

A Trick of the Light

Familiarity: a word that embellishes a sense of comfort in an otherwise desperate situation, instilling hope within human hearts. It is a cleverly devised plan designed to lull its victims into a false sense of security, ultimately making it easier for the darkness that lives within the world to take hold until hope becomes almost alien. This comfort through knowledge was exactly what I did not want to be experiencing, and yet here I was walking, once again, through a procession of marble pillars, towards a brooding pair of double doors that lead into a room specifically allocated to the child relocation services.

Everything was the same. I checked in with Morgan at the reception desk and walked down a long, navy blue carpet, leading all the way to the huge doors, where undoubtedly Judge Carl Phoenix awaited me. The carpet reminded me of the ocean, not because of the colour, but because of the fact that every time I made my way down it, I felt as if I was drowning. Even the tapestries depicting scenes of children happily playing in glistening streams and luscious grass fields had remained on the walls, their colours slowly fading whilst thick layers of dust collected on tiny angelic faces.

My long, black hair, pulled into a loose pony tail at the base of my neck, swayed like a pendulum as I struggled to walk down the suffocating carpet in my borrowed pencil skirt and shiny black stilettos. I nervously made my way towards the doors, noting the presence of the empty seats designed for relatives and close friends to support broken families fighting over the lives of their children. But not today. No one had ever sat in those seats for me.

The rhythmic 'click' of my shoes resounded throughout the hall as soon as I reached the timber flooring that separated the carpet from the large, golden knockers shaped into snarling lions' heads that guarded the doors. Their flaming eyes and sharp teeth gleamed viciously under the chandelier lights located high in the ceiling. I smiled at them in greeting as a distant memory bubbled to the surface of my consciousness, a memory of the seven year old me, declaring the two lions Monty and Marcus, protectors of the children. I weakly lifted the gold ring resting between Monty's teeth and the memory dissipated. I exhaled, opened the door into the large office-library that would decide my future and stepped inside.

A wooden chair lay awaiting my arrival in the middle of the room, strategically placed below the Judge's wide and slightly elevated desk in a way that resembled the perils of a troubled child in a classroom. I smiled briefly in welcome at both the judge and the frail figure of the head archivist, Malcolm Brite, who sat patiently, fingers at the ready above an ancient type writer. However, the only true comfort I could cling to was seeing the forever smiling face of my many-times-over legal representative and close friend. He sat in the designated lawyers chair to my left, but the look upon his face shattered my hope as I saw there was no smile where there should have been one. 'Forever' had come to an end.

Alexander J. Marks had always been associated with my family and we had been friends ever since I could remember. He was always there, like my own personal angel set to protect me from the world, his very presence shielding me from the enclosing shadows. The boy was a genius, blessed with an arsenal of talents associated with the powers of persuasion. His dark hair and lean frame complemented an entrancing set of piercing green eyes. The attention he

drew was not from any physical prowess however; as I remembered him jokingly saying that the only girls that ever really paid attention to him on passing were virtual ones on a screen. So when he graduated from Harvard Law at the age of 16, the world was indeed in shock. I still thought it was unfair that one singular being could maintain both a beautiful nature and the brain of a learned scholar without spontaneously combusting. However, despite his youthful appearance, his age was never a hindrance to gaining the results he wanted. Alex never lost. Ever. He was the boy next door who had shielded my seven year old eyes, as he dragged me away from my parents' fifth floor apartment, away from the haunting image of my mother and fathers' blood sprayed across the white walls of the bathroom. The two carcasses of fleshy remains entwined themselves with one another as lovers do. A set of matching pistols had lain limply in their hands as they embraced.

A heavy silence hung like a thick fog over our heads, choking anything that vaguely resembled hope as the Judge began to speak.

"Miss Elenora Rose," he began. Considering it was my fourth time appearing before him in this very room, I thought we'd be on a first name basis by now. I guess not.

"A selection of specialists," he said motioning towards a small door behind him, "and I have discussed your rather unfortunate circumstances concerning the demise of your previous guardians and in doing so have come to the conclusion that there is no other choice but to send you to a foster home."

He gave a slight pause to see my reaction to his judgement and was surprised to see I barely even flinched at what was to happen to me. Being only seventeen, I knew I was not old

enough to be considered capable of controlling my own life and all those who could have cared for me were dead, leaving me with very limited options in living accommodations. “However,” he continued, “because the current rates of abandonment among children have risen dramatically in the past ten years, the majority of our homes willing to take on children are full to bursting. Also, because you are nearing an age of legal independence many of the families that do have space are very... unwilling to undertake the responsibility of an adolescent.”

I looked at Alex in an attempt to decipher the direction in which the verdict was heading, but his glassy eyes stayed locked in a love affair with the floor, a small muscle in his jaw twitching slightly whilst his face held an expression as cold as ice. I had assumed that the excess time allocated to my case was due to the difficulties in deciding who would be the most appropriate choice of guardian; however, when I saw the blank, rigid expression on Alex’s face I knew he had lost whatever argument he was fighting.

“After a very...” Judge Phoenix paused and glared down at Alex over the top of the half-moon glasses that were balancing on the bridge of his crooked nose, “... heated discussion, we were able to come to the solid, if not only, conclusion suitable for a case such as yours, Elenora.”

Alex moved for the first time since I entered the court room, and he slowly raised his head to glare at Judge Phoenix, disgust written across his face, as the man continued to speak. I saw his eyes briefly flicker in my direction, but upon seeing my face, he quickly resumed his study of the floor.

“We have decided that you are to be sent to Kent Michigan’s Correctional Facility for Young Ladies until either you are of age to be considered an adult or an opening in one of our foster homes becomes available to you. However, considering your circumstances and especially

your age, the latter is rather doubtful, so we have already taken the precaution of sending your belongings to the facility where they will be waiting for you to arrive.”

My heart sank. I was not a criminal to be exiled to correct my ways at an institute especially designed for female juvenile delinquents. I did not want to be sent to a housing facility run by thirty seven year old, multi-millionaire named Kent Michigan. The man owned a large percentage of some of the most successful businesses all over the world and was renowned for his delight in the fact that all his employees were terrified of him. He had a team of the best lawyers in the country paid off to bend at his will and was the kind of man who could do anything he wanted, and he did. I looked towards Alex as Judge Phoenix pushed back his chair and made his way to the door. The small hope I had that he could do something to help me quickly diminished as his pained, green eyes said everything he could not.

“We’ve called a cab for you; it’s waiting out the front,” Judge Phoenix stated as he held open the large door for us. “Miss Petersen. You and your sister can come in now,” he called out the door as he hurried us out of the room. A young woman stood before us in a freshly pressed suit, her arm soothingly ushering a girl that looked only slightly younger than me through the doors we had just passed through. I caught the girl’s eyes moments before she entered and my heart broke. Her eyes were sunk deep into her skull, the essence of a deeper pain radiating from every surface of her being. I shuddered as the door clicked shut behind us, leaving Alex and I alone in the silence that seemed to bounce off the walls.

Suddenly, my ears began ringing with a strange sound resembling the rhythmic beating of a drum, or a large set of wings forcefully pushing the air into the ground. I looked in the

direction of its origins, but all I could see was a slight glint amongst the shadows in the rafters and the silhouette of absolute darkness hiding amongst the mottled greys.

The shock of the situation at hand in conjunction with the hollowness of the young girl sent a shiver down my spine and froze my feet in place. I could feel myself beginning to lean slightly in one direction to the point of almost falling, before regaining my grasp on reality.

Alex pulled me to his chest and began to hum softly, the vibration radiating from deep within his diaphragm.

“Everything is going to be okay. I will fix this,” he whispered, his words trailing off into nothingness, the last of them almost escaping me completely. “I have to.”

I looked up at Alex and he smiled at me, smoothing my hair back from my face and tucking it behind my ear. “Let’s go,” he said as he dropped his arms and I saw, rather than felt, him take my hand and lead me towards the exit.

As all my belongings were waiting for me at the facility, I could not stall any longer and instead slipped into the back seat of the cab in quiet submission to my circumstances. I heard a small ‘click’ as Alex closed the door behind me and made his way around the car to speak briefly with the driver before knocking gently on my window. I wound it down and Alex leaned in on the frame close enough to whisper,

“I’m sorry about all of this Elle and I just want you to know that I will always be around to protect you. I have made sure of it.”

His words confused me and I stared after him as he signalled the driver to pull out; a mischievous smile played upon his lips. I looked out the rear window of the car as it drove

away from the curb and saw the smile drop from Alex's face. He turned and disappeared into an entrance way that lead towards a small car park located under the building. The sound of beating wings filled my ears once more as the cab turned out into the street, taking a sharp right in the direction of Kent Michigan's Correctional Facility for Young Ladies.

There is something about sorrow that lies like a thick fog over sufferers in a way that makes the world seem hazy and far off as the body and the mind fall simultaneously into a welcome unconsciousness, an unconsciousness that enveloped my entire being only to be ruined by the rough jolt of the cab as it pulled into a dimly lit parking lot. As the sun began to sink below the horizon, giving its authority over to the powers that control the night, I quietly slid out of the backseat and into the dwindling twilight, thanking the driver as I went. He grunted in reply and as soon as I was clear of the car, he reversed out of the car park and sped off into the distance. I watched the taillights disappear around a corner. I looked up at the large building in front of me: its outward appearance lead me to assume it was once a large manor of purpose in its prime, but now it was partly surrounded by thick concrete walls and wire fence, the glint of metallic barbs shining in the darkness. I released a breath I did not realise I was holding, made my way nervously up the small flight of steps leading to the outer wall of the facility and pressed the buzzer to notify whoever it might be behind the threatening doors that I was waiting.

The static, white noise of sonic interference came from a small intercom just underneath the buzzer and the sing-song voice of a woman came through the speaker.

“Whhooooo is it?”

“Umn”, I began. “My name is Elenora Rose. Ah, Judge Phoe-” I was cut short as the sound of crashing furniture and manic giggling burst out of the intercom. It stopped almost as soon as it had begun and then, nothing. After a few moments the deep voice of a man, probably a guard, grunted from the speaker.

“Come right in. We’ve been waiting for you.” The static disappeared and a loud buzz filled the air as the door swung open into a narrow corridor. My heartbeat increased as I stepped through the doorway and into the artificial light, to be met by the smiling face of a young woman in her mid-twenties, her slender body clothed in an old-fashioned maid’s uniform. “Don’t be put off by the uniform,” she said as she followed my eyes from her shoes to the apron drawn across a short black dress, ending just above her knees. The edge of what seemed to be a large bruise on the inside of her thigh was scarcely covered by the flimsy material. She smiled and took a step towards me.

“Mr Michigan has strange policies when it comes to uniform.”

I blushed, a little embarrassed at my obvious staring and stammered, “I-I umn...”

“It’s okay. I understand that it must be a little strange seeing the nurse of a correctional facility wearing something as impractical as this, but policies are policies and the pay is not too bad either.” She smiled even more brightly than before, filling me with unease and a growing suspicion that something deeply wrong was going on here.

“Well Elenora, you must be exhausted after the day you’ve been through,” she continued, still smiling. “Your bags arrived yesterday afternoon and are waiting for you in a temporary room we have prepared for you upstairs. You will also find your uniform and schedule for the next couple of months before you turn eighteen and are allowed to leave.”

“But my case wasn’t until this morning. How could my bags have already arrived last night if it was only decided...” A mixture of pain and sympathy flashed across the nurse’s eyes as she momentarily dropped her smile and unconsciously reached out towards me. When she realised what she was doing she quickly re-adjusted herself and beamed at me once more.

“Shall we?” she said happily as she motioned towards a stair case to her left. I followed her as she began to make her way up the twisted flight, passing floor after floor cast in darkness before finally coming to a halt outside a ramshackle, wooden door, the paint that once decorated its ornate frame almost non-existent. The nurse unlocked it and ushered me inside where my bags stood lonely in the near-empty room, kept company only by a small wooden dresser and what resembled the remnants of a hospital bed, pushed rather unceremoniously into one of the dank corners of the room.

“I’m sorry that you’ll have to lodge in the attic for the time being,” the nurse began, her smile slowly waning like a full moon before sunrise. “But it’s another one of Mr Michigan’s protocols that all new girls must use this room until we see how she interacts with the other girls in the facility and before we can room her with somebody else.” She let out a somewhat defeated sigh before picking up her smile and continuing her routine induction. “Luckily, Mr Michigan is due to visit in the next couple of days, which means he can give consent for your room allocation and you can move out of... this.” She waved her hand a little disgustedly about the room as she said this, before moving towards the door, grasping its handle and smiling her ever-so-radiant-smile.

“Goodnight, Miss Rose. If there is anything you need just come and find me in the office. Ask for Lucy.”

The light switched off. I heard the door click shut and I listened to Lucy's hurried footsteps disappear back down the stairs, leaving me alone once more, the shadows drawing ever nearer.

I walked towards the bed in the corner, leaving my bags, schedule and new uniform untouched, and curled myself into a ball on top of the covers. I lay wide eyed and unable to sleep for hours on end, before my fatigue became overbearing. I drifted off into sleep. My parting image from consciousness seen through bleary eyes was of a man, not too dissimilar to Alex- in fact I think it was him- appearing in the light of my window, folding away a set of large wings, before effortlessly gliding to my side, protecting me from the shadows and watching over me as I slept.

"I was waiting," I whispered unconsciously to him, a lazy smile spreading across my lips as the dark, persuading hands of sleep took me.

As the morning light shone brightly through my window, I uncurled my aching body from underneath covers that I had never drawn up. The room seemed even smaller in the daylight and I opened my eyes to unpacked bags; all my clothes were on hangers in the open wardrobe and, after quickly checking the drawers of the beaten-up bed-side table, I came across the rest of my meagre belongings. I slowly roused myself from the small comfort of a warm bed and, whilst stretching, my eyes caught sight an article of clothing hanging in the wardrobe that did not belong to me. I walked over and pulled out the hanger, looking in dismay upon the tiny piece of material that hung off it. Attached to it was a note from Lucy, her fake smile showing through her big cursive lettering:

I trust you slept well.

We arranged your things to make your stay more comfortable and have

organised breakfast for you in the lobby at 9:00am.

This is your uniform.

Mr Michigan has called in and said he will be around later tonight as he cannot wait to get acquainted with our newest resident.

This means, however, that your uniform must be worn in full or disciplinary action will be undertaken.

Lucy.

I looked in incredible discomfort at the 'uniform' I was expected to wear, if it could even be called that. It was made up of a royal blue tartan skirt that seemed to be a length suitable for a six year old and I could tell just by looking at it that it would only just cover the necessary areas before being deemed unsightly. A white, buttoned blouse with a pointed collar topped the outfit along with a short black tie that was draped around the neck of the hanger, the letters 'K.M' embroidered in gold thread into its base. I looked into the bottom of the wardrobe, only to find a pair of high heeled, black buckled shoes and, folded neatly on top, the recognisable bundle of a pair of long, black socks.

I stood for a minute holding my new uniform fit for a street walker, before reluctantly undressing and wriggling into the vulgar ensemble.

I sat on my hospital bed, rolled the socks over my knees and slipped on the black high heels before pulling my obscenely short skirt as far down as it would go without falling off.

Nine o'clock came and went as the confusion in my head stole away the time. A soft knock on my door roused me from my trance. I looked up at the sound and was surprised to see the vibrantly happy face of a small child. She wore a small dress made of forest leaves, with a crown of holly resting on a cascade of flaming red hair that lit the room with its fire, whilst her curious blue eyes searched me for answers.

I looked in shock at the sight of the infant, eventually managing to reach out a welcoming hand and quietly stammer, "H-Hello, did Lucy send you to fetch me?"

At my welcome the child slid through the door and closed it shut behind her, a dazzling smile springing from one pointed ear to the other.

"Who's Lucy?" she said happily, her voice bouncing off the dreary grey walls, creating a small symphony of innocence. Worry suddenly tugged at my chest as cautious words formed in my mouth.

"Lucy is the nurse in this place. Who are you? Are you one of the guard's daughters? How come you're up here if Lucy didn't send you? I didn't do something wrong did I?" I trembled in panic as the little child gazed at me, laughter dancing in her eyes.

"I am nobody's child, Elenora. We used to be friends, you and I."

The panic began to rise as a whisper escaped my lips. "I don't understand."

"My name is Hope and I've been dead to you for a very long time now."

"What? I..." fear gripped me as Hope stretched out her arms towards me.

"Don't be afraid. Or maybe you should, especially after what happened to the last girl. He watched as his poisonous erosion slowly wore away at her until there was nothing left. He really should have been more careful though, considering the poor thing was the sister of a detective."

I screamed and ran from the room, slamming the door behind me, the echo of Hope shattering as her final words lingered in the air.

“He’s coming for you Elenora, he’s coming...”

I continued my attempt at running, my high heels catching in the creaky floor boards, causing me to fly straight into the arms of... Lucy.

“What’s wrong, Elenora?” she said, worry creasing her cheerful face.

“N-nothing. I just though I saw... Never mind.” I bowed my head, a little embarrassed as Lucy regained her composure and lifted my chin slightly to smile at me.

“That is good then. I was a little concerned at your absence from breakfast and came to fetch you for morning classes.” She beckoned me to follow as she began to walk down to the stairs.

“You have a busy day today,” she began, as what looked like a checklist attached to a clipboard appeared out of thin air. “However, you’ve already missed breakfast and I’m afraid there is nothing we can do about that. We run on a tight schedule you see, leaving little room to accommodate just one individual.” We continued down the stairs and onto the lower platform, Lucy’s mindless chatter playing in the back of my mind. At the bottom of the stairwell she stopped abruptly, almost causing a collision between the two of us, before she quickly turned to face me, hugging her clipboard as she smiled.

“The rec room is just over there, where your art class will be held.” She pointed in the direction of a set of tall, beaten doors covered in peeling crimson paint, the left one slightly ajar. My eyes wandered, catching the occasional glimpse of the blue and white uniform and the manic laughter from the night before trickling through the opening. Lucy led me to the room and stopped me before I could enter it completely.

“Remember, you have an appointment with Mr Michigan just before tea time.”

“I’ll be sure to remember,” I said with a smile, in an attempt to comfort not only Lucy but also myself. She shifted her weight in what seemed like discomfort as I turned towards the door.

“Elenora...” she began, her eyes becoming glassy as she dropped her smile, “I truly am sorry about all of this.”

I gaped a little in confusion but, before I could muster up some sense of reason behind Lucy’s final words, she had hurried off down the corridor, leaving me standing alone once again. I stood there, staring after her for a moment before making my way cautiously towards the red doors. I pushed open the left one and slipped inside.

Antique magnificence flowed from every surface of the hall, radiating from the large, central chandelier that hung high in the rafters of the ceiling. Decorated awnings and secluded alcoves that were once used for the secret affairs of businessmen and passionate encounters of star-crossed lovers, dotted the walls in their deteriorating beauty. It was like walking into a faery tale one hundred years after the infatuation burned out; Snow White returning to her glass coffin with a broken heart, to die a second time. It was like having a hole in your heart; there was something missing, standing in this room full of damsels in distress with no Prince Charming to come save them.

About fifty girls in total, wearing the blue and white uniform, sat spaced out along three long tables, lined parallel to each other down the centre of the old ball room. One of the three supervising staff, all of whom resembled the nurses in a 1930s pin-up gallery, looked up from the student she was helping and smiled at me, before walking over, taking my arm and sitting me down at the end of the middle table.

“I’ll be with you in a minute,” she said sweetly.

I shifted my weight a little nervously in my seat, as I looked around the room and into the faces of fellow ‘felons’. There was a girl sitting just a little down from me, on the opposite side of the table, spiky hair framing an impish face. She could not have been more than fourteen years old. I let out a small sigh and my eyes began to wander under the table where I saw, attached to the girl’s ankle was a beeper with a red light that flicked on and off consistently. I let out a gasp as the realisation of the situation hit me. I had seen things like this in cop shows on TV. The anklets were especially designed for those under house arrest, containing a GPS that was triggered to shock the wearer if they ventured outside a certain perimeter. The girl glanced up at the sound and grinned slightly at me as she began to slide down the bench in my direction, her toothy smile becoming more menacing with every inch she gained.

“Hello, Girl.” Her hollow voice was barely a whisper.

“H-hello,” I croaked, trying desperately to keep the fear out of my voice.

“I have something that belongs to you.” She giggled slightly at my shocked reaction, the manic laughter I’d heard from the night before rattling her frame.

“What? I don’t understand”

“It’s a letter, stolen from the fallen and torn from grace. I also have tears shed by the guardians and distilled in the sacred pool of the broken, presented to you by the unstable...” she trailed off and stared towards the ceiling as if in deep thought before turning back to me.

“Yes! I do think you’ll like the second one. Now I will distract them.”

Mischief played in her eyes, the only warning I received before she lunged across the table, pressing something into the palm of my hand and rolling off me to run wildly around the room. Rippling peals of happiness, granted to the insane, sounded throughout the hall as the small girl started tearing at her clothes and skipping just out of reach of the teaching staff.

I uncurled my hand to find a folded piece of paper in the shape of a rose. A playful squeal sounded from the stage at the front of the ball room and the girl glanced at me ever so slightly and crooned, "Hurry up sweet heart." I took the hint and unfolded the rose until the message that it withheld became obvious:

I will save you.

Alex

I looked up and searched the room for the girl only to find her running towards me. Her right hand was poised above her head, the glint of a syringe reflecting off the surrounding light and the figures of the teaching staff hot on her heels. My eyes widened and blackness swallowed me as the girl's manic laughter drifted into the distance and the buzz of electricity coursed through her tiny body.

I woke in the dimly lit castle tower on the upper floors that was supposed to be my room. The smell of dust and rotting wood filled my nostrils, making my head spin as I pushed myself up onto my elbows and gradually manoeuvred into a sitting position. A sharp pain shot down the side of my neck as I looked left and right around the small room. I winced and held my hand against the pain in a weak attempt to stop it from spreading.

The fog in my head began to clear as I recalled the events that had taken place in the rec room. A slight shiver ran down my spine as distant laughter filled my head along with a sneaking suspicion that the needle on the syringe may have broken inside my neck as I fell. Brief movement caught my attention as the breeze coming through my open window stirred a note that had been slid under the door. I watched it for a moment as it made its way eerily around the room on the back of the wind. I stood slowly and groggily made my way over to

pick it up. My forehead furrowed in concentration as I struggled to read Lucy's handwriting whilst a fair amount of the sedative still coursed through my body.

Mr Michigan will be up to see you at 7 30pm.

Make sure you're ready and in uniform.

Lucy

I looked around the room in search of a clock, finding one hanging off-centre just above the door frame. I squinted to be able to see the positioning of the hands and my eyes widened at the realisation that I only had half an hour to change into my uniform and get the last of the sedative out of my system.

I rushed to the rustic closet, panic slowly replacing the effects of the drugs as I opened the doors, to find no such uniform. I turned my 'room' upside down in search for the inappropriate bits of clothing. I was just beginning to give up my search when a familiar voice resonated from the shadows.

"You're wearing them, Elle," a deep voice chuckled out of the shadows. I sat in shock and stared into the darkness before looking down at myself and discovering the uniform I had been so desperately searching for.

"Alex? Is that you?"

A dark figure stepped into the light and at the sight of it I backed myself up against the wall next to the bed in attempt to create as much distance as possible between us.

"What happened to you?" The fear I tried suppress in my voice was no match for Alex's monstrosity. A set of gargantuan leathery wings protruded from his shoulder blades whilst grotesque, newly formed muscles twisted around them to hold them in place. Fragile looking

bones lined the fragmented length of his wings tipped with an array of spiked talons, separating the devilish enhancements into a webbed aerodynamic flight engine.

He held out his arms and stepped towards me. My eyes bulged as the light caught the ebony horns, spiralling out from each side of his forehead. The veins in his arms were stained black and lifted from his skin like a tattoo.

“That girl, Elle, the one we saw outside Phoenix’s’, she was the last girl Michigan paid Phoenix to send to his facility. Michigan is a man no longer driven by his love for money, but the rush he feels through the power he’s gained... He has paid off entire courts, Elle. I did my research. I’ve seen the things he’s done and this was the only way I could protect you from him. I bargained with the Darkness to give me the power to save you.”

“Please don’t go.” My words didn’t make sense because of my fear but Alex still turned his head towards me and smiled.

“Never.”

My door began to rattle as a loud knocking pounded throughout the tiny room and a deep male voice resonated from the other side.

“Elenora Rose, it’s Kent Michigan. Lucy is here with me. Please open the door.”

Anxiety crept back into me as Mr Michigan discovered the handle and let himself in, his lanky body lingering in the doorway; an almost empty bottle of alcohol was cradled in his arms like a baby.

“Leave, Lucy,” he said with the firm politeness of a man who always gets what he wants. He shut the door behind him and dropped all the feigned pleasantries, reaching out to me as I shrank away.

“My, my, my” he said, almost managing to keep the slur from his words as he smiled. He pulled me roughly towards him by the waist, my protests no match for a man’s strength.

Laughter sounded in his chest as he pressed his lips against my neck and buried his face in

my hair. "I love it when they put up a fight." I screamed as loudly as I could in the hope that Lucy would hear and come to my rescue. Mr Michigan stopped his caresses and looked me straight in the eyes.

"You can scream all you want darling, nobody is going to save you." He pulled at the black tie around my neck, fingering his embroidered initials. The smell of alcohol on his breath made me dizzy and I noticed a small blade resting in the palm of his hand.

He brought the knife towards the lowest button of my shirt, "I. Own. You." punctuating each word with a sharp flick of the knife, removing the buttons keeping my shirt together. My bottom lip trembled as he lightly dragged the knife up my torso from my naval until he reached the point of my chin where he balanced my head on the knife so I could not avoid his eyes. Anger flashed behind them, and he raised his hand above his head in a fist. "You should sit down," he crooned, bringing his fist down upon my face. I tasted blood in my mouth as I scrambled as far away as possible, pressing my back against the wall, his ravenous smile drinking in my desperation.

Suddenly a loud crack resounded throughout the room followed by an eerie silence. Mr Michigan lay slumped on the floor, Alex's demonic silhouette towering over him, his fists clenched.

He walked silently to my side and helped me to my feet.

"Let's go Elle. Let's fly away from here," he said softly in my ear as he led me towards the window.

I held tightly to him and closed my eyes as the muscles on his back surrounding his wings began to twist and knot in motion, lifting us slowly off the ground and out into the night.

The sharp ringing of a nearby telephone broke the early morning silence in the small Queen Street apartment of Detective Michelle Petersen. A slight groan escaped her lips as she rolled off her stomach and scrambled to the phone, knocking the handset onto the floor before swearing lightly under her breath and answering with a groggy, "Hello."

The familiar voice of Sergeant Nicolas Mahone projected through the handset.

"We are in need of your expertise down at the ladies psych institute run by Mr Rich ASAP, Miss Petersen. Mr Phillips is already on his way."

She rushed about the room, wiggling into a pair of black pants and a loosely fitting white blouse, the phone pushed against her ear with the aid of her right shoulder as she spoke.

"Again? What has happened this time? Anything conclusive that will lock Mr Michigan up for good this time?" A spark of venom had crept into her voice.

"Just get down here," the Sergeant replied.

"I'm on my way," she said and hurriedly hung up the phone, grabbed her keys and rushed out the door, clumsily tucking in her blouse and tying her dark hair into a crude knot behind her head.

As Michelle turned into the car park at Kent Michigan's mental institution for women, a familiar scene laid out before her eyes. The plastic glare of the street lamps flickered off police tape wavering in the slight breeze as the various silhouettes of homicide workers surrounded the alleged 'crime scene'. Camera flashes like lightning, captured morbid memories of what was once a living human being.

Two squad cars were parked just to the left of the line surrounded by a number of officers first on the scene. One of these men pointed in her direction and his lips moved ever so slightly, indicating to the Sergeant that she had arrived. He turned, a grim look upon his face,

and made his way towards Michelle as she stepped out of the car and started towards the police tape. He nodded in greeting and handed her a clip board that detailed all the evidence collected thus far in the fairly recent investigation.

There is something about the mind of police officers that seeks to distract them from the grotesque nature of crime that automatically sends them into a state where they involuntarily list the evidence they have just given. Sergeant Mahone was one of these police men, as he began to rattle off various pieces of standard information.

“Her name is Elenora Rose,” he began as both detective and Sergeant made their way to the other side of the police tape, entering a scene of grotesque deformity surrounding the mangled body of a teenage girl.

“Seventeen and eight months; no known relations.”

Michelle crouched down next to the body and calmly took in the curved lips that formed a somewhat mangled smile; but a smile none the less. She slowly drew her eyes away and looked back at the information on the clipboard, flicking through the pages until she found what she was looking for.

“Why is she dressed like that Sergeant?”

The Sergeant shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot at the detective’s tranquil approach towards her job before opening his mouth to talk once more.

“That we are unsure of, there is no logical reason that would be deemed... tasteful. The only lead we have as to why, is the letters embroidered into the black tie around her neck.”

Michelle reached for the tie, and looked as though she would vomit at the sight of the golden ‘K.M’ shimmering in the moonlight.

“The Vic was diagnosed with a rather serious case of Schizophrenia in early adolescence,” continued Mahone, “after witnessing the joint suicide of her parents. She was admitted to this institution on Monday after her psychiatrist deemed her,” he paused and flipped through the pages in front of Michelle, stopping on the third turn and reading aloud, “unfit to withstand the pressures of society.” He looked up from the paper and looked at the small mangled body of Elenora Rose. “He also made a note of an imaginary support network known only as ‘Alex’, to which she constantly referred over the period she was monitored, which ultimately encouraged her illusions and enhanced her schizophrenia.”

“Who was her specialist?” The rhetoric in her question demanding an answer she already knew.

“Why Dr Carl Phoenix of course.” Embarrassment crept into his face as he realised, too late, what Michelle was implying, only then to be replaced by anger. “You’re not suggesting that the Doctor had anything to do with this? You have no proof. You can’t just...”

“I,” began Michelle testily, “am not implying anything. But don’t you find it a little strange that all of the referrals and transfers to this place are signed off by the same man; the same man who is also the personal psychiatric physician of Kent Michigan himself? Look around Nick!”

The Sergeant’s face darkened. “Do not test me Detective. The determination you have to lock Kent Michigan away is unhealthy and unprofessional. There was no conclusive evidence in the case against your sister that suggested he was responsible for her condition. You should leave this grudge behind or I will have no choice but to remove you from this investigation.” The detective’s hands clenched into fists at her side and she took a steady step towards the Constable, her mouth parting as if to speak again.

“Detective Petersen?”

Michelle was startled by the small female voice calling her name and turned around slowly to discover a somewhat distressed... maid? Yes, a young woman in a maid’s outfit, standing before her. Shock crept into the detective’s face as she drank in the woman’s dishevelled appearance; dark make up stains spread from her eyes and her hair had come unbound during whatever struggle she had recently been through. Her maids’ hat flopped forward to cover her face as she looked at the ground.

“Yes, I am Detective Michelle Petersen,” she said, all her professionalism returning to her face and projecting through her voice.

“I know what happened here Miss Petersen. I know it all.”

Fresh tears formed in the girl’s sad blue eyes.

“Sarg, where’s Phillips? I need somebody to sit in on this conversation.” Michelle said to Mahone.

“He’s still on his way. I can sit in and document. I may not be your partner but I do have some authority in the justice system,” he replied with a smug look upon his face.

“I guess you’ll have to do.” Michelle turned back to Lucy and smiled, “Shall we step into my office?” She said, motioning towards her car. “What is your name Miss...”

“Lucy. Just Lucy.”

Michelle slid into the drivers’ seat and turned the heater on full as Mahone sat quietly in the back of her car with pen and paper at the ready along with a voice recorder he handed to

Michelle. Lucy sat nervously in the passenger seat and fidgeted as Michelle pushed the 'record' button.

"What exactly happened here?" The tone of her voice displayed a sense of healthy curiosity which seemed to calm Lucy slightly.

"I-I am sorry but I don't know where to begin." A hint of fear crept into her voice as her eyes flashed towards the door confining her in the car.

Michelle smiled, softly encouraging her to continue "How about at the beginning, Miss Lucy. Who are you?"

Lucy blinked her big blue eyes, confusion striking her. "Well, I'm the receptionist at the asylum. Mr Michigan's personal assistant."

A hungry glint of interest flashed across Michelle's eyes before she composed herself and resumed her questioning. "So you were there on the arrival of Miss Rose two nights ago? Was there anything unusual about Elenora's commencement at the institution?"

"After I left Elenora in her room I waited outside her door for a moment. She kept calling out the name of a boy... Alexander I think it was. Most of the new girls tend to converse with themselves, so I let it go; however, when she did not show for breakfast, I began to worry. When I went to fetch her she leapt out the door at me as if she were being chased."

"What happened next?" Michelle said, gently encouraging Lucy to continue.

"I took her down to the hall for morning activities, only to find her in the infirmary an hour later after she stole a sedative needle from one of the nurses and injected it into her neck, but it was strange... she ran from the nurses as if they wanted to kill her and spoke to herself the whole while. We found a crumpled candy wrapper in her hand."

"How did she die Miss Lucy?"

"She jumped."

Her lip quivered as her eyes went glassy in remembrance. "Mr Michigan... he- he..."

Michelle's eyes darkened with anger.

"It's okay, Lucy. I think I know right well what Mr Michigan did."

Lucy pulled herself together and continued her story. "For too long now I have sat by and listened to the horrors of that room, as girl after girl has been passed through those doors in need of help and come out more damaged than ever before. I have taken his abuse because I thought of the things he was capable of doing to me and I cowered in fear, but not anymore. I could bear it no longer as I heard her scream, "Save me, Alex! You said you would save me!" It was as if I had lost control of my body. The next thing I knew I was standing above Mr Michigan's body, his bottle of Blue Label clenched tightly in my hand, but by the time I regained control, Elenora was standing on the window sill, the outline of her broken uniform blowing like a flag in the wind as she peacefully stepped out of the window... she didn't even scream as she fell, but whispered to herself as she went, and then I ran."

Tears began to stream down Lucy's face and Michelle patted her lightly on the arm, barely keeping the smile from her lips. She looked to the Sergeant, whose jaw slackened in surprise as Michelle mouthed a very unprofessional 'I told you so', before turning her attention back to the teary maid.

"Will you testify if asked, Lucy?"

Lucy stopped crying, the corners of her mouth pulling up into a shy smile, "I can do one better" she said, shakily pulling out a disc from inside her skirt pockets. "The information on this disc is all the proof you need to bring him down."

"Finally" Michelle muttered to herself. "There is one last thing I would like to confirm in relation to the body, so if you'll excuse me for a moment, I shall be right back." She opened the car door and strode towards the police tape, crossing the invisible line and kneeling at the Elenora's side. She examined the girl's face and a singular tear slid down her cheek. "You were the girl at Phoenix's office."

A gentle breeze blew across the scene and Michelle shuddered as the hair covering Elenora's face danced in the wind; her parting smile still playing on her broken face.

Reflection Statement for the Short Story 'A Trick of the Light'

The themes and concepts displayed throughout 'A Trick of the Light' were developed and changed in a lengthy process involved with genre, which affected writing style, personal selection of wide reading and independent research. This process ultimately reflected four main themes in my story: corruption in multiple 'systems' within society and its effect upon the individual; insanity in young people; the treatment of women in society and the constant battle between good and evil. Along with peer and teacher evaluation, my progress throughout the year saw changes in form, structure and subject matter that contributed to the story's overall success.

From the beginning of the year I was set on writing a short story that abided by the conventions of fantasy fiction. It was a genre that was, and still is, of personal interest to me and made up a large part of my wide reading and was the subject of much of my initial brainstorming and research. Writers such as Patrick Rothfuss and Brent Weeks inspired me through their well-structured novels and their powers of description. This was a skill I wished to acquire through the completion of my major work in a style which I enjoyed writing. I was to reflect through my work, at this stage, an inner battle associated with good and evil that ultimately resulted in insanity, a theme which stayed with my story until the end through the character of Elenora.

As I began to research the conventions of fantasy and plan my story I realised that eight thousand words would not be enough for me to complete it in the way I would like to. However, it wasn't until I proposed my ideas and concerns at the viva voce that I decided to change the genre of my short story. I was advised to research into an alternative genre known

as magic realism and found it to be the perfect avenue to apply fantasy elements in a context that would allow me to write a story in eight thousand words.

Magic realism itself is a genre that incorporates fantastical elements into a non-fantastical setting in a way that the events that occur are portrayed as a believable reality. For example; novels such as Becca Fitzpatrick's 'Hush hush' (2008) that tells the story of fallen angel in modern day America and was part of the inspiration for the character of Alex. I received most of my information regarding the subject from Bruce Holland Rogers' article, "*What is Magic Realism?*" an article in which he discussed the conventions and various themes of the genre. I found these conventions of mixing reality with the paranormal to be a perfect guise to be able to write in a modern day setting, but in a fantastical way. I applied this through the introduction of the character of Alexander, whose presence was made legitimate through insanity, but throughout the first section of the story is portrayed as a real person, in the first person narrative given by Elenora.

This change of genre from fantasy to magic realism impacted on the way I wrote because I had to make the language I used more appropriate to the context I was writing in and the images I described less dramatic. My story had to become realistic through the form and any fantastical elements had to be explained in the end with logical reasoning for it to be believed. Through this genre change I was able to strengthen my concept of insanity through the impact of a real setting, but I also had to make the battle of good and evil a subtle one, choosing to do this through the constant imagery of dark and light within my story. This dark and light is hinted at through the title itself as Elenora's name means 'of the light' and the

'trick' refers to, not only to the tricks her mind plays on herself, but also how the audience is deceived until the very end by the reality that she sees herself in.

I planned to write in this magic realist style under the guise of Elenora's growing schizophrenia, a mental disorder in which repercussions are most commonly seen in young adults due to past experiences. For example, Elenora's witnessing of her parents' joint suicide. Hallucinations, hearing voices, delusions, social withdrawal, paranoia and anxiety are all common symptoms that are associated with schizophrenia and thus are responsible for the character of Alexander. He is created in Elenora's mind as a hallucination due to her condition, in an attempt to feel security. He is never referred to by any of the other characters and is important because he gives Elenora hope, ultimately leading to her demise as she believes they are flying away to a safe place, but in reality she is falling to her death.

This idea of two different realities was inspired by a number of related and also prescribed texts from the Senior English Course. For example; Joseph Heller's novel, *Catch 22* explores the idea of insanity and its effect upon the individual in a cold war context through characters such as Yossarian, who tries to use insanity as an escape from the Pianosa air base. I have taken this concept of 'escape' into a more psychological context, as Elenora delves into her own mind to escape whilst Yossarian uses insanity as a cover that will allow him to be sent home.

However, it was David Fincher's 1999 film, *Fight Club* that gave me the idea of splitting my story in two, to explain the happenings surrounding Elenora. This is shown through Elenora being, for the most part, unaware that her reality is twisted, causing havoc amongst the lives of the people around her and leaving the audience in appreciative shock when the truth is

revealed by a third person, second part of the story revolving around Detective Michelle Petersen.

The intended audience has changed considerably through the development of my story because of the decision to write in the 'magic realist' genre. This change gave me the opportunity to widen my intended audience to include those interested in fantasy but also those who enjoy realistic writing and situations, as all the actions and characters in my story have a logical reasoning as to why they exist. However, apart from the influence of genre on my audience I would expect those who would most likely enjoy it to be of a mature mindset due to the imagery associated with insanity, suicide and sexual assault.

The above themes allow my story and the characters within it to become more relatable to a modern day audience and through this another main theme becomes apparent through the treatment of women and those with mental illnesses. I incorporated the poor treatment of these two groups in my story to highlight the prejudice that is still part of society today, although hidden and denied. Through my story I wanted to show that women are still being oppressed in the workplace and are constantly taken advantage of and looked down upon by many of those in power. This is shown through Lucy, the staff member at the facility and the girls that live there as they are forced to wear unsuitable attire that does not encourage professional relationships. I also reinforced this by the way Sergeant Mahone reacts to Michelle's accusations against Michigan by dismissing them completely. At first these things highlight the existence of sexist oppression; however Lucy's testimony gives the women in the story a voice and grants them ultimate power by presenting the evidence that will lock Mr Michigan away and free his female employees and patients from his tyranny.

The purpose of my story as a whole though, is to reflect the impact of corruption in the system through the power of the wealthy and its effect on the innocent. This was a theme developed to enhance the social impact of my story and to strengthen my concept of insanity. In this instance the 'corruption' is instigated by the almost mysterious character of Kent Michigan. 'The system', in which Michigan corrupts however, is not only one of the law but also the processes involved with the rehabilitation of young girls within mental disabilities. He does this, not only through owning 'Kent Michigan's Mental Institution for Young Woman', but also by paying off men like Dr. Carl Phoenix (referred to as 'Judge' in Elenora's mind because that's what he is to her), a man whose job is to help people recover, but instead his greed condemns the innocent, his patients, to the mercy of Mr Michigan.

Overall, through the processes taken to achieve the final results in 'A Trick of the Light' and having overcome both personal and school related obstacles along the way, I have been able to create a work that I am proud to submit and that reflects the originality of my concepts and my personal style of writing.

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