

The Boy at the Center of the Universe.

If there was one word that could be used to describe the Sinclair family, it'd be "peculiar", a close second being "a cult". From the members, to the plot of land they resided on, to their origins, their practices, and the rumors about them being a cult, they were, and always had been, peculiar. The current generations which occupied the manor were no different.

The family had arrived in America amongst the first settlers and had gradually migrated to a more barren, rural area, where they would build their family home, which was, in part, what would spark the murmurs of cultish activities.

It was massive, to say the least, spanning so far that if you stood from a certain distance back and looked directly at its frontal, exterior wall, your line of sight wouldn't be enough to capture the entirety of the construct.

The house itself was located in the depths of a woodland area, the plot riddled with babbling streams, rock queries, and of course, a multitude of trees which wove into a thick canopy, casting an ever present shadow over the property.

The family was self-sustaining on the land. They had several livestock which the adults would tend to in addition to a garden. They even had a church. Members would rarely grace the nearby town with a visit, and when they did it was typically the eldest member of the household, formally known as "Grandfather", or as his given name, "Ambrose".

In addition to the seclusion of their property, their infrequent appearances also fed into the rumors of them being a cult. The origin of the rumor could be traced back to their arrival in the colonies, where people claimed they had "fled" due to their odd nature and practices specifically revolving around religion. Their seldom emergings aided the adjacent town's claims, leaving the family with a soured reputation.

If there was one word that didn't describe Reverie Sinclair, it'd be peculiar. In contrast to his family, the boy was perfectly normal, in fact, he was so perfectly normal, so perfectly sane, that he was able to discern that his family's practices weren't exactly orthodox.

He was an intelligent boy, a clever boy, not a mad one, by no means, none at all. If Reverie could now, he'd make it explicitly clear that he was anything but mad!

And, if he had been mad, he'd have been mad due to the insanity which engulfed him, his family. The crazed whisperings, the secrecy, the seclusion from the outside world, all of those factors combined turned his family insane, and Reverie, in his infinite normalcy, was simply unable to cope with his family's dementedness. But he, of course, was not mad! Not in the slightest bit!

The only thing slightly odd, and even the word odd, even with the word "slightly" prefixed before it, is a long shot, about the boy was his persistent infatuation with his family's home. Just like he knew his family was weird, he also knew his house was weird. It was monstrously brobdingnagian and even harder to traverse. Reverie, had long since been enthralled with the concept of the center of the house. And ever since he was permitted to wander out on his

own, he had explored, alongside one of his cousins, in a journey to locate the center, having broken down the manor into a series of interconnecting “rings”.

He had worked tirelessly to find the center, not in an obsessed way, though. Obsession is a sign of insanity, and insanity is not one of the things Reverie happened to have been plagued with. Astonishing levels of intellect? Sure. But madness? Preposterous! He was just about the only sane one in his family. The center was not an obsession, and the insanity which ensued as a result of his achievement, reaching the center, was not caused by him, it was brought about by his family. Besides, it had been a life-long, or at least, as long as he could recall the first mention of the center, goal of his. No matter how ludicrous his family was, *he* was going to reach the center.

He had reached it all right. The center, the absolute intersect of the very fabric of the universe, of the concept of time, of the concept of being, of the concept of nothingness, of the culmination of everything in this wretched world, pinpointed bitterly into a singular coordinate. An item he had so desperately, for so many years, sought, clung to, pleaded for. Now, having satisfied his goal, he stood, the boy at the center of the universe, Reverie Sinclair, staring at his Grandfather and a corpse.

Basking in the splotchy bank of freshly expelled crimson, the man trembled. His fingers grappled around the frail cadaver, its figure sunken and slouched, the color trickling out of it methodically in a manner akin to that of an icicle depositing droplets from its decaying tip. The man dared to raise his head, how could he meet his gaze? How could he meet his gaze after what he had done? His weight shifted against the floorboards, which possessed an air of increasing decrepitness, as he cradled the loll-jawed girl in his muddied arms. His chin, tinted red from the amassment of salty fluid congregating at the point, finally raised, his piercing blue eyes now glowering up at the boy.

“You... you killed her...” The boy’s voice trailed off, the man’s eyes having finally dared to venture towards his. He pinched his gaze, sight singling in on the man. “Why...? Ambrose, why did you...?” The boy staggered back, his head pulsating with tremors of fragmented recollections. He tended to his noggin with his palm, cradling his forehead against the curvature of his hand’s heel. Sweat crept from his brow in an oozing form of excrement, the droplets cascading down the sides of his face and slicking stray locks of hair to his puffed-red cheeks.

The girl, now motionless in her grandfather’s hands, had mentioned something to him. But what was it? He racked his brain, thumbing through his assortment of remembrances in a bid to draw an answer.

“Reverie,” The girl’s voice- no, not her voice- an echo of it, fixed within his mind, interjected his calamitous roar of thoughts.

The boy blinked, lugging himself from his daydream. Glancing around he discerned which task had been allotted to him. His hands were shielded from the depths of the frothy sink

with a pair of hastily patched gloves. When he wriggled his pinky finger he could just barely make out the white peak of its nail.

“What is it, Antoinette?” He whipped around on his heels, face drawing into an overly stretched smile riddled with eccentricity.

“Today’s the day,” Her voice was muddled with a thick fog of solemnness, her eyes narrowing.

“Today,” He parroted the phrase. “The center,” A grin played briefly across his lips, dissolving after a few brief seconds of relishing his own accomplishments. Not now, he would grin later.

“Yeah...” She heaved a sigh, her shoulders deflating as the air crept from her body. “Look, Reverie-”

The boy’s head bolted up, swiveling to view the girl. *Reverie*, his name. Did she have to shout it from the rooftops? It had always been a sore spot for him, that blasted name, but he made an effort to not let on to the fact.

“Yes?” He intercepted the statement, his eyelids slumping and further dampening his vision, which was already blotted out with streaks of wiry, charcoal-black hair.

The girl twisted off the faucet, the aged plumbing squealing as it was shifted to a halt. She retracted her arms, fussing momentarily with her skirt, which descended just shy of the bottoms of her knees. “I’m not sure if-”

“Antoinette,” he cut her off once more, “we’ve been working our whole *lives* for this. Please, don’t give up now. Not when we’re so close.”

“Can’t you just do it yourself?” The girl returned meekly, voice compressed with a gurgle of fear.

“No, we started this together, I’d like to finish it the same way,” He wagged his wrists in a dismissive sort of motion. “Besides, you’re a much better map-maker than I,” He complimented.

The girl averted her gaze, tethering a loose strand of hair around her index finger and securing it behind her earlobe.

“And why are you even concerned, Antoinette?” He queried.

“It’s nothing. Just you know how Grandfather is... he gets *finicky*.”

Finicky, he repeated in his mind. It was a funny word.

One of his eyelids drooped down to the summit of his pupil, he quickly shot the flap of skin upright, retracting it into the belt of his eyebrow’s bridge.

“It’ll be fine,” He assured. He had always been an excellent public speaker, awfully persuasive. He was so wonderfully brilliant in fact, that he permitted himself to be ever the slightest amount of boastful regarding the topic. Even the adults of the manor agreed, constantly applauding his genius, and for good reason too. So it was to no surprise when Antoinette relented without any further complications. In fact, dare he say, she even seemed a bit giddy about the prospect of the center. Perhaps the boy’s own enthusiasm was beginning to rub off on her.

“Okay... then we best get going now,” Antoinette said, eyes peeling towards the door.

“Mhm!” Reverie bobbed his head, the straps of his suspenders digging into his shoulders as he swayed from heel to toe, brimming with excitement. Perfectly *normal* amounts of excitement, that is.

The center. It very well could’ve been his first conscious thought. The eldest of his memories served as a memento to his first encounter with the concept, an introduction to an obsession.

Well, not an obsession, by no means, no. If there was one thing Reverie was certain of, it was that he, himself, was not obsessed with the center. If anyone was, it was Antoinette.

He must’ve been about four years of age at the time. He could recall it ever so clearly, like a pristine gemstone, shaped and polished, resting in the murk of the mud yet still unsullied by the dampened earth’s ever engulfing grasp.

Two of the manor’s, the Sinclair manor’s, residents, a pair of adults, stood, conversing in hushed tones, palms cupped against the other’s ears.

“Center, tonight,” That was where the idea, that wonderfully, horrible idea, first installed itself into his mind.

The adults, his aunts, snapped their gazes onto him. Eyes ticking across his miniscule figure like a duo of owls examining a mouse, their next meal.

For a moment he was left staring back at the duo as they glowered down at him. His hair had been thrown a muck that day, as if it were a mop haphazardly slopped onto his scalp, per usual. He had cocked one of his eyebrows up into an arch, examining the pair with a certain intent curiosity, a feeling that only the center could presently arouse in him.

That was when the thought first emerged in his mind. The center. *The center*. The contentedness which he held in regards to his mundane existence fled, and in that moment, all that mattered was the center, and the fact that *he* was going to *get* there. *No matter what*.

The two adults then scurried off, tearing at their dresses and bunching them up in their whitening knuckles, leaving Reverie with a new idea to mull over for years and years to come.

The adults of the home had always been paranoid, always cautiously stalking through the halls, only occasionally consolidating into small clusters at corners, whispering and murmuring, passing incoherent ramblings of messages to one another. They approached the children, Reverie and his cousins, with an air of uncertainty and wariness. If they had been attempting to conceal something from the younger residents, they had in fact succeeded in withholding the information, however they had forgotten to adequately conceal the fact that they were hiding something to begin with.

Regardless of their crazed exchanges, Reverie never frowned upon any of the adults, perhaps he pitied them a bit, considering he was the only person in his family who wasn’t a lunatic. His family’s practices might’ve been unorthodox, having three generations reside in one manor, but he was bright enough to recognize that abnormal aspect and even brighter enough to garner that it should be ignored for the sake of the others.

Even if his family members were a bit off their rockers, Reverie certainly wasn't. He was the outlier of the group, perfectly sane, perfectly perfect, perfectly centered. He wasn't obsessed, not with anything, and unquestionably not with the center.

The pair strided through the inward winding walls, the textures and materials constructing the partitions shifting with every ring of the house they once again conquered. Wooden paneling encased corridors, peeling wallpaper possessed passageways. The lamps dimly emitted their rays, shivering and shuddering unrhythmically, shadows lurking across the carpeted floors, masses of dust slinking across the ground. The air was stale and had an almost salty sort of quality to it.

"Reverie," The girl called.

The boy turned, the floorboards below moaning under the shift of his weight. "Yes?" He snapped his neck to the side, leaving his vision as well as his figure lopsided.

"Do you remember the first time we explored the house?"

The family's rules.

The first rule, don't break any of the rules. That one was self-explanatory.

The second rule, residents under five were prohibited from exiting their rooms or straying from marked hallways.

There were a multitude more, a list too numerous to count.

The first venture. Right. It had occurred on his birthday, his *fifth* birthday, January 19th, two days after Antoinette's.

Festivities were held for the both of them upon their shared request. There was chanting and ritualistic blessings offered, the usual birthday ceremonies. Following the conclusion of the celebrations, the two were dismissed.

Decored in their dapper clothing, they departed into the vast expanse of the manor's inner walls. Silky white button-ups and coats, britches which were just a sliver too big on Reverie and had to be hemmed, and a lengthy puffy skirt on Antoinette, alongside a matching pure white ribbon which had been neatly woven through her hair of course, adorned the pair as they marched.

That was another one of the rules, all the girl children had to wear ribbons. Reverie never quite understood its purpose, the only people who would see them were family members! How ludicrous! No one dared to challenge Grandfather's mandations of course, but no one seemed to grasp how silly they were either! No one except Reverie, of course. Nevertheless, the ribbon-rule didn't bother him, he was a boy, so he was never plagued with bows on top of the rat's nest that was his hair.

They had, predictably, gotten lost. Reverie in his excellent memory, had almost succeeded in leading them back to the main foyer, but his suit was growing muddled with splotches of gray, masses of dust which had clung onto him, and it was nearing nightfall and he was just horribly, horribly, tired.

Truly, honestly, he could've navigated them back, but alas, it was much more simpler to chime one of the bells strung throughout the manor and alert the adults of their location. The bells served as a sort of rescue system, allowing the children of the house to notify the elders when they wound up lost.

Reverie was a fervent votary of the "work smarter not harder" ideology. And it was in fact, exceedingly smarter!

"I do," He replied, having finally tore himself from his eruption of abrupt recollections. "What about it?"

"Oh, nothing. Just... thinking about it."

Reverie arched a brow.

"Reverie-"

"Yes?" He whipped his head around.

"The other night-"

"What about it?"

"Could you stop interrupting me?"

"Sorry."

"It's fine."

"So, about the other night?" He motioned for her to continue.

"Grandfather spoke with me."

"Regarding?"

"Our map."

"And?"

"The center..." She swallowed uneasily.

"Well?" He prompted.

"He said... he said," Her voice crumbled, eyes swatting anxiously over the floor. Finally, in two fragments, she summoned the words, "He said... to stop."

"*Stop?*"

"Yes."

"Stop trying to reach the center?"

"Yeah..." She nodded sheepishly.

"Mm," Reverie grunted, scrubbing at his chin in contemplation.

"Maybe we should.. turn back?" Antoinette proposed.

"Turn back? *Turn back?*" He retracted, halting in his march. "Are you *serious*, Antoinette? After all we've done? We're going to *turn back* because of some old man?" He snarled.

"Don't speak like that... he'll hear you," She warned.

"Hear me? How?! I don't see any ears on the walls!" He threw his arms up in exasperation.

"Don't be rash, Reverie, it's not worth it."

“WORTH IT?” His voice lunged in volume. “This is the only thing that’s ever BEEN worth it!”

“Calm down.”

“I AM CALM,” He said, very calmly.

Antoinette flinched.

“Sorry, sorry,” He apologized, picking at the excess fabric of his britches which pooled at his knees.

“It’s fine.”

“Yes. Yes it is,” Reverie chimed. He wasn’t being rash, he was being calculated.

Antoinette was the obsessed one, she was the one in hysterics, not him. The idea was preposterous, ludicrous even, he, Reverie, was anything but crazy! Not mad! Not obsessed! None of those things! He was perfectly sane, in fact, he was just about the only sane person in his family!

And he was unequivocally more reasonable than that blasted old man! Surely, *surely*, Grandfather was merely intimidated by Reverie’s persistent refusal to abide by the manor’s standards. Certainly Grandfather feared Reverie for that simple fact, the fact that he wouldn’t go along with the nonsensical rulings, the fact that he was the one normal person there, that he wasn’t insane like the rest of them.

“So, what’s fine?” A voice beckoned from behind, rough and raspy in nature.

The duo turned.

“Grandfather...” Antoinette stammered out.

“Grandfather,” Reverie growled, voice charged with distaste.

His gaze was cool and unyielding. He was well into his seventies, but still maintained a fit physique. “Children,” He greeted.

Reverie nodded in acknowledgement, knocking Antoinette with his elbow, signaling for her to do the same.

“Why so far out? Hm?”

“Just exploring,” Reverie answered.

“Ah, there’s no need for such frivolous things. You’d fare much better in your rooms, studying, reading, drawing...” His voice drew out as he listed off various activities.

“Frivolous?” Reverie snapped his head to the side.

“Yes, frivolous.”

The boy glanced at his cousin, she was silent and clutching her palms together in one, big, shaky knot. “And what are *you* going to do about it?” He challenged.

The old man stood in contemplation. He pivoted on his hips, rotating ninety degrees in one swift turn. He marched over to the wall, grappling his fist around a rope and ripping it downwards.

The bell cackled.

“All adults, report to segment B-12,” He spoke into an intercom.

The boy sat on the ground, something limp and lifeless strewn overtop of him, his grasp clenched tightly around the item.

“You... you killed her! You’re mad!” Someone cried, pointing accusingly at him.

“I... no, I didn’t... it was him,” He gestured towards Ambrose.

“Grandfather? Reverie you foolish child! You are the one with the bloody hands!”

“My hands aren’t...” He looked down, voice trembling along with his figure. He examined his hands, they were drenched in a murk of red. “I...” He looked up, cradling the corpse in his arms. “I didn’t...”

“You killed her Reverie!”

“No I didn’t!”

“You killed her!”

“Someone get him!”

“He’s mad! Mad!”

“I didn’t... I...” The boy stammered out, eyes flickering from the motionless body and the crowd of relatives encircling him.

He had been framed. Grandfather had washed his hands and deposited the body into Reverie’s clutch in his moment of shock, muddying his hands in the process.

“No..! No! It was him! Ambrose...” He felt something caked against his face, a smear. He raised his hand to his cheek, dabbling its back against it. He retracted his knuckles to see a streak of red lining them. “I...” He gaped, pupils whirring around.

“Let me explain! Please!” He pleaded, scuffling around wildly on his knees, juggling the cadaver in his hands. “I didn’t.. It was Ambrose! You have to believe me! You *HAVE* to! It was him! Ambrose killed her and now he’s trying to frame me!”

“Reverie,” One of the voices spoke, emerging from the crowd.

Him. Reverie’s gaze widened.

“My boy, my hands aren’t bloodied...” The old man frowned.

“No... you..! I...!”

“Someone get the body away from him! Maybe she’s not dead!”

“No, she’s clearly dead! He went mad and bashed her skull into the wall! Didn’t you hear that bang?”

“The wall..?” Reverie croaked, his voice shrill and shrunken. His head swiveled to look at the wall. A splatter of crimson lined the center of it. “No... I...” He rotated the girl, the back of her head having been caved in. There was no way for him to have done this! He was too small, too frail... it was Ambrose. It was Ambrose. It was Ambrose. It was Ambrose. It was Ambrose.

“Hurry! Get him!” Someone demanded.

“No, I- I didn’t kill her!” He sobbed, reeling the corpse in against his chest, clinging to it.

“I- I! I didn’t kill her! Please! I didn’t kill her! I didn’t kill her! I didn’t kill her! I didn’t kill her! I DIDN’T KILL HER! I DIDN’T KILL HER! I DIDN’T KILL HER! I DIDN’T KILL HER!”

The adults approached.

Reverie wept.

“I didn’t... I didn’t kill her...” He murmured.
He shook the deceased girl.
He hadn’t killed her... he hadn’t! He hadn’t! Grandfather had!
“I didn’t kill her!” He pleaded, the growing crowd of adults closing in.

The center.
Reverie had reached it alright.
What a ludicrous idea.
It didn’t exist.
It never did.
It was only a reverie.