

1. Letter

Cory Anderson always got the feeling he was being watched, and in spite of his best efforts, could never shake the notion that someone was following him.

Late that October afternoon, a low fog had clung to the surface of the ground as summer limped into its final days of existence, bringing an already bitter, wet autumn, one of which Michigan was famous for. An abnormal fog had coated the air since earlier that morning, and had dropped all possible visibility. Ever since he had left work, he was forced to turn on his headlights in order to cut through the thick mist. He didn't yet look into his rear view mirror, but he knew someone was behind him.

The fact that someone drove behind him wasn't the odd thing. Not everyone that joined him on the same road was following him. The strange thing was that even in the thick clouds of smoke, they weren't using lights. He tried not to let it get to him, and didn't want to jump to any conclusions. It was possible that their lights didn't function, or maybe they didn't need them, for whatever reason. When he saw the bright green sign labeled "Hunter St," He veered onto it without using a turn signal. The car behind him slowed when he pulled into the subdivision, but continued on its journey after Cory had gone around the corner. After taking a breath of relief, he traveled toward his destination: the house where he currently lived, along with his mother and two younger sisters.

As his speed limit dropped while he crawled along the looping road and he looked at each of the houses lining the occupied street, he still felt as though eyes were on him, like the entire neighborhood could see and hear him, and that no matter what he did, he would never truly get a sense that he was alone. In the twenty-four years he had lived his life, never had he experienced a sensation that unsettled him as much. Where this feeling originated, he might never find out.

When he parked his car in the driveway of his mother's house, he was waved to by Denise Ballard, his neighbor, as he walked up the cement path to his front door. She was preparing her garden for the upcoming winter, tending to her magnolia bush. Cory tossed her an amiable wave back, but he wasn't in the mood for small talk. He walked into the two-story, grey and white split-level before she could speak to him, hanging his keys on one of the series of hooks on the wall.

A pile of mail was stacked on the kitchen table, and on top of it, a clock radio. He took this as a sign that his mother was already home from work. The radio was meant for him to repair, a sentimental item of hers that once belonged to his father, who divorced her two years ago. He would fix the radio for her (again, for the third time), but not until he had filled his stomach. He prepared himself a microwavable frozen dinner, and nibbled on it while he grabbed some tools to remove the outer cabinet from the radio's chassis. While he checked the capacitors and coils for damage, he heard footsteps behind him, descending the stairs.

"Hi, Cory," squeaked a saddened young voice.

Cory turned halfway toward her while seated, peering at the juvenile visitor. His youngest sister at fourteen years of age, Erica, was shambling toward the living room, cradling her ten pound, rambunctious calico cat, Missy, in her arms, which she then released when it fidgeted. It scampered over to its food bowl and gnawed. "Hey, Erica," he greeted with a drawn-out sigh. He soon noticed the redness around her eyes, the wet glaze of fresh tears over her irises. "What's wrong? Everything okay?"

"Me and mom got into another fight. She doesn't like Josh."

"I'm sure she'll come around," he said while turning back to the radio's husk.

"Yeah right. Maybe you could talk to her for me?"

Cory stifled a threatening groan. He was always looked to as a family mediator, one that they rarely listened to, even when his advice was solid. It was simply one of those things, those responsibilities that he had to take on when moving back home, whether he accepted it or not. “She’s just protective of you.”

“Yeah, I know, but she listens to you better. I keep explaining that Josh is really nice.” She stuck her bottom lip out in the same manner she once did after being denied a dollhouse when she was nine. “She hates him for no reason.”

“Give her time,” he sighed, squinting at the tiny parts inside of the radio, which he gave most of his attention. “You just started dating him. He hasn’t made an impression on her yet.”

Erica didn’t make any more remarks on the subject, dragging her feet into the kitchen to find an afternoon snack, and he went back to his job fixing the radio. Samantha Taccetta, Cory’s mother, entered the kitchen from the bathroom down the hallway. She didn’t seem surprised to see him, but otherwise appeared troubled. “Oh, good, you’re home,” she noticed with a casual, however tired tone. “I see you’re already looking at the radio. Did you fix it already? I’d like it fixed.”

Cory often used his busy hands to silence his busy mind, but these serene moments were frequently vanquished by his mother’s presence, who insisted that it was always a good time to use Cory as therapy. “It doesn’t look good, mom,” he pronounced like a surgeon to a dying patient’s family, awaiting the incoming torrential sadness.

“What do you mean? It worked just fine yesterday!”

“Well, today it’s not.”

Samantha leaned over him and the table where the dead radio rested, and gazed upon it with her eyes growing rounder, her hand planted against her chest. “Can’t you do something?”

He elucidated the situation precisely as one would when explaining the death of a goldfish to a toddler. “Mom, I just don’t think it’s going to work anymore. You can still keep it if you want it for sentimental value, but with all of the money I keep putting into fixing this thing, I could have bought you a new one by now.”

“I see.” She accepted the clock’s fate, for once. “If that’s what you have to do, I guess I’ll get over it. Maybe I’ll try to give it back to your father.”

“Why would dad want a broken radio? Just put it in the attic.”

“No, I don’t want it up there. I’ll just keep it in my room.” She watched Cory reassemble the lifeless fragments of a once fully functioning timekeeper, clicking her tongue a few times. “Do you think he might like a new one?”

As he tightened the screws along the sides of the outer cabinet, he shrugged before handing the junk over to her. “I’m sure he has a new one by now. I’m assuming that’s why he left this piece of crap here.”

She either hadn’t heard him, or didn’t pay much mind to his realism. She rarely did. “I’ll buy him a new one. I need to stop by his house later anyway.”

He didn’t lecture her, as he normally would, that they were divorced for a reason. Instead, he left the table, relieved that he didn’t have to fiddle with the scrap of rubbish any longer, and could finally have some alone time. As he ascended the narrow staircase to the second floor, he checked his cell phone as he headed toward his room. He had no texts or calls from anybody. Nothing he wasn’t accustomed to seeing.

When he returned to Michigan to live with his family, he left more than just his old apartment behind; he left his two closest friends, Alex and Scott. In between working, partying and bar-hopping, they would find the time to call every now and then, but Cory had recently felt like he was losing touch with them. They were too busy for him, now that he wasn’t around them, and though at the start they phoned him every day, it had been a while since he had heard anything from them.

His only friend now was his childhood buddy Angie, who had lived her whole life in Lansing, and refused to move. She told him it was to stay near her family, whom she loved and respected, but also to stay near Cory, that is until he abruptly moved to New York when he was old enough to. He wasn’t aware of the impact it had on her when he left Michigan when he reached nineteen, but he found out when she cried to him how much she would miss him just before he departed. It was the saddest he had ever seen her, even since their days in high school. Angie was one thing he was happy to come home to when he moved back in with his family, and despite having a busy life herself, he was usually able to convince her to spend time with him.

Once in his bedroom, he shuffled into his adjacent bathroom, giving himself and the brunette-auburn stubble growing on his chin a good look in the mirror. His straight hair was chin-length now, a style he never really desired, but one he allowed in apathy. While shaving the fuzz from his thin and pointed jaw line, he noticed one of the light bulbs above the mirror had dimmed. He frankly didn't give enough of a damn about it to inform his mother, and as long as he could see what he was doing, he might let the rest of the lights follow in its path.

Another chore knocked off of his already short list, he went to his computer to check his e-mail and networking sites. He had empty inboxes on both accounts, and no one bothered to comment on the new photos he posted a few days ago. Dissatisfied with the shortcomings of online relationships, he shook his head at the monitor as if it could understand his plight. He abandoned the Internet with a heavy heart, and instead played some music he enjoyed, resting on his bed while listening to it, hoping it would drown out the sound of the sudden bickering of his mother and Erica.

After an hour or so of random titles blaring from his shuffled play list, his phone rang. Like a mole emerging from a hole in the ground, he leapt to life, clutching his vibrating cell phone and pressing it to his ear. "Hello?" He said to his caller with hope.

Angie was on the other end, and as usual, she sounded exhausted. "Cory, you are taking me out tonight."

He was inured to her short and to-the-point personality. At times it was refreshing, and others, it caught him in the worst of moods. He wasn't particularly in a good one when she rang. "I am, huh? When is it your turn to take *me* out?"

"When I can afford it!" She exclaimed, however in amusement. "There's a new bar open downtown. It looks pretty trendy. It's a good chance for you to get out of the house."

Perhaps a game of pool would ease some of his stress, even if only temporarily, but alcohol was not something he consumed on a regular basis, or socially for that matter, and Angie was well informed on this. Not only did booze disgust him, but he was quite the lightweight, and he never enjoyed the feeling he got when inebriated. "Are you sure you're not doing this because drinks are cheaper at Happy Hour?"

"Don't be so negative. Of course I'm doing this for you. If I have a few drinks, you can't hold it against me."

It had been long, too long, since Cory “went out” just to entertain himself. Angie was a good friend in some respects, but in most, she loved attention, and nothing greater. Nevertheless, even with that in mind, Cory’s desperation had reached full throttle; he *needed* to get out of the house, to change things, to do something different, and it didn’t matter who he did it with. After a few moments, he let out a weighted sigh. “I’ll come and pick you up.”

Cory didn’t mind spending his time practicing a lone game of pool while Angie ordered drinks all night and talked his ear off regarding her boyfriend, Derrick. The fact that he wasn’t required to speak to her, since her mouth almost never closed, kept his concentration on the game steeled.

“He keeps asking me if I have a thing for you,” she continued while gorging herself on martinis.

“We all know that you do,” Cory joked, knocking a solid ball into a corner pocket.

With an affronted gasp, she replied, “What are you talking about?!”

“I’m just messing with you, you know.”

“Oh. Yeah. Yeah, I knew that.” She silenced herself with a swig of her drink. “I’m just tired of him asking me. If he really thought I preferred you over him, I don’t know why he thinks I’d stay with him all this time. You and I have been hanging out like this since you started living here again. You’d think he would grow up by now.”

“Maybe because lately, you see more of me than you do of him.” With a clack, the cue ball struck a striped one.

“That’s ridiculous. He lives with me, silly.”

“Exactly my point.”

She blocked his next shot with her arm to attract his full attention. “Wait a minute! Whose side are you on, anyway?”

Sighing, he lowered his cue while waiting for her to move. “I’m not on anyone’s *side*. I think if breaking up with him is the right thing to do, maybe you should do it.”

“I think I know better than anybody what the right thing is for my relationship.” There were a few beats of silence, other than the sound of the chattering crowd and music. Cory rubbed chalk onto the end of the cue he was holding while averting his gaze. “Okay. I have been seeing you a lot. I didn’t think there was anything wrong with that. He’s just been getting weird on me, that’s all. He’s getting possessive, almost. He needs to respect my boundaries.”

“We all have to make tough decisions, Angie. If you don’t love him, maybe it’s time to ask yourself some serious questions.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t love him.”

He wasn’t listening to her anymore, because he felt it— eyes were on him, burning into the back of his shirt. He peered around the bar, searching for the source of his paranoia. He hoped to see someone familiar, anyone that he might recognize, but there were so many strangers mashed together in the crowd that he couldn’t confirm or deny his delusions.

“Cory! You asleep over there?” Angie’s voice echoed for the third time, but it was the first time Cory heard her.

“Huh?” He turned his attention, as well as his eyes, to her. “Sorry. I’m a little distracted.”

Her smirk meant that she was about to get playful with him, which he already didn’t appreciate. “The men in black suits after you again? They’ve come to check on the chip in your brain!” She then pulled aside a few strands of Cory’s hair as if looking for a hidden scar.

“Stop it. Don’t tease me. I’m telling you, someone really is following me. I can *feel* them. I know it sounds crazy...”

“Sweetie, you’ve been saying that for, what, two years now? Who the hell would keep that up for so long without saying anything to you?” She snickered and slugged him in the arm with a balled up fist, causing him to flinch and retract his upper torso from her vicinity.

“Maybe they’re afraid of me? You ever think of that?”

“Who would be afraid of sweet, adorable little you?”

He endured a pinch to his cheek, which he winced at. “Never mind. If you’re not going to take me seriously, I don’t know why I bring it up.” He knocked his cue into the white ball once again, frustrated at her condescending nature.

“Oh, come on, Cory, you know I’m just playing.”

He ignored her, aloof to her taunting. He knew how foolish he sounded whenever he brought it up, and he didn’t need to be reminded of that. He loved Angie, but after she had a few drinks, she was too absorbed in looking attractive to be concerned for him, and became detached from any serious conversation. It was embarrassing bringing it up to her, and having her laugh at him made him even less inclined to rely on her assistance.

After driving his intoxicated buddy home for the night, which he was rewarded for by a sloppy kiss on the cheek— one that reeked of vodka— he made his way back to his own house. Now alone in the car, which was thankfully vomit-free, he was able to wallow in his own thoughts. He was sure the person inside of the car behind him wasn't following him, but he performed routine checks into his mirrors out of habit, wanting to catch the person in the act and end this charade once and for all. Had he seen that car before? It looked familiar. Many people drove green cars, and many drove that make and model, so how could he know? He was more than certain that he never would for sure.

Upon arriving, he parked in the driveway, not wanting to wake everyone by opening the garage, and sauntered inside with his head low and his hands in his pockets, shivering in the chilled October winds. He saw his second youngest sister, Amanda (who, like him, took a more physical likeness of their father rather than their mother), standing in the kitchen, drinking a glass of water. She smiled when she saw him and waved, chain bracelets jingling as they dangled from her wrist.

“How was your night?” She asked before rinsing her cup out in the sink.

“Interesting. I usually have fun with Angie, but tonight felt different. I don't know, maybe I'm in a bad mood. I've been a little off since I woke up this morning.”

“This might take your mind off of it.” Amanda shuffled some papers upon the kitchen counter, where they usually kept all of their junk mail. She retrieved a white envelope from the pile and held it out to him. “This was in the mail today.”

Cory glimpsed at it with intrigue, having not expected any mail. After taking the envelope from her, he saw written in fluid curves the words *For Cory*. There was no stamp, address, or return address— just those directions in two straightforward words.

“What the hell is this?” He asked after a few thoughtful seconds, looking to Amanda for answers.

“I don't know. I asked mom and I don't think she knows either. It kind of freaked her out, actually.”

“Well, it's freaking me out, too. You know how I've been telling you that I feel like I'm being followed?” He held the envelope up to the light, trying to see the contents inside. “This isn't helping.”

“Come on, open it,” she urged, bouncing up and down on her heels. “I want to see what it is.”

With a twist of the wrist, he tore open the edge of the envelope and reached inside, pulling out a few pages of loose leaf, which were neatly folded before they were inserted. Curiosity took hold of his hands as he opened and flattened the sheets. The handwriting on the letter matched that of the scratching on the front of its container, and every word seemed to be written with time and care, as if the author had considered each one for some time before jotting it down with a black fountain pen.

Dearest Cory,

For two years now, I have been preparing for this moment; the time when I finally speak to you. I thought that after all of this time, I would have the courage to approach you personally, to at least say hello. I am nothing but a coward.

I'm ashamed to admit that I have employed myself a position I didn't intend to fill. I can tell, when you look around for me, that you know deep down that I'm there. I've noticed your expressions of fear and concern. This wounds my heart so deeply, because I never intended to inflict harm or fear upon you. I only want happiness for you, and that is the reason for the letter I am writing you today.

Yes, I am the one. I am your shadow. I didn't plan to be, but it merely just happened. Call it fate, if you will. My reasons and justifications for such actions stem from too many issues that I can even speak of, let alone write here, especially without risk of sounding utterly insane, but over time, those reasons have developed into a strong and devoted fondness for you.

You see, it was an accident that I have fallen in love with you, or rather, the person I've learned that you are. You became something, someone, of great importance to me, and being near you has become necessary for me to go through my daily life.

I'm sorry I waited so long to even write you just a simple explanation. You deserve so much more than that. If only I could trust within myself that telling you to your face my reasons for my apparent insanity had some reasoning, a background, a story, no matter how wild and crazy it might be, without receiving a painful rejection. Just know that deep within the confines of my very dark and dreary heart that I know how lovely you are.

He was speechless when he came to the end of the unsigned letter, a tremble now rattling his weak knees. Amanda scooted up beside him when she saw how pale he was, and looked at the creased papers in his hands. "Someone really has been following me," Cory confirmed, and he looked at his sister, his face filled with complexity. "I have a stalker."

With bugged eyes and a gaping mouth, she softly spoke. "Who is it?"

"That's the thing, I have no idea. There's no name, no return address. It's like it was written by a ghost."

"Do you have an idea of who it is based on the way they wrote it?"

He raised a sarcastic eyebrow, his lips curling. "Please. Half of the people I talk to can barely spell, let alone use proper grammar, at least from what I understand from the way they text me. This has to be from someone I've never even met. If I've never met them, how can they think all of these things? The fact that they know where I live means they've followed me to our front door." Saying such a thing aloud made his stomach tumble.

Amanda took the letter from her brother and scrutinized it. "Maybe you've met them, but you don't remember?"

"I can't recall meeting any lunatics in the past two years."

She scoffed at him, rolling her eyes. “It seems kind of crazy, but whoever wrote it was at least a little smart. How did they manage to hide from you for that long?”

“I frankly don’t care either way. I need to find out how to deal with this.” He took the letter back from her, carrying it up to his room. While sitting at his desk, awake later than his intended bedtime, he read and re-read the anonymous letter. Cory had felt very alone since he moved to Michigan, even with Angie around, but he found the irony a bit too much to handle. He would have liked to have more friends, but he didn’t necessarily want someone to be obsessed with him, to stalk him. He had to learn who wrote it, and soon, before he lost his mind even further.

He now had the proof he needed that he wasn’t insane, that it hadn’t all been in his head. He had that to be relieved of, but all the same, he wished he had learned of something less serious in nature to console him. Now the problem had gotten even more complicated and unsolvable.

For two years, his mind replayed. For two whole years. They’ve been following me since I moved here, and I never noticed them. They could be anyone. They could be anywhere.