

Orchestra of the Lonesome

By Mx Frog

I know what they think about me. They think that I don't think. That I can't think. Not like them, anyhow. I guess they're right. In a way. I guess I can't know the things they know.

They've seen something else. Another room. Maybe even something beyond that. Something I couldn't think of. I like the way they move. Their feet hit the floor and it echoes. That's nice. It's something else. Something besides the droning. From the vents.

I wish I could see into those vents. I'd like to figure out why they hum. I don't know if I could if I did. The vents feel nice. The air is cool on my body. It's always so hot. I don't know how they do it. Wear those long coats. Those pants and shirts. Socks and shoes.

It's probably nicer in the other room. I've felt it. When they open the door to come in. To leave. I like it better when they leave. I know I can relax. When they enter... I don't know what to think. But I do think.

It's either food, drink, or needles. The food is the same. I guess it's just food. Bowl, spoon. Some of them talk to me. While they feed me. They tell me stories. About other rooms. I can't picture them. They all look like this room in my head.

I don't talk back. Can't. Some of them yell at me. While they feed me. Their spit gets on my face. It goes in my food. They feed it to me.

Some of them don't talk. They don't look at me. I look at them. They look the same. Like the ones who do talk. Like the ones who yell.

The needle people are different. They look the same. They don't talk. It used to hurt when they poked me. It doesn't hurt anymore. I can't feel anymore. Not like I used to. I used to squirm. I always wanted to beg. I wanted to ask them to stop. I can't talk. Their mouths make words. I don't know how they do it.

The cords digging into my arms and legs used to hurt me. Now they don't. The cords are my home. I wonder what the ground would feel like. I'd like to make those echoes. With my feet. Go into the vents. Into the other room. I can hear the echoes now. They won't stop. The echoes are my breathing. I'll stop breathing to feel the silence. I can't feel it. I have to breathe again. The echoes are here. I don't like them anymore.

I see the echoes. The room is gone. I thought I'd see another room, but all I see are echoes. I thought I'd feel the floor, but all I feel are echoes.

I think they poked me. The echoes are colder and brighter. They're fast. It's fast. That's it.

Aye Bill. Bill! Fuck. Number 29 is gone. Yeah, dead. Well how long did you think he'd last? No, I didn't talk to him, I never talked to him, I –

What do you mean? How often? Jesus, man, are you serious? Supposed to talk? I – What did *you* think was the point?

Okay, okay, fine, you go talk to him and see what *he* says about it. I swear I'm not taking the blame for another butchered project after what happened with Number 10...

I should go? I – You think I give a fuck what management says? No, I – I can talk to him myself, you take down the body. Well, he's not gonna like it when I tell him you've told me to leave and just left 29 all strung up like that. Wha – Fuck, fine, have a word. And don't tell him if we talked to 29 until you figure out what he wanted!

Fuck. Fuck! Okay, okay, gotta burn... *Fucking* okay let's go let's go

Bill! Oh, hey, did the, did the boss-

PROJECT 29

Status: FAILURE

Reason: Human error

Notes: Project #29 was undertaken in order to understand the combined effects of spatial isolation and social connection. Project was on track and exhibiting hypothesized results for the first five years of the subject's life. At that point, project manager Terry Lingard was assigned to oversee stage 2. A recent investigation into the period of Terry's oversight of Project 29 found that the numerous issues which arose with Project 29 and contaminated the data were directly attributable to Terry's management.

Terry was found to have contradicted the aims of this organization in undertaking this project. While the goal of this project was to isolate the effects of physical and mental stimuli, Terry Lingard, in the view of our investigation, intentionally and malignantly disregarded these instructions. For his own purposes, Terry used his position as project manager to enact physical experiments on the subject, primarily through the intravenous and intramuscular injection of experimental chemicals into the subject's body. Thanks to the atrophied nature of the subject's body, these chemicals had an oversized effect, leading first to the loss of the subject's vocal capacities, and then to the premature termination of Project 29. Further examination of Terry Lingard's motives and the specifics of Project 29 were planned as part of the investigation, but fell through due to unforeseen circumstances.

Management suggests that, following internal consumption of this report, all evidence of Project 29's existence be destroyed.

Feb 22:

It's been a while.

It's been good, I guess, since my last entry in here. Life's been simple, work's been easy. Carmen finally started speaking to me again, so now I get to see little Julio two days a week. He's a funny little guy. Shy, quiet, but damn is he smart. I sat down to read to him the other

night before bedtime, but he wanted to read to me instead! And he did, he did good, too. I know he's gonna do fine in school, he'll find a good job when he grows up, but... He's so much like ME. He has no friends, he never goes out to play with the neighborhood kids, he just sits inside and reads and I know he wants to go out there and play, and have fun with everyone else but he's too scared, he's scared they'll be mean to him and reject him, and then he'll really KNOW he'll never have any friends. Right now he can still at least think that there's a potential in the future, and I think that's what he's holding onto, that's the hope that's keeping him going.

Shit. What am I saying? Does a five-year-old really need hope like that to keep him going? He never even told me any of this. I've only seen him a handful of times in the past year!

It's just me. Of course it is. Always alone, always scared. Even Carmen couldn't handle it, and she'll probably drop me again after a couple of months. Maybe it's for the better if Julio doesn't know me. Or maybe I'm just writing a self-fulfilling prophecy and should stop writing these things. But that court-ordered psychiatrist said it would help, and... I don't know. I love that kid, but I wish he could avoid being me.

Okay no what surface-level "father" shit is this these problems aren't special it's useless to write about and that's not really why I started this entry anyway. I said work was boring before but this week's been different, this week they've really got something to pique my interest.

Monday morning the boss handed me a case from the science division. They said it was urgent, that I'd have to hand my ongoing investigations to someone else and focus on this one. Rob took them, luckily. I didn't even have to ask. I think he just likes easy work for the fat paycheck we get, but my bosses obviously know that I can't resist a tough case.

The science division is a shitshow, as it turns out. It didn't take much snooping into their internal reports to see that managerial oversight is thin as spring ice. Whose idea was it to start 36 projects and only increase staff from 20 to 55 people over the course of 36 years? It's not like they don't have the budget for it. Well... It's not like they didn't. I don't know what'll happen now...

Poor oversight, understaffing, overworking, bizarre, unnecessary, and poorly thought-out experiments- I mean, the science division should have been shut down years ago! Or at least upper management should have sent us in a lot earlier to investigate. Maybe SD convinced the upper management that their internal investigations were sufficient. What a joke! Those idiots shut down their "investigation" the minute they smelled me, tried to wipe it off the map! Good thing they're as incompetent at covering up their tracks as they are at making them. These people are supposed scientific geniuses but whoever was supposed to delete the folder with the project reports in it left a copy on their desktop. Unbelievable.

I was tasked specifically with investigating the failure of Project 29. It seems like 29's failure can all be traced back to a younger scientist named Terry Lingard. From what I can gather, Terry was the egotistical type, he thought that his ideas and experiments could change

science itself, change the world. So, he was always pushing the limits of what they would let him do. He was written up a number of times within his six years in the SD, mostly for bending experimental guidelines, but occasionally for attitude problems as well. It doesn't seem like he was very popular with his coworkers. I would guess that he was offputtingly arrogant, putting his own goals over everyone else's and scoffing at compromise. It must have hurt, having no friends... Maybe that's why he acted that way in the first place, to avoid building connections just to be rejected as he had before. Maybe he felt he had to prove his worth through his intelligence since he couldn't prove his worth socially.

That's off-track stop it Geraldo take yourself out of it. Terry is nowhere to be found now. Disappeared from the face of the earth without a trace. SD says they've got him in custody but that's obviously bullshit, I checked the cells that security has in their building and they were empty. My guess is the SD put a bullet in his brain knowing that this could expose the entire operation given Terry's... impulsive nature. Probably stuffed the body in one of the freezers they use to store their drugs. I would say it's sad, but I don't think there's a soul alive who cares for the guy. He was alone in this world. Just him and his smarts and his "great" work.

Is this why they assigned me to this case? Because we're so similar? Every time I try to work out the investigation it just keeps coming back to me. If I can only think of myself when I think of Terry, what does that make me? Can they tell that I'm losing it, just like Terry was? So, I lied when I said things have been good, I mean, sure I've got Julio back but looking at him is like staring in the mirror and I can't do that I hate me I'm useless alone and Carmen will see again and then even Julio will be gone and I won't have the mirror and I'll be so lonely.

So lonely.

Okay, so I'm back because Terry is still on the mind. He worked on a lot of projects in his time, and he bent a lot of rules, but it wasn't until Project 29 that he systematically introduced his own experimental drugs into the mix. Why? It's probably because Number 29 was one of the few not undergoing physical experimentation. I mean, the kid was strung up on cords his whole life, never took a step in his seven years, but his blood was clear. But then how did Terry get on the project? From what I can gather, all of the other project managers were assigned to a project based on their particular strengths. By that logic Terry should have been assigned a project rooted in chemical experimentation, such as Project 10, which he had overseen before taking over on 29. The PM's weren't even supposed to know about the details of other projects! Although with that level of understaffing they probably lent each other a hand when they had to.

Is that how he got to 29? Did he work on it and then request to become PM after finding out that Number 29 was an ideal candidate for his drugs? But then why would they request his help on 29? It's not like he would have been very good at talking to the kid...

He must have found out some other way, and convinced management that his interests had shifted to psychology. They must have really wanted to believe that he was changing for the better. But now I'm sliding into the territory of conjecture.

Maybe I should go poke around SD again. Maybe I can talk to some people, really figure this out. Maybe then I can get these thoughts of Terry out of my head. But I can't get myself out of my head.

So, what, Kerry, what's the big deal? It's 8 AM, you know we don't usually meet until

Brenda

Until 10 o'clock or so, I've got some things to take care of

Brenda. Listen.

What?

This is serious, okay?

Uh, sure, yeah, what's going on?

Okay, so you know how we sent an investigator down to the science department to figure out what happened with that experiment?

What, the one with the kid all strung up?

Yeah, that's the one. Well, the guy we sent down there to investigate is one of the best we got. Geraldo Diaz. But security caught him digging around in the experiment quarters outside of his authorized time and took him in.

Okay...

He escaped, Brenda, shanked a security guard with a pen and

I –

And he took a body with him.

A body? What do you mean, a body?

The body of Terry Lingard.

No! You – I – I thought science department had him in custody! That's mostly what Geraldo was supposed to do was go down there and interview him! Science lied to us? God they don't even know what I'm gonna –

Wait, wait! Brenda, hold up. Sit down, you haven't even heard the whole story. Right. So, yes, science lied to us. But, so did Geraldo. He had already gone in and done his investigation early yesterday morning, but he didn't go back to work to write his report. Actually, he didn't go back to work at all. He went to his apartment.

How do you know?

A man employed by our corporation running around with the body of a man once employed by our corporation seems like a pretty big liability, don't you think?

So you found him.

We raided his apartment once security sent word of his escape. They found him about an hour ago – he killed himself, shot himself in the head and died in Terry’s lap.

Well how’d you know where he was yesterday, then?

This was laying on his desk.

A diary? What –

Read it over. Just the last entry, I’ve bookmarked it for you.

Ugh, what a massive loser. All that moping and self-pity makes me nauseous.

Yeah. You know what this means though, right Brenda? We’ve got to shut down science. Terminate all projects... Terminate management.

M – No. No! We can’t, Kerry! Come on! We can just, just do a shake-up, some major restructuring –

Brenda. This almost got out. And if it did, that would be the end of us. Look, I’m sorry, but –

Sorry? Sorry? You’re fucking *sorry*? No, Kerry, you can’t *fucking* do this to me, he was with us from the start, and I – I *love* him

He’s done this long enough. We can’t keep supporting his... vision, Brenda, you know that.

I – I – No, why, why? I –

It’s okay. That’s alright. Yeah, that’s okay. Okay. Hey. Hey there. I’m still here for you, alright? I won’t leave you. I love you, Brenda. I’ll always be here for you.

I love you too.

The pain is deep. It’s so deep and it’s always there and sometimes, more now than before, sometimes it feels like I can’t tell the difference, what difference there is between pain and pleasure it’s all just horrible pain every time they open the door I feel it biting me it’s like I can feel my toes and fingers again for a second just to feel them get cut off again they squirm and tingle even when they’re just bringing food and I can’t tell what’s food and cutting anymore but sometimes. Sometimes it’s all clear, all clear for a moment I can understand. Sometimes they come in and talk to me and I get it and I know what they’re talking about and they talk more now they talk fast and high and a man came in to cut off my finger recently I only have six now no toes but I feel them but he came in to cut and he talked fast and hard and once he talked I was clear. I was clear I could think I could listen so I listened to him talk he said he’d inject drugs he really wanted to inject someone without drugs needles but everyone already had drugs and he cut my finger and dropped it and burned my hand and I remembered. I remembered the last time I

understood before someone else he fed me food it hurt but I remembered he told me 29 had no drugs no drugs 29 29 no drugs I remembered so I told him my hand was hot but I was clear and I told him 29 no drugs and he left. He left but now they open the door that horrible pain tingle my toes are moving they'll feed me but –