

IN THE SHADOW

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a stone building with a single lit window, framed by tall, thin trees in a misty or foggy setting. The scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the warm glow from the window, which contrasts with the cool, blue-toned ambient light. The trees are silhouetted against the background, creating a sense of depth and mystery.

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Keeping a firm grip on the wheel, I allow myself to imagine this overhung country road in the summer: sapphire skies, shimmering grass, green leaves fluttering in the trees. But it is winter, and the sky is dark and ashen. Leafless twigs protrude skyward from the treetops like gnarled fingers. The stone wall lining the road makes me feel hemmed in and I can't gauge how much daylight remains. Vince has been quiet, letting me drive and napping on and off. I don't know what to say to him.

Learning about Carlotta changed something for me.



At first light this morning, underslept and deeply shaken, we loaded up the Subaru and left the abandoned motel. I thought we'd finally head east, but Vince came clean about Carlotta's compound. After driving for hours along a barren road, we arrived at a high, sprawling wall, with armed guards perched on turrets and big, powerful-looking floodlights. Vince has known about the place since the early days of the spore spread—but he never told me about it because I'm guessing he didn't want to explain why he and Carlotta were still talking.

It would have been great to ride out the last few months there—instead of on the road, crisscrossing the country and searching for any place with reliable lighting. But when Carlotta came out to meet us, she told us they were overflowing. Turning away from her and the hulking man behind her, I whispered to Vince that we were

almost out of gas and went to wait in the car.

A couple minutes later, Vince opened the car door, looking pleased with himself. “She’s gonna give us some gas.”

I breathed a little easier, relaxed my grip on my purse. Getting turned away from the compound—and lucking into a full tank—meant I could finally take us east toward Chesapeake Bay, to try to track down my brother and parents.

But Vince wasn’t done sharing news.

“She knows about a house—her aunt’s old place. She died. Carlotta thinks it’s probably been sitting empty all this time.”

Shaking my head, I replied, “I wanna head east, Vince.”

“Marion, listen: her aunt figured out how to siphon power from the geo-plant. The lights are always on there.”

Looking at Vince, I knew there would be no further discussion.



It is dangerous to be alone. With two, you can look out for each other. With two, you can take turns driving, sleep in shifts. It’s safer. I don’t know how I could make it on my own. Vince and his ex-wife—I’m sick thinking about it. How long? The whole time? And lying, keeping it from me —I’m sick. But it’s dangerous to be alone. So, now we go north instead of east, moving further and further away from my brother.

I’ve been keeping something from Vince, too. It’s an entirely different category, of course. Just something I’ve always kept to myself. Then, with the spore spread, and the people changing, I’ve kept it secret, afraid to tell him about it because if I do, he’ll try to take control of it.



Hours later, the flat, fallow fields have given way to the rolling hills and stunted trees that flank the country road we are on now. The road tapers to a single lane and turns to dirt. The sky is socked in with mottled grey clouds. Carlotta's directions thus far are accurate. But then we pass a dilapidated roadside inn, and I look away with a shudder, gripping the wheel as the memory of last night comes rushing back.

When we came upon it, the old motel was abandoned, but people were living there anyway. Seemed safe. Someone had hijacked a bunch of streetlights and propped them up in a perimeter around the complex. We stayed several nights there, wearing our sleep masks and keeping the lights on through the night. But last night I awoke to a deep thrum coming from outside, followed by a sharp *clack!* It was so loud that I flinched. I pulled off my eye mask just in time to watch the death of all the lights, inside the room and out.

I gathered my purse from the floor and nudged Vince awake. "Help me barricade the bathroom door."

"Let me just see what's going on."

"Vince."

Ignoring me, he went to the curtain to draw it back. Here and there, flashlights came on in other rooms. There were people in the parking lot—their panicked voices reached us as they too flicked on flashlights and headlamps. We watched as they scrambled for their cars or their rooms. Picking up our biggest flashlight, Vince opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. In the darkness beyond the halos of the lights, something moved.

"Vince, wait—"

A flashlight fell to the ground, and a man screamed. Fear was in his voice. The scream faded, then became an outcry of pain. Vince froze in place, his mouth opening slowly.

Then, overpowering the scream, another sound ripped through the complex—a voice. The only thing I can compare it to is the

sound some women make when giving birth without anesthesia. Low, guttural, ancient. It rose in volume until it drowned out the man's screaming and was soon joined by the voices of more Changed. Then, almost as one, the Changed fell silent to feed on him. But the man screamed on.

I shook my head and stalked over to pull Vince inside and shut the door. "Bathroom, Vince."

Another man screamed out. The bellowing of the Changed struck up again as we dragged a pair of chairs into the bathroom with us. There we wedged and angled the chairs against the door and made ourselves very quiet until an electric hum struck up around the motel, and the lights flickered on again.



Between my ears their sound echoes, all day while I drive. It is late afternoon when we finally reach the bridge from Carlotta's directions. Old wood and rusty iron. Creek flowing underneath. The water is silver and immeasurably deep as we drive over it. Not long after, we reach the two stone pillars she described. They are so covered in lichen they look like flaky skin. I pull into the arcing driveway and am about to press the gas to drive up to the house when Vince says, "Stop the car Marion."

Something in his voice stops my breath. I hit the brake.

"Did you see something?"

"Turn the car around. Keep it running." I glance up at the house, but it is still again. Vince hops out of the car.

I tell him to wait but it's no use. When I've got the car facing the other way, I throw my purse over my shoulder and hop out to watch him. He approaches the house with a hand held up in greeting to anyone watching. The door opens slowly, and a pair of worn sneakers comes into view. A figure appears in sweatpants and a dark

hooded sweatshirt. Finally, the door opens all the way and I see a tumble of salt-and-pepper hair hanging about the shoulders of a middle-aged woman, smiling at Vince and standing in near-darkness. She and Vince exchange a few words. After a moment, he turns around to wave at me. He beckons me over, and I reach into the car and kill the engine.

Vince is cheerful when he introduces us to her. Dolly is the woman's name. "Short for Dolores," she adds, overly friendly. She invites us in. Only when she turns around do I see the boy lingering in her shadow and staring wide-eyed at the ground. I reach for Vince's arm, because I want to talk this over, but I stop myself. Gritting my teeth, I follow them inside, clinging to my purse.

The house is a labyrinth: blackout curtains, drywall baffles, and homemade screens cut different parts of the house off from one another. Seeing my hesitation as she guides us inward, Dolly explains, "We keep the place shuttered real good so that anyone passing by will think the place is boarded up. Lotta people out there with bad intentions, don't you know."

"Can't be too careful," says Vince as we pass through a hallway, family portraits still hanging on the walls, and enter a living room that appears frozen in time from the 1970s. Dolly sits on the sofa—a faded, earth-toned relic, upholstered with a nauseating floral pattern. Her son sits beside her on the couch, and as she settles into the cushion, he leans into her and clings to her sweatshirt, cowering and staring out from the nook of Dolly's armpit.

"How old?" I ask, sitting alongside Vince in a pair of mustard colored chairs, laying my purse in my lap.

"Eleven." Dolly's smile falters. "What kind of world is he growing up in?"

I glance at the boy, but he only cowers more. "Eleven," I repeat.

We sit in silence for a moment. "So, do you just keep the lights on all day long then?" I ask. "Why not let some natural light into the

place?”

Vince turns and gives me a reproachful look. I press my lips together and lower my head an inch or two, but I hold Dolores’ gaze.

She grows serious, and then a soft smile spreads over her face. “I guess our luck can’t last forever y’know? But I do hope you won’t turn us in. The owners—whoever they were—managed to find a way to keep power flowing.”

And the lights are always on...

Vince glances at me and I relax a little.

“You didn’t know them?” I ask.

“Who? The owners? Heavens, no. We just lucked out with the place.”

“How did you find it?” I ask.

Dolly turns her head to me and gives it a little tilt. She holds my gaze like that for a moment before widening her smile. Vince tenses up beside me—he wants me to be quiet.

“We were desperate, just like everyone else.” Letting out a heavy sigh, she adds, “Searched everywhere. By Providence alone we came upon it.”

I start to ask another question, but Dolly goes on.

“You’ll be wantin’ a place to rest, of course. Seeing as we don’t know you, ‘fraid I can’t allow you to stay here in the house, with me and my son.”

I feel my jaw clench and my hand tighten around my purse. It will be dark soon, if it’s not already.

“The guesthouse’ll have to do.”

“Guesthouse?”

Dolly grins. “You betcha.”

It is already dusk. Dolly leads us through the back yard, her boy clinging to her sweatpants and shuffling along behind her. In spite of her grey hair, Dolly is surprisingly spry in her stride. Yet, she

seems too old to be this boy's mother. And I don't think he is 11 years old.

"We don't have much food, and the taps in the guest house don't work."

"We're ok," I say, wanting to leave it at that. But Vince adds that we have tons of food and water in the car.

Along the perimeter of the yard, a row of looming trees divides the property from a flowing creek—the same one we drove over earlier, I realize. Mist rises from the silver stream, coiling in tendrils and dissipating into the gloom. I try to picture it in summer, but the spindly trees and bare hedges just look dead to me. Vince comes to stand beside me. He wants to say something, but doesn't. He stirs, and I worry he will try to put his arm around me, so I turn away and continue after Dolly.

The guesthouse is sturdy enough, though the door seems flimsy. Two sets of floodlights are fixed to the roof—seeing them, I unwind a little. "Why aren't they on?" I ask.

Dolly stops mid-stride and turns to look at me. With a wry smile, she turns back, opens the guesthouse door, and reaches inside. With a *pop*, the floodlights come on, along with the light inside.

"You'll be wantin' to leave that *on*." She lets out a high laugh. I force a smile.

We unload the car. The sun must be setting behind the clouds by now. Dolly watches us from the back door, casting glances at the sky. The boy tugs at her sleeve and asks her something but she waves his question away. Finally, she waves at us and heads inside as I shut the door to the guesthouse and slide the bolt.



After using the bathroom, I take a last sip of water, slip on my eye mask, and lay down to sleep. Lifting one side of the mask I peek to

see that the light is still on. A few moments later I am already drifting off, but Vince slides in behind me and loops his arm over my shoulders the way he used to. I tell him no and his arm slithers back to his side of the bed. I wake sometime later to the feeling of Vince's hand on my shoulder. *Sbh, sbh*, he says. "You had a nightmare." I lift one side of the mask and peek to see that the light is still on before drifting back to sleep.

The next time I wake, in my bones I know something is wrong. Vince is not in the bed. He has just now made a strange noise, which woke me.

"Vince. What is it?"

"I stubbed my toe. It's all right. The light went out. We're ok."

"The light?" I peel the mask from my face and throw off the covers. "Vince I can't see."

I hear Vince at the door. In the blackness he flips the light switch. Nothing happens; he flips it again.

"Vince."

He doesn't answer, and in the silence that follows, I hear something outside the guesthouse: muted footsteps, bare feet on soft earth.

"Vince the lamps." But he is already on the ground near the door, feeling about for the lanterns.

"Vince."

"Marion, they're not here."

"That's impossible." I breathe out, in, out. I remember my purse, gathering it from beside the pillow.

"The headlamps," says Vince. I dig in our bags for them. Outside, it is quiet.

Then, someone bangs hard on the door.

I hear Vince test the bolt. Was it unlocked? Finding a headlamp, I flick it on. I throw it on my head and dig for the other one.

Bang.

The door shakes in its frame. I find the second headlamp, gain my feet, and bring it to Vince.

The banging continues. I count two sets of hands now pounding on the wood. *Bang bang bang*. I flinch from the horrible noise.

Is it just these two? I wonder. Then, something clicks for me and I breathe out a slow sigh to cool down.

Vince leans his weight against the door and mutters that we need weapons.

I say nothing for a moment. But I can't keep it from him anymore. I clear my throat.

“Don't tell me you *have* a weapon.”

I straighten my spine and step back from him, extracting the pistol from my purse.

His headlamp beam rests on the sidearm. “How long have you had that?”

The door shakes behind him. *Bang*.

My stomach flutters as I tell him. “I've always had it.”

“Give it here.”

I shake my head, the beam of my headlamp slashing across him.

Vince thrusts his hand forward. “Give me the fucking gun.”

I shake my head again. The banging goes on and I hear the hinges start to go. I deepen my breathing and take a stance ten or so feet from the door.

Vince takes a step toward me. I lift the pistol coolly and let it linger at my hip, aimed in his general direction. “When's the last time you went to a range, Vince?”

His mouth works, but he says nothing.

“Open the door, Vince.”

“There could be dozens of them out there. You want me to let them in?”

“No. There are only two of them.”

“How would you know that?”

“I’ll explain later. Now open the door before they tear it off the hinges.”

He is about to say something else, but I no longer look at him. I look past him. I feel my heart slow down and I feel my shoulders relax. Repositioning my feet, I cradle the sidearm and prepare to lift it.

A little squeak comes from the hinge with each strike. “Open it,” I say.

He looks around for a moment, then turns to face the door. He hesitates. I growl at him: “Now.”

I step back as he steps forward. He slides the bolt, twists the knob, and leaps to one side, swinging the door open wide. For a split second I take them in. Two *Changed*—once a man and woman. Pale, pale skin, question mark curves in their spines. They wither in the beam of my headlamp for a moment, but lurch forward to charge me—their expressions are those of a pair of angry children, throwing tantrums, screaming in rage. I forced out a breath and squeeze the trigger twice, aiming at the chest of the one on my right, and then do it again, aiming at the one on my left. They slump to the floor, silver hair glinting in the light as their bodies collapse in heaving lumps of alabaster flesh. With another slow breath, I lower the pistol to my side.

Vince steps forward from behind the door to nudge the *Changed* with his foot, and as he does, powerful floodlights come on with a *clack*, washing the world outside in brilliant beams. At that moment, a scream shreds the stillness of the night. As Vince and I turn to face the source of the sound, Dolores appears, charging my husband with a baseball bat.

“Don’t,” I say flatly, bringing the sidearm level with Dolly’s chest.

She freezes mid swing and turns to face me. Her expression is pure despair.

“They were yours, weren’t they? One of them was your child.”

Dolly breaks. The bat clatters to the floor and tears spill from her face as she rushes to smother the bodies of the *Changed*.

I gesture with the pistol toward the house. “That’s *their* son in there. Your grandson.”

Dolores wails, stammering between breaths, “They were beautiful. He was so beautiful.”

“They died when they changed,” I say.

She wails on.

“But *we* are not dead,” I continue. “How could you feed us to them?”

Dolores doesn’t answer, but falls to a quieter, sustained bellow.

“How many others have there been?” asks Vince, stepping closer to her.

“Leave her, Vince.”

“No. She would have let us be devoured by those things. I’m gonna—”

I take a step forward. “You’re gonna leave her. Let her wallow here. We’ll stay in the main house and look after the kid while she... says goodbye.”

Outside, floodlights attached to the main house illuminate the entire yard, all the way to the perimeter where a cluster of trees conceals the brook and the world beyond. There, something moves. It is only the water, but somewhere past that, in the distance, there are surely more of them. I make my way inside the main house, Vince following.



In the early morning, I load our food and water into the car. I siphon gas from Dolly’s car, spitting out when the acrid gasoline splashes over my tongue. When Vince asks me what I am doing I tell him I am leaving.

“I don’t want to go. Make them go.”

“Oh, you’re staying here. I’m going to DC.”

“Marion!”

“Good luck.”

Another grey day unfolds around me. I don’t know what lies ahead, but I’m finally headed east. I’m still afraid to be alone, but I think with Vince I was even more alone than I am now.

Alejandro de Gutierre is a writer living in California. Born and raised in the Pacific Northwest (of the US), Alejandro obtained a BA in English and spent years as an on-again, off-again music maker. In July of 2014, Alejandro decided to pursue storytelling. He has been diligently writing and learning about the craft of storytelling ever since that time. He self-published his first book, *The Rat Tunnels of Isfahan* in 2017. In 2021, he won second place in Vocal Media's Summer Fiction Series challenge for his story, 'Grandmother's Hands.' Alejandro also received an Honorable Mention from Writer's Digest for his story, 'In a Cucumber.'