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about 5500 words

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Fog In My Lungs

(Excerpt, Chapters 1+2)

## Crumpled Letters

My idle hands wring together as I grind my teeth to chew on nothing, blinking so that my eyes stop aching, but it doesn't work, the smell of rot is stuck in my nose... I have wanted so desperately to become someone else for so long, but cornered here in my room, I cannot change, I am stuck among rot. I do what I can to stave it off, but I am tired of writing this and writing that in all but the same way every time. Still, I must...they've become like a reflection of myself. So, I must write to stay the same. Writing the same memories, the same letters, the same words over and over again- only changing so much as I forget the words and meanings- so that I may be stuck as the man that I do not want to be. This is not living. Yet, I need to see who I am. I cannot forget it. I've done horrible things. I have hurt people good and bad. And if I forget... I don't want to live to see that day... I deserve punishment, its true; But this is no damnation. This is no sentence. This is not a punishment. This is something inhuman.

There was a time not too long ago, I think, that these walls surrounding me reflected myself. But they have changed too much. They want me to forget myself. They are wet and dark now, every little thing is, from the sun to the sky to the people that were once on the street. They have lost their shape and soul. The black stained walls are looming over me, keeping watch, as the acrid air strangles me, the mirror is reflecting me, but not as myself. When I look into it, it is worse than I remember. And every time I look it is worse than the

last. It twists and contorts each and every time we lock eyes, always less recognizable in every way, from hands to eyes to smile, I do not understand what I see in the mirror, and I think it is better that way. It wants me to understand something that I cannot. And I would rather die than let it have its way. And they jeer at me, they stare into my soul, the walls, the roof, the mirror, and them all. They tell me that it is inside me, that it is inside everyone I've ever known... that they're all waiting for me to join them. Their voices are too close. Always so close to me. Watching me. Judging me for everything that I do to cope with their presence. Like yesterday and days before, I want to fall into bad habits. I want to see my brother, but he is gone. I want to talk to her, but she is gone. The only thing that is here is myself and the inescapable sickly scent stuffing the room, my lungs, and what is left of my mind...

I am rotting. I can't stand to rot here any longer. Trapped in rot. Stuck with them. Watching me. Always watching me with bugging eyes, pinhole gazes, never moving except when I am watching them too. Sometimes dying and falling to the floor to melt in time. They rot too. But when they move out of my sight. It is slow, almost too slow for me to realize. But I do, I see them. And I cannot change how it happens. I see them slink off out of the corner of my sight. And I am stuck while they are moving, yet we all are sick. We are wasting away. They are only waiting for me to die first, to do their part in it, so that they may feast. For now, they feast upon me with their eyes. Letting the tendrils crawling up and down, like mycelium on the walls, roof, floor, spray spores: Season me. There is bigger fish too. Bigger

fish in this cramped puddle. Sometimes I catch them tap, tap, tapping on the balcony door, tapping on my blocked-up window (I see their form, peeking in at me, only I cannot recognize their eyes. I cannot understand in the most basic senses in them. How do they see me... through the peepholes in the window and the walls, to catch me in my moments of weakness, when I am under the sheets protected by thin cloth? How will they know if I am appetizing... tapping on my head in the dark nights, they don't have a nose, nor a tongue, nor a mouth, only they have those things... they must, only they belong on another animal. They do sometimes have a human mouth, but they should not. They stole it. They stole it from them like they will steal it from me. Their design is not primitive. Someone put them together with a plan. So, they do not need a nose nor a mouth nor a tongue. And that fog, that slime, that poison, that death must already be inside me by now. So much of that growth coating all of my insides. Like a mucus. But born from the thick fog descended over my home... it is beyond me, beyond! beyond me. It has cursed ever thing I have seen. The walls. The floor. My shirt and shoes. The birds that used to fly outside. Those pretty birds. They are no longer beautiful. They are not themselves. And that is no way to live.

That's what gets to me... it's just that I don't know what to do. I cannot choose. I want to change. But... I can't. Then I end up stuck with the last-minute option. I struggle to hold onto what I was holding because I can't decide whether I want to cling onto it let it go. It is a normal thing. I'm sure. So many others are stuck with themselves.

I think it's time for... I want to do something soothing. I— I need to stop scratching the back of my hand. Oh, think of my brother for instance, he is a great man. And I can prove it too. Look! I do not resent him. Not a bit of it... we're close. And I do not resent anyone I am close to. I love him. I love her. I love my father. I love my mother. See, its over here, somewhere at the desk, on the desk, in the trash? What a mess I've made. Already made. Its somewhere, just hard to remember, with the air so thick, with my mind so slow. I think... dammit! My hand. Again. Always the same cut. Always the same hand. Always the same fetid stench. And it bleeds so much. But I don't want to write. I just want to reminisce.

Ah-ha— this is a decent one, I remember. A funny one too. Hidden in one of my desk's drawers.

"William!" mind the sloppy hand writing, "You are my best friend brother and I do love you and I do respect you and I do..." illegible, "Yet, you chastise me for being me. And I know what you've said time and time again, but..." it gets better, later on, here, "We can put it all behind us. We did it six years ago. We do it almost every week. We are still brothers, and that above all else is what matters! You are my brother. And I want you to forgive me. I want you to respect me as I am. We are who we are, brother, and that we are as we are is not the problem, but instead it is how we react to how we are. How you react. How I react. How they all used to. You have your problems too, too long in seclusion, too long isolated and always seeking some out of hand change. I'll tell you, and I know it to be true, I'll tell you

that what you are afraid of. You are afraid to look at me and say, 'We are the same.' Because we are. And that is okay. And I forgive you. I am sorry. I have done too much again. I am sorry. Let me go to you. Or throw me away, like you have the right to. Like you want to, no matter how much you say to the contrary. I hate you. I am sorry. This is best kept to myself. You are..."

And so on and so forth and what in the world! I have mistaken my letters. I have. This one was... it wasn't the one I was thinking of. It's just fluff. Just a rant. I sent another one. There was a reconciliation. There was something better. I remember...

The letter I was thinking of was pretty. It was a back and forth where we talked and talked about how much we missed those times long gone. We were so close. And we were not afraid. We were content. And how I should visit him for coffee; he's only down the hall. Of course, now I would but—

There are so many more memories calling out to me. Stuffed deep inside the trash besides the desk, spilling over the top and filling the floor. Staining it with ink. Red. Blue ink. Black ink. Black at the bottom, then the blue, not much of it, and finally red, red, red. Those are my past. Those are what call to me now. I forget what it used to be like, except for what I wrote. Every letter, each word, crafted so that I can remember before my confinement. They are all there; Idly chatting with themselves, lying still, until they drown in more and more and more. I try to write the same sort of letter every time to everyone. But every time I reminisce; I find that they are

drifting. By now there is enough unique letters to cover my desk, the floor, my bed, and more. Try as I might, they never come out the same. No matter how hard I try. But they are still my lifeline. They are still my memories, and I still trust them; I still love them.

Like! This one, oh, this is the letter. Tucked inside my pillowcase, sometimes my nightstand. This one, isn't very special. It's not the letter that I love, but the time it reminds me of... almost forever ago now. I sent a very different one, a very different one, perhaps more mature, but I cannot— will not— I'm here for yesterday. To reminisce. Not contemplate. And this is the only letter I have. That other one is long gone. But this one is real and that one is gone.

"I finally read did your list. I read the one about the musketeers. I read the one about the house of evil. I read the bible— completely, and it was boring, and it was only to understand the allusions on some of your favorites. And I read it all. The whole little library. For you. I finally did it all. For you, Stephanie, and all I ask is that you read this letter quickly and keep it close to your heart. For all the hours of all the days, although they were not nearly enough, I want you to remember as much as I remember. Even if you must forget. Even if I must forget. But forgive me for writing like this. With you gone, I can't go so far. But your memory is like a flower. Pretty petals falling off. And I am left questioning whether you love me or you love me not..."

And it goes on and on, but it is smudged with thick ink runs, smeared over some parts. There isn't much more to read. But it is a wonderful memory. She always is. That's the trouble isn't it. Such a great memory. The rest can't compare. Even if the ink is pressed on tense and thick at times, rubbed out, left to dry like that; This is as good as it gets here. But there is some more legible. There is a little more letter to read, even if I know better.

"I miss you. I've missed you. I want you to—"

Disgusting. Bastard. Coward.

"Won't you forgive me, for this, for all of this, for resurrecting it?"

And it gets worse. Worse that I wrote it. Worse that I never sent it. Oh! but I meant it. I meant it. And I never sent it. I wrote it shaking like a leaf and I never sent it. And how much worse it gets. And so how much worse it is that I meant it. This was real. I can hardly read it, the words are fuzzy and can't be read more often than not, but I know every word all the same. I think, that how the words came out had a great effect on me. I remember the effect they had on me, not only because of how ugly it all was, but the idea that Steph might be struck the same way. How could I send a letter like that? Well, its all behind us now. It is.

But there is another one. I wrote many other ones. Even up until yesterday. But I cannot read those now. I will not read them now. I would rather read anything else. They are only little things. They are



only complaints. They are only lamenting. I wish I had water. I wish I had food. I wish I had you.

But now it is dark again. And I want to sleep so bad. And I can go on forever like this. I have gone on forever like this. And the sun has fallen again. Not a shred of sunlight remains to force its way through and the moonlight is too weak to not be eaten up whole. If I only make it through tonight then tomorrow will come and show me the way.

## 2

### Morning Light

Don't look through the balcony door, the glass peering back; Don't look at the roof with its tendrils fluttering away their short lives, until they decay at an alarming rate; Ignore the glances from the mirror and the scratches from the door behind it. Was there ever a door behind the mirror before? No, no, forget it, they are faint, little scratches, too faint to be real. The scratches must be fake, but the smell, the rot, like wood left to disintegrate to forest mud. That must be real. I can smell it from here. The taste coats my tongue, earthy and light and bitter— saccharine, light yet too much. In every taste too much. It reminds me of rotted fruit. Rotted fruit. Not like bananas and oranges in the markets. Not like an apple set onto the forest floor and left to turn sediment. Not like a fruit at all. But sweet, too sweet, like that rot. It reminds me of a funeral.

Too much perfume sprayed to mask that scent. I don't want to smell it. I don't want to see it. I don't want to hear it. I don't want to peek my head out from my sheets. Soft and soiled and safe. But look at how dark it is, peek out just enough to see that there is that particular lack of light, remember how you wrote to him about this. Brother this. Brother that. Without being able to see the letter you were writing.

"...its dark; Too dark. The moon hasn't come out in a long time, it should have come out any moment... now... it should come out any moment—there. There is a visitor tapping. He is tapping. With one gnarly appendage, tap, tap, tap. All the while... is he going to get in? he is not idly tapping, no, he tries the door at times with what he has free. He has tried the balcony. He has tried the door; I slid the dresser to block it. But I don't have anything for the balcony. Nothing I can move anymore...."

Don't remember. Don't think. Don't remember the memories. They pretend to be mine in the dead of night, but I don't remember them. I'm plagued. Plagued by recollections. Wholesale times that I never spent. And Déjà vu, of things I have not yet done. When I beg, there is this feeling in my heart, a bending tearing feeling, that I have begged a thousand times. When I tried to pray like... on my knees, by the bed, but without a bible... I couldn't find... I felt that feeling again. My knees ached from a thousand times. My fluttered closed and stayed shut. I spoke prayers I did not know. At first, from my brother's mouth, and then from someone else. From somewhere else. From the mirror, that shifting mirror; speaking in tongues together. But it

was not the mirror speaking, it could not be. But it told me what I ought to know. And I should know a prayer to a God different than my own. It was not something to be spoken lightly, and yet, I spoke quietly, quickly, sickly. Hardly breathing. Afraid of the breeze coming out from beneath my bed. I spoke words that for some time I understood. And they made sense. Except now they are foreign, like some sort of mirror trick, but that mirror did not speak it. They did not speak it. Mirrors don't speak. I was spoken to by what's behind the mirror, by him, always peeking out, always reaching out, crawling along my walls, peering at me through countless faces, jumbled and confused, always trying to touch me even through the veil that hangs between us. But they can only touch me if we were both in-between it. I don't understand it. It's just that he dreams with me. Regal, intelligent. Not my brother. Not my father. Not her. It's the wrong face. It's the wrong smile. It doesn't make sense. But a prince visits me in the time that I should be asleep. He hides himself. Through the door, thump, thump, thumping all out and around the house. In the halls. At all our doors and windows. He makes me think of her. I see her, every night, on the balcony, above it, high in the clouds smiling at me, so erudite in her charm, beautiful, but she goes down, down, far below the clouds into the dense street below with all its grinding skin and meat. Tempting. But I dare not look. Tempting. Yes, it seems that way, and she is such a reprieve, every night like clockwork.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock

I used to be clean. Running water and soap. Clean every night, every morning, clean.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock

And I was better too, I didn't just hide. I had a soul that I was working on.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock

But as time passed me by in this place...

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock

Does it ever stop? Its tick-tock, tick-tock, ticking and talking into my ear. And beneath its words there is the faintest whimper from the weakest voice trying to be heard. But stifled all the same. And it is sweeter sounding than that—

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock.

So, I crawl out of bed pulling my blanket with me, bidding my time until— thud! Down unto the cold floor, and before the blanket falls, I throw myself under the bed. Safe for a moment. So, I breath. I breath but I do not have the time to. There will be no rest here. I must listen out for those voices. Ear to the floor I can hear better, and when that one is sore, right at the wrong moment, right when I swear there was something crucial to be heard, then the other is slammed into place so I may listen longer. But it is hard to hear them. I hear them, almost, but I'm cold. And I swear that whatever ear is pointed upwards is listening in the wrong way, to the wrong types. And when

they are so close that I can hear them breath, I almost scream, but then I listen. It is not my scream bound by clenched teeth. It is a whimper from beneath the moonlight, out passed the balcony rails. I squirm and press closer to the floor, edging myself almost out from beneath the bed, in order to sense out their shape: what is left of their body. I want to know them. But I cannot quite understand. There are too many of them all close together and moving like one and pleading with a mind of their own. And I swear they are at once convincing me with my own words, they want me. Yet, they are all the same disgusted and distraught that I might listen to them at all. So many antagonistic opinions. Good intentions mixed in. Along with the bad. They are not one. But they are... and how that confuses me. If I only saw them, spoke to them. But I cannot. I can only ask myself, in a whisper, on the cold floor, hiding from those watching eyes all around the mirror, from the prince at the balcony, from the monster in the hall— should I fly into their many embraces? or listen to those ones who warn me of what will come if I do.

They say, "...should you come there will be hell to pay..." And, "...keep yourself, if nothing else, keep yourself..." Oh, but most of all they beg, they plead, those who warn, warn in simple pain. They cannot make a real word anymore. But still they mourn what they have lost, and twice as much lament what will be taken from me. And yet, I cannot understand. How could it be worse there than it is where I am now

Here. Now. Wind against my neck. My hairs all on end. Rot following my noise wherever I turn my head. There is no more clock

ticking. There is no more tapping. Only a silence that I cannot reckon. Contrast makes a silence heavy.

The door. Its hinges travel just the slightest amount. They make the faintest noise. Oiled hinges. Quiet. Almost silent. Except when they are left alone. They dry up. They rust. They denigrate. And then... they are an alarm for the lazy and the wicked and the dead.

I throw myself out from beneath the bed almost ready, but still willing to fight. Yet when I do, there is the faintest light rising from far away. It is beautiful. It reminds me of reminiscing. So, as the sunrise reminds the world it is real once more and those skittering creature nip at me, that stomping things beats in my door, he tries to grab me by my hand, I let this vain hope overtake me. I run to the balcony, smelling blood in my nose and tasting it in my mouth. Exhausted. Sleepless, eyes closed shut if not for the terror, yet they threaten to close despite the circumstance. Too long awake for such a pivotal moment.

But I have to run. I have to make it. For there are grotesque little things all around me, in the darkness (corrupted by the slime and ink and fog) have become far more than simple fantastic fears. They really do smile back, frown, hate, and wish. They are real like me. They are hateful like me. They are afraid that I might slip away. They would taste the salt on their tears as solace if I survived even just one more night of this agony. And there is a better place. There must be a better place than this. So, I search. And I am close. Up on the balcony railing. Close enough to touch it. I reach out towards the

sky. I look back towards my clock not so tick-tocking anymore, just to see its face knowing that I have won; But it isn't moving anymore. I must have forgotten to wind it. Up on the railing, I stagger under my own weight, braced by my hand against the terrace top and feet on slick metal. I've gone too long without food, without water, without strength. But still, my eyes drift up. Glazing over at the sky. It seems so bright; in contrast to that dark room, her face is heaven.

I see her. Up above. Her familiar eyes so— Brown? Hazel? Or green... above all else they are pretty. As they always have been. So familiar. Comforting. I can almost feel her next me again. And I want to feel her next me again. From afar they rain a shine down so heavy. It covers me. I reach further out for her, to feel her presence again in my life. I want it to be like days long gone by. I want to let go. I want to go back to bed. I want to be a child again.

But then, it happens. I see the prettiest birdy. They fly. Swooping wings, too big for its body, or rather, the wings are enormous and the body is too! I remember how a bird guided me out of the forest when I was young. I remember. And it was so awfully sweet. We never spoke. But I've been putting bread crumbs and carrots and... anything I didn't want to eat... out for the birds, for as long as I've loved them now. And there one is. I see it. Sharp beak, bigger than I remember. Funny, isn't it, that something you remember as small... that it might get bigger. It shouldn't do that. A different bird. I'm sweating now. Shaking where I stand on the railing. The railing is slick. Too slick to be sure where I stand. I could fall either way—

but don't look down. Three stories? Three stories up on our home, stuck in-between two other homes, not too grand, the height is from the lack of space, not so much success. And it makes me wish that we had been more successful. So that there wouldn't be so far to fall. But its only a bird. Only looking at me with eyes. Familiar eyes. Green eyes! Brown! Hazel! With stolen eyes, it swoops down from the grand display of the sun. Its silhouette sharp and indistinguishable, made of patchwork clothes and skin and cheek bones. The bird's skin was patchwork. Its feathers were not feathers, and they were vile. I shook. Sweat making it hard to hold onto myself. It stared through me, without real recognition, but its eyes recognized me, for a moment before they changed. Then those new ones saw me too. And its hands clenched at me, its claws lent out a hand to me, its nose was a beak was a nose I had seen before and wanted to study forever. Then, it was someone I had seen on the way to work. Then it was again, as it were, trying to hurt me. It was an amalgamation of all that it could clasp in its tendril-like claws. It was sharp. It was clear. It was fuzzy. It was my memories corrupted.

And it flew too close to me. I panicked. My fingers went numb. All I can think is that I cannot fly. At once I am torn between reaching up again towards the terrace, to the bright morning sun, to her memory, already fading; And reaching out to grip onto the railing with a driving desperation. And I want to decide, but... then, there it is.



For the longest of seconds, I see the street below; And I see them all. All churned up. All packed into a space so tight. Rich folk. Poor folk. Honest folk. All churned up into one. At least it looks that way, I only saw it for a long second. But still I understood them. As disgusting as they were all to look at. I recognized my face in theirs. We were screaming together, only on the inside, but screaming out all the same. We are close. Not so far away as we could be. I have arms. They have arms. All loose. All pinned down where they shouldn't be. Flowing. Reaching out. They want me to join them, some of them, but they cannot seem to agree. They all want me. Pieces. Some want my mouth. Some want my eyes. And they are all somehow fighting underwater there. How can they fight beneath the surface of that muck? Muck... it feels wrong to call it that. I can tell that it isn't muck. That is them. That isn't some spill of water or oil or molasses rushing through the streets. That is them. And they have been mixed up for so long. Suffering for what must feel like forever. They are castrated down there. In sex. In emotion. In soul. They cannot smile without a face contort. They cannot pray without a body to bend in servitude. They are worse than I am. I am only a husk. Still, I cannot help but be convinced that they have it better. I cannot help but feel compelled towards them. I want to be mixed up there. I want to be them. I yearn to match their flow. To be unable to frown like I do. I am husk. My soul is weak, so let it wash away down the gutters and into the mouths of the bottom feeders. Let my body melt around the carts once full of fruit. Let it flow through the alleyways and into

the open doors of powerful houses. I want to flow like they all do. I want to become them. I want to belong with them.

But then, after I avert my eyes. After I watch that mass flow for a moment, I want them to go away forever. All of those people, bound together, closer than people ever ought to be. I want them gone. Those many faces welded together, bitten in place, told to stay or else.. they are in pain. So much pain. And I swear I see my face reflected in the slick oily surface of it all. He looks so sick. He looked ready to give up. Yet, reflected in a pool of eyes, I see that in those many eyes of all shades of all shapes of all souls; I am yearned for: but I am, too, rejected. Instinctually, my eyes slam shut, black splotches and morbidity litter my vision; these things do not blink out, rather they stay forever, in the background, waiting to be remembered. They are not so beautiful after all. And I know, there is no world where I would not regret flying into that pit. I do not want to go. I would do anything not to go. If I had a gun, I would make sure it is loaded, if I had a knife, I would be strong, I would do anything. I cannot help but keep my eyes shut. I am a simple animal overwhelmed. It is instinct. Shouldn't they scream louder, be more desperate too? let loose holler cries... but instead they whimper. They whimper without a mouth. They flood. They flow like a river below. Putrid spoiled river. Meat in the sun. That is all they are now. Meat in the sun. Without maggots to clean them, because those cleansing worms too. Never once would I think, if I did not recognize their expressions and voices, that they had once been, may even still be, people. Their afterlife, if they were dead, is just flowing water, only something to drown in.

I want mine to be something like heaven with my brother. Or at least nothingness. At least an end.

But regardless of my wants, I fall.

**END OF EXCERPT**