

Flicker

Josh swung open the front door of his house, letting the handle slam against the wooden plane wall where a picture he had hanging fell and shattered on the floor from the shockwave. His body was bent over to the point where his head was near the same level as his waist. He didn't have the strength nor the energy to lift his head. While facing the floor, Josh stumbly walked into his house, his boots crunching upon shattered glass and soft carpet, and gripped the door with his left hand to throw it shut behind him on the stormy night outside. Walking in the most zigzagged, straightest line he could in his intoxicated state, Josh made his way to his couch on his left. He threw the briefcase in his right hand to the edge of the couch, and continued to use the momentum to spin himself so he could drop down in a seated position. He raised his head to the ceiling, his eyes closed, as he groaned before and after taking in a deep breath of relief from the outside world. He was done. Done dealing with people, done dealing with work, done having to feel like a tool in someone else's story. He just wanted to relax, forever hopefully. At this point Josh didn't mind if he never got to see tomorrow, if anything could take him away from this place to somewhere peaceful, maybe he could live with that. At least that's what Josh wanted to believe.

He brought his head back down to look forward, now opening his eyes, but in front of him lay a wall of television-like static that expanded infinitely in all directions as if it was a two-dimensional plane. He stared at the object in awe, quite puzzled by this scene, but he just assumed that the drinks from before had finally gotten to him. He decided to rub his eyes, maybe hoping it would sober him up somewhat, but when he moved his hands away, the static wall was now only inches away from him. He panicked as his eyes widened, and his heart skipped a beat. He jumped up and back away to the top headrest of the couch, but as he did, he felt himself sitting on something very fluffy, and this sensation caused him to shoot himself

forward to see what it was. Completely forgetting about the static wall for this short second, Josh ended up going through the static and was then entirely absorbed by it before he could see what was on top of his couch.

Josh awoken from what felt like a deep sleep in a standing position at the end of a “T” shaped hallway. Before him, the paths in front split between the left and right directions. The walls, floors, and ceiling were all made of the same static-like material; they were also the source of light, as they illuminated the area.

He looked back to see how he got into this situation, but behind him, at the edge of this hallway, was a large black void that nullified all light that contacted it just a few feet behind Josh. At least that’s what Josh assumed, but he didn’t feel like walking into that void. For some reason, maybe instinctual, he felt safer being in the light, at least as safe as he could be, since he was still in some unknown location. How did he get here in the first place? He wanted to think of what he did to end up here, but for some reason he couldn’t. When Josh tried to remember anything, he was just met with an incomprehensible blurry memory where words and place were impossible to distinguish.

Josh finally decided to find an exit to this place so that he could find something to trigger his memories. Before moving forward towards the intersection, away from the void, he took a deep breath to resolve himself. The stale air filled the place, reminding him of the same smell of a newly ordered book right out of the cardboard box.

He walked down the six-foot-wide corridor, his footsteps breaking the almost dead silence from the low humming emanating from within the walls. The sounds echoed, bouncing off the surfaces from the lack of other furniture. It took him around twenty feet of movement to reach the edge of the intersection.

Josh took a right turn into a large cylindrical room. This room was lit up more brightly, as an almost white light shone from above and made it impossible to see where the source was coming from. In the center of this room was a diving board, also made of the same static-like material as the walls, but even so, he felt as though the diving board itself was a blue color. He didn't know why he thought this; the diving board just felt familiar somehow, and the blue diving board paired with a white ladder was the first image to come to his mind. But what was strange was that the diving board didn't seem to lead to a pool. The floor itself was brightly lit from above, to the point where it hurt to stare directly at it, and it seemed as though it just led to the middle of the floor without any pool. Across from Josh, on the opposite side of the room, just slightly displaced to the left, was another corridor, where it seemed as though a large spherical light was protruding from the wall. To his right was a set of stairs that led down into another voided passage inside another cylindrical protrusion that stuck out halfway from the wall.

The abrupt start and end of light was starting to make Josh uneasy, and he did not want to get close to the stairs. As he stood there, the sound of a light switch flicked, as if it was right next to both of his ears. The entire place went pitch black. Dead silent. Josh felt a primal fear surge from within him. Adrenaline began to rush through his veins.

Then the sound of the light switch returned, followed by the loud humming of the labyrinth slowly dying out to a dead silence as if it failed to start up properly, but this time the light was drastically weaker than before. The illuminated light from the surfaces had dimmed to a dark greyish color; even the bright light from above, but the ceiling was still impossible to see. This time he could see the floor clearly, and now he could see a large chasm in the middle of the room that the diving board led to.

Josh cautiously decided to step towards the chasm to examine it further. He moved, toes first, leaning back while also stretching his neck to try to see deeper into the chasm. A frigid chill was leaking from the depths of this chasm. Josh was sure that he didn't feel the cold before this. He could now see that the opening appeared as a jagged slit that seemed to drop endlessly down. An abyss. As he stood there, trying to wrap his head around the layout of this room, and slowly realizing how dangerous it was as he couldn't see this chasm before, something caught his attention from the corner of his right eye. In this still world, he saw and felt the movement of something by the stairs leading into the voided passage.

He didn't know where to go next. The light coming from the sphere across the room had ceased and was replaced with another void at its entrance. Paired with the stairs, now both of these passages were black voids that Josh didn't really feel like going through but knew that he must in order to progress forward. For some reason he never considered going back to the T-shaped hallway, but the stairs held something interesting. Something that was calling to him to move towards despite his trembling body telling him otherwise.

On the best possible solution, maybe someone else was in here who could accompany him on his journey. It was rather awkward for him to be traveling in this unknown place for so long with no real direction to move towards, and who knows, maybe this person is just shy and can help him find a way out of this mess. This was assuming that what moved was a person. Josh didn't want to linger on any of his thoughts telling him otherwise. He wanted to be able to have a clear head and successfully escape this place, this way he could feel some sort of power over the achievement of escape. Reassuring his mind of the best possible solution, he headed for the stairs in hopes that, if there ever was a divine entity similar to God that existed, he would encounter a person he could reason with.

Joash walked towards the edge of the stairs. The pitch-black darkness in front of him allowed for nothing to be seen, just a few steps down. He wondered if he'd even be able to see anything once he stepped inside, but it didn't matter to him now. Nothing so far had made sense to Josh, so he decided to just rule out reason; until he found proof once again for reason to take its place. He took his first step, then the next, and went down five steps until he stopped at the last step right in front of the darkness. He wasn't planning on stopping; he wanted to walk right through it. *Unbelievable*, he thought. Did his body just decide to stop moving forward? This was absurd! Never in his life did Josh's mind and body ever have a difference of opinion on what actions should be taken. He believed those instances came only from fairy tales.

Maybe it would be better if Josh didn't proceed down these stairs, but he wanted to find someone, something, anything that could help him. He closed his eyes and decided to take one more deep breath to calm his nerves. Without opening his eyes, he stepped down the stairs. He was able to move forward, but the sudden end of the stairs threw off his balance and caused him to stumble until he caught himself on a wall. At least he thought it was a wall. Once Josh reopened his eyes, everything around him was still slightly dark, but there was a light behind him that shone and seemed to glaze off the vantablack surfaces as if they were marbled obsidian. He turned around to find a bright white light that obstructed the stairs. It wasn't there before. What appeared before Josh was a strange phenomenon he would never be able to discern. The black void and the bright white light were both two halves of the same two-dimensional plane. Now that he walked through the voided side, he was only able to see the light side from the bottom of the stairs.

To the left of the stairs, down a very long hallway, was another blinding white light, but this time something stood right in front of it. It seemed to be human in shape, as it had long hair flowing down to just below the deltoids. It had quite thin legs that were almost

overshadowed by the light. Its arms seemed to be placed on its side, but they also seemed to be quite long, as the hands were near the knees.

Whatever it was that Josh had encountered, he felt as though he should walk up to it. Somewhat in awe, Josh steadied himself on the wall and once resolved, began to walk slowly towards the creature as if he wasn't sure if it was the right thing to do or not, but he felt as though there were no other options. It was at least somebody that could help him, despite appearances, he didn't feel as though he had the luxury to judge what could possibly be the only other living creature he would encounter in this place. As he made his way to the figure, it began to move its left arm up slowly. Now, the silhouette of the hand was visible and seemed to be unnaturally large and bony. It moved towards the wall of this dark hallway and placed its hand in the position one would use to flick a toggle light switch down.

Something clicked in Josh's mind. He mustn't let this thing flip that switch. If there was a switch, he assumed that it would cause what happened before to happen again. So, he started to run toward the switch, but it was useless since the creature already had its hand on it, and a simple flick downward would once again make the entire space go pitch-black. Both lights at the end of the hallway were gone. Fortunately, Josh remembered where the switch was, and after a brief moment, he flicked the light back on.

Josh was now resting by the light switch, tired, and catching his breath from the run. He was partially glad he remembered the position of the switch, now that he could get a good look at it, the toggle was a light beige color accompanied with a dark green border holding it on the vantablack wall, it was the first time he would see color in this space that wasn't a shade of grey. As he admired the switch, he noticed now something else presented a problem. When the lights came back on, only the light coming from the stairs had returned as the light at the

end of the hallway remained off and presented this hallway to stretch endlessly into a void. At the same time, Josh noticed that he was also alone as the creature was not in this direction anymore. *Where did the creature go?* He decided to look behind him towards the stairs. There, the creature that was in front of him earlier was standing at the bottom of the stairs next to the light. As if during the time it was dark, the creature had moved at an extreme speed past Josh to reach it or maybe teleported, but Josh was unsure. The creature then began to move its right hand, as it was stretched out towards the wall of the passage, towards the center of its body and as it did, the darkness of the space was slowly blocking out the light. *A door!* There was some sort of door that was being closed on him! Josh began to move to the door as fast as he could, trying to call out to the creature to stop and help, but he was still struggling to catch his breath and was unable to form any coherent words. This time, the light was able to hit the creature from the side, and before closing the door all the way, the creature was able to raise its head. Its hair now moved to the side. Even though the door was already covering half of its face, the other half was the only thing Josh needed to see; for half of the creature's face was his face. Exactly down to every detailed wrinkle and freckle. The utter surprise stopped Josh in his tracks. *How could this be?* All he could do was stare in shock as the last bit of light was snuffed out by the darkness with the creature. Leaving Josh all alone in a voided room.

What unholy creature was that? Josh stood there, paralyzed in the darkness. The thumping of his heartbeat became violent, as if it wanted to burst through his chest. His breath was still difficult to catch. He could only take in short bursts of air. As he continued to think about the creature, wondering why it had his face. Josh put his hands to his stomach, as a horribly churning feeling had assaulted him and made him feel sickly. As he stood there, trying to fight back the pain, his eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness and as it did, he could see tiny white

dots of dim lighting appearing slowly throughout the voided hallway, resembling that of a starry night sky.

After a while, he felt his back overcome with goosebumps. It was cold. Too cold. He didn't remember the place being this frigid before. He hugged himself, shivering, trying to warm himself up with the friction from his hands. Not even the worst of winters compared to this. *Was that thing able to withstand this freezing room?* Josh didn't know what to do but to continue trying his best to warm himself up while he walked around in the darkness, barely illuminated by the few white dots of light scattered about. As he moved, Josh remembered where he felt this cold before. It came from the chasm in the room above. Now that he had moved to a lower level, did he unknowingly walk closer to the frigid source? Maybe it was linked to the darkness? The only time Josh saw the chasm was when it was dark, or at least not when the bright lights were on. As he continued to warm himself, nothing seemed to work. His fingers began to go numb, his toes were losing feeling, and snot began to drip from his nose. He wanted to try doing some jumping jacks. Maybe this time, it would warm himself up, but as he tried to move his hands to his side, his fingers did not budge. The fingers stayed, clutching his arms. Maybe he could just jump, but as soon as he placed pressure on his toes, Josh collapsed onto the skin-freezing, marble-feeling floor. He managed to roll onto his right side, but getting up was impossible. His body, shivering, began to curl in on itself. Soon, Josh would find himself in a fetal position, remaining there, freezing over.

Maybe I deserve this, Josh thought. These feelings lingered in the back of his mind the entire time he was here, but he didn't want to succumb to them. He wanted to believe that whatever this was would blow over, and he would be able to return home, but how? Now that his ego shattered, all doubt began to flood his mind. *What were you doing? Where were you going? You don't even know where the exit is. You believed another person was really going to be in here? You*

got tricked! You got played! You let whatever that thing was earlier trap you in this dark, cold room where you will die. And you're going to die. You're doing that right now. You can't even get up! Can't even leave this fetal position! You are going to die in the same position that you were born! Oh, what would your mother think of this? Well, that doesn't matter. Mother is dead. She died so long ago that I stopped thinking about her. Maybe this was fine. This way, I would die and I would be able to be reunited with mother once more, in the world beyond. I mean, what was there to fight for? I have no car, no partner, work minimum wage, and no ambition. All that I would leave behind was my ramshackle apartment and Darcy.

Oh yeah! Darcy!

With the remembrance of Darcy, vitality began to return to Josh. If he died, who would take care of Darcy? *It couldn't... it wouldn't be... now way... the creature!?* This realization dwarfed all the other doubts that assailed him, and he would not allow himself to die in this place and let that horrible thing do as it pleases. First, he had to move, but he still lacked feeling in all his digits. Nonetheless, Josh continued to fight. He resorted to shaking whatever parts of his body he could still move, hoping that the blood flow would grant feeling back to his body. Slowly but surely, he continued the task with the most confidence and resolve he ever had during his entire time in this damned place. A twitch. His right index finger was the first to twitch, then the next, and the next. Soon, Josh was able to place his hands down under him to raise himself back up. He did it. Despite the dead cold of the place, Josh arose once more. He was hunched; his body not yet ready to stand tall after the trauma but was now unaffected by the cold. He couldn't feel it anymore, maybe it stopped being cold or Josh's mind had somehow ceased the feeling. But his victory would end short, as through the struggle, Josh lost track of

his placement. He didn't know which direction he walked, for how much distance he traveled, and where the light switch was, as it was now lost in the darkness.

“Stupid!” Josh spoke to himself for the first time during this trip. How could he have forgotten about his mother, about Darcy? It was as though his memories were fogged, and through his time here, they were slowly coming back to him. He still couldn't understand why, maybe once he gained clarity on his memories, he would soon be able to figure out what was going on. Josh continued to move in the dark. Maybe if he could hit a wall, he could scale it and eventually find the switch. The switch was his main priority. It somehow had the ability to drastically manipulate the level of light throughout the entire space he's been able to explore so far.

Josh's isolation was then interrupted by the echoing sounds of footsteps. Footsteps that were not his own. He looked off into the starry void, and walking out in the distance, visible by the slight lights outlining its figure, was the creature. As if it felt Josh's gaze, the creature turned to its right by rotating its head first, then its torso, and lastly its legs. As Josh strained his eyes to see the creature, he could see now that the creature was wearing the same grey suit he wore for his office. That's right, his memories of his work now returned as he worked minimum wage at a content agency that his mother helped him get a few years ago. He never bothered to get a promotion or find a new job after that. As he continued to examine the creature, he could tell that its body was now the same size and shape as Josh's. The creature only tilted its head to the side slightly, the same motion a dog would do, before rotating back to its original position and continuing to walk down its path in the exact way Josh would walk. “Hey! Wait!” Josh yelled out, his voice dry and raspy. He slowly walked towards the creature, the fastest he could do, as he had very little feeling on his toes and was trying his best not to collapse, but he only took a few steps before he slammed onto a hard surface. He put up his

hands to feel a wall was in front of him, but he was still able to see the creature off in the distance. *Maybe it was glass?* Josh continued to move in the same direction as the creature, trying his best to keep his eye on it, but as he moved in the starry space, Josh suddenly kned something in front of him.

He fell over a little bit but caught himself on whatever it was that was there. Even with the very faint lighting, it was still too dark to even see what was there. Josh decided to look back up to find the creature, but he couldn't see it anywhere. The creature was gone and now frustrated Josh gripped at the chair. Now that he had his hands on it and didn't have to worry about the creature, he decided to feel the leathery object with his hands and discovered that it was a chair. Not just any chair, though, judging by the shape and its plushness, it was the cushioned chairs specifically placed in his community pool lobby. That's strange, but as the memory arrived, as if it was the trigger, he could now see a faint white outline of the chair emanating its own light in front of him. Even though he could only see its outline, as the chair itself was still the same vantablack color as the majority of this space, his mind once again registered that it was actually beige. Very similar to the diving board from before, and now that Josh thought about it, no matter how much he thought this place was unknown and labyrinthine in appearance, he couldn't help but shake that there was always some sort of familiarity he had in the deepest recesses of his mind. If this were true, Josh got an idea. Knowing the position of the chair, he focused his mind to picture the familiar lobby room and where he would be. He now remembered seeing commercials about the community pool on his television and had gone to visit it one day to past the time. In his mind, the beige chair was now in front of him, its back against the yellow wall. With this, he was able to turn his head to his right to find the exact same switch from before on the wall directly across from the chair. Now in the starry-like space Josh moved towards the imaginary location of the light switch he hoped

would be there. Every step he took, his heart pounded harder and harder beneath his chest. This had to work, it must work, it was the only plan Josh could think of to help him traverse this darkness, and it all relied on his memory, in which he still didn't have full control over.

Finally, as he reached out his right hand, hoping that the wall would soon be there, he edged closer and closer. As if the space was rejecting his approach, the tips of his fingers began to get colder and colder to the point of a numbing state caused by a sudden wave of frigid wind giving him push back. Josh didn't stop; he kept going. Even if his fingers had to gain frostbite to do it, Josh had to at least try to push through.

At the peak of his heart thumping violently through his chest, his fingers and hand crashed onto a surface, with a protrusion piercing between his mangled fingers. Finally, he felt it. The light switch. As he could no longer move his fingers, Josh used his entire arm to flick the toggle down, and with the sound of the light switch echoing all around him, the world lit up once more.

Josh opened his eyes, and the previously starry room was now lit up normally, as he could now see the same static-like material return to the walls, floors, and ceilings. Josh could now see how narrow the hallway was. Around three people could probably stand in it shoulder to shoulder width-wise. Just enough space for the cushiony static chairs on the opposite side of the switch to not take up space in the center of the hallway. He was now able to see that the chairs were evenly spaced between each other, going down the long hallway towards where the previous white light had returned. This was the direction that the creature walked down towards, the opposite side of the stairs. Maybe now he could go back to the stairs, but as he turned to hopefully find the door that closed on him, he found out that the "door" was just another static wall. It was a dead end.

Josh limped towards the dead end. He wanted to run, but the cold had ceased feelings in parts of his legs from the knees down, in the same way that he had very little feeling and mobility from his forearms to the tip of his fingers. The fingers on his right hand being mangled from slamming against the light switch. His skin showing the vivid purple frozen color that would mark the point of no return.

Once he reached the wall, he had to use his shoulders to move his entire arm. He tried to feel the left side of the wall, then the right, then he just frantically started waving his arms around. There's no handle! Nothing to grab, nothing to insinuate that this even was a door. But he saw it closed just moments ago. He didn't understand. He couldn't understand any of it! He proceeded to just slam his entire forehead against the wall, gritting through his teeth. Why. Why? Why! He slammed his head continuously after each thought, more and more, it was the only sensation he had left that he could control. His pain. The feeling of his blood swelling up was a pain more pleasurable than the frostbite placed on his limbs. Once his last head slam pathetically collided with the wall, he decided to slide down it. Before hitting the floor, he heard a new noise that he had never heard his entire time here.

A meow.

Josh caught himself halfway down the wall. He just heard a cat, but not just any cat. This meow was familiar, for a moment, he felt as though he had heard this exact meow plenty of times. A second meow. Josh turned away from the dead end to stare down the hallway. This was the direction the meow was coming from towards the bright white light. He had to see. He had to go see what the meow was. Something in his mind was telling him that this was important, that the source of this meow had to be found. He wasn't going to fight it; he tried, and look what it did to him; he had no other options anyway. The only way to go was down

this hallway towards the light. Whatever this place was, whatever that creature was, it was truly all one big, horrible prank set up to make his life more miserable than he could ever imagine. Part of him just didn't care. What more could happen to him? With nothing else to lose, Josh found his way to limp towards the light, chasing after the meow, both readying himself for anything but knowing that "anything" was impossible for him to get ready for.

During his walk down the hallway, Josh felt lightheaded, and it didn't help that he was trying very hard to think and remember other things in his mind while also dealing with missing chunks of his memory and being confused as to how his life even connected again. All he could think was that this had to have been the work of that creature. Why did it want his likeness? To live his life? To be with Darcy? He was just going in circles again; he could only remember all the horrible things in his life. The time he was bullied in school for being the smallest kid there. When he accidentally called his crush fat at a house party his only friend invited him to. When he decided to get sloppy drunk after a bad day at work and got too hungover the next day for what would unknowingly become his mother's final birthday. At no point did he find anything good besides the name Darcy and his familiarity with it.

After passing the ninth chair in the hallway, he heard a third meow. Josh refocused his eyes to look towards the light, now he was so close to it that the light had overpowered the nearby static-like walls and made the hallway seem like a white void. As he looked through the white space, Josh was able to see a room. A normal room. Within the border of the white light, as if looking through a cloud, was his living room. Josh could now see and remember what his living room apartment looked like and figured out which direction he was looking at it from. His eyes were on the same level as his television, facing towards his brown couch, now appearing as a mountain in relation to Josh's size, the long yellow curtains closed behind it, and

diffusing the light of the sun to spread an orange glow throughout the brown-colored room with wooden walls and beige carpeting.

Then he saw her. Waking up from a nap, atop a massive cat tree, was Darcy. She stretched her back, revealing her blue fur and underbelly white fur that trailed up to her bottom jaw. Of course, Darcy was his cat, but now multiple times larger than normal. Seeing Darcy had once again cleared his mind even further, and large pieces of his memory returned. Through all the shit he's been through in his life, she's always been there. For the last twelve years of his life, Darcy has been his shining light during his darkest moments, and to put it bluntly, the only reason he's continued to keep pushing on.

For the first time in a long time, a smile made its mark on Josh's face. He continued to push through, hopping through the limping to get to Darcy as quickly as possible. *This is it. I can finally be free!* An exit was finally in sight for Josh, and he wasn't going to let it go. Running through the white space towards the room, nothing would break his focus. That is, until he heard the front door of his house swing open.

Entering the living room from the left was Josh. Although not this Josh, but another person who was identical to Josh in every way possible. He walked into the room, towards Darcy, and embraced her. Josh couldn't believe this. That was an impostor! He had to go save Darcy, take her away from whoever was trying to take his identity. Then, as he ran towards the screen, the doppelganger, with Darcy in his arms, turned to face Josh's direction and made direct eye contact with him. This stopped him in his tracks, as a cool shiver ran down his spine. He began to sweat, and the abrupt stop caused him to fall to his knees, staring up at the scene in disbelief. The doppelganger grinned at him with a smile that curved up to the edge of his

eyes, raising up his right hand to stick his long, bony index finger in front of the smile. Of course, this was the creature.

“Please don’t do anything to Darcy.” Josh pleaded as his raspy voice cracked.

Ignoring the plea, the creature mouthed a word, although it became difficult for Josh to see what it was, as tears began to blur his vision. The ground beneath him vanished, and below was a dark abyss. One in which Josh began to fall in. He tried his best to reach out his hands to grab the edge of the ground, but he had forgotten that his fingers were struck with frostbite, and all he could do was violently slam his hand against the ground before continuing to fall, deeper and deeper. Deeper. Deeper... deeper... deeper.