

2/21/22

At 7:00AM Celia's alarm goes off, and downstairs the espresso machine turns on and quietly starts making a cup of coffee. Celia rolls over to turn the alarm off, and Valerie, still asleep, mumbles something and puts an arm around Celia. Celia laughs, turns off the alarm, and says, "You can't get me to stay. Go back to sleep, love." before getting out of bed.

Celia gets dressed and goes downstairs, where a warm cup of coffee is waiting for her. From a speaker on the kitchen island, an electronic voice says, "Good morning, Celia."

"Good morning, Alfred!" Celia responds, picking up the mug from where it rests under the coffee drip and replacing it with another, empty mug, "How's the weather?"

It takes less than a second for the AI to find a local weather report. "Cloudy with an 80% chance of rain, slight chance of freezing rain. Low of 18, high of 36."

"Blech." Celia responds. She likes to think of Alfred as a stone-faced butler, showing only a hint of a smile in response to her childish banter. She takes a sip of coffee. "What day is it?"

"Wednesday." Alfred says, and just as she is opening her mouth to ask a follow-up, it adds, "Garbage day is tomorrow."

"Right!" Celia says, "Very good! Thank you." She knows that it only feels like it knew what she was thinking because she's asked "when is garbage day, again?" the last three Wednesdays in a row, but she's still surprised at how often it feels like Alfred has real thoughts. She

takes another sip of coffee, and then says, "Remind me to get groceries on the way home."

"Okay." the AI says in reply.

At 7:30 AM, upstairs, Valerie's alarm goes off. She fumbles with it for a minute before hitting snooze.

[WRITTEN 3/6, transferred here from my morning pages/diary because when I sat down to start writing I didn't realize I would be writing a rough draft.]

"THE END IS NIGH!" he shouted, standing atop the shoebox, waving his antennae wildly. Nobody looked at him as the hordes of roaches scurried past. He continued, "IT'S ALMOST UPON US: DOOMSDAY! THE END OF THE WORLD!" [etc]

[Another roach passing by shouts something mocking, which gets some laughter from the crowd.]

[Oh my god why are there so many roaches in the wall of this house. I'm so concerned. Maybe it's actually a junkyard instead. Are there a lot of roaches in junkyards?]

[Prophet Roach: "You'll see! You'll all be sorry!" etc.]

[For later/end of story, (hopefully) with very Terry-Pratchett-esque energy:]  
And then, somewhere, in a room filled with screens and maps and long tables and men in dark suits, somebody pressed a button.

Then there was a bright light, and it got very, very hot.  
[etc description of atomic bomb]

Then in the rubble something stirred. A pebble rolled down the pile of debris, and from under a cinder block, eventually, a pair of [unbeseeming/innocuous] antennae appeared, and wiggled.

One by one the little brown roaches climbed to the top of the heap to survey the wreckage. Not a house nor tree nor fence nor dog nor person stood for as far as the eye could see. [deranged nursery rhyme vibes]

There was a laugh. A weak one, at first, that grew into a giggle, that erupted into a loud, uncontained guffaw. All the roaches turned to its source: atop the crushed and fritzing remnants of the

Cathode ray tube TV, between the crumpled silver antennae stood a single cockroach.

"I was right!" he cried, convulsing with throes of laughter, "It was the end! None of you believed me, but I was right!"

The roaches stared at him and looked at each other, their antennae waving gently in the atomic wind [is that a thing?] The mad prophet laughed and laughed and for miles of miles around his burbling chirps were the only sound. At length, he lost his breath, and his laugh turned to a sputter and then a whimper, and then to noiseless wheezing as he stood amidst the rubble. At length, another roach, one in the large crowd who had gathered, spoke:

"No, you idiot," it said, There was a sussurrus of clicking as the other roaches muttered their agreement. The objecting roach gestured to the wide world around them. "It's not the end," it said, "it's the beginning!"  
↳ What's even the point of the story? I feel a kind of existentialism around Prophet's cruel and ironic journey, that he was right after all but for the wrong place/time/people. But is that interesting enough of a cruel irony to be the ~~rain~~ rain point of a whole story? I mean, regardless, something like this silly thing will never be as good as The Rats of NIMH.

3/16/22

VALERIE WAS DRAGGED INTO A KIND OF GROGGY, GRAY consciousness at 7:08 AM by the beeping of an alarm clock. She rolled over, reaching and—  
—finding nothing. It wasn't until 7:15 that she realized the alarm was still going, and dragged herself over to the access point on the opposite side of the bed to turn it off. Dragged herself into that cold spot, that emptiness of half the bed, fumbling with the alarm, trying desperately to hit the right button and being unable to because she was just too tired, and then, when it was finally off, left her lying there. Cold. Alone. [ew. dramatic much?] Too tired to go back to her own part of the bed, where it was warm but too uncomfortable to fall back asleep. [I like the idea of Valerie → the AI and meeting it at Celia, in the middle.]

After a few moments lying there, she heard the shower turn on. Celia had liked to let the water warm for a few minutes before getting in, and after a while the house had learned to anticipate this, turning on the shower in advance so it was already warm by the time Celia wanted to get in. Valerie lay in the cold dim bedroom, thinking about the water bill. Yesterday Celia's alarm hadn't woken her, and by her usual 8:00 AM wake-up time, there'd been no hot water left. "Smart Home" indeed.

At 7:27 Valerie was awake enough to realize she wasn't going back to sleep. She got out of bed. Turned off the shower. Went downstairs into the kitchen, where a cold cup of coffee sat under the spout of the espresso machine [percolator?] Valerie ignored it and sat down at the island.

Good morning, Valerie. an electronic voice hummed through the closest speaker. Valerie ignored it. After a few moments, the voice, as if she'd responded, continued, Today's weather is partly cloudy, with a high of 47 and a low of 28.

"I didn't ask for the weather." Valerie said [coldly / irritated / maliciously.]

No response from the house. Valerie sighed and looked down at the screen embedded in the island. Sensing her eye contact, it flickered to life and pulled up the daily crossword. Valerie had completed it every day in a row for ~~the last~~ 487 days. She had stopped three days ago. She swiped the crossword away and checked her messages: 32

unread notifications. But the Smart Home had flagged only 3 as important.

Valerie ~~opened the first one~~, didn't want to read them in the kitchen. She went into the living room, where there were still empty glasses from the night before. The Roomba spun its wheels helplessly, stuck on the wadded-up sleeve of her jacket, left on the floor. Valerie sat in ~~the~~ her corner of the couch and moved the empty cups off the side table, ignoring the House's notifications, sensing the cups' RFID tags, reminding her to return them to the dishwasher. She Opened Important Notification #1: a text from mom.

Hi sweetie, hope you're holding up okay. Can't imagine what you're going through. Give me a call if you want to talk. It must—

Valerie was distracted by the voice of the smart Home emanating from a speaker on the mantelpiece. Valerie, Celia wanted me to remind you that today is garbage day.

Valerie stared into space, thinking, it is a garbage day. She didn't realize she hadn't replied until the house asked, so you want me to remind you again in an hour?

"No." Valerie said curtly. She sighed, mustered her energy, and rose. She drifted into the garage, where the garage door began opening automatically. In her pajamas, she walked to the cold curb. By the time she was back inside her skin was

mumb from the wind. As she closed the door behind her, she realized with panic that she could hear the coffee machine running, and frantically ran into the kitchen, swearing, too late to stop the house from pouring a second cup of coffee into the already-full, cold, first cup. She slammed buttons on the coffee-maker until it stopped pouring, dumped the mug into the sink, and pressed a button on the closest access panel to summon the mop, while she wiped down the counter. She didn't bother to change her shirt; the sleeves now stained brown. She returned to the living room exhausted, and lethargically glanced at the rest of her mom's message.

It must be good to be home, at least.

Upstairs, Valerie's 8:00AM alarm began to go off. Valerie sat on the couch, not moving to turn it off.

3/19/21

She was a house-flipper, and she'd just struck gold. It was a Victorian-style home out in the suburbs, a few acres of garden neglected-garden-turned-to-forest on each side shielding it from the neighbors. The only evidence of its existence was the driveway, a small road with a bit of rock wall on either side, the remnants of a gate. Three floors, four bedrooms, three-and-a-half bath. Old and dusty, and in surprisingly good shape considering it hadn't been lived in for years. She'd managed to get it for cheap from a company that'd bought the land with the intention of developing condos, who hadn't realized

there was a house there when they'd bought it. She thought they hadn't know what they were missing.

She had to go a weird way around the back the first time she went inside, because the key she'd been given—a large brass thing that looked more like a prop in a young adult fantasy novel than a house key—hadn't worked in the rusty lock on the front door. [but perhaps it WILL work on that strange door in the cellar...!]  
↳ I don't know. This isn't going anywhere until I figure out WHAT is in the house and WHY any of this is happening. Liking a concept does not a story make. \_\_\_\_\_

4/16/22

TWO PEOPLE STOOD AT THE EDGE OF A CEMETARY. One was a man, the other a woman. The man was older—not ancient, but definitely, as the other Hunters said behind his back, "past his prime." The woman was no older than 17, but she was often told (by men she was, in fact, trying to avoid, more often than not) that she looked older. And the men weren't referring to the look in her eye that was so old that most people never grew old enough to get it, although she did have that look, and so did the man. And they both wore long black jackets.

It was near midday, but a New England fog had settled in, dimming the light to a mild, cold gray. The two were standing near the cemetery's entrance, and they were waiting. The woman kept checking her pocketwatch. Watching the minutes tick by was more interesting than looking at the tombstones, or at the outside of the small church and the thin woods around it. She wondered how much longer they'd be waiting before proceeding without him, when she spotted a figure coming toward them up the hill, and the man said, "That's him." and started walking down the hill. The woman promptly re-hooked the watch into her chateleine and followed.

"Sid, old friend," the older man said, when the distance between them drew to a close, "How are you?"

"Not too bad. Good to see you, Luca." the newcomer replied, drawing the older man into a hug. The woman looked at him with interest, standing a bit back. He seemed to be only a few years older than herself, and was quite short—shorter than herself, even. Light brown hair, blue eyes, and clean-shaven—hardly what she pictured as a Hunter. He wore their signature long black coat, but underneath a lighter garment with large pockets that looked somewhat like a butcher's jacket. And while Luca's accent was distinctly Romanian, she couldn't pin down exactly what Sid's accent was. She got as far as "possibly from Sweden a long time ago" when her thoughts were cut off by Luca introducing her.

"Sid, let me introduce you to Elizabeth Black. She's the vampire-hunting prodigy I told you about."

"Liz." she ~~explained~~ clarified, and she put out her hand.

Sid took it in a handshake, seemingly unaware that this was not the usual way to greet a lady, and said, "It's a pleasure. Let's hope you live up to Luca's depiction of you." He smiled, patted her on the shoulder, and said, "Shall we?" while looking up toward the graveyard. Then he started trotting up the hill without waiting for an answer.

Liz stared after him ~~with a~~ slack-jawed, as Luca let out a deep sigh. When he was out of earshot, Luca



said, "Don't let him get to you. He treats everyone that way."

"Everyone?" Liz asked. She and Luca started following him up the hill.

"Everyone." Luca said tiredly, and added, "You should have seen him at the Pennsylvania Governor's banquet three years ago."

Liz snorted. "Good God." She watched Sid trudge up hill ahead of them, his shorter butcher's coat over his long black wool coat. "My parents would hate him."

"He does grow on you. Well, on some people." Luca said defensively, but Liz shook her head vigorously.

"That was a compliment, not an insult. I hold no stock in the opinions of people who exhume their children."

It was Luca's turn to be thrown into social uncertainty. After a moment he shrugged and replied, "Fair enough."

Sid by this point had reached the top of the hill, looked over the churchyard, and stopped to turn around and wait for them.

"Only on time when you're already late, ah?" Luca ~~said~~ called out to him.

Sid smiled widely. "Well, one of us has to walk at a normal speed. Otherwise the other wouldn't be able to look so menacing and broody."

Luca laughed loudly, in a way Liz hadn't seen ~~before~~ him do before, and as they reached the top of the hill he slammed his large, calloused hand down on Sid's small shoulder. "What would I do without your insights?"

"You'd be lost," Sid said, plainly, still grinning like the

Devil, "Or, at least, you'd be walking very, very slowly."

Luca laughed again, and then Sid gestured to the churchyard and added, "Speaking of my insights—this is the place you wanted me to check out, no?"

"Yes," Luca replied, "Liz, would you care to fill him in?"

Liz nodded, and explained as the three walked through the cemetery. "Four months ago, there was a minor landslide just outside of town, a few miles from here. A couple kids were playing along the shore nearby, and when they went to investigate, they found a body."

"Recent?" Sid asked.

Liz shrugged. "Not a skeleton. It'd definitely been dead for a while. The locals think it's the body of one Don Remington, a local hunter—uh, trapper, that is; not a monster hunter—who disappeared a few years ago. He was widely disliked, had a short temper."

"What's that got to do with it?"

Luca sighed. "Sid—"

"No, seriously," Sid said, "Let me test your protégé. Why is it important that he was disliked?"

Luca shot Liz an apologetic look, she kept her cool, and said, "Because when weird things started happening, people already had a corpse they were eager to blame it on."

Sid nodded. "Hm. Impressive. You'd be surprised at how few hunters—capital H—actually get the point."

"She's a natural," Luca said, more annoyed at Sid than proud of Liz. "Please continue."

"The priest here gave the body a proper burial." Then he

died, one week later, of consumption."

Sid frowned. ~~and said~~ "Hm."

"In the next few weeks, sheep and other livestock started getting sick. But since no families or large numbers of people got consumption, no one pegged it as a vampire attack until last month, when all the crops died. That's when ~~they~~ they decided to track down ~~me~~ Luca and me."

"And then things got weird, right?" Sid asked, "

"Because I got Luca's letter not long after that."

"Yes," said Liz, hesitantly. "When we arrived, we

found out that people have been having dreams. Nightmares where they hear a voice, and see a man who sits on their chest. But unlike a vampire, the man is fully a corpse, not lifelike, "and no one who had dreams of him is sick."

"Like a revenant?" Sid asked.

"I don't know what that is." Liz said flatly. Luca took a quick step forward to stand between Sid and Liz and said, "It's a kind of ghostly thing. And sure, Sid, that part of it is like a revenant, but wait. It gets stranger."

"Some of the people getting these dreams said they could smell the rotting flesh, and that the smell was still there when they woke up. Then, the corpse started bringing rocks with it."

"Rocks?"

"A large stone, maybe ten inches wide or so. It was just holding them at first, and then it ~~was~~ in the dream, it put

the stone on one man's chest, and..." Liz trailed off as Sid looked at something at the edge of the graveyard and suddenly changed course.

"And?" Sid asked, as if nothing had changed.

"... And when he woke up, it was still there." Sid, with a jarring speed, lunged forward, picked up a rock, and threw it with startling accuracy at something in the trees, which began squawking angrily. After a few moments Liz realized it was a raven.

"Get out of here!" Sid shouted. He readied another rock, but the raven took off, flying slightly askance, and Sid dropped the rock again.

"I see you brought your friend." Luca said.

"It's not my friend." Sid seethed, "Sorry, Liz. This raven keeps following me everywhere."

"How do you know it's the same raven?" Luca asked. His tone was joking, but Sid didn't joke back.

"It's bad luck. Ravens in general."

Luca scoffed and rolled his eyes. Sid didn't seem to notice.

"Sorry." Sid said again. "Anyway, that leaving the rock—that's odd. I know sometimes ghosts can move objects around, but I've never heard of a vampire doing that, in a dream. And the fact that it doesn't seem to be feeding off of them is strange, too." he started walking again, in the direction they had been, mostly pacing to think. As the others began to follow, he said, "You mentioned earlier that it was talking to some people—do you know what it

was saying?"

Liz shook her head. "It wasn't saying anything. It was a disembodied voice — though, I guess if it were talking no one would know, since it's missing its lower jaw. But regardless, it's all just a bunch of weird sounds — like, wailing and such." ~~It was~~

~~everybody was remembering the experience~~  
"Huh." Sid said. He thought for a moment. "Well — sounds like an interesting case. I'm in. Where do we start?"

"How about the scene of this morning's crime?" Luca said, dryly, and he grabbed Sid by the shoulder. Sid stopped and stumbled, confused, and then struggled to get his footing as he turned away from Liz and looked forward. The graveyard was at the top of a hill, and they'd been walking downward for a bit, but directly in front of Sid's feet was a sudden drop, where the dew-wet grass gave way to a harsh ~~to~~ gash of dirt. There'd been a landslide. And at the bottom of the hill, in the mound of dirt, was a coffin, ~~it had snapped in~~ ~~half on the ground~~ tilted upright against the slope.

It was empty.

After a moment's silence, Sid turned back toward Luca and Liz. He was smiling.

"Oh," he said, "So this is going to be one of those Hunts."