

19th Century American Literature Final Project (Creative project)

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Introduction

This work is an attempt at a literary response to *Daisy Miller*. It is not an adaptation, but rather a piece of fiction in conversation with James' work— through more overt intertextual references, as well as plot/narratives that engage with relevant themes or theses. Thank you in advance for your time!

Blurb: “You” are a student journalist, and someone who has read a portion of the canon. You arrive at this small town meaning to do a piece on it; they’ve just produced a viral adaptation of *Daisy Miller*. The town isn’t an Utopian model or a direct inversion of modern society— it’s just a town, with cultural and historical differences from your own, as any other town. It isn’t a rural town either, it’s rather 21st century developed, if geographically a bit isolated. Only, there are the “Things”, the human-shaped shadow entities. In the local society, they function in a sort of role as men would in a patriarchal society; not exaggeratedly so, but structurally they are in a more dominant power role; and they aren’t a monolith, they differ very much Thing to Thing. There are rules to follow, of course, when interacting with them... and consequences if those rules are broken. You are brought around town, interacting with the locals, and understanding more about the “Things”.

On some creative decisions:

- Who is the audience?
 - Preferably someone who has read *Daisy Miller*, but hopefully written such that someone who has not read it can still enjoy this piece.
- Why second-person pov?
 - For me, in reading, first and third person always feel like narration of fictional characters, while second person consistently feels like inserting the reader into the story, having more immediacy. As with visual novels and plot-centric games, the writing is often second person as well. I hoped to achieve a similar immersive effect.
- What are the main objectives of the work?
 - This work hopes to show first and foremost that groups are heterogeneous, and people are multi-faceted, multi-dimensional. We are simultaneously more alike and more different than we think: more alike inter-groups (across gender, across race, across species...), and more different intra-group (not a monolith). The possibilities are multitudes, and we must be careful about bringing preconceived notions to new interactions.
 - In response to the aggressive flattening of women in *Daisy Miller*, and the constrained female agency in *Roman Fever*, this work hopes to emphasize that

before gender differentiation, we are people. Lastly, this work intends to illustrate how such issues take shape and relevance in modern society for modern readers; these are not issues of the past.

- For context, the “crazy-hot matrix” as mentioned in text was recently mentioned in a Chinese youtube video and was somewhat popular? I have heard friends discuss it in real life.

- Horror

- In the works we read, of both Poe and James, horror has often been treated as more tangible manifestation of certain fear and anxieties. And, for example, with *the Yellow Wallpaper* or *Frankenstein*, we also see many instances where horror has been treated as a vehicle of expression for female fears.
- The theme of social rules also made a good fit for rule-based horror (a common online horror trope).
- I also hoped for the tone to lean towards cozy horror (another recently popular subgenre) — something one would want to read casually — rather than purely depressing, disgusting or terrifying.

- “Things”

- In constructing a “monster”, I hoped for something Lovecraftian/cosmic horror style (beyond human understanding), but also wanted to avoid making it female-and-primitive/nature related (common tropes in horror but ones I feel reinforces certain stereotypes this piece wants to work against). Thus I settled on a more modern/urban setting.
- I intended to construct a “third party” that functions almost as men’s role in the patriarchy.
- The final result I settled on, is an almost anthropomorphized object, or an objectified being? Yet it consistently resists being gazed at or objectified in a demeaning sense despite what its name may suggest, it is in a “superior” role within the power hierarchy after all. As inanimate objects frequently occupy the bottom of the hegemonic hierarchy, what happens when things change up?
- Town _____ and the Things are meant to highlight possibilities, destabilization, a different way of thinking about things and of living in society. When you come to this town, an exchange — not so much a clash — of culture occurs. They may not be the perfect way of existing or governing, but they are a different possibility, with certain aspects being better.

- An issue I have with reading *Daisy Miller/Roman Fever* in the modern day and especially with adapting them, is that not only are they not fully representative of modern reality, they actively reinforce harmful ideas, particularly when read uncritically or without context; for people outside the classroom, this is something to be considered. Even within classrooms,

I've read academics stand on both sides of whether the works are for or against the same issues (e.g. feminism), due to ambiguity in-text.

- Why not a simple gender-swap, or an inversion of gender roles?
 - Inverting roles without changing the framework does not escape the problems of the framework. As in More's *Utopia*, the Utopians' inversion of the roles gold and iron plays socially, serves to reproduce the same type of prejudice just under a different name, towards gold. When there is dismissal or a lack of respect towards any position on a constructed hierarchy, there will be an imbalance of respect towards all positions except the imaginary "undominated head". In London's *To Build A Fire*, the main character's demise originates from his recurring dismissal/disrespect towards nature (inanimate), animals (non-humans) and women ("not-men"), from his perceived superiority towards all three.
 - Thus, when critiquing certain issues concerned with patriarchal society, particularly in writing fiction about it, I try to avoid reenacting the same violence under a different name, to avoid a simple role reversal between men and women.
 - Swapping roles and enacting violence the opposite way also often serves to aggravate and provoke more than help the problem.
 - As to whether the framework of the Things fall into this trap, hopefully the whole of the story resolves this.

Inspiration:

My first encounter with the idea of exploring an academic argument via fiction was Rebecca Staffords' *Mercury (a novella) and critical essay, Cycles of Sickness: the role of the abject in Robert Louis Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde and the Millennial Zombie Outbreak Narrative*.

Also, in retrospect, the setting and presentation of my piece of fiction was likely influenced by my having been reading *Under the Glacier* by Halldór Laxness at the time of writing it.

More consciously, with respect to the objectification of women, I was inspired by Sofia Isella's song "The Doll People".

(There is no title, the story starts on the page after this and has numbered pages.)

I

When you first walk into the Starbucks on the edge of Town ____, there are at least five featureless, vaguely human-shaped blobs of shadow in the room. One of them waves at you.

You shriek. Quite loudly actually, despite yourself. Heads swivel towards you. Your handheld luggage escapes you and drops on the floor. Someone stands up from three tables away, chair scraping the floor. “Ah,” she says cheerfully, “you must be the one who contacted me.”

At this point, you’ve collected yourself somewhat, feeling embarrassed. “Y-yes.” Heart racing, you straighten your clothes a bit performatively, mentally trying to figure out the logistics of bending down inconspicuously to retrieve your luggage. You’d known of the shadow people beforehand, from what information there was online, but there weren’t any photos...not that anything would have prepared you for meeting them in person. Not a great start. It’s probably fairly rude in any culture to scream upon seeing someone, you think.

She walks over to save you from yourself, smiling, voice bright and unbothered, to the effect of placating the surrounding observers after your disruption. “Don’t worry, don’t worry. Just someone new.” She picks your luggage off the floor, and one or two spilled personal effects, carrying them to an empty table. “Here. It takes some getting used to, but I bet you’ll be all familiar with us in no time.” She gestures at the shadow person who waved at you. “That’s Thing #3.”

“Thing #3?” You echoed. Your gears were still not turning properly.

“Mm-hm. They’re really friendly, jumps at the chance to meet outsiders. We’ve seen each other around a lot.”

You hesitate, processing, while simultaneously trying not to look too surprised, or incredulous, or anything that might be read as impolite. “Just,” you pause momentarily, searching for words. “Doesn’t it— they! Don’t they have a name that they...prefer?”

“And also,” as if aware of how this might land, you lower your voice to a hush, “not to be rude, but uh, how do you tell them apart?” You look around the room again. At the human silhouettes, black voids of light, fuzzy around the edges, cut out from the setting, blotting out different parts of your view as they move. Still decidedly very indistinguishable blobs. And your head feels a little dizzy from holding your breath, you realize. Or was it from looking at them?

“Thing #3 is their name,” she clarifies with an amused look. “As for telling them apart, you’ll just know, after you spend more time here.”

“Is that so,” you murmur half under your breath.

Pulling out a chair, you prepare to sit when a second glance at the empty table prompts you to flip through your backpack for your wallet. A drink, yes, you convince yourself it might afford more of a semblance of normalcy. And you are rather certain that cafés want those who take up seats to pay. The Things certainly have drinks.

A few fumbles later you have succeeded in retrieving your wallet and are at the counter. You try to order a Yam Drizzle Red Bean Matcha, which you always get. They don’t have those. They do have the Salted Artichoke Juice Spinach Blend, a local specialty, and would you like that? You politely decline and ask for a cold Americano. You are relieved to receive one.

Walking back to the table, you see she’d already pulled out a brochure. As you sit back down, she glances up at you with another smile — gaze pausing for a moment on the Americano — and hands the brochure to you. “The local travel guide. It’s a bit outdated and there’s not a lot inside, but I thought you might want one.”

Taking it from her hands, you thank her for it. Carefully placing your drink far from the table edge, you flip open the guide. Gaudy, colourful letters welcome you on the front page, and there is a cartoon mascot happily waving a banner. Skimming through multiple introductory passages, your eyes land on the middle pages, where there is a typewritten list, dissonant from the polished, upbeat tourist-friendly tone of the booklet.

Instinctively, you look to her. She is still smiling. Your eyes dart around the room, and suddenly the unreadable — or missing — faces of the Things feel unbearably nervewracking. Uneasily, shielding the contents from nearby customers, you show her the page. “What’s this?” You ask in a low, hushed voice, wondering if it was a prank, but almost afraid of hearing the answer.

“Shh— read on! It’s just some local customs. Best to go over it in detail. If you have questions, I can answer them later... not here.” Her smile doesn’t diminish.

Her voice sounds serious, so you do as she says. Your eyes return to the page.

Rules.

1. Never be alone with Things you do not know.
2. If a Thing you know shows signs of erratic behavior, it is not the Thing you know. Look for ways to get away, immediately.
3. Do not walk alone at night.
4. Do not walk into isolated places. Even if a Thing invites you there. Especially if.

5. Do not look at Things for too long.
6. If you feel watched, do nothing. Be careful. Find crowds or the nearest authorities.
7. Never upset a Thing.
8. If 6. occurs, soothe their emotions as quickly as possible.
9. Do not tell a Thing about the Rules.

How not to anger a Thing.

1. Do not talk about how Things look. Do not discuss appearances.
2. Do not discuss clothes or worn items at length.
3. Never, under any circumstances, take unpermitted photographs or recordings of Things.
4. Always let Things have the right of way.
5. Do not presume knowledge about Things. (If you talk about Things, they will know. If you think it's private, it is not.)

You read the ninth rule again. It does not make you feel better— it does make you stop asking about it in Starbucks.

II

Some safe distance away from the café .

You stop in your tracks, causing her to stop too. The booklet was now slightly crumpled from being clenched in your hands the whole way. The lines you just read race through your mind, the words jumbling and tumbling before you straighten them out again. Maybe you just read it wrong, you hope, and if you read it again the letters would be differently arranged. Slightly frantic, you fumble to the page again.

It still said the same thing. You try to show it to her, unsure if this is what she meant by “later”, if you’re far enough away from the Things. The self-referential rule about not letting them know about the Rules, and the rule about them knowing when you talk about them...you point at the latter on the page, inquiring wordlessly with your expression.

“It’s fine, so long as we don’t openly talk about it in front of them. Debriefing behind-the-scenes has generally not been a problem.” She pats you on the shoulder. “Don’t be so nervous. You can ask if you want to know anything.”

“I—”

Where do you even start?

“These are rules? What— you said they’re customs? What happens if you break them?”

She raises an eyebrow, “probably what you think will happen. I’ll remind you if you get close to breaking them. Other locals would too, anyway. If you say or do something that might anger a Thing, people’s reactions will probably remind you immediately. No one wants them angry.”

You pale a little. “And you guys just live with it? I didn’t see any information about this online at all, and I prepped quite thoroughly too. And if there’s been incidents, surely the news?”

She shrugs, not unkindly. “Well, having it on the news would probably rather displease the Things, like I said, we don’t talk to them about it, and it’s not something for open discussion.”

She starts walking again, and you unconsciously follow, preoccupied with the conversation. Too caught up in your thoughts to think about your legs. “As for living with it, it’s actually not that bad. Every town has its quirks, and this isn’t all that different.”

The nonchalant attitude throws you off balance a little, even though you know this is all just a given in her life. “Surely, recently, what with the *Daisy Miller* adaptation going viral and all, there’s been lots of new tourists like me?”

“There has!” She laughs, a light lilt in her tone. “That’s why I’m used to this whole procedure. Which reminds me, the Director said they’d meet you at the art museum tomorrow noon. They’re holding a personal exhibition there at the moment.”

You brighten at this. This is the main reason you’re even here in the first place. For a school project. Your class had been reading *Daisy Miller*, and the recent hit adaptation came at such perfect timing, you’d thought it’d be nice if you could interview the director. Luckily they’d agreed too.

“The Director is such an interesting pseudonym. It does sound grand though, like they’re representative of the profession, or something. Do you know who they really are?”

“Oh, you’ll know tomorrow,” she says slyly.

Upon her words, the both of you reach the door of the hostel you’re going to be staying at. You’d specifically chosen one on the outer skirts of town. She helps you take your luggage inside, then shows herself out, promising to accompany you to the museum the next day.

There are three Things in the public area, as well as two guys and a group of girls. They're lounging about, some of them chatting, but not loudly. People standing with shoulders or backs comfortably smushed against the wall, or people settled cross-legged on the floor, neither for lack of sofa seats. There's a board game with pieces sprawled on a table, looking recently used. Light jazz music hums in the background, mixing into the murmurs of conversation.

You run the Rules in your head again, trying to memorize it. Greeting your fellow lodgers briefly, you make sure to look away from the Things after three seconds. You aren't sure how long is too long, and you don't want to risk it.

You don't sleep well that night, must be you had too much coffee.

III

**EXCERPT FROM
INTERVIEW WITH THING #142,
THE DIRECTOR OF *DAISY MILLER, A MURDER IN 3 ACTS***

Q: Good afternoon. Thank you so much for taking the time for this chat, it's such an honour to be here.

A: Nice to meet you.

Q: I must say, I saw the exhibition on my way in, it seems to be having quite a good reception, and I was rather intrigued too. Would you mind sharing your ideas behind choosing performance art, sort of, as your next endeavour? Or "creating art through interactions", as the exhibition claims. Given the recent highly acclaimed film, what underlies the decision to not choose something like a photography exhibition?

A: Well, the answer is simple, with a typical art exhibition, you have static pieces of "art", and you have observers paying to see it. Visitors buying a ticket to look at something the artist created and left there. Looking, judging, deciding if it was worth the price, if it's meaningful, if it's aesthetically pleasing... I think we have enough of that in today's society. What if, instead of evaluating from an elevated distance, we have the visitors interact with the exhibition? Affect, desire, these aren't a one way street, they're bi-directional. Flow, you know, flow. For me, art that is truly changing, comes from the

visitor placing themselves on level ground with the exhibition. I'm not saying normal static art can't do that, but it's harder, because you can't really control what visitors think, can you? The mechanisms of my exhibition sort of forces it a little. So you have these interesting people — performance artists, if you will — standing at each checkpoint. There is no plaque or introductory labels, and they don't really have a preconceived script. Each visitor, each interaction, gets a little something unique, a little something different, and that's where the art comes from.

Q: Would you say this is connected to your recent *Daisy Miller* adaptation?

A: Certainly. The same throughline runs through these works, I do hope that's clear, if you've watched the film. One might even call this a publicity stunt, or marketing.

Q: Bringing us back to the adaptation. I've been curious, as I'm sure many others are, as to what made you choose *Daisy Miller* in the first place? The end result is spectacular, but this is in hindsight. I used to think a director aiming for the big screen, and big impact, would have to choose something more universally known. But the recent *Metamorphosis* adaptation, released around the same time, didn't do quite so well despite centered around the workplace and capitalism, things young people are concerned with, and the story is more well-known than *Daisy Miller* too. I would love to hear your thoughts behind this counterintuitive phenomenon.

A: *Metamorphosis*, huh. Kafka's work is great, of course. A man turning into a cockroach one morning, losing humanity, losing worth, losing connections under capitalism, the patriarchy, and he's still worried about going to work. But the thing is, it's pretty well-done satire already, the absurdity, even in the original book, I don't think I would personally have much to add. And *Daisy Miller*— it sparked something from the first read. People generally read it as a comedy of manners, many around me have. But that's silly, to see it as something funny, when it's not quite absurd enough. And so many, so many discussions on her, judging her, when that's just the reader stepping into the shoes of Winterbourne, thinking we have a right to judge without knowing. When I read it, I saw a murder. And I thought, let's make that a little more explicit.

Q: Yes, and what an ingenious idea as it turns out, to make it into something halfway between true crime and a detective story. I had the most enjoyable time watching it. Could you walk us through the thought process of shaping the script and characters?

A: So, mainly, Daisy Miller was a victim. Not just a victim, but a victim nonetheless. And with true crime, we've been seeing more and more exploration into who the victim was, and not just the perpetrators. I wanted to make her explicitly, tangibly a victim — one of murder — and flesh it out by showing she can be unfavorable, detestable, or annoying, not necessarily someone all pure and angelic, and still be a victim. She can be a person, and still be a victim — both of which she was, in the original story, but people all too often flatten her character. So I wanted to explore that side. I also wanted to highlight Giovanelli's role as the guy who brought her out into a contamination zone after essentially realizing she wouldn't marry him. And also the fact that for some reason, of Winterbourne, Giovanelli and Daisy Miller, the three who were in the same place the same night, only Daisy died. Is that not suspicious?

Q: Well, some might say that's the point. The malaria being a metaphor?

A: Metaphor or not, it only killed her. There's murderous intent, murderous perpetrators, murderous methods, and a murdered victim.

Q: Listening to all this, I'm curious why you didn't pick *Roman Fever* to adapt. It seems to explore more of what you're interested in? The female story in such a society. And we learned that it may have been written in conversation with *Daisy Miller*.

A: Of course. This question, *Roman Fever*, came up when I was finalizing my choice for the adaptation too. It seems to be more female-centered, but funnily enough, when you think about it, it passes the Bechdel test even less than *Daisy Miller*. I don't think I can comfortably adapt it to the screen. Are we to say it showcases more of the female story? Is the female story nothing outside of two friends brewing generational jealousy over a man, and one being triumphant she got to bear his child? I wanted to explore more of the untold sides of the stories, to explore people, not just perform pseudo-feminist

agency. This may reflect a facet of history, but surely even then, women had other thoughts and identities. If it was a critique, it doesn't make it clear enough, and especially for time-constricted media, I cannot justify reinforcing problematic stereotypes in my work, or rather, I don't have the will to?

IV

The interview was over and done with, and you are beaming. Was talking to a shadow entity while trying to avoid staring at them very intimidating? Yes. But the interview was held at a public corner of the museum, with Amanda (your guide) waiting nearby, so at least there wasn't the danger of being isolated with Thing #142. It was hard to talk about *Daisy Miller* without mentioning physical appearances, but you'd managed.

You did get caught up in chatting. Thing #142 really liked expressing themselves, but you'd figured that every artistic being has a little something, and they gave you a lot of material for your project.

So now you're happily eating lunch, with Amanda planning to show you around the town's Public Relation Center — where she works at — afterwards, when her phone suddenly pings, and she picks it up to take a glance.

"Ah shoot," she says, "looks like we won't get to go after all. Today's not really convenient."

You inquire after the reason, having gotten a little too into habit after the hour-long interview.

"The Things melted the office. Someone accidentally tried to show off a new bag and angered them."

"What?" Your cutlery clatters back onto your plate. "What? And you're just saying that casually?"

She looks at you expressionless for a moment, then breaks into a grin. "Just kidding. The real reason is that things were getting heated online, so they shut down the local anonymous forums for the day, they didn't want people piling onto witch hunts or getting overly emotional. So now my colleagues are very busy being overworked."

You let out a sigh, exasperated but relieved. "Please don't joke about stuff like that!" She reminds you that bragging about worn items, particularly to the Things, is still a very serious and sensitive matter. You nod. Absentmindedly sending a few more spoonfuls of food into your

mouth to calm yourself down, and finding that it did work— you really were more accustomed to the place even after barely a day— you followed up, “so what exactly happened?”

“You know the crazy-hot matrix? The graph with ‘craziness’ on y-axis, ‘hotness’ on x-axis— ”

“—and used to rate women by ‘date-ability’? Unfortunately, yes. The graph has been making its rounds online recently, for some reason.”

“Well, apparently someone used it to rate Daisy Miller from Thing #142’s adaptation, and as you can probably guess, the Director was not happy about it. Neither were the fans. Understandable, seeing as it is quite literally the antithesis of the film.” She munches on another bite from her plate.

“Ah.” You can only imagine Thing #142’s face— wait, they don’t have one. Your mind does conjure their reaction though, quite vividly in fact, down to the length of the paragraph they’d have in response.

“Mm-hmm. I would bring you later, but you’re leaving soon anyway, and I don’t think an office is exactly the funnest place to be.” Having finished her plate, she wipes the corners of her mouth with a piece of tissue. “You’re not missing out. I’ll bring you someplace else instead, tomorrow.”

V

You wake up early the next day. After a quick washing-up in the shared bathroom, you throw what few things you took out back into the luggage. It barely takes a moment to pack.

Lugging it out the front door, you find her already waiting there.

“Morning!”

“Morning.” The sun is a bit too bright for your eyes.

She ends up dragging you to the playground, claiming it's a central hub of the town. It’s filled with greenery and shrubbery and flowers, intentionally cultivated to maintain a fresh patch of nature, a man-made oasis between concrete lanes and constructed buildings. There are also multiple rather sizable sets of slides, swings, see-saws and jungle gyms, as well as a merry-go-round. This is clearly a conscious investment of the town, and the residents take full advantage of it: the surrounding benches have specks of people loitering, picnic mats are spread on the grass, and children run around the perimeters with full uninhibited noise. There was a surprising lack of litter, and an impressive amount of available trash cans.

Sunlight filters through the leaves, softening from the foliage, leaving warmth for the passersby below. You're delighted to bask in it, even the air feels less muddled.

You're leaning against a random bar, presumably built as part of an obstacle course or for calisthenics purposes or something, when she brings you back an ice cream cone. She's bought one for herself as well, and takes the spot beside you, resting her weight against the same bar.

You're facing the main play area, watching the children (there are little Things too), and a particular pair catches your eyes. They are holding hands under the monkey bars, with a surrounding circle of captivated spectators. Very endearing. "Oh, look at them! Me and my friends used to play at getting married on the playground too—"

You've barely finished your sentence before a little boy rushes onto the scene, into the center of equally young onlookers, spouting a garbled sentence too fast for your ears. The pair who were holding hands turn to look at him, and the little girl suddenly falls dramatically to the ground, fakely convulsing, spasming as the audience oohs and ahhs.

You look so positively bewildered, Amanda snorts a laugh. "It's because of the movie. It's been a local hit as well, and children love to mimic whatever's popular."

How silly. Your cheek muscles tense with effort to suppress a reaction, trying to keep the ice cream eating business from causing a dripping mess all over your clothes.

You spend the morning finishing the cone, watching the children have fun reenacting more scenes, and chatting with her. Noon comes, the sun grows fiercer, and people start dispersing out the park, but you're almost reluctant to leave. She can tell. Attempting to placate your emotions with a pat on the shoulder, she reassures, "you're always free to come back."

As you leave, clasping your luggage tightly, you can't help but look back one last time. Out of the corner of your eye, you think you see a Thing standing there. They sharpen in and out of focus. One moment they seem to resemble a woman. Then a man. Then a bear, then a tree, and then almost a mirror— ? It's becoming ridiculous and you're sure the sun is getting in your eyes. The three seconds are up too. You quickly blink, and they turn out to be just Thing #3, waving goodbye at you.

VI

Two weeks later.

You've finished your school project, having written an article on the town alongside your interview with Thing #142. You're hopeful that it's turned out well.

The morning had been spent on refining details, and you're just now preparing to eat breakfast at noon. You hadn't bothered to turn on the lights earlier, intending to get to your work first thing in the morning. The room now feels lethargic, slow, cloaked in a muted grey that renders the space mostly flat; few precious slivers of brightness stream from the gaps of the window blinds.

Twisting open the packaging, letting gravity do its work on the loaf as it spins, you pluck the bread tag off to siphon a piece of bread from the top. Hastily spreading on a splodge of jam with a nearby butter knife, you bite down near ravenous on it. You hadn't realized you were this hungry up till this moment.

The phone rings, it's Amanda. You shove down a few more bites without properly chewing.

"Hello?"

You ask after each other's wellbeing, catching up, before she swerves right into the main reason she called.

"You remember the Rules?"

"A bit hard to forget."

"Well," she laughs, and for the first time you hear a smidge of fluster in her voice, "something happened recently. So. We had another tourist after you left, someone here because of the movie too."

"Mm-hmm?"

"I gave her the booklet as usual, Rules and all. The same one I gave you."

"Yeah."

"Would you guess what happened?"

"She freaked out?"

"Understatement. She didn't believe it, or didn't quite trust it I guess. So she decided to just read it out loudly, vehemently interrogating nearby Things about it."

"Oh," you wince. "Did something bad happen to her?"

She laughed that laugh again. "Well. As it turns out, and as we all found out that day, the Rules aren't real."

"What?"

"Yeah, the Things in our town had a real laugh about it."

"What? How does something like this happen? I thought you said incidents happened, that the Rules are local customs... people scared of you breaking them?"

“Turns out, that’s probably the extent of it. Like, I said there were incidents, I meant stories and word of mouth; I mean, you’re not going to find survivors if something went wrong anyway. But like, as it turns out, it was always just people being scared.”

“Apparently,” she continues, “some of the higher-ups in town, the men and women in charge, decided this was what the Things wanted when they appeared.”

“So what happens now?”

“I guess you’ll be seeing more of the Things online! Though they really don’t show up in photos or videos.”

You stifled a laugh. “Bummer.”

“Mhmm. You’re very welcome to come back though. You’ll probably have more fun this time round with this cleared up.”

“Likely,” you say, smiling.

When you hang up the phone, for a moment you’re unsure how to configure your face. Then you sigh, and brush the crumbs from your clothes; you’ll have to rewrite your project now, but the smile has not disappeared from your face.