

Looking Inside a Cryptid

People say he's eccentric, deviant, enigmatic. People say he's reclusive, funereal, invisible. He's a man who seems to only exist in the musings of others. But that's not true, is it? I mean, I've sat across the table from this man, albeit on the more rare of occasions, for the past eight years. His personality, his story exists in the musings of others perhaps.

Peter has staggered through his life with the determination of a sailor lost at sea—teetering on the edge of conviction and feeble defeat. The same blue sweater and gray pajama pants have clothed him for the past eight years. If you so desire, it's reported that Peter can be found in the bookstacks of the medical library or hiding in a, seemingly, fictitious bar in Spain (he'll tell you all about it, but its existence remains in question.). He loves his dog, Molly, almost as much as he loves hallucinogens.

Ask his friends and they'll say he's genuine. Ask his spectators and they'll say he is unpredictable. Sometimes the inverse, too. There's never been consistency on the topic of Peter.

Peter is a cryptid. He can be any place at any time doing anything. Truthfully, Peter is constantly struggling— but isn't everyone? Give the lad a break.

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During his freshman year of high school, Peter's new friends took him to the homecoming dance. He went with what was possibly a feigned reluctance, convinced by his friends that it was just an experience; he didn't have to love it, just try it out. And try he did. I remember watching Peter run to and fro, laughing with and talking to everyone he recognized. But such is not enough for a force like Peter. He left within an hour, without a word. His friends

found him in the neighborhood adjacent to the high school deconstructing mailboxes. Not destroying them or smashing them, nothing so violent. He was just taking them apart, piece by piece and perhaps this is what we should do to him, take a look at the wheels and cogs working inside. What makes Peter tick? Winter (his good friend) says that Peter is motivated by a pure passion for chaos. Winter says this with a tone of fondness and admiration. Jane (not so much a friend, maybe just an acquaintance) says that Peter is constantly vying for attention, any attention at all, happy to get even the merest of glances. If you ask me (and what exactly am I?), I think that maybe Peter hasn't been able to feel anything for quite some time. Maybe too much stimulation led to an aching dullness. I see Peter and he's just trying to get high again. On anything, really.

Throughout high school, Peter was consistently sick. His illnesses would knock him out and put him in the hospital; no one knew or knows what these illnesses were. We wouldn't hear from him for weeks in these absences and that became normal. Then some random Tuesday, he'd saunter back into our lives as if no time had passed at all. His ability to adapt remains unparalleled. But I don't think he ever truly caught up on his schoolwork, or maybe he did, who's to say?

I suppose not all of these hiatuses are cloaked in mystery. There's plenty of stories surrounding these absences as well. Sophomore year, Peter was absent for about a week. Upon his return he informed us that he had electrocuted himself. This was on purpose, of course, he explained to anyone that asked. He wasn't one to do such a thing accidentally. But, if you ask some of his friends, the occurrence was purely incidental. But, please tell me if you know, how does one stick a fork into an outlet incidentally? Peter made sure to tell us that it was the most

euphoric thing he'd ever felt. I suppose that could be true, regardless of the circumstances.

Electricity is electricity whether you want it or not.

When Peter was a junior, he showed up to his ACT higher than any of us had seen him before. He proceeded to score the highest possible, a thirty-six. Or, at least, that is what Peter told everyone who asked. Our history teacher asked him about it one day in class, Peter's response only resulting in Nick whipping around to say "you literally told me you got a thirty-four like two hours ago." So maybe he *didn't* tell everyone who asked that he had gotten a thirty-six. It must have depended on who you were. If he thought he could best you, he'd flaunt. But, if you could rival him, he'd submit. For what it's worth, he told me he got a thirty-six. Ah, to analyze friendship.

The first two months of our senior year, Peter could not write with his left hand. Due to the third-degree burns, of course. Over the years, I've collected many different tellings of this story. I've asked Peter himself, on multiple occasions, but I can't seem to put all of my faith in him. But I think his friends make the story sound too cool while his jury make the story sound too batshit. I've gathered what I hope is the truth in the middle of the mess. Peter, allegedly, entered the bathroom with his beloved dog, Molly, and filled up the bathtub with cool water, as a precaution, of course. Safety was paramount for this experiment of human tolerance and consequence. Using acetone from his mother's medicine cabinet and matches from the kitchen drawer, he set himself alight. His eyes caught his image in the mirror, reflecting his burning appendage held next to his face. He must have been entranced. Perhaps the trance was broken by the pain, as he then sloshed into the bathtub, left hand first. Allegedly. Ask some and they'll say he's just an idiot that made a mistake around a blazing campfire while drunk. Regardless, Peter

was so proud and wanted everyone at school to touch the scars on his hand because he couldn't feel a thing.

Anyone on the outside might be appalled by these events, but those who know and love him resort to something along the lines of "he's fucking awesome, man." Peter will be Peter, and there's not a damn thing anyone can do about it. Hey, at least he's only hurting himself, right?

The absurdity of Peter's high school years urges one to ask: why is he like this? He spent his childhood making weapons, hacking the school's computer monitoring system, and chasing coyotes in the woods. I've never seen him content. Perhaps Peter's life has lacked stability, pressuring him to cope through self-destructive tendencies. Perhaps people just latched onto the idea of telling outlandish stories about an impetuous kid. Peter became a man cloaked in the prescribed persona. Was he even Peter before he was Peter? He fell further and further into a pit while his friends watched and laughed.

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After high school, Peter was accepted into university and granted a scholarship. When the news had arrived, he went around telling everyone that he had to clean up his act, stop all the shenanigans. Thoughts of medical school pushed Peter forward. He spent his weeknights locked up in the honor's center or the medical studies building. Nonetheless, on the weekends, Peter still found himself in a fugue of delusion and calzones. Despite the specter running around the city, looking for each and every high to chase, the zigzagging trajectory of his life seemed to be on the incline.

I haven't seen him in quite awhile. His friends say that he now possesses the composure that he lacked for so many years. Others have grown weary of the mythical man that has seemed to emerge from the mist. He'll reach out, not too often, asking to get together, finally, *it's been soo looong*. Some respond with a hollow promise they won't even admit to themselves, others just cut him out completely in fear of association. I think I'm stuck somewhere in between. I'm not sure why, but it frankly makes me feel like a bitch. But I try not to dwell on that thought for too long. But can you blame me? Seriously, tell me. I just can't stop thinking about how much of Peter is real. He's like one of those wedding cakes that sit on display at the grocery store. The tacky brides and grooms and doves and crosses sit perfectly in place on top of the sculpted icing. You see it and just want to dig in. At least that's the idea. I've never exactly found one of those display cakes to look appetizing. But anyway, that's the idea. But when you *do* dig in, it's just styrofoam covered in sugar that's been sitting out far, far too long. All Peter is is what is plastered on top.

The last time I saw Peter, he was driving a beat up truck through a Starbucks drive thru in our hometown. I, so amicably, flagged him down in the parking lot and we chatted for a bit.

"Oh yeah, it's been great. You know I'm an intern in the cardiology department up there now?"

"Oh, up at school?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm just visiting my ma for the weekend."

"Yeah same."

"Yeah it was crazy, I had someone die in the operating room earlier. First time that happened to me. They were just gone. But dude, hey! When are we finally going to drink tequila on the roof? You know my place on the northside just has the best roof, we've been talking about it for so long, there's chairs and everything..."

“For sure, when we’re both back.”

To think, the man working on your heart very well could be the same man daring himself to backflip off his own roof with a mid-action shot of tequila. At least he thinks he’s fearless.

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I’m trying to picture what Peter is doing at the exact moment I’m writing this. What does he do on a Wednesday night these days? I wrack my brain and all I can see is one of those optical illusion pictures where you can’t recognize anything. Those images that are supposed to simulate the visual experience of having a stroke. Those images where everything looks exceptionally familiar, readily recognizable— but all attempts come up short. I can never see him as an actual, living being these days. He’s too much of a contradiction, too much of a mirage, too much of an aged kid playing making believe.

When I asked Winter about what he sees for Peter in the future, Winter told me that “he could either do something horrible or amazing, and I would not be surprised either way.” People seem to think Peter will die from a lack of restraint. But isn’t that what the people always wanted? Don’t the people want a big, grand finale from the character at the center of our favorite stories?

All he is, at the center of it all, is the lore that surrounds him. Because all we are is what we are prescribed, right? At least it feels that way, for some of us. Some of us look for direction outside of ourselves. And I’d wager Peter is the type to look to the audience for definition. But when it comes down to it, when everything comes to a head, when the party’s over and all he is left with is himself, what will he become? There will come a point when no one will be there to

tell him what he ought to be, how he ought to act. There won't always be someone looking at him with expectation for entertainment, will there? After the curtain call, who will Peter be, when he can't be himself?