



ABSURDIST

#5 OF 7

\$3

SPEED OF STRIFE

art & story by
Denver Martin-Brown



an absurdist press production

art & story by denver-martin brown

**originally published 2021
first printing 2024**

CHAPTER NINE:

let's sit crooked and talk straight.

As unhelpful as Magic Chaz's followers were, we did gather a little bit of info from them. There were other people like me and Katrina, and we had no idea who or where they were. For all we knew, they were actively fighting against us. Katrina said that Red doesn't seem to have any other girls with titles besides her and Lillian. She said that Lillian is just a demon that's been around with him as long as he has probably been around, but that doesn't curb my suspicions that there will be more fire power coming our way soon.

I think there was one silver lining in all of this that we hadn't yet considered. If everyone had titles, that meant so did Red, and whatever he was the spirit of would tell us his motivation and possible plan. He came from someone's beliefs, so he has to have a purpose. Katrina let me into a little more of her world over these past few weeks. For two months, Red used her voice to lure the town's young girls into a forest. After that, they would disappear with him, while their brain collected none of this

information to remember. They would emerge out of his tiny tomb structure with the tattoos and no questions asked. Katrina told me the process is very painful and she was far less than gleeful after it happened. She was given a lot more free will than they were and she didn't feel the same perpetuation to show her markings, so those two factors are a mystery. Since those days, she has been helping him get specific girls at specific times; there weren't very many left in town. She also got a few men, though the men never came back. Apparently, he eats men in one gulp and leaves the skin behind. He fills it with dark sand and then they are his oversized attack dogs. I didn't ask for too many details on that.

The other big things Katrina mentioned were these objects, these sort of magical relics that allowed people of power to obtain even more unique powers. The most interesting of them was a ring that used to be hers. It's what she used to heal me the first night she saw me. It can sort of materialize shadows

somehow, transforming them into solid objects of the creators choice. Red took it back from her after that night, because she wasn't supposed to have it in the first place.

It doesn't have a lot of limitations, although daylight is a bit of an issue. Red surprisingly hasn't used it much, which over all worries me. Katrina only seems to care about getting it back. It worries me how much she cares about power, but if I ever try and ask her she just says "I want to have it so he won't". I find it hard to believe having that power wouldn't make her want to do something with it, but I can't take it myself, or at least we don't think I can. I don't have markings to fit into their rankings.

"How did you get it to begin with?" I asked her.

"Well, one night I was in that tiny tomb because I apparently needed a tattoo touch up. He had this box amongst all his tools and I guess I got curious and I went looking. When I stuck my hand in, the ring wrapped around my finger. It was kinda spooky, but I had gotten used to spooky things."

"What did it look like?" I couldn't help but be curious.

"It had a big, emerald cut purple stone with all this filigree around it and all around the band. The metal was black and completely matte. There were other colorful, little stones all around the big one. It was pretty impressive looking."

"Sounds like it. I wish I could see it."

Katrina chuckled, "Well, hopefully someday you will."

This is all sorts of crazy, but prying or not prying wasn't giving me too much because even Katrina didn't know a lot of what was going on. So, I guess the only way to know for sure is to go straight to the head. He wants young cult women and I'm one of those, sort of. And I've already met him twice.

"That's a terrible idea," Katrina said, sipping her tea.

"We don't have much else to go on. We aren't getting any closer to figuring anything out than like a week ago, despite a significant amount of blood loss--"

"You heal in like a day."

"That doesn't mean I am a fan of it. People don't usually find pain enjoyable."

"That's debatable."

"Hush, the point is we need to make more head way."

“We don’t know what Red is capable of. He could be a god in his own right.”

“Or, he could be a really good bluff. Think about it, most cult leaders don’t have anything to hold over their victims except emotional ties. They can only control what they can convince people to let them control. What if that heavy handed intimidation is all he has?”

“He doesn’t seem to need much more. It’s powerful enough on it’s own. Not to mention what he does to guys, do I need to tell you about the guys again?”

“God, no, that’s alright. I get it. Still, we have no reason to believe he has any more power than a few objects, which you can take.”

“No one’s ever been that close to him.”

“Yeah because no one has ever tried, so why don’t we?”

“Staying alive is the main reason. I’d really like less death in my life.”

“We won’t let it go too far, I’m sure we’ll be able to tell when we are in over our heads. You’re fast. I’m fast. It’ll be fine.”

“You’re entirely too happy go lucky about this.”

“Maybe you’re too cynical.”

“I like to think of it as cautious. I would like you to live to the end of this.”

“Very death obsessed today, aren’t we?”

“Can you blame me? It is very present in my life.”

I hesitated. I had to ask at some point, but I was scared, “How present is it in your life exactly?”

“Only as present as it has to be. I avoid it as often as I can, but sometimes it is unavoidable. I don’t think you need to know the details of that.”

“Well, I think I do.”

“I’m sorry?” Katrina choked on her food.

“Before we go and face what could be our demise, I want to know what you have done. I don’t want any secrets between us that Red could exploit. I promise, it’s not going to change anything between us.” I didn’t know how much I could guarantee that last part, but still.

Katrina looked around the Cafe we sat in. “I’m not sure this is the best time to go over something like this. Could this perhaps wait till later?”

“Alright, fair enough, when would you like to discuss it then?”

“I don’t know, I guess if we go out tonight we could discuss it then.”

She props her leg up on the seat of her chair and rests her arm on her knee. She looks small, I mean she is small, but she looks even smaller. I used to do something similar as a kid. If my foster parents yelled, if my siblings fought, if orphan and paradox and I fought; sometimes when we are scared, all we can do is try and get small. Occupy as little space as possible to avoid problems.

“You’re so small and cute,” I say, trying to lighten the mood.

“Fuck off.”

“I’m serious. It’s really funny how you just curl up. I don’t think anyone could ever see you as a dangerous monster.”

“Don’t you have church to go to?” Katrina said, blushing.

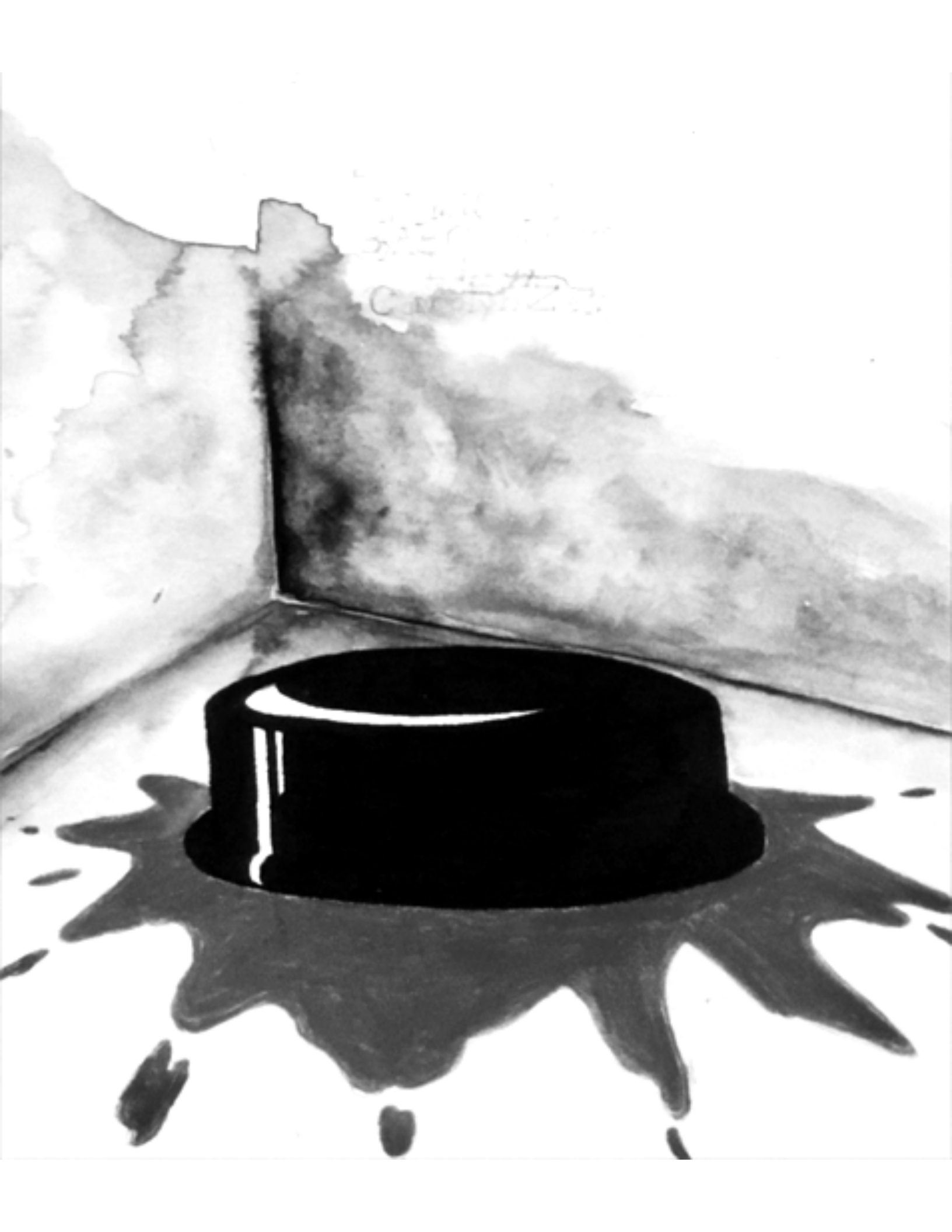
“Fine. But since you said the F word, you’re covering my tab.”

“You’re the worst. Have fun.”

“And I’ll come over around 8?”

She hesitated, pulling her other leg up. “Fine”

“I’ll see you then.”



CHAPTER NINE: toxic masculinity ruins the party again.

I kept going to church. I thought it would help me figure out more faster, but I seemed to be wrong about that. It's been 3 Sundays and still I have gotten nothing from the completely unorthodox, but harmless, behavior. William never really gave up on trying to be my friend. Don't get me wrong, he was always nice at first, but a few exchanges into the conversation he would always ask a question that was a little too personal or a little too judgemental.

I try to keep the conversation brief but he always wants to know why I'm not responding to his messages or doing other town-wide activities. I have a myriad of excuses for this type of thing, that he somehow believes, but those were not going to help me today.

I was walking from the cafe to the church, enjoying a tepid day, when I got a phone call

from one Orphan in a very sour mood.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"It's good to hear from you too, glad to see that nothing has changed," I reply coldly.

"Who is William and why does he keep texting me asking about church activities?"

"He's a guy I wanted off my back and I felt like you could handle him. It's not like you have too much else to do."

"So you ran away from this big city, full of people to help, to play small-town-girl in rural America?"

"Yes, that is exactly what happened. And for no reason too. I just left, shocking isn't it?"

"You don't need to be a smartass."

"Well you certainly seem to be a good example of that, you already dropped the smart half."

"Listen, just get the guy to stop messaging me, or I'll tell him

the truth about who I am and who you are and some other stuff.”

“You would really divulge all those secrets because I gave a weird, but harmless, dude your phone number?”

“Well, I don’t have to.”

“Fine, I’ll give him a different number. Thanks for being so mature.”

“Bite me, Athens.”

“Go choke on a needle.” I hung up.

I walk into a normal service, and get stepped up to by William before I even see which pew is open. “You haven’t been responding to any of my messages. Did I do something wrong?” You know the way a kid looks when he tells his parents he broke something in the house? That’s the look this guy had all the goddamn time. You feel sympathetic at first, but after time it just becomes frustrating and my patience for him was already pretty short by nature of where I was.

“No, you didn’t do anything wrong. I think I gave you the wrong number. I’ll fix it.” I gave him my actual number this time. I’m pretty sure he’s just mildly irritating, instead of actually stalker like. I gave him a

nod and walked around him to one of the back pews and sat down. He followed me too closely for my comfort. The sermon started.

“Can I ask you a question?” he leaned over to me.

“Aren’t we supposed to be listening?”

“I already went to the 8 am service for the senior center, it’s not that interesting this week. Anyway, you hang out with the McDoven girl a lot, right? I see you two outside the diner a lot.”

“Yeah, we’re pretty good friends I guess, why?” I asked, suddenly regretting my earlier judgement.

“I think you should be careful around her. She used to hang out with that Jess girl and I know Jess likes girls.” The way he said ‘likes girls’ made it sounded like Jess liked freebasing and streaking through town center.

“Ok, well, that doesn’t really worry me,” I said, trying to be notably annoyed.

“Well, maybe it should. She could try and do something to you that you don’t like if she finds you attractive. You know, something gross.”

“I think she can control herself in my presence just fine. We’ve made it this far, haven’t

we.” I could feel my brow furrow. I wasn’t gonna tell him that me and her had slept in the same bed many times already, because I think he might just keel over in his seat.

“I mean I just wouldn’t let her stay over, especially if you’re a heavy sleeper.”

I fully turned to him, “Why do you think she would do that? She’s a nice person with a modicum of self control.”

“Well sure, but nice people still have urges to sin. I would never want to hurt someone, but sometimes I do just want to grab a girl I have a crush on and be all over her. Not in a mean way, in like a loving way.”

“Ok, well, thank you for sharing that very interesting perspective, but I don’t think she will have that problem. In fact, since she is a woman and has a small grasp on what women actually want, she’s probably better at it.” I slid all the way down the other end of the pew to get out without having him block me. He tried to stop me by the door, but I blew past him. I might have knocked him over actually, but I walked out too fast to actually see him hit the ground. I was definitely super wrong about

the harmless part, and I don’t even want to think about the messages I would get after that display. What I did want to think about was seeing my, apparently very dangerous, lesbian best friend.

The walk home was quiet, and I found myself wishing I would have just taken my crappy car. A little exhausted, I entered my apartment to the smell of cinnamon and sugar. There was a crop of red hair I could see on the couch. I walked up and scuffed it.

“I didn’t make you food for you to treat me like this,” Katrina said, not even surprised by my presence. To be honest, she shouldn’t be; it is my apartment.

“Well I appreciate you wanting to keep our cafe tab down. Did you make cinnamon rolls?”

“Cinnamon rolls, mac and cheese, sauteed broccoli, and some chicken. Figured you would need something nourishing after dealing with the church folk.”

I walk to the kitchen to see my feast and the smells of homemade food. It’s been years since I had them. I guess I always told myself I didn’t like them, but the truth is they made me remember my mom. Once a month when I was young, we

would get the tubes of cinnamon dough that you had to crack open on the counter. My mom liked to have them with chili. It was odd, but the sweet spicy combination tasted like heaven. I grabbed one of the still steaming cinnamon rolls off the counter and bit into it. I remembered that I like cinnamon rolls.

“Shouldn’t you eat your lunch before having dessert?” Katrina said without looking up at me.

“I haven’t had a cinnamon roll since my parents died,” I say plainly.

“Well, I’m glad I bought them then. I almost got cookies instead.”

“C a n I a s k y o u something?”

“You already did.”

“Do you really think your parents didn’t care about you?”

She took a long pause. “Yes. They didn’t consider me.”

I was pretty shocked by this one. She’s always been pretty uncomfortable with herself but she can’t honestly think that her parents didn’t love her. “I mean, I know you have no idea who your dad is, but your mom was part of your life wasn’t she?”

“Until I was five, yeah, and then she was killed trying to stop two men from taking me away.”

“I mean you can’t say that isn’t love, she gave her life for you.”

“No, it was martyrdom. She could have hid, or called the police. She could have gotten me out a window, or called my step dad. She didn’t need to try and make them leave. She didn’t need to let them know we were in the house by going into the kitchen. She didn’t need to leave me here, with Dave and no one to ask about where I’m even from, or who I even am. My last name isn’t even real. It doesn’t exist as far as any name records I have found. She left me as a nobody in the middle of nowhere and none of it had to happen!” As she spoke, her voice rose and the pan of cinnamon rolls flew off the counter and across the floor, splattering as its shadow reconnected to the floor.

I kneel to pick it up, as Katrina apologizes profusely. I stand up and face her, “I’m sure she didn’t want to die either. I don’t think she planned it.”

“I don’t know, she was married to a man who did nothing but drink. She had an illegitimate

child who she couldn't even tell who her father was. She had to have some sort of life before Dave, so why? I don't guess her self preservation was very high. Red once told me he saw her soul around in the Afterlife, and that it wasn't anywhere finite, but it was happy. I don't remember her being happy a lot here."

"Is that why you are ok with killing? Because you think people will be happier outside of this world? And how do you know he's even telling the truth?"

Katrina sighed, "I mean that's the thing, he's had me do terrible things, and he has caused me a lot of pain, but even when he keeps me in the dark on what is happening, he has never lied to me." She wipes the last of the icing off the ground. "I guess I had some amount of respect for him for that."

I shot up, "How can you respect someone who is wreaking havoc on your town? Whose attacked girls all around you, girls just like you? He's made you hurt, and even kill."

"These girls are nothing like me. And I don't know what havoc he is wreaking yet, nothing even happened so far. Only Lillian and other demons like her have

been causing trouble." She fiddled with a paper towel, "He didn't force me to do everything."

"What?" I say, as my chest tightened in shock.

"There was one, a man, he was in the woods. I hadn't lured him out there and neither did Red. I think he heard about girls being lured into the woods and wanted a piece of the action. When he saw me, he tried to talk me into coming over to him. I declined and kept heading towards home. He ran up and grabbed my arm, and tried to throw a cloth over my mouth. It had been such a long night, I was so scared and angered by another guy trying to take control of me. I turned around and I bared my teeth at the man. He stumbled backwards and I took out my blades. He didn't last much longer. I brought him to Red and that was that. No one ever looked for him. Red never even blinked."

"Is this why you haven't attacked him? You think he cares about you more than the people who died for you? Because he didn't judge you for killing an attacker? You really think he cares about you more than any of those other number of girls he has captured?"

“I don’t know! He’s the first person who ever made me feel like I had any power over my life!”, Katrina screamed. The room hung in silence after that. She panted. “I don’t know what he is, or what he wants, but I wouldn’t be here with these powers talking to you if it weren’t for him. Going against him feels like attacking God.”

“He’s not a God, Katrina. And you thinking that is only gonna make him stronger. You can’t jeopardize my mission to help these girls.”

“I’m not going to. Why would you say that? I thought this was our mission.”

“Because you just said you respected the man we are fighting, and how he helped you. How are you going to fight a man you think you owe something to? It can’t be our mission if you won’t actually complete it.”

“I don’t know how to fight him, but I can try. I thought you trusted me, no matter what?”

“I think you really need to think about what you are doing here. If it comes down to us having to destroy him in some way, would you be able to?”

“You wouldn’t do that, you don’t kill people.”

“Yeah, well, you do! Could you do it?”

She stares at the floor, “I don’t know.”

“Well you need to figure it out.”

“I think I need to go.”

“Yeah, me too.” Katrina nodded and went for the door. I slide myself down to the floor. The one person I had helping me fight this unholy creature, this man made of darkness, wasn’t on my side like I thought she was, and I was far away from any friends I knew could help me. What was my plan now?

I needed to find new help.

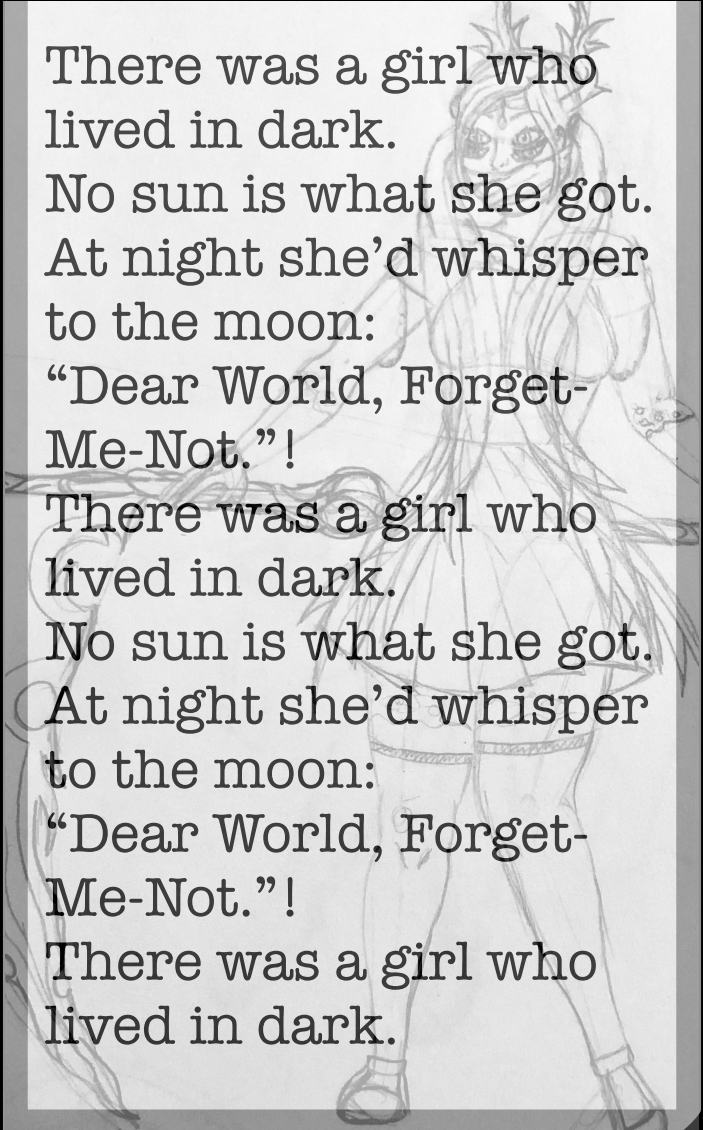
**NEXT ISSUE:
CHAPTERS ELEVEN & TWELVE**



MORE FROM THE ANNALS OF THE ABSURDIST UNIVERSE:

ONE CHANT IN THE MIRROR.

SHE MAY JUST COME TO PAY YOU A VISIT.



There was a girl who
lived in dark.
No sun is what she got.
At night she'd whisper
to the moon:
“Dear World, Forget-
Me-Not.”!

There was a girl who
lived in dark.
No sun is what she got.
At night she'd whisper
to the moon:
“Dear World, Forget-
Me-Not.”!

There was a girl who
lived in dark.

GROWING FORGET-ME-NOTS
BY DENVER MARTIN BROWN

APPEARING IN:

A B S U R D
FANTASY

BE NOT AFRAID. THE SQUID IS WATCHING.



*FIND OUT MORE AT
ABSURDISTPRESS.COM*