“You can get in the front,” the man says, “since you’re the first person. Pretty hefty passenger list today- might be more comfortable up here.”

“With me,” he does not add, but it’s there, somewhere between the dull glimmer of his too-blue eyes and the odd pinkness of his lips. I’m not looking for it, though, so I dump my bags in the back and climb in next to him.

I’ve barely got my door closed before he takes off, zooming out of the Quality Inn loading driveway, almost running over a rogue luggage cart as he does; but even as the van hangs a sharp right out of the parking lot, I manage a glimpse back at the hotel awning, a cursory goodbye to what has been my home for the past two nights- two nights in the middle of what has become a year of temporary two-night hotel-homes. The awning looks like that of every other Quality Inn in every other city, except that now it is covered in the heavy gray-blue of dawn and so somehow the awning looks even bigger and sadder and faker, like a dream. “Don’t forget to buckle up,” the man says as he bounds out onto the main road.

I’ve done this before and my routine is stone, and this is usually when the earbuds come out. But he sped away so fast I had no time for step one, so I haven’t been able to slip on my SeaBands; I don’t relish two hours of nausea, so I pull my purse onto my lap and dig around inside, looking for the little gray bands that may or may not actually help with my carsickness. By now I have already lost valuable time and he seizes on my naked-eared vulnerability and asks, “So, what brings you to Colorado?”

I have failed at Rule Number One of airport vans, “avoid conversation,” but the damage is done and the SeaBands still aren’t found and the question is harmless enough, and I’ve been told there’s a lot of traffic in Colorado and I have a vested interest in keeping this ride relatively pleasant, so I answer, “Just work.”

“What kind of work?”

I find the SeaBands behind a travel-sized bottle of mouth wash and slip them on my wrists. I stick my hand back into my purse and quickly find my earbuds; my fingers curl around them with longing.

“Oh, uh....it’s...weird,” I tell him, pulling out my earbuds, hoping he will take the hint and let me slip into a comfortable dissociative state in peace.

“I like weird!” He says way too eagerly. “Tell me all about it.”

And, it’s happening.

“Ok...” I let out an uncomfortable laugh, “Well, ok, I’m a...convention model? It’s like, those girls who wear evening gowns and point at spinning cars?”

“Woooahhhhh, so you’re a moooodeeeeelllll.” The man turns to me and wiggles his eyebrows- but his eyebrows are so blonde they’re barely there, so it mostly just looks like his forehead is cycling through alternating deformities, crinkling in and out of various grotesque skin formations.

“It’s nothing fancy,” I say back. The nausea is hitting, but I’m not so sure it’s from carsickness.

“Well ya sure look like a model,” he says loudly, with no self-consciousness.

I say nothing.

"Very pretty. Beautiful, even.”

He’s looking at me again, and I don’t want to acknowledge him but I do want him to look back at the road, so I turn and give him a tight-lipped smile. He stares for one second more, then mercifully turns back to stare ahead.

“Hey ya know,” his nothing-eyebrows settle back into place, but his face seems permanently changed somehow, like the deformity is still there somewhere under the skin, and I wish I wasn’t looking at his face so closely, “I’m no model, but I dabble in the performing arts, if you know what I mean.”

He seems to expect something from me so I give him another dismissive smile. I plug my earbuds into my phone, with a hope I already know is futile.

“Well? Do you?”

He’s looking again.

“....Do I what?” I ask.

“Know what I mean?”

Before I can say anything, he throws his head back and lets out a laugh, only it sounds more like a horse braying, or like a woman crying. The laugh seems to last forever and it seems to come from inside of me even as I see it coming out of his wide-open mouth, and at some point I swear I see his milky blue eyes flash orange but it is dawn and I’m sleep-deprived after two nights on a lumpy Quality Inn mattress and I know I must be imagining things, and if only I could disappear into my Spotify playlists, I wouldn’t have to worry about what kinds of things I may or may not be hallucinating but I don’t want to be rude and he’s already got me in the front seat and he’s already got me talking and I think I’m probably past the point of no return, at least until we pick up the next passenger. “A hefty passenger list,” he said. Thank God, I think.

Finally he stops laughing and says, “I’m a musician, is what I mean. I’m a trumpet player. I write my own songs and everything. Do you wanna hear some?”

My head tells me to stop being polite, to stop being so nice, to dig myself out of his trap, but my social training takes over and my mouth says, “Um, sure.”

I guess I’m expecting him to play something in the CD player or plug his phone into the MP3 hook up, but I’m certainly not expecting him to pull an actual trumpet out from somewhere under his seat, swerving a bit as he does.

“Ope, sorry bout that,” he says as he places the instrument on his lap to steady the steering wheel. “Here she is, my baby girl.” He pets the trumpet like it’s a cat, and then brings it to his mouth.

“Um, isn’t it dangerous to do that while you drive?” I glance at the heavy highway traffic with unease but he says, “Oh no, I do this all the time. It’s sweet of you to worry, though,” and he takes his free hand off the steering wheel so he can reach over and pat me twice on the knee.

It’s inappropriate and I’m uncomfortable and I should say something but it’s come and gone so fast and we have at least another hour and a half to go before we get to the Denver airport, so I say nothing and resolve instead to leave a bad Yelp review once I get out of here.

“Buckle up,” he chuckles at his own joke, “This song’s a doozy. Totally evocative. I call it ‘Horses at Midnight.’"

An image appears in my head, an image which must be a memory but which I don’t really remember registering, an image of the beige wall at the Quality Inn and a print in an orange frame above the bed. The print is of a nondescript countryside, the usual bland type of art that decorates hotel rooms; but now I remember something else in the picture, a horse in the far background, not grazing peacefully but standing on its hind legs, a tiny horse that also seems too big for the scale of the painting. In the memory the window shades are still open a crack and outside is thick darkness- a horse at midnight, I think.

The image disappears at the sound of a sharp note blasting from the man’s trumpet. The “song” is so loud it’s almost deafening, but also it sounds muffled, the way the hotel awning looked muffled in the early morning light. It sounds like what a little boy would play the first time he ever picked up a trumpet but it also somehow sounds like horses at midnight, horses with something terrible awaiting them, horses with no shoes, horses with blood in their manes. The melody is hyper simplistic and also there is no melody. It’s just sounds. It’s just shouts. My ears are maybe bleeding. The horses are definitely bleeding.

I guess I fall asleep because the next thing I know the van is silent and the trumpet is gone and we’re pulling up to an apartment building and the clock says 6:30 and before it said 5:30.

“Good morning, Sleepy Head!” He puts the car in park with a dramatic flourish. “Sorry for the stop, gotta pick up our next passenger!”

I’m so relieved I don’t have time to notice that it somehow took us 90 minutes to travel seven miles.

He hurls his bulk out of the van and I notice how tall he is. He leans back down across the driver’s seat and suddenly asks, “hey, are you a feminist?” But before I can say “yes,” he slams the door shut and approaches the complex’s front stairs.

I assume he’s getting out to meet the next passenger, but instead he walks up two steps and begins an elaborate stretching routine, which includes some classic toe-touches and shoulder-openers, but which also includes some sort of strange pose that involves him balancing on his hands and feet, fingers and toes stretched long, with his head thrown back and his white-blonde hair shaking wildly. After five minutes of this, he once more approaches the van, this time opening my door.

“Better text her to tell her we’re out here,” and he leans in directly over my lap to reach for his cell phone. He stays in this position the entire time it takes him to pull his cell phone from the cup holder, open up the passenger’s contact information, and write and send a message saying, “you’re AirportVanExpress is waiting for you,” and I know that this is exactly what he typed because his hand and his phone are directly beneath my eyes.

Finally he retreats and shuts the door again and as he does a girl shuffles out the door with nothing but a single-pocket backpack slung around her shoulders. They look at each other but neither says a word, and he doesn’t even open the door for her but instead falls back into the driver’s seat with a crash while she crawls into the extreme back of the van, her headphones already secured around her ears. After she bangs the sliding side door shut I can barely even see her back there, it seems like she inhabits a whole other world made of shadows and safety and blessed silence, and it is clear she has abandoned me to this place of chatter and trumpet screams and carsickness.

The car starts back up with a jolt and I quickly reach for my earbuds, hoping to block him out before it’s too late, but they aren’t attached to my phone anymore, and they aren’t anywhere where I can see them. I unbuckle my seat belt and reach down into my purse, frantically pawing through the contents, emptying them out onto the matted carpet floor below as I search, but the earbuds are nowhere to be found.

“Um,” I sit back up and look toward the man, “Did you see where my earbuds went?”

“What earbuds? I didn’t see any earbuds.” We once more join the heavy traffic of the highway, and the van is again submerged in a sea of stopped cars and craggy mountain tops, which extend so far upward I can barely see the sky. “And don’t forget your seatbelt, baby girl.”

There is a certain kind of darkness that exists only in hotel rooms: it’s a darkness more total and more penetrating than any other kind of darkness, a bloated, weighted darkness- this darkness is the extreme absence of light, but it is also the presence of something. It’s enhanced by the loneliness, the feeling of transience, the feeling of personal obliteration. It’s full of the pieces of identity left over by the previous occupants, it’s full of something sinister that you can’t quite name, and that also might just be coming from inside yourself.

I spend more of my time in hotels now than out, and the darkness has stuck to me, it returns to me every time I close my eyes now. Somehow I’m still not used to it. Somehow I think I never will be.

When I once more emerge from the darkness, the clock above the radio says 9 o’clock. I assume I’ve fallen asleep again but the man is chattering away as if we are mid-conversation. “I think women are afraid to be pretty nowadays,” I hear, “but it’s definitely nothing to be ashamed of.” I look behind me at the other girl but she is still dead to the world and barely visible in the way back.

“Sorry,” I say, “Are you talking to me?”

He laughs his horse laugh again and then barks “Who else would I be talkin’ too, baby girl?”

I look out at the landscape and I swear we’re in exactly the same place we were two hours ago- that blue car to our right looks eerily familiar, and the mountainous terrain looms ever above us, only now the peaks seem even taller, the cloudy sky even more far away.

“Wasn’t I asleep?”

“Oh no, we’ve been chatting this whole time!”

“Oh...” I glance over at him and then down at my hands, and everything seems to be moving just a little bit. It’s like the loaded dawn has left the outside and descended upon the van’s interior and my whole body is now stuck in the same dream that entrapped the hotel awning. “I don’t really remember.”

“Going a little crazy, are we?” He looks at me and his eyes are still blue but also a little bit orange and also they are still moving.

“The agency told me it would only take two hours to get to the airport? Are we almost there?”

“Well, with this traffic, I’d say we’re still about two hours out. Not sure why they told you two hours- six hours is pretty normal around here, what with these two-laners.” He flashes me a smile and for the first time I notice his teeth- they’re striking in their whiteness, they almost sparkle, they’re beautiful but also they seem a little bit too sharp in some places and just a little bit too big for his dainty little lips.

“Ok well, my flight is at noon....will I be ok?”

“Oh yeah, don’t you worry darling, I’ll get you there on time.” He messes with something on his dash board and then places his right hand on the center console, centimeters away from my arm. I squish a little bit closer to the window to get away from his fingers but they inch closer, and the gesture is obvious but not obvious enough to say anything and there’s two more hours to go. “You travel a lot?” He asks.

“Um, yeah,” I try to squirm further away without clueing him in to what I’m doing.

“You ever been to the Denver airport before?”

Something changes in the stale air of the van, but I can’t figure out what it is. It feels like something sinister, but maybe it's just something inside myself.

“No, uh, this is my first time.”

“Well, ya know, they say it’s home to a Satanic cult. Or the Illuminati. Or maybe both.”

A car cuts us off and he breaks hard and I’m jolted forward and he continues with his voice pitched slightly too loud, “Yeah, they say the runways are laid out like a swastika. I’ve never seen it myself because I’m stuck here on the ground in this van all the time, haha. But then there are these words etched into some of the floors...these really creepy words, like,” he whispers, “Sisnaajini. Deity Dit Gaii. Villarreal.” I am trying not to look at him but I swear he licks his lips and I still swear his eyes are orange at the same time they’re blue. “I’m not usually one for conspiracy theories, but I don’t know, this one seems pretty convincing to me,” and he laughs again.

My stomach starts churning despite the SeaBands, and I’m hot, I’m burning up from the inside.

“Uh, could I open a window? It’s really hot in here.”

“Sorry, no can do- company policy, we have to keep the windows closed on the highway. It’s for your safety, ya know.” He rolls his eyes as if we are co-conspirators against this airport shuttle service which misguidedly considers my safety.

“Because, of course, then there’s also Blucifer.”

I don’t want to know about whatever Blucifer is, or really anything about the Denver Airport Satanist Cult, and I’m still so hot so I say “Can you turn the air on? I’m just really, really hot.”

“Air’s up all the way, baby girl.”

I look at the dial on the dash and it is up to some number but my vision is weirdly blurry so I can’t see exactly what it is. Carsickness, I tell myself, it’s just carsickness.

“Ok well, I’m feeling really sick, can we pull over, please?”

He grabs my arm then, and I let out a little yelp. I look behind me but the other girl is asleep now, or at least her eyes are closed, and I’m alone in the front seat with the man and his orange eyes and his too-big teeth and his roaming hands.

“You want to make your flight, don’t you?”

This is too much, I’m done with being polite, fuck this guy and fuck this van and fuck these mountains and their sharp edges that could cut me in half and so I open my mouth to say “Get your hand off me” but the words don’t come out and instead what comes out is vomit, hot and sharp in my throat, and it pours out onto my lap and onto the seat and tears burn my eyes and my head spins and everything is even more blurry, and everything still feels like a dream, except that now it feels more like a nightmare.

"Oh, don’t worry about that, baby girl, don’t worry, happens all the time. Why don’t you just rest a bit. Here,” he leans over and pops open the glove department and pulls out some crumpled napkins and kind of throws them at my chest, “take these, clean yourself up a bit. Oh, poor baby girl.” He rubs my knee again and then brings his hand back to the dial on the dash.

Don’t call me baby girl, I try to say, but everything is going dark again, and right before it does my vision clears and I see that it hadn’t been the air that was up all the way, the dial is turned to the part that is red and it’s the heater that’s all the way up- or really, almost all the way, because now his long fingers are turning it the last notch up as I again slip away into some kind of craggy, heavy blackness.

I always feel safe in hotel rooms at night- the anonymity, the triple-locks, the do-not-disturb signs, the heavy shades, all the barriers against the forces of the outside world. Inside my hotel room I owe nothing to anyone, there are no fake smiles I have to give, no sneaking, snaking hands to endure, no inane small talk to engage in. When the phone rings, I can ignore it, and when the convention guest or the event coordinator or the coed from the catering company or the car salesman tracks down my room number and shows up at midnight, drunk and banging and shouting to be let in, slurring about my beauty and about their loneliness, I can ignore it, with a little help from my earbuds and from Spotify and from the loud hum of the hotel air conditioner and from the locks, and of course from the darkness.

It’s the deepest of darkness, but in that darkness, the only thing I have to fear is the deepest part of myself.

“I thought you might want some water,” he’s saying as I come to again. I look to the clock but it seems to be broken now, disparate numbers flash frantically back and forth, but the mountains are darker now and if I didn’t know better I’d say it was dusk, and also I don’t know that I really do know better and I don’t know if any of this is real or if I am even real.

“What time is it?” I ask, my voice sounding rough and strangled.

“What is time but a construct invented to impose the illusion of meaning on a senseless universe?” He responds, “Here, take this water, I found it under my seat.” He’s shoving a half-empty, gum-crusted, crumpled plastic water bottle at me.

There’s no way I’m drinking this water so I say, “no, thank you,” the first time I’ve even come close to standing up for myself on this shuttle ride, I’m a pathetic excuse for a strong woman and the mountains are somehow even taller now.

“Ok fine, I was just trying to help you. You could show a little gratitude, ya know.” He opens the water bottle and throws the gum-cap haphazardly over his shoulder into the back of the van where the other girl is still sleeping in the shadows and he gulps the water down in one swallow. “So there are also these murals.”

“Hey,” I interrupt, on a roll now, “it seems like it’s getting dark outside. I don’t know what’s going on but my flight was at noon.”

“Calm down, princess, I told you I’d get you to your flight on time and I meant it. Just trust me, ok?”

I don’t know why this hasn’t occurred to me before but I suddenly realize I need to contact someone, something is very wrong and at the very least my agency has chosen a terrible shuttle service for me and I have a *cell phone* and the solution has been there all along. I pull up my purse again, careful not to trail it into the mostly-dry vomit that’s still down my front, and quickly, blessedly, find my phone. I push the button to turn on the screen but nothing happens. I am looking only into another abyss of blackness, and I realize with horror that my phone is dead, probably has been dead for hours.

“Wouldn’t do you much good anyway,” the man says, “Can’t get service out here.”

I think I might be crying now but I also feel a passive numbness start to spread through me, which seems like resignation, but which I might even call peace. My lack of control over the outcome of this scenario is painfully clear, and I figure I will either make it to the airport, or I will be murdered, and since I am powerless to affect the outcome either way, I surrender and ask the man, “what murals?”

“Ah, yes, the murals,” he says with glee, his eyes flashing and his teeth shining, “There are these murals in the airport, ok? Pretty normal, fine. But these murals, they show all this really spooky stuff. Like...kids getting killed by men in gas masks, and like, dead animals preserved behind class. Really apocalyptic stuff. Do you believe in the apocalypse?”

“You mean, do I believe in the concept of an apocalypse?”

“No- I mean, do you believe in the imminence of the actual apocalypse? As in, the annihilation of the human race?”

It’s completely dark outside now, and the same blue car is still to our right.

“A lot of people think the world will end with nuclear war, or something like that.” he continues, “Or by some megavirus, like biological warfare type stuff. Actually, ya know those words that are carved into the floors of the airport? Some people think those are symbols for a new strain of hepatitis that will infect the whole human race. But I don’t know...I don’t think the end of days will be man-made.”

A car honks from somewhere behind us, making me jump. I’m reminded of the trumpet sounds, and I wonder where the instrument disappeared to.

“See, humans are too stupid to demolish themselves. Everyone thinks, oh, we’re so good at science, oh, we’re destroying the environment, oh, humans will destroy the world. I mean, come on. That’s giving the human race waaayyy too much credit.”

He’s merging lanes now, and it looks like he’s going to drive straight into the side of the blue car, but somehow he slides into the right lane uninhibited, and I can’t see the blue car anywhere anymore. It’s as if it vanished in to thin air, or as if it never really existed at all.

“No, I think the apocalypse will come from something supernatural. Something cosmic. Maybe even something Biblical.”

He is exiting the highway and I’m able to glimpse a sign that says “Denver International Airport” and I am definitely crying now, mostly from relief but still a little bit from fear because until I am safely at my gate with my phone plugged into a charger the murder option is still on the table.

“Because, Baby Girl, there are forces in this world that go beyond what the human senses can perceive. There are entities so powerful we cannot even imagine them, there are beings that transcend the planes of good and evil and exist in a morality of their own, a true morality. Ya know what I mean?”

He laughs again and then he’s digging around in the area under his seat which somehow contains all the mysteries of the universe and finally he pulls out a dirty, torn up notebook which he tosses into my lap, with no concern for the bile that is now flaking from my shirt onto the book’s cover.

“Now I’m no muralist, but I dabble in the visual arts, if ya know what I mean. That’s my sketch book- take a look for yourself.”

I open the book and on every page is a different drawing of a door, all of them closed, all of them out of focus, all of them somehow resembling the Quality Inn awning in the darkness of daybreak. The doors seem to be pulsing, and the book is beating in my hands like a human heart, and they are singing something, these doors, they are chanting and whispering Sis-naa-ji-ni, Dei-ty Dit-Gaii. Vil-lar-re-al....

But the singing isn’t coming from the doors- it’s coming from the shadows behind me. I turn and see that the girl in the back is sitting straight up now, her headphones askew and her mouth mechanically forming the relentless syllables, “Sis-Naa-ji-ni, Dei-ty Dit-Gaii, Vil-lar-re-al.”  The only other person from his “hefty passenger list,” except that there had never really been a hefty passenger list. Her eyes are open now, unblinking and unseeing, but also seeing something beyond me, beyond the man, beyond the van, and they’re shifting from blue to orange, blue to orange, and she’s chanting and it’s getting louder and I look back at the drawing in my hand and I swear the door is opening on the page, out of the page, and suddenly I’m falling, back into the blackness, down below the mountains, deep through the clouds at dawn, through the door and into the depths beneath the driver’s seat.

There is a certain kind of darkness that exists only in hotel rooms. It is a darkness both sinister and safe, both anonymous and personal. It is a darkness both quiet and loud- quiet enough that you can hear yourself think, but loud enough to drown out the banging and the shouts. Loud enough to let you forget that you are never really safe, quiet enough to let you forget that you exist. The darkness never leaves me, now. The darkness is always there. And yet, I’m still not used to it. I don’t think I ever will be.

And they’re still out there shouting, let me in. Come on, baby girl, let me in.

It looks like the Quality Inn hotel room, except without a floor, and without a ceiling. There is something that looks like a bed suspended before me, and something that looks like that painting, the one with the secret horse, suspended above the bed. I look down at my feet and I realize that I am also suspended, held up by the darkness, held up by the heavy morning air. I should be afraid, or at least confused, but mostly I just feel relieved- relieved that the van ride is over, relieved that I don’t have to fight anymore, relieved that I don’t have to hide anymore.

“The locals call him Blucifer.”

It is his voice, coming from behind me and above me all at the same time. I can’t see him but I feel him all around me, can feel his forehead crinkling and uncrinkling, deforming and retracting.

“He killed his maker, did ya know?”

The room is all blackness except for an orange and blue glow that comes from somewhere high above me. I look up, and rising into the ceiling-less abyss is a giant horse, at least thirty feet high, and it’s kicking and braying and shaking its mane and its enormous muscles ripple with bright blue veins and its eyes flash that color of orange I now know too well and it’s two-foot teeth are sparkly white and much sharper than a horse’s teeth are supposed to be. The girl from the back is nowhere to be seen, but if I listen closely I can still hear her chanting sis-naa-ji-ni, dei-ty dit-gaii, vil-lar-re-al, and I can hear the distant sounds of a trumpet playing and the cries of women at midnight, and then there’s the man, and he’s saying,

“Right after he finished painting Blucifer’s eyes. A piece fell off Blucifer’s head and severed an artery in his maker’s leg.”

The space is filled with the sound of that laugh, that laugh as sharp and as looming as the mountains, that laugh which sounds like screaming and which blocks out the sky.

“It wasn’t even getting crushed that did him in. Nope. It was that artery. He bled to death. It took hours for anyone to find him.”

I feel phantom arms wrap around my back and an invisible hand patting my knee, and suddenly I am lifted up and now I’m face to face with the horse’s orange eyes, I am far from the ground and there is no ground.

“I like you, Baby Girl,” the voice says, “You’re so polite.” The horrible, humongous teeth gnash and they’re coming closer and I’m blinded by their whiteness and the voice says,  “So nice, and polite. You’re very pretty. Beautiful even. Yes sir, you sure do look like a model.”

I close my eyes but I can still see the gaping mouth getting closer and the orange pupils flashing. I consider struggling against whatever force is pulling me toward the demon orifice, but I know that against this, I am powerless; there are forces in this world, he said, entities so powerful we cannot even imagine them. I think about all the things I did wrong, the conversation I should not have reciprocated, the smiles I shouldn’t have given, the touches I should not have allowed, and even then I know that it wouldn’t have mattered anyway, my fate was sealed the minute I stepped out from under the safety of the Quality Inn awning, the minute I took this job, the minute I was born.

I am being gulped up in one swallow and now all I can think about is how dawn makes everything feel like a dream, and about how that darkness never leaves you, not once you’ve stayed in it too long. The darkness was a part of me, I think, but now I am part of the darkness.

Let me in, the voice says.

Let me in.