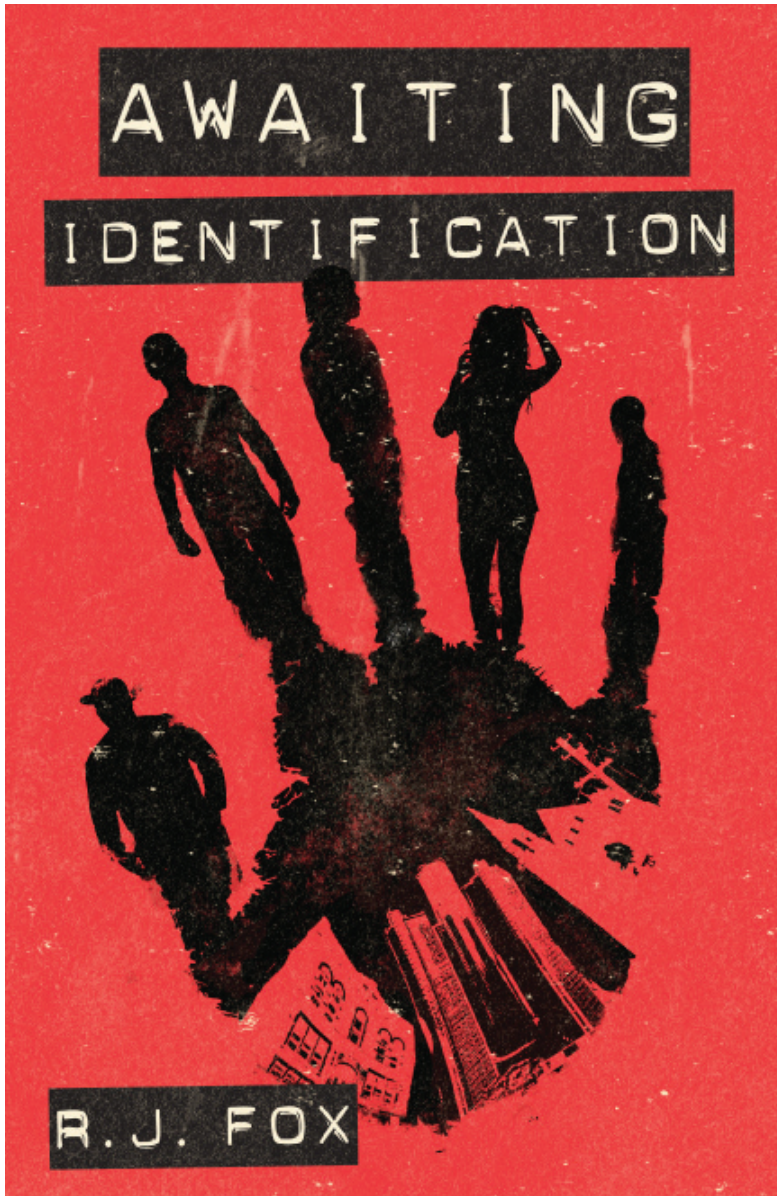


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~Requiem Aeternam~

October 31, 1999

Halloween

Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office: Detroit, MI

Jane Doe: "NYC Girl." A badly bruised and bloodied female. Late-20's. Pregnant. "I Love NYC" medallion. Severe head trauma. Multiple fractures. Laceration on left hand.

John Doe #1: "Leaf Man." Bloated. Mid-20's male with a gunshot wound to the chest. Marijuana leaf ring on right ring finger.

John Doe #2: "R.I.P." Late-30's male. Obese. Barely decipherable "R.I.P." tattoo etched on left bicep.

John Doe #3: "Zealot." A mid-40's male. Thin. Pale. Multiple stab wounds to the chest. A cross-shaped scar across his torso.

John Doe #4: "Cat Man." Late-50's male. Scraggly, peppered beard. No obvious sign of physical trauma. Smile etched onto face.

~Kyrie Eleison~

The Night Before — Devil's Night

NYC GIRL

NYC Girl stepped off the now vacant bus that had been her prison for the past twenty hours.

"You take care out there, okay?" the driver said, a split second before she turned her ankle on the broken concrete.

Welcome home.

As she surveyed her surroundings, Detroit felt almost as unfamiliar as the numerous boondock stops throughout Pennsylvania and Ohio that she had passed through in and out of consciousness.

She bent down to rub her ankle, grabbed her suitcase, and glanced around the empty bus terminal as though she were expecting a welcoming committee. But despite her brief self-delusion, NYC Girl understood one simple truth: nobody was expecting her.

I'm a ghost

In fact, not a single soul even knew she had returned home from her seven-year Big Apple experiment. At one point, she would have preferred it this way. But not now. Not even close. And what did "home" even mean now?

Seven—fucking—years.

Seven years of rejections and wrong turns.

So fitting that it all began with a nasty argument between a daughter and her coked-up mother over dirty dishes, followed by a broken mirror while frantically packing for a fresh start, on the heels of a vanished "mercy" scholarship for graduating from the school of hard knocks. Despite her flaws and the endless roadblocks, she somehow managed to keep her grades up. Before she simply threw it all away.

Life had been a conveyor belt of bad luck ever since. There wasn't a day that had gone by when she didn't replay that scene in her head. If only she tried to be the better person and just washed the fucking dishes.

Would her life have turned out differently? Or, was that simply just the straw that broke the camel's back? After all, the dam of built-up resentment could only hold water for so long before it bursts.

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And rather than picking up the pieces and trying to make things right, she did the “easier” thing.

She fled.

Her homecoming felt like self-surrender. But it was time.

Time to make things right. A return to starting position. Sometimes a fresh start means returning back to where you started, before you begin anew.

How in the hell had it been seven years?

She wanted to believe that her luck was about to turn, but she knew better. Her whole life was a shattered mirror. Fractured shards of glass interlaced with sharp, invisible slivers.

But that certainly wasn't going to stop her from trying to sweep up the mess. She was never one to quit, and she sure as hell wasn't going to start now. On the other hand, it would have been the logical thing to do.

Now that she had found the guts to return home, she wished she had a better idea as to where her life was headed.

For the majority of her ride aboard the sweatbox of a Greyhound bus, she was convinced that she had it all figured out. But by the time the bus had entered the Detroit city limits, her thoughts had begun to waver. One thing was clear: she needed food and shelter.

But when your only option isn't really an option . . .

NYC Girl was getting ahead of herself. What she needed more than anything was rest. But where?

I just have to get through the night.

And then, maybe, just maybe, she would finally see things more clearly.

Without doubt, she would need a concrete plan beyond tonight. She had to find work. She would rather die of starvation than turn another trick for a lukewarm meal and bed.

She smelled fire in the distance and was struck by how oddly comforting it felt.

Home sweet home.

And then she remembered the date: October 30.

Devil's Night.

Detroit's unofficial holiday.

This time on the cusp of a new millennium.

~Tuba Mirum~

LEAF MAN

The glazed, beady eyes of a stuffed teddy bear stared up at Leaf Man as he hurried down the street, a battered, rolling suitcase trailing behind him like a lost puppy.

The stench of smoke assaulted his nostrils. And then he remembered.
Goddamn fucking Devil's Night.

He raised the volume on his Discman. A demo mix of his favorite new track—DJ Rolando's "The Knights of the Jaguar"—got his adrenaline pumping, instantly making him feel invincible, a reminder that as long as he continued to play his cards right, he would one day be up there with the DJs he had kept close tabs on since the 80's, when his dream was born.

Though it saddened him to see so much abandonment enveloping him, he found beauty in the squalor. In fact, the industrial blight inspired his creativity as much as did any of his musical heroes. More significantly, where most saw a city on its death bed, Leaf Man saw a blank canvas.

As Leaf Man stood upon the precipice of a new millennium, he imagined himself front and center.

A rebirth.

For himself.

And for the city he loved.

A city that had made an indelible mark on the world.

Only to be shunned, spit upon, kicked, and burned.

And left for dead.

A city finally ready for a true Renaissance.

Rising from the ashes.

A phoenix emerging in the form of his dream.

A couple of blocks from his destination, the wheel of his case became lodged in a crack, almost pulling his arm out of the socket. After a brief struggle, he wiggled the wheel free and continued on his way until he reached a dilapidated ranch, which one could easily assume was uninhabited, as suggested by its shattered windows and rusted bars.

Leaf Man knew otherwise.

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Not only did he know *exactly* who lived there, but he had timed his arrival for when he knew no one was home—not by choice, but by court mandate.

He headed toward the back door, past a pile of putrid trash bags. The corroded handlebars of a child’s tricycle poked through overgrown weeds.

Leaf Man removed two-hundred dollars from his wallet and slipped the money inside a box of chocolates from his suitcase. He sidestepped the rotted wooden step that led to the door and placed the box inside the torn screen door.

He walked away, saddened that he couldn’t deliver the gifts by hand and fully cognizant of the fact that the intended recipient—his three-year-old son, Marcus—might never even get it.

Leaf Man’s desire to once again see the joy on his son’s face was the driving force behind everything he did. He was confident that day was only just around the corner.

Just have to make it through the night.

Of course, he knew that one slip up would mean losing *everything*, which is why this final deal couldn’t be over soon enough.

He wanted to make headlines someday.

But for the right reasons.

He arrived at an empty bus stop, en route to soon becoming free from his self-made prison. Leaf Man was never one to place blame on others for his situation, or for the choices he made. Blaming himself meant that *he alone* was in control.

As the minutes rolled by, his hopes for a bus diminished. He knew one was *supposed* to arrive, but he also knew better. If he were lucky, he might find a cab, but he probably had a better chance at catching a bus. He could possibly reach his destination faster if he walked.

He would give it ten more minutes. Nine minutes later, he was on a bus. As the bus rumbled over streets strewn with potholes, he twirled his lucky ring on his right ring finger—gold, with an embossed marijuana leaf on it. As he thought about Marcus, pangs of panic settled in.

Every day that he couldn’t see his son was a day he would never have back. Now that he was a father, Leaf Man had become fully aware of the importance of each and every day. His precious little boy was the only reason he was saying goodbye to the only life he had known for the last decade.

~Hostias~

R . I . P .

R.I.P. saw smoke before fire. But as expected, no one else was around to notice.

He reached a deserted street off 7 Mile where flames poured out of an abandoned house.

The sun hadn't even set on Devil's Night.

Not that he gave a flying fuck.

After all, Devil's Night comes but once a year.

R.I.P.—who, as he liked to think, bore a close physical resemblance to his hero, Biggie Smalls—was certainly no stranger to Devil's Night. At one point, he participated out of peer pressure and the need for acceptance. But then he became addicted—a card-carrying arsonist—until he decided to give it up for good after *possibly* causing the death of an 18-month old girl five years prior. No one ever questioned him. And partially because he wasn't sure himself, he sure as fuck wasn't going to turn himself in.

By no means had he turned into a choirboy. He had merely stumbled upon another, far more lucrative activity to put food on the table.

Lately, however, food was the least of his concerns.

He eventually came to the conclusion that there was no money to be made in arson, anyway, unless it was for shady insurance purposes. But that option would involve actually owning property to burn down in the first place.

Though he missed the thrill of watching something set ablaze by his own hand, he needed money—but not for himself. In fact, he hardly spent a dime on his own wants and needs. Most of the money he “earned” went toward his father's medical expenses.

For the past couple of years, R.I.P. desperately needed money to keep his father alive. More recently, however, it had become more a matter of doing whatever it took to keep his father as comfortable as possible, for however long necessary. Despite the realization that he would be better off without his father, he knew he would miss having someone to care for. There was something uniquely special about feeling *needed*. Caring for his father gave him purpose, something he was scared to admit he would otherwise lack.

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He was en route to his neighborhood pharmacy. As he reached into his pocket to grab yet another prescription, the paper sheet was swept away by the wind. R.I.P. chased it halfway down the block, before he finally caught up to it and pinned it to the damp concrete with his foot. He picked it up and wiped off as much of the mud as he could. He was completely winded. In fact, if his increased wheezing was any indication, he had never felt this out of shape—at least not since he decided at the age of fourteen to begin working out, to defend himself against bullies. And maybe, *just maybe*, pick up chicks.

It didn't help.

R.I.P. entered the sparse, bare-essentials pharmacy in a huff, almost knocking down another customer half his size. R.I.P. glared at the customer, even though he knew damn well that he was the one at fault.

"Well, look who the devil dragged in," the pharmacist said. "You look like you're about to drop dead of a heart attack. Should I call 911?"

R.I.P. was too focused on regaining his breath to respond.

"So what is it today?" the pharmacist asked.

R.I.P. slammed the wet, crumpled, mud-stained prescription down on the counter with his meaty hand.

The pharmacist took one look at the slimy slip.

"Not even gonna ask."

"How much?" R.I.P. interjected. He meant business.

As the pharmacist looked at the prescription, his eyes widened.

"You looking to kill pain, or a person?"

"Come on, man. You know who it's for. And he's getting worse every second you're wasting!"

"I can't just keep giving this stuff out willy-nilly. I can lose everything if someone thinks my client is the new Dr. Jack."

R.I.P. felt the gaze of the other customer in the room and turned toward him.

"The fuck you looking at?"

The man diverted his eyes away from R.I.P.

"No need to give my man a hard time," the pharmacist said. "Ain't his fault."

"C'mon, man," R.I.P. pleaded, hoping to guilt trip him into giving him what he needed. "You want my father's death on your hands? You know him. You're his friend!"

~Dies Irae~

THE ZEALOT

*Remember, O LORD, what is come upon us: consider,
and behold our reproach.*

The smell of autumn over sunset
Of death.
And fire.
I see smoke in the distance.

And I'm reminded of my purpose
I pop my trunk and remove one of the crates.

It is cold.
But it awakens me.
Makes me feel alive.

I enter the dimly-lit cellar.
More like a crypt.
Fitting.
A single yellow bulb dangles on a string.
Blinking intermittently in a haze of stray smoke,
barely illuminating newspaper clippings,
showcasing acts of redemption.

Prostitutes.
Drug dealers.
Murderers.
Rapists.
Homeless.
Filth.

A new millennium
harking the arrival
of end times.

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Death not by my hand,
but the hand of the Almighty Creator,
through whom all Judgment
and fire comes.
I am merely the conduit.
The spark.

Red crosses drawn over each article.
With blood.
My blood.
Unsolved case known by two beings:
GOD
And myself.
Nothing else matters.
A clandestine, holy covenant between
a mere mortal and the most high.
For the good of all His church and of all this city.
I carry my crate to my father's old workbench.
Rotting wood.
A cockroach runs out underfoot.
I am a living corpse inside my self-made tomb.
I snuff out its life with one swift stomp of my foot.
If only my other victims were disposed of so easily.

Sacrificial lambs.
I retrieve my other crates, then get to work.
I grab an old pair of rusty scissors—
my mother's scissors.
And cut six-by-six inch squares out of old rags.
Like Jesus turning water into wine.
Each cut reveals flashes of my angel in white.
And then she fades.

But the feeling remains.
It always remains.
It is my fuel.

I fill the empty bottles with kerosene
and stuff the rags into them.

I put four boxes in my trunk.
Each crate contains a dozen bottles.
Each bottle contains a message.
Each message an intended receiver.
A message of hope.
Salvation.
A cleaning solvent.
Fuel.
Holy water to purify.
To make this city chaste.
I am a sweeper of the streets.
Cleansing this ash-covered town.
One night at a time.
One abandoned house at a time.
Ashes to ashes.
Dust to dust.
Till death do us part.
Amen.

~Rex Tremendae~

CAT MAN

Cat Man turned to his favorite passage in the Bible and readied himself to face his congregation, huddled inside a tattered, makeshift tent.

He could smell fire in the distance. More so than usual.

At least to the best his memory would allow.

He was dressed in everything he owned: a green, threadbare military jacket, gray sweatpants and Velcro-strapped black shoes, topped off with a knit cap that had more holes than fabric.

His loyal parishioners—a dozen or so cats—listened intently as their caretaker, their human Lord and savior, began to read:

“When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

As he finished the passage, he broke into an uncontrollable cough—a worsening of the untreated asthma that had plagued him since childhood. The smoke in the air certainly didn’t help.

But nothing could stop him from his daily devotion.

He used to go to a church on a regular basis, and, as far as he could remember, he had never missed a Sunday service.

Until it burned down.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Rather than seeking out a new sanctuary, an old, tattered Bible that he found in a shelter became his church. It was his most cherished possession. He never felt closer to God. Cat Man had come to realize that the less one has, the more one has God; the more one has, the less one needs God.

Cat Man gently closed his book and set it down adjacent to a pile of neatly arranged remnants that he had found on the streets of Detroit. He took great care in collecting and carefully curating other peoples’ castoffs. He scooped up the latest addition to his family—a scruffy, malnourished kitten that he brought back from the dead—and placed it into the front pocket of his jacket. He emerged from his homemade tent, a living,

breathing piece of performance art in the epicenter of the Heidelberg Project. Despite its deceptive name, the Heidelberg Project was not a low-income housing project. It was an urban art project designed to inject new life into a no man's land on the east side of the city.

The entire neighborhood *was* the canvas. Abandoned houses were adorned with colorful polka dots. The empty spaces where houses once stood now showcased displays of mannequins, old phone booths, and discarded stuffed animals—all strategically placed for a specific purpose.

A Salvador Dali junkyard.

Though considered art by many, city officials consider it an eyesore drawing unwelcome attention, despite the irony that the whole purpose of the Project was to put a man-made bright spot on man-made blight. Despite recent efforts to erase it from existence, the Project continued to subsist through multiple arson attempts and city-sanctioned razes. In fact, a significant portion of it had been razed by city bulldozers just months earlier. But it refuses to back down, standing its ground. It embodies the city's spirit like nothing else.

And Cat Man was its beating heart.

~ End Excerpts ~