

WRITE A STORY INSPIRED BY THESE LINES FROM A WELL LOVED POEM

We listened, flinching there

And looked, and looked, on the untouched meal;

And the overtopped chair

The wind howled against the manor walls, rattling the stained-glass windows in their iron frames. A fire flickered in the grand hearth, casting long, skeletal shadows across the dining hall.

We stood in silence, our breaths shallow, the air thick with something unseen but present. A presence that had not left, though it had no form we could discern. We listened, flinching there.

The long mahogany table was still set for dinner, though no one had eaten. The plates gleamed with the sheen of candlelight, silverware arranged just so, as though waiting for hands that would never lift them. The food lay untouched, steaming faintly in the chill air, as though time had paused at the moment of serving and refused to move forward.

And looked, and looked, on the untouched meal.

A chair had fallen. It lay awkwardly on its side, its legs tangled with the folds of the heavy carpet. There was no sign of struggle, no spilled drink, no shattered plate. Only the silence, thick as the dusk settling outside, and the chair—overtopped, abandoned in the wake of something unseen.

And the overtopped chair.

A soft creak above us. The hush of something shifting. We dared not move, dared not breathe too deeply. The house had many secrets, and tonight, it wished to share them.

The wind pressed harder against the walls, whispering through the cracks in the wood, slipping its cold fingers beneath the doors. The candle flames flickered, wavering as if in warning. Somewhere in the depths of the house, a clock chimed—a dull, distant toll that reverberated through the bones of the manor.

We turned, our eyes drawn upward to the ceiling where the sound had come from. Footsteps—faint, deliberate—moved along the upper hall. The boards groaned beneath their weight, though we knew no one had ascended the stairs. The dust on the banister lay undisturbed, the air held the scent of wax and old wood, yet something unseen walked above us.

A gust of wind rattled the chandelier, sending crystal fragments of light dancing across the table. The food, still untouched, grew colder. The chair, still toppled, cast its own accusing shadow across the carpet. The silence deepened, pressing against us like a weight, urging us to leave.

And yet, we remained.

A whisper brushed against my ear, low and intimate, though no breath stirred the air. The words were indistinct, a murmur that barely grazed the edge of understanding. My heart pounded, my fingers tightening around the back of a chair. I turned sharply—no one was there.

The presence grew, thickening, curling like smoke around us. The fire in the hearth shuddered, the flames bending as though recoiling. A shadow, deeper than the darkness around it, flickered at the edge of my vision.

A second whisper. Closer this time. I recognized the voice.

And then, the footsteps above us stopped.

A slow, deliberate knock echoed from the ceiling. One. Two. Three. A rhythm as steady as a heartbeat. The room's hush became unbearable, the tension tightening around us like an iron shroud. My breath came shallow, my hands cold as ice.

The knock came again, louder. The fire spluttered in the hearth, shrinking into embers, and the shadows stretched unnaturally. Something was waiting. Watching. The unseen presence was no longer merely lingering—it was demanding.

A door creaked somewhere in the depths of the manor. A distant gust swept through the corridors, rattling the chandeliers overhead. The footsteps resumed, slow and deliberate, making their way down the unseen staircase. The unseen guest had decided to descend.

I reached for the person beside me, my fingers clutching theirs tightly. The air between us quivered. The whisper returned, curling against my ear with chilling familiarity, the voice unmistakable this time.

"You should not have stayed."

A final gust of wind tore through the hall, extinguishing the candles, plunging us into darkness. And in that black void, the last sound we heard was the scrape of the toppled chair being set upright again.

The experiment that went wrong

As the darkness of night edged into dawn, the vivid hues of blues, the charcoal blacks and the patches of purple danced among each other. The blanket of a purple night divulged a sun, grazing the crests of a jagged horizon. A warm glow radiated from where land brushed with the sky. The sun peered out to cast its gaze upon the world and for the world to see it. The day was now old enough that its scenery's colours were so bright and radiant they bounded from their surface. After a few minutes, the cliff faces and hills were silhouettes no more. The view now had discernible features, like the caverns between the trees where light would fall searching for an exit yet to be found.

This landscape was one of China's greatest. You could have thought this to be a perfect day, still innocent, being that it was still in its infancy. But the ground the scene rested on was tainted. Miles beneath the surface was a lab concealed by a blanket of terrain.

In the underground lab an invention poured a byproduct of thick steam, which dissipated to reveal a menagerie of blank-faces with lab-coats trailing from their ominous necks. Among the astir lab, mysterious solutions mingled with one another. Scientists made sparks that illuminated their projects before fizzling to dust.

In the centre of the room a towering cube fabricated from fibreglass, accommodated a spherical looking amalgamation of wires, metallic plates and canisters. On the other side of the glass enclosure there was an appendage that looked like it had been torn from a colossal robot. The mechanism held a glass torus containing a white gas.

On the arm a green light ignited suddenly; the process that had taken the scientists years to perfect had begun. A vague murmur loomed over the room like an ominous mist. The lab coats' bleak heads turned to face the ongoing proceedings. The pincer tipped arm began to precisely situate the torus in the compartment on the spherical clump of devices. As the hatched closed, the mundaneness of the room was the most riveting activity that could be seen. Then the machine's lights flashed before being permanently lit. The room itself plunged into darkness as all electrical power drained to sustain the life in the experiment.

But then the experiment deactivated leaving no light to see. Lab coats began to run as the room was bathed in red and a siren cried out in distress. Something was wrong. Subtle creaks radiated from the spherical capsule before it fulminated, coating the glass barriers in mechanical organs. The glass cube enclosure filled with the gas. Thankfully the biological weapon was contained, until a furry faced rodent broke the seal with a tunnel that exploded from the base of the glass interior. This tunnel acted as a funnel for the gas. The whole room burst into a state of panic, everyone frantically running around to save their lives. But their efforts were futile, the sound of collapsing bodies ricocheted around the

room. The rat sank back into its hole, seemingly unaffected by the poisonous gas. It foraged through the ground and the longer the rat had the disease the more it combined with its DNA.

The rat scuttled back through a maze of tunnels away from the lab, to carry its deadly gift to its next victim. The rat's lungs were corroded by the gas, this compelled the rat to spew poison in every direction. The rat's senses were enhanced. The scent of human activity was near. The rat instantly scurried towards the vibrations in search for something living. With a powerful jump the rat thrust itself upwards breaking the surface of the ground. He explored the labyrinth of walls and windows to find a bustling market. As gaseous venom poured and spluttered from its nose, leaving a wave of people to collapse into one another as the rat passed.

The rat continued to travel the world unaware of the lives it stole, all because it visited the location of where the experiment went wrong.

The Experiment That Went Wrong

In the quiet town of Hillview, nestled between rolling hills and ancient forests, lived Dr. Edward Caldwell, a respected scientist known for his groundbreaking experiments. His modest laboratory was a haven for curious minds and cutting-edge research. But, for Edward, it was a place where dreams transformed into reality—or so he thought.

One chilly autumn morning, Edward embarked on an experiment that would change the course of his life forever. With years of meticulous research behind him, aimed to create a serum that could enhance humans' cognitive abilities. He envisioned a world where diseases like Alzheimers were a distant memory, and intelligence soared to unprecedented heights. But he was also aware of the delicate balance required to achieve such a feat.

As the morning sun cast a golden hue over Hillview, Edward carefully prepared the serum, mixing ingredients with the precision of a master artisan. His colleague and best friend, Dr. Laura Mitchell, watched with bated breath, her eyes reflecting both admiration and apprehension.

"This could be revolutionary, Edward," Laura said, her voice tinged with excitement.

Edward nodded; his eyes fixed on the swirling liquid. "I know, Laura. But we must proceed with caution. The slightest miscalculation could have dire consequences."

With the serum finally complete, Edward and Laura decided to test it on a lab mouse named Whiskers, who had faithfully served as their subject for numerous experiments. Whiskers' small, beady eyes seemed to understand the importance of the moment.

Edward injected the serum into Whiskers, and the mouse immediately began to exhibit signs of heightened intelligence. It solved complex mazes with ease, demonstrated advanced problem-solving skills, and even appeared to understand human speech. The experiment seemed to be a resounding success.

Days turned into weeks and Edward's excitement grew. He saw endless possibilities for humanity, with Whiskers as proof of his groundbreaking discovery. But then, something went horribly wrong.

One evening, as Edward and Laura were finalizing their research, Whiskers began to exhibit erratic behaviour. It clawed at the cage, gnawed on the bars, and emitted strange, unsettling noises. Edward's heart sank as he realized that the serum's effects were not as stable as he had hoped.

Laura's face paled. "Edward, something's not right. We need to stop this."

But it was too late. Whiskers' condition deteriorated rapidly, and within hours, it convulsed and fell lifeless in its cage. Edward stared in horror at the lifeless form of his once-intelligent subject, unable to comprehend the magnitude of his failure.

Laura placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Edward, this is a setback, but it's not the end. We can learn from this and improve."

Edward shook his head, tears streaming down his face. "I was so blinded by my ambition that I overlooked the potential dangers. Whiskers paid the price for my recklessness."

Days passed and Edward's once-vibrant laboratory became a sombre place of reflection. The townsfolk of Hillview, who had eagerly awaited the results of his experiment, now whispered in hushed tones about the tragedy that had unfolded. Edward's reputation was tarnished, and he felt the weight of his failure pressing down on him.

But Edward knew that he couldn't let this be the end of his journey. With Laura's unwavering support, he vowed to learn from his mistakes and continue his research, this time with greater caution and humility. He would honour Whiskers' sacrifice by ensuring that his experiments prioritised safety and ethics above all else.

Years later, after countless long nights and painstaking moments of failures, Edward's laboratory once again buzzed with activity. He made significant strides in his research, developing safer methods to enhance cognitive abilities. He worked tirelessly to restore his reputation, driven by a newfound sense of purpose and responsibility.

Though the memory of the experiment that went wrong haunted him, it also served as a powerful reminder of the delicate balance between ambition and caution. Edward Caldwell had learned a valuable lesson, one that would guide him for the rest of his life - to be patient and mindful and demure.

Word Count: 675

‘Social Media: friend or foe?’

For several people, businesses and communities social media can be a tool for growth, improvement and inspiration. But the way these programs are designed are really what determines whether social media is actually a friend of ours.

Social media is filled with content created by people and other users of the service. Whatever content is created and posted onto the platforms immediately becomes available to millions, even billions of peoples, with the slight chance that it'll appear on what is called their "feed." A user's feed is what appears when they begin scrolling through content; what appears on their feed is determined by algorithms, coded into the infrastructure of social media. For example Instagram, a social media platform owned by Meta, has got 3.8 billion downloads just of the app in its 25 year history. Instagram, just like any other social media platform, has an algorithm. Its algorithm is a set of rules that the platform uses to tailor the content shown to each user based on their preferences. They also predict what users are most likely to find interesting and engaging based on their past interactions on the platform. Interactions on a platform such as Instagram are liking, sharing, commenting, disliking and who you follow

The world of today is commonly evolved and influenced by content creators and the content they create. These people, who create content for a living, are commonly referred to as influencers. Influencers make their living through being paid by platforms such as YouTube, another social media giant owned by google. However the majority of content creators income comes via sponsorships. For example, Jose Zuniga, a popular self-improvement youtuber is sponsored by the private therapy company BetterHelp. They have paid Jose Zuniga money in exchange for recommending their business within several of his videos. Many companies use this as a way of advertisement, with many videos reaching millions of views. This system of paid-sponsorships helps both the influencers and the businesses. So in the entrepreneurial term, social media is overall a great tool, helping many businesses, entrepreneurs and influencers thrive in their life goals and financial goals.

Though businesses, entrepreneurs and influencers benefit, how does this widely varied tool affect ever-day people's lives? Firstly, let's focus on the youth. With 93% of teens having social media accounts, it's an area that ought to be looked into, with many teens undergoing education, how does this affect them academically? Well, influencers play a part in influencing 93% of the globe's teenagers. While many work towards a good cause and inspiring self-improvement. In the end it all depends on what the algorithms put on your feed, which after all, is all dependent on you. Your feed could be a university of information, financial advice, and things that'll change you for the better, this once again, is entirely dependent on what actions you take. For example, if you follow people like Mark Tilbury, Matt D'Avella, Brandon Snaderson, Gohar Khan, Dan Martell, Vinh Giang, Jose Zuniga and Simon Squibb. All these people create content, and make money from what they're doing, but rather than posting jokes and false news, they are motivators, mentors and people that will help improve and inspire you to reach your full and entire potential, by following these kinds of people, your feed will become a university of information, helping you improve. This

list of people is all you need, to tell your algorithm, "I'm not wasting my time," and "I want to be inspired and more productive," as soon as your algorithm get's these messages, you'll be done scrolling through thousands of useless posts, and you'll be making yourself better! Your algorithm makes much more of a difference than you think.

Now to the final part, dopamine. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter made in the brain, it gives you a feeling of pleasure, satisfaction and motivation. Though it may sound great, it's not in every sense. As when you scroll through your feed, an extremely high amount of dopamine is released, even higher from when you're playing a game or a sport. This means by scrolling a lot, your average dopamine levels become higher, at first sound, it seems like it's a good thing: "I'll be happier most of the time!" But it's not, for young people going through education this means that when they're doing tasks that release less dopamine, like studying, they find it harder, much, much, harder. Meaning that the only way it is easier is by releasing less dopamine throughout the day, therefore reducing their average by scrolling less, and simply doing less activities that release high amounts of dopamine.

In conclusion, social media can be a great tool for businesses, entrepreneurs and content creators, but for the every-day "ordinary" people, it's not always a good thing, especially for the youth.

**'We listened, flinching there: And looked and looked on the untouched meal,
And the over-topped chair.'**

I didn't notice them. They appeared faintly, like whispers on glass, until one day, they refused to be ignored. The whispers turned to screams and the screams to desperate cries. What was happening? As I approached the mirror, the dark shadows behind me crawled and writhed- their mouths slowly stretching like an agonistic cry. I touched the glass. Small cracks appeared, shaping themselves like pieces of a puzzle. Perfectly fitting with each other. But the room—the room had changed, though I had never seen it happen. The chair by my desk lay on its side. My bedside lamp flickered though no hand had touched it. And the mirror—the mirror was different. The dust was disturbed around it, but not a single fingerprint remained.

A plate sat on my nightstand, untouched, food long since gone cold. Had I left it there? Had I ever taken a bite? I couldn't remember eating. I couldn't remember sleeping.

The cracks in the mirror revealed hidden messages. Secrets began materialising— whispers became words, names, warnings and suddenly a dark figure emerged from the mirror. Not a reflection, not a hallucination: a figure. My eyes fixated on the entity on the other side. Soon more and more appeared, decayed and twisted, each one staring right at me with gawking eyes.

I examined every one of them- I looked deep into their souls opening a lock for every new person. Their secrets spilled forth, unravelling before me. Something almost felt familiar. As if I had known them my whole life- yet I didn't recognise them. Their faces left a blur in my mind; each one of their features were unfamiliar, as if lost in time.

As I stood there, surrounded by faces eluded in recognition- I felt something. My eyes felt itchy and my whole body was shaking. A creeping sensation took over me, twisting my words into phrases I couldn't understand. I sensed a satanic sense slowly swelling within; my legs trembled, and my arms extended as I turned. He was here.

The dark figure from the mirror had arrived walking out, resembling someone I knew very well: my father. Something was wrong. His eyes were black, darker than I remember. His mouth was stretched- almost like he never stopped smiling. Yet he didn't look happy; he spoke. "Its been a long time," His voice was crisp almost like he was forcing the words out, "Why have you let me out now?" I didn't understand, my mind was blank and when I tried to speak, nothing. Came. Out..." why now?" he repeated it over and over and over again- twisting my brain, hurting my soul.

"WHY NOW!?" I stopped, I looked in his eyes and my mind fell into a loop. I searched for the answer. Why did I let him out? All it took was to awaken my curiosity, wonder what really lay on that mirror.

The writing meant something, I meant something. I knew why. I pulled out a knife from the draw by the mirror- I always keep a knife near me-, pulled it up and ran at him, I couldn't stop. I forged my way through him, ripping him to pieces; I didn't know when to stop.

I hit the wall.

I bashed my head.

I didn't know what was happening.

All I know is that this would be the end.

My body lay in a puddle of blood, my own blood. I regret wondering.

591 words