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## **Guidestones**

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**Approx 4,000 words**

*The Georgia Guidestones were an American monument located in Elberton, Georgia. Their origin is shrouded in mystery, having no explanation for their existence other than being erected in secret, then unveiled on the morning of March 22, 1980. An unidentified collective took credit for the monument, claiming it contained guidance for navigating an ever-changing world. On July 6, 2022, the Georgia Guidestones were destroyed in a still unsolved bombing. This work of fiction imagines a sequence of events leading to that explosion.*

The night enveloped her car, fastening its grip while Isa drove farther away from civilization. Soon, she found the only light around her emitted from the headlights.

“I keep having the same dream. I’m floating through nothing. Just the void and my breath catches, but I can’t breathe. Or more like my mind won’t allow it. Then these lights appear, like nebulae, and I don’t feel scared anymore. I’m not alone and I never will be again.” Isa’s grip

tightened on the steering wheel and she felt the crackle of lightning pain pulse through her aching fingers. These days, that pain was more common, as she found herself clenching her hands often. Clenching her whole body, in general. Isa always felt more anxious when making a film with Jake. They had made other films before, short movies that snaked their way through horror film festivals. Splatter Fest in Tennessee; I Spit on Your Grave Festival in Nebraska; Shriek-o-Rama in Texas. Now that they were about to start production on their fifth film together, the process never became easier, only more familiar. But this instance felt foreboding, as if she drew nearer to an ending. *Can Jake feel it too?* Isa contemplated as her car barreled down that back road, greenery surrounding them as if the trees were watching their every move.

She had story in her soul, having found her first love to be movies, images projected in celluloid that neatly structured any of life's complications into three acts. When she left high school, she knew she wanted to make movies. Now she found herself a working filmmaker, production jobs paid the bills, and movies sufficed her passion. It helped when her romantic and creative partner were one and the same. She was the producer and he was the director or *auteur*, as he called himself. He would claim the "film by" credit, so every movie became "A Film By Jake Clemmons," even if Isa found the money, the locations, the crew, and guided the story.

*It will be over soon*, she reminded herself, knowing that she still had to tell him. She couldn't deny Jake's brilliance in crafting a horror tale. It would only be a matter of time before he left Atlanta for Los Angeles to be discovered and made films in which women were topless when murdered in some grisly manner. Especially with his brazen attitude, his uncompromising vision, his insurmountable ambition, *he would be perfect for Los Angeles*, she thought. Isa tried to imagine what it would be like for Jake to leave and she felt no sadness, only relief. She tucked

a tendril of honey brown, curly hair behind her ear and glanced at him to notice his pale skin and clean shaven face illuminated by the ice-cold light of an iPhone screen.

“So you see nothing. Then what?” Jake’s eyes flicked to Isa, then back to his phone.

“Then nothing. I wake up.”

“That’s anticlimactic.” Jake huffed and kept his gaze on the phone. “You really need to tell better stories.”

“It’s my dream. You’re not allowed to direct that, too.”

When they first started working together, she had been attracted to Jake’s need to define everything, therein asserting control over anyone in his radius. This level of control usually equated to intelligence, Isa reasoned, a knowledge and awareness so few possessed. But after five years and four films, she could feel his reach all over her, in their relationship, in her choice of words, and most regrettably, in her creative expression. For years, they made films that all found homes on the festival circuit. They had big meetings, even garnered big budgets that fell through before cameras were on set. Isa had accomplished great things with Jake. But her ambition would destroy her if she stayed. She wondered if she could finish the film with him, even if her first loyalty was to the story, always.

Jake lowered the phone, now illuminating a sliver of his forearm and the edge of a Freddy Krueger tattoo, grim smile and finger knives brandishing on his canvas of skin. “That’s what will make our story interesting. We are a mosaic of our dreams and nightmares, after all.” Jake’s voice contained a hint of whimsy that, on any other night, Isa would have found charming. But tonight, she only felt irritated.

She waved him away with a snap of her wrist, the gold bracelet with her initials as charms, I.A., clinking through the shadows. “Just focus on navigation, alright? I want to get this over with.”

Jake outstretched his arms in a grand gesture, conjuring the image of a ringmaster in the passenger seat of a Prius. “Come on, this is the start of production. We’re gonna get some great b-roll. The Guidestones are a horror movie unto themselves. Do you even know the story behind them?”

She remained silent, knowing he would tell her anyway, no matter her answer. Isa noticed him shake his head and she almost turned the car around.

“You didn’t do the research I asked you to.”

“I’m kind of busy with work and finding you a crew, okay?”

Jake took a deep inhale. “So this eccentric billionaire, rumored to have been from Georgia, believes he holds the secrets to a better world, one that he could safeguard, right? Call it megalomania, call it a higher calling, but it was a burning desire within him, something he believed to be his purpose in life. He contracts a local concrete company to fashion this monument, a shrine to a new world order.”

“Illuminati?”

“Perhaps, but that’s extremely reductive.”

Isa’s familiar tension stiffened her hands as they clenched the wheel. Her teeth gritted while they traversed the dark. *Do I tell him now?* Jake remained in rhythm with his storytelling.

“He claims that due to the trappings of this modern world, an apocalypse is inevitable. Thusly, he will use the stones to define and fashion what life should look like. Each stone

contains ten guidelines for living. He translated these tenets into eight different languages so as to ensure that the widest berth of humanity could comprehend them.”

“And what are these guidelines?”

She glanced at Jake, whose smile dissipated in the cloudy dark of the car. He shifted in his seat and focused on his phone.

“You’ll see when we get there.”

“Well that’s anticlimactic,” she responded, mirroring the same tone he used with her. Jake had his flaws, but Isa never turned away from a moment to poke him. Perhaps it was the nature of their creative partnership, all great collaborations subsisted on equal parts challenge and care. Or perhaps it was more that Isa could bask in the warmth of his shine whenever he pointed his spotlight on her. There were few things more satisfying than calling the attention of a talented narcissist, and Isa knew this to be true, deep enough that it ran through her blood, just as their story did.

“If you had done the research like I asked you to, you would know.”

“I know what it means for the story and that’s what matters.”

Jake swiveled in his seat towards her, the outline of his *They Live* t-shirt illuminated by moonlight. “What does it mean then?” The cinematic alien’s eyes gaped at her and she felt that same pull to prove him wrong, to challenge him, the rush she experienced when she bested him. It was the heartbeat of their relationship.

“Our protagonist is visited by these otherworldly beings, right? And they belong with the Guidestones, which are portals for them. So, the protagonist feels more at home in another world rather this one. The Guidestones are not just a portal for her. They are her way out of an

existence steeped in misery. This nightmare sequence reveals her burgeoning connection with the Guidestones.”

His face lowered and he sunk back into his seat. “Yeah. You get it.” His downtrodden tone weighed down the car. Isa expected him to fire back some question about the protagonist or her narrative arc, or at least build upon what she had said. Prove her wrong, even. But this immediate capitulation felt unnerving. He usually had some retort, a quippy comeback, as if they were always fencing. The dynamic felt equal parts infuriating and stimulating, but his acquiescence spelled trouble. *He knows*, she thought.

Isa’s gut tightened. As a producer, she had done some dicey things before, like filming without a permit or running scenes with a minor who did not sign the requisite release form. She did what she had to do to get a movie made. *Ask any producer and they’ll tell you wild stories of questionable acts*, Isa would affirm. But this time, she felt a dread she could not reconcile and was unsure if it was her secret or the film itself. With this being her last movie, she figured the risk was worth it. Perhaps it would add some panache to the film, but she wondered if she had overstayed her welcome in the loft of Producer’s luck.

“Are you sure this is a good idea? We’ll be trespassing.”

Jake scoffed. “It’s all open. What’s there to trespass? You lost your nerve a couple of movies back.”

“Nerve and intelligence are two different things. We have to be smart here.”

Jake removed an ID from his pocket, showing it to Isa. “Any cops show up, we’re film students.” The ID had an Emory University banner at the top and a picture of a much younger, far more jejune Jake.

“You look twelve there. It’s not going to work this time.”

“It works every time,” Jake’s arrogant smile reminded her of why this would be her last film with him. “We always get away with it and we’ll keep on getting away with it.” Jake’s hand landed on Isa’s thigh and she recoiled as an instinctual reaction. The movement would have been imperceptible to anyone else, but with their history and Jake’s keen eye for detail, he lifted his hand.

“What’s wrong?”

She shook her head, not ready to tell him that this would be her last movie, not ready to give up the dream they had together: love each other, make movies, tell stories.

At that moment, Isa saw flashes of their past: how they met at a double feature of *The Kid* and *Modern Times*, bonding over the impact of a well-told story, even in silent film. Months of being inseparable followed. She showed him Pedro Almodóvar. He showed her John Carpenter. Weekends spent in bed, *All About My Mother* and *Escape from New York* playing in the background. Jake would pick up his guitar, serenade her with an acoustic version of “Freebird.” Isa watched as his tattoo moved along with the rhythm of his strumming. Their last semester of film school was spent planning their first movie together. Isa wanted to create a character story, a tale rooted in visual storytelling with an open ending, something that could not be easily defined. Jake urged her to produce a script he had worked on for years, a slasher film, rife with gore and jump scares, inspired by German Expressionism. She recalled agreeing with a soft nod as she looked up at Jake in bed, white jersey knit sheet wrapped around their intertwined bodies. He sealed their compromise with a kiss, assuring they would make her character study next.

After five years and four horror movies, she was still waiting to make her story, the one that brought life to her voice and no one else’s.

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” Isa admitted while her car sped down the dark road, as if they were driving into the same void from her dream.

“Do what, exactly?” His voice rang cold through the car. A chill scampered down her spine.

“I can’t keep making movies with you. I want to venture out and do something on my own.” She knew this was a terrible time to bring it up, but she couldn’t hide anything from him and she abhorred lying. Bend and stretch the truth like it was doing yoga, that was the lifeblood of producing. But lying would compromise herself in a way she couldn’t reconcile.

“You’ve just been looking for a reason to go do your own thing.”

“Jake, please.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying this now. This is so typical of you. Trying to ruin something that means everything to me.”

“I’m not trying to ruin anything. I’m reading the writing on the wall here.” For a moment, Isa focused on the moon trees lining this narrow road. They stood like a phalanx, protecting something else beyond their leaves, the dense foliage that appeared onyx in the meager light.

Jake’s voice lured her attention back to him. “You don’t know what you’re saying. You don’t mean it.”

“Aren’t you tired of this? Of us? We needle each other until we’re just riddled with holes.”

“That’s what we do. That’s how get better.”

“No. We destroy each other over and over again. No one wins. It’s a stalemate every time.”



A silence persisted through the car. Isa considered pulling to the side of the road and turning around. But the night felt increasingly like a lead blanket, holding her in place. Just as she removed her foot from the gas pedal, Jake's words cut through the dark.

"This is all I have and you just want to leave."

Isa eased the car to a stop and pulled over to the side of the road. Shifting the car into park, she turned to him.

"I need to do something for myself, Jake. I can't just be a channel for your dreams."

"I thought these were our dreams."

"I've lost myself in your vision. I don't even know who I am anymore because I'm too busy trying to make sure your voice is heard."

Jake reached for her hand and kissed her fingers. She felt the tension ease immediately. Her heart raced and she could feel the nostalgic pull between them, the energy created when they were together.

"Please don't walk out on us."

She felt her heart split, torn between reason and emotion, the right choice floundering somewhere in the middle. Her voice wavered. "Why does it have to be all or nothing?"

"Because that's who we are. We give everything to our art. If we're not making movies, then why the hell would we be together?"

She lowered her head, feeling the sting of his words. Isa wanted him to admit he loved her, whether they were making movies or not, that perhaps they were more than any story or festival or contract that would cement their ambitions into reality. But instead she took a deep breath. "Don't do that to me. Don't use my dream to hold me ransom."

She could feel Jake's gaze on her, holding steady. "I can't do this without you."

Isa closed her eyes in an effort to slow down her heart rate. She had dedicated years to this man and his films. If she wanted to make a name for herself, she couldn't be swayed by sentimentality at a decisive moment. She needed to rise to the occasion of her own narrative arc.

“You just want me to finish the film.”

“Can you blame me?” His voice raised to a sharp crescendo, making Isa flinch in her seat. “We've worked so hard and you just want to quit.”

She sighed, realizing she would follow through with the shoot tonight. Jake knew that, too. Being a director gave him an astute ability to analyze behavior and it wasn't lost on Isa that he knew her next move. Her loyalty was to the story, above all else. So, she could keep tonight's work on track, as any competent producer would do, and make this her last film by Jake Clemmons.

“No, we're getting our Guidestones footage. How far away are we?” She adopted a vocal tone rooted in the lower register of her voice she used when she wanted to affirm her seriousness. Whenever she needed something for a film, that tone always got her what she wanted. She used it on Jake often, whenever he started spinning out of control, too brilliant for his own good, too narcissistic to see past himself. It worked every time.

Jake's gaze returned to his phone and his voice became calm. “We're close.”

Isa punched the car into drive and accelerated down the dark, solemn road. Past the dense tree line in the distance, a clearing appeared where she saw the six granite slabs standing twenty feet tall, reflecting the moonlight at the same time as absorbing it. The stones stood in pairs, appearing to be more like three open books, spines resting on a center pillar of smooth concrete, thereby creating a circular formation.

“I think I heard once the stones were meant to be a compass or something,” Isa murmured as she slowed down.

“Let’s get this done,” Jake replied and he opened the camera case in the backseat. She noticed a single electrical line ran close to the Guidestones, leading to a box containing a CCTV camera. When Isa parked the car, she pointed up to it.

“You didn’t tell me there was surveillance.” Her hushed voice moved through the darkness towards Jake, who trudged out of the car, a digital camera already hanging from his neck.

“It’s off every night from three to four. Relax.”

She followed Jake towards the monument, wondering how she didn’t account for the surveillance camera. He had planned this excursion on a whim, claiming it to be critical for the visual storytelling and building of the protagonist’s character. Isa knew better than to argue with his directorial decisions, so she relied on him to know the details. She felt a hum ring through the air. Perhaps it was electrical, good thing this scene was supposed to be MOS. But for a moment, the sound rang too true to be mechanical in nature, more like the hum that emitted from vocal chords. Her feet froze in place and she checked her phone. *Still got a signal*, she thought, ready to run as fast as she could in case there was any trouble. She unfolded a piece of paper from her pocket with a shot list: close up on Guidestone text; establishing on the monument; vertiginous shot of the night sky. Her calloused fingers traced each shot, her hands weathered from the years of production work, taxing on the body and never for the weak of spirit.

“You want to start with the establishing?” She approached Jake, finding him at the center of the monument, the camera lens pressed inches away from the English text. Isa’s eyes followed the lanky letters.

“Be not a cancer on earth. Leave room for nature,” she read aloud, while Jake framed up his shot. “Guide reproduction wisely – improving fitness and diversity.”

“It doesn’t sound that bad, right?” Jake clicked the ring on his lens, changing his f-stop to account for the low light conditions. Isa looked to him, trying to analyze his seriousness, but he sauntered around a stone, disappearing into shadow.

“It’s got a Eugenics vibe, but that’s not the worst one.” Her neck craned to read the etched lettering. “‘Maintain humanity under 500 million in perpetual balance with nature.’ Alarming, to say the least.” Just as the words tumbled from her mouth, she heard the same humming, as if it were threaded in the wind. “Did you hear that?”

Jake’s focus remained steady, watching playback on the pop out screen at the back of his camera. “Hear what?”

“It’s like a rumble or something. Far away but I can feel it.”

“Can you put your hand on the edge of the stone and pull it away slowly? It’ll be great to amp up the personal factor for the protagonist’s nightmare.”

Isa made perfunctory movements to appease Jake’s direction. She remained silent, but as she dragged her hand along the edge of the stone, she heard the hum again. Catching a hollow divot in the stone, her hand found a peep hole revealing the other side of the field. “This is weird.”

From behind his camera, Jake answered. “It’s for the solstice.”

She perked to her tip toes and peered through the hole, spotting a hooded figure approaching with a burly man’s build, tall and menacing, as all tall men are at a distance.

She gasped and grabbed Jake.

“What’s your problem,” he sputtered.

“There’s someone here. We need to go.”

Jake wrested his arm from her grip. “There’s no one here. Just let me get these shots.”

“Screw your shots. I saw someone.” Isa turned to face the car, but stopped when she saw three hooded figures coming towards her, blocking her escape route. They moved in concerted steps, no rushing, striding with certainty. Her heart raced and she darted in another direction, maneuvering around the stones. But across the field, seven more hooded figures approached.

She clamored for Jake’s hand, but he took a step away, now standing in front of the Russian translation of the Guidestones. He couldn’t meet her gaze. Realizing the inherent danger, she grabbed her phone. Before she could dial a number, Jake snatched it from her trembling hands.

“Jake, what are you doing?” She stared at him, tears starting to well, a knee-jerk reaction to her very real fear.

He pocketed the phone and kept his other hand on the camera still hanging from his neck. “I asked them not to scare you.”

She froze, focused for a moment of pure clarity wherein everything slowed down. The weighted footsteps of the strangers, her pulse quickening to panic, Jake’s breath becoming shallower with remorse.

“They told me I could make all the movies I wanted to. I just needed to bring them a woman.” His voice rippled in his throat as he sobbed. But the ominous humming grew louder, drowning out her lover’s voice and the price of his ambition.

He turned away from her, pressing his forehead into the stone as thick hands grabbed Isa and pushed her to the ground. Her back hit the dewy, freshly mown grass as they dragged her to the middle of the monument. She now lay in between all six of the stones, the various languages

surrounding her, radiating crimson light in all directions. Her arms and legs flailed, trying to wrench herself from their might, but she felt weak against their strength. In the dark, she could not see their faces, but their eyes glowed orange, ravenous in the shadow. Above her, she noticed a rectangular sliver in the concrete, offering a slice of sky. The dark swallowed her, but the sliver pierced through with blinding light. Isa's eyes squinted when faced with it.

She fought to breathe as the sliver's light eclipsed the shaft in the stone and consumed her. A paralyzing pain took hold of her limbs when the light penetrated her body. She screamed, but soon her voice propelled forward, becoming more than notes and timbre. The sound fused with the light to reveal the electromagnetic spectrum, every color filling her vision. The force of it all lifted her from the dewy ground and pulsated through her limbs. The humming grew louder and asynchronous, reaching a climactic cacophony.

With the light lifting her, she floated up to the top of the stones and, in one cresting explosion, the humming stopped. The light shattered, the colors faded, and the pain subsided.

When Isa regained consciousness, she could no longer feel her body. She wasn't certain if she even had a body anymore, but she knew she could see. Inky darkness punctuated by indigo nebulae encapsulated her and her vision offered a bird's eye view of the earth, so far away that she could see all the stories that ever existed projected in anamorphic widescreen, just for her.