

Fiction Narrative by Aaron Loguercio. Written December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

*The Feeling That Will Always Follow*

I slam my hand on the table, enjoying the feeling. Operating off two hours of ‘I Can’t Believe It’s Not Sleep’, I keep myself awake through adrenaline sometimes, since it’s stronger than coffee. I berate myself: “Stay awake!” I need to keep myself from falling asleep. I look at the table and see some blood on it “Damn it.” I go to the bathroom for cleaner and a washcloth. I hate getting blood on the family table my parents gave me after I moved out of their place. In the bathroom I wash my hands and watch the bright red inky blood disperse in the flow of cold water, spiraling down the drain, “Just like my life,” I muse to myself. I look in the mirror at the disheveled man that seems ten drinks in without a drop of alcohol—messy hair, untucked white button-down shirt.

I work many hours, far too many hours. I am tired, but I know I can’t go to sleep. Accounting has me struggling to stay awake though, all those numbers and making people’s charges magically smaller, so much to keep track of... Oh no, I’m falling asleep now, I don’t want to go back, to see that place again.

I find myself wandering in a desert, a desert with a ceiling for a sky, pitch black with no stars. How strange not to see the sky or the stars in a vast open area of sand that is lit up as if it were midday. I take steps across the white sand, trying to find a way out. Then I remember this place. Panicked, I look around. I see the city off in the distance like it always has been, but so far, I don’t feel “it” nearby. Once I get to the city, I try to find some way to solve the meaning behind this place.

Up close, the city is all dark green colors with blackened gradients, walls that seem drawn with a slick ink stretching up and down the buildings. As I approach, I feel watched. Statues of shadow make up this city’s denizens. They watch me from high places and dark alleyways. They seem harmless enough despite their glares sinking into me.

As I get further into the city, white sand blown around by false wind becomes scarce and the layout of the city becomes more complex. A concrete jungle ensnares me and right then and there, I feel it.

I can tell, maybe because it is a dream, that I am being chased by something, although, I can't see it. Of the five senses, this monster only exists in one, the sense of touch. It is no monster I can see, no beast with a roar, no smelly creature that chases me. It is as if I am being chased by the concept of feeling itself. Its footsteps are like thuds, it looks like vibrations, sounds like cold, smells like hunger, tastes like pins and needles. How can I run from something like that?!

I move quickly, running as fast as I can, but I can feel it catching up, an approach warned by goosebumps crawling from my back to my chest. I run until the city darkens to a corridor. I see skulls on the walls, row after row of them. I feel surrounded by them until eventually goosebumps that are all over me are also inside me. I'm suffocating. I cough and cough in an attempt to breathe until I cough up red. I look up and see the family table before collapsing completely, my vision going dark.

I awake in a hospital to the sound of buzzing lights, not knowing how I arrived here. I see my brother sitting next to the hospital bed. "Hey brother, wake up," I urge him. I haven't seen him in a while.

He wakes and sees me; a grin lifts on his face. "Hey, how are ya? Mom and Dad called me after they couldn't get a hold of you, told me to go over to your place. I found you knocked out on the floor."

My mood had brightened upon seeing my brother's calm smile, but had changed to seriousness upon learning how I got here. "Oh, I see. That's strange."

My brother's face contorts with concern. "So, you passed out, and the doctor said you've been out for almost a day, told me it might be stress."

"You could say that..." I reply vaguely.

"Say, what happened to the family table Mom gave ya?"

My eyes widen at my brother's innocent question. I feel it right then and there; it wasn't just a dream.