Perception

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Abstract

Starting with this issue we will publish a series of psychological horror stories. Each story of this literature genre is based on familiar situations, mental and emotional anguish. The stories are focused on the inner conflict of the characters, rather than on an external one, designed to frighten and thrill the readers without the typical slaughter that is usually found in classic horror stories.

The compelling ideas combined with sensory details and psychological elements such as mental illness can be recognized by the readers as they feel something twisted is waiting just around the corner, foreboding in the story.

Unmatched by any other spine-tingling tales, you are invited to discover unsettling atmospheres and experiences of characters dealing with a disturbed psyche reinterpreted in a metaphorical manner.

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I. PERCEPTION

He took in a deep breath and smiled at the sound of the loud engine. He pressed the gas pedal and the car started moving into the night and into the fog that was beginning to form. There was something about that moment that just made him feel ecstatic. Alive.

He gently moved the steering wheel from side to side, following the curves of the undulating road. The only thing he could see ahead of him was what the car's headlights revealed. *Well, hello, dear friend! How have you been lately?* He thought these words as if the road would reply. He wasn't crazy; he was aware the road couldn't speak, but he knew for sure that road had energy of its own. That road was like no other. People called it "the path to Heaven" during the day, thanks to mesmerising scenery to its right, all the way to the top of the hill, where there was a platform where you could see the city and the other hills surrounding it. Ironically, though, that road was also called "the Devil's trap" during the night due to its dangerous twists and turns, as well as the ravine on the side of this road that you could easily fall into, especially on a foggy night. That road could be either a friend to you or your worst enemy. But he didn't worry, because the road had always been good to him.

He turned the headlights off; he switched the gear and pressed the gas pedal to the fullest. He watched the speedometer going up and up and he smiled satisfied. He took the turn to the right and then another to the left. He was defying fear. He felt invincible. And then, he was in free fall. How could he have missed a turn? How could the road have betrayed him?

He sat in the falling car, eyes closed, and his hands tight on the wheel. The only thing he could do now was to wait for the end. The fall must have lasted a few seconds, but to him, it seemed like ages. Enough to realise what he was going to be left behind. Enough to realise that despite his reckless behaviour, he didn't want to die. The car rolled into the air, gravity made no sense anymore and then it finally bumped into the ground. He felt squished from every side and every inch of his body hurt. The airbag finally blew up in his face. But the end didn't come. Instead, he felt a sudden change in temperature and he understood immediately what was going on: the car was on fire. He watched as the wheel and his hands that were still clasping the wheel were suddenly eaten by bright orange flames. *No, not again!* He thought as if that would put a stop to his suffering. Thick black smoke filled in his lungs to the brink of suffocation and before everything went dark, the last sensation that he felt was desperation.

"No!" he heard himself shout.

He opened his eyes and realised he was sitting at the desk in his office. He must've fallen asleep while he was working. His shirt and face were wet from sweating. He took in a few deep breaths to calm his nerves. He looked at his hands and arms recalling the feeling of being burned alive. He knew that feeling too well and the scars on his arms were there as proof. It was just a nightmare. It was just a nightmare. He repeated in his mind, but no matter how many times he thought that, the feeling of desperation wasn't going away.

He heard the door open and he saw his assistant coming in with a worried face. "Mr. Anders, is everything ok?" He nodded and then checked the time: it was a quarter past midnight. He hoped his son had come home already and high as he probably was, he already was asleep. He knew it was wrong, but he was trying to avoid seeing his son as much as possible, hoping that his drug problem would eventually go away.

He looked at his secretary and noticed how tired she seemed. "I think it's time to leave, Maria. It's very late. Come, I'll take you home." She simply smiled and went to reception to gather her things. He put a few papers into his briefcase. He was sure he wasn't going to be able to fall asleep again, so he planned on working.

As soon as they got inside the car he tensed, recalling the way that nightmare ended. Both he and Maria were being silent. Her, probably because she didn't know how to approach him anymore. Himself, because he was too lost in his thoughts. The honk of a car woke him up from his reverie and realised he was driving on the other side of the road. He turned the wheel brusquely to the other side and managed to avoid the car that was coming towards them by inches. He regained his composure quickly and continued driving. If Maria got scared by this incident she didn't say anything out loud.

He stopped the car in front of Maria's house, but she didn't seem she wanted to get out. He didn't look at her, but he was aware she was staring at him. "Do you… do you want to come in?" She asked. He was about to snap at her, but when he finally looked in her eyes he simply sighed and shook his head. "We've talked about this, Maria. I'm just not good for you." Her face didn't show anything, but he was sure he hurt her feelings for the millionth time. She got out of the car without saying anything else. He watched her walk along the alley and then stops in front of the door searching for her keys. He was about to stop the engine and go after her but then she opened the door and went inside the house. Maria was a nice woman and they had tried to go out in the past. Things went well for a while, until his ex-wife visited from Spain and he realised he still had feelings for her. His wife went back to Spain, to her new family eventually and left him

longing for her once again. He ended his brief relationship with Maria quickly afterwards. In his eyes, no woman could compare to his ex-wife.

When he pulled up the driveway, he was relieved to see the lights were out in his house. As soon as he opened the door, however, he realised not everyone was asleep. He could hear the sound of some kid's cartoons coming from the living room. He reckoned that was strange considering his youngest son should have been asleep at that late hour. He went into the living room without taking his shoes off and as soon as he saw what was going on he stopped in his tracks and went still for a couple of seconds. Alex, his son, was on the floor, his body moving with violent convulsions and in that strange blue light coming from the TV, Elijah saw foam gathering on his son's lips. What did he have to do in that situation? Where was the nurse? "Help!" He shouted hoping someone will answer, but no reply came, apart from the happy tune that was playing on the TV.

He grabbed his phone immediately and called the only person he felt he could trust. "Maria!" he said, barely holding back tears. He was aware that at that moment he sounded like a child, but he felt so alone and desperate. After all these years, he still didn't know how to tend to his child when he needed it. "Please, help me! I don't know what to do. I'm scared." Those were the only words he could say before his phone vibrated and then shut down. "Damn it!" He shouted and threw the phone against the wall smashing it into pieces. He sat there on the floor, next to his son who was still convulsing. He pushed his body on the side so that he doesn't choke on that yellowish foam in his mouth. "It's fine, son! Everything will be ok! Don't worry!". He said this as if his son would understand anything he was saying. And in the background, he could hear the TV going. It was his son's favorite cartoons, "The Happy Family". *We are the happiest family in the world*, they sang with those big smiling faces. "Shut up!" He shouted at the TV as if it would turn off by itself, and when he realised that wouldn't happen, he stood up and punched the screen so hard it cracked right in the middle. The pain in his fist was so acute, he closed his eyes for a second and when he looked at the TV, he realised that the cartoon was still playing, but now, the characters looked weird, distorted wherever the screen was cracked. *Who's the happiest family? We are! And you can join us too!* They continued to sing. "Shut up!" He shouted, and he punched the TV again, creating even more cracks in the screen. He then stared at the TV as it continued to play the cartoon and when he was about to lift it and throw it to the ground, it shut down, and the living room became completely dark for a few seconds. And then the lights turned on and he could see Maria standing there, next to the switch.

He pointed with his bloody hand towards Alex, who was now lying on the floor motionless and then he started crying. "I didn't know how to help him! I don't know where the nurse is. And my phone had died. And that cartoon was awful!"

Maria came to him and sat him on the sofa. She checked on Alex who was making some intelligible sounds. "Elijah, he's fine! He got lucky. Come, let's put him to bed. He's fine!" She reassured him.

"I don't understand what happened to the nurse. And I don't know where Denis is." Elijah started to ramble. Maria came to him and took his face in her hands.

"Let's deal with one problem at a time." He nodded, and they took Alex to his room.

While Maria was putting his youngest son to bed, he went upstairs to see if his other son was asleep. And for the second time that night he stopped in his tracks shocked at the sight, while tears started gathering in his eyes again. "Oh!" was all he could say. Andrea, the nurse who was supposed to take care of Alex, and Denis, his other son, were lying on the floor next to the bathroom door. Two syringes were sitting beside them, and he could see purple dots on their arms like infected bug bites. Elijah's first intention was to lay on the ground with his eyes closed and wait for everything to go away. He regained his composure quickly this time and came closer to the still bodies of the nurse and his son. Their eyes were half-closed, and they had dreamy smiles on their faces like they were stuck somewhere in-between reality and the land of dreams. With a sigh, he grabbed his son by the arms and pulled him into his room. He stripped him off his clothes and changed him into something more comfortable. He put him in his bed and covered his body with a blanket and then he remained there, staring at Denis for a few seconds. He then took Andrea downstairs and laid her on the bed next to Alex's, where she usually slept. As he was starting to leave to deal with the mess in the bathroom, he felt a hand on his arm and he couldn't help but jump. "Mr. Anders… I'm sorry." Somehow, Andrea managed to get those words out of her mouth. He waited for a few seconds, but she didn't say anything else. I'm sorry, she said, like that would make things better. His son could've died. Maria came close to him and put a hand on his shoulder to calm him. He brushed away her hand and left the room to take care of the mess in the bathroom. He threw the syringes away and put the drugs he found on the floor in his son's jacket where he knew he usually kept them. As always, he reckoned that pretending he never saw anything would be best for everyone involved. When he came downstairs he found Maria waiting for him on the sofa.

"You should talk to Denis, Elijah. You can't continue to turn a blind eye to this situation. And I can help you find another nurse. I feel responsible for this. When I helped you hire her she seemed to be the perfect candidate."

He frowned and shook his head slightly. "No. It's the first time this happened. Finding Andrea like this. I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding. As for Denis, I remember how I was at his age. I'm sure it's just a phase that will end soon." Maria didn't say anything else, but from the way she looked at him, he was sure she didn't agree with him.

"I think I'll just sleep at the racecourse office tonight. I'll take you home first." Maria kept quiet and followed him outside. He wanted to shout at her for not continuing to argue with him. He was fully aware she had a lot more to say about the situation.

That night, his sleep was uneasy, his dream playing again and again in his head. He was also very uncomfortable sleeping on the sofa, in his work clothes, but he preferred this rather than being in his house. "Elijah!" He heard a voice and he felt someone shaking him. "Wake up, brother! What the hell are you doing here?" He opened his eyes reluctantly and blinked a few times before he took a good look at the person. "Anders, come on!"

The person who was talking to him was his older brother, Matthew. He was also not the person Elijah wanted to see at that moment. Their relationship was of a weird kind. The kind where they would tell each other everything but at the same time, they would be very competitive with each other. In life and at the racecourse.

"Ah, shit. What time is it?" Elijah asked while stretching.

"Forget about that, man. You have two beautiful ladies waiting for you outside." Matthew said with a bit of annoyance in his voice. Elijah looked at him sceptically. He was sure Matthew was joking around.

"I'm serious man! It's your wife. Oh, pardon me, your ex-wife. And some other young lady. A really nice one, I might add. Seriously, Elijah, you have to leave some women for the other men. You can't have them all." Matthew continued while pouring himself some cold coffee from the counter. But Elijah wasn't listening anymore. The minute he heard his ex-wife was there, his heart skipped a few beats.

He hurried to the door and opened it to find her waiting there. Along with Maria.

"She came to your office. She asked me to bring her here." Maria explained apologetically. She looked very uncomfortable, to say the least. His ex-wife, on the other hand, was radiant as always. He gulped, trying to swallow the big node that was suddenly stuck in his throat. "Lana" was all he could say. As always, he was taken aback by her presence. And he just couldn't get enough.

She smiled at him brightly. "Well, don't just stand there gawking!" she said while approaching him. "You look good, darling."

Elijah heard Matthew scoff behind them, while he was still trying to find his words. Lana suddenly turned to Maria. "Margo, is it? Could you please pour us coffees, please? We have a lot of catching up to do." Maria looked at Elijah, probably hoping he wouldn't agree, or at least he would correct Lana, but he avoided eye contact with her at all costs.

"Oh, don't worry. I can do it!" Matthew volunteered two empty cups already in his hands. Elijah looked at him annoyed. He didn't seem like he wanted to leave the room anytime soon. In fact, Matthew seemed to enjoy the situation very much.

"Come! Let's sit down." Lana said taking Elijah's hand and pulling him towards the sofa. When they sat down, he realised Maria was still standing in the door frame staring straight at him, no expression on her face. "Margo, you can sit on that chair." Lana intervened pointing to an empty chair in the corner.

"Lana, what are you doing here?" Elijah finally spoke, and he noticed that he couldn't help but smile. "You look good, as usual." He added, and his ex-wife returned the smile and took his hand in hers. Although he didn't want to admit it, every time she visited, he secretly hoped she would tell him she wants to come back to him. He knew she had a new life, a new husband and children with him, but if she was able to leave her first family, he couldn't help but wish she could do that to her second family. It was a guilty thought, but it was following him constantly.

When Matthew came with the two cups filled with coffee, he winked at Elijah and then turned to Maria who did as instructed and took the seat on that chair. "Margo, would you like some coffee as well?" Elijah's face dropped when he heard Lana's question and he realised he had to say something this time. He made eye contact with Maria, who was looking at him

expectantly. Could that moment become more uncomfortable? If only he could be alone with Lana…While all these thoughts were running through his head, Maria stood up.

"It's Maria, not Margo. And I can help myself, thank you." Maria's words were blunt, provoking.

Matthew raised his eyebrows at Elijah and smiled wickedly. "Oh, she's an independent woman. I like it." He commented. Elijah sighed. He was just simply relieved that he didn't have to intervene after all.

"Oh my god! I am so sorry! I had your name all wrong this entire time." Lana exclaimed.

"I'm sure you did." Maria commented bitterly and Elijah was afraid that her comment will start an argument with Lana, but his ex-wife didn't budge. "Mr. Anders" Maria continued. So, she was back to using his last name. That was a clear sign she was upset. He shifted in his place waiting for her to continue. "I would like to return to the office. If there is nothing I can do for you here, then I would like to excuse myself."

Elijah was once again relieved and was about to say she was allowed to leave, when Matthew cut in enthusiastically. "Is this your assistant, Elijah? I'm so glad to finally meet you!". Maria had been working for Elijah for less than two years now and there was a good reason why he never introduced Maria to his brother. The competition between the two of them, of course, extended to women as well.

"Please, stay! Elijah and I were actually talking about having a little race now. You can be my co-pilot!" Elijah caught Maria's glance at his scarred arms. Then, they made eye contact and he knew exactly what she was thinking. Not only she despised the situation she was in, but she also disapproved of him racing.

"I really should get back to work…" She tried to excuse herself when she understood that Elijah wasn't going to offer her any help.

"Elijah, I didn't know you were still racing!" Lana intervened. "I thought you stopped after your last accident." She said while pointing to his arms. Elijah scoffed. A few months ago, after his car broke down during a race and there was a malfunction that caused the car to light on fire, he had made a promise to himself never to compete in a race again. He didn't fear another

injury, but he was terrified that another accident would leave his children without a father. Elijah didn't keep his promise in the end. After Denis started taking drugs and Alex's condition worsened, he felt a compelling pull towards the racecourse.

"I race from time to time." He said while avoiding making contact with anyone.

Matthew laughed. "From time to time? He practically lives here. He's competing tonight, actually." Elijah gave his brother an exasperated look. If only his brother would stop talking.

"Oh, that's fantastic news! So let's race now. I'll be Elijah's co-pilot." Lana said standing up. "What do you say?" She asked Elijah with a wide smile.

"I don't know…" He hesitated.

"Oh, come on, brother! Are you scared I am going to win the race?" Matthew provoked him. Elijah focused on his brother and he hoped that his eyes were saying more than his mouth. He was certain that Matthew was aware of how uncomfortable he was making the whole situation. And there was also something in his eyes, something aloof that made Elijah speaks loud and clear for the first time that morning. "I changed my mind, Maria. You will stay. We will race." He then eyed Matthew and came closer to him. "And I will be the one who beats you." He added. He looked again at Maria who had an incredulous expression on her face. He knew what she was thinking, but he didn't care.

While they were walking outside to the racecourse, Lana kept the conversation going. "So, I think you'll be happy to hear that I'm staying here for a few weeks." As his ex-wife said this, Maria, who was striding in front of them along with Matthew, stumbled on her heels and almost fell. Lana couldn't help but comment with an amused tone: "Be careful, Maria! Those heels look dangerous." To Elijah's relief, however, Maria didn't respond, and she graciously moved forward. But the tension grew as Elijah watched Lana assessing Maria from behind. He worried that she would make another vexing comment about his assistant but what she said was completely different: "So, Elijah, how have the children been since the last time I saw them?"

That question made Elijah's stomach turn upside down and he became gloomy when he remembered what he came home to the previous night. He looked at Maria who continued walking as if she didn't hear the question. He knew she would not tell Lana anything. He shivered for a second at the sight of his sons in those moments. But, of course, he wouldn't tell Lana about this. He wanted her to come back to their family. And how could she do that if it wasn't a happy family? He took a deep breath in and then he answered: "Well, they're doing ok.

I was just talking last night with Denis about me taking some time off work and inviting you to stay with us for the given time. I have been very busy with work lately and I wish I'd spend more time with them." The lie came out so easily he almost believed himself, but then the sound that Maria's heels were making on the ground reminded him of the truth. He cared about Maria, but at that moment, he hated her so much for knowing everything and for being there. Lana put a hand on his shoulder and smiled "Well, then, here I am, darling! Great minds think alike!"

The oval race track and the arena surrounding it were empty at that early hour. When they reached the race cars, Elijah cast a glance at Maria who was ostentatiously keeping the distance from him. He reckoned if she wasn't his employee, she would've never spoken to him again. But given their situation, he could only hope she would just forget all about it eventually.

As if Elijah didn't have enough on his plate already, Matthew came to him and whispered in his ear "Elijah, let me win this one. I want to impress Maria." Elijah felt his blood boil. "She's not available, Matthew." He looked at Elijah as if he didn't believe a word he said. "Oh, yeah? Who is she with, then?" Elijah ignored the question and he put his helmet on. "Ten laps, Anders. I'll beat you!" He heard Matthew say before he put his own helmet on.

The minute he got inside the car, the dream from the previous night kicked in again. As he studied the steering wheel he grew more and more anxious and the urge to call off the race was imminent. But his discussion with Matthew and Lana's presence made him decide that it would be a mistake. Instead, he started the engine and he drove past the starting point without waiting for any signal. He hoped that would infuriate Matthew.

He pressed the gas pedal and he allowed the loud sound of the engine to wash away every fear that he had. For a few moments, he even forgot that Lana was sitting next to him, or that he was competing in a race. That was until he looked to his right and through the side window, he saw Matthew's car running at the same speed. And unexpectedly, Matthew turned the steering wheel to the left causing Elijah to do the same to avoid the collision. The anxiety he had a few minutes before was replaced by anger and determination, so he quickly moved the wheel to the right towards Matthew's car. He was so focused on getting revenge that he didn't realise they had reached a turn of the speedway, so when Matthew tried to avoid being hit by Elijah's car; he drove right into the fence. Elijah pressed the brake pedal and his car stopped violently with a squealing sound. He opened the door and ran hurriedly towards Matthew.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Matthew shouted while coming out of the car and taking his helmet off. He threw the helmet on the ground and before Elijah could say or do anything, Matthew grabbed Elijah's collar and started throwing punches at him. Elijah's first intention was to apologise but when Matthew's fist stroke his jaw forcefully he began hitting Matthew as well. They fell to the ground, rolling from side to side, entangled in a weird dance.

"Stop it!" He heard Maria pleading. "How old are you?" She continued.

"Just let them do it. You know men!" Lana said. Somehow, Elijah managed to get on top of Matthew and as he was about to throw another punch, he looked in Matthew's eyes who had completely given up the fight and was just waiting for the hit. Elijah let out an angry roar, almost inhumane, and then he stood up, arranging his clothes. He then helped Matthew stand up as well. They were both in bad shape. Matthew's lip was beginning to swell and blood was dripping from one of his eyebrows. Elijah could feel his nose pulsating and he had a sharp pain in his entire back from when Matthew threw himself at Elijah and pushed him on the ground.

"God, you act like two big nasty children!" Maria said furiously. All the formality that she had used had vanished into thin air.

"Should we continue the race now?" Lana said clapping her hands. "I mean, I don't know about you, but I felt such a rush the entire time."

Maria, Matthew and even Elijah looked at her in exasperation. The whole situation was chaotic, and they needed to end it right there and then. "Matthew's car is damaged." Elijah said quietly and then he started walking towards the building at a very slow pace.

From behind, he heard Matthew talking to Maria. "So, I know this wasn't exactly what you would call impressive, but I hope I had convinced you to take you on a date." Elijah was outraged that his brother wouldn't give up, so he turned around, fist clenched to his sides. "I told you, Matthew! She. Is. Taken!" He pronounced the last three words very clearly and slowly.

"Oh, yeah?" Maria said in a challenging tone. "By who?" She asked. Elijah looked at her, and he hoped she knew how angry he was. "You told me you have someone." He answered simply and he was once again surprised by how easily the lie came out. Maria raised her eyebrows and a mean smile spread across her lips. "No, Elijah. I don't think I told you such a

thing. In fact," she said turning to Matthew "I would love for you to take me out on a date." Elijah scoffed, knowing that Matthew felt triumphant.

"And I have the best idea for your first date!" Lana intervened, and Elijah dreaded hearing her next words. "How about you take her to Elijah's competition tonight?" She put her hand on Maria's shoulder as if they were best friends. Maria looked at her and shook her hand off quickly but Lana didn't seem to mind. Instead, she turned to Elijah who was once again speechless and said "I will come for sure to support you. And we can even bring the kids. I'm sure Alex especially would love it!"

Elijah looked at her hoping he just imagined her saying all of that, but when she kept fixating him with those determined eyes, he sighed in defeat. "I need to get to work." He announced and then looked at Maria. There was annoyance in his voice when he said "Take the day off, Maria. You should get yourself ready for your date." Elijah understood at that moment that this disaster wasn't going to end anytime soon. He could only hope that everything will just fix itself eventually.

As if Elijah's mood wasn't already down, later that day, the rain started pouring down and it only became heavier by the hour. Although driving in the rain relaxed him and made him feel at peace, when he spotted the first raindrops on the windshield, he became nervous all of a sudden. He felt trapped inside the metal walls of the car and he couldn't shake the feeling that he wasn't in control of the car anymore. He started to look in the rearview mirror every few seconds, to check on his two sons and Andrea who were all sitting in the back. As if a spell was cast on their car, no one there was making any sound and at some point on their way he even turned the music off, afraid that he would get distracted. He felt a tickle on his forehead and he realised it was a drop of sweat. He clenched his hands on the stirring wheel until his knuckles turned white. His eyes started to burn because he was afraid that if he blinked too often he wouldn't be able to see the dangers on the road. His breath became jerky and he hoped Lana, who was sitting on the passenger seat, couldn't hear him.

He checked the rearview mirror again and this time, he noticed Denis and Andrea were exchanging whispered words. He took a glance at the road and then returned his attention to Denis and Andrea. He followed the movement of their mouths carefully; afraid he would identify the word "drug" on their lips. And as he lost his focus on the road, he felt Lana's hand grab his arm and she shouted: "Watch out!". At the same time, the car hit something and then it stopped. Alex started whimpering in the back, while Denis and Andrea directed their attention to the road.

Elijah remained still for a few moments, his mind still processing what was happening. "Elijah, what was that?" Lana asked slowly. "An animal, I think." He replied as he opened the door and got out of the car.

The cold raindrops hit his face and his bare arms and he shivered. As he walked to the front of the car, he could see in the headlights, the body of a dog. Blood was spreading through its fur, darkening its light color and its body was captured by uncontrollable spasms. Its tongue was out, its breath was uneven and it was making weak yelping noises. Elijah hoped it was his imagination playing tricks on him, but he could've sworn that the dog was looking right at him and in its glassy eyes he thought he saw fear and pain, but more than that he thought that dog was begging for mercy. Elijah couldn't tell what exactly he felt in that moment, but something about the whole scene sickened him so he hurried back inside the car. There was something so terrible about that dog that he just couldn't stand looking at it anymore. He drove in reverse and then passed by the dying dog without taking another look at it.

"Why did you leave him there?" Lana asked.

"Don't call it *him*!" He snapped and then regained his composure. "There was nothing I could've done for it." Lana paused for a second and then asked: "Well, is the car ok, at least?" Elijah realised that he was so horrified by the whole scene that he forgot to check if anything happened to the car. He wasn't going to tell her that, however, so he simply replied: "Yes!". Although he saw that dog for only a few seconds, it was enough for the image to remain imprinted on his mind. And the more he thought about it, the more he understood the reason why it made him feel that way. That helpless crippled dying dog reminded him of his son, Alex.

When they finally arrived at the race track parking lot, Elijah felt relieved. He didn't care he occupied two parking spots, he just needed to get out of that car immediately. "What is wrong, Elijah?" Lana asked getting out of the car as well. "You've been very quiet the whole time."

He forced a smile on his lips. "I was just thinking about that dog. I will be fine. Don't worry!" Lana seemed satisfied with the answer, so she proceeded to take Alex's wheelchair out of the trunk.

Although he was so familiar with the racecourse grounds, that night, Elijah reckoned the place was anything but welcoming. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

"Alright, I'll see you later!" Denis announced all of a sudden.

"Oh, honey, where are you going? We will sit in a special area and you can't get in without your father." Lana said while Elijah was placing Alex in his wheelchair.

"No, Lana. I'm meeting with some friends. We already bought tickets."

"But, honey, why didn't you ask your father to get your tickets for the special area?"

"My group of friends is big. I didn't want to ask my father for so many tickets." Denis' answers were brief and simple and they came out of his mouth as if he had them prepared before the questions were even asked. Although Lana seemed satisfied with the answers, Elijah looked at his son suspiciously, but Denis wouldn't meet his eyes. This confirmed to him that he was lying and it probably had something to do with his drug addiction. Elijah took a glance at Andrea who wouldn't meet his eyes either and he felt like he had something stuck in his throat.

"Well, then we'll meet with you afterwards, honey." Lana said and Denis nodded. As he started walking towards the entrance, Elijah felt pressured to take a decision. He could either keep hiding Denis' addiction from Lana or pretend that everything was good, or he could stop his son from making a mistake. His eyes darted from Lana, who was completely oblivious to what Denis was about to do, to Denis's silhouette which became smaller and smaller by the second. He sighed and shouted out loud "Denis!". His son stopped but he didn't turn around. Elijah looked at Lana who was now watching him and then sighed. "Be careful!" was all he said and then he watched as Denis started walking again away from them. Elijah hated himself for the choice he made. He pushed Alex's wheelchair forward and they walked slowly towards the entrance to the special area.

The arena was full of cheery people who were waiting anxiously for the race to begin. Elijah should've already been at the race track getting ready, but he kept postponing leaving his family. When he finally decided it was time to go and prepare for the race, Matthew, followed by Maria appeared out of nowhere. Elijah sighed and braced himself for the uncomfortable interaction that was about to happen. He noticed how happy Alex had become when he saw Maria. There was a small broken smile on his face and he was mumbling unintelligible words, but Elijah was certain that Maria, who had been helping him to take care of his youngest son, represented comfort to Alex.

"Well, hello there!" Lana said clasping her hands. She moved her gaze from Matthew to Maria with a devilish smile. "How is your date going, darlings?"

Maria cast a glance towards Elijah and then smiled brightly at Lana. "It's going fantastic!". Andrea, who was playing with Alex stood up and allowed Maria to approach him and caress his tiny head. "Hi there, little guy." She said to him and then she kissed him on the forehead. Elijah couldn't help but smile at that moment.

"Oh, I didn't know you and Alex were that close, Margo." Lana commented and Elijah's face dropped.

"Lana…" was the only thing he could say.

"Oh, my bad! I completely forgot. It's Maria, right?" When she realised no one was going to say anything, Lana continued: "How about I join you two while Elijah gets ready for the competition?"

"Yes, brother. What are you still doing here? Are you afraid you'll lose? Like you would have this morning if you hadn't cheated?" The yellowish lights strangely hit Matthew's face and there was something so mean in his eyes that made Elijah realise Matthew wasn't over their previous confrontation. And he was sure he wanted payback.

"I didn't cheat, Matthew. It was an accident." He amended.

"For someone who so easily ran me off the road earlier today and then beat the shit out of me, you sure seem very coy now." Elijah studied his brother for a second and he decided he wasn't going to give into Matthew's challenge. "I wasn't myself this morning, I admit." He explained, trying to avert another conflict. Tonight, wasn't a good time for this.

He hoped Matthew was going to let this go. But he didn't. Elijah felt how Matthew's hands pushed him forward into Alex's chair. "No, Anders. You were your true self this morning." Elijah forgot about any composure that he wanted to maintain or about the race. He pushed Matthew back and they found themselves entangled once again in that violent dance.

"Not again! Stop it!" He heard Maria shouting.

"Would you stop being so righteous and just enjoy the show for once?" Lana complained and then the two women started arguing as well, but Elijah couldn't care less at that moment. "You're going to lose this one, brother." Matthew groaned while throwing a punch. "You told me Maria wasn't available, so you can have her for yourself. You're so selfish!" While the rain started showering over the grounds, people gather around the two brothers who were rolling on the ground.

The fight would have gone on forever if someone didn't scream. Elijah and Matthew stopped fighting and looked around to see what was going on. "Someone call an ambulance!" He heard someone shouting. Elijah's heart started beating so fast even before he realised who was in danger. Alex was in the middle of another epilepsy episode and just like the other night; he fell from his wheelchair to the ground. He realised their fight wasn't the centre of attention anymore, but the epileptic child convulsing on the ground. In that exact moment, with the rain washing over him, his muddy clothes and the fresh new wounds and bruises, he was terrified. And the only person he knew could comfort him was Maria. His eyes searched for her in the crowd he couldn't find her. When he finally ran to his son, he felt that node stuck in his throat. Alex was still, eyes wide open, his limbs torn into strange positions from the violent convulsions. He was just like the dog he left on the road earlier that night. Elijah knew his son was dead.

He stared at his little motionless body for what felt like ages before he felt someone's hand on his shoulder. He turned around to see Lana standing there, with her brown lipstick smeared on her chin, her hair ruffled and a few scratches on her face. Maria was behind her and she was ravished just like Lana, which indicated that they had been in a fight while he and Matthew were having one of their own.

His confusion only deepened, and questions started popping up into his head. Was his son gone? How could they have been so preoccupied with their childish fights? So preoccupied that they became completely oblivious to the fact that their son was dying inches away from them? This realisation made heavy tears roll down his cheeks. If he became aware even a second earlier, maybe he could've helped his son.

The hospital was nearly empty at that hour. There was someone who was groaning in pain somewhere in the background but Elijah couldn't tell exactly where the sound was coming from. The lights on that floor had a malfunction and they were blinking constantly, creating a stroboscopic effect. Across from where he was sitting, Elijah was staring right at a man with his whole right leg wrapped up in sheets that appeared to be bloody.

He watched a nurse passing by, pushing a stretcher. She sat the stretcher next to a wall so other people could walk through the hallway and then she patiently waited for the elevator. Elijah frowned, trying to see if the stretcher was empty, but in that stroboscopic light, he could barely understand what he was seeing. He thought he spotted two white feet, one of them with a tag on it, coming out from under the white sheets covering the stretcher. He wanted to turn away, but at the same time, he felt mesmerised by what he was looking at. He wasn't sure if it was his imagination, but he thought he saw a birthmark on the right foot. What a coincidence, he thought. Denis had a birthmark just like that. From the other side of the hallway, another nurse came to the elevator and she looked at her co-worker with a knowing smile. She waved at the stretcher and then she asked so easily: "Going to the morgue?" The other nurse simply nodded and then she added: "There's something weird about tonight. There have been a lot of deaths. And someone should fix the lights on this floor. They're making me nauseous." Elijah was so fascinated by their conversation and how easily they could switch the subject from death to fixing the lights.

He continued to stare at them until the elevator came and they, along with the stretcher, disappeared. The nurse was right, he reckoned. They really should've done something about the lights. That stroboscopic effect made him feel dizzy.

"Elijah!" He heard his name being called, but it seemed that voice came from somewhere far - far away. Maria appeared in front of him and kneeled, so her face could be on the same level as his. She was clearly uncomfortable to speak about this. "They… um… they registered his body at the morgue… We can come and pick him up for the embalmment tomorrow." He could hear her speak but he couldn't comprehend what the words meant. So, he just nodded and said: "Good. Let's wait to see what the doctors have to say about Alex." Maria frowned and then looked behind her at Lana and Matthew who seemed to be as abashed as she was. "Elijah… Alex is dead."

"Oh!" was all Elijah could say. The information wasn't new, but somehow it seemed strange to hear it. "Does Denis know?" He asked and frowned because those blinking lights were making it more and more difficult to see anything. Maria looked again at Lana and Matthew who once again looked very uncomfortable. "We think he left the racecourse. And… we can't reach him right now. But I'm sure he'll come home soon."

Elijah frowned again and images from earlier that night flashed in front of his eyes like those blinking lights. "Oh, no!" He whispered and grabbed Maria's arms. "He left to take drugs. I know it. Andrea was in on it too. I know it, I could tell." He then remembered the body on the stretcher that had the same birthmark on its foot. "He's dead too. He's here. I saw him." He spoke feverishly as he stood up. "We have to go downstairs to the morgue." He turned to the elevator and then he noticed that the man with the bloody leg wasn't there anymore. "What happened to the man? He was sitting right there and staring at me!" He could tell they were becoming very worried. "Elijah, let's get out of here. This hallway looks like it's been taken right out of a horror movie. And these blinking lights, I think they're making you delirious." Matthew said while coming to him and grabbing him by the arm. Elijah shook his brother's hand off and went to the elevator. He pressed the button multiple times and then looked back at them. "I saw Denis! He is dead too! Oh, no! What have I done?" He started weeping.

The elevator came and he pressed the button to the lowest floor, hoping that was the morgue. Matthew, Lana and Maria followed him, but it was clear that they didn't believe him. When they reached the lowest level, Elijah ignored the "restricted area sign" on the door and hurried to open it. At that exact moment, the lights were cut off completely and the only light came from the red exit signs on the wall.

"Elijah, let's go back!" he heard Matthew say from behind him, but he didn't listen. The door led to a hallway filled with stretchers sat next to the walls. There wasn't enough light to see clearly, but it was enough to see that all the stretchers carried a body. "It's one of them." Elijah said. "I saw him!" He went from body to body to check their feet but he couldn't find the one with the birthmark.

He heard a door opening and then he heard a woman's voice say: "Excuse me. You are not allowed in this area. Please leave immediately!"

He turned around and in that red light, he realised it was the nurse who took Denis' body to the morgue. "Please!" he said "Where is the last body you brought here? I think he was my son." He could feel his tears were ready to surface again. The nurse paused for a second. There must've been something in his eyes that made her simply point at one of the stretchers. He hurried to the one she pointed to and then he checked its right foot. It indeed had a birthmark. He waited a few seconds before pulling away the white sheet that was covering the body. When he finally did, he didn't understand what he was seeing.

"It's not Denis, Elijah!" He heard Maria say from behind him. He ignored her and continued to stare at the body. If only he could see it better. And then the lights came on again, and the bluish cadaveric colour of that body made him take a few stumbling steps back. He covered the body with the white sheet and gave the nurse an apologetic look.

"I'm sorry! I don't know what came over me." Elijah suddenly realised the others weren't saying anything anymore, they were just watching him as if he was about to do something insane again. "I'm sorry." He apologised again and moved towards the elevator followed by Maria, Lana and then Matthew. The nurse didn't say anything else. She was probably shocked by Elijah's strange behaviour.

When they returned to the floor they left, Elijah realised the lights weren't blinking anymore. He shivered at the thought that he had imagined that as well. He sat down on the same chair he was sitting before and he put his face in his hands. He heard some movement around him but no one dared to say anything.

"We should go home, Elijah." Maria eventually broke the silence. He nodded absently but he didn't make any move towards the exit. He knew there was nothing left to be done.

"Why don't you go, Maria?" Lana intervened. "This is a family matter and you've done enough already." There was a pause in which Elijah realised Lana's words and the hateful way she spat them, suddenly filled him with blind rage. He let the feeling wash over his entire body and he tightened his fingers into fists.

"You should go." He said coldly.

"Yes, that's what I said as well." Lana agreed.

He smiled bitterly at her and came closer to her face before he said: "I was talking to you."

Lana's expression turned into something Elijah had barely seen on her face: surprise and confusion. "It's been less than a day since you came here, and everything went to hell already. Lana, if you asked me a few days ago if I would take you back, I would've said yes without even thinking. But you didn't come here for that. You never do. You only like to stir things up and then leave me to clean up the mess. But this time, the mess can't be cleaned. You're wrong. You

are the odd one in this group. Maria has been part of the family more than you've ever been. It's you the one who should go!"

Lana looked at Maria and he could tell there were hate and envy in her eyes. "Elijah, you're making a mistake. If you choose her, I…" He started laughing, but it was a cold, mean laugh.

"You are incredible! Our son is dead!" He shouted, forgetting he was in a public space. "And you care about me choosing someone else over you? I can't even look at you anymore!"

At that exact moment, Matthew, who had been preoccupied with a vending machine came back to the group and said: "Can you believe this hospital? The vending machine has run out of coffee and I have to get tea. It's awful!"

Elijah studied his brother for a few seconds with that same bitter smile. "Get the hell out! Both of you!" He shouted, not caring who was listening to them. Matthew seemed as surprised as Lana but he didn't say anything. Lana on the other hand, who had regained her composure in the meantime looked him in the eyes.

"If you think she is so good and pure you better think again. You might not see it now, but then again, you've never really been good at reading people."

Elijah's anger continued to grow inside of him and he couldn't help but grip Lana's arm and shake her while he said: "All I see is that because of you, my son is dead! If it wasn't for you who wanted to bring him to the race. If it wasn't for you… none of this would've happened!"

He felt Maria's hand on his shoulder, a sign that she was asking him to calm down. He released Lana's arm. There was nothing left to say so he just watched Lana and Matthew leave. He then sat down, his hand in Maria's. No, he didn't want to leave just yet. He wanted to be closer to Alex for a while.

Elijah returned home early in the morning, but not before spending a few more hours in the hospital, sitting in that chair, crying on Maria's shoulder. There was no sign of Lana or her luggage which meant that she had left. He went inside Alex's bedroom as if everything was just a bad dream and his son was in fact in his bed safe and sound, sleeping. But the bed was empty

and once again realisation kicked in and he started crying again. That bed will never be used again. Alex was dead.

Not many things made sense to him at that moment but somehow a voice from within his mind reached out and reminded him that his other son was missing as well. An image flashed before his eyes. An image with Denis lying dead on the ground, a needle still in his vein. He shivered at the thought. He went to Denis' room, this time, expecting to find no one or nothing there, but when he opened the door, he was surprised to see Andrea sitting at the desk, head in her hands. Her shoulders were shaking as if she was crying and he could hear small sobs coming from her.

When he came closer, she turned around to look at him and she shook her head. "I'm so sorry, sir. I disappointed you."

He looked at her incredulously. "Andrea, where have you been? Where did you go?"

She shook her head again, tears rolling down her face. "I'm so sorry. I'm so terribly sorry."

"Why are you apologising? Do you even know what happened?"

She nodded and she wiped some tears off her cheeks. "Yes!" She burst out in tears again. "Yes! He's gone!"

Elijah frowned, feeling angry at the girl in front of him. The girl who was supposed to take care of his dead child. "He is gone." He repeated coldly.

"I'm so sorry, sir. I couldn't stop him. I tried, but…"

Elijah realised that Andrea wasn't talking about Alex. He took a deep breath in and then he asked: "What are you talking about, girl? Stop being so cryptic and tell me what happened to Denis!"

"Denis ran away. I knew what he was planning to do. He's been thinking about it for quite some time. Tonight, at the race, I ran after him, trying to convince him to stay. And then I

didn't know what to do. I figured you'd be upset I left Alex alone, so I came here right after and waited for you. I'm so sorry!"

There was a long pause before Elijah processed everything that Andrea said. "I don't believe you!" Was all he could say.

She came closer to him and took his hands in hers. "It's true, Mr. Anders."

He shook his head and pulled away from her. "I'll call him. He couldn't have gone far. I'll go after him."

Andrea shook her head with a pitying look. "He left his phone here. And he didn't tell me where he was going. There is no way you can track him down. He wasn't happy here, sir. He will be better off far from you."

Elijah took a few steps back and managed to put a hand on one of the drawers so he can steady himself. His head was spinning and his vision was blurry. His thoughts were racing at the speed of light but not one of them was making sense.

"Get out, Andrea! And never come back!" He pointed towards the door without looking at her.

"I'm so sorry, sir. I'm sorry for your loss… Both of your losses."

He watched her leave the room and waited to hear her closing the entrance door before he laid in Denis' bed and hugged one of the pillows. As he was standing there, trying to make sense of anything that happened that night, a question popped into his head. *Both of your losses*, she said. If Andrea ran after Denis and then came back here right after, how did she know about Alex's death?

Elijah opened his eyes allowing the sunlight that was coming through the window to blind him. He found himself wrapped in the blanket from Denis' bed. It took a few seconds to realise he was still holding the pillow very tight in his arms. Emotions washed over him one after the other. There was sadness. And anger. And grief. And desperation. But what he felt the most was loneliness. It was such a profound feeling that it suffocated him. His sons were gone. He was all alone in the world. He thought of his brother, of Lana, of Maria, but it felt like all the persons

in his life other than his sons were strangers. He looked around the room, reminiscing memories from the past with his sons and tears started to gather in his eyes. They were truly gone because of him and he was going to be all alone in that big empty house forever. He wondered if he would be able to continue living knowing that. He didn't want to have an answer for that question yet, but the feeling that his life has lost any meaning or purpose was becoming heavier and heavier. Not even driving could've helped him at that moment.

The doorbell rang waking him from his reverie, but he didn't make any move to open the door. He couldn't handle any interaction. But then he heard the door open and he realised he wasn't going to be able to pretend he wasn't home. "Elijah?" He heard Maria's voice calling out his name. He sighed and went downstairs slowly.

He found Maria looking inside Alex's room, probably to see if Elijah was there. "Elijah?" She asked again without realising he was already behind her. When she turned around she let out a small scream.

"I'm here." He answered simply. From Maria's expression, he could tell he didn't look good at all.

Maria opened her arms and hugged him tightly, but he didn't return the gesture. She took a step back and looked him in the eyes, her hands still grasping his upper arms. "Elijah, I know this is a difficult moment… But I hope you can see there are good parts of this situation as well."

Elijah shook her hands off and frowned at her, not quite believing what he was hearing. He rubbed his hand against his face and then went to the kitchen to pour him a glass of water. She followed him into the kitchen and watched him filling up a glass. After he drank everything that was in the glass, he looked at Maria who was now sitting at the counter studying him attentively.

"Would you… would you care to elaborate what you said earlier? How does this situation have any good parts?"

Maria smiled sympathetically and came to him, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Elijah, now that your sons are out of the picture, you are finally free from your burden. You don't have to worry about them. And Lana will have no reason to visit anymore. In time, you will realise

she never came here because she wanted you back." Maria paused for a second and then continued. "And we can finally be together."

Elijah sat still in his place, his eyes fixated on his empty glass. Maria kept her hand on his shoulder but all he wanted to do was shake it off him and run as far away as possible. He wasn't quite sure yet if he really heard Maria saying all those things. Something was wrong, but he kept his composure and finally looked at her. He nodded as if he understood Maria's explanation. "I see." He said and then he went to fill up his glass with more water although he wasn't thirsty anymore.

"One more thing" Elijah added. "How did you know that Denis is out of the picture as well?"

Maria seemed to be taken aback by the question but then she answered: "I got a text from Andrea this morning. She was worried about you."

He looked at her still not quite sure what to believe and as they were staring at each other, Maria suddenly couldn't contain her smile. She also let out a small giggle which she tried to cover by putting her hand to her mouth. "I'm so sorry." She said apologetically but it was obvious she was enjoying the moment. Elijah was horrified.

"What… what is going on?" was all he could ask. At his question, Maria started giggling uncontrollably and her face reddened.

"Why are you giggling like a mad person?" He shouted at her. Maria stopped immediately and her face went blank.

She sighed and rolled her eyes. She raised her hands in defeat and said "Ok. Ok. You caught me. You don't have to shout. You caught me! I didn't know about Denis from Andrea."

"How did you know, then?"

She put her hands up in defence again, but it was clear she wasn't taking him seriously. "Elijah, I did it all for you. You might be down now, but you'll see, in time, you will eventually reach happiness. With me."

"Stop speaking in tongues and tell me what you did." Elijah shouted again.

She looked at him as if considering whether to explain or not and then she sighed. "Fine. Fine. I'll tell you. I'm sure you'll understand that everything I did was for your own good."

He couldn't speak anymore, he just waited impatiently for her to continue, his hand clasped on the glass of water.

"I asked Andrea to give Alex small doses of this drug that increases the number of epilepsy episodes and makes them more violent. She's been giving it to him ever since she started working for you. He should've been dead so much sooner, but Alex was a tough kid. Just like his daddy, I guess."

Elijah was surprised to see that he could contain the urge to smash her head against the table. Instead, he calmly asked: "What about Denis?"

"Well, you probably didn't know this, since you barely even spend time at home, but Andrea and Denis grew quite close. She is the one who convinced him it's best if he ran away. In fact, she's the one who got him to use drugs in the first place. And it was very easy, I might add. Denis was very susceptible. So desperate to find someone who understood him. And then Andrea came in."

"I don't believe this madness. Andrea is a nurse. She worked in hospitals before, why would she want to hurt people. To hurt my sons?"

Maria giggled again. "Andrea is no nurse. It's so funny how you believed everything from that perfect CV of hers. I wrote that CV. There was nothing real in it."

"No. This couldn't be…"

"But it is, Elijah. You know, when you asked me to help you find a nurse, all those months ago, I thought it couldn't be better timing."

"Why would Andrea help you?"

Maria giggled once again and looked at him as if he should've figured it out already. "She's my sister, Elijah. The perfect person for what I had planned. And you trusted me so much you didn't even check her record. That's why we are so good together. You have so much trust in me and I usually provide."

Elijah shook his head vehemently as if that would make everything he heard not true. "Why?" Was all he could ask.

"Well, now you're just being silly. I just told you. So we can be together. After you broke up with me, you know, the last time Lana came to visit, I realised you needed to get rid of everything toxic in your life. Your sons, for starters. But also, Lana. My plan worked rather well I might say. You see, I knew you had to realise what kind of person she is. You had to be the one who cut the ties with her. A few weeks ago, I sent her an email telling her how you'd like her to visit and that you don't dare to ask her yourself. And when she came, all I had to do was act all innocent and good and let her do the rest with her unpleasant attitude. You had to see the difference. Between her and me. And last night, you did."

After a long pause, in which Elijah was simply too horrified to be able to say anything, Maria continued: "But Elijah, you're missing the main point here. We can be together now. We can be happy."

He managed to fabricate a smile and nod. "Yes, I guess you're right. Thank you!"

Maria seemed content with the answer so she came to him and kissed him on the lips. He reluctantly returned the kiss and then took a step back. "I need to go for a ride to clear my mind. There are too many things to process."

"I will give you time to let the information sink in. I'm telling you, things will work out perfectly."

"Actually, I'd like you to come with me. It would help me if you were there. Like you always are."

Elijah took Maria on "the Devil's trap". Until they reached the top of the hill, they drove in silence, which allowed Elijah to process everything that he found out. He was very calm and composed because he knew what he had to do next. He stopped the car at the viewing point, close the ravine. They both got out of the car and walked towards the edge of the ravine.

"You've never taken me here, Elijah. It's beautiful. But don't go too close. That looks like a nasty fall." Maria commented.

He turned to look at her and he felt repulsed immediately. He grabbed her arms and then he whispered angrily: "You will soon find out how nasty the fall is." He then started to pull her towards the edge. She tried to resist but she was light as a feather, so he easily brought her to the edge.

"No!" She shouted. "You can't do this. All I did was take care of you!"

He lowered Maria's body over the ravine, her heels barely touching any ground now. Elijah was holding her wrists with one hand and with the other he was strangling her jaw.

"You deserve to die for what you have done!"

He then released her wrists and let her fall. She didn't shout and he couldn't even hear when her body touched the ground, but he hoped she didn't die immediately. He hoped she was lying somewhere on the ground with broken bones, unable to move and bleeding.

He jumped into the car and started driving back into the city, but he had one more stop to make before. He pressed the gas pedal, he closed his eyes and then he took his hands off the wheel, allowing the car to go by itself on the winding road. It wasn't long before the car was in free fall, just like in his dream. The car rolled in the air and smashed into the ground. He felt his body squished and torn. The car rolled again one more time and then it finally stopped when it hit a tree and everything went black.

"No!" he heard himself scream. He opened his eyes and realised he was sitting at the desk in his office. He must've fallen asleep while he was working. It was just a nightmare.