
The Shift-Machine
Kristopher Mallory

The Shift-Machine

by

Kristopher Mallory

The Shift-Machine

A Sci-Fi Horror Story

Copyright



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The Shift-Machine

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Special Thanks

To Khurrum, for the look on the girl's face.

The Painting Behind the Story

The Shift-Machine began with a painting. On a summer night in July 2015, at *Sub Persona: an Artistic Exploration of Masks and Identity*, a pop-up show in Baltimore that brought local artists and writers together, I found myself standing in front of Khurrum Maqbool's *Virtual | Reality*. It was the look on the girl's face that drew me in.

I started writing the next night. What follows is my answer to that painting, and to the question the whole show was asking: what do masks signify?

You'll find the painting itself, and a little about the artist, at the end of the book.

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The Shift-Machine

“Hello, Danny. Come and play with us. Come and play with us, Danny. Forever… and ever… and ever.”

~ The Grady twins, The Shining (1980)

Dead branches scratched against the window, loud enough to rip Val from the twilight dream. As she awoke, the binding memories of the other realm faded until only the last words of a familiar voice echoed in her consciousness:

Don't be afraid… Don't be afraid…

"Rita?" Val whispered, opening her eyes.

A soft cry escaped her lips, for the hour was late, and the dark clouds spinning across the full moon gifted shadows to shadows that crept along her bedroom walls.

Her vision adjusted slowly from where she sat slumped on the floor, tears distorting the pale light shining through the window.

The shape of her bed appeared first, followed by the geography of plush animals scattered across the floor. Then, directly in front of her, an outline of a figure materialized, a shade separating the darkness. Fear swept over her before the features within the shadow formed.

The silhouette sat on the floor opposite Val, cross-legged, mimicking her own sagging posture. A Shift-Machine shroud rested in their lap, its metallic mask trailing tangled wires up into the intruder's hair. The face emerged next, a face familiar as Val's own. Then recognition struck, and Val momentarily closed her eyes with a relieved sigh. "Rita…"

Val watched her twin sister's head tilt slightly, eyes staring a thousand yards nowhere.

"What happened to us?" Val asked, eyes tracing the thick cabling that ran from Rita's shroud across the floor to the Shift-Machine lying somewhere in the darkness behind Rita. "I don't remember anything."

Rita's shallow breaths kept pace with a red light pulsing behind her ear, confirming the shroud maintained an active connection to the port beneath her short, ashen hair.

"Talk to me," Val begged, dropping her gaze to the floor. "It's dark, and I'm scared."

Rita continued to stare, face expressionless, and Val's unease grew with each passing second.

Val did not wish to play Rita's cruel game and waited for the mental fog to dissipate.

Then she remembered entering the rift, wishing to waste away the nighttime hours in one of the lovely virtual realities. Rita had been with her, but the outing had all gone awry; the storm must have triggered an interruption to the Shift-Machine. Her shroud's video feed had gone dark, forcing a transition back to their gloomy bedroom.

Val watched her despondent twin and wondered if it wasn't a game after all. Her mind struggled to find the missing jigsaw pieces. Out of the few clues she had, none seemed to fit together. A forced unbinding from the rift had terrible side effects like paranoia, disorientation, and temporary memory loss. Though terrifying, the Shift-Machine held worse dangers for those improperly interfaced. She drew in a sharp, sudden breath, realizing the shroud resting on Rita's lap still carried power, the ocular sensors inside the metallic mask flickering through several shades of red.

Now that Val saw what had happened to her twin, she could hear the warning message repeating over and over from the shroud lying in Rita's lap. The message played each time the shroud lowered over the eyes, a safety precaution beamed directly into the wearer's cerebrum: *Never remove the Shroud while binding in the rift.*

"Rita, no," Val cried, staring at the blinking red light. "It's still powered up!" She had a sudden urge to recite the confirmation code needed to gain access back into rift space. "The Shift-Machine," she began, voice trembling. "The Shift-Machine… only… has…" She paused, trying to recall the rest of the words she'd uttered hundreds of times before. "It only has…"

Outside, the wind rose into a terrible howl, stealing her attention. Tree limbs whipped the pane, threatening to shatter the thin panel of glass. It mattered little; the bedroom window was raised, and the curtains flew open, giving way to a continuous gust of wind that blew at Rita's back, messing her hair while simultaneously sending shivers down Val's spine. Each successive blast grew colder and stronger than the previous, but the

wind wasn't the root of Val's increasing sense of foreboding; she imagined an intruder entering through the window while she and Rita were shrouded, though that offered no explanation of how the lock could've become unlatched from the inside.

As if summoned from the marriage between the anxiety of waking long before daybreak and the dread of an always-locked window mysteriously found wide open, several dim shapes faded in from the shadows directly behind Rita.

Simple tricks of light and dark, Val pretended. *Simple tricks.*

The lie provided enough courage to steal a glance at each ethereal figure in turn. And in turn, she felt as if each of those figures stole a glance at her.

She tried to force her mind to reinterpret the darkness, to un-see, but the visitors persisted in becoming more pronounced. The largest one, a stoic statue, stood tall in the corner. His slight frown, set jaw, and black cloak reminded Val of mourning, of loss. She entertained the idea of a home invasion again, and her imagination gave birth to eyes that glowed bright as blood. "Rita, we're not alone," Val whimpered, the cry barely reaching her ears. "I need your help. Please wake up." She took stock of the cloaked one, which stared at the wall as if averting its attention would trigger an emotional breakdown.

Then several more scenarios ran through Val's mind, and she planned impossible courses of action for each:

If it looked at her…

If it spoke…

If it attacked…

Monsters didn't exist, Val knew, but the little beasts situated along the shelf which had once been her toys seemed to disagree. Their expressions were as frozen as the stoic figure, though instead of determined composure, each red-eyed figurine shared a vastly different tale: horrified shock, utter disdain, deep hatred, and insane catatonia.

Val looked back to her twin, pleading, only to find Rita mirroring her expression. She fought to block out everything. Val and Rita, Rita and Val, if they stayed together, nothing could touch them. Then from the edge of her vision, she caught the glint of more red lights and cursed the many pairs of glowing eyes that blinked open in unison to unravel the last few strands of rational thought.

Worst fears confirmed, Val screamed, “Rita! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!”

Don’t be afraid.

The scream died in her throat. Those were the same words that had followed her out of the rift. “Rita?”

Don’t be afraid.

Rita’s voice reverberated inside Val’s mind again, though her lips had remained pressed together in a thin line. She searched her twin’s placid eyes for answers, finding nothing except a vacant gaze that stared straight through her, and she tried to convince herself it wasn’t Rita. It couldn’t be. The voice was nothing more than a memory springing from the nightmare unfolding around her.

On the shelf, one of the monsters turned its head towards her.

“You’re not real!” Val screamed.

The monster took a small step closer.

“Rita, please!” Val cried, her eyes still on the shelf.

When she dared look back, Rita still had not moved. Her deathly pale face resembled the monsters surrounding them, and a doubt in the back of Val’s mind whispered that the monsters had already gotten to her twin and devoured her mind. Before Val could dismiss the thought, a blob of a monster emerged from the closet and reached for Rita. Val met its sad eyes. Feigning confidence, she shouted, “Leave my sister alone!”

The shapeless thing trembled and began to cry before retreating into the darkness where its glimmering red orbs continued to burn from the penumbra.

Don’t look at them, Val, look at me.

Val gasped as Rita's voice filled her mind once again. She looked past her unflinching twin to the curtains stirring at the open window. "Rita? Is that really you?"

Yes. We're both connected to the Shift-Machine.

"I thought you were lost in the rift. Your shroud…"

It's all right. I'm right here with you.

The half-truth stung. Rita's body was there, though not her mind, not fully. Val suspected her twin's soul still roamed the hidden universes. Or perhaps, Val thought, it was she who had become lost to the void, trapped in a never-ending virtual nightmare while Rita was safely back in a reality that Val could no longer recollect.

Rita still did not move, save for her steady, shallow breaths.

Val glanced toward the creatures peeking from the closet. "We have to go, Rita."

I can't.

"Why? I need you."

I'm trapped in the forbidden realm where all worlds bleed together.

Val examined the shroud in Rita's lap. Two thick conduit cables welded to the shroud's casing lay on the floor, leading out of sight to the Shift-Machine. Something about the cables seemed *wrong*, but the answers felt just out of reach. As she followed the path of the cabling, another pair of red orbs opened in the pitch-black nothingness under the bed.

Val shrieked and reached for the shroud covering her eyes.

That won't work. You can't run from them.

"This isn't real. I'm still in the rift!"

You're not. You're here with me.

Willing herself to emerge from what had to be a false reality, Val squeezed her eyes closed, but when she opened them again, the red orbs hadn't disappeared, the dark room had stayed dark, and a deeper fear, a voracious terror, took hold. She let out a maniacal laugh so disturbing that all the shadow monsters took half a step backward.

Don't torture yourself, Val. Please? It's all going to be okay.

“You’re not the one trapped, Rita, I am!”

Shhh. Focus on my voice. I can help you.

Val clenched her teeth and stared into her twin’s vacant eyes. Then her eyes fell to the shroud in Rita’s lap. “I tried to take off my shroud. I tried, and nothing happened. Am I dead?”

Rita said nothing. In the gloom, she remained still, unmoving, wearing the same expression of quiet discontent.

“If this isn’t death, maybe I’m dreaming a *real* dream. It’s been so long since I’ve slept.”

I know.

“I can’t even remember what sleep is like,” Val continued. “Why can’t I remember anything? Never mind. It doesn’t matter. The monsters are moving again. Now they’re right behind you, Rita. Look. All you have to do is turn your head.”

The monsters don’t bother me. They’re always here.

“What do you mean they’re always here?” Val asked, her eyes locked on the closest of the beasts.

They want us to know, but they don’t like to be seen directly. We’re not in the rift, Val. We’ve only woken at the wrong hour.

Val’s temper flared. She had the urge to smash the Shift-Machine hiding in the shadows, to shatter the mirror-polished reflective casing that she’d loved so much. Maybe that would help Rita, if not herself. Maybe the horror would end.

That won’t work. We have to face them together. There’s no other way out.

Val watched as the monsters’ shadows closed the gaps behind her twin, pressing into a crowd, shoulder to shoulder, looking down at Rita with red eyes filled with hunger.

“They’re going to kill you,” Val said dryly. “They’ll kill you, then they’ll kill me next. What do you think will become of our corpses?”

Remember, the monsters only come out at night, and they’ll do anything to hide again by the morning’s light.

“I don’t know what you want from me,” Val cried.

Let go of your fear. Make them hide. Time to close our eyes now, Val. Time to help me recombine the dream. You’ve already faced the Shift-Machine.

A thousand claws reached for Rita, racing the first rays of morning that pierced the fall storm. The room brightened a fraction, but that small change changed everything.

The instant the claws touched Rita, Val felt something press into her own back. Then Rita smiled, and together they let out a small laugh.

You see now, don’t you?

Somehow her perspective had shifted.

I do, she thought, finally understanding.

Rita turned her attention away from the monsters slowly tearing open her twin, feeling each rip scorch down her own spine. The torment intensified, but she didn’t flinch or cry out. Instead, she leaned forward and admired the pristine, polished metal of the Shift-Machine close up, her eyes tracing along sharp edges that faded back into the surrounding darkness like a shimmering mirage.

It’s time.

“I’m ready.”

Never remove the Shroud while binding in the rift, the message repeated from the shroud.

“I remember the rest of the words,” Val said, letting go of the last of her fear.

We’ll do this together, Val.

“Together, Rita.”

The ashen-haired girl stared into the Shift-Machine’s mirrored surface, seeing herself reflected so clearly in the approaching dawn. She smiled sadly as her gray eyes drifted to the red glow in her lap.

Two shimmering lights, the girl thought. *And two names, Rita and Val, Val and Rita.*

She continued to stare at herself, trying to grasp the meaning, and as she did, the names slipped further and further away.

Two names? she thought. *Two names?* Then she let even that thought go.

Finally, she stood, still staring at her reflection. And as she did, she watched her lips move and heard her own voice speaking words she couldn't understand.

"The Shift-Machine," she whispered to her reflection, *"only… has… one… shroud."*

THE END.



About the Artist

The painting that ends this book is *Virtual | Reality* by Khurrum Maqbool, the piece that inspired *The Shift-Machine*.

Khurrum is a multidisciplinary artist who paints digitally. His work has been published on *Magic: The Gathering* cards, among them Spare Dagger, Crawling Infestation and Halo Scarab, and his art has been selected for five volumes of the *Infected By Art* art book. He made *Virtual | Reality* in 2015 and entered it in the *Infected By Art* Volume 4 contest, the same year he was a featured artist at *Sub Persona*, the Baltimore show where this story began.

See more of his work at www.khurrumart.com.

About the Author



Born near Baltimore, Maryland, Kris has been writing short fiction since he was a kid. First sharing his ramblings on Stealth Fiction and then on Reddit, where most of his stories were posted to r/nosleep. His stories have been featured on The NoSleep Podcast, Chilling Tales for Dark Nights, Tales to Terrify, and Horror on the Rocks. The recording of The Scarecrow Corpse, read by Markiplier, has been heard hundreds of thousands of times. He lives in Melbourne, Australia, with his wife. And occasionally, he turns into a strawberry.

More stories: StealthFiction.com

What's Next?

LET ME TELL YOU HOW I LOST MY EYES

A Short Story Collection by Sammy Fowler

Coming one day. Maybe. Probably not.

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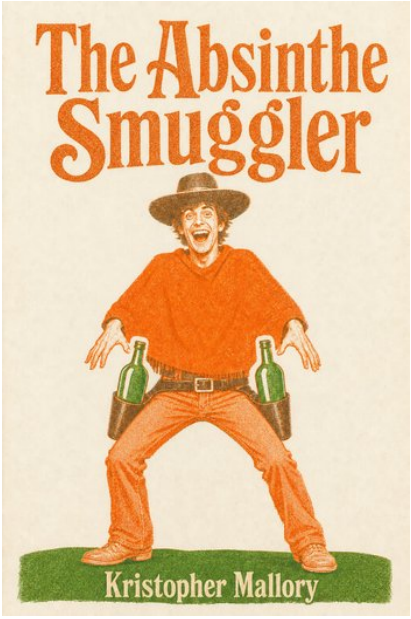
Hear It Read Aloud

Some stories are better heard in the dark.

The Shift-Machine has a complete audio narration, read by Mia, a digital voice. It runs 14 minutes and it's free: play it online, or download it as an MP3 or an audiobook with chapters.

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More from Kristopher Mallory

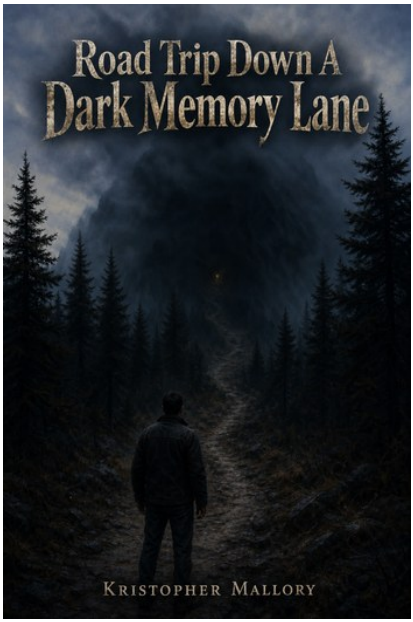


THE ABSINTHE SMUGGLER

This comedy short is now available on Amazon. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

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A teenager on holiday in Madrid promises his friends two bottles of the green fairy, and customs turns out to be the easy part.
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ROAD TRIP DOWN A DARK MEMORY LANE

This psychological horror story is now available as an eBook. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

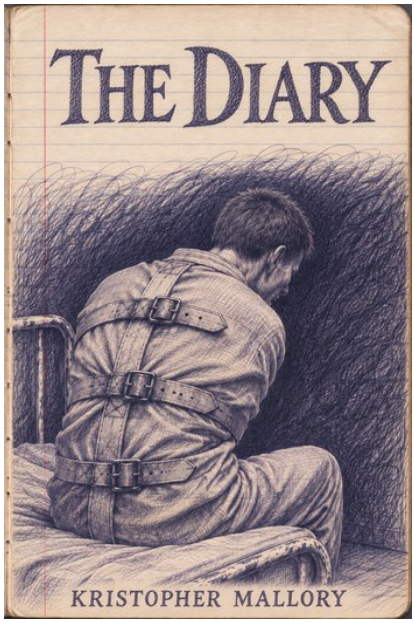
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Twenty-five years after he was taken as a boy, a husband and father writes it all down, loads the car, and drives his family back to Black Fog Mountain.

~~~~~

Praise for Road Trip Down A Dark Memory Lane:

"Every mile pulls the knot tighter, and the ending is the kind you sit with in silence." – *Stealth Fiction*



THE DIARY

This found-diary horror story is now available as an eBook. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

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Diary entries from a man who borrows The Book of the Damned from the library and notices it has only ever gone out once a year, each September.

~~~~~

Praise for The Diary:

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RUINED SHEETS

This supernatural horror story is now available as an eBook. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

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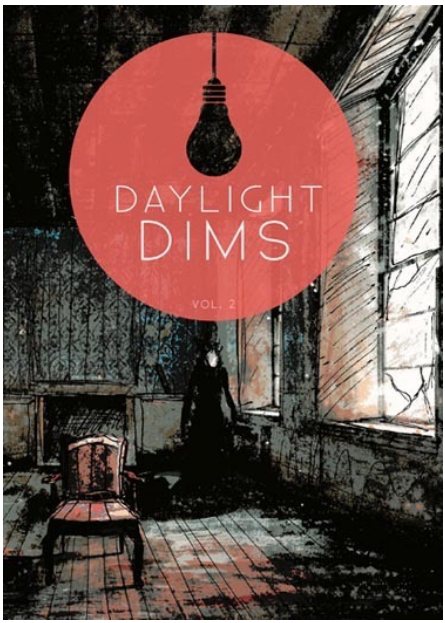
A father is arrested for the third time after his boy's bedroom is found soaked in blood, and he knows the charges will be dropped again.

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Praise for Ruined Sheets:

"You'll want to know why, and then you won't. Unsettling to the very last line." – *Stealth Fiction*

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DAYLIGHT DIMS
VOLUME TWO

This horror anthology is now available. For more information on this book, please visit the Daylight Dims website.

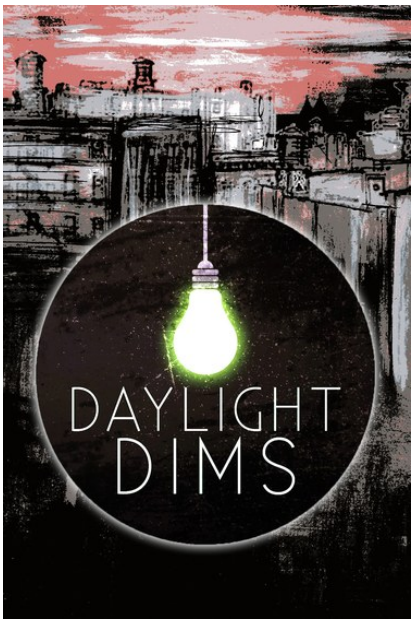
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DAYLIGHT DIMS

VOLUME ONE

Second Edition — now with two new stories from the editors.

This horror anthology is now available. For more information on this book, please visit the Daylight Dims website.

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