

Rust Coleman (he/him)

Upon Revelation, I Found Myself in the Woods

A Horror Novella by Rust Coleman

First 4 chapters (about 4,700 words)

Chapter 1

“My story? You want my story?”

Barrett paused, unsure where to begin.

“I think it all started when I decided to kill myself. Things weren't going all that great, but that was definitely the turning point. That's what brought me here. In fact, I think that's probably the point of this story,” Barrett said. “So, um, here I go. Thank you for listening.”

“Do not worry, child, there is no need for you to tell this story alone,” the thing said. It entered Barrett's skin, occupied his brain, shared his eyes. The thing waited inside him, expectant, as the memories flooded back.

#

The computer chimed. Barrett looked up from his palms.

“Hey Barry, sorry I’m running late. My schedule is full of back-to-back meetings today! Could you believe that?” said Miguel.

“Ha, yeah, it’s almost like you manage people.”

“No kidding! Okay let me just get up my notes,” he paused, eyes lost on the screen.

“Here we go! Before we dive in, how are you doing?”

“Not bad. I’ve been better, but...you know, life goes on,” Barrett said.

Miguel nodded. “Sure, sure! We’ve all been there. I ask because, coincidentally, it looks like your numbers have been better as well. Last year, you were killing it Barry! Top 10% of analysts across all of Stargazer, making deadlines, great reports from the other teams. This year, not so much.”

Stargazer Incorporated, the dream job of all twenty-somethings out of college. An exploitative mining outfit, the company’s primary goal was tearing resources from locals and selling them, at top dollar, to the rest of the world’s business scum. It was massive, with branches spread across major cities like New York and Hong Kong. Barrett was lucky enough to be stuck in the Limestone City office, harbinger of the South, armpit of this godforsaken company.

Even other Stargazer employees looked down on the Limestone office, like its denizens were second rate. Maybe they were. Barrett was a business analyst whose domain consisted of spreadsheets and obsolete computer programs. He hated it with a passion. The job was a result of a flashy career fair presentation, promising excellent pay and the chance to change the world.

Barrett wasn't fully sold, but to his luck, it was the only offer he received after two years of community college and three more at Limestone's own local university.

Miguel continued, "I don't love having to do negative reviews, but in basically all of our metrics you're down year-over-year. Other teams have reported that it's harder to work with you, and the quality of your work has continued to decline."

His eyes flicked to another screen before he continued, "Has anything changed in your personal life that might have affected your productivity?"

See, that's the problem, thought Barrett. *Nothing's changed.*

"No, nothing's new. Just the same old, same old," said Barrett.

"Gotcha, and I see here that you've utilized some of the mental health resources in our benefits package. Including some of our online therapy options, good, good! Has this helped you identify any areas in your personal life that could use work?"

Barrett sighed. "Look, Miguel, I appreciate the concern but none of those services really did anything for me. I don't know if you've noticed lately, but the world is, excuse my language, shit. And working for a *multinational mining company* doesn't exactly provide the most personal fulfillment."

"I don't know if the world is the problem, Barry. The company's profits are up to record highs, we've tapped three new mineral deposits in the last year, and half of your team has put in the work to get promoted already. What's stopping you?"

This guy does not fucking get it.

“What’s stopping me? You really want to know Miguel?” said Barrett. “I barely feel fucking real. Like I look at my hands, I stare at my computer and it’s like I don’t exist. It’s not something that a bullshit virtual therapist can fix, I’m just slowly disappearing. It’s one panic attack after another, followed by bouts of dissociation. So please, tell me how I’m supposed to care about triaging iridium losses when I can barely stay in my own skin.”

Miguel took a few seconds to blink before he said, “Oh wow, you’ve certainly got...a lot going on. Here’s what I’ll do, let’s put you on a performance improvement plan for the next two quarters. Chelsea’s a great mentor and that gives you some time and support to get through these deadlines.”

His eyes flicked to yet another corner. *Just look at me goddamnit.* “As for your mental health, how about you take a half day this Friday? That gives you a bit of an extended weekend. I’ll check back in with you on Monday to see how you’re doing.” Miguel flashed a pearly smile, like this was reassuring.

“Sure thing bossman,” said Barrett through gritted teeth.

“Oh and don’t forget, we have the big Reynolds presentation this Wednesday! Make sure you get your spreadsheet over to me before then.”

Wouldn’t fucking miss it.

#

Excerpt transcribed on the wall of the Pleasant Hill cave system, Tennessee, United States. Date unknown.

Flesh, flesh, flesh.

The very idea of it

flesh, and blood.

It bores to the center of His being,

His existence.

Addicted to human sugar,

the crunch of bones,

their metallic lifeblood.

Tendrils of maggots warm His insides.

He bathes in blood

to wash away the stink of this human world.

Rips it apart,

tears it to pieces.

Removes the mistakes that Others have made.

Drink in the sugar,

savor the forgiveness, the cleansing.

Bathe in it.

Chapter 2

The elevator dinged and Barrett looked up too quickly, feeling the shirt stretch against his arms and stomach. Since working from home, his dwindling supply of khakis and button downs no longer fit perfectly. The occasional reminder that not all people wore sweatpants and sweatshirts. He cursed himself for not making new clothes a priority before today's presentation.

A sharply dressed man walked in, eyes scanning over Barrett with a huff. He squeezed into the adjacent corner while Barrett ran his fingers through his hair. *My goddamn hair*, he thought. The strands had grown too long, a haircut necessary weeks before today.

Disheveled, Barrett exited onto the tenth floor. Only to realize, the office had moved to the fourteenth floor in the last three months. He raced up three flights of stairs to wait for the secretary to let him in, and tried to catch his breath as he knocked on Miguel's door.

“Hey Miguel!” he said, the door swinging open with a crack on the doorstep.

Miguel’s eyes shot up and he said, “Holy hell, Barry, did you sprint here? Slow down before you tear a hole in the wall.”

“Yeah sorry, long story,” Barrett said, adjusting his shirt again. “Here’s that report for the Reynold’s presentation in a few.”

“Really cutting it close to the wire,” Miguel said. “You’ve got like ten minutes before go time. This has to be perfect, Barry.” He narrowed his eyes. “Don’t test me today.”

“I won’t, sir, don’t you worry. I’ve been through these slides a dozen times, should be a dream.” It had only been twice (and one of those run-throughs, he’d been drunk), but close enough. “Did you want me to present from in here?”

“In here?” Miguel scoffed. “No, I’ll be in here at *my* desk, but you can go to Conference Room B, I think it’s open today.”

“No yeah, duh. Sorry, I’ll head that way now. See you on the call!”

Miguel waved him out and Barrett considered flipping him the bird. *And he wonders why I don’t like it here.*

Conference Room B was available, in some sense of the word. Someone had left a half eaten lunch on the table and one of the fluorescent bulbs overhead was out. But the projector worked, and with two minutes to spare, Barrett had the presentation up and the call started with the Reynolds team.

Reynolds Extraction Inc. was a smaller mining outfit than Stargazer, and coincidentally, operated at higher profit margins than much of the industry. Miguel handed him the lead months ago, a throwaway that he had anticipated went nowhere. But as much as Barrett hated mining and conglomerates, he loved people. And he worked the lead for months, eventually convincing half of his executives and the Reynolds team that acquisition was viable. *What a joy.*

Hence, the import of a presentation with basically every important Reynolds employee. He flashed a plastic smile, fixed his shirt for the fifteenth fucking time, and rolled straight into pleasantries.

“Hi everyone, it’s so great to have you here today. For those of you that don’t know me, I’m Barrett from Stargazer Incorporated. I hope you’re all as excited as I am about the prospect of this acquisition! The synergy of our teams couldn’t be higher, and our future looks much brighter with the Reynolds folks looking to come on board. Let’s jump right in, here we can see...”

His flow state kicked in and the slides glided past like water. In the absence of a full conference room or cameras fixed on faces, he imagined the room filled with glass-eyed dolls, fixated on his every word. He embodied a conductor, directing the orchestra from his laptop before him, each move striking perfectly. Building to a crescendo, his tenor changed, approaching—

“Hey Barry, Miguel here. Sorry to interrupt,” said Miguel, sounding tinny from the small laptop speaker.

“Hey Miguel, yeah sure go ahead,” Barrett said.

“I’m just looking at the report you handed me a few minutes ago, so I haven’t had time to review fully. But it looks like some of the numbers on our side don’t match my intuition for this deal. Is it true that this would take three fiscal years to reach financial viability?”

Barrett coughed, caught off guard. Miguel’s question wasn’t unreasonable, but it was disingenuous – the deal hit multiple other metrics before becoming viable, which could have been addressed well before they had the entire Reynolds team on the call. Unless Barrett had missed some internal memo, it seemed like Miguel just wanted to embarrass him in front of practically everyone. Perhaps his “review” had accelerated, and Miguel wanted to get rid of him as soon as possible. He raised a hand, “Excuse me for a second.”

He tapped the keyboard and stood slightly off-camera, drinking deeply from a glass of water. Trying to regain his composure, he inhaled deep, measured breaths. *What a fucking asshole*, Barrett thought. *Trying to derail months of work. My work. The one thing keeping me in this hellhole of a job.*

Exasperated, Barrett said, “Fucking dickhead,” to the empty conference room. Immediately, he felt better. He returned to the camera’s full frame and clicked to unmute. But, the click only muted him, which must mean—

“Yeah, um, Barry? You weren’t muted there buddy,” Miguel said, dripping with condescension.

All of the color drained from Barrett’s face, any ounce of charisma from earlier now cowering deep inside his brain. *Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.*

Nervous looks bloomed across the video call, a growing realization that this was over. The meeting, perhaps the whole acquisition. A Reynolds executive spoke up, tentative. “We were under the impression that your team was unified behind the idea of an acquisition.” They paused. “It sounds like that may have been...misrepresented given the current situation. Can someone from Stargazer please advise on next steps? Miguel?”

Miguel’s face was plastered with a stupidly wide grin, like he had just pulled off the scam of the century.

“Let’s regroup and get back to you in a few weeks, okay Reynolds folks?” Miguel said. He turned up the false hysterics, “I sincerely apologize for the conduct presented on this call. I think we may have some team members changing roles soon, and will need to discuss contingency plans before this deal continues. Thank you all for your time.”

Barrett sank deeply into a chair and his palms found his eyes. The laptop chimed as the meeting was hastily ended; fumbled, failed, lost.

He was so utterly, completely fucked.

Chapter 3

Colored lights sprayed the sidewalk from windows along the wall, the only indicator that everyone in line waited for a bar. Like monsters, cryptids, shadows clung to the people in line. No one enjoyed themselves. Desperate, Barrett sought something that would make time move faster, expand, occupy any other space than this.

Across the street, an exhausted cop sipped coffee, scrolling on her phone to stay awake. The phone's brightness was turned all the way up, and the bar's effervescence mixed with the pasty blue light, giving her a pallid complexion, a zombie in the flesh. He thought of her face, waxy and gooey, and traced his fingers over his own cheekbones. He pulled off clumps, like scooping ice cream with his fingers, curdled and foul. Paper skin gave way to rotten flesh that *squelched* in his hands as he tore. He saw the tendons holding her jaw in the zombie's now dripping face, and thought of plucking them, like—

“Hi, Barry,” Sarah whispered in Barrett’s ear.

“Fuck!” Barrett’s body released, shedding a few layers of skin as he jumped a few inches off the ground.

“Oh my god, it's you. Fuck you, sis,” he said.

“Who else would it be? Are you seeing ghosts again?” she said.

“The only ghost I've seen tonight is Walt – Jesus Christ man, when was the last time you saw the sun?” Barrett said.

He flexed his muscles in response, tendons and sinew bulging beneath a white t-shirt. A contrast to the tiny, tattooed form of his wife. Walt clapped Barrett’s back with one of his meaty hands and he wheezed in pain.

“Barry, my brother! So good to see you. How’s work treating you?” said Walt.

“Eh, you know. Nothing’s new. Exploiting indigenous groups to extract valuable minerals. Oh and I bombed a big presentation earlier this week, so I’ve been put on *temporary leave*. Whatever that means,” Barrett said.

“Temporary leave? Barry, what the fuck did you do?” Sarah said.

“Nothing crazy! Just called my boss a dickhead in front of a big potential acquisition. They, uh...they were not happy,” said Barrett.

“Well no shit, *dickhead*,” Sarah said. “What’d they say about your job?”

“I’ve got a few weeks to recharge and if HR decides I’m in a decent place then I’ll get my projects back. Though, it’s not like I’m dying to keep balancing mining accounts.”

“God, I wish you could just get your shit together Barry. Always the troublemaker, can’t control your emotions,” she said, trailing off.

He tensed at the barb, familiar arguments fitting into his brain like a glove. And in rapid order, his jealousy boiled over like stew. Sarah looked *good* – Walt, certainly a vampire, doted on her endlessly. It must contribute to her well-being, like they toasted their affection by drinking the blood of children. It made sense to Barrett that Sarah was the one with a partner. That he could barely make it through a day without pissing someone off. That he could barely keep his job. That he was stuck with a manifestation of his ego wandering up and down the sidewalk. Go fucking figure.

He shrugged it off, willing another conversation to take root.

After a moment, Sarah took the hint and said, “Well on the bright side, we’re home.” She looked up at the neon magenta sign and Barrett’s eyes followed – The Brood, the infamous bar of their twenties. Free drinks, puking in bathroom stalls, exploring every inch of the dance floor.

Barrett considered that past manifestation of the three of them. A different set of friends, *family*. He gagged at the word. How times had changed, the deep malaise he pulled himself from to be standing here tonight compared to the carefree nights of his early twenties.

“It’s only been what, a few months?” Barrett asked.

“Too long,” said Sarah.

The bouncer recognized Sarah and Walt. Or perhaps the pale giant with his basketball-sized hands contrasted nicely with his petite wife. Sarah asked, “Joe, you remember my brother Barry, right?”

“Sure, sure, gotta check ID anyways.” Barrett looked inside the club, transfixed by the sights and sounds, no longer muffled or splashed across the street.

They approached the long black bar taking up the length of the far wall. The bartender, Cliffy, lit up at the sight of them. This time, it wasn’t mere recognition – Cliffy was a longtime friend and confidant. Most of the free drinks (and nights spent puking in the bathroom) were thanks to them.

“Barrett! Sarah! Walt! Welcome back, come on, come on, give me hugs,” they said.

They tore around the bar, throwing colorful extensions over their shoulder and wiping teary eyeliner smudges before smothering them all in an embrace. Barrett caught his reflection along the wall, a slight smile tugging on the side of his face. Sarah and Walt lost themselves to the band, while Barrett stayed behind to catch up with Cliffy.

“So Barrett, how’s life? What’s this I hear about a stuffy job working for Lex Luthor?” Cliffy said.

“It’s a mining conglomerate, Cliffy. And I’d be careful if I was you,” Barrett said, eyes darting. He leaned across the bar. “They have eyes everywhere.”

“Honey, have you seen the number of eyes in here?” they said. “The same creepy regulars sit in that very seat, stroking their cocks at any pretty young thing that walks through the door.”

Barrett and Cliffy laughed. He said, “God I missed this place, never fucking changes does it?”

“It’s been long enough since I’ve seen you all in here. Last I remember, you and Sarah were in some deep shit. Seems like you managed to patch it up,” they said.

“You could say that. Still feels like I’m on eggshells around her though, like she and Walt are waiting on me to fuck something up. It’s like this week with my job...” he trailed off.

“What? Ol’ Lexy not treating you right?” Cliffy said, trademark sarcasm dripping.

“Very funny. Admittedly, the job fucking sucks. But no, I called my boss a dick in front of some clients, and he was not particularly happy. Hence, the celebration beer in my favorite haunt.” Barrett toasted the Christmas lights strung in the rafters, sloshing some over the edge onto the crusty bar.

“Ow ow! Look at Barry boy living life a little spicy!” They paused to wipe up the spilled beer. “You’re resilient though sweetie, I have faith that you’ll make it through just fine.”

“Thanks Cliffy. It really is great to see you.”

The night entombed Barrett, feeling lived in for the first time in an uncountable number of Fridays past. After a few rounds of darts, Barrett leaned back on his bar stool, nursing his *n*th beer. He spotted a beautiful woman across the bar, dancing in slow motion. Slow, yet, perfectly in rhythm. Her blonde hair, a rainbow, shimmered as it caught the reds and blues of the lights, her face draped in the shadows of the club, strobe lights catching angles, a witch with an unrelenting grasp on his attention.

A trance. Entranced; transcendent. Each strobe light flared with a soft click. Not so much the sound, but the warm feeling of it. Like a bird taking flight, a rush. A shutter, a pulse. A *flash*.

The bar, the game of darts, faded.

Lights and colors and sounds followed, just the two of them now.

Flash.

Barrett was lost, alone with the woman, the *siren*.

But they were only lost, no introductions, no escape. Sucked into the black hole in the center of the floor.

Flash.

gone. Gone. GONE.

Something removed Barrett's brain, his eyes; forced him to watch as he stared down the woman across the bar, blind. Absent.

Flash.

The music returned to full speed. Everyone stared now. Not a glance, no stolen look. Walt, Sarah, they all watched. Barrett's hand found a hole in the table; he caught himself spinning, felt both feet leave the ground. The cement floor closer, the dart board further, lights flashed blue and red. Barrett's vision went black.

Nothing was new.

Chapter 4

Barrett woke up to a nightmare, his ringtone, and screwed his eyes open.

“H-Hello?” he said.

“Barry, what the fuck?” Sarah's voice screeched on the other end of the line.

His senses came to – in a bed, his bed. Sarah's voice grappled with a splitting headache. He still wore his clothes from the night before, and his sheets were rolled tightly into a ball on the floor. Blinking, he tried to remove the buildup caked on his eyes. No one had cared to draw the curtains and light was pouring through, casting the room in late afternoon orange.

This was not going to be good.

“Oh hey Sarah, what's up?” he said.

“What's up? What's up? What the fuck is up with you, asshole?” she screamed.

This was definitely not good.

“Uh okay, rewind. What happened? Did I miss something?” Barrett asked.

“Oh my God! You don't even remember? What the fuck were you on, Barry?” Sarah said.

At this point, he considered for the first time what happened last night. Waiting in line at the bar for Sarah and Walt, bored out of his mind. Catching up with Cliffy, losing at darts. Nothing new. Then a woman dancing. He thought about the trance, locked in, like there was nothing else in the world. His skull hitting the ground. He probed the side of his head, discovering a large lump that when pushed, produced waves of nausea.

He certainly wasn't on anything, just a few drinks deep like the rest of them. How could Barrett explain to Sarah that the head rush at the bar was an intoxicating rush of what? Hormones? A spell? How fucking embarrassing.

“I really don't know Sarah, last night's all kinds of fucked up. The last thing I remember is seeing that blonde at the bar, next thing I knew my head hit the ground and I blacked out,” he said.

“A blonde? I'm sorry, what the fuck?”

“I mean yeah dude, I think she was blonde?”

“I don't give a fuck if her hair was blue, *dude*, you don't remember anything else? Like I don't know, with me and Walt?”

“Uh, no. Just the cold, wet floor of the bar.”

“We get it Barry, you passed out because of whatever the fuck. Meanwhile, Walt and I picked your sorry ass up off the ground, and walked you to the curb. After you came to, you were like a completely different person. You don't remember any of this?”

“A different person? No no, I have no recollection of this.” Barrett braced himself.

“You stood up and shoved Walt, *Walter*, straight onto his ass. He was so taken aback that he stood up and raised his hands, but you swung on him. Barry you fucking broke his nose, you hit him so hard. You started laughing like some kind of maniac and took off down the street. We spent the night in the ER, dealing with all of that bullshit. And I haven't heard from you until right now, because I just fucking called you.”

Fuck.

“Oh my God, Sarah I am so sorry. I had no idea, I just woke up and my last memory was passing out, honest. That is so unlike me, I didn't mean—”

“Save it, Barry. This is how you treat us after not seeing you for months? Fucking months? And all you can remember is some dumb blonde at the bar? Get fucked.”

“Sarah, I'm sorry, I—I don't know. Can I make it up to—”

The line clicked. He tried to call back, and on the first ring, “The number you are trying to reach is temporarily unavailable. Please try again later.”

He unleashed a primal “Fuck!” that scared a far off resident of the apartment building, and launched the phone across the room. It landed on a pile of clothes with an unsatisfying thump. He pushed his palms deep into his eyes, head throbbing, throat dry. Fuck everything.

Like a fever dream – history, rhyming, catching up to him. Months, years before, just like last night apparently. He always fucked something up, never able to get it right. Never able to live up to some unsaid expectation.

Barrett hobbled over to his phone and checked for any remnant of how, or when, he made it home after the assault. No messages, no phone calls – glad to see that people cared for his well-being. His credit card told the same story – all signs pointed to the fact that he ran the seven blocks home from The Brood, which caught him off guard.

Sarah and Walt obviously didn't care to follow him. There was the issue of Walt's broken nose. *Oh shit, Walt's broken nose* – Barrett walked into his small excuse for a bathroom, situated in the far corner of the shitty studio apartment. He took a deep, shuddering breath and flipped on the lights. Barrett expected to see his white t-shirt ripped, covered in dried blood, with swollen knuckles to match.

But, the person looking back at him was a normal and reasonable Barrett, with a wrinkly t-shirt and tired eyes and no visible signs of a fight. Sure, his fingernails were dirty and he looked terrible, but he expected to look a hell of a lot worse. Barrett stared, meeting his own eyes. He placed his palms on the mirror and leaned in, inches away from his double on the other side.

What the fuck happened last night? He was distraught at the thought of losing Sarah and Walt again, and fucking furious with himself that this random woman was somehow still taking up space in his thoughts. He wanted right then to make everything right, to make it up to people he could never please, to fucking forget about last night and repent.

Barrett looked down and saw a spoon next to the sink. Not a normal spoon, a grapefruit spoon. Why the fuck did he have a grapefruit spoon? He picked it up, and ran his thumb along the serrated edge – exciting, sharp.

He met his own eyes again, this time filled with determination. He lifted the spoon first to his left eye, and pushed, hard, against the bridge of his nose. The eye made a satisfying slurp as it accepted the spoon behind it. His vision cut in two, and he let out an excruciating sigh. Barrett drank the pain, relishing the rush of endorphins trying to protect his body from itself. He sucked a breath in between his teeth, and *pop*. The eye landed with a wet thud on the counter, and he watched a stream of blood *drip, drip, drip* from his eye into the sink.

His t-shirt was now stained shades of red and pink. Dirty, finally, matching the damage he had caused. His hands, covered in his own blood. His one remaining eye, frantically searching for a way out, swiveled around to find an escape. Barrett offered it one.

He raised the spoon to his right eye, and again sunk it deep into the socket. This time, he pried it out, like digging a root out from a tree. The eye came loose all at once, and hit the mirror with a splat. He imagined it slowly rolling down, mixed with blood and skin and fear. He allowed himself to breathe, deeply, and took in the smell of iron and gore around him. His head hung over the sink, for seconds, minutes, until the soft, *drip, drip, drip* was finished.

His bed invited him, welcomed him, with its warm embrace. Barrett dug himself deep beneath its covers, trying to hide from his fear and his mistakes. He tried to make this right. If only they could see that. If only he could see that. Barrett realized with a shudder that he could no longer cry, could no longer weep for the pain he had caused. He joined the darkness, and fell asleep with a soft moan, a puddle of anguish and longing and forgiveness.