

Autofiction

Twin Flames: How Death Anxiety Haunts the Narrative in Creative Fiction

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Abstract

My auto-fictional study investigates, through a combination of creative writing and critical commentary, how my protagonist Paul deals with his trauma surrounding death anxiety as it unravels through a therapy session. The fiction shows Paul in the present as the plot oscillates between the past and present to be able to come to terms with his trauma. I draw inspiration from Irvin Yalom's nonfiction novel *Staring at the Sun* (2009) and Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886/1992) to answer my two research questions, both thematically and structurally: In what ways might death anxiety be examined as a hindrance to personal development, particularly for a queer character who has to confront both literal and symbolic death? How can the cyclical nature of trauma be shown in fiction via nonlinear storytelling? By channeling some of my own experiences with death anxiety as well as selected literature on this topic, I show how trauma is not processed in a straight line but is instead very messy as it can disrupt all aspects of a person's development.

Keywords: death anxiety, maladaptive daydreaming, dissociation, queer, trauma

Preface

I chose this topic as a way of confronting my long-term fear of my mortality. Ever since I was young, I have been surrounded by death. The earliest memory I could recall was in first grade when I discovered the body of one of my kittens that had fallen from the balcony. I remember how I wept as I carried the small corpse up the stairs. My father saw me from the balcony and told me to "throw it in the trash" and till this day, I recall feeling confused. I believed that this is what would happen when I died one day because I interpreted it as something casual when in reality it broke me inside. The feeling never left me as I became continuously exposed to death with more pets dying as well as my father after being in and out of the hospital all my life until his death in 2023. Each instance affected my development as I grew up with an unhealthy relationship with death. I delved deep into depression, impulsivity, and a lack of an identity.

The final straw was the recent Lebanese war which was the catalyst for why I channeled my lifelong internal struggle into this autofiction piece. Creative writing was always the best way for me to break down and understand my own emotions. I chose autofiction as opposed to pure nonfiction or fiction as it gave me a safe way to explore my fears while still having an emotional distance to be able to process those emotions. My introspective story was a way to bring awareness to how thanatophobia can break a person through the character of Paul as he grieves his twin brother, Cas. I chose to make the story centered on twins after thinking about the concept of identical twins and the close relationship between them. That made me think about my sister who is a year younger than I and how extremely close we are. Moreover, I came upon the term “twin flame” which I found was similar to a soulmate except more intense. A soulmate could be someone else who is suited for your soul while a twin flame is the same soul split in half for two people.

The main nonfiction novel I studied was *Staring at the Sun* (2008) by the psychiatrist Irvin Yalom who discusses his patients' different case studies correlating to death anxiety. It was recommended by a close friend who also dealt with death anxiety. In this novel Yalom talks about how the fear of dying can manifest in multiple ways, so I wanted to incorporate at least a few in my story. The main way was through the death of a close one which translates to my storyline and how it affects a child. I wanted to try being as “accurate” as possible, so I made my protagonist six years old. During this age, children tend to be egocentric, and I wanted the death of his twin brother to disrupt his development later in life. Yalom's novel discussed how the only way to deal with death anxiety is to confront it as it can manifest itself covertly and impact our lives negatively without us even knowing it, and this usually happens after an awakening experience. An example would be the protagonist in *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (1843/2008). Dickens writes about a protagonist who lives a meanspirited life and then gets visited by three ghosts. Only when he sees a glimpse of his depressing future is when he is able to make the choice to become a better person with the years he has left. This idea helped develop the nonlinear aspect of my story. I also wanted to add other elements of an awakening experience which would be any event that forces you into death anxiety. Examples would be experiences such as high school reunions, menopause, and a cancer diagnosis. I mainly referenced events such as death, midlife crisis, sexual assault, and religious guilt.

Although death is the one truth that everybody on earth must face, grappling with thoughts about accepting it is a common human experience (Wong, 2008). Death anxiety arises from this fear that all life must come to an end eventually, which humans could experience as cognitive stress (Cohn, 1997). The way people react to this anxiety has been explored through psychology, literature, philosophy, and other disciplines (Garuba, 2019). One of the most popular literary works that explores the consequences of death anxiety is *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy (1886/1992). It is a novella that talks about the life of Ivan Ilyich until the day he dies. The novella explores Ivan's coping with thoughts of his own death after he discovers that his body is unwell. Ivan is a man who has lived life through disconnecting from his own family and only engaging himself with professional work. One can therefore wonder whether he even lives, or rather just exists. After an accident, he starts to fall ill. His family and doctors do not face the possibility of his death and neither does Ivan at the beginning. He then isolates himself from everyone, thinking that everybody around him lives a life of superficiality.

Eventually, Ivan starts coming to terms with his existence by pondering whether he lived the “right” life. He realizes his incapability of outrunning death and finds himself reborned

in death. He accepts the unpleasant things about life and eventually dies. Throughout the story, Ivan's death anxiety is evident. He starts off in denial about it as he treats his physical health problem as an inconvenience, not wanting it to get in the way of his life. After that, he starts to feel anxious about his worsening health. The inability of his family to realize the severity of the situation makes him isolate himself to deal with the harsh truths about death. When he starts to ponder whether he's lived life to the fullest, that is when he realizes that chasing civilization and success is not living life to the fullest. Running away from one's self and one's own demise is not fulfillment, but rather a cause for his existential crisis. His final coping mechanism is accepting death with open arms.

Indeed, going through life is going through death. The more Tolstoy's Ivan reminisces about his life, the more he is aware about the pain in it. He ends his life by finally connecting with his son and his caregiver who is also a peasant. This made me think about how Ivan goes through something similar to the five stages of grief, where he starts off in denial about his mortality. This changes into bargaining about his situation, trying to make it better. After it got worse, isolation, depression, and anger maim his heart until he eventually accepts his death. Although my auto-fictional work does have similarities with Tolstoy's where both protagonists cope in life through avoiding it, when they both fall ill, they start to face death headfirst. My short story differs from that of Tolstoy, where he tries to show civilization as the death of life and connection to loved ones as a way to correctly live life. In my story, I try speaking from the perspective of psychology. There is not one correct way to live life. Death anxiety is coped with differently by different people, irrespective of their cultural context. I also try to explore the nuance of death anxiety and how early childhood trauma manifests itself in adulthood, an aspect which is absent in Tolstoy's novella. I attempt to give reasoning behind how a person's different identities and struggles can manifest in death anxiety, whether related to sexuality or familial relationships.

Despite death being a universal concept, the topic of death anxiety is downplayed and not talked about enough, which made it difficult to locate fictional works that specifically deal with it and could add depth to my story; at the end of the day, all our experiences are individual. In Tolstoy's novella, the topic of death anxiety not being talked about was a prominent theme that also resonated with me while looking for such stories. In the novella, nobody wanted to face the reality of Ivan's mortality, so they never talked about it which isolated him further. Life imitates fiction, as Oscar Wilde once said, for writers and authors do not delve into the harsh unpleasant truths about life. Rather than only comparing my autofiction to other characters/short stories, I would also compare it with my own experiences in hopes that, by adding a personal touch, my story would help others with reevaluating their lives to confront death anxiety. I therefore ask, and try to answer through the subsequent story, the following questions:

1. In what ways might death anxiety be examined as a hindrance to personal development, particularly for a queer character who has to confront both literal and symbolic death?

In my story, I focus on Paul Miller's early development where he's seen having to live in a neglectful household before having to deal with the traumatic death of his twin brother, Cas. This event is the catalyst that sets up a life of self-destruction through becoming a sexually provocative delinquent, showing how he deals with covert death anxiety. These impulsive activities are how his death anxiety manifests as he subconsciously does not care about the outcome of his actions. Paul's upbringing highlights the instability his life becomes, as the instability is the only constant. He internalizes his neglectful parents'

actions which translate into him neglecting himself. In his teenage years, he is seen expressing his sexuality with his neighbor's son, Ryan, who is also his childhood friend. Paul is attracted to darkness as that is the closest way he gets to reach death just to be able to feel something as he has never fully processed the death of his brother. Ryan is a perfect option for him to project his feelings onto as he idealizes him to some degree because Ryan's life is fine on the surface with his social life at school and his progression with possibly moving forward in life and changing schools. Paul, on the other hand, is stuck in an infinite loop of hypersexuality as a result of his covert death anxiety. Once Ryan sexually assaults him, and takes him the closest to death he has ever been, Paul's life shifts for the worse. He is no longer the same person as his life dramatically shifts from an impulsive one to an isolated one.

The present timeline is where he is existing day to day with no attempts at confronting his internal struggles to find the root of the issue. I write Paul to be queer as another reason to amplify his covert death anxiety based on the isolation being queer can bring. Without a good support system, he is forced to navigate his sexuality on his own while attempting to express his identity by being sexually promiscuous. In reality, it is paradoxical as his identity is distorted because he does not have a concrete idea about what it is meant to love and be himself because of the secrecy. That is why his impulsivity makes him feel alive as well as is why he is attracted to Ryan's darkness. Another main element I integrate is maladaptive daydreaming as a coping mechanism to showcase Paul clinging onto his unprocessed grief by talking to his brother Cas whenever he feels that his emotions are too strong to handle. After the sexual assault, the maladaptive daydreams translate into dissociation to push Paul deeper into his depression. He never truly confronts his death until on the verge of dying of carbon monoxide poisoning which forced him to accept his past and grieve himself. It is another paradoxical element I want to showcase because even when it is essentially "too late" for him to find peace, he is still able to accept death. He then wakes up in the hospital at the end as this whole experience is his awakening to try and live life instead of just existing.

Other characters through whom I briefly illustrate other aspects of death anxiety are Paul's parents and neighbors. Paul's mother, Claudette, does not confront her covert death anxiety as she believes she does not have a choice in having children or not. This makes her resentful. When Cas dies, this makes her situation permanent because her husband, Garret, stays at his job rather than take a new job that may have possibly given them a better life. Claudette chooses to abuse alcohol to avoid grieving her lost youth while Garret stays where he is to stay stuck in his grief. Both of Paul's parents cope in different extremes rather than accept the past. In the Derringer's household, I briefly focus on Mary's husband going through a midlife crisis, which is his awakening experience, and divorcing her because of death anxiety. I also briefly reference Ryan's religious trauma; he is not allowed to be himself as he fears being punished by God. In contrast, Mary is comfortable in her faith and is not worried about what comes after.

I have crafted this story in a way that highlights elements of Paul dealing with death anxiety. When he first enters his therapist's office and sits down, he chooses to sit in Mr. Miller's seat which symbolizes him choosing to act toward confronting his death anxiety. In the end, when it is revealed that both Mr. Miller and Paul are the same person, the hug symbolizes Paul's identity forming as one for the first time. I also write him in a specific way to show his stagnation where his essence, from when he is six till he turns 24, is similar to show how he's frozen at the age of his brother dying, and to also highlight how this makes him an unreliable narrator. He is reflecting through a distorted lens to try and

make sense of his past and this shows how trauma can blur events all together. I also make the conscious effort to write the story in the third person point of view to show the dissonance between Paul and his own identity as he recounts the past.

2. How can the cyclical nature of trauma be shown in fiction via nonlinear storytelling?

I have decided on writing the present timeline as a therapy session and using that as the premise for showcasing Paul confronting his death anxiety as a result of his childhood trauma. I base the plot on my own experiences in therapy as that is where I have achieved the majority of my growth. Throughout the session Paul talks about his childhood and his experiences that all lead to where he is now, detailing his trauma. The story oscillates between the past and present mimicking an actual therapy session that strives to uncover and make sense of the past, but I also want to emphasize how messy and incoherent a person's memory can be after living a life of trauma. This is why the therapy format works as it creates a structure for Paul to be able to revisit his past and understand his trauma. I believe that this method of storytelling allows me to adequately flesh out Paul's character by allowing him to reflect on his life decisions without making it seem black or white. I think this writing technique is the right choice for me as it can create suspense by revealing things in the present without having to go back to the past to fully understand the plot as the sequence of events unfolds. This also gradually shows Paul's regression as a person dealing with death anxiety, thus highlighting its severity.

I also use a clock as a recurring element to transition time from the past to the present where the clock is "broken" to symbolize Paul's stagnation until he is able to come to terms with his past and the clock starts working again at the end. This is another paradoxical element to showcase his regression as time moves on. To conclude, death anxiety is a silent killer that should be talked about more and normalized in reality so more people can confront it. By fictionalizing it in my story, I hope to make its concept more palatable for others to be able to sink it in, to understand the extremities of death anxiety, and to allow people to self-reflect and question if they are living a life they want to live. Potentially developing this complex topic into a larger body of work, such as a novel, may allow further space for developing not only the storyline but also any untouched nuances pertaining to our silent human struggle with death anxiety.

Twin Flames: A Short Story

Paul sat at the therapy clinic's waiting room as he waited for his appointment to start. It was a small room with a few pictures of different flowers. The room looked unfinished, like it still was in the process of being decorated.

After a few minutes a man opened the door to welcome him into the room.

"Please feel free to take a seat."

Paul avoided eye contact as his face searched around the room. The office contrasted with the waiting room in terms of appearance. The first thing he noticed was the large window at the end of the room covered by black blinds. A desk sat near the window with books stacked on top of one another. In the middle of the room lay a brown couch and facing it at the opposite end was a black armchair. Paul took a seat on the armchair which was supposed to be Mr. Miller's seat and looked up at a broken beige clock that hung on the wall.

"Wouldn't you prefer the couch? It's more comfortable."

"I'm sorry, I'll move," muttered Paul.

"No, it's alright, as long as you are comfortable."

"Your clock's broken."

"In the process of getting it repaired."

Paul stayed on the chair while Mr. Miller got his iPad from his desk's drawer and sat on the couch as he began to ask some preliminary questions. Paul looked for judgment in his eyes after having to admit that he was 24 and still lived at his parents' house. His therapist's face remained blank.

"And what do they do?"

"My mom never worked while my dad was a math teacher until he recently retired."

"And what do you do?"

Paul hesitated before answering as he never was able to keep any job for too long.

"I am kind of in between jobs at the moment." Paul looked around the room and frowned as he spotted some degrees on the wall.

"What's wrong?"

"You seem like you really lived?" Paul hoped that he did not notice the slight envy in his tone. Mr. Miller nodded.

"Don't you think you have?"

Paul sighed as he thought about his response.

"I think I always wanted to leave this town but never had the opportunity as a child." Paul's right leg began to fidget as he waited for a response while Mr. Miller took more notes.

"Before we get into your childhood, please do tell me why you decided to come see me."

"I did not think I had any other choice," whispered Paul as his eyes focused on the carpet.

"Why?"

"Because I have to kill my brother." Mr. Miller's hand froze midair as he turned to look at Paul. Paul's hands were on his face. "Just please don't look at me. I feel ashamed to want to do this."

"Tell me more about your brother, and why you think you have to kill him?"

"He was my best friend, my twin, but he did something unforgivable when we were young."

"What unforgivable thing would warrant having thoughts about murder?"

"It's stupid," whimpered Paul. He wondered if doing this was the right option.

"Try me. This is a safe space."

Paul admired the lack of judgment he felt he got so he removed his hands from his face but still averted his gaze.

"It was when we were six years old on our birthday."

"Why don't you start by explaining that day. Take your time."

Paul thought back to the day he'd replayed repeatedly for the past 18 years.

The electricity had cut out Sunday around noon. Paul and Cas's mother, Claudette, was ironing in the living room while they sat on the carpet and played with the Legos they had received as a birthday present the year prior.

"Look, Mom! We made the Empire State building," said Paul. Claudette was busy checking the cables to make sure that the issue wasn't internal. They had lived in this two-bedroom house for over six years, and it was prone to the occasional mishaps, but never a power outage.

"That's nice, Cas," she replied without looking. Paul frowned as he looked at his brother who stayed quiet.

"Can we have more?" asked Paul. Cas grabbed Paul's arm and pulled at his skin.

"Just break it and build it again" she replied as she frantically checked every switch and outlet. Paul and Cas looked at each other and nodded in unison. It was going to be that type of day.

Claudette put on her matching robe and slippers and headed across the empty street as her sons followed behind her in their pajamas. She knocked on their neighbor's door.

Mrs. Mary Derringer, a short woman in her late 30's, opened the door.

"Why Claudette, what a surprise! We weren't due for a playdate anytime soon? Lemme check my calendar in case I made a mistake. You know how scatterbrained I got after the third baby," said Mrs. Derringer in one breath. Claudette ignored her.

"Listen Mary, I'm sorry for the intrusion but I need to phone Garrett at work. The power's out and I don't know when it'll be back." Claudette watched her neighbor's blank reaction.

"Well of course, I wouldn't be a good Catholic if I didn't help a friend in need," replied Mary as she reached for her cross that hung around her neck. Claudette briefly smiled, pushed into the kitchen to use the house phone, and dialed Garret's number. Paul followed her into the kitchen and watched as she toyed with the phone string while waiting and looked around the kitchen. Family pictures hung on the yellow wallpaper, while sunflowers sat in a vase in the middle of the counter matching the walls, and a radio played a gospel song. The house looked the same as theirs, but also completely different. This house was, simply, happier, warmer, alive. Whenever Paul would visit, he noticed how everyone laughed together, unlike at his own house.

Paul shuddered when Garret's voice came through after a few rings.

"Hello-."

"Garrett, why don't we have power?" Claudette snapped but quickly hushed her tone when she noticed Paul behind her. Thankfully, the radio playing in the kitchen drowned out her conversations so everyone else in the living room could not hear them.

"One second, I'm in class right now." Garret's shuffling sounded through the phone. "I must have forgotten to pay. I've been so swamped with the extra classes I have to teach."

"Get your shit together. You don't know how embarrassing it was to have to go next door just to be able to have this conversation," she whisper-yelled.

"Why don't you get a job?" he replied, passive aggressively. Claudette's eyes opened wide.

"You already gave me this job that I never even wanted."

"Don't worry, you won't have to homeschool for much longer. Once I save up enough, you'll be able to go back to watching your soap operas and reading magazines."

"You are unbelievable, don't even think about coming home tonight." She ended the call before he could reply and turned to Paul. "Please don't turn out like him."

Claudette held Paul's shoulders and left the kitchen to grab Cas from the living room.

"Is everything alright? Did you find the issue?" asked Mary.

"Yes, I did, thank you for letting me use your phone and for watching Cas, Mary. We will

be going now." Claudette forced a big smile as she grabbed her boys and left to go back home.

"You all are welcome anytime!" said Mary, waving goodbye as she watched Claudette grip Paul's left hand and Cas's right one before her oven timer went off.

Paul waited for Mr. Miller's comments as he caught his breath. Mr. Miller wrote a few more lines before looking up from his screen.

"How did you feel about your father never really being around?" Paul did not even need to think about it.

"I was happy. The days he stayed out late or did not even come home were the days we would not hear them fight."

"And how did Cas feel about that?"

"He was always more sensitive than me, and he also had a closer relationship with our father."

"Did this bother you?"

Paul played with his bracelet as he contemplated his response.

"I don't think it did at the time as I mainly spent more time with my mother. I felt like she understood me more, but in hindsight I think it did bother me how different we were."

"Why didn't you spend more time with him if you felt this way?"

"I saw how unhappy my mother was, and I wanted to help her." Paul felt like these words were mostly empty as he felt nothing for her right now. "I just did not know that by spending more time with her, the more she hated us."

"She's told you this?"

"At that time no, but over the years she had been quite vocal about her disgust with never wanting to have kids. She wanted to leave town and see the world, but then when she got pregnant, we had to be her world."

"What did you want?"

"To be loved." Paul shivered as the truth left his body.

"Were you ever?"

More shivers erupted.

"I don't know."

"Tell me more about your neighbor Mary. How did you feel about her?"

"She was nice, but I could tell over the years how much my mother hated her. Overtime, I grew to realize that was because she envied her Stepford wife life. Mary got to have weekly barbecues with her whole family and even bake and do Yoga. My mom never understood how Mary could do it all. The only free time she felt she had was during our playdates at which we would always meet at Mary's house."

"And you enjoyed coming over too?"

"I honestly did for the first few years, but as I grew up, I noticed more and more the cracks in the system of the people in my life."

"What did you notice?"

"How unhappy everyone was."

"What makes you say that?"

"Even the most stable looking person has their silent battles that we do not see. Being homeschooled helped me observe the few people I would see consistently."

"And were you always homeschooled or were you able to eventually go to an actual school?"

"My father came home that night to surprise my mom and tell her that he got a job offer

at a different school in a different town and that we could start over there.”

“But that didn’t happen?”

“It didn’t.” Paul frowned as he recounted what happened that same evening.

After the sun set, Paul opened his bedroom door slowly and cautiously peered into the dark hallway before taking a step out. He didn’t want to wake up his brother as sound travelled fast in this household. The door to his parents’ room stood open to his left so he deduced that his father wasn’t home as the bed hadn’t looked slept in. Paul tiptoed across the slim hallway until he reached the front door. It was locked as he expected, but he had secretly hoped that this time his mother had forgotten to lock it after her fight with his father in the morning. The power still had not been back, but that was the least of his worries. He just wanted to go out and stare at the stars as it was something his family would do each year: eat cake and watch the stars while sitting on the sidewalk. It was a small ritual but just what he needed to salvage his birthday.

He crawled silently toward his mother’s neck. Her breaths were quick, and her snores were loud. She had been passed out on the couch since lunch time.

“What are you doing?” whispered Cas, dovelike. Paul let out a small gasp as he turned towards his brother.

“Go back to bed,” replied Paul. Cas was always a light sleeper in contrast to Paul, so it wasn’t a total shock that he followed him.

“But if she wakes up, she will be angry.” Cas pulled at his brother’s shirt. “Come back to bed please.”

“She won’t be awake for a while.” Paul over time became aware of his mother’s occasional routine that would ensue after a fight with their father. It mainly consisted of falling asleep in the early afternoon and waking up in the early morning, so he ignored his brother and continued towards his mother. Cas stood behind the threshold of their small living room in case she woke up. He didn’t want to leave Paul alone. “Please hurry.”

Paul waved Cas away. The brass house key sat loose in her hand which she kept close to her chest. Paul frowned as he saw her sleeping peacefully. It was one quality they both shared; they both could sleep through negative feelings, but now wasn’t the time.

Paul placed a Lego piece in her hand as a replacement for the key. His heart started beating faster as he went to pull the key from her hands. He grabbed the key and then took a step back before tripping over an empty beer bottle. Cas placed his hand over his mouth to stop himself from screaming.

“It’s okay,” said Paul. “She is still asleep.” Paul had dropped the key when he tripped so he crawled in the dark to try and feel for it.

“Let me help you,” Cas offered. He moved like a ghost into the room as he looked around the couch. Cas stuck his hand under the couch and felt more bottles hidden underneath until he felt the key. “Found it.”

Paul and Cas slowly snuck away and attempted to unlock the front door. Paul stood on his tiptoes till he was able to insert the key in place and open the door.

The cold air was an unexpected warm surprise. They walked towards the sidewalk and sat down. The full moon was the main source of light that lit the street as the streetlights in the vicinity hadn’t worked in years. The street was peaceful with the occasional car passing by every now and then.

"Do you think he is coming?" asked Cas, rocking back and forth, impatiently. Paul felt Cas's anxiety build as every minute passed by.

"I hope so," lied Paul. He wanted to be alone without any noise, just him and the stars but could not bear to say this to his brother. Cas often stuck with him which he didn't mind most of the time, but he wanted to feel like he could be Paul. Not Cas and Paul, just Paul.

Moments of silence passed between them both with the occasional shiver running through them as a gush of wind hit them with every passing car. Paul's heart ached as he watched how the light in his brother's eyes would dim after each car was not their dad's.

"Do you want to go back inside?" Paul also noticed how cold Cas was getting compared to him.

"Five more minutes," begged Cas. Paul fought the urge to tell him that his dad won't be coming.

"I will get us a jacket." Paul stood up and walked up the small steps to open his front door. An uncomfortable warmth slapped his face as he shut the door. The trapped air in the house was almost suffocating.

Paul walked slowly into their room to not risk waking up his mother. Her loud snores eased his anxiety; it was the main thing that told him that he was able to search freely without any risk of being caught. Their room consisted of a bunkbed that took up space across the wall, a small bathroom with a bathtub, toilet, and sink. This was the main bathroom everyone would use. Paul walked up to his closet which stood near that bathroom. Cas had his identical closet near their bed.

Paul opened his closet to find it packed with summer clothes. He avidly searched for a jacket but had no luck. A pit formed in his stomach as he walked toward his brother's closet. Paul opened it to find a mix of winter clothes and summer clothes. His face fell as he spotted separate clothes that their father bought for Cas. He wondered why he did not get the same treatment.

Paul closed the closet and walked toward the living room. His mother had somehow managed to fall onto the floor from the couch. Untamed rage filled his body with every step he took. He watched his mother sleep peacefully. Paul bent down and removed her robe that had covered her. A small red puddle sat between her thighs, but Paul was too focused on the robe to notice. He covered himself in the oversized robe and smiled.

Paul left his mother on the floor and walked out to find Cas not being in the same spot he left him in. His heart started beating faster as he looked left and right. It was unlike Cas to wander off. Paul's first instinct was to wake up his mother but knew it would not be an ideal situation. He instead rushed across to his next-door neighbor's house and knocked on the door seven times until Mary opened.

"Cas...Cas," he heaved.

"Don't worry, he's in the living room with Ryan. As I went to wash the dishes, I could see him outside nearly passed out on the curb. He mentioned he was waiting for your father, so I let him wait here." Mary's face looked tired in contrast to her usual upbeat self.

Paul followed Mary inside to the living room and his hands relaxed when he saw his brother asleep on the couch. Ryan, Mary's eldest son, sat playing on the carpet with a toy car. Ryan was only a few months older than Paul and Cas, so he was who they spent time with during the playdates, rather than Mary's two younger kids who were three and one.

"Wanna play? I have an extra car." asked Ryan. Paul met his green eyes and joined him on the floor, moving the toy car's around. Ryan kept trying to crash into Paul, but Paul evaded him in annoyance and kept pushing his toy car in the opposite direction.

"Ryan, play nice!" demanded Mary, lightheartedly. Ryan ignored her and continued crashing into Paul.

"Cut it out!" cried Paul. Mary walked in between the boys and tried to separate them.

"Ryan what has gotten into you? Go to your room!" Ryan grabbed his cars, stood up, and walked toward the start of the living room before turning around to stare at Paul. He raised his hand and threw the toy car at Paul. Paul ducked successfully as the car hit the side of the wall and ricocheted and hit Cas's head. Cas darted awake as Ryan ran out of the room. Mary followed him in anger.

"Are you okay?" asked Paul, looking up at Cas. Cas nodded.

"Let's go home," yawned Cas. The boys walked out of Mary's living room but could hear the faint screams of Ryan in the distance. Cas looked at Paul with a face that said we should help him, but Paul knew this fight did not concern him.

Both boys walked into the empty street with their mother's robe covering them against the cold air and then started up the steps towards their house.

"Wait look!" pointed Cas at the speeding car at the far end of the road. "It's dad!"

Cas left Paul's side and waved at his father. "Dad! Dad!"

The car continued at the same speed. Paul blinked and the thud of the car hitting Cas was all he heard before it crashed near the driveway. Paul froze in silence as a loud car alarm beeped with only the full moon as witness.

Paul shivered as Mr. Miller wrote his notes.

"It wasn't my father driving. It was just a random driver who never stopped. Cas died on impact, and I just remember how his blood got everywhere. It was on my face and even in my mouth. I never understood how much blood a child could have until that moment. One second, he was there, and the next he wasn't. I'm glad the man is rotting in prison forever."

Mr. Miller watched Paul, choosing his next words carefully.

"I'm extremely sorry for this loss. Losing a sibling, especially a twin, must have been very tough." Paul stared at the broken clock as he thought about his answer.

"I don't think I lost him."

"Why do you say that?" The question did not shock Paul. He had gotten used to Mr. Miller's bluntness.

"After he died, I blamed my parents a lot. Especially with how they handled the aftermath. My father fell into a deep depression and decided to stay at his job rather than to take the new one. This made my mother angry. She dug herself further down a bottle. I guess the only person who never left me was him." Mr. Miller looked up from his iPad at Paul and adjusted his glasses.

"How so?"

"I had spent the next few years growing up angry. I enrolled at the school my dad worked at since we could afford it now but would always skip class but still managed to make the bare minimum to pass."

"Why?"

"Nothing mattered anymore. Graduate, go to college, grad school, and then work? I thought that since we were going to die anyway then what was the point. I wanted to live."

"Do you want to know what I think?"

"Try me."

"I think that part of you was jealous of Cas and the different attention he received compared to you. It is evident with how you describe wanting to separate your identity from him. I also think that you internalized a lot of your parents' neglect which is why you resent them and even hate Cas for dying."

"I think I do accept that we were never equal and that I did resent my parents for it. I think this makes me hate him more even now because of him not leaving."

"Tell me how this all relates to Cas not leaving you."

"As I entered High school, I started to see him. Don't get me wrong, I'm not schizo or anything. I would just daydream and just talk to him about life."

"And do you think there was a trigger at all?"

"Home life got chaotic. Mom was having recurring breakdowns throughout the years, and dad stayed regardless. Talking to Cas made me feel less alone; I could be myself with him and I was able to tune out the destruction around me."

"If talking to Cas every now and then helped you endure your trauma then why did you come here saying that you need to 'kill' him."

"Because ever since my 16th birthday, the daydreams intensified. I have never been the same since then."

"What happened when you were turned 16?"

"I fell in love with the devil."

The sound of Claudette's distant wailing woke Paul up as he fell to the ground. Most days he could not tell the difference. He heard his father open the door to his parents' bedroom to go and comfort her. Claudette had not had an episode in a few days, but Paul understood that Cas's 10th anniversary since passing away could have been a large trigger. A reminder of how stuck she was.

"Are you going to get ready for school?" asked an imaginative Cas as he sat on the floor, facing Paul.

"I think I'm gonna do something less boring," laughed Paul. Cas joined him in laughing.

"Are you going to see your boyfriend?"

"Come on you know it's not like that with Ryan. We have just been seeing each other for a few months."

"But you want it to be. You've been blowing random guys in public bathrooms. I think it's time you choose yourself and go for who you really want."

A knock at Paul's door sent him back to reality.

"Paul, are you ready for school?" asked his dad. Paul sighed and got off the ground. He looked around his room which had barely changed in 10 years. He still had the same two closets, but the bunkbeds were sold, and he got a pull-out couch bed instead.

The knocks persisted.

"One fucking minute!" He heard Garret's sighs through the door.

"I'm going to wait in the car."

Paul searched for a shirt to wear that did not smell and quickly brushed his hair before quietly opening his bedroom door. He could not hear his mother with every step he got close to the door, so it was a good sign. When he reached the threshold of the living room, he watched his mother lie in the fetal position on the floor over a pillow with only a blanket to cover her. He didn't try to engage as he knew that it would always make her episodes worse.

Paul walked down the steps of his house and searched for his father who was parked next door and was having a conversation with Ryan. Paul rolled his eyes at the street sign telling cars to slow down. After Cas had passed, a street sign was implemented as well as the fixing of the streetlight. One street sign did not erase the stench of death that filled the neighborhood.

"Hey Ryan," waved Paul. Ryan nodded before saying goodbye to Garret and went back inside his house. "What was that all about?"

"Ryan was looking into applying to a different school abroad." Paul's face dropped instantly. He had hoped that his father did not notice.

"Everything okay?"

"I'll ask Ryan for a ride to school. I need to talk to him about a school project." Paul felt the suspicion in Garret's gaze as it was odd for him to think about schoolwork, but he did not have time to conjugate a lie on the spot. Thankfully, his father did not question him further and just nodded and drove away.

Paul knocked on the Derringers' front door and waited for an answer. He thought back to the many times he had spent here growing up before Cas's death and how it ultimately led to his affair with Ryan a few months ago. Ryan was an extremely social person in their school but still flew under the radar. He had multiple girlfriends, and Paul would watch as he paraded them around like trophies. He did not really think much of it until they were placed together in a group work assignment and Ryan initiated a kiss. Ever since then, Paul felt like a prized possession in a sea of meaningless trophies.

Mary opened the door and smiled.

"Why Paul, I did not know you were coming over?"

"Oh yeah, Ryan said he was going to drive me to school."

"Well, good luck with that. He seems moodier than usual. Maybe you can see what's up? I have to go and pick up the kids from my husband's home."

"I'll try my best."

Paul walked into the house, and it was the same as always. Only difference was that it was quieter and did not have the same energy from when he was a kid. When Ryan's father divorced Mary, it was a shock to everyone including Mary. Mary had said that he wanted to make the most of what was left of his life, so he left their faith and her. The whole neighborhood wondered about how it would affect her, but she kept saying that it was all a part of God's plan.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Ryan, startling Paul.

"I just wanted to see you." Paul forced a smile and attempted to lighten the tension caused by Ryan's anger.

"And you thought by coming here during the day that nobody would notice?"

"I didn't think it was a big issue. I mean I'm here often as it is."
"Well, it is my fucking issue. What do you want?"

Paul shriveled against the living room corner.

"I just thought we could make love and be a little late to class."

Ryan's face reddened as his voice grew louder.

"Is that what you think we are doing? The only reason I do this is because you live next door and it's convenient."

"Why can't you just accept that what we have is real and—"

Ryan interrupted Paul with a punch that threw him off balance. "Do you want to say that again?"

Paul stared into Ryan's lifeless eyes as he attempted to get off the ground. "Isn't this what you came for?" Ryan threw another punch.

"Ryan," choked Paul as blood dripped from his nose.
"I am just getting started."

Paul stared at the clock in the distance as he lost focus.

Mr. Miller stopped taking notes and waited for Paul to finish recounting his past.

"I don't remember what happened during or even much of after. I just remember what he told me."

"What did he tell you?"

"That we had a fight and had sex after, but it was a bit rough; To the point where he had to take me into the shower to try and clean me up."

"And what is the truth?"

Paul paused before answering.

"That he raped me and that is why Cas never left for longer periods of time."

"I'm extremely sorry for what happened. I need you to know that it was not your fault, and I understand that this situation caused you to experience episode dissociation."

"Yeah, he was the only one who would listen and knew about my issues. Most days after I would stay in bed and speak while life passed by, but some days were worse than others."

"Like your birthday?"

Paul nodded.

"Each birthday I would bleed anally and would not question why. I would instead stay in bed with Cas and talk about anything else."

"It is very valid as your body stored that trauma and would exhibit those symptoms on your birthday."

"I never thought about it before, but I think the same would happen with my mother. Each year, on my birthday, I noticed she bled vaginally. I would often find her in the fetal position when it happened."

"Yes, the trauma from giving birth to you and your brother affected her not just emotionally but also physically. The same how the trauma from your brother's death, the rape, and even the general neglect you received from your parent's affected you both physically and emotionally."

"Is that what this is?"

"You're the one in my seat. You tell me."

"I do think that talking to Cas helped me then, but also never allowed me to grow as a person. I can accept that I loved him when he was alive. My mother thought we ruined her life, my father was a passive person who did not try enough, and Ryan raped me and eventually moved away. I had no one, so talking to him in my head was the only thing keeping me going."

"But you had yourself. Even when your brain was creating scenarios as a coping mechanism, it was your own version of trying to give to yourself the love you never received."

"But that is what it comes down to, right? The fact that I don't love myself. Otherwise, I would not be here."

"On the contrary, I think that this was the biggest step you made all your life in terms of processing the death of your brother. Earlier you mentioned needing to 'kill him' and now you talk about 'loving him.' I think that you are just projecting, and you now realize that it was never about killing him. It was about killing you, or rather the version of you that died when your brother did."

"And how do I do that?"

"By accepting that you cannot change everything that happened before."

"But that's the scary part. I know I have to accept it, but that just makes it too real."

"I also think that is what makes life beautiful. Acknowledging that pain and trying to make the best of it. By living in your head, you resorted to stagnation rather than confronting the root of the issue. You've avoided my gaze all session, but I need you to look at me and tell me why you are so scared of confronting and accepting your past."

Paul focused on the room. It was not the same anymore. The table had been replaced with an ironing board, the degrees were now family photos, and the small office was now a living room.

"Because I'm afraid to die, Mr. Miller, but I think you knew that." Paul looked up to meet Mr. Miller's gaze for the first time to find a carbon copy image of him.

"I'm so proud of you."

"Why? I wasted my life away because of fear."

"And yet here you are acknowledging it for the first time. Something most people don't do."

Paul stood up from his seat for the first time. Mr. Miller joined him in standing parallel, mirroring each other. Paul pulled Mr. Miller in for a hug.

"I'm sorry for everything."

"I'm sorry too."

The beige clock started ticking,

"I thought the clock was broken?"

"It was never broken; It just needed to heal."

Paul awoke dazed and confused in a hospital bed. The sound of his heartrate monitor beating as nurses rushed in, filling the room.

"You're okay. Everything is okay," said a nurse.

For the first time in a long time Paul believed her. She told him that there had been a carbon monoxide gas leak and that a neighbor came over to find everyone passed out in

the living room. He was the only person to make it out alive. Paul inhaled the guilt of his thoughts as he exhaled his relief. He could finally choose to live differently.

Paul looked around the room and could see Mary standing in the back smiling. He deduced that she had been the one to call the police. He would thank her later when he had the energy to.

Hours passed as Paul slept peacefully with only nurses waking him up every now and then to do blood tests.

"I feel like I'm finally going to be okay," said Paul.

"I know you are," replied an imaginary Cas, lying next to him.

"After lots of meds and therapy though," joked Paul. Paul turned to his other side and watched how the clock ticked on and how each day followed the next. He could choose to let go. He could choose to be happy. He could choose to live.

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