

## The Inn

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*written 05/14/2024, based on a dream months prior*

Unable to reach their day's destination, a young professional stops late at an inn. The innkeeper shows them to a dimly lit room. The traveler drops their baggage, scribbles in a notebook, and goes to bed. From a quick glance, the room appears cramped and drab, with a small window over the bed.

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The traveler awakens. The moon illumines the room.

The window over the bed is larger than before. The traveler looks to the far side of the room.

There lies a grand, sumptuous parlor. Moonlight pours in through large windows. The traveler rises and walks among the ornate furniture, in and out of shadow.

The traveler starts to return to bed. They notice another bed on the opposite wall; its curtains stand open.

The traveler walks nearer. They discover a body under a shroud, upon a bed of fresh flowers.

The traveler lifts the shroud. No human face is revealed. An angular metal visage, glinting green and blue, gazes blankly upward.

The traveler touches its forehead, then traces a groove on the side of its head.

The traveler replaces the shroud, then wanders back among the furniture. They start to return to bed.

An iron hand grasps their shoulder.

The traveler whirls toward the metal face. They leap upon their bed, fumbling with the window. They look over their shoulder.

The metal figure stands, as still as when it had lain in state.

The traveler's hands clutch the window.

The figure lifts its inhuman face toward the traveler. It moves to the table beside the traveler's bed and lifts the notebook.

The iron hand pages through it, the iron gaze jumping desultorily over the pages. It fixates on a page of schematics, and glances at the traveler. The tip of one iron finger cuts the page from the book.

The figure puts down the book, and carries the page away. It walks among the furniture, starting and stopping, staring at the page.

The traveler follows at a distance.

The figure evades their steps, still staring at the page. The traveler steps quicker. The figure steps quicker, still looking at the page.

The traveler tries to take the page. The figure holds it aloft.

The traveler tries to snatch the page. The free iron hand strikes and shoves them away.

The figure walks to a small table and lowers the page into a pitcher. The page dissolves into clear water.

When the last shred of paper disappears, the figure carries the pitcher to the bed of flowers. It pours the water over the flowers. When the pitcher is empty, the figure replaces it on the small table.

It walks to the traveler. The iron hand pulls them toward the bed.

It is no longer a bed. The curtains are vanished, and in place of flowers stands a banquet. The iron figure gestures toward the food.

The traveler does not approach the food. They gesture for the figure to do so.

The figure glances between the traveler and the food. The traveler gestures again.

The figure serves itself.

The traveler fills a plate.

They face each other, still.

At length, the figure walks to the small table. It sits, and sets down its plate. It does not eat.

The traveler follows.

At length, the traveler lifts their fork.

The figure does not. The groove encircling its face shines in shadow.

The traveler walks to the figure.

Their finger traces the groove.

The groove becomes a fissure. Into the traveler's hands fall a mask of hollow metal. In its place stands a naked head, navy deltas fanning across the scalp.

The face stares forth emptily, as had the mask. The eyes blink.

The traveler sits. They again lift their fork.

The figure lifts its fork.

They eat.

The traveler observes the pale face. Its eyes move mechanically, eyebrows and lips curved without impulse; no memory inscribed in skin and muscle. No face; any face.

They finish eating. Unwritten eyes look long into the traveler's.

The figure stands. It walks to the traveler's bed, steps upon it, and opens the window. With a final glance at the traveler, it climbs through and disappears.

The traveler steps onto the bed and looks out the window. In the distance glint metal and white skin, nearing the setting moon.

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When the traveler awakens, sunlight illumines a cramped and drab room, with a small window over the bed.

The traveler makes no inquiries of the innkeeper, nor do they search for the missing page.

The traveler returns home by a different road.