

# Somnium

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First Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2013 Young Writers' Contest

Owings, MD—Northern High School

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Har,

*Know that I would give anything to go with you to St. Casimir's, but ALAS! Some peculiar rumors (no more peculiar than usual, I assure you) have been surfacing lately that demand my IMMEDIATE attention. There's been talk of strange activity up further North that I fully intend to investigate while the trail is fresh.*

*Of course, I have confidence that you'll find something extraordinary while roving the halls of that musty old institution. You're certainly capable enough already.*

*I hope you understand,  
Dad*

Harlow Marwick balled the scrap of paper in her gloved hands, not feeling particularly surprised that her father had chosen his work over his paternal obligations for perhaps the ninetieth time in her seventeen-year-old life. But with her lack of concern she felt, as always, that little twinge of disappointment, too. Hastily scrawled apologies on torn notebook paper didn't make up for anything, and he knew it. Even so, maybe it was better she investigate the paranormal occurrences in St. Casimir's Research Institution on her own. It wasn't like she hadn't been unaccompanied before. As her dad had so cheerfully pointed out, she wasn't incapable of performing her own ghost hunts. It was in the Marwick tradition, after all. Her father and grandfather and maybe even great-grandfather all tracked the supernatural in their time, and had passed their knowledge and experience to their children.

Harlow's mother, however, never involved herself with tracking ghosts, only communicating with them. She was the most famous medium in New England, according to the *New York Times*, and her job was just as demanding as Harlow's father's, which was why they had made the journey up to Maine without her.

*And then there was one*, she thought, a little bitterly.

She looked up at the daunting edifice before her, bleak and gray against a sky that was equally so, and clutched her briefcase—her father's, filled with EVP recorders and cameras and flashlights and anything else she needed—close to her chest, tucking her head against the clawing, late October wind. She tasted ice in the air, ice and salt, undoubtedly from the rocky shore far below. St. Casimir's perched precariously at the edge of a cliff, and if one was to take a single misstep away from its Eastern end, it was unlikely that person would survive. Never mind the fact that the water was cold enough to stop your heart, but at the bottom of the cliff there were jagged rocks jutting out

from the dark waves like crooked, rotten teeth waiting to swallow both ships and people whole.

Approaching the institution, she noticed one of the rusted front doors hanging inward at an angle, and could only see darkness beyond it. She took a deep breath in, sparing one last glance at the barren, gray world at her back, and cautiously stepped through the doorway.

Inside, it was possibly colder than the outside had been. This was comforting only in that it meant the possibility of spirits wandering about, pulling energy and warmth from the living things around them. And, right then, that living thing was Harlow. She shivered, reaching in the battered briefcase for her flashlight.

The light it cast was ghostly on its own; a bright streak that only very weakly pierced the veil of shadows within the run-down institution.

"Hello?" she called, into the darkness. Her mother had once told her ghosts only responded to direct inquiries, and that hesitant voices weren't purposeful enough for them to take notice of. "Is anybody here?" she continued, louder than before.

Her foot made a faint *squeeshing* noise as it came down again on the floor. She lifted it quickly, feeling how it stuck for just a moment, as if she had stepped in mud or water or—

Her fingers went numb around the flashlight as she angled its beam down at the ground. Blood! It was sticky and bright red, still fresh.

And it didn't stop there. It was smeared all over the hall, over the doorframes of what looked like stripped hospital rooms, in the form of smudged footprints and handprints and strange symbols that hinted at demonic rituals. She followed its trail to the staircase at the end of the hallway. It was leading her somewhere.

*Leave no stone unturned*, she thought. Her father often used that phrase. She swallowed the bitter taste of fear at the back of her tongue, chanting to herself words of encouragement.

*It's not anything you haven't done before, Har. This is routine. It's normal for someone, Elwyn. You've been doing stuff like this since you were ten.*

She found herself following the trail of blood up the stairs, turning corners to find more stairs, and more stairs still. Finally, the trail came to a stop at the last flight, and, at the end of it, a black door. The beam of her flashlight traveled past its chipping paint and dulled handle as she studied the handprints that turned into claw marks further down.

Harlow ran her hand along the deep grooves, in wonder. The door was made of a dense sort of metal. It was rusted, like the other doors, but one would think human fingernails incapable of making such marks in it. She let out a rickety breath. This could imply the presence of a demonic entity.

She braced herself for the possible danger, turning the handle of the black door, trying her best not to think about all the horrible stories of ghost hunters having run-ins with demons. Harlow gripped her flashlight tighter, as if it were a weapon against evil.

The door abruptly fell open, off its hinges, slamming down on the dusty wood floor in a spray of black paint.

Harlow winced, taking a few uncertain steps into the room, setting down her case. It was hard to imagine a better way to anger whatever resided here than to be brazenly loud. She was already trespassing in its shadowy domain, but now there was no doubt in her mind her presence had gone by ignored. Her whole body began to shake with the thought, with the tenseness she could feel in the air. Something was about to happen, and she could feel it. She could—

She screamed as what felt like two hands grabbed her ankles, yanking her sharply off her feet. She hit the floor elbows first, sending pangs of white-hot pain lacing up her forearms, rattling her teeth. The flashlight rolled away from her, and, as she reached to retrieve it, her hand brushed something cold and smooth.

She held it into the light, recognizing it as a sort of small gas cylinder with a red knob at the top. Turning it in her hands, she could see that there was a warning label on the side.

**WARNING: HIGHLY TOXIC. DO NOT INHALE. MAY CAUSE SEVERE HALLUCINATIONS. POTENTIALLY FATAL.**

Gingerly, she set the cylinder down, reclaiming her flashlight to sweep the room for the apparition that had knocked her to the floor. The room was winter still, just for a moment.

Then, the window to her left shattered without warning, exploding inward in a glittering avalanche of glass.

She put her arms over her head, to protect her face and eyes, turning away from the raining shards. When she lowered them, she found she no longer needed the flashlight's assistance. The pale, silver light of the outside streamed in through the serrated edges of the frame, bleaching the room around her. She glanced around, with a growing dread. The top floor of St. Casimir's was sectioned off on either side into rooms. Each room had a number and a thick door sealing it away, some open, some closed. From what she could see, these rooms were designed to keep everything out. Sound. Light. Maybe even fresh air.

She blinked. *Air*: The gas cylinder!

Harlow put a hand over her mouth to keep in her small exclamation of horror. This place wasn't a research institution. It was a torture chamber.

There were people—human *beings*—who had died here, died horribly and inhumanely in a state of endless nightmares. As this realization formed in her mind, a thin line of blood began to inch across the far wall, forming letters. The letters became increasingly angrier and larger and more uneven. Harlow could make out only one word, over and over.

SOMNIUM. SOMNIUM. SOMNIUM.

She knew the word, of course. Her father had insisted on lessons in Latin and other ancient languages, in case she encountered especially old entities or texts. The word meant things like “dream” and “nonsense” and “sleep” and... “hallucination.” Belatedly, she recalled the warning label on the cylinder: *May cause severe hallucinations.*

She caught a movement out of the corner of her eye, and whirled to see the knob of the gas cylinder turning by its own accord, very slowly. The air around it bled a sickly yellow, like the aging pages of a book, the drug spreading quickly through the air.

The edges of her vision began to darken, and her thoughts felt suddenly like mist, ungraspable and insignificant. Her legs buckled, and she went down on her knees, temples throbbing.

Harlow backed up, towards the window, holding her breath.

The demon had another idea in mind. Something blunt, heavy, and invisible struck her in the gut, forcing her to gasp a breath inward. *Oh no*, she thought. *No. No!*

A figure began to take shape before her. No, several figures. Faceless people in hospital gowns, with blisters all over their skin. Others with twisted limbs and arched backs, in crimson-smeared straitjackets. Their forms seemed indistinct, leaving wispy outlines in their wake as they shuffled closer to her. The word SOMNIUM seemed to dance across her vision, as if it were cut into the backs of her eyelids. She whispered the word, smiling a little and not knowing why she was smiling. She felt strange. Harlow turned to the window, seeing not silver light but an array of many colors. It was so...beautiful. She moved towards it, like the grotesque procession behind her seemed to be doing.

A snarl sounded behind her, deep and feral and dangerous.

She turned to see a black dog, as big as a wolf, its shoulders raised in aggravation. Its lip was curled over sharp, yellowed teeth, drool dripping from its maw in frothy streams. Now she didn't feel like smiling. Now she felt like running. She felt terrified.

The light from the window seemed to invite her to it. She jumped into its embrace, gladly, as the beast lurched towards her.

She plummeted downwards, limbs flailing, into the icy air. The biting October wind jolted her, and she realized that she was falling into the heart of the cliff, into the choppy, dark blue waves and sharp rocks below.

A scream tore out of her, as ripping and violent as the ocean that rapidly approached...

Harlow never believed those stories about life after death. Why would she, when she thought she knew everything there was to know about it? She wasn't raised in a household that ingrained religious nonsense about angels and bright lights at the ends of tunnels. For Harlow, there were only two certainties about death: the existence of ghosts and the uncertainty otherwise.

But there was a bright light now, a wishy-washy orb hovering just above her head. She blinked against the blur, as if trying to keep her eyes open underwater. She struggled to move, turn her head, lift her hand, but found she couldn't do much more than blink.

"She's awake." A rumbling voice slipped across the ring of shadows gathered around the whitish light. "Dear God, Elise, what have you done?"

"How she looks isn't important, Dante," spoke another voice, to her left. "All that matters is that she's alive."

"She won't be happy about this," the rumbling one argued, graver than before.

"And why not?" The third voice was a scoff from the right side of the glow, much louder than the others. "She should be grateful Elise managed to salvage her soul in time."

The first, Dante, sighed. "But at what cost?"

"Oh, don't be so *melodramatic*, little brother," the noisier one shot back. "The scarring isn't so bad."

"It's not the scarring." Now Dante's tone held an undercurrent of anger, though it was resignedly so. "We've damned her more than we've saved her."

"You're the one who suggested we do something..."

"Leon." A pale oval shape blurred into sight as the older woman scolded him, ringed in a silver halo of hair. "Enough."

They were all silent for a moment, leaving Harlow alone with her own frantic mind. *Where am I? Who are these people? What are they talking about?*

As she struggled to see through the haze still clinging to her vision, two other ovals moved into view. The one to her right had to be Leon, a man possibly in his early twenties from his voice. He was strong-jawed and bearded, with a shock of black, curly hair.

That left the center face. This one had a sharper, more angular structure to it, especially visible in the cheekbones. The dark, fuzzy indents of his eyes narrowed as he regarded her. "You think she can hear us?"

Elise's mouth looked poised to respond when she was cut off by a dull thud, over their heads.

Leon cursed. "That's the doctor. We can't let him find her. That would be..."

"Bad," Elise finished, darkly. "Very bad." Both boys nodded in concurrence. "Leon, come with me. You stay here, Dante. Keep an eye on the girl." The center oval grunted wordlessly.

Leon and Elise's faces disappeared, causing Harlow to start. They were there one second and then they...weren't.

*Am I being tended to by ghosts?* she wondered, distantly alarmed by the thought. The irony was certainly not lost on her.

Dante's face drew nearer to hers, and she could make out some details of it more clearly than. His hair was dark and short, with a tone to his skin that hinted at Latin American descent and a frown that seemed to be carved into his expression with a knife. And his eyes. His eyes were an electric blue, and she could almost taste the sparks that leapt from them.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, his voice thick with regret. "If you can hear me, then listen closely: You died down there before we found you. When we reattached your soul to your body, it became tethered to St. Casimir's."

Her heart began to beat faster, pounding against her ribs like a prisoner's fist against cell bars. Dante gripped her hand. "You're trapped here forever."

**Honorable Mentions**  
**BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2013**  
**Young Writers' Contest**

**Hacking**

Dan O'Neill  
Baltimore, MD

**Wing Stock**

Jennifer Paffenbarger  
Baltimore, MD

**Bare Feet and the Raven**

Margaret Fletcher  
Owings, MD



**Grumpy Winged Kitty**

# The Golden Fish

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Second Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2013 Young Writers' Contest

Baltimore, MD—Friends School

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Alexander was walking with his sister Annabelle to the bus stop. They were late, and probably should have been running, but Annabelle refused, so they walked, as Alexander grew increasingly worried that they would miss the bus. He had dutifully promised his parents to watch Annabelle incredibly carefully, which must have been some sort of a joke, because ten-year-olds with overactive imaginations cannot watch anything incredibly carefully. In fact, Annabelle might have been better off watching herself, as the presence of Alexander and his antics could derail even the most focused of children. As they left the house, Alexander had also promised his parents that both he and his sister would actually end up on the bus, something Alexander was positively certain he could accomplish. As the walk to the bus stop progressed, however, he noticed a surplus of interesting caterpillars, and paused to stop for 30 seconds at each one. This behavior, Alexander noticed with guilt, was the sole reason for their tardiness and exactly what his parents had instructed him to avoid.

Just as Alexander was acknowledging his responsibility in the situation, the bus, the one they were supposed to be on, the one Alexander promised his parents he would shepherd Annabelle onto, drove by them, heading toward the bus stop Alexander swore to his parents he would arrive at on time.

"Isn't that our bus?" Annabelle asked Alexander suspiciously.

"Yes. Run," Alexander instructed. Alexander began to sprint. "*I'm going so fast,*" Alexander thought to himself, "*that if I spread my arms apart, I would probably be able to take off.*"

As soon as the thought occurred to him, he was suddenly levitating, gaining height and speed, soaring higher and higher. He felt glorious, like a tropical bird of paradise. He flipped and turned in the air, somersaulting and cartwheeling. His tricks were endless! If it were up to him, he would never come back to the ground. Walking would simply never be the same. "*Why would I ever walk, when I could fly?*" Alexander wondered to himself, doing corkscrews over the treetops. Alexander knew he would be late for the bus, but he could catch the next one. He was sure that when his parents heard about his new superpowers, they would be so mystified and impressed that they would be forced to forget about being angry at him for missing the bus.

"*I'll never have to go to school anymore,*" Alexander thought to himself gleefully. "*I'll become a teacher myself, the youngest teacher there ever was. And I'll open a school where I teach children how to fly, and I'll be famous not only for my flying talents but also for my willingness to dispense my flying secrets to my students.*

*Mom and Dad will be so proud of me, and I could teach them how to fly, too. They're a bit old to start learning, but I could probably make an exception.*"

But before Alexander could continue to consider how much his life would change as a result of his brand-new powers of flight, he noticed that his momentum was slowing. Before long, his toes were grazing the uppermost branches of the trees. Alexander was sinking, his powers short-lived and dying fast. Luckily, instead of colliding with an enormous evergreen tree, Alexander crash-landed in a small, round clearing in the woods, covered with soft moss to cushion his fall.

The clearing was blanketed with vegetation, with a delicate brook running through the middle of it, slicing the glade in two. Alexander had fallen on the left side of the river. Realizing he was thirsty after his flying adventures, Alexander went to the bank of the river to get a drink.

After sipping some water from the stream, Alexander noticed a golden fish swimming around in the water. The sun sparkled on its scales, and it glowed brightly under the surface. Alexander blew bubbles in the water, but the fish was not scared away. "What a very brave fish you are," Alexander cooed to the fish, who continued to swim around. "I'd imagine other fish would be more startled by a boy like me."

The fish stopped swimming abruptly and popped his head out of the water. "Don't talk to me like I'm a child. I am a grown fish, you arrogant little infant."

Alexander was stunned, yet incredibly excited at having possibly discovered yet another power, the ability to talk to animals. "How are you talking? You're a fish!"

"Am I? What a clever boy you are, to figure out a thing like that."

"Am I the only human you can talk to? Can other humans understand you?" Alexander asked excitedly.

"They could understand me if I ever conversed with humans. Of course, I never would, considering none of you are all that interesting," the fish said snootily.

"But you're conversing with me," Alexander said.

"Only because you were speaking to me so impudently that I had to retort. How would you like it if some fish came walking up to you acting superior and condescending, like he knew everything about you?"

"But fish don't walk," Alexander asserted.

The fish looked like he was about to scream. "Whatever," he spat, fuming.

"Aren't you going to offer me three wishes? Most talking fish provide some wishes," Alexander said, recalling a fable

his mother had read to him.

"Three wishes? That's ridiculous! I'm not some sort of magical fish. What, I can talk so now I'm expected to grant wishes? You must be crazy!" The fish flicked his tail angrily.

"I'm sorry!" Alexander said anxiously, desiring nothing more than to stop unintentionally upsetting his new scaly friend.

"And even if I could grant wishes," the fish continued spitefully, "I certainly wouldn't hear any of yours! Walking around, demanding wishes... so impolite..." The fish trailed off, irritated.

Alexander desperately wanted to make friends with the fish, but he was starting to realize that the creature was far too grumpy to accept Alexander's friendship. Alexander's father once told him that if anyone ever spoke disrespectfully to him, he should always stand up for himself. So talking fish or no talking fish, Alexander refused to be insulted. "I won't be yelled at! I've only been trying to be nice, and you aren't being very understanding of our special differences."

"Special differences? Do you mean that you're a fool and I'm all-knowing?"

"This is exactly what I'm talking about. Why can't you just be friendly? I'm not a fool."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really. I got perfect marks in spelling, as a matter of fact," Alexander boasted.

"Well look around, little boy. Do you know how to get out of this clearing? Do you know where you are? How do you expect to escape to find your sister?"

Alexander's heart dropped. Annabelle! He had forgotten all about her! "How do I get out of here?"

"I'm not sure," the fish lied, "but perhaps your talents in spelling could help you." The fish then laughed raucously. "Though, they'll probably be of very little use."

Alexander gulped. "Please help me get out of here!"

"Oh, I'm not sure if I can help you. Quite a lot of things to do, you see," the fish said, and began to float off.

"Wait! Please!" Alexander begged. "I have a bus to catch!"

"Not my problem," the fish called from far down the stream.

"Please help!" Alexander shouted in the fish's direction.

But the fish was gone. Alexander got an idea. "Fish! I have a riddle for you!"

"What's that?" the fish asked, so far away now that Alexander could scarcely hear him.

"Well, you say you're very smart. If you can answer my riddle, I'm stuck here forever. But, if you *can't* answer my riddle, you have to help me escape from this clearing," Alexander propositioned. The fish swam back to Alexander and began to laugh at him.

"That's ridiculous. That would be turning my situation from a win-win to a win-lose. I could walk away from you no matter what, so why should I put myself in a situation where I might be required to help you?"

Fighting the urge to tell the fish yet again that he was incapable of walking, Alexander bit his tongue and said, "If you walk off now I'll assume it was because you were too frightened of answering incorrectly."

The fish paused, and then said, "You couldn't possibly outsmart me. What's the riddle?"

Alexander had not thought his plan through this far.

"Well?" said the fish impatiently.

Alexander stated his riddle firmly. "What is blue, sits on a stoop, and plays the harmonica?"

The fish looked puzzled.

"Are you stumped?"

"No! Just... give me a moment, I'm sure it's very simple!" the fish said angrily, fervently trying to work out the riddle.

"Have you given up?"

"Hah! Please!" the fish laughed a little too loudly, "I nearly have it figured out."

Alexander waited a few moments. "Got it yet?"

The fish paused, and then he shouted with rage, "No! This riddle is clearly impossible. What is it? What's the answer? What is blue, sits on a stoop, and plays the harmonica?"

"Isn't it obvious? A trout."

"That's nonsense. A trout is not blue."

"You could paint it blue."

"A trout does not sit on a stoop."

"You could put it there."

"A trout does not play the harmonica!"

"Well, no. But I had to throw something in there to make it harder, otherwise you would've guessed it."

The fish was fuming, but he admitted defeat. "Fine. You win," he said begrudgingly.

"So tell me how to get out of here," Alexander demanded.

"Easy," said the fish, "If you walk through the river, you'll come out on the other side with the path revealed to you."

Alexander did just as the fish instructed, and as promised, a path opened up on the right side of the clearing, leading Alexander straight to the bus stop. Annabelle was sitting there.

"Annabelle! Annabelle!" Alexander shouted, running up to her.

"What are you blathering about?" Annabelle asked with irritation.

"I lost you!"

"Have you gone insane? You've been sitting next to me this whole time! We've been waiting for the bus, don't you remember?"

Alexander blinked in disbelief.

"Honestly, Alexander," Annabelle sighed, "Sometimes I think you just drift off into your own little world."

"I've really been at the bus stop this whole time?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure I'd have noticed if you'd just gotten up and flown away."

# Radioactive: June's Story

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Third Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2013 Young Writers' Contest

Mt. Airy, MD—Linganore High School

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*September 7, 8*

I decided that, in light of recent events, I should write down everything that has happened and will happen here. In case somebody tries to figure out what went on and finds this journal, thanks for caring enough to look for it.

Anyways, I suppose introductions are in order. My name's June. I'll be turning 18 in four months—hopefully. To clarify a few things, I'll explain what happened to our city with what I know, or at least with what information they decided we could have. To give you an idea of our life, our city's run by Lochlan & Crum, the nuclear power company. "Nuclear power's the new frontier," that's what we learn in school. The Company's Headquarters and main Production Building were built off of their first factory, which was right by the lake north of town; some sort of "legacy" thing I guess.

Unfortunately, about six or seven weeks ago, the dam that was holding the lake away from the city ruptured, and the city was flooded. It was quite the crisis; practically every part of the city was covered. Even today there are puddles everywhere. The southern part of the city's still flooded. We naively believed that the flood was a tragedy, and things couldn't get worse. Nothing better than hindsight, am I right? Well, the sun's starting to set and I need to find some shelter for the night, I'll write the rest of the story later. Goodnight, whoever.

Sincerely,  
June

*September 15*

Good afternoon, whoever. I've found an abandoned meat locker with a loft to stay in (score!). Now I don't have to spend as much time scavenging for food, so I'm going to use my new free time to write you. I'll pick up where I stopped the other day, just after the flood.

So, we all worked to clean up the mess and piece our lives back together, and things started getting weird. Everyone—adults, friends, even little kids—started losing their hair. Everyone was complaining of fatigue and looked paler.

At first, doctors merely brushed it off as stress and the recent trauma of the flood, saying it was only a reaction to what we had just gone through. But it didn't go away; it got worse. People couldn't sleep, they couldn't keep any food down, and their veins started popping out of their skin and turning this disgusting greenish-purple color around their arms and necks. Hospitals were overflowing with patients just weeks after this started. But hardly anyone could take care of them. Everybody, it seemed, was becoming affected.

Eventually, we were deemed worthy of an explanation. We were informed that, prior to the flood, there was a slip-

up in the disposal process of the Company's "contaminated materials." They were dumped into the lake. So, thanks to the flood, we'd all been exposed to highly toxic chemicals, and it was messing with our systems.

By the end of the second week, the whole city had become infected, and the government finally got involved. I thought they were going to help us, decontaminate us or something, but they decided we were past the point of saving. I guess I can't really blame them. They agreed that sealing us off, covering us up, and waiting for us to die out with the radiation was the best course of action. So they put up walls and warning signs. Maybe they've taken this city off the map. I don't know.

On a personal note, I hate fluorescent yellow, and I've seen enough trefoils to last a lifetime. We're no longer the world's problem, but that didn't exactly take care of things for us left in the city. I need to stop writing now; I'm just too pissed off. Sorry.

Sincerely,  
June

*September 21*

Sorry it's been awhile. Apparently the meat locker wasn't as abandoned as I thought, but that's a story for later. I need to finish explaining what happened. So, the government sealed off the city and left us for dead under the pretense that we were all contaminated.

But that's not the case. Well, I'm pretty sure that's not the case. Everyone else got all pale and nasty, but none of my hair fell out. I didn't get any stiffness in my joints, and my arms and neck are visible-vein free. I've been spending my time stuck here trying to find an explanation for why I'm the only one left. Well, I'm assuming I'm the only one; I haven't found anybody else who's stayed like me.

Anyways, to my understanding, radiation enters the body and messes with your genes and cells; that's what's gone wrong in everyone. So, what's keeping me apart has to do with my genes and cells. Maybe I have some kind of super immunity? I remember learning that when you get sick, the body fights it off, and that's how you get better. I think it's the white blood cells that protect the body and fight off the sickness. Maybe I've got crazy, strong, white blood cells? I honestly have no clue; thinking of an explanation passes time and calms me down.

Maybe if you find this journal with my body, you could run some tests and find out for me? Sorry if that's a little morbid, I'm just really curious. Anyways, on the other side of being the only normal one, I'm also surrounded by an entire populace of radiated citizens. Speaking of which, I can

hear some of them up the street. I've got to keep moving, I'll write later.

Sincerely,  
June

*September 23*

Sorry about the other day. Things aren't exactly peaceful here. Anyways, I'm going to tell you about the people that are left. It's hard to explain exactly what they're like, but I'll try.

From a distance, they look like hunched-over, rotted things trying to hobble their way at you. Some of them have it worse, though. They're on the ground clawing up the dirt, trying to move towards any source of food. Up close, you can see their ashy-white complexion, and the dark purple shadows their eyes sit in. You see the way their jaws hang open, exposing a decomposing black mess behind yellowed, disgusting teeth. Creeping up their necks and faces, as well as down their arms, are greenish-purple veins that were once blue and red blood veins—thank you, radiation. The most disgusting parts are their hands and feet, which are—I kid you not—decaying.

My guess is that the radiation has somehow disrupted, maybe stopped, some of the blood flow in their bodies, accounting for the discolored veins and dead-white skin. It would also explain the decaying of their extremities. Think about it; if blood isn't flowing, the body assumes that it's dead and begins to decompose. That would also account for why they can't move well and are hunched over; the blood-flow disruption also affects the body's movement. It's like when your foot falls asleep and you have to walk around like an idiot till the blood's flowing again, only they can't get the flow back. But the lack of blood flowing disrupts more than agility.

Something's gone wrong in their heads, too. Maybe that's directly related to the radiation, but all I know is they're mentally *gone*. I'm no genius, but I think the radiation or lack of blood has closed something off in their brains. They've reverted back to some primal way of thinking. They can't speak or remember families or friends; all they want is food and water, survival stuff. They don't even have the capacity to understand what's food and what's not. They crawl around and munch on anything; a rabbit, empty wrappers from the garbage, or someone's decomposing arm that's been lying in the street for a week. They eat it. Which leads into my story about what happened to me today, but it's getting late again and I need a new place to crash.

I know what I've written is a lot to take in; I just hope you believe me. Someone needs to know what kind of hell this place turned into.

Sincerely,  
June

*September 27*

Good morning, whoever. I think I need a new name for you, I know it hasn't been that long, but for me it's been forever. Besides, "whoever" is a little impersonal, don't you

think? I'd like to think that if you find this and I'm still alive, we'd be friends. So that's what I'll call you, friend. Anyways, I promised I'd tell you about the situation at the meat locker the other day and I never did. However, I did explain what's left of the people who lived here and what they're currently like.

Remember I wrote about them going after anything and everything for food? Well, that includes each other, as well as yours truly. So far, I've done a pretty good job of avoiding them, and when I see one, they're pretty easy to run away from. There's a perk of having good blood-flow. I don't exactly have anything to defend myself with, though. When I left my house, I took a kitchen knife with me, but then I dropped it when I was running away from what was left of an old neighbor. I guess a gun would be handy, but I'd have no idea how to use it even if I could find one. I'm not really sure I could shoot any of them, either. I know it's crazy, but I can't help but remember them as the same people walking around enjoying the nice weather less than two months ago. I'm going to stop talking about this now, because it freaks me out.

As I was saying about the other day, I woke up and left the meat locker to find a warmer jacket; the temperature's dropping, and I thought I was going to freeze the night before. Fortunately, I found a nice coat a little before noon; the clocks don't really work anymore, so I try to guess the time off of the sun's position. It sucks when the sky's cloudy.

Anyways, I went back to the locker. I wasn't paying as much attention as I should have been (I'm not too experienced with living in an apocalypse just yet) and I must've left the door open that morning. Unknown to me, a horde of the rotted things were scavenging through the back for food; I guess the smell brought them in. They heard the bell jingle as I walked in, and stumbled into the front for me. I panicked, but had to get my supplies from the loft. I quickly ran up the staircase and dead-bolted the door. When I moved up there a few days before, I pushed the dresser by the door in case I needed a barricade, as though it was a question. I then grabbed my bag and climbed out to the balcony of the adjacent building. From there I went out into the street and started down the road.

The good thing about the people's radiated brains is that they're too stupid to track you. If they see you, they come at you; if you get away and hide, they can't figure out where you've gone. The sun's setting, I'll write you later, friend.

Sincerely,  
June

*October 3*

Hello, friend. I spent the morning scavenging around; I was running low on water. To give you an idea of my current lifestyle, and to give you some survivor tips, so far I've learned to keep yourself in full supply of nonperishable food items and water, as well as never try to settle down anywhere for more than a couple of days. It's also a good idea to keep your belongings in a ready-to-go-at-anytime

position. The more south into the city I travel, the fewer radiated people there seem to be. I have no idea what that's about, but I'm not complaining.

It's been a quiet past couple of days, and I'm so well-equipped with supplies that I've got more time than I've had since the city was sealed off! If this keeps up, maybe I'll be able to write every day, or at least every other day. I guess I shouldn't be getting my hopes up; optimism can kill you and all that, but I'm overdue for a little hope.

On the downside, all this time reminds me of my isolation. Sure, I've got these letters to write, but it's not the same as a person beside you. Maybe I'm just too sentimental, and not that you're not good enough, but I really miss real people.

Sincerely,  
June

*October 8*

Good evening, friend, I've got great news! The world's got a funny way of working, that's my conclusion. As I was drifting around the southern part of town, I ended up facing down the barrel of a gun, which would normally be frightening, but you know what kind of person can handle a gun? A normal, human person!

She said her name's Isabelle, and I think she's a year or so younger than me. She seemed hesitant about me at first. She said it's hard to trust outsiders, but she told me she'd take me back to her camp to see a medic about an injury of

mine. Meaning, right now, I'm sitting in an apartment with normal humans! Isabelle said there are six others with them, but they're out looking for supplies.

I'm still half-worried this is a dream and I'm going to wake up in the street with my head in a puddle. I asked Isabelle if she knew of more groups like this around. She told me there weren't, that she'd have found them if there were. I pointed out that she didn't find me till now, and she made a face at me. I think Isabelle likes me, though. After I told them about what happened at the locker, she punched me in the arm and said I had spunk.

The medic's name is Anne; I think she's in her thirties. She was a doctor before the flood, and agreed with my idea of why we aren't affected by the radiation. She said she had proof, too, but when I asked more questions, she told me to forget about it. Isabelle says the others should be back soon, so I'm going to stop writing now. I feel like a kid waiting for a holiday; I'm so happy!

Just this morning I woke up feeling like the only person on Earth, yet now I'm in the company of the first real people I've seen in months! I'll write as often as I can. Isabelle said they're up to something big, but she wants one of the others to explain it to me. I have a feeling this is going to change everything!

Very Sincerely,  
June



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