**The Coldest Winter**

*Dear Anyone,*

*Help. I’m so scared. I’ve started getting the nightmares again and I don’t know how to handle it this time. I know I’ve been through this before, but it’s never been this bad. I can’t just do this anymore. I’m scared to death of going to sleep because I don’t want to see her again. I’ve been waiting for this to get easier for years, and I thought it was gone for good, but I guess not. Perhaps it’ll never go away. Maybe this will help. Writing it all down. I honestly don’t know.*

*This is my nightmare: There’s three of us. Me, the victim, and the killer. You’d think that a murder nightmare is some kind of cliché, and it is, but not this one. Clichés don’t cause this type of fear. I’m in the parking lot near the harbour, and they’re over by the docks. He’s dragging her towards the parking lot. It’s so dark I can barely see them, but I know we’re at the harbour because I can smell the ocean. I’ve heard that when you’re dreaming, you don’t have any senses and you can’t feel anything, but I really can smell the ocean. I’m completely aware of my surroundings.*

*There are always a few moments where she begs for him to please let her go, to please don’t hurt her, but it’s useless. He throws her to the ground and she stops. She doesn’t even try to run. Once she’s lying down, he takes out a gutting knife and starts peeling off her skin. He does it so calmly. His slices are so exact, it’s like he’s an expert. It takes a while before she’s all torn apart and her muscles and bones lie next to her strips of skin in a puddle of blood. I don’t even know why he does this next. He scoops her eyes out. Then he turns to me and walks over calmly. I’m about to shit myself. But he never hurts me. He places them in my hands like he’s paying me back an overdue loan and I can’t breathe because her eyes are still alive. Like if they had a mouth, they’d say something to me. I wish I could understand.*

*I can’t do this. I’m scared of what I could do to myself more than anything.*

*From,*

*Someone.*

It’s 5:21 a.m. and I’m sitting alone in my apartment at my desk. A cold draft is leaking in through the window in front of me. Twenty minutes ago, it wasn’t bothering me, but now the hairs on my forearm stand on end. The only light in my room comes from a small lamp on my desk, and it’s hurting my eyes. I turn it off. Now it’s pitch black. The streetlights on my block are out because a tree branch fell and hit an electricity cord last week.

I pick the letter up off the desk and stand up. Carefully, I fold the letter into a perfect paper airplane. This way, when I throw it, it’ll fly far, far away. I take aim and peer out the window. “Three, two, one, take off.” I say to myself. And it’s gone. The city swallows it up, and I breathe.

Tonight marks the sixth night I’ve gone without sleep. It’s not the longest I’ve ever gone, but it’s still it’s pretty impressive. The last time I can remember losing this much sleep, I was fifteen years old. Six years ago. About a week ago the nightmares came back. I thought they’d go away if I pushed them to the back of my head, but after three nights they didn’t, and by the fourth night I was so scared I didn’t go to sleep. I’ve got things to keep me busy and awake at night, so it’s not as lonely or terrifying, but tonight I couldn’t. I started crying and couldn’t stop. The type of exhaustion you get from being awake for so long clings onto me. It’s like I’m carrying an invisible dead weight inside of me, and every day it just gets heavier. But it’s not invisible. How can any of this be invisible when it’s more real and terrifying than anything else I know? How can anyone tell me that “it’s all in my head” when I understand that perfectly well, and it still doesn’t mean that this horrible paranoia hasn’t already chewed up and swallowed every part of my life?

Just as I’m about to slip into an existential train of thought, my alarm clock goes off. My heart jumps. Even though I don’t sleep anymore, I still like to set it. It plays as a reminder to me that even though I’m scared to death, today is a new day, and a new chance to start afresh. I’m an optimist. I can’t help it. For example: perhaps today is the day that I become Employee of the Month at the video shop I work at, or the day that I meet the love of my life sitting on a park bench, or even the day that I finally reach the ultimate Buddhist state of Enlightenment. Whatever. It can happen.

It’s six in the morning on the shortest day of the year, and I have to be at work in an hour. I get up from the chair that I’ve been writing in for the past hour, and walk into the kitchen. I flick on the light and let my eyes adjust. Groggily, I pour myself a bowl of cereal with milk and another cup of coffee. I sit down at my kitchen table and turn the TV on to the news network. And this is what I see.

*“The victim, male, dark skin, around 25-years-old, was found in Sir Fredrick Harbour last night around 11 o’clock in two separate piles by the harbour’s caretaker as he was closing the docks. Forensics have concluded that the victim’s skin was removed while he was alive. The eyes were not found at the crime scene, and were removed post-mortem.”*

My heart stops.

“*The body is unidentifiable, and the police are requesting any persons with information on the victim or his killer to call the anonymous tip number at the bottom of the screen.”*

I shut off the TV. Just like that, it’s hard to breathe. I close my eyes, but I can’t focus. The victim was skinned alive. The victim was *skinned alive*.

This can’t be real. This can’t be real. *This is not real*.

I reach for the phone. If there’s one person in the world who I can count on to always be there for me, it’s my sister Amelia. When I was in high school, my parents sent me to therapist after therapist for my paranoia, but none of them helped. They acted like if they let the therapists do what they were paid to do and minded their own business, this would all blow over eventually. But Amelia understood that healing didn’t work like that.

I punch her number into my phone. She moved outside our small town to the big city after graduating from university. She still lives there now with her boyfriend. It’s only the early hours of the morning, but she should be awake by now.

The phone rings three times before she answers. “Hello?” Her usual soft voice croaks over the phone.

“It’s me, January.” I say.

“What are you doing awake so early? Are you drunk?” She asks.

“No, I’m just scared. There was a murder on the news.” My voice cracks when I say the m-word.

“I know. I heard about it. It’s fine, Jan.” She says. I want to believe her.

“It was exactly like my nightmare, though.” I manage to say. The phone goes silent for a few moments.

“Since when did you start having nightmares again?”

“About a week ago. I haven’t slept in 6 days, Amy.”

“Shit. Do you have work today?” I tell her I do. “I want you to call in sick. Go to a walk in clinic and tell them what you just told me. It could just be a paranoid episode, but I want you to make sure it’s not a relapse. Okay? I have to go now, sorry. I have work.”

“Okay. Thank you, Amy. Bye.” I hang up and immediately call my boss to tell him I’m feeling under the weather.

I decide to go to the clinic as soon as it opens. Quickly, I finish my breakfast, shower and get dressed. Before leaving, I check myself in the mirror. The bags under my eyes have become so dark and pronounced that they almost look like bruises. I pull the skin down with my fingers. I never cared enough to cover them with make up. Not that it would help, anyways. My dark hair is growing out again, and if I don’t cut it soon, it’ll act like it has a mind of its own. I tied it up into a pony tail anyways, and threw on an old but clean shirt and a pair of sweatpants under my jacket. If I could sum up my appearance in three words, they would be: *recovering meth addict*. Yeah. That glamorous.

I step out of my apartment and into the bitter cold.

I arrive at the clinic 15 minutes before it opens. Only three other people are sitting in the waiting area with me. “January Pearson?” The secretary calls my name. The fluorescent lights make her pale skin look grey. As if being in a walk-in psychiatric clinic could ­be *more* depressing.

“That’s me,” I say.

“Just follow me in.” She gives me the same sympathetic smile that she gives all her patients, and leads me to a counselor’s office. His name is printed on his door in brass: *Dr. Norman*. A greying man wearing a casual suit opens the door and looks at me. He smiles differently.

“Come in. Have a seat.” He sits at a semi-messy desk, and gestures for me to sit on the cushioned chair opposite of him. He marks my name down on a clipboard. “What seems to be the problem, January?”

It’s a long story, so I start at the beginning. I start with the nightmares and my parents not understanding and therapy never helping. I tell him I haven’t slept in nearly a week because of how scared I am that the killer is out to get me and that he’s getting closer. I freaked out this morning with the murder on the news replicating my nightmare exactly, and I’m scared of losing myself completely. It’s getting harder to figure out what’s real and what’s not.

Dr. Norman finishes taking notes on my spiel and removes his glasses to look at me. The air feels stale in the few moments we’re both silent.

“And it’s only recently that these nightmares have started coming back?” He says. I nod. “And you’re scared that there’s someone out to get you because the man hands you her eyeballs?” I nod again. “Do you have a history of mental illness?”

“Yes. I have paranoia.” I say. Dr. Norman writes it down.

He shifts his weight in his chair. It creaks under his weight. “Have you ever heard anyone in your dreams talking to you when you’re awake? Or seen people who aren’t really there?”

I shake my head. “It’s just the nightmares. And that it was a lot like the murder last night.” He makes a note of that. “Do you think I’m psychotic?” I accidentally blurt.

He takes a moment to think. “I don’t think you’re psychotic, January. You don’t seem to have any red-flag symptoms of psychosis besides the incredibly strange coincidence of your nightmares and the unfortunate murder at Fredrick Harbour last night. However, from your overreaction to this event on top of your history with paranoia, it could mean that you’re going through another episode, or possibly a relapse. If this doesn’t pass in a week, I strongly recommend that you get into contact with a therapist. If you ever have serious thoughts of harming yourself or anyone else, you can always call 911. You’re never in trouble until you commit a crime.”

For the first time in six days, I exhale slowly. I’m not crazy. What Dr. Norman said makes sense. It really is just a very weird coincidence. I’m paranoid, right? I’m supposed to overreact to things like this. The only thing similar between my nightmare and the murder at Sir Fredrick Harbour was the way the victim was killed. The actual victims were almost completely opposite. Even if the body was killed in the same way, it doesn’t mean the murders were connected. There are a lot of sickos out there.

“Everything alright, January?” Dr. Norman interrupts my train of thought. “You were just staring off into space.”

“What? Oh, yeah. Just thinking.”

“About anything important?” He says. There’s a flicker of unease in his voice.

“No. I think I’m going to go home. Thank you for talking to me today. I feel a lot better.” I get up, and he does too.

“Thank you for coming to see me today, January. Take care of yourself.”

“Thank you, Dr. Norman. You too.” As I’m leaving the clinic, I repeat the words, *I’m gonna be fine. I’m gonna be just fine* over and over and over.

The snow crunches beneath my feet on the sidewalk. I don’t live in the nicest neighbourhood, but I like where I live. The smell of cigarette smoke is more distinct closer to where I am, but for now it’s just an undertone to the cool, crisp morning. It’s the kind of cold that makes your nostrils sting when you breathe in.

I fumble in my coat pockets for my key. Walking up the steps towards my door, I notice a piece of paper taped to it. It might be from my landlord, but I don’t recognize the handwriting. It’s too shaky.

When I get close enough to read it, my entire body collapses and I can’t breathe. My insides squirm like they’re trying to escape from their shell. I don’t blame them. *This isn’t real*, I tell myself, *this is not happening. Oh god, please, this can’t be real.* My knees shake so hard I fall to the ground. On my hands and knees, I read the note again. This time, my heart pounds. Racing harder than it ever did before.

*Dear Someone*

*I have dreams about you, too.*

*From,*

*Anyone.*

Word Count: 2427