

True Sick

Herald Rose

Someone

“Spiegel Im Spiegel (SIS) is a memory retrieval slash divination machine (MR / DM). To get to SIS, you have to find the Redacted Company’s decommissioned warehouse and climb down the two-story wood scaffolding hidden behind the grungy red and brown rubber thermal curtains.”

“The inside of SIS is like an impossibly large basement that’s dimly lit and dirty. There are pathways between floor-to-ceiling piles of objects. The objects are all from your past, present, and future (regardless of whether you consciously remember them or not / have seen them yet or not). Different manifestations of yourself wander through the valleys of stuff, each one representing a version of you from a significant point in your life. They don’t interact with each other or you unless you interact with them. You can ask them questions and if you touch them you can experience their memories like they’re happening in real time. It’s not exactly time travel but it’s close enough.”

(Narrator’s Note: Who do these memories belong to when I remember watching / reading / hearing your stories

recanted to me? I've incorporated them into myself the way everyone else has. We are all so permeable and mutable and erasable and re-writable. I can / can't feel like what it felt like. The context is different. But the context is the only thing that makes my behavior acceptable.)

Alex

My refuge. A summer sun lit prairie of buried bodies. A wrought iron gate left locked. Flowers venture forth from their cheap pots to sprawl across the land. A jail-broke rose blooms continuously pink. Blackberry bushes. A wild apple tree. Couch cushions stuffed into a vault for a bed. Home sweet mausoleum home. The story of how is the typical nightmare.

Steph stabbed the cheap particle board desk with a pen. It was sleeting outside and all she could do was dream about escaping, but all she had was her slow internet connection. She thought about Xander and she wondered what he had in his pockets when he disappeared. She thought about the things she kept in her pockets. Frustrated at nothing and everything, she stabbed the desk again. And again. And again. Choker necklaces and cell phones were thousands of miles away and she dreamed about being anywhere as long as it was thousands of miles away.

“Why would you tell anyone where you live?”

The burn pits outside of our camp filled up with bodies fast. Many were not bodies exactly because they were still moving but we didn't know what that meant yet. They at least didn't seem to be able to feel or make sense of anything (other than grabbing, tearing, and biting). Some people clung to the "bodies" and went into the pits with them and they all burned together. Once the pits were full, the contents were buried. It kept camp quiet for awhile. Until winter. Until too much cold sorrow brought them and shrieking fear brought them. Gave up and sliced wrists brought them. Blood brought them, birthed them, bore them. The camp motto: death being born / birth dying / quiet being born / birth dying.

"Why would you tell anyone where you lived?"

During Christmas break someone suggested that they make a zine. At the time, Steph was more into making weird music on her computer than writing, but she bought a notebook and filled it with nothing anyway. Xander had some ideas, but he didn't follow through, like usual. Alex was just sort of there, observing the scene / being observed by the scene, like a painting on the wall that could make dumb jokes. Someone and Xander constantly side-eyed Alex and

judged him for the choices they assumed he would make in a few years.

In my notebook I cataloged everyone dead and buried. I put their names in alphabetical order (last name, first name). I ranked their headstones (least interesting to most interesting). I held my breath and counted how many years they lived. I sorted them by date of death. A 65 year old man named George died three months before everything happened.

As early as New Year's Eve, Steph had a feeling or premonition that Alex was going to die, and probably like actually soon. His obsession with intentionally fucking up his life was getting sloppy and chaotic and when Xander disappeared Alex really started to spiral. It was like something was gnawing away at him, physically and mentally, decaying the personality he once was or the guy he tried to pretend to be. To Steph, it seemed like the only thing keeping him alive was the adrenaline he got from the bad decisions he continued to make. When Alex was alive, he would say things like: "You should dig up George! See if he heard you from inside his coffin and is trying to get out!"

(Narrator's Note: George (as in Romero) isn't his real name, I just thought it fit better than "Theodore" given the circumstances.)

George had a simple headstone, flat and half sunk into the dry sandy earth. I kept getting dirt on it as I dug, which felt disrespectful (which felt absurd). The shovel I found at the farmhouse finally bounced off something solid and I brushed away the remaining dirt. His coffin was silent but I knocked a few times and listened to be safe, then I pried it open.

George laid there motionless, sort of desiccated. He was clearly old dead, and not the new dead that un-died. Relieved or a little disappointed, I sat on the coffin lid and looked up. Clouds passed the dark frame of the grave. The coolness of being six feet underground discouraged me from climbing out and the boredom of being alone for so long encouraged me to talk to his corpse. I introduced myself and gave him the short version of why I was there. When I finished he creaked, and in a dusty voice, he said, "I'm glad I missed Armageddon."

Steph had seen the world end, or maybe just worlds end. It was at the memorial service after everyone gave up trying to find Xander (who everyone in town now called “the boy”). The boy's parents were gone mentally and wouldn't be coming back, just like the boy. The boy's siblings were invisible and remained transparent permanently. The funeral home was like a scene from a movie where everyone realizes they're all as good as dead. They're all fucked. There isn't anything after this. They're changed forever and they'll never recover. Their world ended and the world with Xander also ended.

Kris

"I'm melting so many existences into this collage that I can't remember who I am anymore. This hallway didn't get real and never seemed applicable but here I am drowning in brick building and rotten teeth."

Steph paused.

"Hey, I'm Sorry Kris. I didn't mean that."

(Narrator's Note: The brick building was a false memory of a photograph and an actual place that was actively falling down. In both cases, it was summer and Steph could smell the cut grass in the dinnertime sun. It felt like 1968 small town America (which only George knew about). It feels like the Fourth of July in a faded tourist town. It felt like a ghost lawnmower and a phantom electric hum. It feels like the air will never move again. Time may pass into night, with a louder hum, and more crickets, but everyone is somewhere else eternally. The interior of the brick building is unknowable and doesn't even matter.)

Kris didn't comprehend what Steph's comment implied, he rarely paid attention to his teeth, and the only people that

understood the way his brain worked were the doctors that diagnosed him with the thing that he has.

“What lunch period do you have next quarter?”

Each evening after I ate whatever qualified as dinner that day, I would climb down into George’s grave, sit on his coffin and talk. When it got too dark to tell which way was up I’d climb out and go back to my mausoleum to sleep. I used to be a night person, but there wasn’t much reason to stay up now. How banal.

(Narrator’s Note: The narrator dreamed of town. It was cold and probably late winter. Somewhere in town. Somewhere Alex was doing something with drugs, possibly with Xander. Dark brown wood paneling maybe? The park by the river flooded and partially froze. The brick building from Steph’s memory was in the wrong place. There was a framed photo of a child and a doll. Or a framed photo of a doll. Afraid that the photograph and / or doll would be possessed, the narrator brought them into the frozen swamp.)

Waking up in the mausoleum always felt obviously apocalyptic. The sunrise through the stained glass stained everything red and yellow. The colors reminded me of the

bodies I'd seen, pulled apart with muscle and fat slop left splattered and hanging. Throats torn. Torsos torn. Legs ripped up. Arms gone to the bone.

First period was about to start and Steph was sitting on the floor by the art rooms waiting for Kris. On the wall above her someone had written, "I wish a Ghostface killer would fucking kill me," with black marker. Kris didn't notice the graffiti when he arrived, or he didn't think anything of it beyond that it existed in the scenery of the school. They walked together to the gym. On the door to the pool someone had written, "I wish a Ghostface would fucking kill me already."

A girl stumbled down the hallway in slow motion, stabbed in the neck, already dead. Time returned to its normal speed as she lunged at a boy cowering in his letterman jacket.

Transparent eyes.

Opaque eyes.

(Narrator's Note: "I know it's ugly, but when I wear it I think of him. It feels like he's still here with me and not a million miles away, unreachable by any form of

communication. It's like a prayer. I hope he can hear my prayer for him and know that I love him.”)

Steph

Garage.

Crowbar.

Mausoleum.

Steph walked into the shitty thrift store and stomped the snow off her shoes. The shop was notorious in town for being completely packed, floor-to-ceiling, with filthy junk. She never bought anything, she just liked gawking at the weird garbage people donated. To Steph, it felt like a museum for memories that people claimed they wanted to forget, but for whatever reason (maybe guilt) still secretly nurtured (hence why they donated the shit instead of trashing it).

She wandered through the heaps of memories / stuff, until she found a stack of VHS tapes poorly shelved on a warped and leaning bookcase. It was mostly abandoned home videos and Disney but one of the handwritten labels caught her attention: *Night of the Living Dead*. It was only 99 cents, so she put it in her jacket and walked out of the store.

George wanted to know what the world was like now.

Steph typed on her grandfather's typewriter.

His body crept up the stairs clumsily, dripping gore on each step. The smell was obvious and expected, but the noises he made weren't. Something like a fully dead gurgle-cry-howl.

He reached the landing and all I could think to do was kick him back down the stairs and watch him climb up again. By the fifth or sixth time, his left shoulder appeared dislocated and his right arm was very broken with the bones sticking out and dark sludge oozing. The seventh time snapped both his legs. He tried to crawl up the stairs but it was so slick with rot that he could only get up a little ways before he slid back down. I went to bed with ear plugs in to silence the sound of him thumping around.

I must have slept quietly because when I woke up he was gone. Following the trail of goo he left, I found that he had wriggled his way out of the house via the sliding glass door that I hadn't been able to close. He was totally gone. Whatever. There were plenty more just like him.

(Narrator's Note: This is not happening.)

He crept up the stairs clumsily, dripping sweat on each step. The sounds he made were obvious and expected, but the smell wasn't. Something like a dog wet from old meat.

He reached the landing and all Steph could think to do was kick him back down the stairs and watch him climb up again. By the fifth or sixth time, his left shoulder appeared dislocated and his right arm was very broken with the bone sticking out. The seventh time snapped both his legs. He tried to crawl up the stairs but it was so slick with blood that he could only get up a little ways before he slid back down. Steph went to bed with ear plugs in to silence the sound of him thumping around.

She must have slept quietly because when she woke up he was gone. Following the trail of gore he left, she found that he had wriggled his way out of the house via the sliding glass door that she hadn't been able to close. He was dead in the backyard. Whatever, she thought. There were plenty more just like him.

(Narrator's Note: This is happening.)

"True sick. People act dumb when they see grandma biting into a kid's throat. Into. Creating a wet red cave with

her dead teeth. Into like an apple. Into like a wolf. Run around outside screaming; you've lost your mind. Get taken down and caved out like the kid. Get taken down and covered in red wet holes. True sick because they don't know how bad it gets. Sometimes the bodies were piled up in the corners and leaked on the floorboards. Sometimes the bodies were piled up and burned up in pits (which I already told you about), smelling like the worst family reunion / barbecue ever."

"The boy's family moved away. His mom told my mom that they were tired of the constant reminders and the suspicious glances. She said it was slowly killing them. They didn't even give the post office a forwarding address. They knew he was never coming back."

"You can smell them before you can see them. Sometimes they lock together like flailing mannequins. Arms and jaws nearly pushed through themselves and each other. Contorted piles of putrid flesh. Cut belly guts spill. Wrangle the intestines like a lasso around a neck or hand or face or knee and yank. Got another one. Freak on a leash. Grease things up and let them slide around. Someone thought about

it, I'm sure but I guess that'd be a true sicko not just a run of the mill ghoul. Not a ghoul that's just a ghost who hasn't died yet.”

“My mom called home on her cellphone from the grocery store to tell me that she saw Alex getting arrested for shoplifting. She said he looked different but she couldn't figure out how.”

“Bones are everywhere now. All that's left of the people that didn't escape with 'just a bite.' I always wanted a human knuckle necklace, so I guess it works out in a true sick sort of way.”

“Kris got pulled from regular classes so I don't see him much anymore. He still calls sometimes but he just talks about Depeche Mode and then hangs up.”

“Rattled the drawers looking for something of use. Nothing of use. Go outside. Hot summer sun boredom. Scavenge all day. Talk to George a bit as the sun sets. Hide all night. Drink from the hand pump well. It tastes off but don't have to boil it first. Don't worry, the scene is romantic; bucolic because of the reality. Thinking on it further, the best bet was always the cemetery. True sick. At least until it gets

cold and starts snowing. Do hand pump wells work in the winter? Still have to find food but no one comes here because superstition? I guess everything else is dead so there's no need. Whatever. Hell might be full but I'm not walking the earth yet. And if I do, at least then I don't, won't know how bad it gets. I won't know if it gets worse.”

Xander

Steph saw the circle of boys in the parking lot. They said “hi” in a lazy unison but basically ignored her while she moved around them like a vulture, picking up their teenage twit theories about whatever and, more importantly, the boy that disappeared. They had heard things about the boy, who they only kind of knew and definitely didn’t actually care about. They talked with unearned surety. They said it was a conspiracy, a big cover-up. The cops knew or his parents’ did it; they sent him away somewhere. But in the end, shrug, because, as they reminded each other, they didn’t actually care and his disappearance didn’t actually mean anything to them. So they mumbled defeated and shot down, and shut up, smoked their cigarettes, and thought about their boasting in secret, deeply unsure and actually fearful of themselves and the world they were inheriting.

George asked how things fell apart.

“I remember that it happened fast because it was quietly happening slowly. But the timeline is abstract and overshadowed by everything that happened after. The worse

parts. The parts that actually matter now because understanding how it happened doesn't really tell us anything except we should have expected it but we can never expect it because we're only what we are."

(Narrator's Note: Everything moves together. We are one giant, stupid organism.)

One hundred years later, Steph opened her old notebook and wrote on the last page. "It was so wholly novel that I could not relate it to any other experience. This combined with the longevity resulted in a feeling of being untethered from my own history, my own past. A before and after. Now it feels deleted because nothing in the before or after resembles the during." Steph closed the notebook and set it on the bookshelf next to her typewriter and VHS copy of *Night of the Living Dead*.

"I miss watching movies."

George asked me if I had any books or knew of anywhere that I could find some. He thought that maybe I could read to him on evenings where we didn't have anything to talk about. I told him about a farmhouse nearby that had a lot of books in it but that I didn't like going there.

(Narrator's Note: The farmhouse was, used to be white, now it was cloudy gray. Hand-me-down 90s TV / VCR combo on ashtray carpet. Bad news upstairs bedroom. Dirt floor basement. The preacher found it once and dragged him away. Not Xander. Some other damaged teen. He became a cop or the target of manipulation for liars. Unlike meth cooks at Denny's. "You mean Denning's?" That place by the freeway making you think there's something real to escape too. You know the one. "Hopelessness?" Yeah.)

Steph was sitting in a booth at Denning's drinking coffee by herself when Kris walked in. She waved at him and he half-waved back with his hand still inside his jacket pocket. He walked over awkwardly, looking sheepishly paranoid, and sat down across from her. He whispered that he missed the school bus and was looking for a payphone.

Around a sunny corner one lurched out. A spring flower tangled in its hair. Fell off the curb and smashed its face on the concrete. Got back up and shambled down the road toward the farmhouse.

Something happened in that house, like something happened in a lot of houses. Whatever was gone now but blood aged black was everywhere on the first floor tile. I could imagine it sticky, but it was now flaky dry and it got kicked up into the air with the dust when I had to walk through it. I hoped that blood-borne diseases die when dry but there's nothing I can do about it now.

George

Steph drove Kris home from Denning's as the sun set and the early spring darkness enveloped the back roads, her car, and the two teenagers inside.

Star field in concrete.

Xander was gone.

Drunk driver.

“Alex is dead.”

Freeway cars stopped and their taillights bled out. There was no one alive to put grease paint dates on the windows of the abandoned vehicles. A pickup truck crashed into the ditch and caught on fire. I'm guessing they were over it and just wanted out. Burning flesh and noise attracted more so I stayed next to the tree line and kept walking.

“Remember to wear your seat belt,” at the memorial assembly.

“Prove how stupid you are,” thought Steph.

She skipped school that afternoon and sat on the bench outside of the pharmacy. The sun had warmed and the snow was finally melting. A man walked down the middle of the

road with his eyes closed, face toward the sun, oblivious to the world. Steph watched as he tripped on a rock, fell to the ground, and didn't move.

The civil emergency sirens spun up.

The man stood, grabbed a corpse, slung its arms over his shoulders and kept walking. Its feet drug behind him like a wedding dress train and the toes slowly ground down to blood colored absences.

Steph thought back to sixth grade when a girl asked her, "Who can't wait to get married?" Steph had rolled her eyes at the girl and went back to reading about Egyptian mummies under her desk with Xander. He gave her an Atomic Fireball. It made her lips burn and she wondered out loud if dead bodies smell sweet. Before he disappeared, Steph had asked Xander if he remembered that day. He said he remembered imagining his organs being removed from his body and placed into stone jars.

I saw a body that was mostly gone, its chest cavity empty, but still twitching and writhing in any place where muscle, tendons, and nerves remained. Bits of flesh jiggled with each tiny spasm.

Steph remembered something she overheard Alex say before he died.

“You guys are idiots. You know what happened. He wanted to die. The train conductor didn't see him and *smack*, he ‘rode the rails’ until his body dislodged and joined the animal carcasses by the tracks. It all happened so far away that no one ever found the body. Coyotes probably ate it or whatever.”

It had been badly smashed by something. Its blood was drying on the rocks around it. It would try to push itself off the ground looking like a big scab then immediately collapse, unable to support its own weight.

The Narrator

It was nearing the end of the school year. Kris sat on the hill by his house waiting for the bus. It didn't always show up because the driver didn't like him. Today was one of those days and it never came. Kris went back inside his house and sat on the kitchen floor. No one was home and no one would be for a long time. He traced the dark brown lines of the linoleum with his fingers for hours. Steph never saw him again. She graduated high school and left town. She didn't return until there were no other options.

“Where will you go?”

“Home.”

“It will be weird to fear the dead again.”

George's remains remained dug up, coffin open to see snow fall. A quiet eternity waiting for entropy to bury him again. He asked me to leave him that way. I said I'd try to visit next summer but he said I wouldn't remember to.

Alex was cremated.

Leaves scattered across the road in an eerie wind.

The day I arrived home was unseasonably hot and dry. The grass in the front yard was well past overgrown but the house looked intact. There were no broken windows, no doors had been kicked in. My key still worked and I went inside. It was quiet and no one was home. No one had been home in a long time. Maybe there were graves out back. Everything had a covering of dust that sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. I took my boots off and left them by the front door, making sure to deadbolt it behind me. I went upstairs to my bedroom, shut the door and pressed the button lock. My bed was still made and the room was still tidy (except for the dust). I opened the window and smelled the sill mold that the breeze carried in. I took the top blanket off my bed. I'll shake it off outside tomorrow, I thought. I laid down and I fell asleep.

“Why would you tell anyone where you live?”

I bet you can't guess how many movies I've rented.

“What the hell was that kid's name?”

You can keep checking, but you'll always get it wrong.

(Narrator's Note: Ultimately, this is how, but not why, I disappeared.)

2024