

Origins

My father always told me I was born with my eyes open. It was a story he liked to repeat from time to time, like a favorite party anecdote—only he couldn't relate it in company. This story was private. Creation myths, they're called.

He told me the myth because he thought I needed it. He thought I sensed that I was different, and I needed an explanation. He used to bring out the photo albums that archived my early years—picture after picture of a small, oddly still child, dark eyes wide and unblinking. I'm never smiling in those pictures, either alone or in a group. Every few pages, the books are punctuated by entire class portraits. In every one, a girl with dark eyes and short dark hair stands a little apart from the other children—or perhaps they stand apart from her—and stares with those wide eyes at the camera.

He need not have bothered with the myth. Every child thinks they're different—it's our earliest solipsistic impulse. It's so human. To feel lost is to feel alive; we're a species of solipsists. Big human brains are a mistake of evolution—too big to find satisfaction in small lonely lives.

And anyway, I never thought I was different. I just didn't like to get my picture taken. I found cameras innately suspicious. Why would anyone need an image of me? I quietly held the belief that their purposes were nefarious, and I expressed it by refusing to obey any photographer's request for a smile.

I didn't think I was different. He could have just told me the truth. I think about that sometimes. What would I have done differently, had I known?

When she was ten years old, they went on a road trip to see her aunt. Charles Logan loved road trips. He liked to think of himself as something of a nomad, even though they never moved anywhere. He'd called the estate his home base since before she was born. But they went on trips all the time. When she was ten, they went to see her aunt at Other Side, and they stopped at a gas station.

The rain was hard against the window, and the sky was so dark she could hardly tell it was day. Charles pulled to a stop near one of the pumps, set the brake, and turned to her.

"Do you need to go to the restroom?"

She shook her head, staring sullenly.

"All right. I'm going to go inside, and I might be a few minutes." He turned down the edges of his mouth, his best attempt at looking stern. "You will stay in the car. You will not wander off, under any circumstances."

She didn't nod this time. She only stared. Charles sighed and went inside.

Years later, when she thinks of it, she will remember the sound of the rain. She'll remember reading a book about another world, but she won't remember the book or the world. And she'll remember thinking she could see something, about thirty feet ahead of her. Something out in the rain.

Did she see something? It was gone so fast.

She had to wait in the car. She looked over at the store inside the gas station, checking for her father's outline. She watched him disappear behind the bathroom door.

Then, all of a sudden, the rain seemed to get quieter. She glanced outside, but it looked as heavy as ever. It was only the sound that had changed.

She told herself to ignore it. To go back to her book. Back to her second world.

But then, again, she saw something. Just for a moment, just a flash. Something flashed in front of her.

The rain was definitely quieter now. In fact, she could barely hear it. She could barely hear anything. It was almost as though someone had shut a door somewhere, and it had sealed her off from the auditory world.

Then, at the back of her brain, she felt the slightest suggestion.

Come find me.

It was almost like hearing a voice, only she heard nothing. She *felt* a voice. Or rather—she felt the presence of one.

She also felt, somehow, that she wasn't supposed to know. She could feel the voice, but the voice didn't know that. The voice thought it left no trace.

She was supposed to come outside. She was not supposed to know that someone had whispered it to her first.

Come find me.

The sound of the rain came back. She glanced back inside the gas station, but her father hadn't come out yet. When she looked down, she found that her hand already hovered over the door handle. She pulled it back, to make sure she could. Then she pressed down on it and stepped outside.

Even zipped up in her rain coat with the hood fully secured over her head, she felt the force of the wet cold outside. She closed her door audibly and walked forward, knowing somehow that if she only went far enough, she would see what she had already seen—the brief flash in the storm.

After a moment, she realized she was coming up on the broad side of an 18-wheeler truck. The rain was so thick she hadn't seen it before. Now she could make out the outline, the edges, and the wavering shadow on the side.

The shadow? What shadow? There was no shadow.

Only there was. She blinked, and it was gone. Had never been. She blinked again and it returned. She stopped walking, closed her eyes with purpose, and took on a stern tone inside her own head.

The shadow is real. You see the shadow.

She opened her eyes again.

She could see the shadow. Only it wasn't a shadow—it looked like a man. An old, pale, shriveled man, shoulders slumped forward and curling inward inside a tattered trench coat. She couldn't quite make out his face, but what she could see of it looked crumpled somehow. The longer she looked, the more pronounced his deformity became.

When he grinned, his mouth revealed a dark, deep black hole. No light escaped. As she gazed at it, a thought came to her like something unbidden, like it had been planted there by someone else: *nothing escapes*.

The grinning mouth tilted slowly to the side.

Come find me.

She looked it straight on, but she sensed that it didn't quite look back at her—its eyes moved in her direction, but only took in her form. It never fixated on her face.

It didn't know yet that she could see it, too.

Come find me.

She knew she was supposed to keep walking. It wanted her to. She was more vulnerable if she kept walking. Harder to help.

She planted her feet. She allowed her gaze to go slack, to drift aimlessly around ahead of her, keeping it in her sights but not pinning it down. Couldn't let it know that she knew.

Come find me!

Impatience seeped through the voice now. The misshapen man took a step forward, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

How quickly could it move? It took another slow step, halting and awkward. Was it still finding its footing? Or was its uncertainty some new kind of trick?

Come find me.

How limited was its coercion? How broad?

Come find me.

It took two more halting steps, and she tensed invisibly. She was ready.

With another flash, the misshapen man closed all the space between them, launching himself at her in full attack.

Years from this moment, she will remember that she raised her crossed arms over her face and launched herself right back at him.

Apart from that, she won't be able to remember much. Her father came outside and screamed some nonsense words into the air, and she saw the gray sky turn red with fire, and then the fire was gone. And so was the misshapen man.

She bore no signs of an attack. No bruises, no abrasions, no broken skin. Her father turned her arms over in his hands, checking to make sure when she told him she wasn't hurt. Then he told her to get back in the car.

“What was that?” she asked.

Charles Logan said nothing. He turned the key over, and the engine came to life. Did he think if he ignored her, she would forget?

“What *was* that?”

“It wasn’t much,” he answered gruffly. “If this rain doesn’t let up, we’re going to be late getting into Other Side.”

She stared at him in disbelief. He ignored her and drove.

She turned her arms over, trying to see them on all sides.

How could she be unhurt?

She remembered throwing up her arms, and she remembered feeling something, some kind of incredible pain bursting through her forearms, from her wrists to her elbows. Had he struck her? What else could it have been? But her arms looked perfect now—completely unmarred. Had she imagined it all?

Later that night, she dreamed of monsters. Or, at least, she thought she did. She dreamed that she walked through a crowd of hooded creatures, each one facing away from her. The closer she got to any one, the more certain she became that it was a monster. But when she reached it, she spun it around to face her.

And instead of a monster’s face, she saw her own.

The whole thing was quite enough to make her question her solipsism.