

There are ideas in this world that can infect a person, can change them. They make themselves at home in the dark and quiet places of your mind, they creep into your heart and wind their fingers in your soul.

And maybe you aren't always aware of them. Maybe you can forget them for days at a time. But when you look in a mirror, there's a part of you that knows they're looking back at you. And while you may try to pretend that the idea isn't in you, every now and then you think

*What if?*

That's all. Just a simple question. That's all.

Just an idea.

There are never very many of us. Perhaps a few dozen at a time, as many as a hundred when things are very good. It's a surprisingly easy thing to become, but mostly we have a short life expectancy. A year or two, for most of us, at the most. It takes a certain sort of person to become a wendigo, a very specific sort of person, and we tend to lead fast lives, with no thought for the day after tomorrow.

I'm something of an anomaly, in that regard. A combination of natural inclination, skill, and a healthy dose of luck.

I've always been lucky.

Perhaps more than anything else, though, what sets me apart is a difference of taste, of preference. My inclinations are much the same as any other wendigo, but with a slight twist in application. I like to think that I have a slightly more refined palate than most.

When you see a person standing on a ledge, there are conflicting urges. There's a part of you that feels concerned for their safety, and then there's a part that thinks *I could push them*.

Normally, of course, the first of these dominates, and thus society is fairly stable. You tell yourself that the other is just a momentary lapse of reason, that you'd never actually act on such a destructive impulse.

But then there's that moment, in the dark and the quiet, when you're all alone and the light feels a million miles away, and you think

*What if?*

And generally, there are two ways you can go after you think that. You can try to forget it, and generally you can be fairly successful. You can live your regular job, run the rat race, go home to your spouse and your two children and your dog. You can pay your mortgage and save up for a car and have an affair with the secretary from work, and desperately want a divorce but always put it off one more year for financial reasons. And you can even think you're happy, most of the time. Except for that quiet moment in the darkest hour of the night, when you feel a longing that you can't define, a hole in your soul that you don't know how to fill.

Or you can choose another path.

I prefer to work subtly. Not every wendigo does. Most don't, in fact, which contributes a great deal to the remarkably high death rate. But subtlety, a fondness for working behind the scenes, has always been a talent of mine.

I am, undeniably, the second most important person at the club, and likely the most responsible for its day-to-day functioning. Yet none of the clients know my name, and even most of the staff would be hard pressed to remember it. I don't make a great show of my work or my presence, don't demand servility the way many people might in my position.

But I am the one who keeps things happening as they ought to, in a thousand tiny ways. When someone doubts, I am there with a gentle touch and a word of encouragement. When someone hesitates, I am there to give them that tiniest of pushes over the edge. When someone reaches out a hand without quite knowing what they want, I am there to fill it with a drink, or a pill, or a knife. And always, *always* I am there to urge them onward, to tell them to take that one step further, by my very existence to provide a reminder that there is further to go.

That's what I am. At my core, that is what makes me what I am.

The legends say that a wendigo is a spirit of hunger and madness, that it crawls inside cannibals and makes itself at home.

They aren't entirely wrong. They *are* missing the point.

Everyone who goes to the club has needs. Hungers that they live to sate—or, as the case may be, don't. That's the point, the telos of the institution. No one goes there except because they need something that they can't find anywhere else.

For me, it's something more abstract, more *meta*, as they say in this age. I'm not there because I need to feast upon the flesh of men. I *do* feast, of course, and I quite enjoy doing so, but that's not why I'm there. It's a side dish, an ancillary benefit.

The main course is something so simple, most people don't even fully recognize its presence.

It's a quiet night, tonight. Barely thirty people and not-people in the main room, another ten in private rooms for one reason or another. That's very slow, for us. Even on a weeknight.

I make my usual rounds, checking in with the various members of the staff. None of them have anything of interest to report, and so my rounds don't take very long. Just a few minutes, and then I make the next set of rounds, taking a moment to observe each of the things being done in the room.

There aren't many, of course. There weren't enough people for there to be very many. But the ones that were there were fairly creative. To most people, they would even have been shocking. From my perspective, they were rather bland.

And then I noticed one in particular, and focused on it. A young woman lying on the ground, half a dozen chemicals pulsing through her veins, writhing in agony or ecstasy at the visions only she could see. She came alone and everyone else was busy, even the ever-present guards having more important things to occupy them.

She writhed on the ground, bleeding from where she'd clawed at her own face, her beautiful features marred by irregular wounds. And no one looked.

No one cared.

I felt a sort of satisfaction at the sight, a sort of fulfillment.

This was what I fed on, what I was. This was what had led a girl and a spirit to join with one another and become something that transcended both, a whole greater than the sum of its parts. It was that element of excess, of transgression. It was the things done in the dark, the things no one looks at because no one wants to know. It was the small voice in the back of the head, when you knew that something was wrong and you couldn't do it, asking

*Why not?*

I go to the woman and sit beside her. I take her hand and she clutches at mine, fierce, reflexive, her nails biting into my skin and drawing cold, slow blood.

I sit and hold her hand as her breathing slows, and her grip grows weak, and at the end her heart goes still.