

## Real

The new calm is eerie and desensitizing.

I cannot even remember what it was like before, what busyness felt like, what chaos looked like. Now it's only a remnant, a fossilized panic. Houses in shambles, abandoned cars, trash in the streets. Darkness in every window. Emptiness.

I shook my head. It wasn't worth thinking about. If I did, I would only long for the past, and longing is dangerous. It makes it harder to resist the visions. Staring at the wasteland that separated me from a monolith of a grocery store, I pulled headphones up and over my ears. I pressed play on the old cd player. I had started using cd players because I could replace the batteries. Once my iPods ran out, I could not charge them. Slowly, a beat pounded in my ears. A classic by Elton John.

I took a deep breath, closing my eyes, stretching my neck side to side. *Relax*. That was impossible and essential. I had to fight the tension in my body, had to fight my own thoughts. The best way I had found to do that was to fill my head with music.

Walking forward at an unhurried place, I felt the words roll of my tongue. I dwelt on them. Savored them. The song filled my mind so that nothing else could. Still, when I opened my eyes for a moment, just to make sure I wouldn't bump into anything, I saw them.

People filled the streets. Bustling, talking, chatting, living. Someone turned to look at me and I turned away quickly. I must not stare, must not let my attention linger.

The longer you looked at them, the more real they became.

But they were not real. There were no people, anymore. No one was left alive. These were images projected into my mind. Hallucinations. But they were not my own hallucinations.

I clicked the volume up on my cd player. The figures became shadowing, transparent, and amorphous. Piano and nonsense words drowned out the agonizing silence. That was how I made it into the store, just like every time before.

I surveyed the derelict aisles and warm freezers. It was picked over, but there was still plenty of food for one person. Plenty for me. It's funny, I always imagined the end of the world would involve more of a struggle for resources. But you would have to have survivors for that to be a problem. How long would it take for a single man to exhaust our store of canned food and bottled water?

*Surely there must be someone else* I thought for the millionth time. Someone else must have figured out how to keep away from the projections. Someone else must have learned the secret to not thinking about what you saw and heard. Of course, the curious people must have died first. Probably the brave and smart too. And all that was left was me: the most average human on the planet.

I threw four cans of beans into the cart. Why did I keep doing this? Why was I so determined to survive?

Just then, the music jerked to a stop.

I looked down, staving off panic. The light on the cd player went out. I must have had forgotten to switch the batteries. I was unprotected against the silence. It fell hard on my ears, suffocating me. I looked up and saw—nothing. And I heard nothing. The sound of my feet shuffling echoed and echoed. I felt my heart hit against my chest.

Another sound grew. I did not know what it was. It rose out of the distance, like a far-off crowd. I felt the presence of someone—something—coming. *Run*, I thought, but to run would acknowledge the reality of it, and the fear would grow, and the vision would trap me. There is no need to run from nothing.

Briefly, I wondered if they might come in person. I had never seen them, but it would be ironic if I stayed firm against the vision that I knew to be false only to be attacked by something flesh and blood.

*Stop thinking about them.* I couldn't. My mind was drawn to it. No wonder so many people had succumbed to this hypnosis. How can you fight an enemy that you can only escape by ignoring?

“Casper.”

The voice was soft, but determined. I turned and saw her. She looked the same as always, dressed in a red sweater over leggings, brown hair loose around her shoulders.

“Look at me, all right? Think about me.”

I nodded. I stuffed the food that I could into a backpack and left the cart where it was. “How are you Mia? Tell me about your day,” I said, walking beside her, my focus entirely on this girl.

“I slept in. I’m always sleeping in. I feel so drowsy this time of year.”

I nodded and kept walking. I would not stop until we were well out of the city, where the visions were everywhere. I watched Mia, watched the way she stepped over rocks, bouncing a little while she talked, arms moving constantly, restlessly.

Mia was not real. But she was a figment of *my own* imagination. Somehow, at some point, I had dreamt this girl up. I thought at first it was to keep me company, to keep me sane. But she was more than a companion. She was a survival tool. She tended to appear when I most needed something to occupy my thoughts. She was a vision that protected me from the invading visions.

But, she was a companion too.

We sat down together, once I felt alone again, and I opened the cans and began to eat out of one of them. I offered the other to her, and she laughed.

“You know I don’t eat.”

“I don’t want to be rude.”

“That was a close one, back there, Casper,” she changed the subject, her tone serious.

I swallowed. “I will be more careful.”

“What do you think happens? No one has ever seen where they take their prisoners. All those people who follow the visions... they may not even be dead, you know.”

“They are.”

“Why do you think that?”

“I feel it.” My eyes felt hot. I held off the tears that waited behind them. Mia crept closer, examining me like I was a frightened animal.

“We shouldn’t talk about the Invaders,” I said, “They’ll find me. We should talk about something else.”

“Of course,” she said resolutely, “Are you lonely Casper?”

“What kind of a question is that?”

“You feel alone, right?”

“Yes, but it’s not your fault, Mia. You do your best.”

“Of course. Only I’m not real.”

I looked up from the can, my eyes meeting hers. They shimmered green and excited and sad all at once. They told me so many things, things I did not know I was capable of imagining.

“Are you real?”

She smiled, longingly. “How would I know the difference? Besides, I could never prove it to you if I were.”

There was a hope in her voice. But it was a weary, fainting hope. Everything in my life was weary and fainting: my spirit, my faith, my mind. Except Mia. Mia was bright.

“What are you going to do now?” She asked, creeping towards me. I could actually feel her brush against my knee as she sat directly beside me. Why not? If my sight was fooled, why should other senses be immune?

“I think I’d like to go to the ocean,” I said, decidedly. I thought the water seemed open and alive, and the wildness might be good protection against the haunting of the human race.

“All right,” she leaned her head on my shoulder, “Which way is that?”

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We had been walking the better part of the day. It was the first day that I thought the air was changing: the breeze was blowing wet and salty. We were nearing the ocean, and the ocean was coming to meet us on the wind.

Mia was with me, most of the time. She came and went. The next time she appeared, she looked confused.

“Casper?” her voice was ragged. “Where are we? What is this?”

“It’s okay,” I took her hand in mine. “I’m staying out of the city, that’s all. But we’re close to the coast.”

She glanced around the rocky path we were walking. Then she gave me a critical look.

“What?”

“This is the long way.”

“So? Are you in a hurry? Do you have somewhere to be?”

“No,” she furrowed her brow. She pulled her hand out of mine and wrapped both arms around herself. “But why is it so cold?”

I was concerned, but I reminded myself that Mia was not really cold. Mia was not really anything. It was just strange, because really, the air was quite warm. Still, I had already realized that, for whatever reason, my imaginary friend was sort of schizophrenic. *Look who’s talking.*

“Careful!” She gasped and grabbed my shirt. This time, though, her fingers slipped right through me. But I stopped anyway, looking for the source of her fear. We had come up a steep hill and were nearing the edge of it.

I peered over the ledge. It was a rocky surface all the way to the bottom, steep and jagged, like torn paper.

“We should go around,” Mia said, “There will be an easier way down.”

“No, it’s all right.”

“What, are you in a hurry?” she said, in an attempt at my voice.

*And sassy. She was schizophrenic and sassy, I thought.*

"I just want to get there," I answered, "And besides, I've climbed down worse than this."

"It's riskier now."

I shrugged. I lowered myself to the ground so that I could shimmy down the first part of the cliff. My feet slid on pebbles and powder. My hands dug into the side. I stabilized.

"Mia, why don't you meet me—"

But as I looked up, I saw that she was gone. My throat tightened. I hated this feeling, the feeling of alone-ness. I had been wrong to tell Mia I was lonely before. Lonely was not the right word. You can feel lonely in a crowd. What I felt was a complete alone-ness that I had never experienced before I lost everyone.

I began to descend the cliff-face. The ground rose up to meet me, now maybe thirty feet below. I started to climb a little faster, confidence growing with every sure step. Sometimes I slipped on the rocks or misjudged my footing, but I was always able to catch myself.

Until I wasn't.

The rock I stood on gave way. My hand closed around a long root, but it tore from the dirt and I kept falling. My body scraped against the cliff, and still I could not cling to it. I kept falling and tumbling and rolling and falling.

My motion stopped, suddenly. I imagined how small the accident must have looked to the universe, but to me it was an avalanche. My whole body tingled with adrenaline and pain. *Pain*. Pain in my ankle...

Groaning, I rolled over and bent my leg to view the source of my pain. The slightest movement sent agony up my leg. I bit my lip, then decided it was pointless to keep in my emotion, so I let out a long scream. My foot remained at an awkward angle, already swelling, bloodied from landing on a rock.

The cuts from the rock hurt, but I knew that what really hurt was a broken bone.

Everything changed in that moment. I had no idea how much damage I would do to myself by walking. I knew that I was risking infection, which could be deadly. I needed to stop the swelling and the pain so I could think clearly.

I sat there for a long time, listening to my own breathing: in and out, in and out. Finally, I pushed up, standing on my left leg. Hesitantly I lowered my right foot.

As soon as I put my weight on it, I collapsed.

Another muffled cry. No one would hear it. I thought about unleashing a slew of curses at the universe. But what good would that do? Anyway, where was Mia? I tried to picture her, wondering if I could summon her with my imagination.

Frustrated and scared, I crawled a few steps forward. I had to think. Had to decide on a course of action. I knew that I needed to get to a hospital or a pharmacy. Probably a hospital would have more supplies, since people did not like to raid places of disease. I had passed one on the highway when I headed out here, so I knew if I went back to the road I could find it again. I closed my eyes and pictured the way back. Probably only a few miles, ten at the most.

Ten miles on a broken ankle.

Two more days alone.

It was exhausting. And for the briefest moment, a desire flickered in my mind. A desire to stay and lie on the ground and close my eyes and give up. Almost at the same time, I thought of Mia. What would become of her, if I died? What if that meant she would be left alone, forever?

I got up, more carefully. A faint, weary strength guided me back towards civilization.

\*

The hospital loomed before me against the blackening sky. I let my body rest against the stick I was supporting myself with, took in a breath, and hobbled forward. I had to watch my step, but I tried to avoid looking at my red, swollen ankle, with a wound that now looked quite angry. The pain radiated up my shin as I stepped, but I tried to think of my aching stomach instead.

“Casper—”

I did not bother to turn and look at Mia. A day and a half I had walked alone all the way to the hospital before she showed up at this last moment.

“Where were you?” I asked, as though it were her fault, as though she could control when my neurons fired her up.

“I don’t know. Something—something happened to me—I. They did something to me.”

I looked. Her face was more gaunt than usual. My heart softened, even at her nonsense words. She, too, looked compassionately on me. Her eyes widened when she saw my foot.

“Oh, Casper! You’re hurt.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I should have listened to you about the cliff.”\*

She reached for my arm. “I wish I could help.” Her eyes landed on my walking stick. I saw a longing, again. Longing for touch, for reality. She couldn’t carry me, like the stick could. “I am no use to you,” she murmured, reaching for my face.

"That isn't true," I said, closing my eyes against the touch of her fingers.

"Did you miss me, then?"

"Of course, I did."

A smile. "I thought you might." She looked down, a rare moment of shyness.

"Casper, do you think you love me?"

I chuckled, stepping forward. "No, Mia, I couldn't love you."

"Why?" she said, not the least disheartened.

"Well, you're really just myself. My own brain. How could I love you? That would be selfish."

"But it isn't wrong to love yourself."

"It isn't the same as true love either."

"All right," she spun around in front of me. "What if I wasn't?"

"Wasn't?"

"What if I was not just a figment of your imagination? I might not be. What if I were real?"

*Oh Mia, how I wish that were true* I thought. How wonderful to not be alone, to have someone to love, truly. To know that she loved me, too. *Would it make a difference though? She is as much to me as any person could be.*

"You are real enough," I said quietly. Then, I focused my attention on the door. The door to the hospital had materialized while we were walking. I started to feel edgy with the sense of being watched. Conscientiously, I pulled the headphones from my pocket, where a cd player with fresh batteries was stuffed.

We entered the hospital. I struggled to keep my mind from wandering to the Invaders, wondering if any visions awaited me inside this place. I was seeing things out of the corner of my eye, but I fought the urge to look and so continued towards the stairwell. A directory posted on the wall told me which floor to search for pain medication and proper dressing.

"What do you need?" Mia asked, once we exited the stairwell on the fourth floor.

"First some morphine or something," I said. Suddenly, I wondered how the medication might mess with my already tattered mind. "On second thought, the strongest ibuprofen we can find. And antibiotics. A splint and good crutch will help a bunch."

"We could try the x-ray machine!"

“With what power?” I was walking toward the nurse’s station, where a small supply of medication was. I also found crutches there.

On the desk, a folder lay spread open. It was an admittance checklist, with pictures and medical history of the patients on this floor.

Wait—I read the top of the page again. This folder was misplaced, it was marked for psychiatric patients.

Not knowing what I was doing, I began to flip the pages. Names and faces flashed before my eyes. I guess maybe I just wanted to see some real pictures of real people for a change. It was a nice reminder of humanity. Still, I felt uneasy when I considered the invasion of privacy I had committed, so I turned one more page and prepared to close the book.

I froze.

Unblinking, I stared at the picture. The music in my ears blurred into the background. Her face stared back at me, happy and solid looking.

*Mia.*

She came up next to me, her eyes just as wide with shock as my own must have been. I turned to her. I looked back at the page. I searched for words.

“I don’t understand.”

“It can’t really be me.”

“Mia Everton,” I read, “It’s your name. It says you were experiencing delusion-like symptoms of schizophrenia. It says everything...”

I sank to my knees, partially due to a lack of physical strength in my foot, partially due to a lack of emotional strength.

“I must be hallucinating,” I finally managed, “It could be a projection of theirs. Something to really get my attention.”

Suddenly, a dread filled my heart. “You might be a projection. Might have been all along.”

“No, Casper,” she said, “You can’t believe that.”

“Maybe I am crazy,” I said at last, “Maybe all of this nightmare as just been that: a nightmare.”

Silence. A moment passed. Then her voice was tender, earnest.

“Casper, I *feel* real.”

I looked into her face, into her eyes. "I don't understand how there can be evidence of your existence if you are only in my head."

"But I am in your head," she answered, "Only... I am somewhere else too. Somewhere cold and dark. I can't move much. My mind wanders."

Could that be true? Could she possibly exist somewhere in the world, in bodily form?

"Do you believe me?" Mia asked.

Determined, I grabbed the file from the folder and studied it. A physician had noted that Mia Everton had been seeing images which she believed to be projections from outside her head. She thought that she had connected with some creatures from elsewhere.

*The Invaders.*

I checked the date. It was a week before the Invasion began. No one had known that these creatures were among us. They had used their mental manipulation to conceal their presence until it was too late.

But Mia had known.

Because Mia was special. And if she were special—if her mind had been strong enough to use the Invaders ability to find them—then maybe she had been strong enough to use it to find me, too.

"I believe you Mia," I said, "Now, I need you to try to think clearly now. I need you to help me find you."

She closed her eyes. "I'm asleep, Casper. My eyes are closed, and I can't open them. But it's cold and wet around me. I'm submerged, I'm—"

"Mia, when did you get there?" I asked gently. Her distress gave me fear, but also hope.

"I saw them—in the hospital courtyard. Not the visions. *Them*. They had never been seen before. They took me—took me... not far. They've built a massive facility just north of here, but you won't see it if you look."

I inhaled sharply. "Then how do I find you?"

She opened her eyes. Her focus was new, unlike anything I had seen in her. She stood up and located a drawer full of splinting supplies.

I followed her implied orders without a word. After cleaning the wound on my foot, I fit a small ankle brace on it and swallowed a handful of ibuprofen and one antibiotic capsule. I hobbled back toward my crutch and picked it up, securing it under my armpit. Mia still said nothing, only took my hand and we started walking.

My heart raced. Adrenaline soared through my veins, clearing all the pain from my body but filling it with fire. I was so consumed by hope that I didn't even remember to replace my headphones. Yet, I was never drawn toward any visions or projections. Even though I had been thinking of the Invaders before I left, now they were absent from my thoughts. A single truth swallowed all my attention.

Mia was real.

And she was in trouble. We walked out of the city, seemingly into nothingness. But Mia knew where she was going. For all her confusion the past few months, now Mia knew.

Suddenly, the grass beneath my feet felt hard.

"Do you see it?"

I shook my head. It was an empty field.

"Look with your eyes, Casper."

How? How could I trust my eyes again? How could I see what was real and get the thoughts out of my head? I struggled to grasp the idea, but I tried anyway. I noticed the way the light fell on the grass. In shadows. Shadows that didn't make sense. There was a structure, and I started to see it. The mirage melted away and we were standing before a giant warehouse, with a wide-open door.

Mia smiled. "They didn't expect this," she said.

No, they never could have predicted two kids finding them. Their invasion plan had worked marvelously well on our weak minds so far. It was against all odds that I had figured out how to survive. It was a miracle that Mia had figured out how to outsmart them.

We entered the building.

Horror clenched my throat when I realized what this place was built for. We began to pass rows of storage tanks. Inside, immersed in some liquid and connected to wires and tubes, people slept.

*They might not be dead.* Mia's words returned to me. Somehow, I knew that they were not.

"They are powering something," Mia said, "Everything the invaders build runs off of imaginative energy. They know how to harness it."

"How do you know that?"

"The invaders are not only master manipulators, they can read minds. But they open a two-way door into our thoughts. I figured out how to go through. I just didn't

know I was doing it. It was only a fraction of my consciousness that made it all the way to you.”

I nodded, still unsure how to process what was happening, still overwhelmed and overstimulated. I had the feeling that I was walking into the belly of the dragon, so to speak. But I was not alone, at least—

I stopped. Mia stopped a second later, and turned to look at me. “Casper?”

“They read minds?” I said.

“Yes.”

“To know what we really want,” I took another step back, “So they can use it against us.”

“What’s wrong?” Mia stretched her hand toward me.

“Don’t!” I said. There was pain in her eyes, but I just looked away. I had to be strong.

I had to survive.

“They made you. They let you stay with me for so long I wouldn’t notice. I would think you were mine. I should have known. I should have expected them to be that clever, since, after all, they’ve taken over a whole planet. But you aren’t real.”

“Casper, please!” Her voice cracked. There was desperation in every syllable. I could barely stand it. I turned around, wishing with all my heart I could run out of this place.

But I couldn’t. I could only limp along, passing rows of unconscious humans, who probably were not even there at all.

“Which thought do you think came from them, Casper?” she called, “The thought that I am real? Or the thought that I am not? *Look with your eyes.*”

I paused, but only to shake my head. I turned to one of the clear tanks with an older man, helplessly bobbing inside.

I felt a familiar draw. The buzzing hypnosis that started when I stared too long at a projection. *This is not real.*

But, instead of turning away like I had learned to do, I wanted to prove it to myself. I wanted to see what was truly there. I squinted, trying to make out the inconsistencies in the vision, the way the liquid moved and bubbled, the flow of air and clothes that were invisible.

Finally, I saw what was there. And it was Mia.

She was perfect. That beautiful hair I had come to recognize gently drifted in the water. The sight of her rang true and honest. She existed, and they had been trying to hide her from me. I had almost let them. I had almost abandoned my hope, while she had been waiting here, patiently.

The dream of her stood beside me. That is, her consciousness stood beside me, looking just as amazed. She slowly touched the glass, every movement trembling and cautious.

“Wake me up, Casper.”

And then she faded away.

I gasped. I had not realized I had been holding my breath. There was a simple control panel outside the tank. Somehow, I knew exactly where to press, and the liquid drained, and other mechanical sounds echoed in the vast tomb. The door slid open.

Mia's eyelids fluttered. Her mouth opened. Then, she fell into my arms, and I caught her, and the weight of her brought us both to the ground.