considering Yadana had not needed to raise his voice to call Edward in, it was clear that he was able to hear the entire conversation through the door. The doors must not have been as thick as they looked. Before I could think on this topic further, Edward motioned us into the hall as we headed eastward towards the lounge.

III

I'd never been the life of the party. The few that I'd willingly attended were in the company of friends, and even then, we always ended up wallflowers, tucked in a corner making small talk. At the retreat, I had no friends, and even with only 5 other people I felt it hard to engage. Perhaps it was harder precisely with so few people present, any conversation would be heard by the entire room. Yadana practically ordered us to have fun, so I was surprised to see the other writers act so casually upon entering the lounge.

The east lounge seemed more fit to be called a library. Bookshelves dominated the room. The two against the wall were upwards of 3 meters tall and had cast iron sliding ladders installed to reach the highest shelves. The bookshelves and the accompanying ladders were pitch black, and with the amount of old-looking tomes upon their shelves, the room gave off a gothic feeling. Each individual shelf was thick enough to warrant ornate carvings into the side of them. The scaly pattern engraved into them looked as if a legion of serpents were slithering across them. The other two bookshelves were chest-height, set in parallel in the middle of the room. Their different design principles, looking much more ordinary, told me that they were installed at a later date, brought in once the original shelves reached their capacity.

I guessed the reason it wasn't called the library was either because there was an even larger library somewhere in the mansion, or it was merely because of the armchairs dispersed throughout the room. Because of the placement of the smaller bookshelves, it felt like some of the armchairs were placed at awkward angles to fit everything into the room while still maintaining ample space to walk around. Even so, if you could feel how comfortable those chairs were to sit in, you'd forgive the awkward arrangement.

In the corner of the room a small drink bar was installed where a table of hors d'oeuvres sat. Among the selection provided was a large amount of shrimp and cocktail sauce, cheese that looked ordinary to me but was likely extremely expensive, and two bottles of white wine. Everything was placed on plates that looked so delicate I was afraid to even touch them. Even the paper towel holder seemed expensive. A minifridge tucked underneath the bar counter was filled with nonalcoholic drinks, such as apple juice and cola. Being the only one underage, it somehow felt insulting to see something so clearly set up for me.

A self-playing piano was nearby the bar. It seemed newer than the ones I had seen playing in old western movies but worked the same way. If you got close to it, you could hear the mechanism inside moving as it played the notes. It made for an interesting sound. As I thought, once there was classical music playing, the mansion began to feel more alive. I was surprised that I recognized the piece, considering I rarely listened to classical music, but I knew it was *Gymnopedies*. I know many people considered it a depressing or downbeat song, but I personally thought it was calming.

Across from the bar were large sliding glass doors that allowed access to a small, cantilevered balcony and accompanying pool chairs. On a nice day the ocean view would probably make it a great place to relax, but today's weather only allowed a viewing of a sickly sea and a sickly sky. The balcony clearly did not have an overhang, as rainwater was washing over the deck.

A chandelier was hanging in the center of the room. At the time I thought it was the fanciest one I had ever seen, but this record would be broken in only a few hours. My memory of the lounge is warped due to what would happen there, but I'd imagine that on most days it was one of the most relaxing places you could be in the mansion.

Despite the intensity of Yadana, everyone seemed to lighten up once they got a hold of the shrimp hors d'oeuvres, myself included. It helped that the wine Yadana had supplied as if it were cheap punch was likely a luxury most of the authors couldn't afford, not that it meant much to me, being too young to drink. I filled a glass of apple juice from the fridge. Yadana was unpleasantly temperamental, but he said he would be leaving the next day, so we thought if we could just bear with him for a few more waking hours it would be smooth sailing.

The room soon found itself in two groups, Romance, True Crime, and Fantasy in one, with Horror and Poetry making up the other. This left me watching the groups from afar, half-sitting, half-leaning on one of the ladders. Despite the air in the lounge being pleasantly warm, the cast iron rungs sent chills up my spine, the cold easily penetrating my cheap dress pants. From this position I looked out into the room.

First, I looked at the Horror and Poetry duo. They had taken up a pair of seats and seemed to be deep in conversation. My better judgement told me that an old man sitting a young lady

down for conversation on a secluded island could be rife with ulterior motives, but if Poetry was being a creep, Horror was certainly not giving off any signs of it. Instead, both looked entirely serious, not an urgent seriousness but rather the seriousness one displays when devoting themselves to a compelling topic.

Horror and Poetry took turns speaking while the other nodded in response. When Horror was speaking, I noticed she motioned with her hands a lot, while Poetry consistently kept his hands clasped over his lap. The other group was being louder, so I could not make out what Poetry and Horror were talking about. I was no good at reading lips either, so I'd have to get closer if I wanted to eavesdrop.

Fantasy, True Crime, and Romance were talking a decent deal louder. Their volume, their choice to stand rather than sit down, and the alcohol they held lazily in their hands made them the "party group". As with the other group, the age division was not what I'd typically expect. Romance was older than True Crime but they were both women. Fantasy was the one who stood out. If you were to put Romance and Fantasy side by side, one might assume that they were aunt and nephew based on their ages, but their chemistry was akin to old drinking buddies constantly cracking jokes with each other. He even seemed to be talking to Romance more than True Crime, who was closer to his age. It seemed that both Horror and Fantasy had no qualms speaking on equal terms with their senior writers, something I wasn't able to overcome. Unlike the Horror-Poetry group, I could easily overhear this group and listened as Fantasy told a joke, the same type of unfunny joke your uncle spouts at a family reunion, and heard True Crime laugh as if it was the funniest thing she had ever heard.

As I wondered if Fantasy was the type of person that got along with the older generation better than his own, his group approached me.

"Hey man, are we scaring you away? You've been standing by yourself ever since we gave formal introductions. Well, as formal as introductions with pseudonyms can be," said Fantasy.

"No, I'm just not the most social person" I responded.

There seemed to be an unspoken agreement between the writers to continue using the names given to us. Yadana was likely still in his office and had no idea what we were talking about

in the lounge, but a superstition directed at revealing our real names before he left the island must have formed.

True Crime chimed in, “Oh but it’s all authors here, we’re all weirdos, so there’s no need to be shy.”

“Thank you, but that’s not really the issue.”

For some reason, True Crime’s comment about us “all being weirdos” did not sit well with me. It reminded me of how the supervisor of my part time job would always call the major retail company we worked for “a family.” It felt disingenuous. Her giggling too. True Crime herself did not seem like a weirdo. She looked good, but with blond hair tied into a ponytail, it was not anything I hadn’t seen before.

I stopped my thoughts before they could go any further. I had a habit of assuming the worst in people, which often lead to me distancing myself from them even if they did nothing wrong. I figuratively slapped myself to get myself focused back on the conversation.

Romance spoke next, “We were talking about the books we’ve written; would you like to join us?”

“Well, it’s a mystery, so telling you about it would spoil the point, wouldn’t it?” I said. Explaining my writing to others out loud always made me nervous.

“What about a synopsis? I understand you don’t want to spoil the surprise, but what’s the hook?” Fantasy moved his hand up to his chin in inquiry, exaggerated, like the mannerisms of a cartoon character.

“Um, it’s a pretty stock standard story, I’m not sure why Mr. Yadana liked it so much, but the basic premise is that there is a murder on a cruise. The body is found in the pool. It looked like an unfortunate but natural drowning, s-so nobody thought it was a murder, but there were remnants of poison in his system. That’s when it’s revealed that the cruise happened to have a famous detective on board, and he, uh, helps solve the case.”

“Hmm, sounds interesting. What’s the name of it?” Fantasy asked,

“*Leapt into Rain*. I don’t think it’s the best I could come up with. The title doesn’t have much to do with the story, I just thought it sounded nice.”

“I think that’s evocative, although it kind of sounds more like a spy movie than a murder mystery” said Fantasy, nodding his head with his hand still on his chin. I had no idea where he was coming from with that statement, but I tried to keep my confusion from reaching my face.

Romance gave her review next, “It’s nice. I don’t read many mystery books, but if there was a movie by that name, I think I would be interested in seeing what it was about.”

Then finally True Crime, “As a fellow writer of murders and explainer of how they were committed, I truly understand the challenge of making a title that doesn’t sound tacky, like *Murder of So-and-so* or *Death in the City*, but I do have a question for you.”

“What is it?”

“The title *Leapt into Rain* doesn’t sound like a spy movie to me, but it doesn’t sound like much of a mystery either. Did your editor have any criticism with it?” She sounded like she was guiding a newborn chick. It was annoying.

“I didn’t have one. It was never published.”

“Oh, is that what you call indie? Yadana is really digging deep to find new talent these days. Well, if you want any advice, you can talk to me sweetie~.”

“It’s not indie, only close friends and family have read it,” I responded. “Oh, and now Mr. Yadana too.”

“Did your family like it?” asked Romance.

“They said they loved it, but they’re my family. They love everything I do so that praise probably doesn’t mean much,” I said.

“That’s what family is for Mystery! And it seems like people agree, since Ted invited you here. He wouldn’t even do that for *his* family without reason,” Romance said. She clasped her hands together and leaned back, almost looking like she was performing a prayer, “I certainly wish my husband responded well to my stories. Whenever I ask him to read a romantic scene he looks

at me like I'm cheating on him with my characters. We've been married for 30 years and he reacts the same every time, it's really quite ridiculous. Maybe I should write a mystery next so he doesn't act so childish."

True Crime chimed in, "I once had a boyfriend read my book and it was disastrous. I was writing on Sidney Jackson, you know, the serial killer, and it scared him out of his mind. Jackson always slept with the men she killed, and I must have written too well, because I'm pretty sure my boyfriend thought I was going to do that too him. He didn't last too long after that."

"So, you did kill him?" Fantasy said whimsically, slicking back his already slick hair.

"Oh yes, disposal of the body was just the worst."

The trio burst into ugly laughter. I tried to match the energy with a smile. What a bad joke.

Afterwards there was a lull in the conversation. I sipped from the cup of apple juice in the reprieve. It had been moved into a different container in the fridge, but I could tell that the apple juice was the variety you could buy in any convenience store. I had at least hoped that it would be fancier. Soon enough, Fantasy asked another question.

"Hey, Mystery. Are you in college?"

"Yeah, I am."

"I thought so, you looked the part. This might not mean much coming from someone you just met, but you should take pride in making it here at your age. I mean, getting here unpublished. My publisher recommended me for this, how'd you get here?"

"Thanks a lot for your compliment. There was a poster on my school's wall advertising some type of writing competition. But I didn't think too much of it, writing is just a hobby for me, I'm going to school to study astronomy. I'm just as surprised as you are that I'm here."

Fantasy's mouth went agape, and his glasses slide down his nose, "'Just a hobby?' 'Didn't think too much of it?' Oof, that hurts. Your hobby got you face-to-face with Ted Yadana while you're still in college. That's pretty crazy. I for one *did* go to school for the humanities, and it's still been a struggle."

“Did the struggle work out in the end?” I asked. “I know that fantasy novels can get pretty popular.”

“Well, if you are wondering if you might know my name, I don’t know. Are you big into fantasy?”

“Uh, I probably only know the biggest names, sorry.”

Fantasy stroked his head of hair again. With how shiny it is, he must have put in an immense amount of product this morning. It was somewhat distracting.

“Well then you likely wouldn’t know me. I wish I could say I had movies made from my book but oh well.” Fantasy shrugged as he said this. “My publisher keeps interfering in my current series, so if they *did* make a movie, it’d probably make me more frustrated than anything.”

“Editorial micromanaging. That’s the absolute worst,” said True Crime. “It’s probably because I write nonfiction, but my editors never get in my way when I’m the one who has done all the research. How is it on your end Romance?”

“They were so forceful back in the day. Although I’ll tell you youngsters a secret. If you make it to my age, you can avoid interference by using your advanced age to your advantage. Just tell them ‘I think this book will be the last before I retire.’ If you can get past them treating you like a dead woman walking sometimes, they generally don’t mess with you anymore.”

Fantasy guffawed, “That’s great advice, but I’m hoping to get more artistic leeway a tad sooner than that. I heard that Lorelei Publishing is extremely hands off, so if Mr. Yadana thinks I’m worthy, I’d love to work with them. I’m nearing my 30s and I’m not sure if any of my books truly represent the worlds I want to create. They might hold fragments of my true vision, but they never quite reach it, no matter how many fantasy races or magic systems I create. Hopefully Lorelei will give me that opportunity, as long Mr. Yadana likes what I show him.”

For the first time since we arrived, I let out a chuckle, “Of course he will, you’ve made it all the way here, maybe I should get your autograph before your rise to fame!”

“Yeah, maybe we should all give autographs to each other to be safe.”

Despite putting forward my best effort to make a joke, Fantasy did not laugh. True Crime did let out a small chuckle. Suddenly I sensed someone behind me and turned around to see Horror standing there, still wearing the red coat. I hadn't even heard her approach.

"Signing autographs over here?" she asked.

"No, just joking about it," answered Fantasy, "pleased to make your acquaintance, Horror, we haven't talked yet."

"Nice to meet you," said Horror nonchalantly, "and the same to you two ladies."

True Crime looked over Horror's shoulder.

"Is Poetry coming over?" True Crime asked.

Now that Horror was standing with the group, Poetry had been left alone, although he was looking over at the group.

"He should, but I said I would be quick. We're kinda in the middle of an argument. Not a serious one though!" Romance and True Crime frowned in confusion.

"Um, that aside, while you're here, mind telling us about yourself? What do you write about?" politely asked Fantasy.

"Horror," said Horror. She paused for a second, saw that no one besides herself was smiling at her answer, and added, "Psychological Horror. Like you are your own scariest monster type stuff."

"Ooh, sounds cool," said True Crime with a giggle, "Maybe we should team up to write something, it sounds like we'd work well together."

"Well, you can certainly count me out of reading it," said a disgusted Romance, "I just can't stand blood and guts." She put her hand to her mouth in shock quickly after stating this. "No offense to any of you sweeties, it's just not my style."

"No offense taken; I have no illusions about what I write, it's fine if it scares ya off. That means I'm doing something right," laughed Horror. For a second there it sounded like her accent changed slightly.

“Oh yeah, I came over here to ask a question. Do any of you know who wrote the song that’s playing,” said Horror.

I raised a hand.

“Cool. Mystery just come over here for a second, okay?”

“Alright”

She practically dragged me over to where she had been sitting earlier to an expectant Poetry.

“His name is said like Satie,” said Horror.

“No, it’s pronounced *Satie*,” said Poetry.

“Mystery, we need a third opinion, is it Erik Satie? or is it pronounced Erik *Satie*.”

“I, uh, think its Satie.”

“Hell yeah!” pumped Horror.

“Now you’re both wrong,” said Poetry, “Mystery, do you even know who we’re talking about? Or did Horror just tell you to say it that way?”

“No, I know that Erik Satie is the composer of the song,” I said, stressing the pronunciation. Their conversation seemed a lot more important when out of earshot.

“See Poetry, this guy knows his stuff.”

“This song has been on loop for a while now, it’s getting on my nerves,” said Poetry, “How about this Horror, you supposedly can pronounce Satie’s name, but can you pronounce the title of the song?” A smug smile came across his tanned lips.

“Uh it’s, *Gymno*-no its *Gymno*-wait I almost have it.” She seemed to be struggling. To be honest, I wasn’t confident in my pronunciation of Satie either.

She soon gave in, saying, “It doesn’t matter if I pronounce it correctly or not, I’m simply being true to myself.”

“Oh boy, here we go again,” moaned Poetry, adjusting his suspenders. They had only known each other for a few hours but Poetry reacted as if this was the beginning of a topic he had heard a hundred times over.

“Mystery, when do you think an author is most free?”

“Huh?”

“When is an author most free?”

“Um, when they’re writing what makes them the happiest?”

“I guess, but it’s more nuanced than that. It happens right before they get published for the first time,” Horror replied. “When you’re writing what you want to write for the first time, that’s when you’re freest. The moment after you get published, you’re put into a box. Write an urban fantasy? Guess what, you’re the urban fantasy guy now. You might be able to prove people otherwise with a down to earth drama down the line, but even then, you must meet expectations derived from what you’ve already made,” exclaimed Horror.

“Yeah, you’ve already been over this, and I’ve already said that even if an author’s ‘freest’ the first time around, usually that first work sucks. You only get better with age and experience. My first works are just angst-ridden embarrassments to me,” said Poetry.

“Yeah, maybe for you, but it’s imperative to me to keep this feeling of freedom. As a tradeoff I’m part of a much smaller publishing company with little publicity, but my editors don’t try to change my work into something else. If I set out to create a world, no matter how strange, it’s not getting published until it satisfies me. If you get complacent and only work within the confines of what others have set out in front of you, you might as well quit writing.”

I don’t know what she was so mad at, but it seemed like some people in the past really ticked her off. Her intensity was off-putting, and she seemed to be content with just arguing with Poetry, so I backed off.

As the stormy sky darkened even further with time, the room quieted in turn, a mutual understanding between parties that the lively reception was coming to an end. Still, the lounge was unsupervised by any of Yadana’s employees, and no one seemed to know the plans for the

evening. Without knowing whether someone would collect them from the lounge, an invisible film separated it from the rest of the mansion.

Suddenly Horror loudly stretched in her seat before heading to the door and bluntly stated that she was going to look around. She took her luggage. She likely wasn't coming back anytime soon. The invisible film was torn as she exited the room. Not long after, Fantasy politely excused himself from his group to head into the hall as well.

"If I don't see you sooner, then I'll see you at dinner." With that Fantasy did a quick two fingered salute and left the room in an animated stride.

The rest of us took this as a signal to explore for ourselves and we all started to leave. I headed to the door too, unsure of where I would go but not wanting to remain in the lounge any longer. When I was about to step into the wider mansion, I overheard True Crime.

"Wait, I'll fill my glass before we leave."

I was sure Yadana would have many more extravagant meals for us in the days, or even hours to come, but I understood the desire to grab and go. Wanting at least one more shrimp before leaving, I turned and headed to the hors d'oeuvres where True Crime was pouring what would be her last glass of expensive wine. Much to my dismay, the shrimp were long gone.

IV

The next hours passed in a reverie. The first thing I did was visit my guest room to deposit my luggage. I would be holed up in my room to write later in the week, so I had no urge to investigate. The hallways of the estate were carpeted in black with swirly gold accents on each side of the hallway. In my opinion, it clashed with the mint green paint that covered most of the walls. I walked from room to room, wondering what purpose each held, or if they were used at all. One such room was the exercise room, with visible dust present on much of the equipment. Yadana didn't seem frail, but I could not imagine him on a treadmill or lifting weights. Occasionally I poked my head into a room where I'd see another writer looking about, such as Romance playing pool by herself in the game room, but I felt too exhausted to engage in conversation.

The further I strayed from Yadana's office and the lounge the less furnished the mansion seemed, as if Yadana himself rarely came here. Encountering workers in the halls was rare, and the ones that I did see made no effort to guide me back to the lounge, so I didn't think I was intruding on places I shouldn't. The workers only nodded as I went by. Their reverence towards me, although born from the desire to treat me as an esteemed guest, felt unnerving. I saw the most workers around the kitchen, which seemed to be the one active place in the mansion. Peeking through the windowed door, a battalion of white-clad chefs were dashing from station to station. Considering what would occur before dinner was served, the herculean effort made for a mere seven people's dinners would be in vain.

My mindless exploration was interrupted by various dinner bells ringing through the hall, unknowingly heralding the end of my time in reality and the beginning of my time spent in fiction, a flip in perspective from which I am not sure whether I have fully recovered. I rushed back to my room to get dressed up in the fanciest clothes I could scrounge up for the trip.

Despite the distance I had to walk, coming from the far reaches of the mansion to my room and back again, I was not the last one to arrive in the dining room. The tablecloth set for us was a deep red, with matching napkins stationed at each seat. An even fancier chandelier than the one in the lounge hung in here; the chain connecting it to the ceiling seemed far too thin to support its weight. On the walls were landscape paintings of foreign-looking lands, some showing the blazing desert, another displaying a house standing in a frozen tundra. Everyone had changed into

their dining attire. Fantasy's slicked hair appeared even shinier, likely the result of a recent shower. Poetry only put a black dress coat over his previous attire, and added a bowtie, but even that was enough to make him look far classier. The same could be said for Romance, who had changed into a black dress, and Horror who chose the same colors, but Horror's red leather coat could still be seen splayed over the end of her chair. The bright red of her coat next to the deep red of the table seemed like a challenge from Horror to Yadana, or at least to Yadana's interior designer. Yadana was of course at the head of the table and motioned for me to sit down.

"It's good to see you again Mystery, now we are only missing True Crime. Once she arrives, we'll be serving a main dish of swordfish. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Being referred to as Mystery had not affected me much so far, but being referred to that moniker while being dressed as fancy as I was and under this massive chandelier suddenly felt incredibly wrong.

I sat down next to Romance, across from an empty chair that would've seated True Crime if she ever arrived. Including Yadana, there would only be seven people eating in the dining room, but the table had the capacity to accommodate 12, if not more, people, so a significant portion of the table to my left remained unused. I couldn't help but think of the dusty unused gym in the far reaches of the mansion.

Small talk between Yadana and his writers continued, but not for long. Soon the question on everyone's mind was spoken.

"I wonder what's keeping True Crime. Has anyone seen her recently?" said Yadana.

"I haven't since we were in the lounge," replied Romance.

"Can you hear the dinner bells from everywhere in the estate? Would she be able to hear it from her room?" asked Fantasy.

"I was putting some stuff away in my room when the bells rang. There was a servant ringing right in the hallway, she wouldn't miss that," answered Horror. I noticed she was looking down at something in her hand obfuscated by the table's edge, her arm slightly moving all the while. I remembered her doing something similar when we first arrived in Yadana's office.

I was about to give my testimony of True Crime's location when the double doors to the room burst open. It was Edward, the butler who guided us into the house. His stoic, professional manner was gone. His wide eyes bulging out of his head looked more akin to eggs as he walked to Yadana's ear to relay an urgent message. While his posture suggested the message was for Yadana's ears only, the butler's squealing voice reached us all.

"True Crime has been involved in an *accident*."

A gasp left multiple mouths. Horror looked up from her lap. I don't remember exactly how I reacted. The next question was obvious and came from Yadana.

"What do you mean by accident?"

Edward solemnly shook his head.

"You don't mean..." said Yadana, rising from his chair.

Yadana's voice, mannerisms, and expression looked authentic but there was something I couldn't understand. The dining hall transformed into a cinema, my chair became cinema seating, the scene in front of me now projected on a wall, I only the onlooker. The gasps of the writers, Yadana's surprise, even Edward's sudden announcement. It all felt stale. Of course, it did, it was exactly the stale writing I included in *Leapt into Rain*, the same stale writing that miraculously brought me to Karasu island and to the stale scene unfolding in front of me.

Panic filled the room at an exponential rate. It was only natural; my reaction was the strange one. Questions flew rapidly and Edward had to avoid the stampeded by the emotional group.

"You mean to say that she's dead?" asked Yadana.

"Y-yes. Unfortunately. That is what I meant. I should have chosen my words better sir. I'm truly sorry."

"Was it really an accident?"

"That was my wording, but that remains to be confirmed."

"Remains to be confirmed?"

“I mean to say that considering the circumstances under which I found her body, I believe that it was likely deliberate.”

The room gasped again. Things had taken a turn in the worst possible direction.

“Where was she found?”

“The west lounge.”

“The police have been called?”

“I thought I should inform the master of the house beforehand.”

With this, Yadana pierced the wall formed by the group and made space between his servant and the writers. Doing this quieted the crowd. Despite initial impressions, Yadana was the head of the house, and it was a relief to see him take charge of the situation.

“Edward, don’t inform the police yet.”

The momentary relief was the drawing back of an emotional slingshot, sending the room into pandemonium as it was released. Curses flew in Yadana’s direction, Poetry nearly fell back into a nearby chair, and Romance started to sob. I just stood in a daze, barely believing any of my senses. Yadana waited out the initial yelling of his audience before explaining his reasoning. Yadana and Edward positioned themselves in front of the door, and Yadana cleared his throat.

“The police will be called as soon as possible, but that mustn’t be now. There are *things* that need to be put in order. I estimate that we can get sorted fast enough that they can arrive in the morning. Until then, assuming that this is a murder, everyone should stay in their rooms with doors locked and preferably barricaded. Anyone that is seen outside of their rooms tonight will be detained until morning and considered a suspect. This way everyone will be safe...”

Yadana seemed to realize something important, and his features sunk into his face.

“Edward, that means everyone needs to be in their rooms, even the staff.” He promptly backed away from his butler, “Edward, it’s not you, is it? Your loyalty couldn’t be bought, especially not from *them*.”

The situation slowly dawned on us. This was not about the death; it was about the attention the death would bring, and Yadana knew, or thought he knew, who would want to bring attention to him. Yadana perceived this entire situation as an attack on him. The death of the human called True Crime was forgotten, now the corpse was only a signal of war against him.

Poetry snapped out of his daze and rose to face Yadana once again.

“Ted, I don’t know who you got yourself involved with this time, but we aren’t involved. You’re an asshole, but even you usually know that your problems are yours alone. You can’t keep us captive here,” he said.

“I am not keeping you captive. I promise you all on my wife’s grave that the police, and your ride home, will be called as soon as I can. Arthur, these people are a lot scarier than you or me. I need time to make sure I minimize the damage this could cause to me and the people I know.”

A silent room. Poetry’s hand was wound into a fist. Yadana faced him dead on, his strong stance debased by his paranoid face. The stare down between these two old men was the only thing I could focus on. Only Romance’s sobbing was evidence of others in the room. Looking back, I know it would have been possible to force our way to the phone and call for help. It’s likely that Poetry could accomplish the task without our assistance. Maybe we did not quite understand the danger of the situation, or maybe we held some sort of sympathy for Yadana. Whichever it was, Poetry, or should I say Arthur, left Yadana with only a hard slap in the face.

I looked down at the cold swordfish sitting in front of me. It was loaded into a container that would not be out of place in a takeout restaurant. There were small portions of the many sides that would have been at dinner piled on top of the swordfish. A cold broth forming from each of the ingredients was collecting in the bottom of the container. With no microwave in sight, it felt as if I was eating cold leftovers from the previous night rather than a meal freshly cooked a few hours ago. Yadana and his staff scrambled to find something to package the dinners in, before sending us to our rooms, where we'd be safe from whomever the murderer was. As Yadana said, anyone who was seen outside of our rooms from that point on would be considered complicit in the murder and would be detained until the police arrived. Compared to the dark room and the sloshy food in front of me, I wondered how different detention could be.

As the chefs rushed to package their food, a few more details about True Crime's death came to us. Most of the writers were out of it, me included. We were in the process of resigning ourselves to hide in our rooms until morning while a murderer could be among us.

Edward was equally frazzled. He looked unkempt. He had taken off his green dress coat and had his undershirt unbuttoned at the very top. His hair was a mess from rubbing his hands through it in panic. Still, the fancy cologne from earlier wafted off him. At some point Horror moved to his side and simply asked how he found the body.

"I was looking for Ms. True Crime to summon her for dinner. I was checking each room when I got to the lounge. The door was locked. While most of the rooms are fitted with locks, Mr. Yadana rarely uses them, and I knock first before opening occupied rooms. When I knocked on the lounge door, nobody answered, which alarmed me."

Edward was unnerved but made no attempt to avert his eyes when recalling his story to Horror. He continued.

"Luckily there are two ways to enter the lounge. The second is through the door just down the hall. This door leads into a storage room for food and drinks that are given out in the lounge bar. We had a staff member who once stole from this room, Mr. Yadana has made sure that door is one of few that are usually locked."

“Why couldn’t you unlock the lounge door when you could the storage room door?” asked Fantasy. He was laying his head on the table in resignation, but Edward’s interrogation seemed to pique his interest. Edward shifted his stance to face him.

“As I said, it is rare for the lounge to ever be locked, so I did not have that key on me. The storage room, on the other hand is regularly locked, so I was prepared to open that one.” Edward said.

Horror raised an eyebrow, “Does that mean that there isn’t a master key?”

Edward sighed, “As Mr. Yadana implied, this estate is not limited to only hosting... *legal* affairs. As a result, it was decided that it was imperative to tighten security. This was one result.”

Looking deeply tired of the events of the night, Edward reached to his back and showed a cumbersome ring of hanging keys. By brief estimation there had to be at least 20 keys.

“These are the most commonly used keys, but they are unlabeled, and even if they were taken from me, a thief would not know where to use them. There are more keys, but they are stored away.”

Horror reached into her own pocket and took out a small black rectangle. She examined it briefly and flipped and folded it at a regular pace. This must have been what she had been messing with at dinner and when we arrived.

“So, unless the culprit managed to find the key, they had to lock the door from the inside?” said Fantasy.

“They would have to, yes,” answered Edward.

“Sorry in advance for bringing this up again, but speaking plainly, do you think this is a murder?” asked Horror. Edward winced.

“...Ms. True Crime was dead, there is no doubt in my mind about that now. If you could see the body, you would instantly come to the same conclusion, and with the doors being locked, I do not know what else it could be.”

“It could be suicide. It’s not hard to lock yourself inside a room,” chimed in Fantasy.

“It wasn’t a suicide,” replied Edward immediately.

“You’re a lot more certain about things now compared to when you rushed in here.”

“I have had time to reflect on what I saw in the lounge, and I have made up my mind,” said Edward.

“The scene must be pretty ghastly to rule out suicide so easily,” mused Horror.

“I know you must be curious, but please do as Mr. Yadana says and do not endanger yourselves by attempting to enter the lounge. Let us all remain in our rooms for the night.”

A locked room. It was a locked room mystery. Even after I stomached my cold meal, and prepared to sleep on the impossibly soft bed, I could not leave this line of thought alone. It was not as if the story I had written was coming true; the only tangible similarity was a murder. But even so, what was happening on Karasu Island felt deeply familiar. Murder occurring on an island, a small number of suspects, an impossible crime in a locked room, and the police are slow to arrive. It was obvious why this was so familiar, I had written *Leapt into Rain* with the explicit intent to avoid these cliches.

While I had respect for the works that popularized these tropes, I did not want to copy them. To copy was to be compared. I knew my writing and my puzzles could not stand against the greats who mastered these settings. Instead, I needed to create my own path, create a work with gimmicks people had never seen before, settings where they would never imagine a murder taking place, planned with methods engineers would blush at. If I consistently wowed the audience with spectacle, I thought I could distract critics from the weakness in my technique. People forgive an action movie for having a weak script when they get the action that was advertised.

Unable to expel True Crime’s murder from my mind, I surrendered myself to going over the facts. Based on the little information we had on the murder; Edward was the most likely culprit. He discovered the body alone, and as far as I knew, he was still the only person to see the body. He also has everything he needs to set up a locked room. It wouldn’t make a good book, but with all the keys he could have locked the door easily. As for motive, I wasn’t sure. It could be as Yadana theorized in his paranoia: some higher power with a connection to him has had one of us murdered to draw attention to this island. I was lacking far too much information to know who

would plan this or what on Yadana's island was so important and criminal that another organization had to sabotage him, but as long as the broad strokes of the theory were correct the details would not matter.

To commit this sabotage, the higher power bribed or otherwise influenced Edward to betray Yadana and carry out this task, knowing that there would be more people on the island than usual. With our outsider statuses, it would be harder for Yadana to do an internal cleanup of the incident and be forced to remove us from the island out of fear of upheaval, something that was only narrowly avoided a little over an hour prior. When the police did come, the idea would be that in their investigation of the murder, they discover whatever criminal element lies on the estate. My mind wandered once more to the dusty locked rooms in the depths of the mansion.

It was a complex plan, but if there was a criminal organization behind it, it may be achievable. This was, of course, based on my knowledge of how organized crime works, said knowledge coming almost entirely from fictional gangster movies. Either way, if that was the true nature of True Crime's murder, we had followed the script perfectly.

I moved onto other theories. With Edward still as the culprit, it's possible that this was either done of his own accord, or of Yadana's. If it was of his own accord, I had no clue to his motives, and if it was an order from Yadana--that was especially troublesome. That meant Yadana had full control over the situation and has been acting all this time. Not only that, but we essentially closed ourselves off from the others, even if our rooms *seemed* secure. I had no way of contacting the others, they could be dead, and I'd be none the wiser. Plus, if this was Yadana's doing, then there was a far smaller chance that the police would be called by morning.

It was a line of thought tinged by paranoia. At the time, both theories seemed to slide into place in my mind, everything seeming so obvious. If a third party was orchestrating the events to pin a crime on Yadana, then us writers are just pawns. If we left the island and kept our heads low, I doubted we'd be targeted. The Yadana-culprit theory, if correct, boded dire consequences, but there wasn't much I could do on my own, and there was no way to contact the others. So, in both cases the logical thing to do was to calm down, go to bed, and see what the morning brings.

Instead, I got antsy. I was a mystery writer. It didn't matter how much I thought myself an amateur. If I accepted all of this, I couldn't even call myself a mystery reader, much less a writer. While the theories I made were tight and logical, they only made sense relative to themselves, and they all came from the same place, with Edward being the culprit. I examined the plant's branches stemming from the seed of 'Edward = culprit' thoroughly, but that tree was just one in a garden of possibilities.

Even beyond the six writers, Yadana, and Edward, there were an unknown number of chefs on the island. To immediately assume Edward is the culprit due to it being the simplest solution was irresponsible. Edward's testimony was the only proof we had of the murder. Even the world's greatest detectives couldn't solve their mysteries with only one testimony. I hadn't even seen the body.

The body. The most important part of crime investigations, both real and fictional, and we hadn't seen it. Edward stated he was nigh certain it was a murder, but was it? He never even described the crime scene. He was quick to disregard suicide, but in mystery novels that is one of the most common solutions for locked rooms. True Crime could have, for reasons unknown, locked herself up in the lounge and killed herself. I was in my room playing bedside detective without even knowing the body's status; this wasn't right.

Without even realizing what I was doing, I moved to the door and swung it open. At the time I didn't know where I got the courage. My entire life up to this point was risk-free, easy as can be, the greatest challenges I had to regularly face were choosing what to eat in the morning and trying to turn in homework on time. Perhaps I wanted a challenge. Maybe I wanted this event, the death of a fellow human, to be my big moment; the day where I finally proved to myself that I was worth something. That's probably why I wanted to become a published writer in the first place.

I mentioned that my major was in astronomy. There are astronomers and astrophysicists that are household names. Those household names helped sprout my interest in the stars and how the universe works in the first place. But they are but a microscopic sample of those who have devoted their lives to study. It's selfish of me to say--extraordinarily selfish in fact--but I didn't want my name to disappear into obscurity. It felt like unless I found the Grand Unified Theory for

the universe, my name wouldn't be anything more than a citation in a bibliography of someone greater.

I liked writing. It was fun creating worlds and characters. It also had far more reaching appeal than research, and your name is splayed proudly across the cover, a declaration to readers that you were the one that made it, for better or worse. In research, I could make a celebrated paper discovering something in the world, but when it comes down to it, the important thing is what was "found" not the "finder." That's why research papers are supposed to be as mechanical as possible, they are not supposed to draw attention to the writer, but the findings. Literary authors become known. You aren't bound to write about things that only exist in reality, and even if you do, the way you convey it is the important part. Authors become known. Someone enjoys the world you create, and remembers it and thereby remembers you. Authors become known.

That's why I stepped into the hallway that night, even though I didn't yet know my reasons why. I wanted to solve a mystery. I didn't care about finding justice for True Crime. I didn't even know her name.

I was in socks walking on carpet, so I made little noise as I walked through unlit hallways. I decided to keep them unlit. If someone awake in their room noticed light suddenly coming under their door, they'd discover me. Following Yadana's orders, there were no staff in the halls. Unless I was peeped on through a door, nobody would see me. Even if I was caught, I was innocent. I doubted wallowing in paranoia in detention would be any worse than wallowing in paranoia in my room.

On the way to the lounge, I saw a phone on a small table. It was a cyan rotary phone, a harsh contrast from the dark greens and browns of the mansion hallways. Just to check, I lifted the receiver. Nothing. It seemed like the phones were out, likely to keep us from sneaking to the phones and calling the police, like I had just attempted to do. We were truly at the behest of Yadana.

My eyes had long adjusted to the darkness of my room, so navigating to the lounge was not difficult. The wooden stairs to the second floor creaked but went unnoticed. I soon found myself in front of the lounge door. It was only then I came to the realization. The door must be

locked. There was no way Edward wouldn't have locked up the room until the police arrived. It was the smart move, it stopped anyone, such as the killer or a self-absorbed amateur mystery writer from tampering with the body. Even so, I didn't sneak all the way there for nothing, so I twisted the doorknob. Locked solid. I moved down the hall to the storage entrance. It was the door Edward unlocked earlier. Another twist.

Click

It opened right up. I was aghast. Did Edward not re-lock the door in his haste to report it to Yadana? Did someone pick the lock? I cautiously stepped inside. The storage room was filled mostly with wine, but I only got a cursory look at the room before I shut the door to the hallway and enclosed myself in a complete darkness. With the scent of wine and dust quickly overtaking me, I flailed around in the dark before finding the door latch. I swung open the heavy door.

I entered the lounge. I was tackled. I smashed my head on the counter on the way down. It was time to solve a murder.

VI

I woke up fast, or so it felt. I did not know how long I was out; I only knew that I was probably concussed. In retrospect, playing detective with a concussion was a stupid idea, but I wasn't going to give up now.

The lounge was lit up now, hurting my already pulsing eyes. I had been moved to the center of the room, bookshelves flanking me. The more I lifted my head off the floor, the more my ears rang. It made an awfully convincing argument to stay down, but I had to see who did this to me. Turning myself over and onto my back, I looked up at my assailant, or rather, assailants. Two figures came into focus. A man and a woman, both wearing what looked to be pajamas. The man was wearing pin stripe pajamas that seemed out of an old movie, although he was lacking the nightcap and candlestick to complete the look. The woman was wearing much more traditional pajamas, navy sweatpants, and black shirt, with the shirt having a crudely drawn logo across the chest. I didn't recognize it, but with its striking design and the words 'Theory of Relativity' written under it, I guessed it was some band. What was notable was the bright red leather jacket being worn over the shirt. These two were Poetry and Horror.

"Good morning. We didn't mean to knock you out," said Horror, "Wasted time on our end too waiting for you to wake up."

My head still hurt too much to sound overly surprised.

"...Why are you two here?"

"We came to look at the body. As we were heading to our rooms, we quietly talked it over and agreed to meet up. Worst case scenario we wouldn't have been able to get in, but it seems no one locked up tonight. Suppose luck was on our side. Although we didn't get much done before we heard someone else coming in and had to tackle him."

I was starting to get back to my feet. Neither of them made any motions to stop me.

"What?"

"We figured that the killer would come back, so we tackled you," Poetry said. He looked like he was observing a pitiful animal.

"I *watched* you get tackled. Arthur did the honors," Horror clarified.

Arthur. That's what Yadana called him during their argument. It was strange, despite 'Arthur' fitting the rugged man's exterior, I had grown accustomed to 'Poetry' over the course of only a few hours. I suppose that was simply the power of first impressions.

Arthur continued, "We are going to hold you here under suspicion of being the killer, unless you can explain your way out of this quickly."

"I didn't do it." This pathetic retort was all I could muster. I knew I was slurring my speech.

"That's... um. Arthur, we should just let him rest for a bit," said Horror.

I wasn't resting though.

"How do I know that you two aren't the killers?"

Horror rolled her eyes. "Well, if we killed before, we probably could kill again, especially when dealing with an unconscious person. So, consider every breath you're taking as evidence that we aren't the culprits. If that isn't enough for you, then we can attest to each other's alibis for most of the day. Even after we left the lounge, we ended up talking again maybe 30 minutes after. While that's enough time for one of us to kill and leave, unless Arthur is a stone-cold killer, I doubt he'd be able to come talk to me about the agricultural economy after doing *that*," She pointed towards something, but Arthur's wide body blocked my view. "It isn't a watertight alibi by any means, but it's all I have."

She paused to make sure I was following along. I nodded. My mental fog was clearing up. I was becoming more conscious of my surroundings. True Crime's body must have been nearby, but I couldn't see it. I wondered if the body would have decomposed enough to emit an odor, but I couldn't smell anything.

"Now Mystery, to us, you have no alibi. We talked in the lounge and then didn't see each other again until dinner. You also didn't speak up when we were asking for True Crime's whereabouts. Not enough to seek you out for questioning but showing up back at the scene of the crime, that makes ya pretty suspicious," said Horror, an accent slipping into her speech once again.

“You were with True Crime the last time she was seen alive,” stated Arthur inelegantly.

“When was that?” I asked. I recalled spending minimal time with her.

Poetry spoke up, “When we left the lounge. You know, earlier? We left at nearly the same time. The only one left in the lounge would’ve been True Crime, but then you turned around and walked back into the room. I didn’t pay attention to what you were doing but nobody saw her again after that, so I’m thinking she never made it out of the lounge. Puts you in a strange position, doesn’t it?”

“No, I-I was checking to see if there was any more shrimp,” I said, my statement sounding phony, even to my own ears. Was I the last one to see True Crime alive? I barely acknowledged her existence at that moment.

“Was there more shrimp?” asked Horror with her hand on her chin.

“No...”

A moment passed. And then a few more. I was as suspicious as could be. Police would have detained me as a suspect for questioning. I fully expected another tackle to the floor, and by the time I woke up a second time I’d be loaded onto a police boat, and all the other writers would sigh in relief, glad to see me go. Instead, Arthur was standing by, looking at Horror, while Horror was staring at me as if diagnosing me. Despite Arthur’s seniority and physicality, he seemed content with letting Horror take control of the situation. Their talks must have instilled a great amount of respect for Horror in him. Finally, she rubbed both her eyes with her pointer finger and her thumb and spoke again.

“Alright Mystery, why *did* you come here?”

I took her mercy as an opportunity to tell her everything I had thought of so far. How suspicious Edward seemed, what I thought about the possibility of a third party pulling the strings, how much I thought Yadana knew, and why I felt I had to see the body. When I finished, Horror didn’t look impressed by my explanation.

“Well, it seems we’re on the same page. That’s basically what I came up with. I was sorta hoping that a mystery writer might figure out something crazy that others missed,” she sighed an exaggerated sigh. “Mystery, want to help investigate the crime scene?”

Arthur raised an eyebrow, “You’re letting him mess with the body?”

“He’s not going to mess with the body, and neither are we. If he tries anything it’ll be very obvious, and we can tackle him then. But I honestly don’t think he has anything to do with this,” Horror responded.

Even I questioned her sudden approval, “What makes you trust me?” She shrugged her shoulders, emphasizing her already emphasized coat.

“It’s a hunch.”

VII

With Horror's permission, it was decided that we'd investigate the crime scene together. We were an official unauthorized investigation team. Arthur seemed displeased, probably thinking I was not much more use to him awake than asleep. Even so, he still walked up to me and shook my hand.

"My real name is Arthur Denpragon. I apologize for knocking you out earlier, although you know I still don't fully trust you."

Arthur Denpragon. At the time, the name sounded familiar, albeit only slightly. I saw his poetry collections in stores, but as someone who wasn't, and still isn't that interested in poetry, I ignored them. By now, I know that he is a fairly noteworthy poet, although not a mainstream hit-as mainstream as poetry can get. His early career was notable for its violent tone, some calling it "aggro-art," condemning injustices in his life and the wider world in esoteric meter. However, his later poetry calmed, and thus became less critically interesting, focusing more on the intrinsic value of isolation from others and nature, likely spurred by his move from the inner city to a rural farming town. Of course, I did not know all this on Karasu Island. Back then, Arthur Denpragon was only one name of many I'd seen in bookstores.

I felt compelled to state my real name as well, saying, "It's fine if you don't trust me, I know I'm not the killer. My real name is I-"

"Hold on Mystery," Horror said as she stepped closer to us, "You don't have to reveal your name,"

"Why not?" Arthur and I said in unison. Arthur may have had his first name revealed by Yadana, but Horror did not stop him from revealing his full name.

"I won't stop you if you really want to state your name, but I'm sticking with Horror for now," she said as if it was obvious.

"A woman has died. Ted's farce is over," scowled Arthur.

Horror stated, "We're going to be called into questioning by the police, and the papers are going to report on this all over. If there are criminal organizations involved, we might be able to

get out without our names being published somewhere, as protection. If we speak willy nilly about our names, some tabloid mag is going to figure it out somehow. They always do. And I'd rather be marketed with my own merits rather than marketed as a survivor and solver a locked room murder." She said that last part so plainly it almost seemed like she already solved it.

"Mystery, you've never been published before, right?"

I shook my head.

"So that means nobody knows you?"

I shook my head. Again.

"Well, you're in the best position of all of us. Even if our names do get leaked, you can sidestep it by making up a pseudonym. Good for you!"

Horror patted me on the back. I had respect for personal boundaries, maybe too much respect, so her sudden camaraderie was extremely unpleasant. I wasn't sure about her reasoning. We would all have to state our names to the police, so what difference did it make here? Still, with the insanity of my surroundings, I'm not sure if I wanted to be referred to by my real name. I was so normal, I might just be crushed by the pressure of it all, but as Mystery, maybe I could handle it.

"Plus, we're calling him Mystery. Doesn't that fit? A mystery writer called Mystery, whose real name is a mystery, is helping solve a mystery. Isn't that perfect, Arthur?" Horror said. Arthur grimaced in response.

We finally decided to begin the investigation. First up was surveying the room. Most of the room seemed untouched. The bar counter hadn't been cleaned off, and empty plates were scattered atop it. The corner of the room remained in darkness, the lights nearby not being lit. The grand piano's glossy black finish was the only thing that kept it from being completely submerged in darkness. The books were in their places, all except for one. It was an exceptionally large and old tome, wearing a blue cover that had aged into a teal. That teal was contrasted with the dark crimson splotches of what could only be blood all over its front. If you ignored the blood, the book looked to be in extremely good shape considering its age. Through the nearly opaque

crusted blood, the title of the book was still legible. *Crime and Punishment*. The reveal of the title made me sicker than the sight of blood. Continuing the feeling of the night so far, it felt too on the nose to be real.

The body. Its why I ventured there that night. I had never seen a dead body before, let alone a murdered body. I imagined a common scene; a corpse on the floor, a single stab wound to their back, enough to kill, but done with efficiency. Sometimes the murder in a mystery novel is so efficient that the investigators believe its suicide, just for the detective to change all their minds with a crazy new theory. True Crime's murder was anything but efficient. She had been brutalized. She was lying face down on the carpet, near the bookshelf. Her left arm was outstretched with her right arm laying by her side. The back of her head had been beaten in, concave. The sight was so distressing that I couldn't look at it without getting nauseous; I had to view it in my peripheral. Her white top made the bloodstains on it incredibly obvious. She was lying in a puddle of blood that spread roughly from her head to her left hand. That hand was missing all fingers beside her thumb and was completely soaked in dry blood. The fingers were nowhere to be seen.

Arthur and Horror had already seen the body, so their reactions were less dramatic than mine. Still, I noticed that Arthur was standing perpendicular to the murder scene, alternating from looking at the scene and looking away in what I could only figure as disgust. Horror on the other hand, seemed acclimated to the sight, and squatted with her hands on her knees and looked at the body, albeit from afar.

"Initial impressions?" she asked.

"It's... it's pretty bad," I said. She laughed. It was a laugh you'd hear between two friends making small talk.

"Astute observation."

I hadn't smelt it before, but a pungent scent emitted from the body. It wasn't enough to make me gag, but it wasn't a smell I would forget. Still, we should have been grateful. The body was still fresh, the smell would have been much worse later.

I asked my first question, "Does anyone know the time of death?"

Horror shrugged, “I don’t know how to determine that. It was today.”

Arthur said, “Does that even matter?”

“We need to know when True Crime died if we want to pin it on the culprit,” I said.

“I think Arthur’s right, time of death doesn’t mean much without knowing any alibis. Also, a reminder, if we use lack of an alibi as a basis for suspicion, you’re the most suspicious one,” said Horror.

“Then what can we base it on? We can’t guess motives,” I said.

“That’s true. I know that you’re the de facto mystery expert, but I know a thing or two about them as well. Obviously, people don’t commit something as grave as murder without reason. Well, there’s exceptions. Serial killer maniacs are unusual even by murderer standards. But most of the time people have a reason.”

Horror began to pace around the room, pulling out the stack of cubes she fidgets with out of her coat pocket. Once she started moving it around in her hand she continued speaking.

“When I got the acceptance letter it mentioned other writers, but nothing specific about them. I imagine it said the same thing in yours?” We nodded and she continued.

“So, no one should have known who was coming to the island. In case you lost track of time, we haven’t even been here for a day. Less than 24 hours together and someone ends up dead. Unless True Crime really pissed someone off, I can’t imagine someone committing murder that quickly. Especially not a murder like this.”

“So, the murderer must have known she was coming,” I said.

“Or they knew her beforehand,” Arthur said.

“Yeah, both of those options seem more probable. Although if someone knew True Crime beforehand, I feel like we would notice. I could understand the culprit hiding their association with her, but True Crime wouldn’t have any reason to hide it.”

It suddenly hit me, “So maybe True Crime knew them, but didn’t know their face? But that would mean that the murderer knew her face.”

“It’s possible. Maybe she pissed off her pen pal,” said Horror. Her eyes were looking at the ceiling in thought. “But we don’t have the resources to figure out any hidden connections.”

“Well, if they knew she was coming, it could only be Yadana or one of his men.”

“In that case, yes, it seems like it could only be them.” She was still looking at the ceiling. “The only problem with this perspective is that Yadana seems very fearful of a police investigation. I could understand bringing us here to kill one person, it’s a lot less suspicious than her turning up dead and being the only one invited. But the explanation for why we can’t call the police is strange from this perspective. Either he’s really stupid, really smart, or really not responsible.” She failed to mention my theory that he wanted to keep us there so he could kill us all. Maybe that was too over the top, even for someone who writes horror.

“The final perspective is what we both came up with, Mystery. Edward, or someone else, is acting on behalf of a third party to pin something on Yadana. Despite the absurdity of it, there’s quite a lot of evidence for it. I don’t have any evidence to completely deny it, but Mystery, can you just look at True Crime’s body with that theory in mind?”

I did not understand what she meant, but I did as I was asked. I turned back to True Crime’s body and looked at it for a second time. Splayed out. Head beaten in. Fingers removed. I realized what Horror wanted me to see. A murder is a murder. It didn’t matter if someone was hit once in the back of the head and died or was completely dismembered, the police would show up either way. If a third party was using the murder to target Yadana by proxy, was there reason to go as far as beating in her head and cutting off her fingers? It was just as I thought when I first saw the body, it was inefficient. I did remember learning that certain criminal organizations cut off the fingers of their members when they did something improper, their disfigured hand as a signal of their betrayal to everyone who understood it. I decided to keep this to myself for the time being.

“The murder seems too personal to be done by a third party. They wouldn’t need to disfigure her,” I said.

“That’s what I think. Well, I don’t know how real-life mafia operate either, so take my thoughts with a grain of salt,” Horror said whimsically.

“Are we getting any closer to figuring out who did it, or are we going in circles?” Arthur was clearly doing his best to follow along, but it was clear that our fast-paced discussion of motives and culprits was beginning to overwhelm him. “We’ve said that its unlikely to be one of the writers unless they already knew True Crime, but we can’t figure anything out regarding that without interrogating people. Yadana’s behavior seems too weird for him to be behind it, and the murder seems too bloody for a hitman. So, is anyone a suspect?”

“You’re forgetting something,” Horror said, “I mentioned it early as ‘unusual even for murderers.’ A murder that is bloody yet has no motive behind it. Sounds like a serial killer to me, or at least someone who could become one,” Horror mumbled something to herself and then stretched her arms over her head, “but Arthur, you have discovered what I’ve wanted to say for a while now. I don’t think that there is any way, or rather any definitive way, to determine who committed the crime based on motive or alibis. We just don’t have enough info. What we do have is a body in front of us. We should switch from whodunnit mode to howdunnit mode.”

Arthur again: “How-done-it? She was hit in the back of the head with Dostoevsky.”

Now me: “I think we should investigate further. We need to decipher this locked room. If we can’t find an alternative way to lock the room and leave, that means that someone with a key locked the door after leaving. That would limit the suspects to Edward or someone acting on his behalf.”

Horror nodded satisfactorily. It was a roundabout way of going about it, but figuring out how the crime was committed could help us determine who committed it. Of course, Edward was still the most suspicious. Even if we did determine a way to lock the door without a key, that wasn’t to say that the crime *had* to be committed like that. Regardless, it was time to take a more extensive look at the body.

We all gathered closer to the body than ever. Horror knelt and struck a prayer pose. With how strangely unaffected, and almost upbeat she had been so far, I was surprised when the expression on her face looked genuine while praying. In the moment, everything was crazy, and I was concussed, so I didn’t analyze her behavior at the time, and Arthur must have followed suit. She was taking charge, so we didn’t question her methods, but to anyone removed from the

situation her actions would seem unusual. Looking back at it now, the act of murder must not have been alarming to her. That's why she was able to stay so calm. Her calmness in turn allowed us to be calm, without her leading us, I doubt I could have analyzed the body as much as I ended up doing. Arthur would not have come in the first place without her, and if I was alone with the body, I probably would have run out of the lounge without accomplishing anything. I still haven't figured out who Horror really was, but I have a baseless, ridiculous theory for why she was so poised in the face of death, but that's not important now.

Horror finished her prayer in silence and peered back at the body. I did the same. I noted a few more things about it. Firstly, is how nice True Crime's hair looked. I said her hair wasn't anything I hadn't seen before, but now against the red stains on the floor, the blonde hair glistened nicely. That is, besides the hair closest to her scalp, which was completely matted to her head in globs of thick blood.

On the topic of blood, I don't think there was as much as I expected. It could not be described as anything other than a bloody scene, but with her head destroyed like that, I still imagined more. Particularly violent books always loved describing the amount of brain matter left on the floor after a head injury to shock readers. It seems like they might have been overexaggerating.

Not only was there blood on the carpet around True Crime, but it was also staining the back of her clothes. It was roughly circular in shape and was located on the middle of her lower back, about waist level. The dress wasn't torn there, so there was no way to check whether that was a wound underneath without touching the body.

Our mere presence was enough to count as disturbing the crime scene, but the reception earlier had already left our fingerprints and hair all over the room. If nothing was moved, I thought we would be fine. Or at least I hoped.

A huge carpet took up most of the room, but it ended just before the edge of the bookcase to make way for the movable ladder. The ladder seemingly rolled on a cast iron track that was lipped a couple centimeters above the floor, with a sharp V-shaped groove for the wheels to roll

on. It happened that True Crime's fingerless hand was almost against this rut, with a small trail running along to the ladder's wheels.

"What new evidence are we supposed to be looking for?" grumbled Arthur.

"I don't know. How about..." Horror hopped around the body to the nearby bookcase ladder, "This little thing." She brought our attention to a small metal cord, in a voice as casual as ever. It sounded like she had been waiting for us to notice it. She grabbed a small handkerchief from her jacket and picked it up. So much for not interfering with the scene.

"A cord?"

"Seems to be one."

"Is it tied to anything?"

Horror tugged on the cord gently, maybe fearful that pulling it too hard could disturb the body in some way until she saw the end of it. I'm pretty sure that it still counted as disturbing the crime scene, even with the handkerchief.

"It's just tied to the ladder."

A cord left on the scene of a locked room mystery. Locked rooms were often solved in two ways, either it was proved that the room wasn't truly "locked," or the detective finds a mechanism that allowed the culprit to lock the door. The latter solution often is seen as a sort of literal *deus ex machina*; a mechanical system that was made specifically to lock a door is a cop out of a complex solution. What people desire from fiction didn't affect the facts of reality, however. A cord was just discovered in a locked room.

I moved to take a closer look. Horror moved aside, giving me plenty of room to examine it. The cord couldn't be more than a few millimeters wide, but it was likely strong, being made from metal. The loose end was sharp, probably enough to draw blood. It was probably cut from somewhere. As I scanned the cord for any clues, I leaned against the rungs of the iron ladder, the same one I had leaned against during reception. Although at the reception the ladder was resting in the middle of the bookshelf, it had now been moved all the way to the far end of the shelf.

I stood and turned towards the ladder. It was unpainted cast iron, which was very heavy. I didn't think myself an expert on libraries, but I thought most rolling ladders were wooden. It would be a lot easier to move that way. That's when I noticed a small panel on the wall tucked against the corner where the bookshelf ended. It was easily hidden from view if you were standing any further down the bookshelf. On this plain metal panel were 5 buttons, with the same symbols you would see on a VCR: skip back, rewind, pause, fast forward, and skip forward. Without thinking, I pressed the fast forward button. The ladder moved towards me by just a tiny amount accompanied by a mechanical whir.

"Woah! Don't just press stuff without warning," cried out Horror.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"Ask for the handkerchief first, geez," she pouted.

"What was that you just did? Move the ladder?" Arthur asked.

"It seems that these buttons control it," I responded. The 'fast forward' button was actually a 'move right' button. That meant the rewind button must move the ladder left relative to the panel. But if those moved the ladder, then what were the skip buttons for? I was a little scared to ask Horror if I could move it again when she just yelled at me, but I was beginning to get a sneaking suspicion of something.

"Horror can I move the ladder again. I promise I won't hit the body."

"As long as you avoid the body, I think that's fine. You already got your fingerprints on it." She hadn't even turned to me to speak. She seemed focused on the bloody spot on True Crime's back. It seemed that we were all carrying out our own investigations.

Being as careful as I could be, I moved the ladder left using the rewind button. There was a noticeable delay between pressing the button and the ladder starting to move. However, lifting my finger would halt movement instantly. Once I moved the ladder as close as I could before reaching the body, which wasn't a large distance, I pressed the skip forward button. The ladder whirred once again before it started moving to the rightmost edge where it had just been. I had only pressed the skip button; I did not hold it. That meant that the forward and rewind buttons

only moved the ladder when they were being held down, while the skip buttons sent the ladder to either edge of the bookshelf with a single push. I looked at the ladder and then looked across the bookshelf. I paused. I realized what the ladder was in line with.

I marched for the door. Arthur took my place at the ladder, picking up the cord with the handkerchief to get a look at it for himself. The door was what you'd expect. Large, old, and wooden. The wood looked expensive, but otherwise it was featureless. This was a locked room, but I had not even taken a good look at the lock responsible. For this door the handle and the lock were different components. The handle was a surprisingly standard chrome doorknob, and the lock mechanism was the kind you twisted a latch to lock.

I tested unlocking it. To use it you needed to twist the latch 180 degrees to either unlock or lock the door, although after a quarter circle rotation, or 90 degrees, a spring activates, and if you let go at that point it would automatically rotate to 180 degrees. That meant you could let go after rotating the latch at least 90 degrees and still unlock the door. This method created a lot of noise as the lock slammed shut, but as far as we knew nobody heard any noise coming from the lounge.

The lock bolt was old-fashioned, the type where a metal rectangle juts from the door when it's locked. This meant you couldn't do something as simple as open the door, lock it, step outside, and close the door. No, this meant that the door had to be closed before the door was locked. Returning to the twist latch, I saw that was not flush against the doorframe, and left a small gap of clearance.

I suddenly felt all the information come together. I needed to tell the group what I had found. Arthur had a discovery of his own to announce.

"It's a piano cord," he said.

"I thought a piano chord was something like C minor," said Horror with a smirk plastered on her face. When she was met with crickets, she said she was sorry. The apology for her ill-timed pun was the only one she gave out that night.

"I don't own a piano myself, but I do think this is a piano *wire*. I showed my close friends a lousy table I made a while back and now they all think I'm some type of craftsman. Anyway, a

friend asked me to help fix his grand piano once and I remember how much of a pain these things are to install. Considering there's a piano right over there, I'm guessing that's where it came from."

Arthur did not know it, but he gave me the last bit of info I needed to tighten up my theory.

"I-I think I know how they locked the room." I sputtered.

Horror's eyes widened.

"Hell yeah, give it a shot Mystery!" She really was great at pushing us forward.

"Well first, I think the murderer came back into the room after I left. It's hard to tell when exactly this happened, but the murderer obviously didn't alarm True Crime, as the culprit was able to get behind her with *Crime and Punishment* and kill her with it. She might have been wounded elsewhere to explain the blood on the back of her shirt, but we can't disturb the body to look. Here's where it gets complex. I believe that the culprit used the piano wire and ladder to lock the room after they left."

I paused for dramatic effect, and to gather myself. The other two were watching intently.

"The culprit must have cut a piano wire out of the piano and wrapped it around the ladder. Then using the panel, the ladder must have been moved all the way to the left side of the shelf."

I moved towards the door. The others followed.

"From here the culprit wrapped the wire around the twist lock. It's hard to tell without moving the ladder and wire this way, but I think it is long enough. When this lock is twisted clockwise the door locks. It's not an ideal angle, but I believe it's enough to lock the door, because you only have to twist the knob 90 degrees before it will rotate all the way around and lock. At some point the wire must have broken or untied, because we found it loose by the ladder."

"Okay, I see what you're getting at. The culprit tied the wire around the lock and moved the ladder, and that managed to lock the door, but to move the ladder you must stand by the panel. How would they escape the room?" said Arthur.

"But the ladder is slow, and you don't necessarily need to be standing by the panel to move it. If we assume that the mechanism was set with the ladder moved all the way to the door,

pressing the skip forward button would move the ladder to the opposite side. With the delay before the ladder starts moving, combined with its slow movement, you could probably dash into the hall and close the door before the wire goes taut.”

Arthur was aghast.

“That’s crazy. Could... Could that really be done?”

“I think it could, but the culprit would certainly be a fast thinker to make a mechanism like that. Or this had to be premeditated by someone who was familiar with the room layout already. But if one of us is that quick of a thinker, this doesn’t shrink the suspect pool at all.”

“So, we’re not any closer to knowing what bastard did this, huh. But still, that was amazing work Mystery. Horror, you may have been right, Mystery can solve this mystery.”

The stern older man eyeing me with suspicion had suddenly become my biggest fan. Horror, however, looked much less enthusiastic.

“That was a pretty good story, but where’d her fingers go?”

She caught me off guard.

“Her fingers were cut off when the ladder rolled over her hand, which was laying on the track.”

“I agree with that. The wheels are certainly heavy and sharp enough to do that. Honestly, I think this ladder is a safety hazard, but where did her fingers *go*?”

She had managed to throw off my theory with one question. I overlooked something so obvious even a child could have pointed it out.

“Mystery, I know you like writing mysteries, and your ‘mechanism’ sounds interesting for a book, but this is still reality. You can’t overlook things for the sake of a clean conclusion.”

“What if the culprit... maybe they cut off her fingers with the ladder, disposed of them, and then used the ladder to lock the room.”

“Nope. Look at the ladder track. If they rolled it back to the left after cutting off her fingers we would notice blood.”

I looked to the track. The ladder was to the right of the body. A small blood trail went from True Crime’s hand to the ladder’s wheels, with no track heading to the left. That meant that after cutting off True Crime’s fingers, the ladder never moved to the left of her body, meaning that after cutting off her fingers, the culprit could not lock the door with my method. I had fallen into a logic error I could not rebound from.

“Three more points. First: I doubt even the quickest runners could not wait for the ladder to sever her fingers, take them, and still escape out the door in time. Second: If someone wanted to create the mechanism you imagined, wouldn’t the rolling ladder on the other side of the room be more ideal?”

She pointed to the bookshelf on the other wall of the room. The attached ladder looked like it operated on with the same controls, but if you carried out my method of attaching the wire to the lock notch, it was a much better angle with much less chance of the wire sliding off or not rotating enough. All you would have to do is make sure it was taut around the bottom of the notch rather than the topside.

“Third: you failed to cons-“

“Alright I get it!” I shouted. I hated raising my voice. “I get it. I messed up. You can stop now.”

“I thought I was just giving some constructive criticism” pouted Horror.

After she had demolished my theory, Arthur recrossed his arms and resumed his accusatory look towards me.

“So, was that just a bluff or what?” he said.

“Calm down Arthur. Don’t be so mean to him, he just missed a few things,” said Horror.

I completely clammed up. The whole night I was experiencing a burst of courage that was giving me the ability to do things I never thought myself capable of. Heading to the lounge, easily interacting with Horror and Arthur, investigating on my own and performing a dénouement; I

couldn't do that. But maybe I thought Mystery could. A side of myself who, according to Yadana, was worthy of being here among all these other authors. A side of me that could potentially rise to fame and have people like me. I put all my courage into that new part of me. And then Horror shot me down. Mystery wasn't some new side of me, I'll always be me, and I'll always be someone in the background.

"We shouldn't shame Mystery for trying. That's the purpose of thinking in teams. They call it group think, I think. If everyone agrees, I think I'll give my theory next," said Horror as if she was at a team meeting.

She did not wait for us to agree.

"I want to draw the room's attention to something very crucial to this investigation. The literary classic known as *Crime and Punishment*. I might lose some credit as a writer for saying this, but I've never read it, but I heard it involves a murder?"

"He kills a woman, yes," answers Arthur. I hadn't read it either.

"Then the culprit seems to be using poetic irony, you may have competition Arthur."

"That's not what poetic irony means."

"Nevertheless, this seems a little trite to me. Also, I've never done it, but could you really break someone's skull with a book and only make it a little bloody. The thing doesn't even look bent!"

It's true, despite being smattered with blood, the book looked to be in good condition for its apparent age.

"Are you saying this isn't the murder weapon?" asked Arthur.

"Probably not."

"Then what was she killed with?"

"Dunno. It's probably in the ocean now."

She pointed towards the glass door separating the lounge from the small balcony. It was unlit, but you could still see rain pummeling the balcony and deck chairs. The storm was still going strong.

“We’ve gone on about this being a locked room, but isn’t there an opening right there? The culprit could have thrown whatever they didn’t like in this room out the window and over the brink. The murder weapon, True Crime’s fingers, things we don’t even know about, all could be sitting at the bottom the sea right now.”

I hadn’t considered the balcony. While we are too far up over a far too rocky coast for someone to escape over the balcony, I had not considered the disposal of evidence. Yet another blind spot.

“So, I’ll ask again, is there anything in here that could serve as new evidence? Well, more specifically is there any *lack* of something?”

I took a half-hearted look around the room. There was a slight difference.

“The napkin holder...” I muttered.

The napkin holder that was set up beside the hors d'oeuvres was gone. I remembered seeing it when I went back for shrimp with True Crime. If I remembered correctly, it looked like it was made from some kind of metal, although I never touched it longer than to grab a napkin.

“Ah, so that’s now our prime suspect in the murder weapon department. Anyway, I believe the napkin holder, *or something else*, was used to murder True Crime, and only afterwards was blood wiped onto *Crime and Punishment* as a theatrical measure.”

She started her routine of pacing and rotating the metallic cubes in her hand once again. Despite wearing a leather jacket over a band shirt and pajama pants, her words and movements conveyed a sense of professionalism.

“I said it was ‘theatrical’ to frame a book called *Crime and Punishment* as the murder weapon used on someone called True Crime and, if the culprit was theatrical once, they likely wouldn’t miss a chance to be theatrical again. So, True Crimes missing fingers. Where are they? They could have been thrown into the ocean, but what would that mean?”

With every rhetorical question she asked, she would exaggeratingly shrug her shoulders and arms in confusion. Her speaking was also getting a lot faster, and her accent was leaking into her speech more. If I subconsciously wanted to solve the murder for my own amusement then she was forthright about it.

“Wait, before I go any further, I want to say something. Her head was bashed in, yes, but I think that her fingers were cut off first. There’s too much blood. I’m no nurse, but I have done some research for my books. When your heart stops, ya blood stops pumping. No pumping equals no blood spurting. If that much blood came out of her hand, then she was alive at the time, but probably unconscious. On the other hand, there ain’t enough blood around her head injury. Your head bleeds a lot! Especially when it’s cracked open! So, here’s my explanation.

“The culprit knocked her out, cut off her fingers with the ladder, likely grabbed the fingers or put them somewhere separate, like for example, a plate from the bar. Then they moved True Crime’s arm and rested it on ‘er back. This explains the blood circle. They then moved her body, making sure that the blood from her hand only bled into her clothes. The killer is about to do something very bloody, but they want to minimize it, where should they commit the murder? That’s right, on the balcony being pelted with rain. A natural shower to wash all the blood and brain matter away. Her clothes don’t appear wet, so they either only stuck her head onto the balcony, or her clothes dry fast. They probably smashed her head out there, waited a bit for the blood to stop, and moved her back into the lounge. Why would they bring her back into the lounge? Well, they likely had something else planned.”

She let herself inhale.

“Theatrical murder, finger removing, piano wire left behind. Have any of you watched the movie *House*?”

We both stared at her quizzically.

“I should have expected that, it’s not an easy movie to find. Anyway, it’s a horror movie, and that’s sorta my thing. In it, a sentient piano eats a poor girl’s fingers when she tries to play it. In here, we have a fingerless woman with a part of a piano nearby. I doubt our murderer has watched *House*, but I think I get what they’re trying to say, pianos and fingers go hand in hand.”

As I wondered if that was a pun or not, she dashed from one side of the room to the other. She grabbed hold of the piano and lifted its lid. The smile on her face faded instantly.

“Or~~, there’s nothing.”

Arthur and I walked over to the piano to look at it ourselves. From what little I knew of pianos, it looked normal, a bunch of piano wires were laid over a wooden surface. It didn’t look like any were missing.

Just as it looked like Horror was going to start apologizing for leading us on, Arthur noticed something near the piano. It was a cardboard box, something that felt out of place in this expensive mansion, labeled crudely in marker as ‘Piano Maintenance.’ Arthur also pulled out a roll of wire.

“Here’s where the guy got the piano wire, they have a ton of rolls of it,” he said.

So, this meant that the killer did not take the wire from the piano, but rather the piano supplies. Maybe the piano wasn’t involved after all. Well, that’s what I started to think.

“Arthur, did you say you know how to fix pianos?” Horror asked.

“I know how but it’s not my specialty,” Arthur grunted.

“Do you know If we can get a better look inside this thing?”

“What happened to not disturbing the crime scene?” he grunted.

“I think that ship has sailed,” Horror cast a sidelong glance at me, “If we’re going to get yelled at anyway, might as well open the piano. You can use the handkerchief if it makes you feel better.” She held out her handkerchief towards Arthur with an earnest smile on her face. He lightly swatted it aside.

Arthur sighed. He walked to the front of the piano, the side where the keys were. In a smooth, easy motion, he lifted the fallboard, the part that covers the keys. With two small clunks, the fallboard came free and a small gap into the depths of the piano was uncovered. We didn’t have to look far to see what we wanted to see.

Placed just behind where the fallboard came off were four fingers. What little blood there was had sunken into the wood of the piano. Accompanying the bloodstains into the piano was barely legible writing. ‘Remember Me.’

“It looks like he wrote this in blood. Probably with the fingers as pens. Gnarly,” Horror said this out loud, but unlike before I think it was only directed at herself. Her mood had changed.

“I think we’re done here,” she said.

“Huh? But we haven’t even figured out who did it? We didn’t even make the suspect pool smaller.”

Much to my own surprise, this was me talking.

“But we have. This isn’t on Yadana’s orders, and it’s not done by a third party. This is done by a psycho with delusions of grandeur. So, it’s likely one of the writers invited.”

“It couldn’t be a third party?” I asked.

“No reason to be this theatrical. Especially if it’s just to get the police here. ‘Remember this’? What a banal reason to take a life,” said Horror. She wasn’t dancing around, fast-talking her way through her explanations now. Her words held weight.

I spoke up.

“Why does it have to be one of the writers? Maybe it was one of the staff members acting of their own volition.”

“I can explain that in a second. Arthur, ask me how the culprit made this into a locked room,” said Horror. Arthur looked stunned.

“H-how did they make it a locked room?”

She pointed her thumb behind her, in the direction of the window.

“He leapt into the rain.”

Her choice of words startled me. Even Arthur seemed alarmed.

“If that was the case, we’d know who the killer was. They’d be dead after impaling themselves on rocks after plummeting from the balcony!” Arthur bellowed.

“But what if he didn’t?”

“There’s no evidence!”

“Nobody else is dead. And I doubt Yadana wouldn’t make sure all staff members were accounted for.”

“That’s because they didn’t jump off the balcony!”

Horror pushed her hands into her face, clearly wanting to get it over with.

“This is a case with a closed number of suspects. When the police get here, they’ll investigate, and unlike us they’ll have permission to tear this place apart. They’d find the fingers in the piano, especially after they started decomposing, and they’d likely find the stuff thrown in the ocean. They’ll ransack our luggage, check all our clothes. Even if the killer washed off in the rain, I doubt he could have avoided blood splattering onto their clothes a little bit. There’s also fingerprints. I don’t know if the killer wore gloves, but it’s possible he didn’t. It might take a while, but I imagine the killer would get caught. But this wasn’t a murder committed out of hostility, it was done for notoriety, hence the message. Mystery, correct me if I’m wrong, but locked room mysteries aren’t common, right?”

“I don’t think so...”

“A locked room is rare, so it catches attention. The murderer wants us to remember this. They want to be known as someone who committed a locked room murder. But I don’t know if they wanted to get away with it. Maybe, to him, this was a form of suicide. He could jump off the building and get a mention in a newspaper, or he could jump to his death to finish a locked room and be etched into the annals of history.”

“But now we’re back to the same question, if this was meant to be a murder-suicide, why did only True Crime die?” said Arthur.

“Luck, I guess. Or unluck,” replied Horror, casually. “The same type of luck that kept the storage room unlocked for us, when by all accounts Edward should have relocked it.”

We all paused to catch our breath. Horror felt like she was moving too fast, was she not forgoing important details? I steeled myself before choosing to challenge her one last time.

“Yadana could still be behind this,” I stated.

“Yes, he could,” Horror replied. “He could either have ordered True Crime’s murder, or done it himself, it’s just as we said earlier. Only ultimately circumstantial evidence absolves him.” I expected more resistance, but then she continued.

“However unlikely, he could have set the crime scene up as we see it to hide his involvement. If a staff member did die jumping from the window, he could easily hide that from us. Yadana could be lying to us, and the police are never coming. However, chasing this line of thinking will get us nowhere. Come tomorrow, if there’s no sign of police, we can start worrying about Yadana.”

“So just because it’s unrealistic, we should ignore the possibility?” I cry.

“Exactly,” Horror responded, “It called an informed inference. There are many possibilities I cannot rule out. But just listen to me for a little longer. Suppose a member was acting of their own volition and jumped out of the window, intending that to be their death. They miraculously survive. Ignoring the currently unprovable possibility that there is someone on the estate we have not seen, the only staff we have seen here have been Edward and the chefs. Edward appeared at dinner wearing the same clothes he was wearing before. The chefs were also busy preparing our dinner. If someone disappeared for a long time at the time of the murder, they’d notice, and hopefully speak up.

“Meanwhile all the writers changed clothes before dinner, and nobody would question if someone showered beforehand. The culprit could have easily washed off the smell of salt water and changed their clothes in that time.”

“Did nobody notice them walking soaked through the halls?” asked Arthur.

“It was a risk the culprit would have to take, but all our rooms are on the first floor. Luckily, the first floor has a dark carpet, so they wouldn’t leave footprints. The carpet would have likely been wet for some time afterwards, but you wouldn’t notice if you were wearing shoes.”

Outside of a few locations deeper into the mansion, the halls were nigh empty. If the culprit had gone quickly, and maintained their luck streak, they could have probably made it to their room without anyone noticing. All of it was improbable. She was ignoring too many possibilities yet was so confident in herself that Arthur and I couldn't refute her. She mentioned the notion of someone we don't know about committing murder and disregarded it like nothing. I hadn't even considered that. This case was much more complex than I thought, how did I think I could solve the crime myself? If the police arrived in the morning, then it'd be in their hands, so why did Horror try so hard to determine the culprit? Where did her confidence stem from?

"Can we really rely this much on luck?" I asked, realizing I would never be able to stand up to her.

"Mystery, there's nothing more dangerous to a logical argument than a person's luck. You should remember that."

VIII

Soon after Horror finished her denouement, she exited the lounge in a hurry. We followed behind her, not wanting to be left alone with the body. We had no clue where she was running to.

“It’s a hunch,” was all she would say when we asked where she was going. She stated that the murderer was insane, but I could say the same for her actions.

She half-walked half-ran through the halls. She did not mind how loud her footsteps were as she traveled to the guest wing. Our first stop was the room with Fantasy’s name on it. Horror waited for us to catch up before throwing her arms around our necks like we were in a team huddle. The close contact still made me squeamish.

“Stand on both sides of the door, but make sure that it only looks like I’m knocking,” she whispered. We had already broken the rule, but nobody was supposed to be in the halls or answer the doors, so I hoped she knew what she was doing, but considering I lost the logic battle in the lounge, I didn’t feel it appropriate to question her. We moved into our assigned positions.

Horror gently knocked on the door. No answer. She knocked again, no louder than the first time. No answer. She knocked again. No answer. I couldn’t imagine that those knocks were loud enough to wake Fantasy. If he did happen to be awake, then staying silent was the proper thing to do. I might have opened my door and left my room of my own volition, but opening a door knowing someone is on the other side is another matter. Regardless, Horror kept knocking. Whenever me or Arthur began to speak up, Horror would silence us with a quiet ‘shhh.’ After what felt like 10 minutes, movement could be heard on the other side of the door. Horror straightened her posture and knocked one last time.

“What do you want?” moaned Fantasy through the door.

“Remember *who* exactly?” replied Horror with a cheeky smile.

There was silence on the other side.

Click

The door opened inward. I know I wasn't supposed to make myself known, but I peered my eye out over the edge of the doorframe. Nobody was standing there. All I could see was a black void.

Everything changed over the course of 3 seconds. In the center of the void a pale white face appeared. The face was contorted in an unholy shape and rapidly approached. Nothing could be seen around the head, as if it was floating in midair. It was Fantasy's face. It approached so quickly that I yelped and lost my hold on the doorframe, collapsing to the floor.

I watched as the black void wearing Fantasy's face leapt from the interior of the room towards Horror. Against the black void that formed his body, a thin white shape became visible. The void raised the shape to its head and shot it forward towards Horror's face. It was over. Whatever the void was holding, with that much force, it would surely pierce through Horror's skull. Or at least it should have. With a motion so smooth it looked as if it had been practiced a hundred times, Horror moved her head to the side while simultaneously lifting the palm of her hand up. The void's weapon narrowly missed her head and flew through hair. Horror's hand met the void's stomach and started pushing him off the ground. With her other hand, she grabbed his weapon arm and pivoted her legs. With the void's momentum propelling him, Horror easily flipped the man onto his back with a slam, and immediately knelt herself onto his chest. She twisted the void's wrist to make him drop the weapon, which I could finally tell was a metal fork. It was probably taken from the hors d'oeuvres table.

In just 3 short seconds, Fantasy was pinned to the floor without Arthur or I having to contribute.

"Attacking a lady ain't usually a sign of innocence ya know!" spat Horror.

Fantasy had been slammed onto the wooden floor incredibly hard. He was wearing all black pajamas, which explains why he appeared so suddenly from the darkness of his room. Even after being flipped to the floor, Fantasy's dark hair remained pristine. It only took moments for Romance's room to start rumbling with commotion. As for Fantasy himself, he made no effort to get Horror off him. He saw Arthur and I standing by and knew that he was finished. All there was left was a few more questions from Horror.

“So did you know True Crime or was this spontaneous?”

“I chose her because she laughed too much.”

“Did you mean to live after jumping from the balcony?”

“No. I could have killed myself elsewhere, but I took it as a sign to keep living. Even if it was just for a bit longer.”

“So, it really was all for fame?”

“Fame is for movie stars. Notoriety is for criminals. But yes. To be remembered as a middling fantasy author who offed himself or to be remembered as a fantasy author who committed a fantastical crime. I’d chose to go out the way of the latter.”

“You disgust me.”

“Coming from a horror writer, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

IX

There isn't much more to this tale. After the commotion died down, and we explained everything, Fantasy was held under strict observation. As Yadana promised, the police arrived at sunrise. I hadn't caught a bit of sleep.

We essentially handed the culprit to the police. Fantasy made no effort to deny the crime, but they still had to do their own investigation. The amateur investigation team was heavily reprimanded for disturbing the crime scene and littering the area with excess hair and fingerprints. They told us that we'd get even more reprimanding at the station, where we would also deliver our testimonies. Yadana promised us full reparations before we left. That was the last time I ever saw him. The money never came, not from him at least, although we received some financial compensation later.

Aboard the police boat, Romance was crying. The two friends she made during the retreat were either dead or being sent to prison, it wasn't surprising. Arthur had managed to get a cigarette from a cop and was smoking on deck. He said he didn't smoke anymore, but this was a 'special case'. That left me and Horror sitting together, still in our pajamas. I had a few more questions for her.

"Horror, wh-what was with that kung-fu you pulled on Fantasy."

"It was tai-chi. It's more of an exercise routine now than a martial art, but I suppose that's what it started as. I should thank my sifu when I get back home."

I didn't want to speak about it too much since we were still under police supervision, but I just had to ask.

"Horror. I'm not jealous. But is there any reason why you were able to figure out the murder so easily?"

"Hey, that wasn't easy. It was a lot of work. Smoke was practically coming from my ears at points."

"You sure made it look easy. You never once lost confidence in your theory, and even with

Arthur and I pushing against it, it ended up being the truth. Unlike my botched attempt at a theory.”

“You really got to let go of that. You messed up. Big deal. That’s a secret between you, me, and Arthur,” She glanced at the officer looking at us, “And this officer. But still, it doesn’t matter that you messed up. We got the guy. Plus, you probably have a concussion.”

“But it does matter to me. I put myself in danger for no reason, I contributed nothing. I know it’s stupid of me to think this way, but if I couldn’t solve a murder in real life, how can I write about them?”

For a split-second Horror looked at me in horror. Then she burst into laughter. More than laughter, it was a guffaw.

“Oh my God. Holy shit. That is stupid. Do you think all the mystery writers have *solved real cases*? I bet most of them haven’t even seen a dead body. Holy crap. Maybe we should change your name to Comedy.”

She desperately tried to regain a serious face, but it looked like the laughter was winning.

“Ok, besides that being maybe the most insane thing I’ve heard this week, seriously, you just missed a few details. I didn’t. That’s all. Now I will say I’m not a complete stranger to writing mysteries just because I’m a Horror writer.”

“Really?”

“Well duh. Things aren’t scary if they’re explained to the reader. The mystery makes things scary. Also, how much different is a slasher film from a mystery novel. You have murders, but nobody knows who’s doing it. Now there is the big difference that a slasher villain usually wins and kills everyone, instead of a detective coming and saving the day, but y’know the setup is kinda the same. I bet if you took the detective out of most mystery novels and focused on someone being targeted instead, you could turn it into a horror novel. We’re like sister genres.”

She leaned in for another ‘arm around shoulder’ move, but this time I leaned away.

“So, you’re saying you’re better at writing my genre without it even being your main focus,” I said.

“Oh my. You’re insufferable.”

“That was a joke.”

“Ok let’s not change your name to Comedy after all.”

I didn’t have anything else to say. Even if she said it didn’t matter, I couldn’t get the thought out of my mind that I was a waste of space. I wasn’t even able to receive any advice on my writing from Yadana or the others. I did not expect that I would be one of the ones Yadana chose to publish, but at least I would have gotten advice. Instead, I got to live through a traumatic experience, one I didn’t gain anything from experiencing.

“I can see you moping over there,” she said, “You said you contributed nothing, but that’s objectively wrong. You saved my life, or at least my pretty face.”

“Huh?”

“When Fantasy lunged at me. You screamed. Fantasy was probably expecting a noise out of me, but instead he heard you. It surprised him. It wasn’t very noticeable, but I think you threw him off, even if by a little bit, but that bit gave me enough leeway to dodge out of the way and disarm him.”

“Really?”

“Yes really, I’m not just giving out platitudes. I’d be skewered if not for you. So, consider a life saved.”

She said this while looking deeply into my eyes. It eliminated all doubt that she was not telling the truth. I really ended up saving her life, or as she put it, saving her face. I turned away from her, slightly embarrassed by how intensely she was looking at me. Her face *was* certainly pretty. While facing away from her, I asked the question I really wanted to ask.

“How’d you know it was Fantasy?”

“Worst case scenario I would have just knocked on everyone’s door and asked them the same question to bait them. I figured if my theory was correct, I could probably fish them out of

their room with their own words pretty easily, since it means we spoiled their surprise for the police. But Fantasy just happened to be the first door we visited.”

She ended her explanation with a shrug. She was lying, or at least hiding something. I could tell. Even after everything she discovered in the lounge, there wasn’t any reason to eliminate Edward as the prime suspect. Instead, she trusted the theory that the killer had to fall all the way into the ocean, swim to shore, and reach their room to change and take a shower without being seen. And with all that in mind she went to Fantasy’s door first. Walking from the lounge, we passed Romance’s room before we got to Fantasy’s. She skipped her room on purpose. She also started referring to the culprit as a man after discovering the fingers when she had previously used gender-neutral terms. She had to know it was Fantasy. I don’t know how, but she did. All she said was that it was another ‘hunch’ as she walked to his room. She was a much better detective than I could ever be.

“You should have used the handkerchief. Now we’re going to get in trouble.”

“Would using the handkerchief even have changed anything?”

“...Probably not.”

Horror was not only a better detective than me, but she also made for a good prophet. Like she said, our names were never published by the police or news. We were only briefly mentioned as “other guests” in all succeeding papers. This was not the case for Arthur. I don’t know how it happened, but his name was revealed only a few weeks after the murder case by a tabloid magazine in an article written by an exceptionally pushy reporter. It sounded like he dealt with it well. He reportedly told a lot of reporters to “screw off,” which seems about right for him. Romance was revealed to be Everlyn Meshell, a name I was quite familiar with. She happens to litter my mom’s shelves with her nigh-identically titled books. It turns out that she put large pictures of herself in the “About the Author” section of her books, but I had never bothered to look at my mom’s collection, so I did not recognize her.

Fantasy got what he wanted too. Just last week, what ended up being the impetus for writing this memoir, a major news network put out an article on him:

‘Remember Me,’ with movie inspired by killer Lloyd Twin announced, critics are rushing to highlight ethical issues.

2 years ago, Lloyd Twin, writer of fantasy book series *Tales of Trails*, murdered fellow author Linda Stack on a writer’s getaway hosted by the former CEO of Lorelei Publishing, Ted Yadana. Twin confessed to his crime upon the arrival of police and was detained. While investigation was underway, Twin committed suicide with a fork he had snuck into the detention center, dying without proper trial. Twin’s method of murder, which included a locked room usually limited to mystery novels, has been a point of interest to many. Twin’s connection to the Tricoli Crime family has also been speculated, with host Ted Yadana admitting to helping smuggle drugs for the family on the same estate where the murder was committed during the police investigation of the murder.

This has led some to treat Twin's actions as heroic, as they lead to the arrest of someone normally "untouchable."

What would have usually been seen as a tragedy has unexpectedly burst into a pop culture sensation. So much so that sales of Twins *Tales of Trails* series have increased "dramatically" since the murder according to Triangular Publishing. Nicole Strife, the screenwriter for Justin Faiz's upcoming film *A House by the Sea* has called the murder an "inspiration" for the script, much to the dismay of critics wanting to avoid a culture of "glorification" around Twin.

That article basically summarizes the case as well as I could. As can be seen, Horror and I avoided the brunt of attention. Maybe they really did try to protect us from the Trincoli family, and it's always possible that my name could leak from the police reports, but it wouldn't matter much right now. I haven't told anyone besides my parents that I was there that night, and if the name was released, I bet most people who know me would simply assume it's someone else with my name. After all I'm still not a published writer. I've finished college, and I'm at something of a crossroads.

This memoir is basically a form of procrastination from what I'm really supposed to be doing, but I also thought writing this could reconnect me with that night. It was such a short time (I wasn't even on the island for 24 hours) that it sometimes feels like it didn't happen at all. Maybe I just dreamed it all. Besides occasional nightmares of Lloyd Twin rushing at me in the darkness, or visions of Linda Stack's body, I've rarely thought about it. I simply returned home, hugged my parents and continued living. My parents were so happy I was alright they even bought me a camera I had wanted for a while. That camera ended up being my sole benefit from the whole fiasco, as well as the most prominent reminder of it.

Even if I ended up ok, or at least mostly ok, I still never saw Horror again. I stayed true to my word, and she stayed true to hers and we never revealed our names to each other. I only have a few clues to pull from, so I haven't easily tracked her down. Sometimes I go to the horror section of the bookstore, and rather than look at the book's synopsis, I rush to check the photos in the

“About the Author” section. It’s been so long since I saw her, however, that I fear that I might misremember her face. Even while writing this memoir, I lacked confidence in my recollection of her. Drafts describing her appearance often contradicted each other, so in the end I omitted them completely.

I said I had a personal theory for why Horror seemed so calm in the face of death. I know that my theories throughout this memoir have oft been unreliable, but this one is quite simple, if baseless. I theorize that the events on Karasu Island weren’t Horror’s first time in front of a dead body. It might not have even been her second time. She didn’t flinch at the sight of True Crime’s, or rather Linda Stack’s body. That wasn’t to say she was insensitive to murder. I believe she respected murder in a sense. That prayer she performed in front of Stack’s body was sincere, I know it. A dead body wasn’t strange to her, and the investigation into why she was killed seemed fun to her, but upon realizing why she was murdered, she became much more serious. Only after I left the island did I think whether Horror would have been as mad if Twin had a more legitimate reason to kill Stack.

For some reason that last point weighs on my mind more than anything else. It shouldn’t be that important, Twin’s already dead, the case is closed. But I can’t just let it go. Truth is, I just want to know more about Horror. I don’t think its attraction in the traditional romantic sense, but maybe it is. She seemed to know everything. Maybe I want to just ask her where I should go from here, or to ask her something more important. But it doesn’t matter, I can’t find her anyway, and I may never find her.

But until never comes, I’ll keep looking for the girl with a red leather jacket in the back of a horror book.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Lukas Norment was born on April 2nd, 2002, in Gainesville, Florida. Despite this, he grew up in Glenburn, Maine, and attended John Bapst High School just in time to graduate during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Lukas gladly attended the University of Maine as a Civil Engineering Major but is still sad that he never got a chance to take a film class. This did not stop him from getting a proper camera, which he is currently obsessed with using.

Lukas is currently applying for the University of Maine's Graduate School in order to further his education in Environmental Engineering.