

Xanadu

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Fiction

There is a train that runs from the town where I was born all the way to the capital, on rails that were laid for the most part right along the lake. It is fast and almost soundless, like the breath of the people who watch it pass, and its roof is made entirely of mirrored glass, so that from the outside you just see an impenetrable gleam, but from within, you can admire all the surroundings as if you were out in the open air.

This stretch said to be one of the most magnificent train rides in the world, and I don't disagree. Our town is small and inconspicuous; it is one of those places where time passes slower, where people come to rest, and to forget, and not to be bothered by the turmoil that is all around. Two public primary schools, a little library, a lot of concrete housing blocks and a few private homes with lush gardens and berry bushes surrounding them, three department stores, a hospital and a police station that has been fast asleep for as long as I can remember – that is all there is. Around it are hills and forests that turn vermilion in the first weeks of autumn, three narrow streets leading north, south and west. A few holiday houses where the well-off from the capital come to spend their holidays. Cycling tracks and a local museum complete the kind of serene emptiness that has become scarce and scarcer nowadays. In the afternoon, flocks of birds fill our pure blue skies, and from twilight on, there are the milk-white outlines of singing bats. This town is a haven – the place that you're always drawn back to, no matter how far you travel, no matter how much you see, because hot chocolate at sundown will never taste quite as wonderful as it does here.

If you board the train, that huge crystal pendulum that oscillates between my hometown and the capital, it takes you first deep into nowhere land, through fields and forests and fields again, through a long brickwork tunnel underneath the mountain pass, after which the color of the sky changes all so subtly. You see it all from underneath its glass roof, you feel the sunlight on your face while you're sipping sparkling wine, seated comfortably on leather and silk. After you leave the tunnel, the sun is brighter all of a sudden, the air is humming like a string suspended tightly, and you catch your first glimpse of the lake.

There are a few fishing towns along the shore, and from the train you sometimes discern the fishermen drawing in their nets at dawn. Sometimes it is fish they catch – carp and catfish, cherry trout – but more often than not they also bring home more peculiar things: bells and bottles with poems in them, golden swords and chandeliers that, if you light them, will keep on burning even under water.

More interesting than the fishermen in their little boats – of which some are painted in bright colors, with eyes on their bowels and feathers along the sides – are the sirens. You only see them at certain times, and only then if you are lucky: in the first rays of morning light, under a full moon or in the silence before a brewing storm. They slouch lasciviously on the stony beaches, stark naked but for a wash of hip-length hair, their bodies impossibly pale and beautiful with full breasts, luminous eyes and lips as red as the drowning sun.

The glass roof of the lakeside train is soundproof, so you never hear them sing. They are exclusively visual to the traveler – you see them glare at the passing wagons, see them moving their lips, and sometimes, on very rare occasions, you see one of the fishing boats veering too close to their lairs, see the fishermen suddenly standing spellbound, their features entranced, their bodies shaking under an erection that buckles their pants, leaping into the water of the lake but forgetting to swim, neither waving at the train rushing by nor calling for help, but simply sinking to the ground where none but the sirens themselves know what happens to them afterward.

The sirens are under protection of the law, part of our cultural heritage or something like that, so they can do all they please. Several years ago, the family of a drowned fisherman once stuffed their ears with wax, went down to the beach, poured a gallon of petrol over one of the sirens and set it ablaze. They got twenty-two years under max security each, and nobody has ever tried to interfere with the natural order of things ever since.

I heard that at the capital, they sometimes sell CDs with recordings of the siren songs, but also that they sound atrocious coming from electric speakers, that there is no magic in them, and no harmony at all. Only from the lips of a real siren does that music unfold its splendor. Sadly, nobody who has ever heard their song has lived to tell of it.

I would like nothing more than to hear that music once in my life, myself. Sometimes, I imagine what it would be like if the train went off the rails, if it fell to the side and its glass roof burst into a million pieces. I imagine how happy I would be lying there between the glistening shards, listening, finally dying to the music of the lake.

The house that I grew up in was a seven-story cube of concrete, with flowerpots in front of the windows, but more of them were empty than abloom. We lived on the fifth floor, seven people in four rooms. From my sister and I's bedroom window, you could see the main street with its candy shops and one of the two department stores, a barren field in which children sometimes built forts out of old wooden boards and duct tape, but little else.

Nevertheless, I was happy. That window, that view, everything about that apartment had promise. There was always the hope that one day I would be able to go out, move out, and learn to see everything else.

In the flat below ours lived two witches. Their names were Mrs. Bloom and Mrs. Spindelson, but of course we would only ever call them Mrs Broom and Mrs Spider, and I have a strong suspicion that those were also the names that they used between themselves. Mother used to warn us about them when she was still alive ("You should never talk to our neighbors downstairs, they're witches!"), but I never really understood what that actually meant until so much later. There are things that aren't meant for children's ears, things that government officials and policemen and dutiful parents should be concerned about, but that would only increase the nightmares that we already had anyhow, more often than not.

Barely a year before we moved in, Mrs. Broom and Mrs. Spider snatched one of the kids from the second floor, one Stacey Breckenridge. Apparently, they found her playing on the front lawn one morning and offered her candy, gingerbread and Turkish delight, the whole palette. Either Stacey hadn't heard the stories growing up, or she felt oh-so-smart and considered them to be nothing more than that: stories, meant to frighten dumb children.

She followed the witches upstairs into their flat where the curtains were always drawn, where there was an enormous kettle simmering on the stove and the neighborhood cats went in and out to spend long afternoons brooding over books that no human eye could read. None know what exactly happened to Stacey thereafter – witches value their privacy above all else, and their precise culinary preferences have been subjected to speculation for centuries – but she surely was never seen again. All that remained of her was a pink ribbon lying on the front lawn.

Sometimes when we slept at night with our shutters closed, we could hear Mrs. Broom and Mrs. Spider flying by our windows on rusty harks and pitchforks, chattering madly with the wind and vanishing into the hills where they'd meet their sisters for dances in the full moon light, blazing bonfires and frolicking Fauns, and babies fried in olive oil and all. They would shed their fragile, worn appearance and dance more passionately than any human ever could, before they'd return home in the first light of day and assume their spinster-masks once more.

They would also perform services sometimes: brew love potions, heal diseases, make warts and make jealous lovers disappear. However, since they were the only known witches in our town, their rates were unreasonably high, and my parents had never had money or black goats to give away, so they'd never even considered asking them for help.

Witches can grow very, very old. I strongly assume that Mrs. Broom and Mrs. Spider were already there long before our concrete block was built, and they might still linger when it's torn down again, and fancy modern glass front houses are built in its stead. Maybe they'll just change their disguise a little – swap the patchwork coats and hairnets and the endless topography of wrinkles for black business skirts, red lipstick and heels – and keep going about their business as they always have.

Most other tenants of our block were ordinary humans, but there was also one old man who trained unnaturally large rabbits to fight in tournaments, and an old widow whose son was a world-famous architect of glass palaces in a major trading port down south.

As far as I remember, it was a perfectly normal place to grow up, with little amenities, but sufficiently peculiar if you only dared to look close enough.

Every Wednesday, my brother comes to visit me to bring me news and inquire about the state of things on my side.

“I was in the capital again this weekend, for a business meeting with some executives of FELIX.”

“Who’s Felix?”

“Not *who*, rather *what*. FELIX – Federation of Entrepreneurial Luck and Infallibility of Xanadu. They’re by far the largest player in the market of commoditized chances, at least on this side of the ocean. It’s practically impossible to keep a business running without their support.”

“What do they do?” I am eager to learn.

My brother goes rummaging through the pockets of his double-breasted suit jacket and produces a glistening golden coin that he places on the table in front of me. It has a five-pointed star minted on one side and the word *FELIX* on the other.

“They ... Well, in broad terms, they’re basically a bank. Just not for money.”

“But this is a coin.”

“It’s only a physical representation, really – you can get it as a print document or a simple digital transmission as well. As I said, it’s a crucial business, not just for entrepreneurship, but also in politics, for running a government and conducting international trade, all of that ...

“Let’s say your life is going really well for a while, you succeed in everything you do, you find the spouse of your dreams and all your financial troubles lie in the past. Then, you may want to go to *FELIX* and deposit some of that superfluous good luck that you don’t really need at the moment, you open an account, get a viable interest rate and go back home. Maybe things aren’t gonna run quite as smoothly anymore: you gotta make some effort to pay all the bills in time, you’ll get into a quarrel with your family, and your car breaks down on your way to work, but really nothing too serious – those little struggles are just part of life, are they not? And you’ll know that if worse comes to worst, you can go and withdraw your store

of good fortunes again any time you like. Who knows if some day you might be really, really glad about that?

“Now, of course that’s only how *FELIX* acquire capital to start with. The good thing about luck is that it multiplies. It substantiates, gets more reliable the longer it lasts. Let’s say you have a business idea, something that promises to be brilliant but is also somewhat of a risk, like ... like a cupcake factory that makes icing in the taste of your favorite songs, or a construction company that employs ogres – you don’t see them around here often because they’re just too much of a liability, if they’re not yet adapted to civilization they might just snatch a pretty young woman from the sidewalk and tear her to pieces with their bare hands on a bad day, but they can carry ten times the load of an ordinary man, and they’re surprisingly skilled in a masonry ... The point being, you go to *FELIX* to get a loan, so your chances at the beginning do work out and you can establish your brand, consolidate your position in the market and start expanding. Once you’ve gained some momentum you can do with a little less luck for sure, you pay *FELIX* back with interest, and everybody wins.”

“So this – this coin is what, physical luck? A loan?”

“Oh no, don’t expect too much from it – it’s more of a token, a free sample that they give out to high level customers. You just keep it for a while until it grows dull. It’ll make for some wonderful surprises, I’m sure. It’s just way too little for ... you know.”

“Yes. I thought so. But thank you anyway.”

“You have to be very, very careful doing business with *FELIX*, careful to never take out anything more than you really need, because they have means to get everything back that you owe them, if necessary at once. There was a major scandal last summer – one Murphy Silversmith, who was the lustrous young Secretary of Interior Relations, had privately taken out vast loans from *FELIX* for himself and his wife. I’m sure he was enjoying himself, doing lots of base jumping in his free time and, it turns out, also repeatedly banging his assistants without anything ever leaking to the press. He underwent three major surgeries without any complications, cancer free even though he smoked near seven packs a day, and plenty more ... Also, of course, his political career! You know what happened to him when he eventually failed to pay *FELIX* back in due time?”

“What happened?”

“His car went off track in early September on the coastal road – apparently there was an tiny oil spill – broke through the side rails, went over the cliff and got hit by lightning in mid-air. Apparently that very moment, he was holding his hand out the window with a cigarette in it, so the whole Faraday-thing didn’t help jack, and he and his wife both got electrocuted before they even hit the water.”

Another miracle that I would very much like to see, but probably never will: There is a city called Nouveau Ys at the westernmost edge of the world, right where the horizon doesn’t keep retreating from you anymore and the ocean falls down into blackness. Allegedly, it was founded by merchants in early medieval times because they sought a place that was both close to the ocean and endowed with the best possible protection from both pirates and rivaling states. Even with modern-day technology, it is absolutely jaw-dropping how people managed to build house by house vertically under the roaring cascades of several billion liters of seawater per minute, how they calculated currents and sheltered zones underwater, sealed the brickwork so perfectly that not a drop of moisture could get inside their spacious rooms and tunnels, and even included a great many of glass windows facing westwards through the perpetual spray. From Nouveau Ys, you can look down into the night sky, an infinite blackness that only becomes penetrable at a certain time in the evening when the sun has reached the end of its run and starts sinking down below the sea. For a few precious minutes, then, you see the sun filling the entire Nouveau Ys sky, vast and crimson-colored, an infernal halo that is matched in beauty by nothing here on earth. The sea looks like a plain of ruby, the waterfall a raging fire, the stars a radiant red like nowhere else on earth.

Only minutes later, the sun has passed below the city and was only visible as an obscure gloom from down where the ocean plummets into darkness, and the stars are once again everything that you can see from the windows of the underwater houses.

On a few rare occasions, you might even spot a whale that has been captured by the current and driven over the edge. It'll get carried out of the roaring water by its own momentum and suddenly find itself off the surface of the earth in zero gravity. It must be an absolutely awe-inspiring sight to see a sperm or blue whale, nearly thirty meters of gargantuan grace, glide into the night sky swifter than they ever could under water, circle in the open air, do a few playful loops and then drift back above the edge, where gravity will start taking control again, making the whale descend and finally dive back again into the ocean, accompanied by shoals of smaller fish that have become caught in the same experience, but that are hardly visible against the blackness of the sky.

Like many things astonishing and old, of course, Nouveau Ys also has its share of problems. For one, parts of the city are well over 500 years old and need constant renovation. No day passes without water starting to seep through some part of the brickwork in that part of the city. A whole army of carpenters is occupied 24/7 with patching up weak spots in the ancient walls. They're indefatigable and among their fellow citizens enjoy the status that military officers enjoy in other parts of the world, but even all their best efforts might eventually be in vain.

Ever since my brother told me about it, I can feel my heart grow heavy at the mere thought of it.

The world is getting warmer. That's old news, of course, and for most of us – most of them out there – it will probably mean having to build dams and move away from the coast, but it will mean fewer fields sparkling in winter snow, and more people dying from mosquito bites and thousands of refugees fleeing north from their homelands turned deserts.

For Nouveau Ys, however, it will mean something else altogether: A warming ocean, a shifting balance, and sooner or later – not even the best scientists are able to predict when exactly, it might be a matter of years or a century – a change of currents. The mighty oceanic streams will topple, the water will start moving in an unexpected course, and the city, which was so carefully built lee of all the major currents, might suddenly find itself exposed to them.

The architecture of Nouveau Ys is an example of the greatest early-renaissance craftsmanship, but even supported by the pinnacles of modern technology it would not stand

a chance. Sooner or later, it will be ripped from the bottom of the sea like a bird's nest from a breaking dam, and every one of its inhabitants, every brick and piece of masonry, every mural, every piece of stained glass will be washed down into never ending night.

I've fallen in love with a boy only once in my life, and all we ever did exchange was smiles. He was a gardener, I assume, or a poet who liked flowers: for several weeks he used to come into the courtyard with the marble fountain that I see from my window and take care of the lilac and laburnum bushes around it. He would trim and water them, check the soil they're growing on, and every now and then he would also just gently lift one of the branches to his nose and smell on those delicate flowers, his eyes closed and a look of perfect serenity on his face. Sometimes he would touch the petals with his lips – if on purpose or by accident I wouldn't know, but there was more love and tenderness in it than in any kiss between two human beings I have ever seen.

He would usually work for close to an hour, snipping away on protruding leaves and sprinkling pearlescent water over them, and after that he would take a few minutes of leisure time, which were by far my favorites. Sometimes he'd have brought an apple or a freshly baked croissant – I imagine it freshly baked, for the smell never found its way up to my window – and a bottle of coke whose hissing sound I would rather see than hear when he cracked it open.

Sitting on the edge of the fountain, his legs crossed, he would eat and drink and look around at his finished works, a young, curly-haired god after creation, a faun in his Arcadian realm, or maybe also a demon sent down there to tempt me, to lure me out of the safety of this room and into whatever freezing hell the courtyard with the fountain would suddenly turn into.

Sometimes his gaze would brush my window and find me sitting there, looking down at him. He'd smile, and after a few times, he'd even wave. He had a smile so wide and pure that it never failed to make me smile back. It raised faint memories of strawberries in spring,

or nights getting warmer and the air getting wilder with the aromas of life, of iced tea and of bumblebees whirling like humming specks of sunlight in the air.

His eyes, I would like to think, were cobalt blue, but the truth is that I don't remember anymore.

One single time, after waving at me, he threw up a kiss, as if I was one of his dear flowers. In the moment it felt like nothing, like the brush of a butterfly wing, and all it did was make the corners of my lips twirl a little more. But it would feel more and more real as time progressed, growing from the flap of a wing into a luscious summer storm, a memory that kept me awake at night, that made me forget my pain and endow all other memories of that time with a bittersweet glamor. The ruby-breasted robin that settled on my windowsill a little later that day might as well have been one of the sunbirds that can be found farther south, whose wings burst into golden flames when they try to attract a mate, so beautiful it was to me.

I think that for a while, back then, I was in fact happy.

Only I think it was Muriel Macello, the world-renowned illusionist, who once said: "Happiness is very much like a cat: it comes, it goes, and most of the time, you can actually discern a reason for that."

I never learned the name of the boy who gave me my first and only kiss. I never learned what his life was like outside of that hour he spent in the courtyard caring for the flowers, I never learned if there were others besides me that he smiled at. One day he simply didn't turn up anymore; and at first I believed that maybe he was sick, or that he had taken a day off. After a week or so I started thinking he might have gone on holiday – I imagined him wearing a flower-print shirt and sunglasses, looking down onto the sirens by the lake from underneath the crystal roof of a train, listening to the poets' trees of Shantaia, listening to the waves at a southern beach underneath the palm trees, or maybe dancing, drinking and making feverish love in the nightclubs of the capital. That last image stung my heart like a needle glazed with ice, but even that was preferable to the alternative of having no image at all.

I never saw him again, never learned where he went, what he's doing now, or if he even still exists. And an elderly woman now cares for the flowers in the yard. Her back is crooked with gout, so I don't think there is a chance she'll ever even look up and notice me in the window.

“Have I ever told you about that road trip I took with Cassandra last summer?” My brother is sitting on the edge of the bed, a chicken, avocado and mango sandwich in his hands that he seems to have entirely forgotten about.

“You haven't even told me that you went away at all!”

“I haven't? Then I apologize, it must have entirely slipped my mind ... It's about time I do then, isn't it?”

“It sure is.” I take a big gulp of water – my throat is extraordinarily dry today, so dry it starts to hurt.

“Well, it's not that great of a story, at least not the way I'll be telling it ... But I'll try my best. We took two weeks off from work in July. We flew from the capital down south to Agartha – not the most pleasant city I must admit, it gets murderously hot in summer, and the traffic is a nightmare. You can barely breathe at times or see the sky because of all the smog, and sometimes the sewage systems dry out, so ... Well, you can imagine. Or you can't, which is even better. They have some nice colonial architecture and are famous for their coffee, which they serve in cups hardly as big as a thimble but so strong it gives you the chills and makes your hair stand up on your head. Delicious stuff, I tell you – this watery beverage they serve around here should be ashamed to call itself coffee!” He licked his lips, his eyes trailing off for a moment after the memory. “Anyways, we treated ourselves for an afternoon and then got the hell out of that city as fast as possible. We had a hotel at the outskirts where the air is already a little cleaner, but not exactly a heavenly place either. We almost got mugged when we came back from the restaurant that evening. There's a lot of wraiths living in Agartha, almost fifteen percent of the population I believe, most of them migrants from farther south. I don't wanna say anything against them, beware, most of them are quiet

apparitions that keep among themselves, but every once in a while you get a bad egg – where don't you? – and they get involved in all sorts of shady business. Pardon the pun.” He smirks. “They materialize out of nowhere, all long black coats and hoods with nothing but darkness underneath, they float right through you, and once you've somewhat gotten over the shock – they're cold as ice, I tell you, you almost forget to breathe! – they've disappeared again, and your wallet or your phone right with them. I fortunately held on to mine in a reflex, but they got some cigarettes and 25 bucks from Cassandra's purse. You'll understand why we didn't wanna stay there a moment longer than we had to.”

I nod assertively.

“So the next morning we got a car, a pretty green Ford Passat, and took off to the surrounding hills. You get out of the city and into all these magnificent vineyards at first, then olive groves and finally just wild, wide mountain sides with the occasional farmers' village on them, built from orange sand stone and usually painted with all sorts of geometrical patterns. Someone, I don't remember who, once described them as ‘humans living in butterfly wings,’ and I don't think I could describe it any better than that.

“Our first goal was Kubla Keep. The pictures are all back home on my computer, I have to show you some of them when I'm here the next time! Imagine driving into a deserted valley in the middle of nowhere, nothing but orange rock and shrubbery on all sides, following road signs for hours, and then suddenly seeing this needle of polished white stone in front of you that seems to disappear into the sky! Its height is 215 meters, and it was built in the 13th century, can you believe that? And historians still argue about what it was actually used for, because it seems to be some kind of fortress, only that there are no doors and windows, no discernible way to get in our out, even though they found that the inside is hollow, with a huge stairwell leading all the way to the top. Some think it was used as a prison, others as a vault for treasure and opium, and others again think it was never meant for humans at all, more of an ancient shrine, some kind of sanctuary for the gods. In any case, it makes you feel so tiny ... We wanted to have a picnic at the foot of the tower, we brought bread and olives and smoked ham, but the whole scenery was so awing that we ended up just

staring at it for half an hour, walking around the tower at least seven times, and then leaving again.

“Next we went to the Oshmiri carpet manufactures, about a two days journey to the east. They used to be world famous up until early modernity, once of the richest places on earth – luxury industry before there was any industry in a narrower sense. Nowadays it’s touristy as hell, unfortunately, totally overrun in prime season, overpriced and with barely any locals living around there anymore, but it’s touristy for a reason: the architecture is simply gorgeous, the palaces of the ‘carpet kings’ some of the most extravagant buildings you have ever seen, and the fabrics they still produce there are sublime. Cassandra got a crimson-and-blue living room carpet that when you touch it makes you literally forget the world around you. We paid a small fortune for it, but there’s a guarantee that the colors won’t fade for twenty years, even if you place it in bright sunlight, so I don’t regret a dime of it.”

“And after that?”

“After that: spooky. No, that’s the wrong word, more ... *disconcerting*. Uh, one of the most disconcerting places I have ever seen. Another five hundred miles east from Oshmiri, when the mountains start flattening out and you reach the actual desert, there’s one of the only three angel graveyards known to men.”

“An angel graveyard?”

My brother bites his lips. “It’s a sad place. You’re asked to keep your distance – there’s a parking lot and a tourist view point above some kind of plateau with dark sand on it. Like, gray at the periphery, and it gets darker and darker towards the center, so that the middle of it is pitch black. Black as a nightmare. You look at it, and it is as if you’ve gone blind, there is nothing that you can discern in it, it could be a hole or a hump or a person standing there for all I know – it swallows all light and doesn’t reflect a single ray back at you. Eerie.”

“Why is it called an angel graveyard?”

“Because every once in a while, an angel will fall down there to die. They’re one of the biggest mysteries left to men, you know, the angels ... We know they exist and we know a little bit about what they look like, but other than that, nothing at all.”

“What do they look like?”

“Light. A somewhat humanoid shape engulfed entirely in this white aureole, bright without being painful to look at, beautiful even though you wouldn’t be able to say what the beauty exactly stems from. Don’t imagine a lamp – imagine a star – that comes a little closer – even though they have none of the distance of celestial lights. There’s something shaped like wings on their backs, even though they more, like, hover, they don’t actually flap them like a bird might do.

“If you stand at the vantage point for long enough you might just be lucky – or unfortunate – enough to see one falling. Sometimes it happens several times a day, then not anymore for weeks ... I believe there’s a group at Agartha University that keeps track of all instances, but even with latest analytical software, they have not been able to find any pattern whatsoever.

“We don’t know why they fall. We don’t know what they do before, where they come from, if they always look like that, if they procreate, if they grow old or grow sick or get killed or simply grow tired of life ... If they live at all. But sometimes one of them will emerge from the sky – first you think it’s a shooting star, even though it touches your heart in a way that no shooting star ever would. Then they come down, and it’s as if you see a human growing up: only a speck of light at first, then a little shape growing ever bigger and more intense, suddenly vast and awe-inspiring in their beauty, and suddenly you realize how weak they are. They turn fragile as they hit the ground – always in the middle of the field, always where the blackness swallows everything around them where, for a moment, they shine even brighter against a backdrop of nothingness, before their light starts to flicker and to dim. Like a candle burning out. Like a firefly in a spray of pesticide.

“They are snuffed and become one with the black sand around them. I think once an expedition was able to retrieve something that looked a little like feathers, even though their material was more similar to paper, or the bark of a willow tree ... I don’t know. None knows. They fall, they die, and they disappear.

“Even those feathers disappeared within a week at the laboratory, and there is nothing they could do to preserve them.”

. . .

Sometimes I think bad things about my parents.

I never really got to know either of them – our dad moved away when I was hardly one year old, and Mother died only a few years later ... My memories of them are a series of pictures like projections onto fog, some words spoken here and there without much context, some dinners around our kitchen table or afternoon walks in the sun.

Other than that, they are just two people who I know must have existed, for I exist as well, albeit just barely. And sometimes I think they've sold me.

I know that there are countries in the way south where it is common practice to engage in pacts with demons. I know that there are starving families who will abandon one of their children once in a while, promising them to infernal powers in exchange for water, or medicine, for food, shelter or for being taught how to read and write. There are armies of the lost that raid the poorer parts of this world, legions of children seldom older than five that are slowly getting consumed by the powers they serve – always cold, always hungry, neither alive nor dead and always longing for something that they can never again obtain. When I cannot sleep at night because of the pain in my joints and my chest I imagine them wandering through the savannah like phantoms, pale little figures with hollow eyes whose feet don't make a sound, who seem to manifest from the sheets of wavering fog that shine silver in the moonlight. I hold a strange feeling of kinship for them. Sometimes I think I would be better off as a part of those legions, because then at least I would be with other people like me.

Of course the practice of selling children to demons has long been illegal in our country, but when has that ever really stopped people crippled by despair? Who knows what my parents might have gone through when I was still too young to remember? Who knows who they might have gotten in contact with? My brother is a successful businessman nowadays – is that something that can happen simply by chance?

I think maybe this is why my father left. Maybe this is why my mother died so early; maybe it was the guilt eating her up.

I think – sometimes, in my very darkest moments, when the pain becomes unbearable and I only want it all to end – that she deserved what was coming to her, and that my brother would deserve it as well, for profiting off my miserable fate.

Of course, whenever I have those thoughts, I regret them the very next moment and hate myself for them. My brother doesn't deserve anything bad – he is the only one who has never abandoned me, who still comes to visit every week and tells me of what's happening outside of this room.

He is my hope, my fortress, and my window to the world.

The doctors and the nurses barely ever talk to me at all, probably for their own protection. They have long ago found that there is nothing they can do, except to wash me and feed me and fill my veins with morphine when the pain gets too bad. My room was first paid for by my parent's meager income and later from my brother's own pocket, and so they're not trying to get me out of here, but they're also not trying to make any commitments. They're really just waiting for me to die, and every day that I do not is just one more day of staving off the inevitable.

They've never told me what exactly I have, which confirms my suspicions. They talk of rare genetic mutations, potential cerebral metastasis and experimental treatments which have shown none of the expected results.

It all sounds like a lot of fancy circumlocution for the fact that hell is inside of me, and that when it consumes me entirely is only a matter of time.

In this moment, I am seventeen and a half years old. It all started when I was two, and shortly after my third birthday I became stationary.

I haven't left this hospital room ever since.