

What It Is To Be

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Overture

This short story is a grand blend of fiction and reality. The protagonist and his slew of characteristics are immensely influenced by myself. Given, this is not an autobiography and, as it is technically fiction, the protagonist is as such—a creation of my imagination. Even so, I hope that my readers can touch upon the actuality I'm sketching here and embrace the values I'm trying to illuminate.

A couple of things I want to clarify, first.

I am eternally grateful for my closest friends, and family, who support me and my writing. I wouldn't be anywhere without their collective encouragement. And any new readers or fans to come about in the future, I am just as indebted for your honesty and feedback.

A true writer measures his success in love.

The love exhibited from his words, characters, and worlds, but not without the voice of his supporters.

In this manner I am filthy rich.

Thank you for reading

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01

Spencer Martin's conscience unraveled on the dark ceiling. Sleep was not coming to him, not like the ideas were, so he severed the binds holding him back and opened the floodgates. Thoughts profuse with erraticism crashed into his formerly placid mind. He was too impatient to wait for slumber's touch, yet patient enough to write a three-hundred-page novel without deviation.

The labyrinth that was Spencer's conscience melts into that which constructs his imagination. The two were always doing battle, his sense of morals void from his literary concepts. He would throw himself into the ring with his characters; subject himself to isolation and abstinence across several fields, forcing the despondency on his pages to adapt credibility.

As avid and dedicated a writer as Spencer was, he lacked the sociability and ambition to publicize his achievements. No matter the amount of dust layers—nor how thick they become—that his books collect over time, he never arraigned the term 'failure.' While his thought process burst with activity on all ends of the creative spectrum, when it came to reality he would fall shy in putting A with B to form a sequence.

Instead he gauged his success on his writing, and not necessarily the quantity either, but the quality.

Given, this didn't go to say that Spencer's collection of

completed works wasn't sizeable. At the very least, it could be considered 'vast.' Twelve years he has been filleting his thoughts and spilling the contents across lined pages of composition notebooks. Twelve years he has been organizing contemplation after contemplation about an alternate reality—however better or worse than his own was—and materializing characters with greater depths than anyone he has ever had the pleasure of meeting before. Twelve years he has been orchestrating music in the form of poetry and fictional essays, journal entries, monologues, and narrations on thin back-to-back paper. His longhand style and steadiness has changed over the years, but for the past seven it has been immaculate text.

A stranger could look at a single page, much less collective thousands, and mistake the smooth black handwritten ink to be the work of a machine. A typewriter, hardly; better yet a computer with state-of-the-art printing capabilities.

In this sense, Spencer was a machine.

However, he possessed a heart with all of its strengths and too many of its weaknesses. The blood which ran through his veins did so only at the cost of him exploring his passion—gift?—of writing.

Being the ardent writer he was, no small thought slipped through his mental clutches. Nor could the vastest big-picture concept escape him. He pondered everything that could ever be, and then some. The notion of an afterlife, its potential boundaries—or complete lack-thereof—kept him awake many nights. The idea of extraterrestrial life, and its many possible parameters, was another thought that crossed his mind from time to time. Whatever the subject, he would pick it to death and then dive into the autopsy headlong, unafraid to open the most repellent doors and walk the darkest corridors.

And from time to time, however seldom—as it was his one truly apprehensive thought—Spencer would imagine life without composition.

No arms? Arms, but no hands? Hands, but no fingers?

Worse yet, any of these amputative misfortunes without

the ability to mend them at all. No prosthetics of any kind. No way to handicap the issue and try working around such adversity. While technology these days has become something reminiscent of science-fiction novels and film, in Spencer's head such theoreticals existed only if there was no aiding them.

Life without writing...but what of another way?

Maybe Spencer could write, still, in this abstract view of a different and far less fortunate life...however, would he even want to, knowing of its cheapness? Its, simply and bluntly put, terrible composition? He didn't need others to tell him that he wrote well, or couldn't write fiction worth a damn.

Spencer began in a cesspool of mediocrity.

The ripples had eddied away from him in rings of improvement that gradually shallowed until he seized the fluency that felt truest to him.

After that, progress in coherency and flow developed at a dramatic rate. Within a couple of years he was writing novel after novel of pure quality. If he felt that he was dragging his feet in a muddy rut full of hackneyed ideas and transparent characters, the entire composition notebook would go into the fireplace. He would stoke it until the flames enveloped cardboard and paper and binding alike, the ink on its pages seen through his eyes as sheer human error.

And not even the dust particles of time were neglected enough to experience such mistakes.

Spencer did not see himself as a perfectionist in the way many others might. While he did suffer from some obsessive-compulsive tendencies, most of them were in regards to the maintenance of his works.

Completed and otherwise.

His residence was a small apartment surrounded by riotous neighbors and restless dogs. The seemingly constant noise might stir loose the nuts and bolts from many authors' sanities, but for Spencer it sometimes acted as a shot of adrenaline. He could better draw from his less pacifistic emotions like anger and irritation, developing characters with

distorted agendas and troubled personas. More often than not these characters were simply adaptations of his own form, though typically more spiritual than physical.

Nevertheless, Spencer wrote marvels when under the influence of complete tranquility. An atmospheric equilibrium would engulf him and his hands would transfer words to pages as if sentient ink coursed through his veins. Ataraxia would massage the ideas from their hiding places within him so that he could substantiate them without holding back.

Spencer's lack of mental inhibitions led to a broad range of topics he could write about. Genres became smeared lines in the sand under his eyes, and with his touch they imbibed so much water to the point where they dissolved.

An even decade has brought considerably stable writing to Spencer Martin's life.

Nineteen novels of three-hundred pages or more.

Twenty-six novellas between sixty and 250 pages.

Thirty-one collections of twenty-entry poems.

And Spencer has yet to celebrate his thirtieth birthday. Given, it wouldn't be much of a celebration at any rate. His mother passed of cancer four years ago. His father, in a car accident less than two years later. Spencer's connection with them was not that of a traditionally happy family to begin with, although he cared for them greatly.

Devastation wrought his heart after their deaths.

Dedicated poetry cauterized the wounds.

Determined fiction sealed the rolls of gauze.

Spencer sought shelter under the cover of his own words, which built worlds apart from his and yet sharing so many similarities he often felt lost between them. With a lick of ardor to his persistence, he became enrapt in his own characters yet again and resumed the pace with added fortitude.

Emotion amplified in the right places.

Solemnity became all the more meritable.

Despair fused pain with beauty and sometimes he felt like he couldn't tell the difference between the two.

When needed, Spencer could detach himself from the rest of the world so that he could complete a story the way he truly desired.

This aspect of writing style, a passion some might call an obsession—healthy?—led him down a murky path canopied by touchy questions. Of course, for Spencer they were not sensitive to him—only in a theoretical sense, and only if he dwelled on them for too long.

What role would friends play in his life?

He imagined they could supply support and feedback, as well as influence moods of a story or characters.

On a personal level, provide entertainment both public and privy. This question garnered memories of his reclusive high school life, which followed a rather active and buoyant middle school experience. The recollections swarmed his head in ways he wished they wouldn't—while loneliness did work its claws under his skin from time to time, he usually managed to fare.

And fare well, he would, the best way he knew.

Write liberally, write profoundly.

The absence of talent in other artistic expressions—drawing, painting, singing, musical instruments—led him around a full circle back to writing. The only other extracurricular passion he possessed was photography. It would often fuel a story should he have troubles with pacing, or kindle an entirely fresh idea altogether. However, it was not enough to draw him far from his adherence in writing; it served as nothing more than an eidetic ballast.

With his mind erratically touching upon the 'friends' theoretical aspect of his life, he also pondered how extensive sociability would affect his writing.

Negatively, he could only imagine.

More distractions, vaster immoralities, temptations high and coherencies shallow.

No, Spencer preferred the malleable cage he'd chosen.

And what of a future for his books? Surely he could profit from them. Years siphoned from his life, as if cut straight

from his flesh like cake to greedy vultures of solitude, accounting for nothing but another layer of dust. No eyes aside from his would ever be cast upon the composition notebooks, of which now included seventy-six total. He was a very organized young man despite the chaos shuffling through his head at times, sorting his completed works by title instead of category, though the act of rereading seldom occurred.

He worked as a freelance editor from his apartment, making barely enough to support his minimal bills. With a broadly windowed spot in the building, he conserved electricity as often as possible and owned an elementary cell phone which he infrequently used.

The idea of extending a hand outside his bubble so as to profit from his books was always a fleeting thought. He believed that his work could only be called such because it consumed a form of energy and due time from him. Contrarily, there wasn't a single page—nor the slightest word or letter—across the thousands that bore the mark of his inked words that Spencer regretted. There were even few books he favored over others, few poetry collections he likened to above the rest.

He felt that his books were as much a part of him as his skin. His flesh and blood, even, but in more ways than one far deeper than that. Each book was another undisclosed lobe in his brain, another notch on his spine, another valve to his aorta. And the characters, they were his individual breaths as much as his wounds and silhouetted memories.

Spencer absorbed a moment of clarity as he rested supine in bed, gaze dancing across the ceiling. His mind blazed like wildfire, idle trees victim to a sidling breeze. He moved with the satin flames, enjoying the wealth of imagination in lieu of insomnia. He did not fight the restlessness; he imbibed it.

His ideas spawned substance which moved like fire in zero-gravity. Beautiful and chaotic, all the more infectious.

Spencer might need sleep, but his conscience did not.

02

Time of day was not a crucial guideline for Spencer's writing. Essentially whenever the flow was at its thickest and smoothest would he pounce on a page with pen in hand. He always used black ink, always the same sort of pen, which was quality but not superior. The only money he ever spent on himself, excluding the necessities, were for an abundance of pens and composition notebooks. Then again, in Spencer's heart writing unrestrictedly was a necessity. It was a required aspect of his survival, one that was inexpensive and self-exploratory.

After arranging a new chapter—and then some—on his bedroom ceiling, lying in bed, he felt the energy surge through him like lightning. Spencer bound to his feet, discarding the sheets and covers from him so that he could attack his story in full freedom.

The darkness enveloping his apartment did not mind him. He shifted through it blindly, yet as if he was nocturnal and eyeshine led the way. Socked feet glided across floorboards, hands floated along walls, and then he slid to a stop in the small den opposite his kitchen—the library, he sometimes called it.

All seventy-six composition books arrayed, alphabetically, on the wooden shelves provided. Spencer has lived here for the past five years; in that time he has needed to

buy and install additional shelving to accommodate his growing collection.

Spencer snagged the black binding of a particular notebook jutting out from all the rest, about halfway through the alphabetized sections. Its temperate, smooth cover—the same as all the rest, black and white mottled with a rectangular space in the center for title and owner—slipped into his hands like it truly belonged. And it did. This was Spencer's child, it was his sincerest gem, it was an additional organ.

Extraordinarily vital to his subsistence.

Protruding from the notebook's innards, more than halfway through it, was a lone sticky note. He opened the notebook there, temporarily discarded the marker, and push-buttoned a pen open. Its tip hovered above the ink as his thoughts collided inside his head. They were then steered to his nerve endings, into his blood, and driven to the instrument of creation in his hand.

Spencer struck gold through plain black ink as he put the pen to the paper.

Love was one way of describing his zeal for writing fiction and poetry. Although he has never experienced the emotion for another human being outside his kin, never had the opportunity to explore its intimate boundaries and push its physical envelope, he knew he was not virgin to it.

Love worked its fibers into his life, all the time.

Writing was only one part of it, albeit a colossal percentage. Photography was another element, which essentially encompassed the fortune of sight. While sight was not necessarily a flawless trait of healthy humans, for someone like Spencer he felt that it might as well be. He appreciated the beauty in many aspects of life; for him, life was superficially distasteful. However, the layers beneath the surface and all of the lines in between were what snagged his attention. The possibilities, the circumstances upon dissection, the thoughts and emotions of billions collected under one ambient sky.

Spencer attributed love to music, as well. He had no

solidified stance in one genre of music, no ear specific to one facet of sound. There were repelling opuses as much as there were tantalizing ones. The latter came in all shapes and forms, discordances that stirred his blood and notes that made his skin crawl. It was at one point in his life a despondent feeling that his hands failed at creating music the way his admired artists had done so impeccably; that his voice fell shy of holding notes and carrying his written word to the ears of his friends.

After shifting into his husk of seclusion, he gave his musical passion yet another try. And yet another failure sunk into his heart.

However, it did not take long for Spencer to realize that he had always been and would forever be a musician at his core. The stanzas of his prose have emanated a legible sound that he sometimes believed only he could hear in his veins.

Absence of physical, intimate love would occasionally seep into his life of loneliness. Typically it did not entail sorrow, nonetheless, similar feelings would work their way into his thoughts. Often but not always would this sensation of being lost in a whirlpool of untouched love come at him from his writing. Through certain characters and storylines mingled the hollowed desire for physical intimacy. He was attracted to women, and could create both spiritual and physical beauty through his words, however, he was not insensitive to the notion that flesh might be a stronger form of appeal.

He had felt its touch a handful of times before.

While Spencer was not green to intimacy, he was however inexperienced to the mutual love he sometimes felt like seeking. This was where his comprehension of life steeped and his writing took precedence.

Spencer did not claim to know the future.

He never even tried to explore or predict the boundaries and events of his subsequent years. He did not see it as a risk of feeling fear or doubt about his existence—there were no such things. He only felt certainty in that his writing gave him purpose, magnified the luminance inside of him, even if that

meaning and light never extended beyond his own being.

Nevertheless, he did believe in true love. He felt that it was almost naïve and imbecilic not to. As for its emancipated company in his life, he relayed faith in finding it in one form or another throughout his future.

Spencer's attention magnetized to his composition notebook. The pages felt stiffer and stronger after their lines had been filled out with ink, making a completed story an analogical brick to his hut of literature. At first he didn't mind the absence of light in the den—all he needed to know was the paper's location beneath his pen, and he would feel the rest until it unfurled from his mind.

After the first page or two, and he had managed to transiently bottle his bustling thoughts, Spencer sought a light source. He chose a reclining chair that complained every time he sat down in it, much less resituated, but wasn't bothered by its discordance. He cared more for the soft glow of the lamp beside it, which he turned on and resumed writing.

He lost himself in his story. In his characters. In the world he had fabricated to better suit the fictional plot, with all of its realistic elements and personalities, for the time being.

Time, yet, was not a concern for Spencer.

He neither paid attention to it nor minded its swift—or sluggish—passing. He wrote without care to his surroundings, only his state of mind, and that it was a plethora of ways at once.

Unbarred, illogical, coherent, maniacal, feasible, palpable, imperceptible, malleable, congealed, ambivalent, agape, pensive, acute, and somehow or another unregulated.

Given, this was always Spencer's state of mind.

It helped him focus and lose concentration all the same, go off on spine-tingling tangents and delve into the depths of characters, exploring dark recesses that he didn't even know existed. Losing himself in a sea of mystification was often the only way to find himself, and thus truly transmute his thoughts to the paper.

And so Spencer wrote.

Hours passed. Muscles became minutely sore, but he could still go on for half a day before it became an issue for him. Although predominantly right-handed, over the past few years he has learned to write well with his left, developing semi-stable ambidexterity.

Hours passed. Thoughts still ran profusely, a conflagration in his conscious sky. Ideas had long since been coagulated, now was the task of simply conveying their anatomies to the paper in a fluent form. The plot evolved and transformed into something so ugly it was beautiful, so turbulent it was calming. Spencer's mental pipeline had burst in an amber explosion that stabbed through the sky, only to cast a dense pall of oily thoughts above him and his characters.

This was a most captivating feeling.

At times Spencer became gorgonized with his antagonists, to the point where he paused and mulled over greater possibilities with seemingly no end.

Then he would resume, just as enthralled but no longer sporting any sense of dismay. He turned the emotions upon themselves so that they would frenzy like a pool of sharks under chummed waves.

For as frenetic as his hands would get during bursts of fluidic ingenuity, not once did Spencer ever botch a spelling or miss punctuation. Not once had he ever drawn too long of a stroke or skipped an 'i' dot, nor gone uneven on a line or carried off a page. The paper never unintelligibly bled through, nor did the pen ever puncture it.

Outside his curtained window chirped the earliest of birds. He could not hear them; he did not want to hear them, so he would not. There were no sounds to him except for the ambiance eddying through his head and the words flowing like the thinnest syrup. Saturated with creativity and literary cunning, Spencer never even noticed the time.

That is, until he ran out of space.

By which time Spencer's heart leapt into his throat and, briefly, panic struck.

03

Maintenance was always a necessary component to Spencer's progress of his writing. One could not possibly possess the vast collection he did without organization, keen maintenance, and constantly regulated supplies. The lattermost regarded composition notebooks and pens, which he kept in separate storage bins for easy access. There was always a pen on his nightstand; however he never kept one of his notebooks anywhere but on the shelf in the den with the others. If he were to misplace or spill something on any one of his written pages, the catastrophe would strike him as nothing less than just that.

For the sake of a constant supply in times like this one, Spencer has done very well in maintaining high numbers. Composition notebooks were aplenty, pens were abundant.

Some twenty minutes passed before Spencer's rushed ransacking of his own apartment yielded utter failure. He had run out of notebooks. The pens remained profuse. But his canvas of sorts was a dry cache. He thought he had replenished it just two months ago. Clearly that sly fox—time—had eluded him, and not as a first either.

This had only happened to him thrice over the years.

Now number four spat in his face like a deviant child just pushing for punishment.

Spencer was a master of placidity, however. So he stifled his panic, at least suppressed it to lower levels of perception, and then proceeded to prepare for a drive.

His black sweatpants remained on for comfort and maneuverability. So did the relaxed-fit gray T-shirt. He threw on a zip-up hooded sweatshirt for the fifty-degrees outside. He wouldn't be gone for long.

A trip to the local pharmacy and convenience store would satiate his push for more paper. More canvas for his art. More staves for his music.

The store was 24-hours, which was perfect because Spencer realized that it had barely reached five o'clock in the morning. The sun was only beginning to rise, only beginning to lick at the horizon. The clouds layering the muddy sky were in strips and not yet urged to dissipate.

If Spencer did not hurry himself, his train of thought would surely be the thing that dissipated first.

So as to reduce his cost of living and live free of excessive costs, Spencer did not own a vehicle. He typically took the bus or, if necessary, a taxi cab for long distances. In this instance he brought with him a small backpack and palmed a tiny key. He used the latter to unchain his bicycle from the apartment stoop's guardrail. Straddling the seat, backpack slung via both straps, Spencer pocketed the key and draped the snug hood over his messy hair. He began pedaling in the right direction, grateful that the store was less than a four-minute bike from his place.

When he arrived, Spencer dismounted the bike and parked it behind a metallic trash bin by the front entrance. He hadn't brought with him the chain; he didn't see it as necessary.

Entering, Spencer saw that the store was deserted. As it ought to be at this time. Most people around here didn't begin commuting for work until six and seven o'clock at the earliest. This facilitated biking back and forth, too; he could utilize the streets and sidewalks without concern of traffic or pedestrians.

The two older cashiers, one who was a manager, that

worked here for the past six years knew Spencer like a friendly neighbor might. And, despite his lack of sociability, Spencer was a kind person to these people—as he was to most strangers, lest they gave him a reason not to be. In which case, typically, he would just avoid them as opposed to face confrontation. In lieu of hostility, something Spencer rarely encountered throughout his life, he would resort to dialogue. If that were to fail, Spencer was not a frail young man.

All the same, he preferred prevention.

His writing and music and even photography would help tourniquet his adrenal glands and squeeze out the unwanted anger or vexation. In other cases, these passions of his life would help pry open such apertures provoked during said emotions and ventilate their energy until it all wafted free.

Regardless, he had gone some time without palpable hostility. The employees here held him well in their eyes, seeing him as a peculiar young man who spoke little but wore a kind gaze, sported random smiles, and engaged in occasional repartee.

At this earliest time of the morning, while Spencer fought to control his train of thought, he saw neither of those employees. He has before, during these hours, but not in a while—simply because he hadn't been here this early for quite some time.

Spencer thought it was best, perhaps.

He just wanted to snag a single black-and-white composition notebook and be on his way. Maybe even two—just in case. The fewer the better, to facilitate the transaction and be on his way.

He made a beeline for the right aisle.

They kept them stockpiled well over the years, even for such a small store. It humored Spencer to think that he was the only one who bought them here, and he was the reason for their superfluous stocking. Every now and then he would spot an unusual discount on them; buy three, get the fourth for free! What a deal, he had imagined at times, while contemplating how

cunning these people thought they were.

Every now and then he would humor them too.

Today it was just after five-twenty in the morning when Spencer completed the transaction for a single notebook and scrambled outside, pen already procured from his backpack. There were always a couple extras in there—along with his self-printing Instax camera, and some extra film.

Spencer ignored the ‘no loitering’ sign outside the store like he would often do and planted himself by his bike. His back rested against the brick, head just below the windowsill peering into the store. He splayed the composition notebook and pressed his pen to the top left margin of the first page...

The writing commenced immediately.

It felt as if the writing began before the tip of the black pen ever even graced the paper, but in all reality this hadn’t been the case. Even so, Spencer was truly onto something here. He wrote for minutes that turned into ten and twenty, eventually sagging down the wall into a cross-legged sitting position—bike and trash bin by the store’s entrance to his right—with concentration narrowed.

Nearly forty minutes passed as he wrote.

Not once did anyone complain about him being there, as there were passing customers increasing in ten-minute intervals. Not once did anyone stop to say anything, no more than a simple passerby’s glance. Others would stare from afar, eyebrows cocked, curiosity riddling their brains but holding their tongues.

This young man sat there outside the store, back to the brick, robotically and yet humanly writing nonstop in a composition notebook with a pen, beside a bike people questioned might or might not be his, and yet no sign or upturned hat for donations.

He was not mutely panhandling.

Spencer Martin was embracing creative whim.

When thirty-eight minutes had transpired since his pen first touched page one of a continued notebook story, he abruptly stopped. There was an energetic dot to a period and he rose to

his feet, securing both notebook and pen in his backpack before slinging it and tending to his bike. He mounted it and commenced his ride back home, where his slightly enervated mind might just be able to idle in sleep.

Spencer had to slalom between pedestrians, many of whom didn't take kindly to his sidewalk bicycling, but for the most part stuck to the curb. There were no bike lanes on these roads, not in this town. He managed nonetheless, though, and came within sight of his apartment off the main road when something in his periphery caught his attention.

It never took much to snag Spencer's eye, as he tended to fully heed the smallest things and often the tiniest particles of beauty.

In this case it was the limitless sky, within his limited view, doused in a gamut of vivid colors soft to the human eye. He found it enticing, like a beautiful woman's essence, from her eyes to her smile, her skin and the niches of her body. It was the appeal without the tease; he knew he could not touch the sky, swim in its colors, no matter how much he wanted to. There was no tasting its beauty, no sharing of emotions, just the sight and the way that visual ingestion affected his being.

It calmed him, it reintroduced peace.

Most of all, it inspired him. He couldn't place the how or why, couldn't begin to describe it if given a divine writing utensil and infinite ink dipped in the Fountain of Life.

There was just something infinitely pacifying about the horizon when the sun bled across it.

Spencer paused at the crest of the hill, perfectly void of pedestrians and only a couple of passing cars every so often. No better a moment, he thought to himself. So he parked the bike, albeit remaining atop it, leaned to one side so as to not topple, and withdrew his instant still camera from the backpack. The black Instax was an extension of his eyes, an auxiliary occipital lobe, and it had yet to fail him in simple performance over the past three years.

He raised it to his face, back turned to the road's

direction from where he came, pointing instead toward the open sky sprawled out before him. It was a perfect shot. He had taken many from here before, not a single one alike. They each had their individuality, their uniqueness, their interchanging hues and glows.

Clouds differed in collaboration.

Temperature and weather added different effects.

Pedestrians and cars changed the foreground.

Spencer treasured each automatically printed photograph regardless of its minor flaws.

He focused and snapped the shot, grateful that the flash did not automatically pop up. Dawn had arrived early but, unfortunately, it was not here to stay. In a couple of hours it would fade to the blander and less variable daylight, although this didn't go to say that Spencer wasn't favorable of sunshine.

Lately it has seemed that he's grown more accustomed to the dimmer atmospheres, breaking stride in the light so as to pen luminance in the dark.

Spencer was reveling at his printed photograph, looking down at its representation of the sight before him now, when the shriek of skidding tires caught his ear. He spun his attention up and to the left, glimpsing briefly a navy panel van crest the hill, on the wrong side of the road. The side of the road nearest where Spencer had parked his bike, a few feet from the curb. Unadulterated panic bristled his hair and surged through suddenly cold veins. Spencer shoved the photograph into his pocket, crumpling it in more ways than one, and frantically remounted his bike.

The panel van had skidded to a stop directly behind him. The stench of burnt rubber and asphalt stung his nostrils. It was somehow as pleasant as it was repelling. The source, however, was entirely worrisome.

Powerful hands latched onto his shoulders and arms, jerking back, hoisting him into the murky bowels of the van. There was a clamoring of masculine voices, a feminine one seemingly distant, and the barking of orders from a small voice.

Total blackness shrouded his vision when an impermeable bag was pulled down over his head. It was secured by a yank of a cord, tightening around his neck. The snugness of the bag's band did not choke or even threaten to asphyxiate him, however it did keep the thing secure.

There were tiny pinpricks in the bag, but nothing that would suffice as even the smallest porthole. Instead they filtered in infinitesimal beams of light from outside through them, dappling Spencer's terrified face with spots of white. And then a deeper darkness washed over him, cutting off the beams of sunlight, when the panel van's sliding door slammed shut.

Tires howled and an engine groaned.

The van was on the move again, this time with a guest in its seatless passenger bay.

The surfeit of frenzied voices filling the van bounced off the walls and rattled Spencer's conscience. He was used to noises rebounding off the walls of his apartment, chatter and traffic discordance when he wrote or photographed outside, even raucous compositions in his ears...but this was unsettling.

Perhaps it was the circumstances that made it so unnerving for him.

And then the voices cut off abruptly, punctuated by a blunt pain on the back of his skull. It resounded like thunder, pitting Spencer Martin into a fathomless obscurity even his conscience was unfamiliar to.

04

Memories of the abduction clattered through Spencer's skull as a vortex of shrapnel. His temples throbbed with an intense, searing pain, and he idly fought for the capture of clarity. During this teetering edge of mental oblivion, he gradually regained his other senses. And they all came back to him like a spur to his central nervous system, accompanied by jarring pain that didn't pity a single square inch of his body. However, he hurt and ached even deeper than his flesh. The greatest source of misery was his brain, in every niche of his skull and every turn of the maze that was his mind.

His limbic system stirred alive first, resurrecting his sense of smell. Nostrils flared and a dense liquid invaded them. With this came his sense of touch, resonated through his nasal cavities before rippling across his entire body. His skin was wet, but only from the neck up. His scalp itched, hair waving through the unknown liquid like stubby tendrils held captive to a tormenting sea. His mouth was in great discomfort, his tongue restrained and his gums braced by something rubbery. Lips were spread apart to fit this unknown contraption in his maw, and although Spencer could feel the dense liquid engulf them too, he knew he wasn't breathing the substance.

Oxygen was being fed into his system.

Or, worse yet, a gaseous element that kept his lungs

operating and his organs in the right order, but intoxicated him with something else. Something foreign, something noxious. Regardless of what it was, Spencer realized that he was on some kind of life support system—he was just befuddled as to its specifications, constituents, and operation.

Most of all, its ulterior purpose.

As much as Spencer knew he needed to find out, as his eyelids peeled open and consciousness groggily returned to him, he realized he'd rather not.

His inherent curiosity and inquisitiveness still existed within him, however, it lay dormant in the deep recesses of his conscience.

Despite resuming clarity, in one form or another, Spencer's sense of hearing was still a lost treasure. The circumstances of his situation, while his sight adjusted itself through an opaque blur, did not necessarily beckon its presence—but he did. He wanted all of his senses back; he wanted control of his body again.

And even when his tongue tried to writhe, even when his larynx fought to reverberate sound, he could not so much as utter a muffled groan. There was no voice to his throat, no words on his tongue, just a hollow breath and an enigmatic life-support apparatus corking his mouth.

Spencer yearned to have his voice back.

Instead, he was a forced mute.

But no longer deaf, as his hearing returned—albeit in a wave of raucous thunderclaps. It sounded as if a vehicle was backfiring in rapid bursts, the noise funneled into the vat which contained his head. Submerged and entirely engulfed in this mysterious, gelatinous liquid, the sounds were painfully amplified. He could literally feel his eardrums rattle and his skull vibrate. Fortunately they lasted but a few seconds, though for Spencer it had been the loudest minutes of his life.

When his vision corrected, he saw humanoid silhouettes idling around out in front of him. At first they had only outlines and dark features, but eventually they elucidated. Still, there was

the distortion of the clear liquid giving them all wavy appearances.

They appeared as no less than monsters to Spencer.

Humans or not, they were monsters to him.

Their voices came to him like knocks to a hollow oil drum, and in it he was contained, gagged and bound, their slave, their captive, and as he imagined the worst—their lab rat.

“He has come to, yes, he finally sees,” said one, the voice masculine.

A feminine figure stepped forward. In her hands she clutched a horrible looking device, something that looked like a hybrid corkscrew and pneumatic drill. Its metallic spiral claws began spinning, the noise faint to Spencer, albeit a shrill whirring sound. She grinned, gazing up at him from about five feet away. Spencer realized then that he was elevated slightly.

“He is not meant to see,” the woman said, her voice tinny but thick. *“But we are...”* She turned to a pair of men, one robust and the other gaunt, handing the fierce-looking tool to the prior. She spoke: *“Open him up. Keep it intact.”*

“And what of him, ma’am?” said the lean man.

“Leave him to wring out. He’ll be nothing but an empty vessel once we have it.”

Spencer’s panic mode kicked in.

However, it was a futile emotion. The tendrils his deep-rooted panic writhed through his body had no effect. They only made his heartbeat hyperactive and his blood feel as though it were frothing. As the two men shuffled toward him, he realized that he was in fact restrained. While he could not move his body, he could thrash about his head. His neck had little room or freedom to move, as the vat enclosing his head was taut below his Adam’s Apple, but he still managed.

It was no use.

He knew it, too, and it burned the flesh beneath his flesh to acknowledge how helpless he had become.

As the two men encroached upon him, he felt a frigid breeze nibble at his skin. Was he naked? He felt it tug at his

upper and lower back, his thighs and calves. Was he bound to a slab of steel? Their tools suctioned to the clear vat surrounding his head, spiraled teeth and claws of glimmering metal grinding against smooth glass. The grinding, not splintering, sounds reverberated through the vat. Spencer could see, he could feel, the liquid rippled against his face. His breathing became choppy and he felt like vomiting, but his stomach was dry, empty.

Not so different from the hearts of those tormenting him.

“He’s giving too much resistance,” grumbled the heavily built man, pausing with his tool.

“Knock him out, then,” the woman sneered. *“He’ll feel it one way or another.”*

The man turned back to face Spencer, at which point he realized just how human these people were. They were not creatures from another world, they were not the monstrosities under children’s beds or in their closets. They were not foul nightmares doing the will of demons.

Spencer saw that they were just very, very bad people.

And then his heart palpitated into an empty cell. His eyelids fluttered. A foreign substance, stranger and more venomous than before, wafted through the oxygen apparatus and into his mouth; it ethereally snaked its way down his throat and into his lungs. He felt them shrivel, he felt them become punching bags to a fury of spiked brass-knuckles from within.

A shifting shade of gray blinded Spencer.

His body stiffened before going slack, the pain no longer taking precedence. Instead it was the fear and its relaxing state, which all the more unnerved Spencer. But as his senses faded yet again, so did the fear. A baffling yet soothing sensation came over him, and not just his body.

Spencer’s light began fizzing out.

Somebody had stolen his Key. Whether or not they found what they were looking for behind his Door was a question best left to time, because all of a sudden thought became nonexistent to Spencer.

And so did everything else.

05

Colors shifted through Spencer Martin's fibrous being. Light in impossible to discern spectrums dappled what remained of his pneuma. What remained seemed to have been a fragmented relic at first. Time took long, lumbering strides as Spencer's lifeless body became a corpse with pallid skin. The perpetual oblivion, in all of its featureless depth, which had swallowed him whole now struggled to regurgitate him back into reality. It would not be the same reality he has always known, however. But somewhere deep within himself, a place where light and dark mingled like antique friends in the Fountain of Youth, he had always known. Moreover, he had always felt it.

Don't give up, murmured a voice to unseen ears.

Spencer did not so much hear the words as he did feel it course through his body and across his skin. Yet even so, he had neither skin nor musculature. Organs did not contribute to his vitality. A skeletal structure was no more than discarded toothpicks.

There is always chaos before order, spoke the soft voice. *Break the ties that bind you. Wake up and see beyond your own eyes. Create your reality.*

Spencer's own voice ricocheted through him. He recognized the tone, felt the breath waft across the surface of nonexistent lungs. His throat, although imperceptible,

reverberated with life. His voice came back to him in a sea of crashing waves, a beautiful echo that held together planets.

Spencer Martin woke up.

An explosion of color in every hue and shade tumbled through the blackness, illuminating a world that he had previously thought abandoned him. Instead, he came to acknowledge, it had only been the other way around. But now that he was returning, breath seeping back into his shimmering veins, Spencer felt more alive than he had ever been.

He finally understood the meaning.

Spencer became an impossible apparition in the naked eyes of his abductors. Their feeble minds were plagued by craven agendas and cruel intentions. Gray life slinked through their bodies, nothing more. Spencer could think and feel and speak, yet he felt no presence of brain or skin or tongue. To himself, he was personification; he was the embodiment of his imagination, the root of his sweeping creativity. He was the uninhibited incarnation of his own spirit. A manifestation of pinwheeling colors and shifting reality.

Much like his chi, Spencer became inexhaustible.

The polychromatic materialization took on an irregular humanoid outline, acting out of Spencer's basic perception of himself. However, this did not keep him from extending beyond his formerly physical-bound reality.

Spencer embraced his resurrection.

More aptly, his continuation of life.

A throng of his abductors, his tormentors, remained in the vast room. While Spencer could detect their presence and see outlines dappled with basic features, he could not lucidly recognize objects in the room and structural specifics. Articles of clothing, jewelry, the like—extraneous particles of reality, information even, that didn't concern Spencer at all.

Most vividly, however, was Spencer's vision of who these people really were. He could perceive their spirits, but felt unfazed by this capability. After all, they were no more than gray matter, like a muddy sky after a snowstorm.

And as speechless as they were now, he knew that they had been callously talkative earlier, during their process of abducting and restraining and eventually killing a young man whom they had never formally met before. As fearfully livid as they looked now, he knew too that they weren't all entirely quizzical. While shock and bewilderment was an understandable captivation at the moment, many of the nine individuals suffered a painful logic—they were gawking up at the materialization of the man they'd just killed.

And, by the distant feeling of it somewhere in Spencer's pulsing retention, decapitated as well.

More accurately, the victim of a savage brain autopsy.

Now look what has come of it—

"Don't even try to face this," Spencer spoke, his voice a zephyr indoors. To them, however, it was barbed and noxious. Many of them turned to leave, others still gorgonized and unmoving.

Spencer had never killed anyone before.

Even as he swooped towards his first victim, he felt right by himself in knowing that he never would. The scared-stiff man he collided with just then screamed before he left; and he left in a spray of matter the misted the faces of his nearby cohorts, hazing the air briefly. If it was blood, Spencer couldn't tell. He just saw a grainy gray substance that resembled the ichor of a shadow, and then the man's body collapsed in a heap.

Spencer's next two victims fell just as swiftly and in likewise manners. There was no true mess, no brutality, not necessarily even any pain inflicted upon them.

While Spencer might have previously desired a world of agony for these monsters of men and women who scooped him up for their own immoral doing, he now knew it wasn't his choice.

By the time Spencer glided upon the ninth person in the vast room, who had been fumbling with the keys to a large door, eight other corpses mottled the floor behind him.

And this ninth one, she was no different.

A squeeze of Spencer's—fists?—and the woman's antipathetic eyes voided themselves with a burst of gray. She fell lifelessly, and along with her eight cohorts they all drifted through the air. Whatever was to become of them, Spencer couldn't say.

The man, who was hardly such a thing anymore, had once been a mind and a collective heart all too vast for his own comprehension. Thoughts were not so much bound to him as birds were to a cosmic aviary. And now that he had shed his cranium—the only superficial cage his imagination had called home—it seemed logical that his mind would be truly free to roam.

Perhaps it was simply a change of priority that altered his state of mind. He didn't feel too keen on pondering the endless possibilities even as he himself had become just as endless, instead focused on retribution.

Moreover, resolution.

Although what Spencer had done to these people was justified as 'killing' in the mundane world, he knew it was not as iniquitous a crime...if even a crime at all. Instead, Spencer saw and truly felt that he had simply 'freed' those individuals. Whatever binds that had held them to their physical lives which led them to hurt others were now permanently severed.

As for their role in the afterlife—what of it?

The notion, as mentioned earlier, was simply not a fixation for Spencer right now. As long as the spirits he freed, the bodies he killed, no longer obstructed him, then Spencer held them void of concern.

He did not look back on the scene behind him.

The corpses were essentially empty and their contents, that which was all that ever mattered, now danced sluggishly through the air. The substances distanced themselves from him. Certainly they felt blinded by his essence, deterred for good reason. There was neither room for apology nor conversation in this form, especially between these parties; what had been said remained uncorrected and what had been done awaited

conclusion.

Spencer felt that he was the right agent to orchestrate such a terminus to these unfortunate events.

But were they so unfortunate?

Spencer felt whole. He felt that he'd discovered, at long last, what it truly meant to be—not just alive, nor be grateful for what he'd been given, and neither a nod to himself in the mirror. This was an epiphanous discovery that stretched beyond the realms of the egocentric and superficial.

Even so, Spencer had one last self-regarding matter to resolve.

06

Kleptomania had manipulated the minds of these people, pushing them to steal one man's most treasured item—his source of creativity, the abode to his imagination, the place where all of his masterpieces have stemmed from, an epicenter of pure ingenuity and uniqueness. The human mind. Clearly this is what they were led to believe, that is. So they abducted Spencer Martin, surely after having followed him for some time and maybe even snuck into his residence for a closer look into his expansive psyche. Survey his collection of literary offspring, the masterpieces buried under the soot and seclusion. They felt a kindling in their blackened hearts and devised a plan to unearth the Ark to his Genesis.

Little did they know.

As it turned out, it was his Flood that reigned above all else, sustaining the capability to both destroy and blossom, ultimately the only aspect of his imagination that could support his full weight across all sectors.

Intuition, innovation, insanity, clarity.

The list was as vast as it was diverse and contradicting.

Given, they were wrong about an even greater concept of their so-called master plan. They had sought his deepest treasure, his epicenter of ideas, the source of all that he had created, and managed to miraculously steal his mind after they stole him

from his life. They did not so much ‘leave him for dead’ as they did in fact leave him dead. The core group of Spencer’s abductors, his chief enemies now, had left this room with a precious thing in their possession—a thing which did not belong to them—and a pale, limp, seemingly vacant cadaver behind. However, Spencer’s true source of power resonated with him, coursing through the network of unseen channels beneath veins.

Soul.

And now that same essence, that peculiar life-force, drove him toward his goal. These people retained an artifact of Spencer’s being—pulsing as if still behind his eyes—and were not treating it as it ought to be treated.

Which was...not at all.

Spencer followed the pulse like a distress beacon, his manifestation growing in power as he neared. This was some kind of massive warehouse that he had been brought to following the abduction just outside his home. Spencer recalled a glimpse of dawning sunlight distorted through a semi-clouded sky, the way its luminance bled through. A similar array of colors, although far more coherent, much like he was now.

A gliding, roughly humanoid, sentient sunrise.

If only it was that simple...and he was glad this wasn’t the case.

Spencer moved through two spacious and disappointingly empty rooms before reaching a stairwell that beckoned his ascension. So, he rose through it, minding neither the steps nor the guardrails, until he reached the top landing. He paused at the door there, sensing the pulse of his lost gem emanating not far on the other side; its true location an enigmatic clarity void of measure.

With what might be described on an interstellar scale a deep breath—shy of forming a black hole—Spencer tore through the door. The walls rippled and buckled, the door disintegrating entirely against his sheer presence. The room beyond the threshold was immense, and a makeshift laboratory had been constructed of it. There were nearly two dozen people, some in

lab coats and others in aprons over plain clothes, scattered across the floor and on certain platforms. The room was the main cargo bay of the warehouse, some fifty yards long and about thirty across. Spencer's entrance occurred in a far corner of the warehouse bay, close to the high ceiling, and—if he'd been human—out onto the catwalk hugging the walls. Instead, he just about floated over the metallic catwalk, his presence twisting the guardrails and ceiling beams as he edged forward.

Quite an entrance, as it abruptly mesmerized everyone in the warehouse.

Even the three figures he recognized most—a woman and two physically contradicting men—whom were unnervingly close to Spencer's resonating distress beacon.

They had stolen his mind in the physical form that was his brain, considerably intact from his skull, and were storing it in a cylindrical vat at the center of the warehouse floor. The vat stood from a raised platform, encircled by a white catwalk upon which stood the three primary perpetrators. The vat itself was about eight feet tall and three in diameter, its surface surely glass—smooth, immaculately transparent, and containing a bubbly clear liquid. The brain was somehow kept in levitation, centered in the vat.

Spencer saw the jaw on the woman chatter.

The lips on both of the men, quivering.

Six men in the room, diversely placed across the floor, were armed with small automatic weapons. Two of them dropped their weapons out of sheer bewilderment. The other four raised them, firing without thought.

Their guns might as well have been empty.

Spencer expressed neither satisfaction, contentment, pride, anger, nor vanity. He simply waited until their magazines ran dry, at which point so did their mouths, and their hands dropped now useless firearms.

Spencer advanced out into the open.

"I've spent my whole life creating things out of sheer nonexistence," he spoke, his voice permeating every inch of the

warehouse without being deafening. Each word had its own unique echo, its own syrupy flow, its own sting to the skin and ears of those staring blankly up at him. *“Constructing beauty out of chaos, havoc into peace. Everything has a façade to be seen, dissected, and traversed. The world is mutilated, but only because of people like you. I will let yourselves decide where to go after this, but I won’t forget what you did.”*

The warehouse began shuddering. Walls swayed like paper caught by a wind, equipment began toppling here and there, the metallic roof screaming for release. The few rows of windows along the topmost panels of the building shattered with loud pops. Screams washed over the previously awestruck faces below Spencer, while his spectral materialization congealed—

Tendrils of vivid colors shot out from his arms, his legs; branches like variegated lightning multiplied across his body. His form had previously exhibited a forceful presence, but now it sported a glow that warped the very air around him.

Spencer’s voice distorted into a fierce bellow.

“You can have my mind, but you’ll never take my soul!”

The vocalization thundered through the warehouse. The roof rose and fell, rose and fell. Walls buckled in more ways and places than one. Support beams warped like twist-ties. Several people were running already, but the woman and two particular men remained by the vat. She was barking orders at them, trying to protect the vat’s contents somehow or another.

The woman’s auburn hair rolled out behind her in the vortex of air twisting through the warehouse. She was fumbling with some code on a keypad next to the vat when Spencer’s thunderous utterance faded and his attention channeled into the vat. Moreover, into its prisoner.

For the strongest instant he and his mind were pieced together again, his soul enrobing them with an impenetrable cloak.

And then Spencer smiled.

The embodiment of his life-force, which had been occupying the air by a catwalk in the warehouse, suddenly

dissolved. Simultaneously, the vat containing his removed brain exploded with no sound at all, just a blinding array of colors pierced by a prevailing whiteness. The rupture enveloped the entire warehouse in its powerful display of life and death, the colorful and the colorless, fulfilling quintessence and hollow oblivion.

In the wake of the explosion, Spencer was obliterated.

Along with him went dozens of others, their minds left to dust and their souls...elsewhere.

07

Not everything is what it seems. Life extends outward and inward, upward and in more directions than we could ever possibly imagine. These might have been the thoughts and writings of Spencer Martin, a man who dedicated a heavy portion of his young life to creating facets that could never bear feasibility, not in the world he occupied. But still did he, even so, and was the victim of a most untimely demise.

However, Spencer was gifted with the realization of connection. And the chance, albeit of ill fortune, to substantiate that connection.

He had given his all to fill in his emptiness.

The irony led to his abduction and, ultimately, his death. The perpetrators attempted the greatest heist of all, and failed terribly. Their realizations were plagued by cowardice and the unwillingness to look beyond first perception.

Spencer's manifestation was extinguished in the explosion that one day, which took with it all of the warehouse's inhabitants as well as the building itself. However, the strongest form of all survived. A breath of new life into a form over two decades old urged on Spencer's inner existence.

The only one that has ever mattered.

Spencer survives in the air on the tip of every spoken tongue, in the reverberation of every throat, in the shimmering eyes of every revelation, in the dreams of the living and the reveries of the dead.

And his smile stretches for countless fathoms, his thoughts an illuminated expansion.

His discovery is complete.

Now he lets it take him away.

