

December 3, 1992

*Haircut day.* Every third of the month Stephen went to get a haircut. He went to the barber in the strip mall on Kingdom City Road. He hated that it was in a strip mall (too capitalist) but it was a place to get a haircut and a hot shave, and the folks were nice enough.

It was a cold day in Illinois, but the barber shop was warm. The air smelled of what media had advertised as “men’s scent”—thick, full of testosterone and “woods” and “pine” and “flannel.” Every chair was cracked purple pleather, every barber had a black apron that was more “Sweeney Todd” than “I’m going to give you a haircut.” Maybe Stephen’s theatre school education hadn’t gone to waste, like his parents said it had. But then again, he was getting his haircut in a strip mall, and the only thing waiting for him when he got home would be a microwave dinner.

“The usual?” Morris, a barber, asked him. He nodded and sat down in Morris’ chair. Morris whirled the cape around him. He stared at his own sallow face in the mirror. The fluorescent lights accentuated his pitted cheeks. The dream hadn’t died yet, but it would soon.

They were always playing the radio here, and Stephen listened to the music—he was getting sick of the syncopated beats of the dying eighties. He noticed an index card in the corner of Morris’ mirror, cluttered with newspaper clippings and pictures of hairstyles. It read, “Kill your gods.” It was from some punk song by a local band that had gotten some radio air time recently.

Stephen had never really believed in God. To him, God was more of an archaic concept. There was no way that praying to anyone or anything could solve his problems. God couldn’t get him a job that wasn’t Blockbuster. God couldn’t make him stop smoking. God couldn’t move him out of his tiny apartment. God couldn’t bring his sister, Lily, back.

When Lily had died, in high school, God had died with her. The drunk driver that had hit his sister had killed God. It had been all over the news and Stephen had spent the rest of senior year with a cap pulled over his face, avoiding condolences. Then he went into theatre, hoping that assuming one identity after another would turn him into someone else.

He was twenty-nine and nothing had changed yet.

“You like it?” Morris set down his razor, “I can clean it up a little more.”

“It’s fine,” Stephen said, “Thanks a lot, man.”

He stood up and paid, the usual fifteen bucks for a simple cut, and headed back out into the chill. It was fifteen degrees today, and his breath spiraled out in front of him. He jammed his stocking hat on his head and got into his car.

Time for that microwave dinner.

Stephen drove down the road, humming along to the grunge station on the radio. A haircut couldn’t change a man, but it could cheer him up a little. He looked down towards the volume dial and fiddled with the radio. He looked up just in time to see another car barreling towards him, and frantically spun the wheel.

He spun too slow, and the road was too slick.

*Kill your gods.*