

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

12<sup>th</sup> Year of Open Access

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed  
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. 12, Issue - 6 (December 2021)

Editor-In-Chief : Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor : Dr. Madhuri Bite



www.the-criterion.com



AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Unopened Envelope

Bethany Bruno

When a loud knock struck upon her bedroom door shortly before dawn, Maddy was already wide awake. She would be instructed by her mother, Julia, to deliver single unopened envelope hundreds of miles away. A mere twelve hours later, that same envelope rests upon Maddy's passenger seat as she crosses the state line between Georgia and Alabama. As darkness rolls over the vast mountain peaks, Maddy begins to fade deeper into drowsiness. It was a long journey from South Florida to her Uncle Tim's home, and a much-welcomed distraction. Since the loss of her teaching position at the beginning of the summer, Maddy had become a hermit within the comfort of her mother's home. Her days were spent watching mindless television, binging over processed snacks. Her nights overflowing with sleepless dread of possibly never making her own path in life. Freshly out of college, Maddy didn't want to become an art teacher, but Julia insisted. She asked Maddy to give it a try, since "those who can't do, teach." At the end of the school year, the principal called Maddy into his office for her evaluation. He didn't look up from a large stack of manila folders as he uttered, emotionlessly, "I won't be asking you to return for the next school year." She should've felt free to create her own direction. Instead, she felt the crippling fear of having no clear direction. She was lost and desperately wanted to be found.

There was no thorough explanation as to why Julia insisted on Maddy personally driving this small envelope. "Can't you just mail it?" Maddy asked, "It would probably get there in a day or two." Uncle Tim lives upon Oran Mountain, a small community of people who seek isolation above the world below. Electricity, running water, and landlines are available to those who want it, but Tim chooses to go without modern conveniences. The only way to contact Tim is in person or postal mail. She looked at her mother's face, which contained the pale aftermath of pure panic. She had just awoken from a terrible nightmare. The dream had disturbed her so much that she immediately threw off her covers and walked to her small wooden writing desk. Whatever she scribbled down was now inside an envelope. And its delivery was of dire urgency, this was certain. "No, this must be given to him directly," Julia said, "please, promise me that you will place this in his hands." Maddy nodded, grabbed the envelope, and began packing a small overnight bag. The whole situation felt ridiculous, for they had not seen or heard from Tim in years. Plus, what was in Julia's nightmare that would warrant such a hasty journey? Julia handed her a small bundle of

cash and instructed Maddy to sleep at the Dixie Motel once the envelope was received. “And please,” Julia pleaded, “call me, so that I know you made it safely.”

The familiar songs of popular music had begun to fade into static as Maddy crept closer, mile by mile, towards the mountain. Soon, she would be closer to seeing her uncle once more. She would also hopefully find out what all the hoopla was about in that envelope. The same envelope which had tempted Maddy for the last twelve hours to just sneak a peek. She clicked on her headlights right as the GPS alerted her to turn left in two hundred feet. She was on a long stretch of empty highway as nightfall engulfed all light. She turned onto the upward run, which zig zagged across the mountain like a giant stairway towards the thick clouds above. As her tiny car made its way at an incline, the road behind her disappeared. It was replaced by a dense forest of trees and rocks that lined the sides of the upward road. The car’s engine began to rev, loudly, struggling to keep up as it slowly climbed. Maddy, fearful of heights, refused to look anywhere but forward as she squeezed her steering wheel. The leather squeaked as her grip tightened. Her ears popped simultaneously as a song by *The Doors* blared through the radio.

*People are strange when you're a stranger. Faces look ugly when you're alone...*

When she reached the halfway point, a large wild fox walked out from the brush and sat down in the middle of the road. Its beady eyes stared at the headlights as if in a trance. Fireflies suddenly flashed wildly. Maddy slammed the brakes. The envelope went flying from the passenger seat onto the floor with a light thud. “Shit!” She snatched it with a whoosh and threw it back upon the seat. Her eyes refocused, only to find the road empty. She looked to the right, then left. But nothing was visible past the soft moonlit reflection of the treetops. Something felt off about that fox, and its eyes. Bright yellow eyes that felt ethereal.

The song played on in broken fragments as the car climbed once more. Her hands were sweating as she struggled to get a tight grip of the steering wheel. Her mind drifted towards a memory of her other uncle, John. An odd guy who seemed to have a heavy weight within his soul, like a ship’s anchor trapped upon the ocean floor. In and out of rehabs until Tim discovered the body. One week after the funeral, Tim informed Julia of his plans to move away, in search of “a fresh start.” Tim had begun to have nightmares of John slumped over in a darkened corner, with his arms and hands stretched out like a vulnerable toddler pleading to be held. John would call out to Tim, begging to be saved. “It feels real,” he told Julia, “It’s like he’s waiting for me to pick him

up, then place him on my hip, remember that?” Tim, John, and Julia were triplets, born minutes apart, yet John was considered the baby of the trio. Tim’s move and seclusion from the world was another senseless loss. Julia would tell Maddy that she felt like she lost two brothers the day John died, and “two-halves of my soul.” All that remains as proof of their existence is a picture of the triplets as children. It sits upon Julia’s desk within a busted frame made from forty-year-old popsicle sticks, Elmer’s glue, and tiny specks of blue glitter. A black and white photo of the triplets standing side by side in front of the entrance of a shoddy circus tent. Huge grins plastered on their faces while waving at the camera. It’s the only photo that hasn’t been hidden away.

This trip was the first time Maddy would see her Uncle Tim since John’s funeral. She wondered if he would look older. Maybe he would have a bushy lumberjack beard. Or long stringy grey hair. The radio suddenly lost reception. Static buzzed until she pushed the power button. She had reached the end of the climb and no longer needed the distraction. The road plunged into a small descent as it turned into a distantly scattered residential street. There were trailers upon each side with dim porch lights. Various flags that were erected upon each trailers side flapped as she sped by. When she reached trailer numbered 314, a flutter of anticipation passed through her. Both to finally see Uncle Tim once again and for the mysterious envelope’s contents to be revealed. She unbuckled her seatbelt and quickly grabbed the envelope. She stepped out of the car and quietly made her way up to the front door. She took in a deep breath, held it in for a few seconds, then blew it out along with her nerves. She knocked on the door, making three distinct taps. Tap-tap-tap. After a few moments, there came a familiar sound. Ker-chunk. She grinned as the deadbolt unlocked. The door opened slowly for the big reveal. There, standing behind a mesh screen door, was Uncle Tim. Exhausted, with large bags under his blue eyes. He had clearly lost a ton of weight since living on the mountain. Some grey hairs were noticeable throughout his dark locks. He stared at Maddy. As if she was one of those optical illusion photos that contain a secret message if you look long enough. “Maddy?” he asked, as he rubbed his face to awaken. Maddy greeted her uncle as he pushed upon the screen door, producing a loud squeak from its rusted hinge. She shook the envelope in her hand as its contents slid back and forth.

“Sorry to barge on you, but Mom insisted that I bring this directly to you,” she said.

With the envelope now in his hands, he carefully broke its taped seal and pulled out a small piece of college-ruled paper along with a mood ring. He read the note silently. Maddy eagerly awaited.

Uncle Tim pocketed the note and thanked her for bringing the message. “Here,” he said while passing Maddy the ring, “please tell your mother that I’ve made my decision.” As the door closed, Maddy stood still, in shock and utterly confused. She pondered over the child sized ring and placed it on her pinky finger. The colors began to swirl into a mix of lime green and black. “Great,” she said aloud, “even my mood is broken.” As she began the short walk back towards her car, the fox appeared from underneath Tim’s trailer. It sat down upon the doormat and stared up at Maddy. “What do you want?” she asked, “leave me alone!” Maddy reached down and grabbed a handful of gravel. As she stood up and hurled the stones, the fox was gone. She ran to her car, as if being chased by some unknown force as her face swelled hot with frustration.

A whirlwind of thoughts raced through her mind as she started the car and began the descent off the mountain. Perhaps it was the adrenaline, or the lack of sleep, but Maddy lacked caution as her foot pushed hard on the gas pedal. The engine roared as it struggled to speed up. High beams coated the road, revealing shards of glass from shattered beer bottles. Maddy wiped away the overwhelming tears that blurred her vision. As she swerved around a bend in the road, a pickup truck coming in the opposite direction appeared. Each vehicle heading toward the other in slow motion. Maddy opened her mouth with intentions of yelling, but there was only silence. The truck’s headlights closed in as Maddy tensed her body. The screeching of metal colliding rang out like piecing cry. The vehicles side swiped each other, sending both flying off different sides of the road. Maddy’s car veered off to the right and into the mountain’s darkness. Her car fell downward for a few seconds: one, two, three. Maddy clenched down her jaw. Braced for impact. All motion slammed to a stop upon a large patch of rounded rocks. A disgusting metal grinding emanated. The bounce shattered the windshield. Large chunks of glass flew all around. The front bumper was mangled, making the hood look like a crumpled sheet of thick paper. Maddy’s hands were still squeezing the steering wheel. Her breathing was rapid, yet deep. When she looked outward through the exposed windshield, she noticed that one headlight was still shining, illuminating the forest around her. She pulled on the driver’s side door handle to exit, but it was jammed. She then tried to roll down the window as its dying motor made a grinding screech. A large, snaked crack ran throughout the glass. Maddy pushed on it, forcing the window to break into two parts before falling outside the vehicle. She climbed out of the opening and stumbled onto the ground, nearly landing on the glass. Her hands were outstretched as she sunk her fingers into moist dirt in an attempt to regain her balance. A stinging ache soared throughout her right leg. She lifted her hand to her thigh

as warm blood began to flow, soaking the material around the ripped patch of her jeans. Slowly, she pulled herself up, sending waves of pain shooting down her leg with each attempted motion. When she was finally able to stand, she gazed upon the cars damage. She needed to get back on the road in order to make it off the mountain. There, she could signal someone for help. In the distance, she heard the faint sound of a horn beeping sporadically before stopping. The pickup truck was not visible in the darkness as Maddy prayed silently that they were okay. She felt something wet sliding down her left cheek. As she wiped her face, she felt the thin metal band gently scrape against her skin. The mood ring was still on her finger.

Carefully and slowly, Maddy limped her way up the side of the mountain to get back on the main road. As she climbed, she realized that she had abandoned her overnight bag. After what felt like hours of being surrounded by darkness, Maddy's eyes adjusted to the moonlight as it cast down a blanket of soft glow. When she finally reached the road, she looked down below towards the wreckage of her car. Its unyielding single high beam was still emitting light. *Hopefully someone sees that*, she thought to herself, or *maybe someone already has and sent help*. Maddy was eerily calm at this moment, and her fear of heights seemed to have disappeared as she looked down at the vast world below the mountain and the brightly shining stars above. It was like looking at a reproduction of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* painting. The same painting that hung upon her mother's bedroom wall. Swirls of clouds from the night sky were illuminated thanks to the moonlight. A wave of calm flowed through Maddy as she stared. It was a feeling of nostalgia for something that never existed before just then. There upon the mountain, amongst the chaos of the night and of her emotions, Maddy found stillness. It was that feeling of serenity that gave Maddy the strength and courage to make her way down the mountain. As the gravel crunched below her feet, flickers of yellow from the fireflies guided her. When she reached the end of the incline, she saw in the distance flashing police lights speeding towards her.

The officers and paramedics treated Maddy's wounds, as well as alerted her mother and Uncle Tim of her accident. The occupants of the pickup truck were okay, thankfully. As she sat in the back of the ambulance, there came a knock upon the circular back window. The paramedic opened the door to find Uncle Tim standing there. He climbed up into the vehicle, then hugged Maddy, causing her grey blanket to fall off her shoulders. "Kid, I'm so sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to send you off like that." She wanted to assure him that it was fine, but his pensive look told

her to let him continue. He grabbed her hand, and raised the pinky finger up, showing off the mood ring in the light.

“If I remember correctly, blue means calm, or peace. One of those. Your mom taught us. When we were kids, she used her birthday money to buy all three of us mood rings at the circus. She said the rings would be our heart on our sleeve. She was always annoyed at John and me for not being more open. But what young boy likes to talk about their feelings?” he said.

“That was always her one rule, to always be open,” she said.

They both chuckled at the thought of Julia becoming irritated.

“Is that why she sent you the ring?” she said.

“Probably. But I’ve always been open, with her or anyone. I don’t need a mood ring to show my true feelings,” he said, “I made my choice years ago. Your mom thought that if I saw the ring, and you, that it would somehow wake me up.” Uncle Tim looked down at the ring upon Maddy’s finger. He then took her hand, slid off the ring, and placed it on his right pinky finger. It barely reached the knuckle. Within a few moments, the ring began to swirl into a mixture of amber and violet. “I’m happy here, Maddy,” he began, “not in Florida. I wasn’t for a long time.” Maddy nodded and thought about her mother’s constant influence. She had played such a significant role in all of Maddy’s important decisions. In fact, she couldn’t think of a single instance where she didn’t back down to Julia’s persistence. Whether it was a prom dress style, what college to attend, or what career to pursue. Maddy couldn’t even make the choice to drive to Alabama at the crack of dawn in order to deliver a simple envelope. As always, she was told to do it, so she did.

“She means well; I know deep down she does. But she can’t save everyone from making mistakes. John knew that too, in the end,” he said.

Maddy and Uncle Tim soon parted ways once more, with no false promises of staying in touch or meeting again soon. She knew, however painful it might be to accept, that her uncle chose a life where family was no longer included. If her night on Oran Mountain taught her anything, it was that sometimes we need to be destroyed in order to be created. To uncover peace, we need to go on our own journey through the choices we make, however wrong or right. As the ambulance

headed towards the local hospital, the light of dawn finally made its appearance. As Maddy peered out through the small back door window, those familiar yellow eyes emerged once again. The fox crept slowly into the road, as if to wave goodbye before darting off into the woods and returning home once more.