

PROMPT #2: You open a book and a note with a letterhead falls out. At the top it says: If you are reading this, ...

A Melancholic Inferno

by **Madison L. Russell**

Too often she had felt alone in the world. Ignored, tossed aside like a greasy towel for the launders. There was rarely anything to break her monotonous days save for sleep. Her hours were molasses, providing only an existence.

Exploring was her escape, and a welcome one at that. An entire week had been spent in the same routine: she awoke, laced her thick boots and set off, remaining absent from her cold home for hours upon hours. Her favorite place to explore was one not many would have found solace in- Norris-Maple Mental Institution.

There was something about this building, something alluring and beautiful. She was drawn there, through time and tragedy.

On this particular day, the weather was fitting, overcast with a chill requiring the addition of a coat. She neglected to bring mittens, and spent her journey chastising herself for her absent-mindedness.

Through her walk the world was quiet, broken only occasionally by the skittering of a squirrel or the heft of a deer. It was an unsettling volume, with even the bugs dormant for the season, a fact cherished for the annoyance of them and hated for the empty silence their absence created.

Rain the night before had reduced fallen leaves to mush, and walking upon then neglected the crunchy release she had been accustomed to absorbing. A familiar relief and comfort flooded her once the imposing building once more entered her sight.

Two turrets framed the building in a loving embrace and she smiled as she breathed it all in. When she initially encountered the gloomy building, she was wary of the possibilities of

other explorers, ones who may not be as benevolent as she. But, it seemed all others steered clear of her oasis, a fact she welcomed without questioning, as it was comforting to call this place her own.

On her first exploration, she had come across a vast open room which resembled a ballroom, though what an asylum would need a ballroom for evaded her.

Today she infested there first. She savored the feeling of being small, of being the only breathing thing. She laughed. Her laugh increased, bouncing off the walls all around her. She pretended she was not alone, imagining a grand ball filled with attractive suitors and wild women. A smile filled her face and she continued in her cackle until her sides ached.

She plopped to the ground, in the same place she stood, ignoring the mud transfer to her backside. Two feet kicked, hitting the floor with a ***thump, thump*** that echoed off the walls and wrapped around her.

It could have been 20 minutes or 20 hours before she once more arose, continuing in habitation of the premises. She spread her arms, desiring to feel big in the small spaces, soon spinning and laughing once more. This was the effect of the forgotten edifice, the solidarity of it all. She wondered where the electro-shock therapies occurred. What it would feel like- what her very being could become at the edge of consciousness.

Her laughing soon evolved to slight singing, her imperfect melodies filling hallways and providing a voice to the building. Despite never seeing another, she never felt alone in this place, never out of place.

There was a portion of the old place that had been consumed by fire through a cause long forgotten. The husk of stone and rot inflamed something within her and she wondered what that would be like. To burn all of what she considered her life. How she would recover from that.

This day, she noticed something new. A door out of the corner of her eye, just beyond the scorched places that she swiftly re-angled her body to study. She moved closer and saw it was cracked open, an invitation to enter. She briefly wondered why she had not noticed the vestibule before, but quickly reasoned she had simply missed it, her attention focused too much on the burned-out area.

With no hesitation, she entered, knowing the room beyond posed no danger to her- a friend of the framework. There were papers strewn about, a shock to her, as while they were

weathered, they possessed no fire damage. No indication of their proximity to any fiery catastrophe.

She handled some, taking in the rough texture and musty aroma when held to her nose. She made no attempt to read what they held, instead focusing on the few other items in the room. A delicate pool of fabric resided on the floor, nothing more than a shift, colored the brightest of white. A hand mirror, sat faced down upon a book. She bent to the dress and felt the smooth fabric in her cold hands, rubbing it upon her arms and chest. She lifted the mirror to reveal her face, the one that stared back upon her incredibly familiar- though appeared more melancholic than she felt. She wrapped the delicate thing inside the clothing, deciding then to take them all. She lifted the book, opening the cover to reveal thick, coarse pages.

Go

The thought reverberated in her mind like a bullet whose origin she could not trace, simply knowing it was a command she had to obey- and swiftly. All at once, footsteps enveloped her, wrapping her inside a quilt of fear. They grew louder and louder. ***Thump, thump, thump;*** they sounded, each a reminder to move! Finally, she did, each leg pulling her and her new treasures to an exit, ***any exit.***

She clutched her cache as she ran, keeping more care not to drop them than to avoid falling. An uneven floor hindered her rush and more than once risked her ankle, but she pushed on. The steps were becoming louder and she knew- ***she knew***, that if her escape took any longer the result would not be a comforting one.

She couldn't remember making it back home. In her mind only flashes of stumbling, running, and heavy breathing remained; when all at once, she was in her room. She stood against the door, guarding against what? She did not know or did not remember.

After some time- of which she felt each second, she abandoned her post, opting for the comfort of her bed. She hugged her new possessions close to her heart, already feeling a deep connection and gratitude that she had saved them from human ignorance. Just as they had been saved from the fire however long ago. Already, she fancied herself the protector, destined to discover the personalities of these long-forgotten valuables.

She slipped into the silky dress and admired her reflection, a wide smile beaming back. She hugged her arms around her, not to hold herself, but rather to express her gratitude for a sheath that she knew, had chosen her.

Comforted, she opened the volume once more, skipping over blank pages until she glanced at a spattering of ink. “If you are reading this, I have succumbed to the ether.”

She read it again, surprised upon her own confirmation that was in fact, what the sentence declared. Strange, she thought, the *ether*? There was nothing to which she could connect the term to in her mind that made sense. She resolved that the only thing to be done was to keep reading.

“I have ceased to be and have ceased all being. I am in between, not knowing who, nor what. My life comes to me in flashes, no memory clear and no happiness available.”

She shuttered, the bubbling of questions overwhelming her mind. Questions that could only be answered within the strange tome.

“I have been placed here by those who know not what they have done. Those who seek to snuff a flame rather than take comfort in her warmth. I cannot stand it!”

As she absorbed the prose, she was shocked by the account, the details of life in the asylum so horrible she could hardly comprehend it within her sheltered mind.

“They have begun with the shocks today. I have expected so for a while, though nothing could prepare my disposition for what entered me. I had never imagined lightning could be so-comforting. I am enraptured by the heat.”

It was a journal that read as a novel, an account so terrible and amazing she could hardly pry her eyes away from it.

“They have begun to discuss lobotomy. They are disturbed by my outbursts during shock therapy, my pleasure in becoming the host for destruction I covet so wholeheartedly. They believe to scramble me- to snuff me. They can not be allowed to, not before I am to commit my greatest deed. They will not place me into the ether.”

There was that word again, “ether,” she could still not decipher what was meant. But she felt something in the pit of her soul, a certain dread that was combined with developing excitement.

“It will only be one match. One match to that bastard Norris in his office and I will have my pleasure, my release. I will secure my place in this hell. I can only hope that it kills more than him, hope it spreads to his work, his spirit, his legacy, to ensure nothing remains.”

She began to think she knew how the fire had started, all of those years ago- or was it months? Time suddenly reacted too fluidly in her mind to hold any true meaning and all she could think of was the inferno- the combustion it had descended from, the torture she knew it had unleashed. The fear she wished she could have been the one to absorb.

“Tonight is the time. My great love, as it often has, will define me. My time has come.”

The account ceased there, an unfinished record she knew in her soul the conclusion to. She flipped through the page once more, searching for a creator, a name she could assign these thoughts to. She found one just before the pages ran out.

“This Diary Belongs to: Lavinia Horjiim” sweeping inky letters revealed. A photograph was turned over so she could not see the image. She gingerly grasped it, turning the glossy paper to reveal the likeness of the author and gasped.

It was herself, only far more melancholic.