

# BLOOD

I knew there was something mysterious about my University from the first time I saw it. But I could never have imagined the nightmare that awaited behind those cold stone walls.

The University is over four hundred years old: a foreboding complex of Gothic towers and cold stone structures with dark windows like eyes leering down at tens of thousands of students passing through the centuries.

This far north, so deep into the untamed Scottish territories, my University could have existed in another place or another time – the arctic, perhaps, or the days long past when faith trumped reason and punishment was capital.

Our dorms had been somewhat modernized, with tacky carpets and metal bunkbeds, but aside from that most areas in my University looked the same as they had for centuries: rough wooden floorboards, hand-carved desks, and those omnipresent gray walls, smooth and polished on the inside, rough and uneven out where the frigid air had worn them down.

In the nine-month schoolyear, the temperatures in that area never attempted to brush against four degrees Celsius; it wasn't uncommon to wake up shivering in our dorms and find that six or more feet of snow had fallen in the night.

The closest inkling of civilization near campus was a small village almost a kilometer away. They had a post office, a small tavern, and a two-room market they laughably referred to as a grocery store. A few houses dotted the grassy plains that stretched to the horizon at all angles: people whose parents and grandparents had lived and died in homes their *great*-grandparents had built. At some point in the last hundred years, someone must have believed there would actually be a town there one day. And maybe there will be. But there wasn't thirty years ago, and I have to assume there isn't today.

I first visited my University the month after graduating college. I hadn't done well, and my grades were a mess – I had spent a considerable portion of my final year drunk, and it never once occurred to me that universities wouldn't take kindly to my low marks. None of my preferred schools accepted me, if they even bothered reading my applications, and I ended up stuck with an ancient establishment that somehow flew under the radar of Britain's respect.

My mother and I made a day trip of it, driving up from Manchester and seeing the sights on our way. I watched out the window as England gave way to Scotland, and civilization gave way to wide, open fields and towering hills, green as the day God made them. The sky faded from a hopeful blue

to a foreboding white as we drew closer to the edge of the world; in fact, all color seemed to be draining out. The grass went from emerald green to a mossy gray, the distant purple mountains seemed like mere extensions of the oppressive clouds; even the occasional car we passed on the long northern stretch looked like a duller shade of their southern counterparts.

When we reached the University, an uneasy feeling was creeping through my veins. We hadn't seen another car in hours, and the only civilization we had passed was the aforementioned village, so small that no one had ever bothered to name it. When I thought of university, I pictured a metropolitan extravaganza, learning and loving surrounded by an urban jungle and the kind of experiences I would remember for the rest of my life. I imagined making good friends and bad decisions in a place where human beings weren't as scarce as sunny days. But this...well, as we stepped out of the car and I felt the cold stare of black windows in stone towers, I didn't feel excited. I felt uneasy. The world around me was cold, uninviting, everything only a few steps apart from the same shade of gray. The sky, the buildings, the grass: gray, gray, gray.

I made some comment to my mother as we walked to the enrollment office, trying to express my immediate dislike of the place; she dismissed me, of course, and reminded me that if I had done better in college I could have had my pick of universities.

We were shown around campus that day, and my suspicions were confirmed: every inch of the school was as drab as the world outside. I tried to imagine how the dank halls and prisonlike dorms would look filled with students my age, ones who presumably would feel the same as I did. But every time I conjured up an image of teen-agers studying, drinking, bleeding, they were swallowed up by the stone walls and the chill that ran across campus and through the buildings as if they didn't exist.

The president herself showed us around the dorms, talking to me like she was trying to sell a used car. If I decided to enroll, I thought, it would be in spite of the University's overall appearance, not because of it. Our three-man tour was interrupted when an assistant of some kind appeared in the stone corridor, out of breath and anxious-looking. She informed the president that there was someone here to see her – actually, I believe what she said was “A new package is about to arrive.” The president thanked her then apologized to us, explaining that she would have to put our tour on hold. She hurried off to attend to her duties, and my mother and I were left to wander the campus alone.

“I don't want to go here,” I said as we stepped out of the dorm building. I crossed my arms, hoping to find some warmth in the chilly day.

“You haven’t seen all of it,” my mother reminded me. “Let’s finish the tour, then we can decide.” I knew she wasn’t being honest: if by the end of the day I knew I would never want to enroll, she would hit me with the sort of guilt tripping and blackmail that only a mother can conjure up.

We walked around the campus, empty but for a few members of staff hurrying to tie up the last schoolyear and prepare for the next. My fingers were beginning to stiffen in the cold, and a low white fog had descended on the grounds. It was as if an army of spirits had crowded the school to reminisce, to imagine the days when they had breathed and walked the earth as a complete two-part entity. I could almost hear them whisper as we moved through them: a multitude of otherworldly alumni calling to me, some encouraging me to live as they had, others warning me about what was to come.

My mother didn’t try to force conversation as we walked, and for that I was grateful. The campus was silent, with no city noise for a hundred miles, not even a tree to creak in the wind. But without speaking, I was forced to acknowledge the uneasy feeling that we weren’t alone on the empty quad: the sensation of pulsing lifeforce behind me, of eyes on my back that when I glanced behind could only be explained by the black glass of the tower windows.

Round the corner of one tower, we came unexpectedly to the edge of campus. The prickled grass ended where a small dirt parking lot began, accessible by a driveway that looped around into the main artery of the north-south road. Blocking off this driveway was a vehicle that felt even more anachronistic here than the regular cars: an ugly box-shaped ambulance, the sort they’ve now done away with and replaced with the sleeker Mercedes.

My mother and I stopped to stare. The ambulance was received by a few people in suits, including the president and her assistant; they stood there looking nervous as a pair of technicians slid the pram out the back of their truck. I suppose a chill would have run down my spine when I saw the body, but I was already chilled to the bone.

We stood twenty feet away, but the president and her people hadn’t noticed us yet. I’m sure my mother would have preferred to avert her eyes, but she was too shocked to look away.

The body was male: I could tell because of the thick beard and flat chest under a shirt that had been slit open down the middle. But otherwise there wasn’t much to go on as far as personal traits. The man was waterlogged in blood.

I couldn’t tell if the man was alive or simply unconscious. His skull was wrapped in bandages, already soaked through with red. The technicians had attempted to stop the bleeding, but his

lifeforce still trickled down his face, clogging up his beard and running onto his chest. Whatever skin wasn't in its path had already been dyed a crusty copper.

As they set the pram down on its wheels, one of the man's arms slipped off his chest and hung limply over the edge. Whether he was alive or not, he had lost three of his fingers.

The president turned to direct the technicians as they wheeled his pram towards the nearest building. She froze as she caught sight of us; I stared back, unsure what to feel, unsure how to react. Were we seeing something we weren't supposed to? Was this some secret that outsiders weren't meant to know about? Because I hadn't enrolled yet. I had no obligation to this University. I wouldn't be intimidated, if that was what she meant to do.

But the president simply directed her assistants to help the technicians and came over to us, forcing a smile. "I'm sorry you had to see that," she said. "I suppose I should've told you to stay and wait for me."

"What in God's name was that?" my mother breathed, finding her voice at last. "That man –"

"He had a bit of an accident," the president told her. She sounded totally calm, totally in control. "I can imagine how strange this all looks. But I'm sure you noticed it's a long way to the nearest city. We have a full medical facility here, and several trained doctors. For someone in dire need, it's a safer bet to bring them here than drive two hours to a hospital."

My mother and the president went back and forth about this development, and eventually she seemed to accept the given explanation at face value. But her face was still white, her mouth still set in a line as we turned back towards campus to complete our tour.

And that was all. I had no reason to suspect the University of anything suspicious, though I certainly did. I suppose it made sense. Even an ancient stone complex like this would have up-to-date medical equipment. And I would rather have my injuries treated immediately at a university than at a hospital a few hours later.

When we left campus, I reminded my mother that I had no interest in attending a centuries-old school that may as well have been built in the arctic circle. But somehow, in the next few weeks, she managed to convince me: they were the only school that had any interest in letting me enroll, and I wouldn't be allowed to stay with her indefinitely.

Come September, my mother and I again made that dreary trek up north, following an all but straight line into oblivion. With a hug and an empty offer to help me carry my bags inside, she drove off and condemned me to nine months at a University hardly different from a prison.

Orientation was held in the vast dining hall, which would have served better as some Gothic cathedral. The president addressed us from her podium, welcoming us to our new home. I tried to forget how she looked ushering a half-dead man across campus.

After a speech that felt more threatening than inviting, the president told us when and where we could receive our medical once-over. This came as a surprise to me: I had imagined this would be a task for my personal physician, one the school had forgotten to demand.

I did what was required of me, though I didn't exactly approve. I made my way to the campus medical center, a surprisingly modern facility in what I believed to have once been a library. The nurse on duty gave me a standard examination, checking my pulse, my breathing patterns, my ears nose and throat. When all results turned up satisfactory, the nurse informed me that she had yet to take a sample of my blood. This, too, came as a surprise.

"A blood sample?" I repeated. "Why?"

"We test for various contagious diseases," she explained, her voice not unkind. "It's standard at all universities."

"I thought that information was given you by our home doctors," I said.

"Often, yes," she replied. "But we have a full medical setup here, and we prefer our information to come straight from the source. Do you know your blood type?"

I told her I didn't and she assured me that wouldn't be an issue. She drained my forearm's main artery of the thick blue substance that turned a deep crimson, almost black, as it poured from my body into the airtight cylinder. I told myself not to look, yet I couldn't seem to look away; my own blood reminded me of the man I'd seen months before, the man who had bled so profusely from an unseen wound.

I must have looked faint, because the nurse offered me a glass of water. I refused, wanting to maintain my masculine dignity and thinking to myself that I would prefer a shot of gin.

Never before had I felt ill at the sight of blood, or seen those white spots on the edge of my vision. Even while staring in horror at a man who had so recently lost three of his fingers, the trickle of red from under his bandages had no effect on me. It wasn't the sight of my blood that made me feel this way: more so, it was the idea that this liquid was being drawn from mine own body, that it was once a part of me, but would never be again.

I looked away as the nurse labeled my blood, my eyes instead settling on my reflection in a full-length mirror that hung nearby. I had seen the mirror when I first came in, but had failed to notice that it hung on a door of some sort. Though the proper size, this door was painted the same color as the surrounding walls, almost allowing it to blend in: and more curious, there did not appear to be

any sort of hinges or handle. The only feature marking it as a door, other than its obvious separation from the rest of the wall, was a small keyhole built directly into the wood.

“Where does that door go?” I asked aloud. It was strange, a strange place for a door, and a strange way for that door to be presented. I didn’t so much care as I was momentarily curious.

The nurse hardly had to glance over to understand my reference. “That’s where we keep all the medicines,” she explained. “We must keep an extensive collection when we’re set up this far from a medical supplier.”

That made perfect sense to me, so I didn’t press the issue. Of course they would keep their medicines locked up, but I still wasn’t sure why that necessitated the lack of a doorknob. But we finished up with our bloodtaking session and I was free to leave.

As classes began and I was thrust into a world of academic pursuits, I almost managed to forget the horror I had seen mere months ago. Or if I didn’t forget, I didn’t bother to care: my class gradually learned of the school’s function as a makeshift emergency room, and though they accepted this news with vague, shifty-eyed suspicion, no one seemed willing to go the extra distance and actually develop a conspiracy theory.

Occasionally an ambulance would appear, summoning a team of school officials and medical staff – though now, with somewhere in the realm of nine hundred youths crowding the campus, the ambulance technicians elected to drive onto the grass and park just outside the former library, allowing them to shorten the distance they had to transport the bodies, as well as minimize the number of students who could stick their noses where they didn’t belong.

Once, deep into the third month of school, my friend Simon managed to catch a glimpse at one of these still-breathing cadavers. He sat down beside me at the long, ancient table that dominated the mess hall, his whole body jittering nervously, a grin of mischief stretching his cheeks taut. “I saw one of them,” he said, his voice low and excited, as if we had previously conspired to spy. “One of the people they bring in the ambulances. They pulled up to drop them off and I ran to catch a glimpse.”

“And?” I asked. I didn’t understand the excitement in his tone, though I was curious to see if all their patients were in as bad a way as the one I had witnessed with my ever-suffering mother.

“It was a woman,” Simon replied, as if the complementary sex was as foreign to him as a dragon or an incubus. It may well could have been. His voice remained low, though he had no cause for this: the dining hall was nearly full, and the voices of our fellow students all but drowned out his own.

“What kind of state was she in?” I asked, fully expecting Simon to exaggerate.

“Terrible,” he replied. “She had a gash across her face, through her left eye – I could tell because it was bleeding through the bandage.”

“But she was still alive?” I prompted.

“She must have been,” Simon decided. “Otherwise there wouldn’t have been a rush. Plus I don’t think they have a morgue here.”

A silence fell between us. The thought had never crossed my mind – but now that the concept made itself known to me, I couldn’t help but wonder. A University as old as this, in so unforgiving an environment, this far from a legitimate city...there must have been more than a few accidents, no? More than a few deaths? And if not the students, then those poor innocent souls who were carted here in desperate need, to be worked on by a staff of nurses and one doctor, two if they had the foresight to be injured on a day when Doctor Kendrick was sober.

The shadows in the dining hall seemed to grow darker as I considered the possibility of scores dying on these very grounds – and the chance that many of their bodies had rested beneath the old library, cold and still for as long as it took for a representative of civilization to pick them up.

And, of course, there was the other possibility, the one I didn’t want to mention aloud for fear of my words lending credence to it: the possibility that, no matter how many laws of God and science implied this could never be true, the dead had remained in soul as well as body, and now flitted between stone walls and empty corridors, no more tangible than the wind itself, observing we who held on to the spark that had long since departed their human forms.

“Do you think there are ghosts here?” Simon asked, any of the prudence I had settled on passing him by.

“No,” I replied quickly. “They operate on people from the village when they’re in desperate need. If the people die, I’m sure they call someone to pick them up immediately.”

From then on, there was no talk of ghosts or morgues or blood. Simon seemed to lose interest in the ambulances – or else he had grown more afraid. I wouldn’t have classified myself as afraid, being as I was primarily focused on academic and social pursuits, but every so often I would again feel that tugging deep in my gut, that otherworldly pull of the unknown forces that silently dominate not only our world, but all the worlds that came before and all those that will come after.

Only recently have I considered what may have really been driving me during this period, focusing my thoughts like an arrow towards the studious functions I had ignored in secondary school. I never recognized my fear of the supernatural, nor did I allow myself to acknowledge how the memory of that injured man, and the image of his one-eyed female counterpart drummed up by my imagination, affected my psyche on a daily basis. But on a subconscious level, deep below the

planes of human thought, I was consistently aware of my own fear of the unknown, my own paranoia that something exceedingly dark was occurring behind the stone walls of this establishment.

Perhaps it was this inner, unreachable knowledge of myself that prompted me to seek companionship, outside the circle of middle-grade intellectuals I had come to know as my friends. I was in need of comfort: healing comfort of the soul that my sex has always proven exceedingly useless at providing.

I first met Angie early in the academic year, at a dance held out on the grounds. The night was cold, as we had come to expect, but close to the highest possible temperature in that area. We first-years tried to enjoy ourselves, in that uncomfortable way that plagues the unestablished. Angie and I were introduced through a mutual friend – that “friend” being the inability to start and maintain a conversation.

Angie and I remained casual friends throughout the opening months of our tenure, though around the turn of the year we progressed to a more romantic subset of relationship. She was the first of my classmates to whom I explicated what I had seen during my visit the summer before: though she admitted the concept of strangers dying mere yards away unsettled her, she seemed to forget what I had told her by our next meeting.

The last time I laid eyes on my University, the campus was hidden beneath a foot and a half of snow, icy and slick and a far cry from the sort of precipitation that children enjoy briefly before growing bored and going back inside. Strings of colored lights hung from the monolithic stone structures, almost allowing the tiny, insignificant humans who walked beneath to believe there was any warmth to be found in this dark, unforgiving landscape.

Snow was promised on the last day of classes before the holiday: several feet, according to the experts. There was a chance this inclement weather could prove an obstruction to students returning home, and any medium of water falling from the sky would no doubt put an end to even the indoor festivities. And so it was decided that the University’s usual holiday party would be held on the penultimate day of classes. This decision was met with annoyance by those who would now have to choose between abstaining and attending their final class with the illness and brain fatigue that accompanies such late-night debauchery.

I planned to attend the party and accompanying dance with Angie, as we had by then agreed to classify each other as our romantic partners. I had recently taken a very long and very cold walk down to the village with my friends, where we managed to find some secondhand formal attire; this

was in stark contrast to Angie, who had sewn a new dress specifically for the occasion, using materials and tools she had brought from home.

Students had begun trickling into the great hall from every dorm, young women in dresses of bright colors that contrasted with the dreary environment, clutching the arms of young men in suits as dark and uniform as the walls of the school.

I watched my classmates disappearing into the great hall from afar, waiting as I was outside the building which housed the women's dorms.

Angie had promised to meet me here, allowing us to enter the dance together, arm in arm like all the other young lovers. But I had been waiting for some time, and Angie had not shown. My fingers were growing stiff in the cold, and any desire to be fashionably late had fallen by the wayside.

I met Angie's roommate in the corridor of their building, and she assured me that Angie was merely taking an unprecedented amount of time to fine-tune her makeup.

Hearing my voice through the lavatory door, Angie called to me, inviting me inside. After being assured there were no other young women around to be scandalized by my presence, I stepped through the door to find Angie applying her makeup in the stained and foggy mirror. She wore a dress of deep crimson, stitched together so finely that I could hardly tell she had sewn it herself.

"You look beautiful," I told her. She thanked me, but didn't turn away from the mirror. I complimented her dress as well, and she launched a barrage of anecdotes concerning the process of creating such an elegant project. I listened dutifully, walking about behind her and poking around the forbidden chamber. To my disappointment, the women's lavatory looked almost identical to the men's, with its uncomfortably small showers and toilets that had been installed far too long ago for them to retain any sort of functionality. The only difference was a small tin box mounted on the wall, similar to a first aid repository but colored a military sort of olive green, bearing a symbol I did not recognize.

"I wouldn't," Angie said, interrupting her own story. She had noticed in her peripherals my attempt to reach for the olive-green box. Coming this close to the receptacle, I now detected the hint of a vinegar smell.

"What is it?" I asked, drawing back my hand.

"It's nothing," she replied, still not looking away from her admittedly captivating reflection.

"Tell me," I pressed. I was curious – if for no other reason than to maintain the conversation. She didn't want to explain, I could tell: blood had rushed to her cheeks in a flush of discomfort.

Despite what appeared to be embarrassment, Angie apparently failed to see the value in argument. "It's for...disposal," she said. "Of certain...feminine health products."

“Oh,” I replied, taking an instinctive step back. “I thought you were meant to flush those down the toilet.”

“You’re not,” Angie informed me. “You’re meant to throw them away. But here, they say it can be a hazard to the trash collector’s health. I suppose they don’t use strong enough rubbish bags.”

I gave the tin box an uneasy glance. The edges of a translucent green bag were peeking out from under its lid, waiting to be unlocked and disposed of by (I could only assume) one of the school nurses. I wanted to ask Angie about the vinegar smell, but refrained out of fear that this was some basic element of the menstrual process that I had failed to learn.

When Angie had decided her makeup was finally suitable (despite looking, to my eyes, identical to its appearance when I first entered the lavatory) we strolled across the grounds and into the great hall, where most of our friends and classmates were already well into their drinking, dancing, and as much lascivious activity as was allowed at a school function.

I put aside the notion that my girlfriend had spent all that time dolling herself up for my benefit as Angie disappeared to chat with her friends. I went to get a drink then found my own group huddled against the back wall, having all been abandoned by their dates.

“I will admit this isn’t exactly how I pictured this day turning out,” one of my friends said.

“No it isn’t,” I agreed. “But after tomorrow, we won’t have to worry about academia for the next three weeks.”

“Except for the work they gave us to finish over the break,” someone else pointed out.

We stood there for a while, watching the couples whose skills of communication surpassed our own, dancing and kissing in the center of the great hall. At one point our companions began dancing with each other, still talking and laughing and excluding us, which seemed vaguely unfair to the males but we didn’t press the issue. Personally I felt a little uncomfortable at the idea of telling women what to do: that moment in the lavatory with Angie, when she explained the unconventional way our University dealt with women’s issues, had made me wonder if there wasn’t much of the fairer sex that I had yet to learn.

The music was loud, a number of traditional and modernist holiday carols playing from unseen speakers, but the familiar melodies we enjoy once a year and abhor the other ten months were not able to cover the sound of the front door screeching open, or the cold winds that had picked up during the dance.

Nearly everyone in the great hall turned to see as a figure staggered in through the massive front entrance, snowflakes swirling around his body. They had all entered through the smaller side doors: indeed the front door was hardly ever used, not during classes and not during festivities. We

all looked in surprise, our dancing and drinking forgotten, as a man stumbled inside, swaying as if drunk, a thick coat pulled tight around his body and the fur lining of a hood concealing his face.

The crowd of students parted almost on instinct as the figure swayed across the dance floor, hardly keeping himself upright, heading in a roundabout way towards the back wall. A few professors had stayed to preside over the dance and act as figures of authority in the case of too much rowdiness; but they were as startled as we, deep frowns spreading across their faces as the man staggered through the hall, coming straight for – *me*.

I held my breath as the man approached, moving as quickly as he could in whatever state had taken a toll on his physical capacities. It was only when the man came within three yards of me that I recognized his face beneath the hood: it was Simon. I meant to call out to him, but the words caught in my throat: the face of my friend was gaunt, pale, his eyes sunken and bloodshot. It was the face of a sick man, a man on the threshold of Hades – not the face of a good friend whom I had seen well and happy the day before.

With the eyes of near my entire grade upon us, Simon tripped and began to fall. Not thinking, I stepped forward and reached for him, taking his bulk into my arms. In the back of my mind, I found myself marveling at how light he was.

“Simon,” I hissed. I could feel half a hundred pairs of eyes on us, but I ignored them. My other friends were gathered behind us, not knowing what to do.

“Take,” Simon murmured. I could see cords standing out in his neck as he struggled to whisper my name. His hand crept into mine, and I felt something hard and frigid between my warm skin and his cold. His hand fell away and I took the object, unknown and unseen, and put it in my pocket.

As my friend’s eyelids began to fall, the crowd was again stirred by new arrivals: two persons in medical garb, one a nurse and the other Doctor Kendrick. They moved swiftly across the dance floor, Doctor Kendrick’s precise footsteps telling me he had refrained from the bottle tonight. I realized the music had stopped at some point in the moments leading up to their arrival: whoever was in charge of maintaining the holiday carols had noticed the commotion in the middle of the hall.

Doctor Kendrick and the nurse approached us. “Help me with him,” he demanded.

“What happened?” I asked, allowing the doctor to assume half of Simon’s weight. Simon appeared to be unconscious, though his eyes were still half-open.

“This young man is drunk,” Doctor Kendrick informed me, his words reaching every ear in the silent hall. “We found him wandering across campus, nearly frozen. We took him back to the

medical center to give him a saltwater drip, but he escaped when our backs were turned. What he needs now is rest and the needle.”

I held on to Simon for a moment longer, working through this story in my head. It was not unlike my friend to begin drinking early in the day, nor was it unlike him to wander into the elements unprotected, relying on his supposed masculinity and strength of character to keep him safe; but running away from the medical center? As well as trying to escape the trained staff who were helping him through his mistakes?

All eyes were on myself, Simon, and Doctor Kendrick, so I pushed aside my suspicions and allowed the medical staff to carry my friend away from the dance, Simon’s arms thrown over their shoulders as they stumbled out of the great hall.

The tension that ran throughout the students slowly melted into uneasy chatter as they attempted to resume any sort of a festive mood. After what felt like a very long time, the music resumed and my classmates tried to get back into the swing of things. Angie stepped away from her friends and came over to me, a worried look on her face. “Is he okay?” she asked. She knew the drunk man was Simon: the crowd must have glanced his face as the medical staff led him away.

“He’ll be fine,” I told her. “He’s just drunk. He must have not paced himself very well, or else he forgot to eat before drinking.”

Angie asked if I wanted to dance, to distract myself from that disturbing display. I said no, preferring to take a minute to myself. She gave me a sympathetic look and walked away, leaving me to my thoughts and my male friends, who also left at my prompting.

Turning my back on the crowd, I faced the ancient wall at the rear of the building. I could feel the hard, cold object in my pocket, and after a moment of searching with my fingers, I realized what it was. And this moment, or one shortly after, was when my suspicions were peaked: not in the same horrified way as when I had seen that man in the ambulance, nor in the paranoid way I had experienced when the idea of a campus morgue was first breached. This time, I knew – I knew something more was occurring at this University, something none of us quite understood.

Without meeting the eyes of Angie or my friends, I strode across the dance floor and out of the great hall. The wind had picked up, and a few bits of snow were drifting from a pitch-black sky. I pulled my suit jacket tighter around my body as I turned my steps towards the former library.

The woman who sat at the foyer desk attempted to stop me going into the emergency room. I didn’t argue or insist; I simply went in.

I found Simon laying on the doctor's table, stripped down to his undergarments, an IV drip taped to his forearm. Doctor Kendrick stood nearby, fiddling with the plastic bag that fed into my friend. I had never imagined that a saltwater solution would appear so...*red*.

"What are you doing in here?" Doctor Kendrick snapped. The receptionist appeared behind me and apologized profusely.

"I want to see my friend," I told him. "I want to know what you're doing to him."

"I already told you," the doctor replied. "We're feeding him a saltwater drip to help expel the alcohol from his system. We hoped he was merely drunk, but it appears your friend has a mild case of alcohol poisoning."

"Why is it red," I asked.

"What?" Doctor Kendrick looked up at me.

"Why is it red," I said again, gesturing towards the plastic bag whose contents were running down a tube into Simon's arm.

The doctor gave me a look of irritation. Perhaps I was being unreasonable, demanding to understand his work, but this all seemed very suspicious to me. Particularly because I had developed a bit of an aversion to red liquid over the past few months. I could hardly ever drink wine anymore.

"The alcoholic blood is taken from his body," Doctor Kendrick explained, "And mixed with the solution to be put back into his veins. The saltwater cleanses the alcohol from the blood."

That, I knew could not be true. I had no medical background, and had hardly ever stepped foot in a hospital, but I knew taking blood and returning it later was not a process often used by doctors, especially for so trifling a matter as alcohol poisoning.

"May I just speak to him?" I asked. "Alone. It won't take a minute."

"I'm afraid not," Doctor Kendrick told me. "Your friend is unconscious, and has been since we found him in the great hall."

"Still," I pressed. "I would like a moment alone with him."

The doctor shook his head. "No," he replied. "Impossible. I must be here to monitor his condition at all times."

"Well," I said, an idea forming in my head, "May I at least sit here with you? I would like to keep him company, and be here when he wakes up."

Doctor Kendrick glanced at the receptionist, who looked totally lost. He let out a great sigh of annoyance, and gestured towards one of the chairs nearby. I sat down and assumed a still silence, watching the doctor watching my friend.

I now believe Doctor Kendrick had completely forgotten about the evidence of guilt on display in that medical room, otherwise he would not have allowed me to stay. But sitting there, quiet and inobtrusive, my eyes flicked from Simon, to the IV drip in his arm, to the tube filled with his blood, to the plastic bag hanging on its pole, to another tube, one that ran from the bag up to the ceiling, where it was taped up and across the room, eventually reaching the corner where it bent downwards again, running down the wall and through a hole in the floor. My stomach began to churn as my eyes moved across this tube and realized that Simon's blood was either coming or going from a different room, a room in the basement, a room I could not see nor even imagine. On instinct, I almost asked Doctor Kendrick about the purpose of this tube, but then clamped my mouth shut so tight I could feel my skull vibrate. I could not ask him, because he would continue to feed me an IV drip of lies, trying his best to cover whatever was really going on in this medical facility, and whatever was really going on at this school.

I waited, patient and still, channelling all the nervous energy from my body into my brain as I kept from fidgeting, instead using my that excitement to conjure up any number of theories as to this establishment's true goals.

It must have been an hour that went by as I sat in silence, before what I had foreseen finally occurred: Doctor Kendrick excused himself from the room to take a quick foray to the lavatory. Before he left, he reminded me that if I so much as touched Simon, I could do him severe damage in both body and brain. I promised I would refrain from doing so, and this was not a lie: it was not Simon I meant to explore.

The moment Doctor Kendrick left, I turned the lock on the main door. He may have a key, or he may have left it inside; either way, the door would not hold him long, so I moved quickly.

Stepping across the medical room, I withdrew my own key, the one Simon had pressed into my hand. It was old, or made to look old, shaped from iron and intricately wrought. It was the sort of key often referred to as a *skeleton*. The moment I had felt it in my pocket and realized what it was, I knew there was one lock on campus that was not too modern to be opened by this anachronistic device.

The door that wasn't a door swung inward after a few turns of the skeleton key, revealing the full-length reflection of a pale man in a cheap suit with fear etched into his eyes as it did. Behind the door was no supply room, but a staircase: old, stone, a remnant of the library that once was, leading downwards in a steep curve.

I followed the stairs into darkness. There was a matchbook in my pocket, but I refrained from lighting one in case there was some sort of dangerous gas present in whatever room of horrors I now found myself.

When I stepped off the bottom stair, I was in complete blackness. Whatever light had filtered in from the floor above was lost in the curve of the staircase, as I was lost in the darkness of the morgue.

My hand felt along the stone wall, blind and cold, until it touched upon something that had no right to exist in so ancient a chamber. Almost allowing myself a shot's worth of relief, I flicked the light switch, preparing myself for the terror that awaited me. I had never seen a morgue in person, but I knew how they were meant to look: white, sterile, walls lined in cabinets that each contained the bloated corpse of what was once a human being.

Rows of orange electric lights activated in sequence, and I shielded my eyes from the glare. But when my sight adjusted to this newfound vision, it was not a mortuary I had to accept. This room, this subterranean chamber, was not a morgue. It was something far worse.

I could not say, in that first moment, what purpose exactly this room served. It was vast, its floor thirty feet below ground level, the stone walls stretching out beneath what must have been the entire footprint of the library, if not further into the campus. The area was filled with equipment, what seemed to be a combination of modern medical implements and ancient tools that could have been as old as the school itself. Though I could not seem to distinguish where one device ended and one began, I recognized that everything seemed to be made out of either well-polished stainless steel, or a cloudy, aging brass.

A long, precious moment was spent in orienting myself, in breathing, in taking in the confusion of this hidden world. Forcing myself to remain calm and to think, I managed to separate one object from the mass of structures and devices: a vat of some sort, not ten feet away from me, held off the ground by three thick metal legs. From below, I couldn't see what the vat contained; but a ladder was set up against it, and, with heart threatening to burst through my ribcage, I began to climb.

When I reached the top, I could see down through the conical plastic of the lid, into the depths of the vat. At first, all I could see was blackness; but then, the horrid electric lights made themselves visible in the liquid, reflecting through the plastic and appearing distorted in what was contained below. The lights reflected back red, a deep, blackish crimson, and I realized, breath catching in my throat and hands threatening to let go of my perch, that the vat was filled with blood: gallons upon gallons of blood, more blood than could be found in a score of human beings. The ruby liquid was

churning in its vat, spun by some unseen device like some hellish centrifuge, forced to retain its liquid form and the lifepower it represented.

I choked, the contents of my stomach rushing the wrong way through my throat. But I managed to reach up and grab a cluster of tubes that extended from the vat, forcing myself to stay balanced, forcing the ladder to remain still beneath my feet. I turned my head and retched onto the floor, careful not to lean too far over. When there was nothing left in my stomach to purge, I wiped my mouth on my sleeve and realized there were tears in my eyes. I had yet to discover exactly where this blood had come from, or why it was being collected; yet I knew, I knew more than anything, that there would be no coming back from this, no logical explanation, no doctor or professor who could explain that this was a perfectly normal procedure.

Remembering that my time was limited, I let go of the tubes and took a step down the ladder; but then, I froze, a chill running through me as I realized what I had been holding on to for support.

A number of plastic tubes sprouted from the center of the conical lid, one of them running upwards and disappearing through a hole in the ceiling. The tube was filled with blood, and I could now see that Simon, my friend, was not being fed from a reserve to replenish his lifeforce; the blood was flowing down, down from the first floor, down out of Simon, and spurting into this vast receptacle, my friend's blood mixing with that of God knows how many other people or animals, how many innocents, how many patients who had trusted their lives to this establishment and had their trust thrown back in their face.

I choked again, but there was nothing left to throw up. Forcing myself to keep on, knowing this was the only chance I would ever have to understand what was really happening, I looked closer at the other tubes and saw that they were all full: but the blood in these plastic arteries was running out of the vat, not into it.

Slowly, carefully, I climbed back down the ladder, my dress shoes coming to rest in the puddle of my own vomit. I stepped around the vat, more of these devices and – dear God, no – more large receptacles coming into view. My entire body tingled with the horrible realizations, one after the other, as everything I had felt about this school was thrown into sharp relief: the relief of knowing I was not imagining things after all, and, somewhere deep in my subconscious, the relief that if I was caught sneaking around, I may not have to worry about these memories very much longer.

The tubes ran down from more than one vat, blood pumping through them and towards an unseen destination that was hidden from me behind an olive green device, beside which was a trash bin filled with stained green plastic bags.

I moved around the machine, my footsteps echoing loud in the vast stone chamber, bracing myself against what I would find at the end of these plastic arteries. The University, I now saw, was an organism itself: an organism whose veins were hidden behind stone walls, pumping blood to and from this room, the heart of the thing, the central organ that maintained the life of this establishment by feeding off those who believed they were safe.

More and more of these tubes revealed themselves as I came around the machine, an odor of vinegar reaching my nostrils, until I saw what it was, I saw where the blood was going, I saw the corpse bleached white beneath the electric orange glow.

I found myself unable to breathe. So this chamber was a morgue after all: but not a morgue where the dead are allowed to rest, perfectly preserved until those who had loved them in life could come and take them away to be mourned. This was a morgue where the dead were prodded and bled, their bodies drained of its once-lifegiving substance and filled again with that from another being.

I tried to stop myself, tried to turn and run and not come any closer to the naked corpse laying on its table, but my feet did not obey. I stepped forward, motivated by terror, somehow driven by fear in a paradox that would not let me run.

It was only when I was within feet of the corpse that I recognized him. His hair and beard had been shaved off, the rest of his body hair chemically removed – it was only through his injuries that I could say his identity. The pale body was missing three fingers on his left hand, and a slice across his scalp had been stitched back together.

It was him. The man from the ambulance. Six months had passed since he was given over for medical care, and yet here he was, hidden away under the ground, dead but not buried, his desecrated corpse acting as a lifegiving battery for the monstrous evil that was my University.

At first, the man's identity had captivated my attention. But now I remembered the tubes.

Where Simon had been given the honor of a needle and tape, this man required no such fine treatment. Both forearms had been sliced open and a tube slid up inside, the plastic rubbing against his very bones, his natural arteries and the artificial ones forming a continuous vein from his heart to the vats of blood throughout the chamber. The same had been done on the soles of his feet: two tubes reached inside his body, forcing the red liquid back inside, pushing it against its natural flow, inflating his heart to a dangerous capacity.

And where I believed this man to be a white corpse, frozen in the chill of rigor mortis, I now saw I was wrong: he was not pale, no more than any living man. His cheeks were a ruddy pink, his arms and legs and stomach taking on a rosy hue as his body filled with more blood than was ever

meant to exist within a human being: blood not only his own, but Simon's as well, and that of every student who had graced these halls for God only knows how long. Blood that was tinged with the vinegar used to preserve it, and whatever uterine lining and microscopic fibers of cotton could not be separated out. Blood that was meant to leave the body and never return, blood that was never meant to be lost in the first place. It was an unholy compound, a mixture of all different forms of our liquid souls, a blasphemous experiment that spit upon the very nature of humanity and the divine plan of the Almighty.

I could not see it, nor did I have the time to find it, but I knew, I knew as well as I had known this school was not what it seemed, that somewhere in that basement, somewhere inside one of these incubation chambers or cooling devices, there sat rows upon rows of glass tubes, nine hundred at least, each labeled with a name and a blood type. One of those tubes bore my name, and I had hardly attempted to stop myself becoming part of this dark harvest.

It was only after I had fully accepted the reality of this experiment, the true state of this innocent man, that I realized he wasn't alone. Hidden behind more machinery, more receptacles and vats of blood, was another naked body: this one a woman, also shaved bald and devoid of body hair, a stitched-up scar stretching across her face. And more, beyond her: there were more, more innocent human beings who had come to be helped, come to be saved but had found only torture and damnation. The bodies were all sterile and nude – and they were all pink, all inflated with that unnatural concoction of life and death, pumped from one body to the next and recycled through the tireless machinery. There was a chance, perhaps one in nine hundred, but a chance nonetheless, that all of these bodies, all of these corpses, contained some of my own blood as well as my friends'. I was part of this, whether I chose it or not. *They were part of me.*

A sound came from behind me and I turned quickly, hardly able to stand upright for the weakness in my body. I looked around the machinery, but no one was there; no one had come down the stairs, and as far as I knew, Doctor Kendrick was in the lavatory or struggling with the door.

But that sound, again, still behind me. I turned around – and my heart seemed to stop.

The man, the dead man, the corpse pumped full of blood that threatened to burst through his wounds and tear his skin, was looking up at me, his eyes lined in red, wide and afraid and pleading.

The sound came again. A guttural sound from deep within the dead man's body, down in a place where the organs had been pushed past their natural limit, shoved together and grinding against one another, not allowing any room for the soul.

His lips were slightly parted, but no human sounds came out. He groaned again, his red face totally blank, his eyes expressionless and staring at me. He knew I was here. He could see me. He was begging me, begging that I end whatever torturous half-existence he had been thrust into.

I stepped back. The man, the corpse, the wretched punctured *thing* groaned louder, louder with every step I took away from it, its eyes barely visible to me but still pleading, still begging, still using whatever infinitesimal speck of humanity remained behind to shout, to cry, not words but an animalistic scream of misery and terror. I could stop it. He – *it* – thought I could help. That I could end its suffering. But I couldn't. I couldn't return to its side, I couldn't even look at the twisted mockery of the human form.

Its cry, like that of a wild beast, scraped on my ears like a knife as I turned and ran, barely missing the vats and machinery in my route to the staircase, tears running down my face and bile rising in the back of my throat.

I didn't bother turning off the lights as I dashed up the stone steps – in reality, I don't believe I even remembered. The next thing I knew I was in the medical center, closing the hidden door, the cry of the half-human monstrosity finally cut off, if not from my mind then at least from my ears.

I slumped against the mirror, the tears still flowing, my mind pushing away any conscious thought. All that was left in me was fear, misery, and hatred: in that, at least, I was the same as those poor wretches who shared my blood.

The sound that drew me back to myself was, thankfully, something normal, something often heard in one's daily life: the sound of a hand pounding on a door. I looked up and remembered where I was, remembered that I had locked Doctor Kendrick out. I knew what I had to do, but I wasn't sure I was strong enough to keep my revulsion in check.

I opened the door and allowed Doctor Kendrick to storm in. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded. "I left for *five minutes* –" He stopped when he saw my tears. Though he tried to hide his thoughts, the expression that crossed his face in that instant told me all I needed to know about Doctor Kendrick and his role at this University. "What's wrong?" he asked. I was meant to believe he was actually concerned.

"It's –" The words caught in my throat, and I forced myself to remember what was at stake here: if I slipped at all, gave any indication that I knew what was going on... "It's Simon," I said, wiping my eyes. "I'm just worried about him. I'm sorry I locked the door, I just wanted to be alone with him for a minute."

The doctor regarded me, and I elected not to meet his gaze. Finally he seemed to decide that I was telling the truth, that I had no suspicions of my own. He put a fatherly hand on my shoulder,

and I utilized every last speck of willpower to not shrink away from the hand that had plugged half-dead innocents full of tubes. “Why don’t you go back to your dorm,” Doctor Kendrick suggested. “Get some rest. You can come back here in the morning, and Simon will be right as rain.”

I nodded, retaining my miserable expression, though inside I knew that I had won. Without another word, I turned and left the medical center, stepping out into what had become a light flurry. I suppose it was too much to hope that they didn’t have another key to the University’s heart, but the absence of the iron skeleton in my pocket may at least cause them a small inconvenience.

I found Angie in the great hall, talking with her friends. Any holiday cheer or festive excitement was gone from her face, and she looked worried above anything else. I could imagine her friends were telling her to stay put, and not to go looking for me.

The dance was back in order, and I had to push through swinging couples to reach the other end of the hall. As I felt them brush against me on all sides, my body grew cold and my skin began to crawl. Their blood. Their lifeforce. Their DNA. It was being mixed and augmented and pumped into someone else. I felt like Jesus, as he was touched by the old woman in the crowd: every time I felt the brush of someone else’s skin, I could feel a little part of my lifeforce going out of me. But it wasn’t their fault, I reminded myself. They didn’t even know. They were as unaware as I had been an hour earlier. I knew this to be true, but it didn’t stop my natural revulsion as I looked upon the people I had called my friends.

When Angie caught sight of me, I could see her face light up. Through her well-applied makeup, I could see a flush rising in her face: a natural reaction of the blood in her body, the blood that had been stolen from her on the first day of school and was stolen again every month. I swallowed down a retch at the sight of her innocent blush.

“Where did you go?” she asked. “Is Simon –”

“We need to talk,” I said, my voice low. Her friends reacted poorly to this.

Angie suddenly looked worried again. “What’s wrong?”

“I need to talk to you,” I said again, a tinge of urgency creeping into my voice. The only way I could fight back panic and disgust was to push on, to keep forcing myself to move forward towards the eventual end of this nightmare. “Alone.”

“Okay,” she murmured. I knew what she was thinking. She thought I was acting with the mind of some innocent student who believed romantic relationships to be on the highest level of importance. But I wasn’t. I was trying to save her. It may be too late for Simon, and for the seven-fingered man and the one-eyed woman, and perhaps for the rest of the University, but I believed I could still save Angie.

I took her hand in mine and turned towards the crowd. Any number of eyes were turned away, focused on their dancing partners and their festivities, failing to notice the boy who had left in a hurry and come back in a panic; but four sets of eyes, I saw almost immediately, were watching me.

At different points in the great hall, four professors had been stationed to chaperone the holiday dance. All night they had watched the students with blank faces, refusing to allow even a little bit of warmth or emotion into their eyes. But now, they weren't looking at the other students – they were looking at me, and they were looking at Angie.

Perhaps they were just curious, I told myself. Perhaps they were wondering why I left, and what happened with Simon. Perhaps they were...

But no. Even from across the hall, with dancers moving back and forth between us, I could see it in their eyes. Suspicion. And if they were suspicious, it meant they could guess where I had gone. What I knew. And for the first time since staring into the dark depths of that tank, I allowed myself to believe that there were worse possibilities than what was happening to Simon.

I dropped Angie's hand. Without turning around, without dropping the gaze of the nearest professor, I said, in the loudest conversational tone I could muster, "Meet me on the quad in ten minutes."

No response came. I could feel Angie behind me, her body heat rising and her emotions conflicted.

"Angie?" I said aloud. I was sure the professors could hear. "Did you hear me?"

I could feel her nod behind me, then correct herself: "Yes."

"Ten minutes," I repeated. Then, breaking eye contact with the professor, I again made my way through the dancing crowd and out into the snow.

I have no memory of walking down to the village that night, and to this day I think that may be for the best. Almost a kilometer trekked in five degrees below, wind and snow threatening to blow me off course or hide the road under my feet, nothing but my dress shoes and secondhand suit to keep me warm. I believe I must have kept my mind a blank for that kilometer, all my baser instincts working to shield my conscious mind from the thoughts and memories that would have driven me to abandon hope, to lay down my life for nothing as I laid down my body in the snow-covered road.

But I did keep my mind blank, and I did not give up hope, and well past one in the morning an old man whose father had raised him to take over the village grocery was woken from his bed in the upstairs loft by the desperate poundings of an almost-frozen young man on his front door. That young man was drenched in snow, ice glazed across his clothes; he would later feel the effects of frostbite in his fingers, and was grateful that they were healed without the need for

amputation. Though it wouldn't have made much difference either way: my body was intact, but my mind was distorted and afraid. And worst of all, my blood had been mixed and given away without my leave. Whether that had an impact on my soul – whether the soul is truly a thing that exists – I still cannot say.

But that other young man, the one driving north with his mother – I wish I could meet him again. I wish I could take him by the throat and tell him that everything was fine, that his life was a gift from God. The home he thought too small, the mother he thought too abrasive, the friends he thought too vapid; none of these purported insults to his existence came close to the blasphemous crime, the assault on human nature that he would later experience.

That young man, the one who used to be me – he had everything, yet he believed he had nothing. He believed the world had turned against him, that he was the universe's plaything; so with nothing left to hold dear, all he had to lose was his own blood.