

THE DARK ROOM

You take the ferry to the island.

You take the ferry to the island alone because there is no one to go with you, and you are unmoored and without responsibility, and it is a wild and terrible feeling.

You pay your fifteen dollars and you take the ferry to the island.

On the ferry a man talks to you. He is from Peru and he is hitting on you but not so much that you mind. He gives you his business card, but you will never call. This is your first and last conversation, and even though it means something you will never remember the details or his name. It is cloudy but the sun will come out later.

He gives you a keychain. It's gold colored metal and it's a tiny replica of an Incan sacrificial knife. It has the word "PERU" stamped on one side. You give him your soapstone necklace.

You never see him again.

You step off onto the island.

You step off onto the island and into the fort. You pass under the chalk-white stalactites forming from the old concrete, calcium leeching from the building in the rain over centuries.

Someday this will all be dust.

You walk over the dry moat and through the reinforced wooden doors, past the tightly turning granite staircase that goes nowhere now but used to lead to the overpass for dropping shit on the invaders that never came. The yard is in front of you. The sun has come out.

The yard is green and bright and someone is flying a kite but no one picnics here because it's forbidden. The horse chestnut trees are to your right, with the warning sign that says "DO NOT EAT THE CHESTNUTS." You walk across the lawn.

Cannons line the walls above you. Stagnant pools occupy the spaces once held by the enormous weapons that faced out into the open water. The weapons that searched for U-boats. New concrete on old concrete on granite blocks.

This place is haunted.

No women died on this island, at least none that we know of. Two men, deserters, were shot in the 1860s, but no women.

There was no desperate wife who stole the uniform of her enemies and made her way to the kindest and gentlest of all the Civil War prisons, she was not caught and was not hanged in an oversized black robe. The stories exist to scare children.

But she was seen.

You walk across the lawn, past the bakery where you sat on a windowsill and sang to the nothing in the dry moat below. Past the narrow way you explored blindly as a child, at once relieved and disappointed when it deposited you right back where you began. Past the old shells sitting on the lawn, never to be fired.

You walk under the arch, and into the dark hallway. You put your left hand on the wall, cool with condensation even in the summer months. You can see the end of the hallway faintly, but it is not your destination.

You walk along the uneven flagstones. No flashlights, no cell phones.

Your left hand reaches the corner you cannot see, and you turn.

There is a metal gate at the end of this narrow passage that is locked up when school tours are on the island. No one wants to lose a kid in the dark room. It is not locked today.

The room is dark. A single shaft of light falls from the ceiling, a few bricks removed for a chimney. You cannot see the walls.

There is only a small shaft of light, too faint to see by.

You keep your hand to the wall and walk yourself along the far side until you reach the back of the room. The sides are curved, and you worry about hitting your head.

You stand in the corner, facing the light.

You stand alone in the dark.

It doesn't take long for the nameless fear to sink in.

SOMETHING is here.

SOMETHING is dangerous.

You cannot see anything but the shaft of light.

You are not alone.

You stand in the corner and you breathe, because you are not dead yet and as long as you can breathe you will be okay.

You breathe and you tell yourself "I am the scariest thing in this room."

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And suddenly it's true.

You see by the light of the chimney, the brick walls and the worn flagstones. The open gate and the odd remnants of paint.

You stand and you wait for your meal to arrive.

Someday you will leave this place. Someday you will get back on the ferry and everyone will come home and everything will go back to normal. Someday this will just be a thing that you did, a story for parties. Someday people will laugh with you and think "how delightfully eccentric" and pretend that they would do the same if they only had the time.

But they won't.

They do not walk into dark rooms. They do not look into the mirror when there is nothing to see.

You are the scariest thing in this room.