

OUROBOROS III:

THE WATCHERS

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NOVELS

ouroboros:
 twelve
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1 The words of the Teacher,^[a]
son of David, king in Jerusalem:
2 “Meaningless! Meaningless!”
says the Teacher.
“Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.”
3 What do people gain from all their labors
at which they toil under the sun?
4 Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.
5 The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.
6 The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.
7 All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.
8 All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.
9 What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.
10 Is there anything of which one can say,
“Look! This is something new”?
It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.
11 No one remembers the former generations,
and even those yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow them.

PROLOGUE

People called him Gonzo. Nathan thought it was a reference to Hunter S. Thompson, but Alex thought it was because he always wore a purple suit. He was pretty quiet. He'd come by, drop off weed, get payment, and then leave. Gonzo never added anything to their conversations about metaphysics and Alex eventually stopped talking about things like that when he was around.

He missed Seth.

He often wondered if there was anything he could've done to stop Seth from being killed. Or that his drug use had contributed to the death of his friend or even was directly responsible. He never made an effort to try and connect with Gonzo; and part of him was glad that the man in the purple suit never tried to either.

After Gonzo left, Nathan resumed sorting his stuff into boxes. Some were going to storage, some were to donate, but most of it he was trashing.

The world had quickly become a violent, cluster of change. Seth's suicide. Nathan and Laura's break-up. Nathan's plan to move to Korea to teach English. It felt to Alex like the only thing not in flux was himself. He was still at Lattes and Literature. He was still broke. He was still single.

He exhaled, discouraged, staring with unfocused eyes at the ground. In his mind he was contemplating the idea of choice.

What if I hadn't come back from Taiwan? Or what if I had broken things off with Elizabeth immediately after I got back instead of trying to fix something that was obviously irreparable? What if I'd quit Lattes and Literature and went back to school? What if I hadn't let Claire slip away?

"Is there another me somewhere?" Alex sat on the couch, staring at the nearly empty living room. So many things were Nathan's. He was

leaving the couch for Alex though. The naked room looked unfriendly and the dust bunnies seemed to glare at him from the floor now that they'd been uncovered.

"Like a doppelganger?" Nathan exhaled and the smoke rose into the hallow apartment. "Apparently everyone has one. If I ever meet your doppelganger I'll make sure to get high with him. What if I meet him in Korea? How trippy would that be? What if I meet a Korean Alex? I'll call him Alex San."

"That's Japanese, Nathan. I'm pretty sure there's some bad blood between the Koreans and the Japanese." Nathan shrugged and Alex smiled. "That's probably something you should know before you live there."

"Meh, I'll just use the ignorant westerner card."

"Remember we were talking about alternate realities and how different choices made different versions of ourselves?"

Nathan nodded disconnectedly as he threw a stack of ink drawings Alex knew Laura had made in the trash box. Laura would often sit beside him on the couch and draw as they had conversations and got high. At first she'd draw in pencil and then she'd finish the pieces in ink or coloured pencil crayons. He was going to say something but didn't want to take sides. He already lost Seth. And now Laura. He didn't want to lose Nathan too.

When Nathan remained silent, Alex continued: "I sometimes think what alternate Alex's life is like and how things are different for him. If he's happy or if he's worse off."

"That sounds like torture, dude."

Nathan's words made Alex think for a few quiet moments. "If someone could come to you and lead you through the different versions, tell you the pros and cons and then let you choose-" he trailed off.

"Doesn't that take the fun out of life? Isn't the whole point to not know and just experience. If you knew how it was all going to play out, then what's the point?"

"You wouldn't want to know what consequences came from different choices? Help you make informed decisions?"

"There's a difference between informed decisions and having no decisions. If you knew how things were going to play out then . . ." he stopped. "If I knew that Laura would cheat on me and that I'd be moving out to Korea. I would've bypassed Laura and just moved to Korea."

"Wow, that's quite a few years, Nathan. We wouldn't have lived together. I wouldn't have met Seth. I wouldn't be living in this apartment. Who would I have moved in with after Elizabeth and I broke up?"

He sighed. "My point exactly." Nathan was about to drop another of Laura's belongings into the trash but sat down beside the box instead. He stared at it a long while, reading and re-reading the black label: trash. He knocked the box over and the contents came crashing out, landing among the dust bunnies. "Thanks man."

"What?" Alex looked over at him with a puzzled look before taking another hit from the pipe. Alex held the smoke in his lungs and handed the pipe over to Nathan.

Nathan smiled at him. After he took a drag, he walked over to the counter to pick up the black marker and scribbled out the word: trash. Underneath he wrote: Stuff for Laura.

L I L L I T H

Lillith played with the frayed fibers poking out of the armrest on her thrift-store loveseat. It was the only piece of furniture she had. She'd left Red Deer before the monster could burst out of her.

"I'm working on getting all the papers together for a name change," Lillith said. "What do you think of Janet Rice?"

"Janet Rice," hearing Carley say it back to her, Lillith still couldn't decide if she liked it or not.

Lillith had grown up next to Carley. It wasn't surprising to her that the hardest thing about moving to Winnipeg was being so far away from her friend. At least now Lillith had a new cell phone and a new unlisted Winnipeg number. During their first long distance conversation from her new apartment, Lillith had picked out a good fistful of fabric from the loveseat. She rolled it around in her hand a little longer before she went to the kitchen to drop it into the trash underneath the sink.

She was comfortable enough in the new apartment but she wasn't sure about the city. It was cold. She'd expected Winnipeg would be cold, but this was April.

It shouldn't be -19 in April. Lillith snorted into the phone and realized she'd been silent for a long while.

"I'm still working on finding a new job. I have enough in my savings for four months, but I'm really hoping I don't have to go through it all." Lillith opened the fridge and pulled out her leftover pasta. "I was really looking forward to our Spain trip."

"It'll still happen," Carley's crackling reassurance through Lil's cell phone wasn't. "It'll just be delayed a few years. Or I'll

make it a road trip to Winnipeg and you can show me around. I've actually never been further east than Moose Jaw."

"So far Winnipeg seems," she stopped, staring out over the unopened boxes in her apartment and the bleak grey world that lurked beyond the glass of the living room window. It was April but there was still snow on the ground. The dark trees that lined the city streets were still a mass of gnarled, brittle fingers that rose ominously upward, contrasted against the overcast sky.

She noticed that the windows had locks on them. It made her feel a little better. It wasn't like anyone could get in through the windows anyway since her apartment was on the fifth floor, but seeing the locks there was somehow comforting. That was what really drew her to this building in the first place. She wanted an apartment as high from street level as she could.

"Met any guys yet?" Carley's hopeful sounding voice pulled Lil's thoughts from the window, numbly past the weight of the cold food container in her hands, and stopping at the realization that she was silently standing in her apartment amid the few labeled boxes that contained a life she wasn't sure she wanted to be tethered to any longer. She left most of her belongings in Red Deer. She wanted to leave *that* Lillith behind. She still wasn't sure about Janet Rice, but she knew she wanted nothing to do with Lillith Chambers.

I should just kill the little monster in the converse shoebox.

"Lil?" Carley's laugh made her cringe. The sound was an odd and unnerving juxtaposition. "Met any Winnipeg guys?"

Lillith gritted her teeth. "Haven't really had time."

"Haven't had time. Or can't bother?"

"Both."

"I think you need to take a night out, Lil. Cut loose. Get laid."

"Carley!" she lowered her eyes and embarrassedly ran her finger along the pasta container before opening the microwave. "I'm so done with all of that."

"All of that? Lil," Carley paused. Lillith could tell her friend was taking time to choose her next words. In a way Lil was grateful that Carley was trying to be gentle with her, but it also made her feel angry that she was perceived as being so fragile that something as intangible as words could harm her. The fact that Carley was probably right made her even more upset. "It was one creepy guy; one horrible, evil, creepy guy. But not all guys are like that. Someone told me that whether you think the world is a safe place or a scary place, you're right."

Lillith's eyes were watching the digital numbers count down but in her mind she was seeing *him*. Although she didn't really know what he looked like. In her mind he was always disheveled, oily, and grotesque. He may have actually been a tall, handsome blonde man with piercing eyes and a charming smile. He really could've been anyone. Lillith found it was somehow more comforting to think that the man looked as grotesque and evil as the things he'd done to her. The police never found the man. It had started innocently enough. There had been the odd phone call. She didn't have caller ID back then and never got that many calls anyway. It was usually just Carley. Or work. Or her mother.

The new voice on the other end had nervously expressed how enamored he was with her. She thought it was cute at first. And flattering. And kind of romantic. She'd never had a secret admirer before. The phone calls were never more than a minute or two and then the man, whoever he was, would hang up. The conversations were awkwardly sweet and Lillith had actually started to look forward to them. About a month after the calls started she began to have letters

placed in her mailbox. No return address, they hadn't gone through the postal service and the glue wasn't even licked. Inside the unsealed envelopes were type-written messages. At first it was poetry, not very good poetry, but she wasn't accustomed to receiving such things and initially she was grateful. Poems became multi-page letters, and letters became roses at work, and soon she was finding gifts on her doorstep more and more often.

It wasn't until she started seeing Walter that the tone of the messages changed. She hadn't fully understood the situation until she'd sat down and talked it through with Carley. She cursed her past self for being so pitifully unaware.

Her face scrunched together in a hateful grimace as she stared through the microwave. *How could I have not seen what was going to happen?*

She blamed herself for being so oblivious to what, she was now aware, she should've seen coming. Her sweet, awkward admirer had to have known where she worked. Known her phone number. Known her address. And had to be watching her closely enough to know she'd started seeing Walter.

Carley convinced her to go to the police and file a complaint. Her stomach had gurgled around anxiously as she sat with the officer. There was a moment when the whole situation flooded down on her and enveloped her in a tortuous awareness that she did not know who the man was. She did not know where he worked. She did not know his phone number. And she did not know where he lived.

She gave the officers everything the admirer had sent to her but the officers told her that there wasn't any way to trace the items. They did advise her to change her phone number, which she did that same day, and for a few months her admirer seemed to disappear.

Carley figured it was probably because she'd gone to the police. If he was following her as closely as they assumed he was, he'd had known and backed off.

Things with Walter were going extremely well. They'd said the L word. They finally had sex, her first time, and he'd begun staying over a few nights a week. He even had his toothbrush, razor, and aftershave in her bathroom.

A VHS was dropped off at her doorstep one morning. Inside was a little index card with a type-written message:

I was wrong about you.

I was wrong to love you.

You were wrong to hurt me.

She knew it was from *him*. She pulled the tape out of the sleeve. The word *whore* was scribbled in dark ink in smudged, frantic block letters on jagged masking tape along the top of the VHS cassette. At first she didn't want to watch it, she'd just stared at the tape in her hand. The full impact of the whole message wasn't even apparent to her until she remembered the year, and how few people actually had VCRs.

She did.

And apparently her, increasingly more sinister, admirer knew that she was among the few who still owned one.

The microwave beeped and she jumped and let out a brief scream before she realized she was still on the phone.

"Lil, are you okay?" Carley voice was distant but concerned. Lil really only heard, Carley question the third time she repeated it.

"Yah, I'm just," she opened the microwave and pulled out her pasta and set the container on the bare counter. She realized she

hadn't even unpacked any of her kitchen stuff. She saw the box labeled kitchen was on the far wall of the living room underneath another box labeled: spring/summer clothes. None of them were washed. She'd pretty much just thrown them in the box and stuffed it in her car when the monster inside her had become too much. It wasn't like she was expecting she could escape since it was inside her already. But maybe a new city would change things. It hadn't. She stared at the converse shoe box and noticed just how fast her heart was thudding around inside her chest. Whenever she thought she was sure about what she planned to do with the monster in the shoe box something stopped her from acting either way.

She knew she could just stop feeding the monster. That would be the end of it, but she couldn't bring herself to follow through. It scared her, but getting rid of the monster scared her more.

"Carley?" Lillith sighed, her focus never roaming away from the converse shoe box. The monster made a noise and Lillith shivered. "Um, can I call you back in a little bit. I've gotta do some laundry."

"Sure, Lil. Talk to you soon. Love you."

"Love you too, Carley," Lillith hung up and it was then that she was able to fully see the emptiness of her new apartment. It was a discouragingly heavy emptiness that pressed down on her with a force that almost made her knees buckle.

Red Deer felt so far away. *Lillith* felt so far away.

Is there even a Lillith? She didn't feel like a Janet yet, but she'd definitely lost her connection with the being that she had once known as Lillith. Now she just was.

Aimless. Isolated. Alone.

Well, not completely alone.

Through her still, focused, yet cautious awareness of the monster in the shoe box, she coaxed herself out the conflict of what should be done about the monster. The stalemate only served to charge her mind with indecision as the available space inside her head was consumed by the ballooning energy that was neither being overpowered or dispersed. The adversarial energies had nowhere to escape to and once her head was full, the two were forced to contract themselves in tighter, neither wanting to concede any part of their influence on Lillith. Before her head imploded in on itself, she tore her eyes away from the box and allowed herself a reprieve from a decision either way. She turned away from the shoe box and went to open one of the boxes of clothes by the window. She cut the box open and began sorting the clothes into piles of whites and colors. She tried not to think about the monster in the shoebox.