

Lost

“Mom! My shirt is on backwards,” Steven yells from his room, giggling.

“Turn it around then, sweetheart!” Sarah calls from downstairs.

“I want *you* to do it!” Steven says.

“I know, I know,” Sarah says, already walking up the stairs to his room.

“Hurry!”

Sarah rushes into the room, slinging Steven up over her shoulder; he screams with joy. His mother spins around the room, Steven still resting on her shoulder, and then hurls him onto his bed. She’s on him quickly after he hits the mattress. She pulls his shirt up and blows a loud, wet raspberry on his stomach. Steven explodes with almost silent laughter, his lungs caught in a constant inhale and unable to gather the air necessary to produce much sound. Satisfied with her work, Sarah relents and allows her son to catch his breath.

“Are you trying to kill him?” Steven’s dad asks, peeking his head in through the doorway.

“Again, again, again,” Steven says, breathing heavily through a wide grin.

“Nope, time for breakfast. We have to go soon. Auntie Lisa’s waiting,” Sarah says as she turns Steven’s shirt the right way.

“I don’t even like birthday parties,” Steven says, rolling around on the bed.

“Well, you’re gonna love this one, promise,” Sarah replies as she reaches out her hand to Steven.

“Okay,” Steven says, skeptical, but hungry enough to trust his mom.

“Don’t worry, Pops,” Sarah says, kissing Kevin on the cheek before walking past him into the hall, Steven close behind her, “Your son is safe and sound.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, Pops, ” Steven says, patting him on the stomach.

“Aren’t you funny?” Kevin says, smiling, looking down at his son before following them down the stairs.

Kevin ruffles Steven’s hair while they walk, and Steven fights off his dad’s hands without looking behind him as the group enters the kitchen. The kitchen is beautiful. An eight-burner gas stove, marble countertops, two sinks and tall glass windows overlooking the backyard. It was the main reason Steven’s mom wanted this house. The house itself isn’t special. It has two floors, three bedrooms, and a living room with a pretty sizable TV. Steven’s room is right at the top of the steps and his parent’s is just three steps from the bottom. The house isn’t much, but it’s enough.

“Special mac and cheese!” Steven exclaims, running away from his dad’s attacks and leaping onto his stool at the marble countertop.

“Not today, sweetie. We’re gonna try eggs, okay?” Sarah says.

“But, but--” Steven says behind a frown.

“I don’t want to hear it, Steven.” Sarah picks up a large bowl filled with mac and cheese and chopped up hot dogs from the counter, placing it in front of her son. Steven’s face lights up.

“Don’t you think he should start eating a real breakfast?” Kevin whispers to Sarah as Steven begins to inhale his special breakfast. “I mean, hot dogs and mac and cheese?”

“He’s only a kid once, Kev,” Sarah says, a little too loud.

“I’m only a kid once, Dad,” Steven says through a mouthful of food.

Steven’s dad smiles but doesn’t say anything.

“My little parrot,” Sarah says as she walks over towards her husband and hugs him.

“Sorry,” Sarah whispers in his ear, so Steven doesn’t hear.

“Don’t worry,” Kevin says. “I just wish the kid liked breakfast foods.”

The two smile looking over at their son, Sarah’s head resting on Kevin’s shoulder, cheese sauce dripping down Steven’s chin.

* * * *

“May the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen.”

Steven stands next to his father, tightly gripping his hand. It’s been three weeks since Aunt Lisa’s birthday party. Steven’s bright red tie contrasts his white button down shirt and dark blue jacket. He looks up at his father whose eyes are trained not on the priest, but on the sky. It’s a beautiful day. Fluffy white clouds dot the bright blue sky, and blades of grass peek through the thinly snow-covered ground.

“Unbelievable,” his father mutters under his breath.

“What’s unbelievable, Dad?” Steven whispers.

“Nothing, Steven. Nothing.”

The pair look on in silence as Sarah is lowered into the ground. Steven wants to go home, to bury his head in his dad’s coat until it’s over. But he can’t. He has to stay for Mom. That’s what Dad said, anyway. Steven didn’t really understand. If Mom is gone, then how can this be for her? Steven had said this to Dad, but then he got angry, so Steven didn’t ask again. The coffin is nice. It’s white with black handles running along its sides. The top has golden lines arching all across it. Steven saw it earlier in the church when Dad and some of his other relatives had gone up to it to see Mom. Steven wanted to see Mom, too, but Dad said no. He said that he wasn’t old enough. Dad was always saying that. When Steven had wanted to stay home alone. Not old enough. When he wanted to go horseback riding. Not old enough. The list goes on and on. Steven was seven. He sure felt old enough.

Steven can't see the coffin anymore now. Those who had been circling the grave during the ceremony begin to separate, talking amongst themselves. It's a small funeral. Only the closest family and friends were invited. Steven doesn't know all their names, but everyone looks somewhat familiar. He feels a tug on his arm. It's his dad.

"Come on, Steven. Time to go."

* * * *

Steven sits in the backseat as the family's grey Toyota minivan hurtles down the highway, still thirty minutes away from the party.

"I told you we should've left sooner," Kevin says to Sarah who sits in the passenger seat beside him. "Those last games of Go Fish were three too many."

"We had to at least try to take down the champ back there," Sarah says motioning towards Steven.

"Yeah, well you can explain why we're late to Lisa, then."

"Because I'm not a quitter?"

"Because you insisted we keep playing."

"Yeah, because I'm not a quitter."

"I can tell her!" Steven says from the back.

"Perfect," Kevin says, just to Sarah.

"Oh, that's okay, sweetheart," Sarah says, turning around to face Steven. "Daddy and I are gonna work it out...right, Daddy?"

"Yes, Mommy," Kevin says, rolling his eyes. "Let's just both do it."

"Okay, what's our story, though?"

"Blame the kid?"

“Blame the kid.”

“Blame the kid,” Steven says, nodding his head.

The family laughs as Kevin starts to merge into the right lane, not wanting to miss the exit. As he does, a car comes shooting up from behind them. Kevin turns the wheel hard to the left, abandoning the merge just in time. The black Jeep Grand Cherokee flies past them in the right lane.

“Christ, Kev,” Sarah says. “The hell was that?”

“An aspiring Nascar driver?” Kevin says, shaken.

Sarah reaches out her hand to hold his and the family exits the highway.

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“Dad?”

The pair survived the funeral reception and are on their way home. Steven’s dad, eyes fixed on the road and hands tightly gripping the wheel of their new car, doesn’t respond.

“Dad?”

Kevin doesn’t hear his son, lost in thought. Since Lisa’s birthday, all Kevin has wanted to do is to lock his door and throw away the key. He thinks about how, now that the funeral is over, he can do exactly that. No more reservations to make or food to order or friends and family to invite. No more discussions about what coffin he feels “best suits the deceased.” No more people to talk to him about how hard this must be for him and how sorry they feel. Only silence.

“Dad!”

Well, and Steven, Kevin remembers, as Steven’s shouts finally break through to his father.

“What?”

“I was trying to talk to you,” Steven says, innocently. “Are you okay?”

“What did you want to talk to me about?” his dad asks, in a kind but flat voice.

“I miss Mom.”

“I know. I do too, buddy.”

“Is she really not coming back?”

“We’ve talked about this, Steven,” Kevin says, avoiding his son’s desperate eyes.

“I know, but--”

“How about some music?”

“Okay,” Steven says, turning his head to look out the window.

Kevin flips on the radio and Bon Iver’s “Skinny Love” floods the car.

“Can I have special mac and cheese when we get home?” Steven says loudly, trying to speak over the radio.

“I don’t know, kid. How about we figure it out later?”

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Sarah’s eyes open to darkness, and she feels herself falling. She screams, or at least she tries to. No sound comes out. This fall continues, a silent scream in endless darkness, until she lands hard on a thick wooden chair. She braces herself, waiting for the pain to rush up through her legs and consume her, but it never comes. Suddenly, torches burst into blue flames lining what appears to be a large, circular cavern, with a large throne at its back wall and no discernible exits. The throne is right in front of Sarah, about ten feet away. It’s made of polished marble with veins of black obsidian rippling through it. On it is a man, lying horizontally, his legs resting over the throne’s left arm, his head on its right. He says nothing, and instead, waves the shaft of his cane in circles through the air, admiring its silver handle.

Sarah starts to stand up from her chair, thinking that there has to be a way out, but is unable to move.

“That’s not gonna work here, I’m afraid,” the man says from his throne, still twirling his cane, and not looking at Sarah.

Sarah moves more frantically now, but is still unable to stand. The man stops twirling his cane and raises his hand. Sarah’s chair shoots forward, stopping at the foot of the steps leading up to the throne.

“I told you. That’s not gonna work here,” the man says, still not looking at her.

“Please, don’t hurt me.”

The man laughs and stands up from his throne.

“What do you want?” Sarah asks, her voice shaking.

“I want to do my job,” the man says, pacing back and forth in front of the throne.

“What does that have to do with me?”

“It has everything to do with you.”

“But, I didn’t do anything.”

“Liar!” The man shouts, pointing the cane at Sarah’s throat. Sarah is silent. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap.” The man lowers his cane and continues pacing. “You did something.”

“I swear, I’ll never do it again if you just let--”

“You died.”

Sarah falls silent.

“I– I died?”

“Why else wouldn’t this hurt?” The man says, as he flips his cane in the air, grabbing the bottom of it, and whips it around, hitting Sarah square in the jaw with its wolf’s head handle.

Sarah looks up at him.

“See? Dead.”

“But I can’t be dead.”

“Can’t you?”

“No. I can’t be.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Uh, we were going to my sister’s birthday.”

“Did you ever make it there?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me something about it then. What did it smell like there? What did it sound like? What did you do?”

“I, uh...I don’t know.”

“Dead,” the man says in an I-told-you-so tone.

“You don’t have to be a dick about it.”

“Remember that car Kevin so narrowly avoided?” Sarah nods. “Well, he didn’t. That Jeep shot right into the back of your family’s Toyota. Your car spun around, lining up the passenger side, your seat, for the car behind you to barrel into. You were dead in seconds.”

“Why wouldn’t I remember any of that?”

“The mind tends not to be able to handle death very well. Sometimes, it’s easier just to paint over it.”

“Paint over it?”

“That’s what I said.”

“What about Steven and Kevin?” Sarah says, panicked.

“Kevin broke his arm and Steven has a concussion and a few scrapes, but otherwise, the family is just fine. Well, except for you.”

“Thanks.”

“You know, I like you,” the man says, stopping his pacing and taking a seat on the step lowest to the ground, now almost eye level with Sarah. “I don’t play favorites, but I just love that dry humor of yours. It’s so...refreshing.”

“Can’t say I feel the same,” Sarah says, looking away from him.

“You’ll warm up to me,” the man says, still looking at her.

“Who even are you?”

“Truthfully, I don’t even really know who I am.

“Of course you don’t.”

“But, over the years the souls here have tried out a bunch of different names. Iraevius is my favorite.”

“Iraevius?”

“Yeah, I like that. Iraevius, transporting lost souls from the life they once knew,” Iraevius says, like he’s reading a TV commercial.

Sarah stares at Iraevius, eyes wide. He continues speaking.

“I became conscious millenia ago and within seconds, a soul, like you, lost and confused, appeared in front of me. I was confused, too, then, and more and more souls just kept coming to me. I didn’t know what to do and so, I did nothing. I allowed them to roam the earth, free to torment themselves and the living. I knew humanity couldn’t go on like this and that it was my

responsibility to do something. It took time, but eventually I created this place.” Iraevius gestures with his arms to the space around them. “Thousands of caverns, hidden deep beneath the earth's crust. I now had a place to keep all these souls, though I still didn’t know what to do with them.”

“Wait, wait. How does this work?”

“What do you mean?”

“Thousands of caves and souls but one Iraevius?”

“Ah, yes, well, I’m here talking to you, now, but I’m also talking to Jean Dori Flynn. She died just a few minutes ago. Way more freaked out than you were. Sometimes they just won’t stop screaming...really a shame.”

Iraevius looks down at the ground as he says this, shaking his head. After a brief pause, his head shoots back up, smiling as he continues.

“Anyway, there’s also Alexi Kremakov. Damian Michael Harris. You get the point. I’m talking to all of you.”

Sarah stares back at Iraevius blankly.

“Splitting my consciousness?” Iraevius says, trying to help Sarah understand. Sarah still looks confused.

No? Not making any sense? Should I explain again?”

“This is ridiculous,” Sarah says.

“Yes, well, perfectly natural for you to think so.”

“So, you’re like god? Heaven, hell, that’s all real?”

“Not exactly.” Iraevius says.

“Then what is, exactly?”

“A good question,” Iraevius says, standing up from his seat on the steps and walking past Sarah. He waves his cane through the air in a tight circular motion as he passes her and her chair whips around to face him.

“I don’t know who or what designed the universe, but it wasn’t me, and if God and Allah exist, I haven’t met them. I have great power but, unlike these gods that humanity dreams up, I am unable to influence the human world. They can’t see me or anything I’ve built. If they were to somehow reach this cave, to their eyes, it would be filled with solid rock. I only have power over the dead.”

Iraevius pauses for a moment, both in his words and his pacing, expecting more questions. When none come, he continues.

“There isn’t a heaven or a hell. There isn’t a jannah or jahannam. The afterlife doesn’t exist as human religions know it. Everyone just comes here. I bring everyone here. And, when they’re ready, they move on.”

“Move on to where?”

“Their end.”

“What do you mean?”

“I hate this part.” Iraevius says.

“What do you mean!?” Sarah says.

He stops pacing and looks at the ceiling of the cavern. “After this, you cease to exist.”

Sarah raises her eyebrows.

“I know, I know. I wish it worked the way you guys thought.”

Sarah remains silent.

“I’m sorry, okay? That’s just how it has to be,” Iraevius says.

“So that’s what you decided to do with the souls? Erase them?”

“Well, yes, technically,” he says, embarrassed. “I like to think of myself as helping them, though.”

“I knew I didn’t like you,” Sarah says.

“Look, I didn’t ask for this.”

“Why not just get it over with?”

“Well—”

“Why explain all of this to me?” Sarah says, as she struggles against the man’s invisible restraints.

“I—”

“Why tease me with the idea that I might live?” Sarah yells, now fighting even harder to free herself.

“Sarah—”

“Why tease me with the idea that I might be able to see my son again? My husband?”

“YOU CAN!” the man yells as he releases the invisible restraints binding her to the chair with a wave of his cane. Unprepared for the sudden lack of resistance, Sarah flings herself from the chair and hits the ground. She stares up at Iraevius, breathing heavily.

“I’m here as your friend, Sarah. I’m not here to imprison or torture you,” he continues.

Sarah blows the hair out of her eyes.

“My job is to help people accept the end of their existence. Not force it on them.”

“So...”

“I can’t do anything to you until you want me to.”

“And if I never accept?”

“Then I swear I’ll never raise my cane against you.” Iraevius says, bowing his head to her.

Sarah smiles. “Better get used to having me around then.”

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It’s around dinner time when Steven and his dad get home from the funeral. Kevin takes his shoes off, hangs up his jacket and starts walking towards his room.

“I’m just gonna order us pizza or something for dinner, okay, bud?”

“No special mac and cheese?” Steven says.

“Not tonight,” Kevin says as he grabs the door handle to his room. “I’ll probably order in a half hourish. I need to lie down for a bit.”

Kevin enters the master bedroom and closes the door, locking it behind him. He collapses onto the floor as if the gravity weighing him down has just doubled. Now lying flat on his back he stares up at the ceiling, thoughts about his wife gluing him to the floor. He remembers everything. The black flash of a car shooting towards him in the rearview mirror, the sound of metal scraping against metal, and the feeling of momentary weightlessness before the other car rips into her. Her head, slumped away from him after, hair slick with blood. Steven’s screams from the back seat and her terrifying silence.

“Why couldn’t he have just swerved a second sooner?” Kevin thinks to himself.

The minute he saw her eyes he knew. Empty, cold, nothing like Sarah’s. He can’t forget. Forgetting means forgetting her. Instead, he must remember, and so he continues to stare at the ceiling, a prisoner to his thoughts. He wants nothing more than to disappear into the floor, to sink into the thick white carpet and escape the immense pressure building all around him. He closes his eyes, just to open them to the sound of small feet running up the stairs. Steven. Kevin knows

he should make the goddamn mac and cheese. But he also knows he can't pull himself off of this carpet to put a smile on his son's face. He hates himself even more for this, and that only pushes him down farther into the carpet.

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"You said I'd get to see my family again," Sarah says, lying down like a starfish on the cavern floor.

"I did," Iraevius answers, sitting hunched over on his throne, his elbows resting on his knees.

"Can I go now?! You've been blowing me off for weeks," she says, throwing her arms up over her head, exasperated.

"I just think—"

"What? That we should give it some more time?" Sarah asks.

"Well, yes, I—"

"You've been saying that since I got here. How much time do we need to give it?"

"I'm not sure."

"Look, I'm ready. I've sat through your lectures about getting to know my dead self, processing my grief. I know you didn't want to take me before I adjusted to my new reality, but I have! I know that I'm dead, that I'm never not going to be dead and—"

"Sarah—"

"I know all about you, too! You're basically a god, you have telekinesis, you see everything down here and in the real world—"

"Absolute vision," Iraevius interjects.

“Yes, that. You’re also immortal, can split your consciousness between all the lost souls still refusing to accept their end, and I’m pretty sure that you can fly too, but you can’t affect the human world. You’ve explained it all. I’m on board with this Iraevius transporting lost souls afterlife bullshit. There’s nothing else for us to do down here.”

“I’m not worried about you not being ready for them. I’m worried about them not being ready for you.”

“No amount of your stupid therapy sessions are going to make me just abandon my family forever.”

“I understand that, Sarah. I’m just worried that what you see will only make it harder to let go.”

“If you want me to accept my end, seeing my family is the best way to do it.”

“I—”

“You said that you're not here to imprison me.”

“I’m only here to help and advise.”

“How can this place be anything other than a prison if you won’t let me leave?”

“Fine,” Iraevius says. “I hope you're right.”

“Really?” Sarah says, leaping to her feet. He walks over to Sarah and grabs her hand.

“Yes, yes...just, don’t expect too much from them.”

Sarah nods, excited. Iraevius taps the bottom of his cane against the stone floor three times and the pair disappears in a cloud of smoke.

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Steven watches as his dad disappears behind his bedroom door and begins fighting to undo his bright red tie. A few weeks ago he might have pestered his dad about watching a movie

or playing cards, but he knew better now. Since Steven's mom has been gone, his dad is always in his room. Steven has tried to go in a few times and see what he was doing, but the door was locked. He usually doesn't answer when Steven knocks either. Maybe he just doesn't hear him. Steven leaves his jacket and tie scattered by the front door and rushes up the stairs to his room. He leaps into his bed, crawling under the covers. His stomach growls. He could make a sandwich or something, but he doesn't want a sandwich. His dad will order pizza eventually, but he doesn't want that, either. Steven pushes back thoughts about his hunger and tries to think about the new Star Wars Lego set he wants instead. He thinks about whether or not he wants to invite his friends to build it with him when he gets it or if he wants to do it by himself. He thinks about Scooby-Doo and how he can't decide whether he like Shaggy or Scooby better. He thinks about the double he hit in his last Little League game. But the hunger is relentless and his thoughts drift to the funeral. The coffin. His mom. The only person who could quiet his stomach right now.

He thinks about the piggy back rides she'd give him. Her lavender scented deodorant. Her soft, warm hugs. Her long black hair, speckled with the occasional grey strand. He'd always liked those gray hairs. When Steven was younger he'd pull on them and ask her why all of her hair wasn't grey.

"Just you wait, honey," she'd say, smiling. "Someday they will be."

He wonders what color her hair is now, lying under the golden lattice. He wonders if it will ever turn completely grey.

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Sarah's eyes go dark, just like they did when she first entered Iraevius's cavern, but this time when they fill with light again, she's in her kitchen as though she never left. There's a faint light coming from the main hallway, and in it, Sarah catches a glimpse of her reflection in the

long tall windows overlooking the backyard. There's no translucent shimmer or blue glow around her. She just looks like herself, wearing jeans and a white T-shirt that says, "Smile," in thick yellow lettering, the same clothes she wore to Lisa's birthday party. A rush of relief floods through Sarah as she examines her hands and begins to believe that everything, Iraevius, her death, all of it had to have been a dream. This relief turns to ash as she sees Iraevius materialize next to her in the reflection.

"Sorry," Iraevius says sheepishly. "I always forget to warn people about that."

"I look so real." Sarah says, still hoping that she might just be able to slide into her old life.

"I know, I know. It's a design flaw."

"No, no. It's great."

"Yeah, well, not that great. Try to open that cabinet."

"I don't think I want to," Sarah says, backing away from it.

"You may feel like yourself," Iraevius warns, "but do not confuse this life with your other."

Iraevius walks over to the cabinet and goes to grab the handle. As he does his hand passes right through the small metal handle, unable to grip anything.

"This body isn't what it seems, Sarah. Just look at what you're standing on."

Sarah looks down and realizes that she in fact isn't standing on anything. She's hovering only centimeters above the ground.

"Of course it isn't," Sarah says, throwing her hand down hard at the kitchen counter and watching, helpless, as it passes straight through and returns to her side. "This is frustrating, you know?"

Iraevius takes a step towards her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“There’s a reason I exist, Sarah. Human souls weren’t meant to wander the earth in this form. It’s against their nature.”

“Oh, no,” Sarah says, shaking his hand off her shoulder and facing him. “Don’t you go and turn this into another therapy session.”

“I’m just telling you what I know.”

“I’m not accepting shit,” Sarah says, walking out of the kitchen and towards her bedroom. “Give it a rest already.”

“Sarah–”

“Why’d you bring me here, anyway?” she asks from her empty bedroom. “No one’s even home.”

“They’ll be here any second.”

Sarah phases through her bedroom door to meet Iraevius in the main hallway, appearing human as ever on the other side.

“Eternity with you is going to be insufferable,” she says.

“That’s what I’ve been trying–” Iraevius says, cutting himself off. “Oh, forget it. They’re here.”

Just then, the front door opens, and Sarah’s family walks through. Steven’s dad takes his shoes off, hangs up his jacket and starts walking towards his room.

“I’m just gonna order us pizza or something for dinner, okay, bud?”

“No special mac and cheese?” Steven says, already knowing the answer.

“Not tonight,” Kevin says as he grabs the door handle to his room. “I’ll probably order in a half hourish. I need to lie down for a bit.”

Kevin disappears into his room and Steven pops off his shoes before darting upstairs.

“What the fuck was that?” Sarah says to Iraevius, throwing her arms out to the side.

“This is why I wanted to wait. They’re still adjusting to the loss.”

“Adjusting? Kevin wouldn’t make our kid mac and cheese? It’s the easiest food to make on the planet.”

“Go into the room. You’ll see what I mean.”

“I mean I could probably make it right now, and I can’t even hold the fricking box.”

“The room, Sarah.”

“I’m going, I’m going.”

Sarah phases back into what used to be her bedroom to see Kevin lying on the floor, just a couple inches from the door.

“Hey, jackass,” Sarah says to her husband.

Iraevius appears behind her.

“They can’t hear you.”

“I know. It just helps,” she says.

“Do you understand now? He needs time,” Iraevius says.

“He doesn’t have time.”

“Yes he—”

“Help him,” Sarah says, interrupting.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Iraevius says, defending himself against Sarah’s insistence.

“Can I talk to him?”

“No.”

“I can’t talk to him, or you won’t *let* me talk to him?” Sarah says in a teasing but serious tone.

“Is there a difference?”

“Yeah. You’re a bit of a pushover.”

“Yeah, well, you’re a bit pushy,” Iraevius says.

“Perfect!” Sarah says, smiling, still waiting for an answer to her question.

“Of course it’s possible for you to talk to them!” Iraevius says, exasperated.

“So let me!”

“I’ve been through this, Sarah. I’ve tried it. It doesn’t work out the way you think it will. I have to keep you concealed. When loved ones hear or see their departed, they tend to fixate. It makes it harder for them to move on.”

“So? They wouldn’t have to move on. I’d be there.”

“You know, you’re just one of billions upon billions of souls that I’ve gone through this with. If that worked, don’t you think that I’d just do that every time? My existence would be unnecessary.”

“Yeah, sounds about right,” Sarah fires back. Iraevius continues through this insult.

“Let’s say I let you do this, and you rejoin your family in this form. They would be thrilled to have you back. Not being able to touch you would be a little weird, but they’d be so happy to see and talk to you that it wouldn’t matter. Not at first at least, but as the days, months, and years passed, the realities of your different worlds would catch up to you. You wouldn’t be able to help around the house, take your son to school or even go out to dinner with your husband. You wouldn’t be able to connect with them physically either. No hugging. No cuddling. No kissing.”

Sarah looks like she is about to speak but then stops herself and instead kneels beside Kevin. She begins stroking his hair, while Iraevius continues his speech.

“Your ability to converse and empathize with them would also suffer due to a lack of shared experience and ability to engage in each other's lives. Not to mention that you'd be sitting at home bored all day while they are at work or at school. You'd be helplessly alone in every aspect of life, all while not even being able to change the TV channel by yourself.”

Iraevius pauses, expecting Sarah to fight back, but she doesn't.

“There's a reason I do things the way I do, Sarah. This situation doesn't have a happy ending,” Iraevius says, kneeling beside her.

“I disagree,” Sarah says calmly, continuing to run her fingers through Kevin's hair.

“I wouldn't expect you to let them go so soon, but—”

“Never.”

“What?”

“Never expect me to let them go.”

“Okay, Sarah, but you're dead. They aren't. You can watch all you want, but interfering will only hurt them..”

“Then I'll watch,” Sarah says, looking up at Iraevius in defiance. “I won't just leave them like this.”

“You already have, Sarah.”

“That wasn't my choice.”

Sarah stands and phases out through the master bedroom door and makes her way up the stairs to Steven's room. He's curled up under the covers.

“How long have they been this way?” Sarah says, not taking her eyes off of Steven.

Iraevius stands in the bedroom's doorway.

"Pretty much since coming back from the hospital. There are better days and worse ones," Iraevius says, walking towards her and noticing her worried face. "This is normal, Sarah. They'll be okay. I promise."

"I at least thought they'd be together."

"They are together."

"No they aren't." Sarah says as she sits on the edge of Steven's bed and rests her hand on the lump of blankets covering her son.

"Let's go back and give them some time. Seeing them like this won't help."

"I'm staying."

"Sarah—"

"You're here to give advice, right?"

"Yes, I mean, not entirely."

"Well, you've given it."

"Just let—"

"I don't need you here, Iraevius."

"Yes, you do."

"Leave!" Sarah shouts, turning to face Iraevius for the first time since entering the room. Iraevius pauses before speaking.

"Just remember that before I could control them, the souls who roamed the earth freely tormented themselves, too. Not just their loved ones."

Sarah says nothing and turns back towards Steven. She hovers just above the bed next to her son, resting her hand on his back. Iraevius disappears behind her.

* * * *

One month later, Sarah sits on the edge of Steven's bed. Steven sobs underneath his covers.

"Come on, baby. It's gonna be okay," Sarah says, patting Steven on the back. "Kevin! Get the fuck in here!"

The door to Steven's room stays shut.

"Just tell me what's wrong, sweetheart."

Steven doesn't respond, taking deep, shaky breaths through the blankets. Sarah sits next to him on the edge of his bed.

"I'm gonna go get Daddy okay? I'll be right back," Sarah stands and rushes downstairs. Kevin is where he always is after work, in bed. Sarah enters the room. Kevin lies on his side, back to the door.

"Let's go. Time to be a dad."

Kevin doesn't move.

"You better not be asleep again," Sarah says as she walks towards him.

Sarah leaps up on the bed, now kneeling over Kevin to see him scrolling through photos of her on his phone.

"Oh, Kev," Sarah says, forgetting about Steven for a moment, she wraps her arms around Kevin. The pair lie like this for a while as Kevin continues to scroll through his photos.

"I fucked you up," Sarah whispers into Kevin's ear. "Both of you." Sarah tries to hug Kevin harder but her hands start to pass through him. She quickly pulls her arms away and rolls onto her back. Sarah stares at the ceiling for a moment before closing her eyes in frustration.

"I'm here, Honey. I'm here," Sarah says, forcing the words out of her mouth.

* * * *

Two months after Sarah finds Steven crying under his covers, Kevin calls up to Steven from the bottom of the stairs.

“Steven!” Kevin says. “School!” Steven lies in his bed with his eyes open and doesn’t move. “Steven!” Kevin says again, now walking up the stairs. Steven quickly burrows beneath the covers and closes his eyes when he hears his Dad at the door. Kevin walks towards the bed and rests his hand gently on Steven’s blanket-covered head.

“Come on bud, breakfast.”

“I don’t—”

“Don’t worry. I gave up on the eggs.”

“Finally,” Sarah says to herself from her seat at the end of the bed.

Steven pokes his head out from under the covers. “Promise?”

“I’m trying here, okay Steven? Let’s go,” Kevin says as he pats Steven on the back and stands.

Steven rolls out of bed and follows his dad down stairs, with Sarah close behind. Steven takes his place at the marble countertop as Kevin grabs a bowl by the stove and places it in front of Steven’s seat.

“Cereal?” Steven says, looking down at the bowl.

“Jesus, Kevin,” Sarah says, standing behind Steven.

“You can’t always eat hot dogs and mac and cheese Steven,” Kevin says as he begins buttoning up his work shirt.

“Why not?” Steven says, stirring the cereal around, uninterested.

“Because. Now, eat up, we’re gonna be late.”

“He’s gonna be hungry at school,” Sarah says in an I-know-better tone as she sits down next to Steven.

Steven takes a few bites of cereal before pushing the bowl away.

“Couple more bites Steven, okay?” Kevin says, struggling to tie his tie.

“I’m full.” Steven says.

“You’re full?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, but remember that bowl of cereal when you're hungry later.” Steven looks at the bowl but doesn’t take another bite. Now finished with his tie, Kevin grabs the bowl and dumps it in the sink. Sarah starts banging her head on the marble countertop as Steven rushes up stairs to get dressed.

“Why. Can’t. You. Just. Make. Lunch. Foods. For. Breakfast,” Sarah says to Kevin, saying each word as her head hits the counter.

“Time to go kid,” Kevin yells up the stairs for Steven after cleaning a few dishes still left in the sink.

Sarah suddenly stops banging her head and shoots up out her seat excitedly.

“Oh, I know! Because you're an idiot!” Sarah says, as Kevin walks up the stairs to get Steven. “No, no, I wasn’t talking or anything. Go on, walk away.”

Steven and Kevin come back down the stairs and rush out the door, leaving Sarah alone in the kitchen.

“Have a good day,” Sarah says quietly, after the front door has already closed behind them.

* * * *

Three months later, Sarah stands by the front door at three o'clock, as she does every afternoon, waiting for Steven to come home from school.

"How was school, sweetie?" Sarah says as Steven walks through the door. Steven doesn't answer. Instead, leaving the front door open, he walks towards the kitchen, passing right through Sarah. "Monday's are tough huh?" Still no response from Steven as he begins pouring himself a big glass of chocolate milk.

"Steven! Close the door when you come in okay? You'll let all the heat out." Kevin says, entering the house and closing the door behind him.

"Ah, Kevin, my love, come, give me a kiss," Sarah says, walking towards Kevin, arms outstretched, as he walks away from her into his room.

"Have I done something wrong, my sweet sweet husband?" Sarah says, chasing after him. Steven now sits on the living room couch, ready to watch some TV. He reaches for the remote and knocks over his half filled glass of chocolate milk. The glass shatters on the hardwood floor.

"Steven? What was that?" Kevin asks, coming out of his room and walking towards the noise.

"Oh no," Sarah says, following close behind him.

Kevin and Sarah reach the living room.

"Go easy on him, honey. He didn't mean to," Sarah says into Kevin's ear.

Kevin closes his eyes and sighs, exasperated.

"What did I say about food in the living room?" Kevin says, a little too harshly.

Steven looks at the floor and doesn't answer.

"Just go upstairs while I clean this. There's glass everywhere."

Steven nods, darting out of the room and up the stairs.

“Don’t worry about it, baby! Accidents happen!” Sarah yells after Steven, before turning her attention to her husband.

“What is wrong with you?” Sarah says to Kevin, as though she is genuinely curious.

“Go easy on him,” a voice behind Sarah says.

“What the—” Sarah says, spinning around to face it as she jumps away from the voice. “Oh, it’s you.”

“I figured six months was plenty of alone time,” Iraevius says smiling, “although I did consider waiting longer. You were quite brisk with me, if you remember.”

Kevin, having picked up the larger glass pieces and wiping up most of the chocolate milk, leaves the room to fetch the vacuum.

“I remember.”

“Anything you want to say to me?”

“Nope.”

“Really? I—”

“Iraevius, I just want to be with my family.”

“So, you’ve enjoyed watching?”

“Yes! Well, kind of. I don’t know,” Sarah says. “It’s—”

“Wait, wait, wait, let me guess,” Iraevius interjects. “Frustrating, lonely, heartbreaking, but you still want to stay?”

Sarah looks at Iraevius annoyed. “Exactly. So, why don’t you just check back in a couple months. I’m sure your time would be better spent elsewhere.”

“Well, with the whole split consciousness thing—”

“I know Iraevius. It’s a figure of speech.”

“Ah, yes.”

Kevin reenters the room and begins vacuuming the smaller pieces of broken glass.

“I mean, if you're still content watching, I’ll leave you to it,” Iraevius says, speaking more loudly now to be heard over the sound of the vacuum.

“Obviously, I’m not content! I’ve been trapped in this house, talking to myself for months.”

“You’re free to leave the house, you know?”

“It's not like they can drive me places. I’ve tried. I just pass through the backseat when the car starts moving.”

“Hmm, I forgot about that,” Iraevius says, almost surprising himself. Kevin switches off the vacuum and retreats to his room.

“Check on our son you piece of shit!” Sarah calls after Kevin.

“Sarah, he’s doing his best.”

“Well his best isn’t good enough!” Sarah says as though she’s still speaking to Kevin.

“He’s improved a lot. He takes Steven to school, goes to work, makes meals. You can’t ask for much more at this point, honestly.”

“Ugh,” Sarah says, collapsing onto the living room floor. “I just want my life back, Iraevius.”

“I know.”

“Watching all this. Watching my family struggle because of me and not being able to help them, it’s torture.”

“That—”

“And then when something good happens! Like a month or two ago when Kevin finally made Steven special mac and cheese. I wanted to be the one to make it.”

“It’s—”

“And then! And then, I feel guilty for feeling jealous. Like what the fuck?” Sarah says, covering her eyes with her hands.

Iraevius sits down next to her.

“I don’t have anything to say that you’re gonna like.”

“I know,” Sarah says calmly. “I just had to tell someone who could actually hear me.”

“I’m always here.” There’s a long pause. Sarah stares at the ceiling while Iraevius plays with his cane.

“I’m gonna go check on Steven,” Sarah says, standing.

“Sure you won’t come with me?” Iraevius says looking up at her.

“What do you think?” Sarah says as she walks out of the living room and up the stairs.

“Well, just shout if you need me!” Iraevius yells after her before tapping his cane and disappearing.

* * * *

A year after her death, Sarah sits on the living room couch staring at an empty TV. It’s around four in the afternoon when the front door opens.

“Thank you so much,” says a voice that Sarah doesn’t recognize, a female voice.

“It’s really no trouble,” Kevin says, walking through the living room into the kitchen.

Sarah turns to see a young woman, maybe in her twenties, with long black hair follow closely behind him.

“My floors are filthy,” she says as Kevin rummages around a closet at the back of the kitchen.

“I bet they are,” Sarah says, standing behind the mystery woman now.

“Here it is!” Kevin says, triumphantly removing a small vacuum from the closet.

“You’re a lifesaver, Kevin,” the woman says, touching him on the shoulder as she takes the vacuum from him. “I’ll bring it in to work on Monday.”

“There’s no rush,” Kevin says, closing the closet.

“No rush,” Sarah says, rolling her eyes.

“What’s the rest of your day looking like,” the woman says, still not moving towards the door. Sarah makes a retching sound with her throat.

“Not much going on. Steven’s over with a friend tonight, so I’ll have to pick him up tomorrow.” Sarah hunches over, grasping one of kitchen stools, the retching intensifies.

“Well, I’m not doing much either if you wanna grab dinner or something?” Sarah stops and looks up at Kevin.

“I’d love to, but I’ve gotta stay available just in case Steven needs me. He doesn’t sleep out very often.”

“No worries,” the woman says, finally walking towards the door. “Some other time.”

“Some other time,” Kevin says, opening the door for her and closing it behind her. Sarah, still in the kitchen, now sits on the floor with her back resting against the bottom of the kitchen counter. Kevin slinks off into his room.

“Some other time,” Sarah mutters, leaning her head back against the counter.

* * * *

Another year has passed since Kevin lent Rachael his vacuum. She comes over from time to time, but nothing romantic has happened. Sarah sits on Steven's bed, thinking about Rachael, while Steven and Kevin play below her.

"Let me see the instructions again," Kevin says.

Steven connects two lime green Lego pieces to each other and then passes him the instructions. The pair sit on the floor of Steven's room, the pieces to Steven's new Lego set scattered all around them.

"What are we building again?" Kevin asks as he looks at the instructions, turning them upside down, then right side up and then upside down again.

"You know, Dad." Steven says, giggling at his Dad's antics.

"The Mystery Van."

"Machine!"

"Oh, right, right, right." Kevin hands the instructions back to Steven. "Maybe you should be the lead builder on this one, bud. Tell me what to do and I'll do it. No questions asked." Kevin salutes Steven who is engrossed in his work.

"It's not that complicated, Dad," Steven says, smiling

"It's not that complicated, Dad," Kevin repeats in a mocking tone.

The pair laugh as Steven continues to build and Kevin waits for his son to tell him what to do.

Sarah smiles painfully from her seat on Steven's bed.

"Can Dillion and Graham come over tomorrow, Dad?" Steven asks, not taking his eyes off of the Lego set.

"Am I not enough for you?" Kevin says.

“Nope,” Steven says, grinning.

“Well all right then. Just remember to tell Graham to take his shoes off. Last time he tracked dirt all over the house.”

“I will, I will.”

“Does the head builder require any refreshments?” Kevin asks as he stands up. “Your assistant will be having a bowl of cereal.”

“Frosted Flakes?”

“Raisin Bran.”

Steven looks somewhat disappointed and thinks for a moment.

“I’ll have some too. No milk, though.”

“You got it,” Kevin says, leaving the room.

“Good for you, Kev. Good for you,” Sarah says, watching him leave the room.

* * * *

It’s been three years since Sarah’s death. Steven and Kevin have just left for school and work. Sarah sits at the kitchen counter, and stares at the digital oven clock. It reads “8:01am.” Sarah stays like this for quite some time. After a while the clock reads “8:46am,” but she still doesn’t move. The oven reads, “9:31am.” Then, “11:27am.” Sarah continues to stare. At “12:01pm” Sarah gives up.

“Iraevius!”

Seconds later, cane in hand, Iraevius appears across from Sarah in front of the oven.

“This is no way to spend your time,” Iraevius says.

“I’ve gone on walks,” Sarah says. “I can’t smell the air, I can’t talk to my neighbors, I can’t even feel myself walking.”

“So...you stare at the oven instead?”

Sarah shoots Iraevius a dangerous look.

“Sorry, sorry.” Iraevius says, moving towards Sarah.

“I don’t know what to do,” Sarah says, resting her head on the counter top in between her hands.

“There are only so many options.” Iraevius sits down in the stool next to her.

“It was horrible seeing them struggle without me. But somehow it’s worse now! Steven has friends! Kevin is talking to people at work! I should be happy!”

“This situation—”

“But, I’m not! I’m angrier than ever. What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing.”

“I want them to be happy, but for them to be happy, they need to move on, and I don’t want them to move on, so I really don’t want them to be happy, do I? How can I not hate myself for that?”

“You can’t.”

“I can’t? Billions of years of wisdom and that’s what you come up with? Jesus.”

“I did warn you about staying.”

Sarah opens her mouth to argue but then thinks better of it.

“It’s not your fault,” Iraevius says, looking at the handle of his cane. “You’re not the first to choose watching.”

“I know, I know. You’ve seen it all before.”

“Just listen.” Iraevius says, Sarah falls silent. “Watching...it– it’s a natural choice to make, but it’s always the most painful.” Iraevius pauses, gathering his thoughts. “You get more

out of this life than those who just end it all immediately, or who stay down in the caves with me, but you also suffer the most. You remember Miss Jean Dori Flynn? She got out of here years ago. None of this living half a life stuff. Like ripping off a Band-Aid.” Iraevius looks over at Sarah, her head still in her hands, sorrow in his eyes. “To watch your life unfold without you is something I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.”

Sarah looks up at Iraevius.

“I was wrong, okay? I get that. You are necessary. This situation doesn’t have a happy ending.”

“I hate seeing you like this.”

Sarah stands up.

“Me too, Iraevius, me too! How could anyone possibly enjoy this!?” Sarah shouts, motioning to the world around her.

“Just come back with me. Let’s leave this place.”

“I. Will. Never.”

Iraevius stands too now, as Sarah gets more visibly upset.

“Sarah—”

“I’ll be here every day. For every birthday. Every promotion. Every girlfriend. I’ll watch it all.”

“But—”

“Even after Kevin’s remarried and Steven moves out, I’ll watch. I’ll watch until they’re both in the ground. Then, and only then, I’ll let you end me.”

“You’ll be miserable,” Iraevius says, shaking his head.

“I know.”

“Why?”

“BECAUSE THAT'S MY FAMILY!” Sarah screams, inches away from Iraevius’s face.

Iraevius takes a few steps back. He calmly looks up at Sarah.

“If that's what you want,” Iraevius says.

“Please just go,” Sarah says as she turns away from Iraevius towards the two, tall glass windows overlooking the backyard.

Iraevius nods and lifts his cane, thrusting it into Sarah’s back. Before she realizes what’s happened, her body shatters, the shards disappearing as they hit the ground.

He pauses briefly over where Sarah stood just seconds ago. Then, tapping his cane on the ground, he disappears in a cloud of smoke, emptying the house.