

## Local Histories

PICTURE YOURSELF DRIVING DOWN some empty, rural highway. The hum of the engine. The gentle rumble of the road beneath you.

You've just stopped for gas and a bite to eat, having passed through one of those forgettable whistle-stop towns with no post office or identity, a place existing to fill the space between places. A four-way blinking red, a volunteer firehouse, and—luckily for you—a gas station.

A quintessential Nowhere, USA.

You've driven through hundreds just like it over the years, and you'll go through a thousand more in the future (should that future come at all).

*Damn, that's grim.*

You're usually not the pessimist, but it's been hard to stay positive lately.

You've been having these dreams the last few months, unsettling visions void of definition, statically scrambled like poor reception. They mean nothing, really. At least, that's what you tell yourself. Nevertheless, they've got you on edge; even with impressionistic visuals, you wake to feel as if you've spent the night in a mausoleum nestled lovingly against a corpse.

Something dark looms over you. Or up ahead. It's hard to say for sure, but you sense it on the cloud-streaked horizon. Yes, it's sunrise now, the sky a floral pink and orange.

But to you, everything feels more like a sunset.

FURTHER DOWN THE ROAD, you find the pavement pocked with potholes, and you bound over a massive one, swerving to avoid hitting one that was, in hindsight, probably not as deep.

From the sudden impact of your tire against the concrete crater, you bite down

hard on your lip, enough to draw blood. You wince in pain and bring two fingers to your mouth, trying already not to tongue the wound.

These northern roads crumble quicker than sandcastles. They're infamous for it. Autumn rain showers, the early winter cycle of freeze-thaw-freeze, a spring that lies in wait until words like "sun" and "warmth" become anathema, curses you dare not utter for fear you'll jinx their coming. All this wreaks havoc on the roadways. Anything wet creeps into every crevice it can find, then expands, devouring once-solid streets like sharp teeth crunching bones.

Feeling the urge then to do some eating of your own, you reach into the greasy gas station bag on your passenger seat and grope for the half-eaten hash brown you left at the bottom. Your breakfast has grown cold, and the salt stings your newly-acquired cut, but it's better than nothing. You keep forgetting to eat enough on this trip, driving for hours upon hours, stopping only when you need gas, your thoughts consumed with the open road, forever on your destination. (And secretly, on memories of home and all you've left behind...)

Around noon, your GPS pulls you off the main drag—if you could even call it that—and now you're really in the sticks. You're surprised that the road is paved, that it's even on a map at all. *Good old "Bob's Road."*

*There's really nothing out here.*

Except that up ahead, a sign catches your eye: LOCAL HISTORY - 1 MILE AHEAD.

Local history? Does a place like this even have a history?

Then you remember the tiny township where you grew up had a museum, and you suppose there's nothing stopping stories from happening anywhere, even in the middle of nowhere.

You're not sure why, but you find yourself pulling over when you reach the roadside attraction. Inching down the driveway, you look over the museum. It's an old Victorian home, relatively well-kept, with creamy white siding and green shutters. It sits on a manicured lot, at least a solid three acres. The rest of the

landscape is nothing but forest, framing the scene in brilliant greens. It's all rather beautiful. You smile despite yourself and exit the car.

Grabbing your backpack and your camera, you head to the front door. You're drawn to the place like the tide, pulled to shore by some midday moon. And you've got time to spare. So why not look around? You knock on the front entrance.

A stooped man comes to the entrance. You can't tell if he's a younger man who looks old or an old man who appears younger. His posture is rough, and his thin hair is an indistinguishable winter blonde, but his face is rather wrinkle-free, his eyes youthful. He opens the door, but only a crack, and informs you that the museum is closed today before shutting the door in your face.

It shouldn't matter, right? Not really. You don't need to be here; don't need to see what lies inside. And yet, the curator's dismissal makes you want to get in more. You knock once more.

The man returns, and before he can say anything, you dive into an explanation—you're a journalist (which is true), and you've always been fascinated by these small-town museums (which is not true), and you'd really love to look around a moment if it's not too much to ask.

After a considered moment, the man begrudgingly lets you in.

Immediately, the museum reveals itself as the cast-aside time capsule it is, everything you imagined it'd be. It smells fusty, the way your grandmother's attic used to smell, and it's filled with similar fare—relics forgotten when packed away, left to be discovered by the people who mourn you or the strangers who move in next.

The curator, trying his hand at hospitality, offers you some lemonade. You accept. As you begin to snap a few photographs, the man returns with your drink. He seems to have relaxed a bit, and you notice him eyeing your camera with a faint smile.

"You know," he says, "I'm a bit of a photographer myself."

"Oh yeah?" You reply, used to the line. In the age of the smartphone, everyone's a shutterbug.

"Just a hobby, really. But I do enjoy it."

As the curator listens, you ramble about your work for a moment—nothing elaborate, just an awkward introduction, enough personal details to be relatable.

When you grow quiet, the man smiles and says, "Well, please," gesturing to the artifacts around you. "Don't mind me."

You ask for a coaster so that you can set down your drink. He obliges, heading back to the other room—a kitchen, most likely. You return to taking pictures and exploring the exhibits. There's not much here, mostly photographs and furniture, some china and glassware, but you find it enjoyable despite its banality.

Or maybe because of it. The museum is littered with stuff, domesticated detritus, nothing fancy or unheard of or unique. But someone somewhere felt enough of an attachment to preserve it all. Perhaps it was your host, though you doubt it. He has yet to come off as the sentimental type.

Either way, that love of little things, that curation of the mundane... it has to count for something.

You realize then that the curator hasn't returned. You look around and catch him standing in the doorway, staring at you. It's not a lecherous, leering look—more a studious stare. He's appraising you the way a trainer might evaluate a boxer right before he steps into the ring.

Either way, you're uncomfortable, suddenly aware of how alone you are in this big old, empty house. You shift a little, clear your throat.

"So, how'd you end up overseeing a place like this?"

*Overseeing? I've never used that word.* Your nerves are kicking in.

The man ignores your question.

"Could I show you something?" He asks instead. "One of the museum's... private collections?"

HE LEADS YOU TO the back of the museum, down a short flight of stairs, and into a dimly lit corridor. A small black-and-gold placard pinned to the closed door at the end of the hall reads AUTHORIZED GUESTS ONLY.

"Am I authorized?" You ask with a nervous laugh, a failed attempt at levity. The man simply winks as he pulls from his pocket a keyring filled to capacity. It looks like something a prison guard in a pirate movie might carry: a ring of oversized, ornate keys tarnished gold and silver. The curator then holds up from the cluster of improbable keys, one even more striking. Old and red and skeletal, it looks like something that would unlock not a jail cell but a crypt.

"A key to every lock in the land," he says, chuckling. You don't get the joke, but he doesn't seem to care.

"I don't show this to many people," the curator continues as he unlocks the door. "But since you're a fellow enthusiast" —and he gestures toward the camera hanging around your neck— "I thought you might appreciate it."

The curator turns the knob and invites you to step inside.

The room looks small in the sparse amount of light that bleeds from the hallway behind you, but then the curator flips a switch, and a dozen or so lamps—naked Edison bulbs hanging tastefully from the low ceiling—flicker to life. The glow is warm and nonabrasive, a calming luminance you might use on a patio at night, and in the light, you can see the room for what it truly is: a gallery, an open space with cream-colored walls and polished, concrete floors, as wide and as long as the whole museum. On each wall, spaced aesthetically, hang framed works of art.

"I try to keep the lights low in here," says the man as you both begin to stroll into the room. "So as not to damage the pieces. I have no idea how old they are or how much exposure they can take."

The curator leads you to the left wall, to the closest painting. The work is eerie, surreal, and simple: an empty wooden chair sits center frame, huddled amongst a thicket of evergreens, the ground beneath blanketed in dead pine needles.

You take a step closer, examining the piece. You scan it curiously, looking for some indicator of its genesis, some brushstroke or pattern that might give away its age. But there's nothing there. It's well-crafted but not extraordinarily. And yet, it's alluring.

Whether it's the richness of the colors, the depth of the shadows resting behind the pines, or the wood grain detail of the chair, you can't say. But the image, the scene, is tugging at you.

"Interesting," you whisper for lack of a stronger word. The curator laughs.

"Kinda takes your breath away, huh? When my wife and I bought the place, I found all of this in a crawl space just beneath us. I have no idea where they came from, but they grabbed me at once. In fact, they were the catalyst for my interest in photography."

You give him a sideways look.

"These are photographs?"

The curator nods. "All twelve of them," and he gestures to the rest of the room. You pan around, looking at each piece. Even from afar, they present a unified collection with the same dreamlike style and cryptic subject matter.

"There are thirteen," you mention, pointing to the opposite wall, to the frame at the end of the row. From what you can tell, it's nothing but an empty white canvas, but it's mounted and hung like the rest.

The curator nods with a grin.

"Ah, yes, well, that one's still unwritten." And he gives you another wink. You shiver and look back over at the blank frame, wondering what story is meant to be there, what chimera lies waiting in the canvas.

"Here," says the man, pulling you back to the chair in the pines. He reaches up and removes it from the wall, hands it to you so that you may take a closer look.

You run your fingers gingerly across the surface of the work. It has a semi-gloss finish and catches the light like a photograph would, but its detail is stunning. It's definitely printed on the canvas, and the work itself has a texture similar to the ebb and flow of brushstrokes; the ink feels like paint, slightly oily to the touch.

"There's no artist named on any of them," the man states. "But I suspect they're all by the same hand."

"What's this?" You ask, pointing to a bit of chalk-white chicken scratch etched in the bottom right-hand corner. The curator shrugs.

"I believe it's the title of the piece. But who's to say, really."

You bring the picture closer (it's hard to read in the faint light) and make out three words.

"The Faerie King?" You say aloud and give your host a quizzical look. He chuckles.

"And The Dread Queen," he says, pointing at the picture to your right. You hand him back The Faerie King and move on to the next one.

It stops you at once.

The image is bleak and haunting, less beautiful than the last. A large, ominous tree, grey and naked and clearly dead, stands in the middle of a dusty, amber field while in the hazy distance, rust-red mountains rise to greet the sky.

And there, standing near the base of the tree, is a woman in a white sundress, and though her back is to you, you still feel as if you can see her searching eyes, black and ravenous in their pursuit of... something... someone.

*Me?*

"The Dread Queen," you whisper, repeating the title of the piece. Your eyes swim across the photograph as your mind grows fuzzy, and you swear you can hear the ticking of a pocket watch somewhere far off beating like the cadence of a gallows drum, repetitive and precise.

"Where is this?" you utter, your voice strange and airy. "I've seen this place before. In a dream, maybe."

"I knew they'd speak to you," your host says quietly, anticipation in his tone.

His voice is muffled now, carried away on an old western wind. "It's why I brought you back here—why I drew you here in the first place.

"We're kindred spirits, you and I."

But you barely hear him now. Instead, a ringing permeates your ears, drowning out your other senses. The ticking of the watch intensifies, filling your head.

"I call them Impressions, you see," the curator says, small and distant. "The photographs. They give you a glimpse into another life, a scene playing out in some other realm. And a mind as alive as yours? Well, it can't help but fill in the rest..."

*Fill in the rest? You think. What does that mean?*

But the question barely registers now, your thoughts little more than dreams fleeing the sunrise.

The image—the *impression*—has its hold on you.



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