

The Witness

1 – 1: A Very Bad Man

Children are naïve. They look up to authority figures in their life for protection and guidance. I find it sickening to see the way that some adults take advantage of such a vulnerable population. Every child deserves a loving home, though only a surprising few are lucky enough to receive one. Sometimes, certain groups of children, due to neurological or societal differences, find themselves even more vulnerable to abuse. After all, if a victim cannot speak for themselves or if they have no one around who cares enough to listen, the abuser suffers little chance of being held responsible for their crime. People say, “it takes a village to raise a child.” This may be true, but I believe that even a single competent caretaker could make a difference. My name is Owen Christophers. I was born in Ventura, California in 1996. I am autistic and this is my story.

Most of what I remember from the earliest years of my life remain attached to the visage of adults who surrounded me. My earliest memory is of lying on my parents’ bed while my mother cleaned the room. She listened to Paul Simon and sang as she neurotically tidied anything deemed out of place. When she finished, she lay down on the bed next to me and fell asleep. I was playing with a toy while she slept, which I dropped and watched as it rolled off the edge to the floor below. I went crawling after it only to fall off as well. My toy had rolled under the bed, so I crawled underneath to retrieve it. My mother, who must have heard me fall, woke up and turned to her side. My head happened to be perfectly under the edge of the bed frame as she did this. Her weight bent the bedframe just enough to pin my head to the floor. She reached over, tugging on my foot, trying to pull me back up, but I would not budge. She thought I was fighting against her, when in reality I was trapped under the weight of her body. Sometimes to this day, I feel like a part of me is still back there, trapped underneath the pressure I inherited from her.

There are some pleasant memories intertwined with the unpleasant. They coexist within me, hand in hand with each other. I remember my mother teaching me to make a Sock Snow Man. You put a sock over an empty water bottle and use a hot glue gun to attach googly eyes and pipe cleaners. I remember both of my parents holding onto my arms and lifting me off the ground, swinging me between them as we walked into the grocery store. I also remember getting in trouble a few times. Once, while my mother was cleaning the bathroom, I tried to help by picking up the bathmat, mimicking her actions as well as my toddler mind could comprehend. However, she didn't like that I was touching something so dirty, so she began yelling at me. Another time I was pretending to be a Jedi by waving around a candlestick like a lightsaber. I broke the candlestick and lied about it. She didn't like that either and sent me into a timeout.

Though none of these memories were particularly impactful, it would be amiss of me if I did not mention that my mother was quite mentally unwell. She grew up with an abusive and narcissistic mother of her own. She never told me much detail about what actually went on, but I could tell it wasn't anything good. What I do know is that shortly after she began dating my father, she tried to kill herself. She swallowed a bottle's worth of pills. My father broke into her apartment and saved her life. They got married soon after that due to her becoming pregnant. The baby did not survive through childbirth, however, and I was their second attempt at starting a family.

In these early years, I actually have more memories of my father than I do of my mother. I remember that, after church on Sundays, he would make me microwaved taquitos. I liked microwaved taquitos, especially when I was allowed to put cheese and garlic salt on top. It was a delicacy compared to my mother's cooking.

I remember a game my father and I used to play in the car. He would pretend we were on a spaceship, and I was the captain. He would let me choose the direction he was going to drive, even if it delayed arrival at our destination. “May I have permission to turn left, captain?” he would ask. It was cute. I remember Paul McCartney, Electric Light Orchestra, and Pink Floyd playing in the background while we enjoyed our game. I also remember him getting upset when I couldn’t count out 100 pennies for a homework assignment or when I had difficulty finding something he was pointing at. “It’s right there!” he would yell, refusing to get up off the couch and grab the object himself. “Just follow my finger and you can’t miss it!”

“I’m sorry,” I cried, trying my best to trace his finger toward the object he pointed at. He refused to tell me what object I was searching for, instead believing that I should be able to easily figure it out for myself. “Is it the TV remote?” I would ask, grabbing it to hand to him.

“No!” he would shout, continuing to point straight ahead. “That! I want that!” I never could understand why these things frustrated him so much.

Both my mother and father dealt with depression. My mother would get more of your classic depression, a symptom of her having Bipolar Disorder. She would hide away a lot when the feelings rose up. I don’t think she wanted to bother anyone with them. My father had more of a shame-oriented depression, likely tied to the traumas he experienced as a child. There was this episode of *The Twilight Zone* he watched when he was a kid. In the episode there was a child that would say, “You’re a bad man, a very bad man. Off to the cornfield with you.”¹ Something about that episode stuck with my father. I often remember him saying to himself, “I’m a bad man, a very bad man.” He would mutter this phrase under his breath whenever he did something he was not proud of.

I spent much more time with both my parents in the second half of my childhood. During the first half they both worked, so they would drop me off at my grandmother's house during the day. (My dad's mom.) Due to memory issues, she was terrible at watching me, frequently forgetting my presence. One time we were playing hide and seek. I hid in a closet. I waited a very long time. Eventually I got hungry, but I didn't want to lose the game by coming out. I started eating some newspaper I found in the back of the closet. It was quite old, dusty, and tasted unpleasant. I realized the newspaper was probably not very good to eat, so I left the closet to ask my grandmother for some food. When she saw me, she exclaimed "Oh! You scared me! I forgot you were here!" That made me feel sad. I felt invisible.

Later, probably some other day, I was eating at the dining table. She never served me food I liked. My choice was usually between a bowl of cottage cheese and half a grapefruit or undercooked scrambled eggs with a dry piece of toast. The undercooked eggs had the same exact texture and consistency as the cottage cheese: both runny and chunky at the same time. To this day, I hate that texture. I would only ever eat enough to make her happy. Once she forgot about my existence a few hours later, I would climb up the cupboard and grab out stale cereal.

Anyway, on this particular day, I was doing my best to swallow the runny mixture of whites and yolks when my grandmother sat down next to me and started telling me a story. "You know, when I was your age, I lived on a farm," she began. She placed her hand on my thigh and began rubbing up and down in a consistent motion. "I had a cousin that would come to visit. He was my age. We had a lot of fun together, climbing up onto the second story of the barn and jumping into the hay. When we got older, we would sneak into the barn and fool around. Do you know what sex is?"

“No,” I answered. I was only 3 or 4. I only knew it was something that men and women did together when naked. A sick feeling rose in my stomach which, at the time, I attributed to my undercooked eggs. I wasn’t enjoying the story she was telling me, and I wished she would take her hand off my leg.

“Well, we would touch and kiss each other,” she continued. “But then one day his father found us, and he didn’t like what he saw. He sent me back to the house and asked my cousin to stay behind. He beat my cousin with his belt. I remember hearing him cry out. I never saw him again after that day. That’s not very nice, huh?”

She also told me stories of her mother, my great grandmother. I never met her, but I heard they didn’t get along very well. My great grandmother was a sex worker when my grandmother was still a child. She told me that men would come over and that she would be told to wait in her room while her mom was working. She told me how she could hear them working through the walls. Other times her mom would drive out to the men’s house, dragging her along. She would be asked to wait in the car while her mother went inside.

I never understood why my grandmother told me these stories.

My grandmother’s house is where I remember spending most of my time before starting school. She had a dog named Valentine, who I would cuddle with underneath the table where we ate. Valentine gave me fleas, but I didn’t mind. I liked Valentine. Unfortunately, the dog died when I was still a toddler.

My grandmother’s backyard was expansive. There were fig trees, an apple tree, and a yuca tree. They were all great for climbing. The house itself was atop a small hill covered in ivy. Down at the bottom of the hill was a wall of cactus. Between the hill and the house was the lawn I spent most of my time playing on. There was a cement seating area and, around a corner, a

small brick planter box that was perfect for sitting on as it was out of view of anyone inside the house. I didn't like being watched by people. It gave me a creepy feeling.

There was a grapevine along one of the walls. I would wander in circles, snacking on the fruit, and thinking to myself. The grapes had a funny taste to them. Things would get a bit strange feeling when I ate them, like everything around me was slightly spinning. Later, I learned that funny taste meant they were fermented.

I laid down on the grass, slightly intoxicated, and my mind recalled some show I had seen on the TV where somebody used the phrase "best day ever." This made me wonder to myself, "Do I have a best day ever? Maybe today is my best day ever. I do feel pretty good right now. But, if today is my best day ever, does that mean no day will ever be as good as this? If I'm too happy, does that mean I won't ever be this happy again?" The thought sent chills down my spine. "There's still a lot of days I have to get through." The world was still spinning, but it started to feel different. Before, the spinning felt euphoric and peaceful. Now, it felt rapid, and it made my heart race. To calm myself down, I went back inside to watch some Batman cartoons.

Batman was my first special interest. My parents told me that I had been captivated by Batman since the very first time I saw him on TV. Even before I could talk, they said I was glued to the screen whenever Batman came on. I had a stuffed Batman doll that I would hold out in front of my face whenever strangers tried to look into my stroller. I didn't like it when people would look at me or touch me. I especially hated it when they tried to kiss me. It felt painful in a way I didn't have words to describe. It made me angry. I needed a protector. The Dark Knight was my protector.

I don't think my mother and my grandmother liked each other very much. There were some strange occurrences where it seemed they tried to pry for my attention. I knew that I

somehow validated something within them, but I never was quite sure what it was. One time, my grandmother convinced me to spend the night at her place. She talked about how we would make cookies, how I could watch whatever I wanted, and that she would read to me before bed. It sounded nice. She told me to ask my mother if I could stay the night when she came to pick me up. So, I did. My mother seemed apprehensive. She was reluctant to let me stay, but she eventually gave in. We didn't end up making cookies. My grandmother didn't read to me. She forgot I was there. I found her asleep in her bed with her eyes open. I crawled into bed and lay next to her. I felt scared and alone. I wished I had never asked to stay.

Sometimes my family would take me to Chuck E. Cheese. Usually, it would just be my grandmother or father that would take me. Once, however, everyone went together. When we arrived, I went off on my own and played. I liked going up into the tubes. There was always one dead end tube where you could sit and look out at everyone below you. It was nice and quiet there. It was where I spent most of my time.

Eventually, my family found me and told me it was time to go. There, as soon as we got out of the building, my mother said, "Owen, I have a surprise for you." She held out a toy truck she had won from the prize counter.

Immediately, my grandmother butted in, "I have a surprise as well!" From behind her back, she pulled out a stuffed toy dog.

"Thanks" I replied to both of them, not even getting the chance to hold either toy yet. "Which one do you like better?" my grandmother asked. Both of the women looked at me expectantly. I felt strange, but I wasn't sure why. This was a logical choice to me. I didn't realize the feelings they had invested into this moment.

“The dog,” I replied. I wasn’t a fan of trucks. They were too loud. I liked dogs, though. Hearing my answer, my grandmother looked up at my mother with a triumphant smile as a look of devastation washed over the latter’s face. My mother burst out in tears and walked away. My father chastised me, explaining that what I said was mean and hurt my mother’s feelings. I hadn’t meant to hurt her, and I felt ashamed of the pain that I had caused. Apparently, I was supposed to say, “I like them both.” I made a mental note to keep that in mind for next time.

There was one other important family member during this period of my life. Sometimes, when my grandmother was taking care of me, my grandfather (my dad’s dad) would come to visit. They were divorced and later I learned that was because my grandfather was gay. I was too young to understand what that meant at the time.

I had assumed all elderly would be forgetful, but my grandfather was much more alert than my grandmother was. He always seemed to know where I had gone, even when I would wander away from him. Sometimes, when I was napping, I would wake up to find him or my grandmother watching me. Sometimes, he would touch me. I didn’t understand what was happening. Obviously though, I didn’t like it much, because I began to feel afraid whenever he visited.

Sometimes he would bring me presents. Once he brought me a harmonica, which he said had been his for a long time. He asked me to blow it in front of him. I didn’t like it. It tasted like his skin. Why did I know what his skin tasted like? Why did it make me feel nauseas? “Thank you,” I said.

November came around and with it Thanksgiving. I was playing make-believe by myself in the front yard, pretending I was a superhero, when my grandfather’s car came speeding down the road. I watched as he haphazardly parked then tumbled out of the front seat. I began to feel

scared, but not the type of fear I had when I saw a spider or something frightening on the TV. No, this was a panic. I ran through the house to the backyard and down the hill where no one could find me. I sat down, hidden behind the wall of cactus and watched the sun set. I felt the autumn breeze against my skin. I began to calm down. Here, alone, I could allow myself to feel safe.

My grandfather entered the house. My father was busy at work and was not present, so my grandfather said hello to my mom and grandma, then came to find me. He wasted no time. I saw as he approached from the other side of the cactus wall that I had taken shelter behind. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were avoiding me,” he said, feigning offense. “What are you doing back here?”

“I like this spot,” I replied. He came and sat down next to me. I felt my heart race again. The sun set no longer looked beautiful to me. The wind felt harsh and biting. He put his arm around me.

“Your grandmother told me she saw you run down this way,” he stated.

“Oh.”

“Do you think I could have a kiss hello?”

“O-okay,” I agreed hesitantly, afraid of getting in trouble for refusing. He bent over and kissed me on the lips. I don’t remember any other words being spoken. I just remember the feeling of his lips against mine. I remember the taste, both sour and stale with a hint of that fermented smell the grapes gave off. He reached down and began to unzip my pants. I backed away, trying to get some space between us. I think he told me that I was being rude, that he was just trying to say hello. I didn’t make it very far, because now my back was pressed up against the cactus with needles digging into my skin. He kissed me again. My eyes opened, looking out at the sunset. I hated that sunset. And then, my memory went blank.

The next thing I remember was hearing my mother call out that dinner was ready. “We better go eat,” he said. “Hurry up, you don’t want to worry your mother.” He left me there behind the cactus. I pulled my clothes back up and ran inside, sneaking past everyone I could, heading straight for the bathroom. I turned on the sink and tried to wash myself off. I tried to wash the taste of man out of my mouth. I even tried using soap. I had seen people’s mouths washed out with soap on TV. It didn’t work. Now my mouth tasted like him and soap. There was a knock on the door. “Owen! Hurry up! Everyone’s waiting!”

I came out and sat at the table. My grandfather smiled at me, knowingly. We all bent our heads to pray. Then, when the prayer was finished, we all had to say something we were grateful for. I don’t remember what I said, though I do remember picking at my food. “What’s wrong?” my mom asked. “You’re barely eating.”

“I feel sick,” I replied.

“I spent all day making this food and you’re not going to eat any?” Apparently, I had offended her.

“My tummy feels icky,” I said again. “Can I go to my room?”

“No,” she replied, “I want you to stay where I can see you. You can lay down on the couch though.”

So, I walked over to the couch, lay down, buried my head in the cushions, and did my best not to vomit. I pushed the memory of my grandfather to the back of my mind, refusing to acknowledge it. After all, it didn’t seem as if something like this should matter. The sickness would pass in time, just like it had before. It was better not to think about such things.

The Warrior

1 – Fern: Hell

My name is Fern. Everything I write here is true to the best of my memory.

The land I grew up in was grey and dim. The sun rarely appeared, with thick clouds covering the sky instead, which did little to propagate the vegetation. Crops struggled to grow, and, in their place, thick vines sprouted up in populated areas. These vines were nearly impossible to get rid of. Every time someone chopped them down, they would grow back, stronger and more aggressive than before. They latched onto the stones that people built their homes with, ripping them apart over time. This meant that any architecture from the past was completely destroyed, existing now only as piles of debris.

The Tower was the only stone structure that didn't seem to be affected by the vines. It rose up out of the earth and was tall enough that it could be seen from any point in the land. No one was sure exactly what went on in The Tower. Most people didn't talk much about it, other than to use it as a reference point when giving directions. At night, the top of The Tower would glow. This made it visible at all times of the day.

Because people could no longer build with stone, they were forced to rely on wood and cloth. There were two types of people common in this land: the Settlers and the Nomads. Colloquially, the people referred to this land as Hell. Its true name had been forgotten long ago.

The Nomads roamed the countryside, seemingly in search of something, though they would not share any information about what it may be. They were hunters and gatherers who took shelter wherever they could find it. They mostly kept to themselves, and even when one came around, they would be careful not to reveal their faces, instead wearing wooden masks uniquely decorated to suit the individual. They carried wariness with them but had an air of

freedom that I envied. Even though I was raised by Settlers, I never felt comfortable in such a stagnant lifestyle and part of me longed to be with The Nomads.

There was a clear divide between the different generations of Settlers. As the years passed and children grew into adults, they seemed to lose some important piece of themselves: a spark, I thought, or a light. I wasn't sure exactly what it was that caused the adults to change so rapidly upon coming of age, but it was noticeable and drastic. Maybe it was something in the air, the same particles that blocked out the sun. Maybe it was something from the vines, the same force that prevented us from making any consistent progress on creating stable homes. Whatever it was, it didn't seem natural.

The best of the youth, those of us who were born with an intrinsic kindness in our hearts, would grow to find every bit of life sucked out of them, leaving only empty shells of their former selves. They became vegetables, barely sentient. Some were lucky enough to have children take care of them, feed them and bathe them. But even the lucky ones would fade away in time, because the children that cared for them grew up to become vegetables as well. It was a perpetual sickness.

Other youths were either born with an inherent malice or had it beat into them over time. As they grew, they did not lose their will but instead found identity in their anger and hatred. Over generations, families born from these spiteful individuals multiplied. These were the majority of the settlers. I wasn't sure why they chose to have children when it was so clear they lacked the ability to love. Maybe it was all just self-preservation, a fear of death, or worse, meaninglessness. I was born into one of these families.

When I was young, my parents and I lived on a small patch of land in a wooden shack west of The Tower. The shack would often grow mold or fall apart when the wind blew. It was a

struggle to keep maintained. It felt pointless, but the adults prioritized this, sometimes even instead of finding food. I spent the first few years of my childhood here. My family were empty on their best days, cruel on their worst. I had no fondness for them. I barely even remember them now. Sometimes I question whether or not they actually existed. Truthfully, I didn't feel much at all during this time. The small bits of joy I had came from playing make-believe in the forest. I was lonely. That is, until I met Cancer.

Our homes, Cancer and I, were the closest territories to each other. Though, to avoid a land dispute between our families, they were still a decent hike away. We first met in the forest that bordered both our properties. "Hey there!" I called out, seeing a boy playing near a creak. This was the first time I had ever met another boy my age. Immediately, I felt excited and ran up to him. Cancer jolted his face in my direction, a look of fear overtaking his peaceful expression. "I'm sorry," I slowed my approach upon seeing his reaction. "I didn't mean to scare you. I promise that I'm nice." I smiled widely and scratched my head, trying to show him that I was no threat. "I've never seen you around here before. What's your name?"

"Cancer," he replied. I understood why he was scared. If his family were anything like mine, they gave him plenty of reason to fear others. He looked like he was a year or two younger than me and his skin a shade lighter, almost ghostly.

"That's a funny name," I stated. "Cancer like the crab or like the disease?"

"Like the crab," the boy answered. His face lit up as I asked my question. "My sister says it fits me. I'm surprised you know about stuff like that."

"Yeah, I read about it in some old mythology book," I said. "I get bored sometimes and I'll read anything I can get my hands on."

"What's your name?" Cancer asked me in return.

“Fern,” I replied with a smile.

“I like ferns!” the boy exclaimed. “They’re one of my favorite plants. Did you know there’s a legend that ferns produce magical seeds on the summer solstice. That’s the same day as my birthday!”

“I didn’t know that,” I said, absorbing this new information. “That’s pretty cool.”

Wanting to know more about this stranger, I asked, “Where did you come from?”

Though still apprehensive to a degree, he seemed just as interested in me as I was in him, and he did not back away from me as I approached. “Over there,” he said, holding out a finger pointed toward his home.

“Oh, so you’re from that family?” I asked. “I didn’t realize they had a kid. It’s nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” he replied merely out of courtesy. Even though we barely knew each other, it felt good to be acknowledged. It was almost as if this were the moment I became real.

“I come out here to play,” I said. “Would you like to play with me?”

“I don’t know what you’re playing.”

“That doesn’t matter,” I shrugged. “It’s just nice to have some company. What would you like to play?”

“I like hide and go seek,” he said. “Mara and I used to play together before she went away.” The sadness he felt at recalling these memories was apparent.

“Is Mara your sister?” I asked, piecing the puzzle together.

“Mm-hmm,” the boy nodded, still showing his obvious sadness.

“I don’t know that game,” I added. “Actually, I don’t know many games that involve more than one person. I’ve never had anyone else to play with before. Will you teach me?”

He liked this. He smiled and I swear I could see a sparkle in his eyes. That was the moment I knew he would be my best friend.

Time passed and we grew closer, becoming comfortable together. He was always shy; it was just his nature. But his apprehension of me faded quickly. The two of us played together every day. He would bring cards that his sister and him had made. They were cut from strips of paper and had hand drawn symbols on them. There were so many different games he taught me with those cards. He was very good at using his mind and would usually win, but that never bothered me. I was happy just to have a chance to talk. I learned what he liked and disliked. He loved animals, dogs specifically, and hated cottage cheese.

He told me more about Mara, a girl with fiery hair. When he had mentioned her before, I had assumed she had grown of age and lost her light, but that’s not what happened. One day she had just disappeared entirely. No one was sure where she had gone. This brought Cancer much sadness. “I’ll never leave you like that,” I promised him. “No matter what, I’ll fight to stay by your side.” Hearing this, Cancer would sway gently back and forth. He didn’t express himself quite the same as other people. He disliked eye contact, and wasn’t a fan of touch, but I could tell that this swaying meant he felt happy.

For however intelligent Cancer was, he wasn’t used to using his imagination. So, I taught him to play make-believe. We would pretend to be warriors, fighting new battles every day. We climbed trees to find the best sticks, the ones that looked the most like swords. He didn’t like it when we pretended to fight each other, so instead the trees and rocks would be our enemies. We

would make up stories to go along with the fighting and give ourselves heroic aliases. We felt invincible.

We would always meet in the forest, and between our visits to each other I spent all my free time coming up with new adventures for us to share. The sillier the adventure, the more he would laugh. The more he laughed, the more sense of purpose I found in myself. It was always just the two of us. The last thing we would do before going home was sit and watch the sunset together. This seemed to go on forever. Time feels like it stretches into eternity when you are a child. In reality, it was only a couple short years that we were able to spend like this before everything changed.

One day, when we were watching the sunset, his grandfather came searching for him. “Cancer! There you are! Your grandmother told me she saw you running in this direction. What are you doing out here? Don’t you know how dangerous it is?” I didn’t like the way this old man was scolding my friend. I watched as Cancer’s demeanor changed. I could tell he was afraid. He grew silent.

“It’s okay!” I spoke up in Cancer’s defense. “There’s nothing to worry about! We play out here all the time. Besides, I’d keep Cancer safe if anything were to happen!”

The grandfather looked at me with something fierce in his eyes. “Where in Hell did you come from?” he asked.

“I’m Fern. I live up the road. My family are your closest neighbors.”

“No, but nobody...” For a moment he acted confused. “Never mind. I don’t give a shit who you are.”

“Then why’d you ask?” I wondered to myself. I knew it wasn’t wise to ask this aloud.

“I don’t want you playing with *my* boy,” he continued. The old man put an emphasis on the word “*my*.”

“But we’re friends,” I protested. “I don’t understand what’s wrong. Why can’t we play together?”

“How dare you talk back to your elder!” The old man began striding toward me. His fists clenched.

Cancer ran up to the old man and grabbed his hand. “It’s okay, Grandpa. It’s getting late, anyway. Let’s just go home.”

The old man looked down at his grandchild and then back up toward me. “You’re lucky I don’t report you for how much of a troublemaker you are, luring *my* boy out here,” again, putting the emphasis on the word “*my*.” “You’re going to get him hurt. We can’t have that. He’s too valuable.”

He looked down at Cancer again and huffed. He pulled on Cancer’s hand, walking away and dragging my friend along with him. Cancer looked back at me and waved. I waved in return. Neither of us smiled. In my mind, I prayed I would see him again. I knew something was not right, but I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. I didn’t know what I *could* do. I froze. I just wanted to know that my friend would be safe.

When the next day came around, Cancer didn’t show up. I waited all day in our usual spot. I felt worried, but I tried my best to calm my nerves and tell myself that everything was okay. After all, there were plenty of reasons he might not show up. Maybe his grandfather had been keeping a closer eye on him. Maybe his family took him to the market. Maybe he felt under the weather. “There’s no reason to worry,” I told myself, “He’ll show up tomorrow.”

He didn't show up the next day either, or the day after that. On that third day, I could not contain my anxiety any longer. I knew something was wrong. I decided to go check on him. I walked out to his family's house. It was similar to mine, a small shack made of wood and nails. I knocked on the door. "Go away!" I heard a voice say from within. I knocked again. "What in Hell do you want?" the voice asked.

"I'm looking for Cancer," I shouted through the closed door. "I haven't seen him for a few days. I'm worried about him."

The old man came to the door and peered outside to see me. "Oh. It's you." He spoke in a scornful voice. "He's not here. Go away." He began to close the door, but I put my foot in the entryway so I could continue talking to him. He continued trying to shut me out, slamming the door forcefully despite me blocking his attempts. It felt like he was crushing my foot. I stifled a grimace from my face.

"Where is he?" I asked in a demanding way. "I just want to know if he's okay."

"That's not any of your business, is it?" He continued attempting to crush my foot, not caring that he was hurting me. "Move your foot, boy, unless you want to lose it." I pushed my hand against the door, resisting him as best as I could.

"I asked you where he is. I'm not leaving until you tell me."

He grunted and mumbled something to himself under his breath, then continued to say, "Fine. It's not like telling you matters anyway. He's gone. He's not coming back."

This was the most anger I had yet felt in my short existence, and it burst forth from within me. "Gone *where*?" I asked in a condescending tone.

"Jeez, kid," the old man whined. "What's your problem?"

“Where did he go!?” I shouted

“I sold him, alright? Calm down, goddammit!”

For a moment my body froze in shock. The old man used this opportunity to push me out of his doorway and abruptly shut himself inside. I fell to the ground.

“You sold him?” I got no reply. “How could you do that? He was your family!”

“All he was, was a nuisance. An extra mouth to feed.”

“He was my friend!”

“I don’t give a damn who he was to you! Now, you need to leave my property, or you’ll be in for a world of hurt!”

“Who did you sell him to!?”

No reply.

“Tell me!”

Once again, no reply. Then, the door swung wide open. The old man carried an axe, which he raised threateningly at me.

“Fine,” I resigned. “I’ll figure it out by myself.”