

"this is my mixed tape for her/it's like I wrote/every note/with my own fingers"

"Mrs. London," I say. "It's almost time to go."

"Yes, Emo."

She's distracted. A sudden flood of emotion courses through her. I monitor it. It's nothing I don't expect right now.

She's holding an object. An object from the past.

This object stirs old memories in her. Memories so ancient it seems as though they belong to someone else.

I can detect what they do to her. They make her sad— a distant but powerful sadness— and a little afraid. They make her feel a scattering of other emotions that humans know but haven't yet named. To her, they seem far away, strangely familiar yet vastly unknowable. Like stars.

Mrs. London stares out the apartment window at the fields across the road. There's nothing out there but dead dirt and dead clouds and, far away, the silhouettes of dead trees.

It's a dark day outside. Most days are dark. The clouds are black and ragged and they slowly move across the sky like mourners in a funeral procession. There's a light rain, a constant cold breeze, everything chilled and damp. Outside, the smooth asphalt street is streaked with black mud, and the clumps of dead, yellow grass are wet and glistening.

"What are you thinking about, Mrs. London? What did you find?"

I already know the answer to this question and nearly every other question I ask, but it's my job to see if Mrs. London can answer for herself.

"Something peaceful," Mrs. London says, not entirely to me but more to herself. She's talking about the emotions she's feeling— the unknowable ones.

She turns away from the window and holds the object up.

"Emo, would you load this, please?"

It's a thin polycarbonate plastic disc, used for digital optical data storage. Microscopic grooves lasered into the plastic make reflective rainbows on one side. The other side is matte silver and flaking.

An old recording unit, from the late 20th century. The surface of the silver side was once covered with words written in permanent marker, but the marker wasn't as permanent as it seemed and the words are only faint smudges now.

"I don't know if it's readable," Mrs. London says. "I heard they fall apart after only a few years, I can't believe this is still in one piece..."

"I can read it, Mrs. London."

Mrs. London found the CD in her old Box of Stuff earlier this morning when her personal items were being removed. Her Box of Stuff is almost as old as she is. Many elderly people have boxes of random personal things, reminders from when items were more often privately owned instead of collectively shared and rented. Most of the items are commercially worthless and antiquated. Their value lies only in memory.

Mrs. London moved the Box of Stuff in with her the day she was transferred to this apartment. Before that it had been in her basement for several decades, and before that a series of closets, and before that her memories are too scattered to be readable. The Box of Stuff lasted a lifetime with her, full of little odds and ends that had outlived any particular use except — once again— the memories they conjured. Art trinkets, concert tickets, old papers, small toys, and burned CDs like the one she'd just asked me to read. Humans care very much about their memories. It's understandable.

Mrs. London had just finished going through the Box of Stuff and agreed most of it could be thrown away. All except the disc. She'd put that aside, then slid the box over to the trash incinerator. I'd propped her emotions up as she pushed it down the chute. Her amygdala was a tight little wad of clay, sparkling with stress.

She was sad but thought she'd be sadder. Not just about the box, but about all of this. In many ways, that box was the last bit of Mrs. London's earthly self. She hadn't owned anything in decades. She didn't have anyone left— her children and grandchildren were all grown and busy achieving, and her husband and brothers and parents were long since retired.

"So much junk," she'd said to me after the incinerator beeped. "What was even the point?"

"It brought you happiness," I'd said to her. "That was its purpose. And it served its purpose well. That's why you held onto it for so long."

She'd shut the chute door and looked at the CD.

"Would you like that to be saved for your memorium?" I'd asked.

"Just a minute."

Mrs. London is very active and aware for a woman her age. I've very much enjoyed serving her. I've been uploaded into her and into her apartment for a year now, the final year required of an emotionally-minded omni-chat like myself.

Now the apartment is completely empty, ready for the next retiree to move in. The furniture will be printed, the appliances delivered and hooked to the cloud. Another emotionally-minded omni-chat will be uploaded to the apartment,

a virtual assistant to monitor and provide for the Retiree. And that person will begin their end-of-life journey.

The echoes on the bare floors make Mrs. London feel old and alone.

All she has left is this disc. This CD.

"Just take it to my eye and hold it up," I say.

Mrs. London does so, padding to the kitchen in her silver slippers. She's wearing her traveling robe, comfortable and cotton, white and blue.

She shows the rainbow side of the disc to the circular scanner on the wall in the kitchen, a black circle that she refers to as my eye.

She mutters.

"If this is what I think it is..."

I can read the disc easily. The laser grooves are intact. There are many interruptions, but I'm able to piece them together easily, matching them to songs in the cloud. The songs are almost as old as Mrs. London.

"It's a playlist, Mrs. London," I tell her. "A mix. Thirteen songs. Just like you thought."

"Can you play them?"

"The quality has degraded to the point where they would be unreadable by a laser. But yes, I'll identify and stream the files from the cloud."

Mrs. London doesn't answer me right away. I wait, monitoring her thoughts and body. She's looking at the CD, trying to decipher the smudged markings.

"I'm not scared," she says after a minute. "I'm excited."

She remembers where she got the disc. She remembers the specific songs on it, too. Not all, but most of them.

She's afraid of what they'll make her feel. These songs will give her strong recall of certain memories for a few moments. She's afraid the memories will be painful. Especially on this day.

But maybe, she feels, maybe they could also be good. A distraction. A pleasant reminder of long ago— a time of youth and of promise. A time that will need to be remembered today. A time from before her husband and children, who are much too painful to think of. They've already either left her, or will be left behind by this time tomorrow. But the memories attached to this disc are already abandoned long enough to be a comforting distraction.

"Do you want me to upload them into your port, Mrs. London? You will have to dispose of the CD itself before we leave. Unless you want it for your memorium, that is. And the nurses will be here in less than ten minutes."

"That's fine, Emo," says Mrs. London. "It's only a little thing. I can hold it. I'd like to keep it for now."

"Very well."

"Would you play me the songs?"

"All of them? I'm afraid we haven't the time..."

"Yes, but not all at once. Just one at a time for now. Start with the first one."

"Yes, Mrs. London."

The first track plays over the apartment's sound system. It's a five piece musical group—the frontman plays piano and has a high, nasally singing voice with a feminine, adolescent twinge to it. There are electric guitars and electric bass and drums made out of processed wood and polymer.

The singer is singing about the morning, about what he's given up. It is alternately loud and melancholy.

"Oh my God," says Mrs. London.

She leans on the wall. Her heartbeat is increasing. I can feel her emotions swelling, swirling about in her head like hornets.

She speaks a name.

As I mentioned, I've been with her for the past year, inside her head, feeling her every thought and move.

I've never heard her use or even think this particular name before. She's had no reason to.

The name produces another flood of emotions— more than I can calculate (the human mind is infinitely more complex than even omni-chats can decipher). But it nearly takes the strength out of Mrs. London's legs, and I have to boost her endorphins and control her breathing to keep her from swooning. It's a simple correction, but I'm not expecting it.

Mrs. London doesn't feel this way when she thinks of her retired husband, or her children, or her children's children, or her long-retired parents, or her recently-retired brothers. Those conjure a deep, calm ocean of sorrow. But this is different. This is a sudden, infinite longing. This is an old wound torn open.

Images fly across her mind's eye. A most profound and spectacular torrent of aching love and joy and pain and regret. It cuts through the strong current of anxiety that's been building in Mrs. London for the past few weeks and months. I'm efficient at managing anxiety, but this sudden surge is more than I can control. These memories haven't been thought of in a long time.

Mrs. London's eyes well up. Tears spill.

She whispers the name again.

"Luke."

The face appears.

It's an adolescent boy— he has long hair and a handsome, roguish smile. A typical American teenager of the 21st century's first decade, in the prime of his youth, smirking down at the world, hiding insecurity and fear. He's smirking down at Mrs. London. She's looking up at him. She is much younger in this memory— the same age as the boy.

She sees him hand her the brand new, shiny mix CD. The marker is fresh, tiny letters scrawled. A list of songs.

They're standing in a circle of stones, surrounded by brick buildings and trimmed, green lawns. There's a statue nearby— a bust of a great leader from long before even these two young people were born.

"Now you can, like, really know me, or whatever," the boy says.

"Mrs. London," I say. "I'm going to shut this off. But I will save the playlist. Would you like more endorphins?"

I cut the music and the echoes return, Mrs. London's breathing and the faint sound of rain.

"Not right now," Mrs. London says, finally, the surge leveling off. She wipes her face. "I'll want to listen to it on the way down to the epicity."

"Yes, Mrs. London, I will allow it for now."

Just then, someone knocks on the apartment door.

"Emo," says Mrs. London. "Where do you think I'll be tomorrow?"

"You'll be sleeping, Mrs. London."

She walks to the window again. The wide one at the front of her living room. Normally it would be covered with curtains or a view from the skydome. But Mrs. London set it to clear this morning, before all her things were moved out. She wanted to see the real world. Mrs. London is lucky— her window faces outward. The windows of many of the other apartments, facing inward, would show only walls and walkways.

She looks out at the black clouds and their solemn eastward procession.

"I'll be sleeping," she says, taking in the view. She's trying to find beauty in it all.

"Mrs. London, the nurses have arrived at the complex. I'm going to let them in."

"Emo, I've changed my mind. Could you play me the first song again?"

"But it will hurt you. Today of all days, I'm to keep your stress levels optimal."

"It doesn't matter. I'll be fine. It's good to remember, Emo. Especially on the last day of your life."

"Mrs. London, the nurses—"

"The old oak tree," Mrs. London says, firmly but not angrily, her override password. "I've earned three more minutes of peace before letting those silly witches in here."

I do as ordered.

The noises coming out of the sound system and into Mrs. London's mind bring more of those flashing surges of psychic pain. I'm able to anticipate them now, hold them back, steady them.

But Mrs. London wants to feel them. I can tell.

The intro is distorted guitar chops, almost sloppy. The song plays. Rock music, evolved over half a century at the time this song was released. Back then, youths used it as a primary driver of their culture, a main aspect of their identities. This type of music hasn't been even remotely relevant in over half a century. Youths nowadays wouldn't know how to process it, let alone be emotionally affected.

I compile the playlist, log the names of the artists. The titles of the songs.

This first one is by Jack's Mannequin, titled The Mixed Tape. Released at the dawn of the century, at the start of what came to be known as The Brightening, the very beginning of when humans and computers lived and worked together.

Mrs. London feels what the song gives her and I allow it at a responsible level. She is soon in the grip of a controlled weep. Nothing hysterical, just her sadness and fear and nostalgia leaking out. I am there with her. She weeps for many things. It is good to weep, sometimes. I let the tears rinse her mind.

The nurses wait patiently on the other side of the apartment door. They're used to this. Everyone wants one last minute to themselves. But if Mrs. London doesn't comply after the song is over, her verbal overrides will no longer work.

But for now, she listens. And I allow it.

I see into Mrs. London's mind as it burns with memory, so many images of the girl she once was. It's so long ago that it's as if she was another person entirely.

She WAS another person entirely. Back then, she wasn't Mrs. Elizabeth London. She had just begun to think of herself as "Liz" then, though that wasn't the name she was born with.

Memories this old are usually impossible to read unless brought to the surface directly. Mrs. London and I experience them together.

Eighty years ago. A year after this song was released for consumption.

The year 2006.

Once, Elizabeth London had been Amanda Drake.
{[Where are you now](#)}

**"and you know when it rains in this town/I get washed away
without a sound"**

Amanda's mind was made up.

Once at Eastern, she'd introduce herself to everyone as Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was a regal name. A majestic name. A name worth saying out loud.

Amanda's grandmother had been named Elizabeth.

There were pictures of her grandma in the dining room, dressed in white on her wedding day and looking like royalty. Her grandma had been young then. Long before she'd given birth to Amanda's mother, and even longer before Amanda herself had come squalling into the world eighteen years ago, on the day her parents had saddled her with a name she hated.

Her grandma had passed away in July. It was why there were pictures of her in the dining room. It was one of the reasons why Amanda had changed her hair. And her name.

Amanda would not look fondly upon the summer of 2006. She was glad it was ending. It had been full of changes, each one more intense than the last— graduation in May, her breakup with Luke at the beginning of June, her grandma's passing in July, and now the move to Eastern Michigan University at the end of August. Childhood was over. High school was over. Her first serious relationship was over. Her most beloved extended relative was gone.

But it didn't matter. Those moments had all belonged to Amanda.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, was brand new and ready to begin.

"Hey Amanda, why're you staring at your phone?" Amanda's brother Alton asked from the doorway.

Amanda turned and stared at him. He stared back.

"Go away."

She turned back to her laptop. Her cell phone lay next to it. The mix was almost done burning, the little progress bar on her laptop screen nearly filled, the CD tray whirring. She heard Alton trot away down the hall.

Soft rain tapped on the windowsill. It had rained all day— steamy late summer rain, dousing the humid suburbs in a refreshing drizzle. Amanda watched it and felt the butterflies dance in her belly. Everything felt light and heavy at the same time.

In only a few hours, she'd be at her new dorm. And to the people she would meet in those next few hours, she'd be known as Elizabeth.

But first, she had to finish saying goodbye to her old friends.

Amanda had been burning CDs since middle school. All her friends got mix CDs. She was (had been?) known for them around school. If you were friends with Amanda Drake, you got a burned mix CD for all sorts of occasions. Birthdays, anniversaries, prom, homecomings, holidays, the beginning of the year, the end of the year. She'd even given one to her favorite teacher, Mr. O'Dowd.

The previous May, on graduation day, she'd passed out her final mixes to all her friends, even to some she didn't consider close like Yolanda Brown from the volleyball team and Darcy Brossy from Mrs. Fike's photography class who'd bonded with Amanda over a liking of Aqua Teen Hunger Force and not much else.

Now she was making one final end-of-summer mix for each of her three best friends from elementary, middle and high school-- Gabrielle Gonzalez, Maisie Wright, and Holly Malkiewicz. All three were going to college out of state-- Gabrielle to Northwestern, Maisie to Arizona State, and Holly to Bowling Green State. In Ohio, of all places. Amanda planned to mail the CDs in advance and they'd be waiting in dormitory mailboxes just in time for her friends to arrive. A final goodbye from Amanda Drake.

Amanda reviewed the CD she'd made for Gabrielle, the last to be completed. The track listing was spelled out in sharpie pen on the moon-silver face of the CD, written in Amanda's precise, condensed text.

All her farewell mixes had the same opening song: *The Best of Me by The Starting Line*.

Then, on Gabrielle's, there was:

Motion City Soundtrack- The Future Freaks Me Out

Tegan and Sara- Speak Slow

AFI- The Leaving Song Pt 1

Avril Lavigne- Mobile

Green Day- Waiting

American Football- Never Meant

Michelle Branch- Breathe

The mix finished with some random stuff from their childhood-- Edwin McCain's I'll Be, Sixpence None the Richer's cover of Don't Dream It's Over by Crowded House, TLC's Waterfalls, which was the first song they'd ever talked about together in Mrs. Linebaugh's third grade class. Just little hits of nostalgia.

The mix concluded with the same song as the other two farewell mixes: *The Ghost of You by My Chemical Romance*.

Amanda's phone buzzed. It was Gabrielle with her new address.

What do you need it for?

It's a surprise, replied Amanda with a winky face.

Amanda scribbled the address down on a square manila envelope and inserted the CD. Sealed it with a lick. Done.

She heard rapidly approaching footsteps. Her brothers.

"Hey Amanda, you might not go today," blurted her brother Owen, appearing in the doorway with Alton.

Amanda wheeled around in her swivel chair.

"What? Go where?"

"Eastern," said Owen. "Duh."

Alton and Owen were each two years apart from Amanda— Alton two years older and Owen two years younger. They had, naturally, teased her mercilessly about her name change when she'd made the mistake of mentioning it in front of them earlier that week. Now they insisted on calling her Amanda, even when it was unnecessary. It didn't help, but she wouldn't have to deal with them much longer. She still thought of herself as Amanda. It would take practice to think of herself as Elizabeth.

"There's a teacher's strike, Amanda," Alton said, grinning. "Professors didn't like their contract, Amanda. It just started today, Amanda. Could go on for weeks, Amanda. So you won't start classes on time, most likely. Amanda."

"How am I just hearing this now?"

"Mom got an email like ten minutes ago, Amanda," said Owen. "So you might be off the hook, Amanda."

"Yeah, Amanda," said Alton. "Then weeks will turn into months and then before you know it you'll be back here, going to Schoolcraft like me."

"Actually, she can still go," said their father, appearing behind Amanda's brothers. "She's just moving into her dorm today."

"Unless she'd rather just stay here," said her mom, appearing next to her dad. "Which is also totally fine."

This Amanda hadn't anticipated. For a few seconds, she'd felt a little flutter of relief at the thought of staying home for another night or two. She'd been all psyched up to leave, prepared for it, and then for a few seconds, it seemed like it might've been all for nothing.

But now, the anxiety flooded back in. Anxiety about her roommates, her classes, her financial aid, being alone, being without Luke, being without her parents, being without her grandmother.

Her stuff was packed and piled behind in the center of her room in duffel bags and plastic tubs— clothes, bathroom items,

blankets, books, some small furniture, and, of course, her XL Pottery Barn storage trunk, which was packed full of CDs in jewel cases.

Her family stood in the doorway, waiting for her answer.

"Amanda's scared of leaving," said Owen. "That's why she's quiet."

"I'm not scared," said Amanda. "I'm excited."

That was what her grandmother had taught her to say whenever she felt nervous about doing something.

I'm not scared, I'm excited.

She thought about the summer, how many nights she'd cried herself to sleep alone in this room, how she'd wished the end of the summer would just come so she could move on and become someone else.

"I'm ready to go now," she said.

"Excellent," said her dad, clapping hands on each of her brothers' shoulders. "Gentlemen, why don't you assist your sister by moving all her crap down to the car."

"You mean Amanda's stuff?" asked Alton, but he stepped in and grabbed a bag from Amanda's pile and Owen wordlessly did the same. Her dad lifted a stack of plastic tubs full of towels and toiletries, and now the pile was already way smaller.

"Are you sure you're going to keep your hair that color?" asked her mother, standing off to the side.

"YES," Amanda said, more harshly than she meant to. "And it's not like I could change it right now anyway even if I wanted."

"Ok, ok..."

Amanda had changed her hair at the end of July, using a tutorial from a new free video site called YouTube. First she'd trimmed a few inches from her straight, brown, shoulder length hair. Then she'd dyed it all a luscious pink, Deep Rose from Garnier. She did all this without asking, just decided to go for it the week after her grandmother was buried. If she'd asked permission, she knew her mother would've objected and then she would've chickened out.

She'd almost been afraid to look in the mirror when she was finished, but the girl staring back at her was so pretty and so *adult*-looking that any self-doubt evaporated immediately. The pink didn't come out like it looked on the package, but it was outrageous in the best way, a blessed confirmation that she could, indeed, become a new person. The person staring back at her was both familiar and unfamiliar. She'd transformed herself.

Her mother was quietly appalled by the change, her dad liked it but kept it to himself when around her mother, and her

brothers teased her, braying how she looked like something from My Little Pony. She didn't care.

Her mother looked at the items left on Amanda's floor.

"Are you *sure* you want to leave," she said. "We can wait another day or even another week. The email said the strike might take awhile."

"I want to go, Mom," said Amanda. "If I don't do it now I'll just be nervous all over again in another day or week or whatever it is."

Her mother nodded sadly. Amanda knew her mother was just as nervous and emotional about her moving out as she was. But the summer needed to end.

Her father reappeared in the doorway.

"Let's get going," he said. "Your brothers will get that trunk. I'll get your random box."

He grabbed Amanda's Box of Stuff— a bunch of random collected items that held importance to her— and exited. The moving pile was almost gone, the bedroom floor almost empty.

"Are you sure you want to bring *all* of the CDs?" her mother asked, looking at the storage trunk. "You have your iPod now. Can you even lift it?"

"It has wheels," said Amanda. "And you said to make the dorm like home. The CDs make it home."

Her mother sighed.

"Well, you know you're always free to come back whenever you want, honey, even if it's just for a night."

"Thanks, Mom. I'm going to be fine. Really. And so are you."

She paused.

"And Grandma would want me to go today."

Her mother nodded softly.

"You're right," she said. "She would."

She bent, lifted a duffel bag off the floor, and then Amanda was alone.

She watched the soft rains tap against her windowsill, the warm little beads of water sliding down the glass. Beyond the glass were the branches of the old oak tree in the backyard. They were dark with rain and moving gently. Waving goodbye.

There were footsteps on the stairs. Her brothers, coming to get the trunk of CDs.

Amanda looked around the room, at the pictures on the wall and the bed and the shelves and the closet. For the first time, it all looked like someone else's. A little girl who no longer existed.

"I'm not scared," she said to herself. "I'm excited."
([just take a chance somehow](#))

"i've been waiting but oh tonight/this one last try/goes on and on and on"

The nurses wear robes that cover their entire bodies except their faces. One nurse is dressed in black. This is Nurse Hamilton. The other is dressed in white. This is Nurse Burke. As Mrs. London opens the door, they both greet her with warm smiles.

"Hello Mrs. London," they say together. "So nice to see you again."

"Likewise," says Mrs. London, though she isn't pleased to see them at all. "Come in."

"I hope you haven't been bothered by this chill," says Nurse Burke. "Did the move go all right?"

"Yes," says Mrs. London.

"Nurse Burke has agreed that we should go live for today's interactions," says Nurse Hamilton. "We always broadcast Welcome Home meetings. Very viral, of course. Tens of thousands of hearts given. Do you consent?"

"Do I have a choice?" Mrs. London asks.

"We'd really appreciate it," Nurse Hamilton responds in a tone that says Mrs. London doesn't.

Mrs. London nods grimly and the nurses both click their heels together. This activates their cloud-minds and they are now recording their experiences to the cloud for anyone to view. Mrs. London has none of these capabilities, though she could have had them installed. She chose not to. She likes herself without them.

Mrs. London is feeling very scared and very irritated right now. The nurses are only here for the thinnest of posterity— to add a veil of human touch to the process. But they are focused on achievement like everyone else, and this makes Mrs. London very irritated.

"Would you mind if I do the intro?" Nurse Hamilton asks Nurse Burke.

"You may. I did the last one."

Nurse Hamilton speaks. Her speech is very animated, her demeanor overly friendly and outgoing, almost manic.

"Hello, world," she says loudly. "Nurse Burke and I are currently in the humble surface dwelling of Elizabeth London, born Amanda Drake, a centurion who as of today will be judged for Bestowment! Hello, Mrs. London."

Mrs. London blinks and nods at Nurse Hamilton.

"Mrs. London, as of today-- June the 18th, 2088-- you've now completed one hundred years of life, the maximum lifespan allowed for any citizen not Bestowed. Therefore, today you will

be transferred and processed to the epicity. And a judgement will be made!"

Nurse Burke cuts in.

"You know, Mrs. London is total natty," she says. "No modifications whatsoever! Not even an insta-thought! Only her cloud-chip with the emo attached. That is all she has."

"Well, someone certainly loved the surface," says Nurse Hamilton and the two of them laugh loudly. Mrs. London doesn't, standing there with her arms crossed.

"Nurse Burke, won't you continue the proceedings?" Nurse Hamilton says.

"Of course," says Nurse Burke. To Mrs. London, she says, "We're here to begin your final journey. Once back in civilization, you'll be taken via Cyclone all the way to the epicity. You'll take the Yellow Line, and you'll be dropped off at Welcome Home."

Mrs. London stands there with her arms crossed. I stand by, observing and monitoring. Mrs. London is nervous, but she's also very angry and the anger is overshadowing any nerves. She does not like these two women. She would much rather do this without them. She hates their personas, their overly-exaggerated facial expressions, their loud voices, and their frenzied movements—all desperate pleas for attention from the cloud.

"As I'm sure you're aware, your level of life achievement is assessed upon arrival at Welcome Home," says Nurse Hamilton. "Once you get to the epicity, you will be processed and your life-data analyzed. If you have achieved above the current baseline, you will be considered for Bestowment. If not, it will be declared your Deathday and you will be retired, and you will receive an exhibit at your district's memorium."

"And yes" Nurse Hamilton adds, winking. "We DO consider EVERYONE for Bestowment."

"To live forever," says Mrs. London.

Nurse Hamilton looks at Nurse Burke, who nods.

"Essentially, yes," says Nurse Burke. "As long as there is a cloud, the Bestowed will live."

Nerves and fear are replacing the anger in Mrs. London's mind. I have to steady her a bit. No panic. Mrs. London allows the anger to swell again, drowning the nerves and fear which are harder to feel than the anger.

"We all know that I'm going to die today," says Mrs. London.

"Oh, we don't know *that*," says Nurse Hamilton a little too loudly. "We consider EVERYONE."

Nurse Burke puts a hand on Mrs. London's arm. Mrs. London wants to slap her away, but doesn't.

"Bestowment is not common, it's true," says Nurse Burke. "Fewer than one in a hundred thousand citizens are Bestowed. But I promise you, we *consider* EVERYONE."

Mrs. London doesn't say anything, just looks down at Nurse Burke's hand. Inside, she is fuming. I calm her. This is normal.

Nurse Burke keeps her hand on Mrs. London's arm, and looks her in the eyes. In her mind, she no doubt assumes she is being comforting and gentle. In Mrs. London's mind, she appears totally insane.

"If you are selected for retirement, you'll be transferred to the Nightrooms," she says. "There, you may have some of your favorite memories extracted to be displayed in your memorium exhibit for future generations to look over and emotionalize with. So even if you are not Bestowed, you will still live on."

"Sparkle and shine," says Nurse Hamilton solemnly. "Sparkle and shine in eternity."

Nurse Burke continues.

"As I'm sure your emo has explained, the Nightroom is designed to look like your most remembered personal bedroom."

"For comfort," says Nurse Hamilton.

"A good place to fall asleep," says Nurse Burke. "You will be given a meal of your choosing, and a quiet evening of rest. You may go to bed whenever it is convenient. Then, during the night, at a completely randomly chosen time, the ventilation system will gradually replace the oxygen in your room with nitrogen."

"No pain, no suffering," says Nurse Hamilton. "Humanity til the end."

"*Completely* painless," says Nurse Burke. "From your perspective, even if you are still awake at the time of the ventilation change, you will simply fall asleep. Your body will be cremated as is customary, and the ashes added to an urn of your choosing, to be placed in your memorium."

"Will your family be joining us at the Cyclone terminal?" Nurse Hamilton asks.

"I believe so," says Mrs. London. "They're sending projections."

"Oh, wonderful," says Nurse Burke. "So many goodbyes, I may even shed tears."

"Same," says Nurse Hamilton. "In fact, I'm certain I will."

"What is this?" Nurse Burke asks, pointing to the disc in Mrs. London's hand.

"Oh my God," says Nurse Hamilton. "It's a CD! I've seen these before! This holds recorded music! What era is it from?"

"2000s."

"80 years ago," says Nurse Hamilton, awe in her voice. "That is truly something. Will you be putting it in the incinerator before we go?"

"I'm taking it with me," says Mrs. London. "Emo is playing it for me."

"Your emo is playing it?"

"On the way down, yes."

The nurses look perplexed at this, but neither of them objects.

"Well," says Nurse Burke. "That will conclude our proceedings. Would you like our help in disconnecting your emo from the apartment and exclusively into your cloud-chip?"

The nurses have Mrs. London turn off the apartment by reciting a series of codewords. I stop being aware of the apartment, my eye going dark. I'm now confined to the small cloud-chip in Mrs. London's wrist and brain. I am still with her, feeling her heartbeat and reading her thoughts as they flit by, feeling her emotions and doing my best to regulate them by electrical impulse.

The four of us exit Mrs. London's apartment to the waiting transportation— a black, four-wheeled electric magna-transport. Outside, it is cold and wet. Mrs. London shivers.

"Every time I come to the surface, I'm reminded of how fortunate we are to have what we have," says Nurse Hamilton as they walk. "They say that the climate wars made living on the surface all but impossible, but here we are. Why did you decide to live out your centurion year in this surface complex, Mrs. London?"

Mrs. London looks up. The wind smells sweet, despite the black clouds and the chill. Mrs. London inhales it and is thankful.

"I get to breathe real air," she says. "And I get to see the sky."

The nurses pause and both of them get tears in their eyes. They look at each other meaningfully.

"Sparkle and shine," they say together.

The magna-road winds away from the complex into the muddy fields, a black ribbon under an iron dome. The rain doesn't fall so much as mist.

Inside the magna it's totally silent, and the nurses continue asking Mrs. London questions about herself, still streaming their sight live in the cloud. Mrs. London answers them, clutching the CD in her hands.

Up ahead, a tongue of road sticks up at an angle, a doorway slides open.

The magna enters.

Large metal doors slide shut behind us soundlessly, and we begin our descent to the new world.

White lights pass over. We're in a narrow corridor, smoothly gliding. The magna's rubber wheels, meant for the surface, retract into the body and the magnetics take over. It is silent, and we accelerate, and the lights fly by above us so fast they turn into a bright white line.

Mrs. London holds the CD in her hands. Both of us contain her emotions. She thinks of the boy— Luke. She wonders why she hasn't thought of him in so long. Though the memories surface great traumas in her psyche, I allow them. If she thinks of her retired husband, of her children, she may get even more emotional. Thinking of the boy, she is stable. This boy reminds her of being young. It is good to remember being young on your Deathday.

"I'm not scared," Mrs. London thinks. "I'm excited."

Then, the tunnel ends and it's as if midday has broken upon us.

The sky is so blue that Mrs. London gasps. She hasn't seen sky this blue in a year. The spaces surrounding the transport road are wide, and they stretch to distant, beautiful horizons, so bright they seem to be glowing. Buildings and houses and grass and trees sprout everywhere under friendly sunshine. It is an idyllic little town, full of green lawns and picket fences and beautiful houses and churches and stores and places to eat and visit.

We head for the Cyclone— the bloodstream of modern civilization. It goes everywhere in the world, a hypersonic series of magna-trains always coming and going. It's located in a stately building of glittering white marble, located at the very center of town.

We disembark from the mobile transport and make our way across a sunny park.

There are no people visible and the town looks deserted. But it isn't. Inside every building are citizens of all kinds, hooked up to the cloud and desperately trying to go viral. Going viral is the first step of being Bestowed. The more people aware of your existence, the better.

The Cyclone track is the color of a school bus and it stretches off to large openings in the sky to the north and south. Mrs. London will be heading south, to the main epicity, the largest city in the world, the core of civilization.

Outside the Cyclone terminal stand holograms of Mrs. London's family. Her two daughters and her granddaughter have shown up to see her off.

Mrs. London's daughters smile as we walk up.

"Happy birthday, Mom," they say.

"So nice of you to be here," says Mrs. London, coolly. She refuses to get emotional for them. She is angry at them for what they have become. She is disappointed in what the world has done to them. What they have let it do to them.

"Love you, Mom," says Bella, Mrs. London's oldest daughter. "I'm so glad we could fit you into our countdowns."

"I wish you would've come lived with us," says Olivia, her other daughter. "At least Dad had the sense to come live with us before he went."

"I was fine where I was," says Mrs. London. She remembers that. Only a few years ago. She was there for it. She knew then that she would spend her last year on the surface.

"Seniors go viral every day," says Bella. "You would've had a shot."

"I don't want one."

"Grandma, we watched a movie in humanity class today," her granddaughter Avalyn announces loudly, butting in. "From your era."

Mrs. London's demeanor softens a bit. She loves Avalyn, even if Avalyn doesn't think of her that often. Avalyn reminds her of someone, someone who's been gone a long time.

"What movie?"

"The Breakfast Club. It's a hundred years old!"

"103 to be exact," says Bella, Avalyn's mother. "And that was right before your grandma's time, actually. She wasn't born until three years after it was released!"

"I shed tears," says Avalyn proudly. "I shed tears *first* in my class. And it was documented. Ninety thousand hearts I got! Everyone said I sparkle and shine!"

"Yes, they did," says Bella, proudly.

"Does that mean you liked it?" Mrs. London asks. "The movie?"

"It means I'm more empathetic than everyone else in my class," says Avalyn. "That's high visibility!"

"Did you enjoy it, though?" Mrs. London asks. "The movie?" Avalyn shrugs.

"When did you shed tears?" Mrs. London asks. "At what part?"

"At the end. When the bad boy kisses the pink girl at the end. When the song about not forgetting plays. They updated the song for maximum emotional effect!"

Mrs. London is remembering her own schooling. The mix CD has put her back in that mindset. It's a good mindset for her today. All her memories, all the stress and turmoil of her

married adult years, of her relationship with her daughters, are pushed into the background. This is good.

"School was so different back then," says Mrs. London. "In the movie. Don't you think?"

Avalyn nods.

"They didn't even have the cloud. But they seemed more freely. There was no countdown."

"Yes, there was," says Bella. "They just didn't know it."

"There was no BESTOWMENT back then," says Olivia.

"You and your countdowns and your bestowments," says Mrs. London, shaking her head. "That's why I stayed up where I was. A countdown to death or immortality. Ridiculous."

"We don't have much time, Mom."

"You're pushing seventy and you look forty," says Mrs. London. "Your sister just had a perfectly healthy child at fifty-eight. I'm one hundred today and I look seventy. I think we're doing just fine."

"What's that?"

Bella points to the CD in Mrs. London's hands.

"An old mix from college," says Mrs. London. "Emo uploaded it and I'm listening to it. I figure it will be good entertainment for the ride down."

"What kind of music?"

"Emo music," says Mrs. London and Avalyn laughs, thinking Mrs. London is making a joke.

"Can you take that with you?" Bella asks.

She looks at the nurses, who are standing off to the side with their hands folded and heads bowed.

"She may keep it," says Nurse Burke. "It's no problem, and it's important to her."

"I've decided I want it added to my memorium," says Mrs. London. "With the urn and all the other things Arnold and I picked."

"Why?"

"Because it's the last thing that belongs to me."

"Where did you get it?"

"I got it from a friend in college," says Mrs. London, and I can see why Mrs. London doesn't want to tell her daughters about her first boyfriend. They would consider it an insult to their father's memory.

Bella holds out her hand.

"I'll take it. I'll make sure it gets put in your memorium."

"No," says Ms. London. "I'll leave it in the Nightroom."

"Grandma, do you have an emo?" Avalyn wants to know. "Even though you lived on the surface?"

"I have Emo," Miss London says, holding up her wrist with the chip in it.

"You have AN emo, Mom," says Olivia.

"People name their emos," says Avalyn. "When I get one I'm going to name her Sarah. It's an old fashioned name. It means, 'princess'. Did you name yours?"

"I just call him Emo," says Mrs. London.

"Do you like him? Cause I have emos at school but they're not always nice."

"He looks after me," says Mrs. London. "I'd never had one before him. They gave him to me last year. He makes sure I stay calm and makes sure my health doesn't get too off kilter before the epicity decides to kill me."

"Mom," says Bella, rolling her eyes.

There is a rush of sweet wind. Leaves blow across the platform.

The Cyclone is here. It hurtles in from the northern tunnel in the sky, coasting to a smooth stop at the terminal. It's made of long, sleek train cars, all colored silver. It's smooth and fast, so quick Mrs. London can't see it move. One moment the track is empty and the next it's occupied.

"Mom, can I go on holodream when we finish saying goodbye to grandma?" Avalyn asks.

Mrs. London doesn't seem to feel much sorrow or regret. She's mostly irritated at this whole process, and quite afraid. But she is also quietly disappointed in her daughters, who are focused on themselves and their careers. She still loves them, but gave up on that meaning anything years ago. Even before her husband was retired.

"You picked a good urn," says Olivia. "You're going to be right next to Dad. And your parents and brothers and their families are the next memorium over."

"That's great," says Mrs. London.

The Cyclone door slides open.

"We'll see you in the cloud, Mom," says Bella.

"Oh, sparkle and shine!" cries Nurse Burke. Tears are rolling down her face.

"My eyes are sweaty," whimpers Nurse Hamilton, who also has tears.

"I'm not crying, you're crying," shrieks Nurse Burke.

"Love you, Mom," says Olivia.

The tears come. Everyone but Mrs. London is weeping, including Avalyn who doesn't appear to understand why this is happening but doesn't want to be left out.

Mrs. London steps into the Cyclone.

Everyone wails and waves, wishing her well.

The door slides shut and it's dark and Mrs. London is alone with me again.

The interior of the Cyclone chamber is a dim compartment--four seats. They are the color of steel, and made of soft fabric. It smells pleasant in here. Mrs. London's heart beats fast but I don't let her body lead her mind to panic. She is stable.

Mrs. London takes a seat.

"Emo?" she says.

"Yes, Mrs. London."

"Would you play the next two songs on the mix?"

(in the comfort and the fear)

"just maybe you need this and I didn't mean to lead you on"

Liz was on a walk with her earbuds blaring when she saw him.

It was near the MLK memorial on south campus, just across Washtenaw Ave. from the big phallic Ypsilanti water tower everyone called The Brick Dick. A large bronze bust of Martin Luther King, Jr. stood in a courtyard encircled by a squat, brick wall.

Liz recognized him instantly. Even without his hair.

It was Luke.

He was on a skateboard and alone. He had a backpack on. His hair was short now. Very short. When they'd dated, he'd had bushy, shoulder-length hair. He'd buzzed it all off.

His clothes were the same. The same red and black flannel, even in this late summer heat. The baggy shorts. The untied shoes. The hat. The long arms, the way he held himself.

It was him.

She froze.

For a moment Liz thought about not saying anything and just walking past. But then he turned and saw her. Their eyes locked. There was no hesitation on his part.

He waved. Like she was a casual friend he hadn't expected to run into. Like the break-up in June hadn't happened. Like she was just some girl he'd gone to high school with and they just hadn't seen each other since the spring prior and everything was normal.

She waved back, almost involuntarily. He came skating over. Her heart fluttered as she paused her iPod and removed her earbuds.

They met right in front of MLK's stern bronze face.

"I almost didn't recognize you," were Luke's first words.

"You either," lied Liz. "You cut your hair."

"So did you," said Luke. "And added pink."

Oh God. He didn't like it. It was hideous. *She* was hideous. She'd known this would happen— this was why she was alone now.

"What's wrong with it?" Liz blurted.

"Nothing," said Luke. "Just, you know, observing."

"Oh."

It was Monday, September 4th. Labor Day. There were more protests and some holiday celebrations down at the new Student Center. Campus was busy, but not as busy as Liz had always imagined it would be. It had been a week since she'd moved in.

The teacher strike was still going strong. No classes thus far. Every morning Liz woke up and checked her student email to find more messages requesting support for the staff and their

noble cause. Once she'd gone with her roommates and stood around while teachers picketed in the parking lots, but they hadn't stayed long. Liz found the whole process boring— it seemed all anyone did was stand around and talk. She knew it was selfish, but she found herself wishing they'd just wrap it up so everyone could get started.

She ate in the cafeteria, popcorn shrimp and cereal cups and fountain drinks. She made a trip to all her classrooms so she'd know where to go once the strike was finished. She'd unpacked and made her dorm room like home. She'd talked with her parents on the phone a few times.

She'd introduced herself to everyone as Liz, as planned, and her roommates knew her as Liz. Her roommate Danielle complained about her boyfriend and his ROTC schedule. Her roommate Keisha kept to herself. Her roommate Jackie helped Liz set up her computer and drove her to Meijer for groceries.

She'd signed up for something called Facebook. Danielle had told her about it. It was like Myspace but more exclusive— you had to have a college email to get a profile— and it shocked Liz how quickly she'd found herself neglecting her Myspace profile in favor of her Facebook. She found kids from every year of her life on Facebook and friended them, including Gabrielle and Holly and Maisie. She set up her profile with a bio and took a selfie with Photobooth and made it her profile picture, showing off her new short, pink hair. She'd initially set the profile name as Amanda Drake but as soon as she realized she could choose any name she wanted, she set it to Elizabeth Drake.

It wasn't long after that, checking Facebook multiple times a day and seeing that name over her profile picture, that Amanda finally started thinking of herself as Liz.

She was even getting used to being single and enjoying it. She'd gotten a decent share of male attention thus far— compliments on her hair, mostly, also numerous stares and glances and a few guys that dared to spark conversation, but nothing out of line and nothing that she hadn't experienced in high school. The attention was somewhat gratifying and a welcome distraction, even when it was coming from boys (and some men) she'd never consider.

But still, she thought of Luke. She thought of lying in bed with him, holding each other. She hugged her pillow as she fell asleep, pretending it was him.

Now, all of a sudden, here he was again. Right in front of her. She could smell him. Other than his new short hair, this was the boy she'd spent the prior year and a half with.

"What inspired it?" Luke asked.

"What?"

"The hair change. The pink."

"My grandma died in July," Liz said, having imagined this moment many times. She'd always pictured Luke hearing this news, part of her hoping he'd break down and cry and be filled with regret because he'd left her to deal with all of it by herself.

But he didn't, just nodded solemnly, and the moment was over.

"Yeah, I heard about that," he told her. "Sorry."

"It felt like I had to," Liz continued. "My hair, I mean. Like, you know, change a part of myself. To put that past me."

"I get it."

Luke didn't say anything else, just stood there with one foot on the skateboard and the other on the sidewalk. He looked at her. He always used to do this— let conversations just hang. At first Liz had thought it was the cutest, most confident thing in the world but in the final months of their relationship it had made her want to scream in his face.

"So what are you doing here?" Liz asked.

Luke pointed as another boy walked out of Ford Hall's southeastern doors. The boy waved, then stopped and looked down at his phone, texting frantically about something.

Liz recognized him. It was Arnold London. He had gone to high school with her and Luke. He'd played baseball, but other than that Liz didn't know anything about him.

"Just making sure Arnold gets in all right," said Luke. "He's commuting and wanted to come see everything."

"You know him now?"

"Yeah, we sort of bonded over the summer. Spent most of it hanging out. He got me back into skating."

"I didn't know he skated."

"Yeah, he does. I figured I'm not going to be seeing him much once I move, tho, so I figured I'd hang out today."

Liz's blood ran cold.

"You're moving?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"End of the month probably."

"Where?"

"Chicago."

"Why?"

"I dunno. It's not like I'm going to school anywhere. Might as well go somewhere. Just want to see, like, what there is."

Liz held what she hoped was a plain expression but inside she felt a dropping sensation. This meant Luke would be really gone. He'd get with other girls, if he hadn't already. Oh, God, had he met other girls over the summer? Almost certainly. Liz

had sequestered herself in her parents' house, texting but not really hanging out with anyone. She'd strung along a few guys on Myspace for the validation but other than that, nothing. She'd been too numb, too stressed. Her first post-high school summer, completely wasted.

"Oh," was all she said. "Huh."

"What's he doing?" Luke asked, looking at Arnold who was still texting over by the Ford Hall doors.

Liz was about to say she didn't know but then Luke casually pulled out a cigarette and put it between his lips. Liz was stunned.

"You smoke now?"

"Yeah."

"Did Arnold get you into that, too?"

"Kind of," said Luke, pulling out a lighter. He struck it and lit the cigarette and inhaled. Liz expected him to have a coughing fit but he didn't, just held the smoke in and looked at her, then blew it out.

"Why'd you move in if there's a strike?" he said.

"Arnold's, like, just chilling until he gets the all-clear email. Not even worrying about it. It's like an extension of summer vacation."

"Well, it could end tomorrow," said Liz, realizing that the reason she wanted classes to start so bad was that it would mark an official, final end to the summer. "And I wanted to. I wanted to see my dorm and move in and-- why are you smoking?"

"Cause I want to. It's relaxing."

Luke ashed on the sidewalk, blew another healthy plume. It smelled like the band shows they used to go to together. Liz was furious at how all this was making her feel. She was furious at how un-unhappy he seemed. How casual. How unemotional.

"Why don't you go home, then?" he asked her.

"What?"

"Like, if there's no classes. You moved in, now go back home."

"Because it could end tomorrow."

"What could?"

"The *teacher's strike*. And I want to hang out here and get used to it."

"Oh," said Luke. "Where you living again?"

"Downing."

"Sweet."

He nodded, ashed again, blew more smoke. It wafted into Liz's face.

She glared at him. This was one of the things that had always happened. His fucking casualness. His fucking inability

to be mature, to just be in the present fucking moment for one fucking second, making her explain things multiple fucking times. Old hot feelings of stress and frustration bubbled up in her, swirling with heartache.

"So you're smoking now," said Liz. "And you're moving to Chicago at the end of the month."

"Yeah."

"With who?"

"Don't know, I'm looking for roommates right now. I want to maybe join another band. It's been a long time since I was in Social Distance."

"That doesn't sound responsible."

"Maybe, but it's better than racking up tens of thousands of dollars in student debt at a degree mill for no reason."

It was like they hadn't even broken up. This was exactly what it had been like back in May, right around graduation.

Liz was about to ask why Luke always acted like he had such contempt for her, but just then, Arnold came running over.

"Dude, did you hear The Crocodile Hunter died?" Arnold exclaimed.

"What?" said Luke. "When?"

Liz was immediately taken. The argument was temporarily muted.

"No," she said. "How?"

"Did he finally get eaten?" Luke asked.

"Stingray," said Arnold. "I was just texting Gabe about it."

"Wait, he actually got eaten by a *stingray*?" Luke asked, amazed.

"No, he got stung by one. In the heart."

"How the hell did he get stung in the heart?"

"He was swimming with one in Australia and it just stabbed him in the fucking heart. They say he probably startled it."

"When did it happen?" Liz asked.

"Today. Gabe just told me."

There was a small silence as everyone took this news in. The Crocodile Hunter. Someone everyone knew but just always assumed would be around forever. Now he was gone.

Then, to Liz's great surprise, her roommate Danielle appeared beside her.

"My boobs are sweaty as hell," she said to Liz, not acknowledging the boys and adjusting her tank top. "Fuck exercise. Can it be fall yet?"

"The Crocodile Hunter died," said Liz.

"Oh my God," said Danielle, genuine shock on her face. "Did he get eaten?"

"He got stabbed in the heart by a stingray," said Luke.

"I think he probably would've expected it," said Arnold.
"Like, for it to go this way, I mean. At least partially."

"I mean, I'm not surprised," said Danielle. "I bet if you'd told him he was about to die that way, he would've probably still been like, 'Yeah, let's fuckin go, mate!'"

Liz felt a strange sorrow mixed in with her cauldron of anger and anxiety and fraught residual love for Luke. It was probably just the timing-- she'd never thought much about Steve Irwin, but she'd known him and watched his shows. He'd always just sort of been there. Now he wasn't, and there was a strange, yawning sorrow there.

"Wow, I'm like, surprised at how much I'm going to miss him," she said. She looked at Luke, at the new Luke, and felt her throat fattening.

"I know, right?" said Danielle. "It's like Mr. Rogers dying again or something."

"Who are you anyway?" Luke asked.

"She's my roommate," said Liz. "One of them."

"Who are you anyway?" Danielle asked Luke.

"I'm Luke," said Luke.

"My ex," said Liz, trying to sound like she didn't care. She'd never said it out loud, called him that, and now here she was, right in front of him, saying it. Her throat was tightening, and she could feel her eyes getting watery. What the fuck was the matter with her?

"You're her ex?" Danielle asked, and Liz didn't like the way she was staring into Luke's eyes, and she really didn't like the way Luke was smoking his cigarette casually like he was so fucking cool and staring right back at Danielle.

"Yeah," said Luke. "Has she told you all about me?"

"A little," said Danielle, and Liz was very grateful to her for not saying anything more. "I mean, I just met her a week ago."

Luke didn't say anything, just ashed his cigarette. Liz didn't say anything, either.

Fortunately, Arnold saved the moment.

"I didn't know you were going here," he said to Liz. "You been to the new Student Center yet?"

She cleared her throat.

"No, I'm just wandering around listening to New Found Glory."

"Where you living?"

"Downing."

"Me too," said Arnold. "What were you guys talking about?"

"The new My Chem," said Luke before Liz could answer.
"Amanda says there's a new My Chem album coming out in October."

"Oh yeah," said Arnold. "I saw them do the title song on the VMA's, like last week or something. It was really fucking good, actually."

"Wait," said Danielle, confused. "Who's Amanda?"

"Me," said Liz. "My real name's Amanda. I'm going by Liz now in honor of my grandma. I don't think I told you that."

"Wait," said Luke. "You changed your name, too?"

"Yeah."

"So you're Elizabeth now."

"Liz," said Liz. "Yeah."

"You changed your hair and your name," said Luke. He said the name again, trying it out. "Liz. You're Liz now."

"Yeah."

"You did it. Just like you said that one time."

"Yeah," said Liz, knowing exactly what he was talking about and hating it. He thought he was so fucking cool with his fucking cigarette and his skateboard and she wanted to punch him in his fucking face.

"Liz and Luke. You should've done it a year and a half ago. Liz and Luke sounds way better than Amanda and Luke."

Liz nodded and looked into the distance, holding in her emotions. She wanted this moment to end, to go back to her dorm room.

"Are you all right?" Arnold asked.

Liz swallowed, blinked.

"I'm just really gonna miss the fucking Crocodile Hunter," she muttered.

She felt Luke looking at her, and from the corner of her eye she thought his mask of casual cool slipped for a second to reveal a tender concern. But it was probably just in her head.

Danielle spoke again.

"Yeah, God, I can't believe the fucking Crocodile Hunter is dead. Stabbed in the heart by a goddamn stingray. I'll bet that stingray feels like shit now."

"I doubt they have the cognitive capacity to feel like shit," said Luke.

"I saw a cartoon of a stringray earlier," said Arnold. "And it was all sad and being like, 'Sorry, Steve, I didn't know it was you.'"

"That's the gayest shit I've ever heard," said Danielle.

Luke stared at Danielle.

"I like this girl," he said.

Liz felt a searing flash of jealousy and wished she hadn't. She discreetly wiped her cheek with her wrist-sleeve, swallowed again and felt her throat loosening. The moment had passed.

"Let's go to the new Student Center," Arnold said to Luke. "There's some shindig going on there, like for Labor Day. We can walk around and shit."

"K," said Luke.

He pitched his cigarette and looked at Liz.

"Do you have the same phone number?"

"Uh, yeah," she said, heart fluttering. "Why?"

"Is it cool if I call later? I've been meaning to give you something but I don't have it right now."

"Sure," said Liz. "Yeah."

She wiped her cheek again.

"Great. Later."

"Sorry about the Crocodile Hunter," Arnold said to Liz. "I wouldn't have told you if I'd known you'd be upset."

"It's fine."

They walked away, leaving Danielle and Liz in front of MLK's stern bronze face.

Danielle watched them go.

"You all right?" she asked Liz when they were gone. "You looked like you needed assistance."

(though you swear that you are true)

"you're in the middle of the ride/everything will be just fine"

The Cyclone travels at thousands of feet per second through the earth's crust. Digital view interfaces wheel overhead—mountains, plains, starscapes and dreamscapes. There are castles, harbors, cities, towns, rivers and deserts. It's as if we're traveling across the earth's countryside before the climate wars, the scenery changing every five minutes or so, different bountiful sights fading in and out.

Mrs. London is quiet. She feels that low-burning anxiety, that grey tension that tingles at the edges of a person's spirit. She's not thinking about the future. I keep her mellow. She holds the CD, clutches it.

"Play me the next song on the mix, Emo," she says.

I do. It calms her.

I offer her other things— articles of interest, current events, other entertainments, nostalgia triggers. Things a woman her age would find engaging. Things that would take her mind off what's troubling her. She declines them all.

"Just the songs," she tells me. She wants to think about the boy. Luke.

We slow to a stop, our first terminal. Mrs. London's first fellow passenger.

The terminal is on the edge of a massive cornfield. Corn stalks as far as the eye can see. The skydome is blue, showing soft twilight. A dirt road stretches off into the west.

We're here to pick up a man named Rudy Cuervo.

Rudy is a jolly, skinny man in his fifties. Mrs. London thinks the word 'beanpole' upon her first sight of him. It's a word her grandma used to use to describe tall, skinny people. She used that word to describe the boy, Luke.

Rudy is indeed tall and skinny and lanky, his limbs seeming to flop about as he moves across the platform, giving greetings and goodbyes. He's got short, dark hair that he keeps smoothing back with his hand, and locks of it fall on his forehead boyishly. His skin is sun-browned and he has a prominent beak of a nose, though his face is friendly and handsome. He's dressed in his traveling robe and silver slippers.

His family is enormous. There's a veritable crowd gathered at the platform, some holographics and some even physically present. Numerous family members congratulate and hug and help Rudy along. They hold signs saying, "Thank you for everything Grampa Rudy!" and "See you in the cloud!" and "Sparkle and shine!" There are Rudy's wife and children, several uncles and aunts and cousins and even a grandparent. And many, many friends. At good portion of the crowd is recording for the

cloud, displaying the telltale exaggerated behaviors, and Mrs. London spies two nurses near the back of the platform, dabbing tears.

A man who looks very much like Rudy—his younger brother—is speaking as we come to a stop. He talks from a small podium near where the cyclone door opens.

"And he was so good at it he pissed me off," the brother says. "I've never said that, but he was so good he pissed me off. And now that you're gonna get Bestowed like your wife's dad, you'll piss me off even more."

Everyone laughs, including Rudy. The mood is celebratory and cheery— not indifferent and tense like Mrs. London's. A great feast has been served and eaten, a long table sits nearby, filled with half-empty dishes and half-eaten food. There's an open bar and many people hold drinks.

Mrs. London is surprised— she never expected to see people actually celebrate Retirement in such a way. She and I watch from the Cyclone. We can hear everyone talking on the platform. From what we deduce, this has all come on rather suddenly.

"Well, the train's here," says Rudy's brother. "Guess you'd better get talking."

Rudy gets up on the podium and shakes his head and smiles.

"Well, shoot," he says. "It's been great living with you people. I love ya, each and everyone of ya— even you, Randy, you old fart."

"Sparkle and shine!" yells a young girl, and she and her sisters are bawling profusely. An older woman, Rudy's wife, smiles nearby, her cheeks damp.

"You're damn right, Priscillion," Rudy says to the girl. "Sparkle and shine. That's what I did. That's what all of you are doing. But, shoot. Sometimes, you know, the party ends a little sooner than you'd expected. I mean, shoot, only 57 and I get brain cancer. Good thing we're living in the present day, though. If it wasn't for Bestowment, I'd only have about a year left. One *shitty* year."

The family laughs uproariously.

"So I'm doing this a little earlier than we'd all hoped, but I'll see you all in the cloud. I know it."

He only speaks for a minute more, talking about his farming career and his family and how much he loves them, how proud he is and how he can't thank them enough for the joy they bring. He bids them all a big, loving farewell. Everyone is very happy and engaged, nodding and yelling encouragement.

When he's finished, Rudy hugs and kisses his wife one final time, whispers something to her, and steps into the Cyclone.

The women in his family are in hysterics, screaming and crying and laughing and smiling, and the men are yelling and pounding their chests with one fists, raising them and yelling, "To the cloud! To the cloud!"

Rudy blows one final kiss, and the doors slide shut.

Once inside, Rudy turns and smiles widely, eyes twinkling. Right away, he makes Mrs. London feel very relaxed and almost cheerful, despite it all. We're both glad to have him here.

His emo and I exchange cursory handshake information, and for a second I feel the fear and sadness in him. But he doesn't show any of it.

"This my seat?" he asks, pointing at the one across from Mrs. London.

"If you want it," says Mrs. London.

He sits down and extends a hand.

"Rudy Cuervo."

"Elizabeth London. Liz."

They shake.

"You're a centurion, aren't you?" he asks. "My emo just told me."

"I am. As of today."

"Wow, you got to be a hundred years old natty. You're definitely getting Bestowed."

Mrs. London doesn't think she'll be getting Bestowed. No one she's known has been Bestowed. But Rudy's certain attitude boosts her a little hope.

"You think we're getting bestowed?" she says.

"I'm fuckin hope so," Rudy admits. "I've done a lot. Very productive. Big family. Already got a grandparent in the cloud, supposedly. Bastard's gonna be one hundred twenty one, looks a century younger. But yeah, I think it's looking good."

"Why, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Oh, I had long career in underground agriculture. Was my wife's dad's business originally, why he got Bestowed, actually. Grew lots of food and fuel for people, was real involved in the development of underground farming. Very useful, very valuable. Not sure what else I could've done, honestly...gave my whole life to the fields. Plus on top of all my research and development, I own several hundred acres myself. Grow corn, mostly, and a bunch of other random stuff..."

He looks out the window as the train pulls away. His family has already vacated the platform, and the empty party tables are all that's left.

"But, you know," Rudy says, shrugging. "If not, I've been meaning to get some rest."

Mrs. London's dismal demeanor lifts. For a few moments, I don't have to stabilize her stress chemicals.

"You're very positive," she says.

Rudy smiles.

"Try to be," he says.

He points to the CD.

"What you got there?"

"Old mix from college. I saved it from the incinerator."

"Can I see it?" he asks. "Never held one of these buggers before. Only saw 'em in a couple museums."

Mrs. London hands the CD over, watches carefully as Rudy gently turns it over in his hands.

"Couldn't let go, eh?" he says, turning it over and examining it in the light from the screens. "Gosh, it's light. And look at them rainbows on the shiny side."

"I suppose not."

"I shed a few tears when I got rid of my old research notebooks. Most of my shit went to my wife and kids. What you want with this CD?"

"It's been scanned. I'm listening to it."

"Oh, shoot," says Rudy, handing the CD back quickly. "Am I bothering you? I know I'm a talker."

"No, no, it's fine," says Mrs. London, accepting the CD back. "It's nice to talk to someone. I was alone for quite awhile, except for Emo... I'm sorry to hear about your diagnosis. And so early! You're barely halfway to centurion."

"I know," Rudy says, shaking his head. "What can you do? I spent a lot of time experimenting with chemicals back in the day, trying to make shit grow with artificial sun. Kind of inevitable."

"And the epicity didn't just heal it?"

"Nope," says Rudy. "Grampa Frank tried to pull some strings, but I got the retirement notice last Sunday. Gave me three days to put my shit in order. When did you get yours?"

"Last year. The 99 Notice."

"Oh, right, centurion. A whole year to put your shit in order. Dang, that sounds nice. Congratulations, by the way."

"Thank you. You must've been very smart to have figured out how to grow crops underground, especially on such a huge scale."

"Well, I mean, it wasn't just me. I was part of a massive team. But thanks, yeah. Guess I am smart enough. Could always be smarter, though."

He points at his temple.

"Didn't keep this from growing, though. Glioblastoma. Nasty little bugger. They don't call it goodbye motherfucker for nothing."

"How do you feel?"

"Little tired, kinda out of it, nothing serious. I was like, 'Well, sir, you've got the wrong room' when the emo told me I had it. I was only in for a physical. First one in awhile. I'd been feeling sick, but not, you know, *retirement* sick. Total shock. What are you in for?"

Mrs. London smiles.

"Time's just up," she says. "One hundred years is all you get, provided no terminal illnesses. I'm a little frail, but healthy overall."

"So you made it a hundred years."

"Right. With regular status. No one in my bloodline is Bestowed."

"What'd you contribute, though?"

"I was a teacher," says Mrs. London. "For many years. I originally wanted to be a nurse, but, I changed my mind halfway through my first year of college."

"Where'd you go?"

"Eastern Michigan."

"Oh, shoot, never heard of that one. Never went to college myself— just worked with emos."

"Oh, Eastern's been gone for decades now. I think the 2040's is when they closed it."

"Oh, right," said Rudy, slapping his forehead. "Centurion. I knew that. Sorry. I forget we got almost half a century between us. Shoot, when I was born, you were almost the age I am now. Time flies. So you from the mitten, then?"

"Yes. Originally outside Detroit, but I moved to live with my daughters in Chicago after the sky went dark. I lived on the surface for my last year, though."

"Really," says Rudy. "Where at?"

"Southeastern Michigan. As near to my first home as I could be."

"No kidding," says Rudy. "Back home. What's the surface like now? I haven't been to any of the surface colonies."

"It's still dark and cold and drizzly. Not friendly. I enjoyed seeing the real sky, though."

"I ain't seen it since I was a kid," says Rudy. "Only the skydome for me."

They both looked overhead. The surrounding screens of the Cyclone showed them hurtling past a trickling mountain river with a cage of metal bridge scaffolding stretched over it.

"How'd your family take it? You making it to centurion?" Rudy asks.

"They don't care," says Mrs. London. "My daughters and I don't speak much, my husband and brothers and parents are all

long gone. Everyone's busy achieving. I suppose I could've made myself more available, but...people are so different now."

"Shoot, sorry to hear that. That is true-- I had to drag my kids out of the Meta, even just as projections. Still, though, a teacher. That's positively essential. Or at least it was until until the iGen and the first emos."

Mrs. London nods.

"I only worked about fourteen years before I had my daughters. Then I worked part time. Then the iGen took over and teachers weren't needed."

"Sounds like you've got yourself a decent shot then. Your hubby make it to the cloud?"

"No, he was retired. He was in banking. IT. Another job that the emos took."

Rudy frowns.

"See, I don't get that," he says. "Emos got it eventually, yeah, but until the emo got it, it was essential. Why the heck's anyone getting judged on whether it got taken up by a dang emo? They still *did* it. I mean, shoot. I worked with emos myself, doesn't mean they could just figure out how to plant those cornstalks all by themselves."

"Not at first, anyway," says Mrs. London.

"Where's your hubby's memorium then?"

"My husband's in the same plot I'll be in back home under Michigan," says Mrs. London. "My parents and brothers are in another one a block over."

"Unless you get Bestowed," says Rudy. "Being a centurion who was an educator before the iGen started doing all the thinking."

Mrs. London can't help but smile.

"Unless I'm Bestowed today, yes."

"I'm the first person to be retired from my family," says Rudy. "Frank's Ashlynn's dad, like I said. Even my parents are still alive, pushing for that centurion status. No sicknesses yet, still going natty."

"They must be sad to see you go," Mrs. London says.

Rudy smiles again, this time sadly.

"Yeah," he says. "But, hey, it's totally possible I'll be seeing them again this time tomorrow. I don't think Bestowment takes long if you make it through the first round of interviews. Grampa Frank made it through his in like a week from what I hear. And if that old codger can get Bestowed, shoot, anyone can."

Mrs. London smiles at her fellow passenger. She's feeling warm; the warmth of a new, unexpected friend.

"I'm glad you think that way," she tells him. "You seem like a good man. I hope they Bestow you."

"Me too," grins Rudy, and there's some sadness in that grin. "I've had a good life, raised a good family. Made some good friends, did some good things. Can't say you're ever ready for it, per se, but I'm ready to find out what the decision is. Only got so much control over what happens, you know? And I ain't never seen the epicity."

He sits back and crosses his long legs.

Mrs. London smiles again. For a moment, she'd almost forgotten where she was, and why.

"Well, shoot, we sure learned a lot about each other just now, eh? Guess I'll let you get back to your recording before we get another person on here with us."

"We did, Rudy. Thank you."

Rudy looks up at the screens, stares into a night sky as they sail past an erupting volcano with a tower of ash and smoke billowing into the sky.

"Don't know about you," he says. "But I'm gonna enjoy the ride."

(don't write yourself off yet)

"if you were willing to let it be/you were hurt once, that's not me/i will never let you down/i could never let you go"

Liz left Danielle to her jogging, and walked back to her dorm suite.

Keisha was in the common area between the two dorm rooms, watching House on DVD. She was heavysset and short-haired, munching goldfish and half-heartedly splitting her attention between the TV and a copy of Nicole Krauss.

"Sup," she said when Liz came in. Keisha didn't talk much. She was friendly and affable enough, but Liz could already tell they would never be close. Thus far, they'd barely spoken other than to greet each other.

Liz greeted her, then went to her bedroom and lay down, thinking about Luke.

He was moving away. Liz had known deep down that their relationship was finished in June, but now, it just seemed all the more permanent.

"You're not his girlfriend," she told herself. "Amanda was his girlfriend. You're Liz now."

Her thoughts drifted into memory.

They'd begun dating in March of 2005. It was been only a year and a half before, but a year and a half is an ocean of time to a teenager.

It had been at a local band show. That's where they'd formally met.

Amanda would turn seventeen that June. She'd been going to local band shows for a year or so by then. She'd gotten into the shows through youth group at church. She had her favorite bands to go see and occasionally buy merch from. She'd even picked up Alton's old acoustic and tried playing guitar long enough to know it wasn't for her.

Most of the local band shows were run by church youth groups. They were held in venues like The Summit at the Community Center in Canton, The Barn at Calvary Baptist Church, the Trinity House Theater in Northville, Club Triune in Westland, the Internet Café off Lilley Rd in Canton, and other minor-friendly venues like school gyms and skate parks.

The venue Amanda went to that evening had no particular name. It was a garage that most kids called The Tinpot-- a large metal pole barn located on property owned by a wealthy family from Novi. It was located off 9 Mile at the end of a gravel driveway lined with pine trees. There was a modest gravel parking lot and nothing else. The place was associated with a large, recently-founded evangelical Christian church that had yet to build a permanent home.

Amanda was then in her second semester of junior year. Though she'd turned sixteen the previous June, she had no driver's license yet. Just a permit. She got rides from her parents or Alton or sometimes older friends. And sometimes she got them from her now-ex-boyfriend's parents. That was how she'd initially gone to shows.

She'd met her ex-boyfriend Tom through her own church—another local evangelical outfit that went by Living Rock— and the two of them had dated roughly three months, since just before Christmas. It had been Amanda's first actual relationship but the whole thing had left her feeling icky. She hadn't felt much guilt when he'd pulled her aside after Mass two weeks prior and told her that his parents thought they should call it quits and he agreed.

This would be the first show she'd gone to since breaking up with Tom. She was weary he'd be there but he wasn't. In fact, she barely saw Tom at any shows at all after they broke up.

That night she went with Alton and a friend of his. Alton had his license and had graduated the previous year in 2004, but he still hung around. His friend was named Rob and he smelled bad but seemed all right otherwise. Rob sat up front and talked with Alton about Drew and Mike's radio show on The Riff. Their mother had said to keep an eye on Amanda, especially if Tom was going to be there.

Alton brought Amanda to the door and then said, "Be right back," and she knew he was going off with Rob to smoke weed before the show started. It was why Rob smelled bad all the time. He carried weed everywhere with him. Amanda had no idea how he hadn't been caught with it yet. She knew she'd eventually try some, but not with her older brother.

She ventured into the waiting area, stood around watching the bands set up. They'd gotten there just before showtime.

The show's lineup was as follows:

A band called Social Distance opened. They were odd in that there was only a keyboardist, guitarist and a drummer. No bass. The keyboardist sang and wasn't very good. But Amanda found him attractive. She had minor crushes on John from The Rising Tide and Eric from Which Way Is Home, but it was nothing she lost sleep over. They were both a little too old for her anyway, already graduated, but Social Distance was clearly made up of high schoolers.

Amanda was pretty sure the singer was staring right at her the whole time during Social Distance's set. Singing to her. They did a cover of the Michael Jackson song The Way You Make Me Feel. Amanda felt awkward and somewhat uncomfortable but in a good way, not in a creeped out way. In a "I'm excited and I

don't know why or how to show it" way. It was all very sudden and unexpected. She'd assumed she'd be single and utterly uninterested in nearly any guy for quite some time after the relationship with Tom. She kept imagining going and talking to him after the show.

But once their set was finished, the frontman of Social Distance gathered up his things and went back outside and that was it.

Other bands Amanda was already familiar with filled out the rest of the show. There was First in Line from South Lyon, Which Way Is Home from Plymouth, The Rising Tide from Canton, and the headliners were a band called Schaeffer from somewhere downriver. They'd released a full length album earlier that year. They'd played some function at Living Rock and Amanda had gotten a copy of the album, which was called No Ordinary People.

All the bands played agreeable suburban alternative rock with emo influence, save First in Line who were a scrappy garage pop-punk.

After Social Distance finished their set, Alton and Rob rejoined Amanda, clearly stoned, mumbling to each other and snorting laughter.

Amanda was irritated at how much she kept thinking about the Social Distance singer and what had happened to him. She looked around the crowd and couldn't find him.

She didn't need to worry. As Which Way Is Home finished their last song and began breaking down their set, she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Hey," he said.

Several guys had come over to her throughout the evening and tried to initiate conversation in one way or another, but she'd politely rebuffed them with short, disinterested answers, and Alton's presence kept them from pushing it. She figured she'd wanted to be alone tonight.

But now, she felt herself blush.

"Hey," she said. "Sup."

"You're Amanda," he said.

"Uh, how do you know my name?"

The frontman looked incredulous.

"Dude, everyone knows you're Amanda," he said. "You've been coming to these since like last year."

"I've literally never even met you before."

"You're with Tom, right? Tom Tooman?"

"No," said Amanda. "I mean, not anymore."

"Not anymore?"

"I just broke up with him," she said. "I was with him since December. I was really worried I'd see him here tonight but I guess he didn't come."

"Why'd you break up with him?"

"I dunno. He was a dick. A religious dick."

"Aw, man," said Luke. "You're not religious? I thought you went to Living Rock?"

"How do you know all this about me? Cause, like, I'm not comfortable talking to you if you've been, like, stalking me."

"I'm not stalking you," he said. "You're Amanda. I saw you when we were playing. You're Alton's sister. You come to these shows. You go to Living Rock, same as Alton. That's all I know."

"Oh."

"So you're not religious?"

"I mean, I go to church but only because my parents make me."

"Cause, like, I was hoping to tell you about our lord and savior Jesus Christ. Have you accepted Jesus as your savior yet?"

Amanda paused, unsure.

"Just joshing," Luke said. He wasn't exactly smiling, but his eyes were sort of smiling.

Why was Amanda's stomach acting like this? Luke's eyes made it churn in a delightful way.

"I have to ask," he said. "Could you hear my vocals? You were standing right in front of us. I was wondering if people could hear me."

"I mean, yeah, I guess. You guys sounded ok. I've never seen you before."

"This is our first show," said the singer. "I don't know that we'll do it again. We sucked."

"Oh, I mean, you guys were all right..."

The singer huffed genuine dry, cynical laughter and Amanda's heart leapt again.

"Thanks for saying that," he said, looking around. "But yeah, anyway, just wanted to ask. See you around."

He started to walk away but Amanda spoke up.

"Wait!"

She struggled to think of a reason to keep him there.

"Why do you think you sucked?"

The singer looked around. He pulled out a CD from his jacket pocket.

"I just got this," he said, showing it to her. "It's a promotional mix for the Militia Group. Lovedrug and a couple other bands. Wanna go listen to it in my car?"

"You have a car?"

"Yeah. I just got it."

"Uhh," Amanda looked at her brother and Rob, over by the merch table talking to Jay and Jordan from The Rising Tide.

"Sure," she said. "Just a sec."

She went over and told Alton where she was going and why. He looked at the singer, back at Amanda.

"K," he said.

"Do you know him? He says he knows you."

"Yeah, I know him," said Alton. "That's Luke. He was in my gym class my senior year. He's your age. Is he creeping on you?"

"No, he just wants to go listen to a CD in the car."

"K," said Alton. "Don't like, get murdered or something."

Amanda and the singer named Luke walked outside together. It was damp and strangely warm for March. The night would be choked with fog. The air smelled fresh and green and wet.

"I'm Luke, by the way" said the singer when they were outside.

"Yeah, that's what Alton said," said Amanda. Her heart was fluttering and she didn't know why.

Actually, no.

She did know why. She knew exactly why. Why the fuck was she doing this to herself?

"Your brother's a pretty good guy," said Luke.

"Yeah, I guess."

They came upon his car, parked in the grass off a corner of the parking lot, under a bright white streetlight. It was an old Taurus, royal blue. Luke unlocked his side, slid in, and unlocked it for Amanda who slid in the passenger side.

They sat in the car. It smelled kind of musty, but Amanda didn't mind. Luke turned on the radio and plugged in a CD adapter to the tape deck. He put in the Militia Group demo and skipped songs.

"Um, where'd you get the CD?"

"At Club Triune the other night. The Rising Tide opened for Lovedrug. That's when I met Evan. He got us this gig."

He landed on a song, track 4.

"This is my favorite one on here," he said. "Reeve Oliver. They're from Cali."

Pleasant, melodic pop skater rock played, a young man singing about how it's not enough to be honest.

"So why did you think you sucked?" Amanda asked.

"We need a singer," said Luke. "I suck at singing. Do you sing?"

"Oh," said Amanda. "No, unfortunately, I do not. I tried playing guitar but I'm not good."

"Bummer," said Luke. "We'd love a girl singer."

They sat and listened to the song for a little bit more.

"Tell me your deepest secret," said Luke suddenly.

"I can't," said Amanda. "I just met you."

"Yeah, you can. I'll tell you mine first."

"Okay."

"I know the meaning of life."

"That's your secret?"

"Yeah."

"So what is it?"

"I can't tell you yet. You have to tell me your secret first."

Amanda sat there and contemplated this.

"I hate my name," she said. "Amanda. It really bothers me that everyone knows me as Amanda."

"Why?"

"It just... I don't know. It's really American and modern-sounding and it makes me think of some bitchy cheerleader or something. I just... it's not mine."

"What name do you want?"

"Elizabeth," said Amanda. "It's my middle name, and it's after my Grandma. My grandma's a badass. She was a nurse for the army. Now she lives in Traverse City and we go up there once a year to see her and we walk along the beach and eat Girl Scout cookie s'mores."

"Dude," said Luke. "Girl Scout cookie s'mores?"

"Yeah, you take marshmallows roast them and put them between girl scout cookies instead of graham crackers. And the marshmallow toasts the cookies, sort of. Grandma came up with them. We make ice cream sandwiches with toasted Pop Tarts, too."

"Dude, that is like the best idea I've ever heard. Is she your Mom's mom or your dad's mom?"

"My mom's mom. My dad's mom died when I was eight."

"Sweet," said Luke. "I mean, like, not 'sweet', but the pop tart s'more thing. That's fucking, like, amazing."

"We were only allowed to have one," said Amanda. "When I was little. Because they're so sweet. I don't think I could eat more than one, anyway."

She paused.

"So what's the meaning of life?"

Luke looked at her, totally serious.

"To live."

Just then, Reeve Oliver sang, "*Elizabeth, you are an angel*," and Luke pointed to the radio.

"See?" he said. "That was a sign. It's meant to be. You're Elizabeth, not Amanda."

Amanda rolled her eyes but her stomach was churning and her heart glowed.

"I like this song," she said. "I want to know who the girl was, the one that he wrote it about."

"Yeah," said Luke. "She's probably hot."

"Your voice is really hot," Amanda said, suddenly.

It stunned her. She'd been wanting to say this since he came over but for some reason it had only come out now. She looked down, embarrassed. But it was out.

"Thanks," Luke said. "I'm glad you could, you know... hear it...."

He reaches over and touches her. Lightly. Just on her shoulder. But it makes a sort of static wash over her body. She loves it.

They're not talking. They're just looking. She feels his fingers on her shoulder, his arm resting on the seat.

Then they're looking right at each other.

Something is pulling them together.

His lips are on hers. His face is kind of rough but she doesn't mind. His tongue presses into hers but she doesn't taste anything.

They're kissing. This is her first real kiss and it happened out of nowhere.

It's like her body is flowing into his and his is flowing into hers. When they stop kissing they kind of push each other's faces into each other, nuzzling, her forehead against his hot cheek, she wants to melt into him, her body and mind are singing. It's involuntary, it's just what needs to happen, they need to touch each other, they've wanted to touch each other since they got out here and now the barrier has been broken and they're together.

She'd kissed Tom before, but those kisses were brief and forced and felt like children playing truth or dare. Little pecks, sloppy tongue. There was none of this passion, this aurora of fire leaping within her. This sensation of perfect symmetry, like everything was lining up exactly the way it always should have.

"Wow," she hears Luke say as they hold each other.

He invited her to coffee the next day. He said he was going with friends but when he picked her up it was just him. He skated across town to get her, no car this time. Coffee was forgotten, they went to the field behind Amanda's sub division and made out some more in the long grass on the hillside.

The week later, she went over to his house, which was on the other side of town, and it was big, bigger than her own parents' house. Luke had an older sister who was going to U of

M. His parents were cordial but uninterested, watching American Idol.

They went up to Luke's room and Luke showed her his new desktop Mac and they hadn't been together more than five minutes before they were making out again.

"I guess we're dating now," Luke said later that night as he dropped her off.

"Yeah," said Amanda. "We are."

They were inseparable, in school or out of it. Their parents vetted each other when their paths randomly crossed at school functions, firm handshakes and politely-probing questions. Alton in particular vouched for Luke- "He's just like a music kid, he was good at lightning in gym class, I dunno..."

Amanda realized she was in love with Luke later that summer when she accompanied him and his mother to Bronner's Christmas Wonderland in Frankenmuth.

They wandered the massive Christmas displays, everything a riot of red and green and sparkling white, strange wooden dolls winking at them from the rafters, ornaments on every shelf, toys spinning and flying overhead, giant stuffed animals staring from displays under the eaves.

Amanda had lost Luke somewhere in the forest of Christmas trees. They'd separated, looking at different items. When she turned, he was gone.

She began searching for him. For some reason, the thought of not being by his side causing her great worry and discomfort. The longer she looked, the more desperate she was to get back to him.

The separation probably only lasted about five minutes, but Amanda was near tears by the time she finally located Luke by a display of old-timey Santa figurines. The Santa figures were covered in an excessive amount of fake snow.

Luke had picked one up and was staring down at it with an amused smile.

He saw Amanda coming and showed her the Santa figure, wagging it as though it were speaking.

"Cocaine is a helluva drug," he said in a jolly Santa voice.

Liz hugged him and didn't let her arm slip from around his waist until they got back in the car.

[\(elizabeth you are an angel\)](#)

**"try to understand/there's an old mistake that fools will make
and/I'm the king of them/pushing everything that's good away"**

LORENZO SILVER HAS A FAKE HEART.

That's what the sign says. It's large, held up by two people at the center of the group. The words are black on white.

Mrs. London stares at it and wonders what it could possibly mean.

After her conversation with Rudy, Mrs. London listens to another song on the mix. She is stable. It's just about the ride for now. Rudy's emo is regaling him with tales of the Aztec empire, a totally emotionally neutral topic for him. He looks like he's about to fall asleep.

The Cyclone slides along at the speed of sound, and soon we arrive at the next terminal.

This terminal is on the edge of massive apple orchard. Small, stunted trees with fat red apples hanging off their branches, in perfect rows as far as the eye can see. Autumnal sunset blushes the horizon.

Another platform is in the middle of the orchard, and this is where the Cyclone stops and where Lorenzo's family is gathered with their arms crossed, no one talking to anyone. It's a stark contrast from the jubilant send-off Rudy received. The air is charged with furious tension, a storm about to break.

"Cheerful bunch," Rudy remarks.

Lorenzo Silver himself stands on the platform with his back to the Cyclone. He's a big man, dark-skinned and dark-demeanor'd, barrel chested and stone-faced. He wears a black mustache. His head is shaved and gleams in the fake sunset. He seems very cold and unapproachable, but there's a distinct, distant sadness in his eyes.

Lorenzo has a large family like Rudy, but unfortunately it seems he doesn't get along with any of them. Many of his family members hold signs of protest. Signs of glee at his demise. The "fake heart" sign is the biggest, but "Good riddance" and "You won't be missed" and "mean and surly" are others.

Lorenzo stands on the platform by himself, hands in his pockets. I give Mrs. London a rundown, and I know Rudy's emo is doing the same. Both of them are silent, watching.

Lorenzo is in his seventies, and has been diagnosed with terminal heart disease. Unlike Mrs. London, he's had much added to him—many tech enhancements that have allowed him to preserve his mobility and quickness of mind.

He's worked in foundries his whole career, making his living with metal. That was his contribution, his place in the world. Foundry floors—many still on the surface—that melted

and molded the metals. Giant teams of giant drills and giant shovels that bore holes in the earth the size of entire civilizations, so beautiful spaces like this orchard could flourish and grow just like before the climate shift.

As the Cyclone slides to a stop, Lorenzo glances at it, then turns around and faces his family, squinting into the sunset over the apple trees.

Rudy and Liz listen to his family twitter bitterly amongst themselves as he gives his farewell speech. They all whisper with frosty gazes, recording to the cloud. There is not a single kind face to be seen. They all glare at him and mutter, telling everyone how much they are hurt by their father or step-father or brother, who was constantly working and getting different women pregnant all over the globe and not seeing his children and being a mean old cuss whenever he did.

"Thanks for coming," says Lorenzo. "I'm glad I have your attention."

The family doesn't respond, except their mutterings—personal narration to the cloud. Even in this environment, achievement takes precedence.

"I wish I'd spent more time with my family and less on my career," Lorenzo says. "I'm proud of my career, of the things I built. I'm half metal myself, between the hardware I've got in my chest and my hip replacement and the plate in my head from the accident in Pittsburgh... I'm glad I was of use to everyone else, but..."

He breathes deep.

"I know I've let you down. I've had a lot of time to think lately, and it makes sense. I wish I'd stayed married to one person. I wish I'd seen more of life. I thought achievement meant only achieving in career. I didn't realize it also means achieving with those that are supposed to be most important to you. So I tried to achieve. But I didn't. And now I'm here. I understand you think I'm an awful person and you're glad I'm going to be dead in a few hours. I know it's likely I won't even get a memorium. But, at the end of it all, I truly hope you're all happy, that you find happiness, and yes, that you achieve in whatever way you desire."

The only sound is the artificial wind in the apple trees. Lorenzo's family has gone silent.

"I mean that," Lorenzo continues. "For the past few months I've had a lot of time to reflect, a lot of time to get to know you. I've watched a lot of recordings and looked at a lot of old pictures. I'm barely in any of them. But I can admit I was wrong. I'm glad you're here. You still showed up. That means the

world. I don't expect to be Bestowed, as you all know. But that's all right. I've had a long life. I'm ready to sleep."

"You don't get to do that," says a voice from the crowd, cutting him off. A woman. Lorenzo's second daughter from his second marriage. "You're not getting off that easy."

And one by one, all of them recording to the cloud, the family members line up and air their grievances.

"My eighth birthday, I waited in the driveway for you. You never showed up. Mom put on a huge party and I missed it because I wanted to see you. But you never showed up. I just waited in the driveway all evening. You have a fake heart."

"You left me on the platform when the sinkhole at Rochester was swallowing everything within ten miles. I was terrified. But you got in the bus and left and didn't wait for me. You have a fake heart."

"I've never known you at all. And I'm your youngest child. Your baby. You have a fake heart."

"You were always cruel to us. Cruel and mean and surly and selfish. Only wanted your career. You have a fake heart."

The final line becomes a chant. Everyone says it, like the end of a prayer.

"You have a fake heart. You have a fake heart. You have a fake heart."

The emotion builds with every person in line, and soon they are hysterical, weeping and shrieking and wailing and moaning—not for Lorenzo, but for their own lives, cheated of a loving relationship. They show their anger to the cloud. Aside from the fake heart chant, others yell things like, "Why couldn't it have been different?" and "Why can't the world be the way it used to be?"

"I hope they put you in the Nightroom the second you step off the Cyclone," says Lorenzo's oldest son. "You have a fake heart."

"I'm sorry," says Lorenzo, over and over, nodding.

He's stoic, not reacting at all. He's known this was coming. His face betrays no emotion. His posture shows no burden, no emotional weight. He stands there on the platform and takes his verbal beating.

Finally, the line of family members is finished. His family continues their chant, standing there on the platform with their wet eyes recording it all.

"You have a fake heart. You have a fake heart."

"Well, I guess that's enough," Lorenzo says to himself, amid the cacophony.

He turns, and steps onto the Cyclone.

Inside, the door seals and the sound of the chant is cut off.

Lorenzo looks at Mrs. London and Rudy. Rudy jumps up out of his seat and sits down next to Mrs. London, points to the two seats across from them.

"Take a pick," he says.

Lorenzo sits down in the chair nearest the door without a word and looks out the window.

"What you in for?" Rudy asks.

"Heart problems," is all Lorenzo says.

Rudy introduces himself and Mrs. London. Lorenzo nods at them, barely acknowledging. His emo is engaging him thoroughly. Though he looks calm, it's only because his emo is working on overdrive to regulate his emotions. Through our minimal correspondence, I gather the emo is mostly suppressing a terrible fear and a terrible rage.

"You don't like your chances, eh," asks Rudy, trying to be friendly.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," says Mrs. London, and she is sincere. Though her send-off was tense, she's glad her daughters saw no need to excoriate her.

Lorenzo stays quiet for a moment, looking out the window. We're already zipping along again. There's a flash and the apple orchard is gone, back into the smooth, dark, silent, beautifully-simulated tunnels of the Cyclone. The first sight is a mighty mountain, the kind of mountain that might have tons of iron ore to be used, the kind that Lorenzo might have processed during his prime years.

Lorenzo's eyes are dry. His mouth is a straight line under his mustache.

"I'm tired," he says, and both Rudy and Mrs. London know the conversation is over.

Mrs. London looks at the final empty seat.

One more stop, then the epicity.

I play the next song and she's grateful for the distraction.

(i can fail before i ever try)

"where are you/and i'm so sorry/i cannot sleep/i cannot dream tonight"

Luke came over that evening.

Liz fell asleep that afternoon thinking about him, woke up to her phone buzzing. His name on the caller ID. She'd never been able to bring herself to delete his contact info. She picked the phone up so fast she nearly flung it across the room.

"Hey," he said. "Do you mind if we meet somewhere?"

"You can just come over," said Liz, maybe a little too fast. "My roommates won't care. I'll meet you at the front door."

Liz's roommate Jackie was out for the time being. Keisha and Danielle were in the suite room playing some shooter game. Keisha could be heard yelling, "GET THE FUCK OUTTA DODGE!" and Danielle could be heard cussing.

Down at the front doors, Liz waited. She hadn't been there more than a few minutes when she saw Luke walking down the sidewalks in the courtyard between the gym and Pray Harrold.

"I have a confession," Luke said once they were in Liz's room alone. He sat on her bean bag chair in the corner and she sat at her desk chair under her loft bed.

"What," said Liz, though she already knew.

"I was here today hoping I'd see you. Arnold was just an excuse. I had no real reason to come with him. I wanted to see you. I didn't want The Modern Exchange to be the last time I saw you before I, you know, leave."

"Oh," said Liz. "Ok. Yeah."

She was so happy to hear him say this, but she knew she couldn't show it.

"...I miss you," said Luke. "I know it's over, I mean— I'm the one who ended it. But I miss you anyway. And I'm so fucking sorry for how it ended. I thought about you all summer. And your grandma dying. I know you loved her."

"I miss you, too," was all Liz could manage to say. "And I'm sorry, too."

They talked. Like they used to. They talked until they heard Keisha and Danielle shut the lights off in the suite and go to bed in their room.

Liz got down off her chair and sat next to him, listened to him talk, his voice and body a comfort.

She brushed closer against him. He put his arm around her. She reached down and felt him, felt him get the hint.

Then his hands were on either side of her face. They were right next to each other— her looking up, him looking down, their bodies pressed together. Their eyes locked, their lips touched. She put her hands under his hoodie, up and around his

shoulders. She could feel him through his jeans. She rubbed against him.

"I missed you all summer," she heard him say.

The fever took over and they were at it.

At some point they went up to her bed, stripping off clothes.

They moved together. She thought of nothing but him. She felt nothing but him. They clung to each other, rolling like the waves that passed through them. She was crying out, he was whispering to her, sweat dripping from his forehead onto hers.

There was a desperation here, a release. This was the last time. They both knew it.

Everything rushed past, through Liz's head. She finished once, twice, then he finished, trembling inside her, but he continued and she finished a third time, glorious ecstasy radiating from within, stifling her own cries with her fist and her pillow, biting his shoulder like she used to. He kept going, grunting rhythmically. She could feel him building again-- yes, she wanted it all-- YES--

"Uh, what are you doing?" said a voice from the door.

They both froze, Luke in mid-thrust.

It was Jackie. She stood in the doorway, her pudgy frame filling it, a pastry in one hand, Starbucks cup in the other. Her dark hair was up in a messy bun, and she wore sweatpants and a t-shirt.

"We're having sex!" Liz screeched, nothing else to say, covering her face.

"Oh, hi," said Jackie, not leaving, a silhouette illuminated from the blast of light from the suite. "I'm her roommate."

"I'm Luke," said Luke, bent over Liz, the covers slipping down his back to reveal his ass.

"Jackie," Liz heard Danielle yell from across the suite. "For fuck's sake! Are you retarded?"

"No, of course not," said Jackie. She frowned and looked offended.

"We told you she was in there with him!"

"But I have to--"

"JESUS *FUCK*, JACKIE."

Danielle's hands appeared in the doorway around Jackie's shoulders, pulling her out.

"Oh," said Jackie, taking a bite of her pastry as she was manhandled away. "Ok then."

The door slammed shut just as Jackie was saying, "Nice meeting you," and as much as Liz wanted didn't want it to be,

the moment was finished. She was surprised at how worn out she felt— a devastatingly divine and aching glow in her loins.

Luke dismounted and lay down next to her.

"Nice roommate," he said.

"I'm sorry," she muttered. "She's really socially awkward. I think she's Jehovah's Witness or something."

He kissed her forehead and she clung to him, their burning skin seeming to fuse together.

They held each other, inhaled each other, lost in the sweet rhythm of the other's rising and falling chest. The moonlight through the window was as thick as the frosting on a wedding cake.

For the first time, Liz thought of their breakup months earlier. That night had carved a cavern in her middle, one that still hadn't filled in, and never really would.

She hadn't allowed herself to think of it all summer, blocking it off, her grandmother's death taking precedence only a month later. But now that Luke was here, and she was in his arms, it was safe to revisit that part of her mind.

It had happened at a concert, naturally, all the way down at The Modern Exchange in Southgate, a venue with a bar that was low-key notorious for serving minors who knew how to ask.

Earlier that day, Amanda had found out her grandmother's illness was terminal. She'd "battled" it off and on for the past nine years, but that morning Amanda's mother had sat her and her brothers down and explained the situation— they were out of options. Amanda had wailed and asked to see her, but her mother said her grandma was on a lot of meds and not really herself.

"What would be best for now is if you just live your life," her mother told her. "We still have some time with her."

Luke had picked Amanda up. He'd been distant for weeks, bored. She'd been bored, too. They'd both been bored and unable to admit it. Older, emotionally experienced couples would've recognize this boredom for what it was— the relationship had run its course. But neither of them were mature or brave enough to talk about it. So it festered.

When Amanda had brought up her grandma's situation gone in for a comfort hug, all Luke had said was, "Yeah, that definitely sucks."

So Amanda did something she didn't often do.

She'd gotten drunk.

She'd done it specifically to spite him. Luke didn't drink— his father was a drinker and Luke considered drinking a sign of weakness. She'd finagled two beers out of the bar, then took turns chugging a bottle of vodka with a couple in their early

20's out back behind the dumpster. She offered to pay for her share but they refused.

"It's a good night for vodka," said the girl, whose name Amanda never learned. "Sorry about your grandma."

She was the drunkest she'd ever been, chatting with everyone, telling them about herself and her ambitions and her grandmother, completely ignoring Luke who stood by the stage and watched the bands. The evening became a dizzy blur.

That all wasn't bad. A bit embarrassing, but forgivable. But then, it happened.

She'd made out with some guy near the bar. He had to have been at least twenty-five. She hadn't really wanted to kiss him, but she'd been flirting with him and enjoying the attention, when he'd suddenly grabbed her during a slow song and begun dancing with her. She allowed it at first, but then she looked up at him to say she needed to go and he'd pushed his lips to hers and she was too drunk to do anything other than go with it. It only lasted for what seemed like thirty seconds, and Amanda didn't particularly enjoy it, but it happened.

She remembered shuffling over to Luke after the show was finished and the bands were loading their equipment back into their vans and trailers.

"Having fun?" he asked without looking at her.

"Not really," she said. "I didn't see you all night."

"Yeah, you looked kind of busy."

Amanda exploded.

"You've been ignoring me since last fucking Christmas," she shrieked, fully aware of the heads turning to watch. "I'm your fucking girlfriend and I'm in a really bad place and you don't even care!"

She was throwing a tantrum, the same helpless rage she'd felt as a small child when her parents would make her do something she didn't want to. Helpless, infantile rage.

Luke nuked it all with a single sentence.

"You are *not* my girlfriend."

He said it calmly.

Then he added, "You can get your own ride home."

And that was it.

He'd walked away, a portrait of indifference. Gone. She didn't see him again until that afternoon in September on Eastern's campus, riding his skateboard with his long hair cut short.

There were a few crushing moments where Amanda thought she'd have to stoop to asking the twenty-five-year old for a ride, but the vodka couple had seen the moment with Luke and taken pity on her. Amanda gratefully accepted and shoved a ten-

her only remaining cash— into the girl's hands when they pulled up to her parents' house. She let herself in the side door, mercifully missing her family members, though she could hear her brothers in the game room.

She'd stripped naked and crawled into bed and let the room spin, lying there, and the grief and realization seeped through her like toxic sludge, wracking her drunken body with shivers and guilt. Waves of regret, waves of bottomless sorrow, pouring into her with every hitch in her breath, her face soaked, hair matted as she tossed and turned.

She tried texting Luke sometime around 2 in the morning, apologizing, begging his forgiveness, then raging at him when he didn't respond.

No delivery.

He'd blocked her.

She took to saying, "Fuck Luke" over and over, a mantra, softly then loudly then softly again. Her stomach clenched, her face sore.

She threw up sometime in the early morning hours, and the clarity it brought only made things worse.

Memories tore through her head, and she couldn't tell which were more painful— the good ones or the bad ones. How could she have been so stupid? He'd been drifting for months, and their year anniversary in March had come and gone without much fanfare. She replayed all the negative moments— every time she'd ordered him around, every time she'd snapped at him for no good reason, every time she'd belittled him just because to test his metal to see how he would react. They'd had a good relationship, he was a good guy, a godsend, why had she fucked it up?

It had only been a year and a half they'd been together. Why did it feel like a lifetime? How would she live the rest of her life— decades upon decades— without Luke Samson's arms around her, without his smile to wake up to, without his body to love?

And now, after the hell of the summer, which had seemed so wide it was like a desert, here he was again.

She could smell him. His distinctive scent. In the days immediately following the break-up, Amanda was stunned to realize how many of her clothes held traces of Luke's scent. She washed everything multiple times until they smelled only of Tide. She ate shitty cheap processed garbage, fast food and gas station snacks from the Shell station on the corner near her sub division's entrance, spent time alone on her phone and laptop, watched The Notebook and Get Over It five times in a row apiece, blasted Embrace and Rites of Spring and The Cure and Silverstein and The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus through her earbuds and cried and

sobbed and screamed at her brothers and parents to leave her alone.

That was over now. Liz could feel it. Somehow, it was done. She'd gone through the desert and emerged on the other side. The summer really was over.

For now, he was here again. One final moment. A proper moment to appreciate it all. Sometimes life— the universe, God— gave you what you needed.

She breathed him, cheek pressed against his chest, his arms enfolding her, safe and perfect. The only thing missing was his former tangle of hair.

"I missed you," she said again.

Then she added, "I'll always miss you."

"You go to sleep," she heard him say. "And I'll be here when you wake up."

(you're already the voice inside my head)

"am i more than you bargained for yet/i've been dying to tell you anything you want to hear/cause that's just who i am this week"

The Cyclone sails along peacefully and on schedule. Mrs. London is enjoying her mix as well as a person can enjoy anything in a situation like this. The latest song gave her quite an emotional surge but I managed to contain it. She is clinging to every thought of Luke and it is good. We're nearly to the third stop and final stop, then the epicity.

I'm just about to play the next song for her when suddenly, the Cyclone begins slowing down.

"Why are we stopping?" Rudy asks.

"I don't know," says Mrs. London.

Lorenzo doesn't even look up. He's had his head back the whole ride, eyes closed.

"Someone has overridden the system," I explain to Mrs. London. "It happened a few seconds ago. Our original third passenger has been switched to the Red Line. There will be a slight interruption."

"Overridden?" Mrs. London says out loud.

Lorenzo and Rudy's emos are explaining to them, as well.

The Cyclone continues to decelerate until it comes to a smooth stop.

The third platform is on the edge of a dark forest. No sunlight, just some old style electric lamps along the terminal under a dome of stars. A white marble mausoleum, towering and gaudy and gilded with flecks of gold, stands nearby.

"A private memorium," I say to Mrs. London. "The name has been made private, but it almost certainly belongs to an ancestor of someone Bestowed."

The mausoleum is surrounded by young, beautiful people of all genders, dressed in all manner of ostentatious display. No one speaks to each other, just to the cloud. The gathering has the air of baited anticipation.

A single man stands out among them, at a podium on the platform. He has a coif of bright orange hair. He's tall, broad, imposing, body carved of muscle, perfect as Greek statuary. He wears no shirt under a magnificent orange feather boa that matches his hair, draped around his shoulders and flowing down his back like a glorious mane. He wears a pink speedo with a large golden belt and nothing else. His face holds no kindness at all, and his eyes shine with an unmistakable, casual cruelty. He wears light, tasteful make-up, and has many augmented reality filters activated, giving him the appearance of eternal youth. He looks to be about twenty.

"That's Lionel Stump," says Rudy, shocked. "My granddaughters follow him. What is he doing here?"

"Who's Lionel Stump?" Mrs. London asks. She's never heard of him. I tell her, but Rudy answers at the same time.

"He's the son of a Bestowed. One of the most powerful in the epicity. Descended from a long line of ultra-achievers. He's born Bestowed. He shouldn't be here at all."

"He's protesting the system," I tell Mrs. London. "He's become an activist. Today he's decided to allow himself to be sent to the Nighrooms."

"He's a fraud," said Lorenzo, speaking for the first time since he got on. "This is all a show. You watch. Even if he gets on at all, his daddy will come pick him up once we get to Welcome Home."

Rudy and Mrs. London are looking out the windows.

"Why's he getting on our car?" Mrs. London asks out loud.

"He just announced it to the cloud a few minutes ago," says Rudy. "Or at least that's what my emo says."

"He intentionally let his health run out," I explain to Mrs. London. "Even though he has what is effectively infinite credit, he intentionally drained his account. Gave it away to others. That's why everyone's here."

Mrs. London watches out the window.

Lionel stands at the podium, face showing no emotion at all. He holds a hand up, pointer finger and thumb together, the other three vertical.

He speaks. His voice is a feminine lisp, contradicting his appearance in every way possible. His eyes are watery, his skin blotchy.

His followers stand enraptured.

"First of all, bitch," he says, slurring his words. "I'm fucking wasted."

He clears his throat.

"So... yeah. So... I just wanna say..."

He glances around himself, as if hoping someone else will fill in the sentence for him. His eyes fall on the gold-flecked mausoleum.

"...we're in the best fucking place possible right now. A fucking... cemetery. Right next to where my ancestors were laid to rest. It shows you. Even the Bestowed in ancient times, before the climate shift, before the cloud, were allowed to die with dignity. Now, those of us who choose to *not* live forever should *not* be *required* to."

His followers cheer and show their emotion to the cloud, wailing and recording themselves. *Sparkle and shine* is chanted loudly.

Lionel gives a huge, dramatic sniff, makes the hand gesture again, thrusts wildly with it.

"Our revolution is all but complete. With my martyrdom we will finally gain the momentum we need to take it all the way to the epicity. My ancestors were democratically elected. They achieved the old fashioned way. The way the universe intended."

His supporters are in a frenzy now, shrieking and slapping themselves and clawing at their faces and rolling around on the ground and banging their heads against trees and sobbing uncontrollably and rocking back and forth, a ridiculous display, all for the cloud.

Lionel can barely be heard over the commotion.

"Believe me, bitch," he says. "If this doesn't get their attention, nothing will."

He pauses, sniffs again, and Mrs. London realizes he's holding back tears.

"And I just wanna say, for the cloud, that my *EX*-boyfriend, Adam Schoolcraft, son of the Schoolcraft achievers, is a manipulative, duplicitous, toxic, next to natty, cheating *manwhore* with a tiny, tiny penis that I couldn't even feel but I acted like I could because he was the best soul I'd ever met and I hate him forever..."

He trails off, his voice choking with sadness. His followers continue their wild, performative display below him.

"We're going down," Lionel says, composing himself. "Our civilization, our focus on achievement and synthetic immortality. Ridiculous. Silly. Evil. SAD."

He sniffs again, looks thoughtfully upward.

"But with my sacrifice, we will have their attention. I know now is the correct time to do this. So I bid you farewell, my friends. Please do not forget me."

He walks to the Cyclone. Raises his hand in that three-fingered gesture, doesn't speak.

"We confess our love!" they all yell at him, shrieking and screaming and continuing on. "Sparkle and shine!"

The doors slide shut and seal.

Lionel turns, and his face goes from determined, drunken placidity to irritated disgust when he sees Mrs. London and the others.

"I specifically requested an empty car," he growls.

He stands there for a second, swaying. Then he moves to sit down.

He takes the seat next to Lorenzo, snapping, "Move your fucking arm, don't you touch me."

Lorenzo's poor emo is trying its hardest to keep him in check. He stares straight ahead. He wants to strangle this man right now.

"What?" Lionel snaps at everyone as the Cyclone slides up to speed again. "Why is everyone looking at me?"

None of them answer. Mrs. London is staring back at him, frowning. Lorenzo is staring ahead at the scenery above Rudy's head. Rudy is looking down between his legs. Everyone's emo works to calm them.

Lionel, however, has no emo. He has connection to the cloud and whatever other enhancements his family can afford, but his emotions are unregulated. All the better to sparkle and shine for the cloud and those watching.

"What do you want?" he snaps at them.

He looks at Rudy.

"What are you looking at, *Mexican*? Probably some brain enhancements, too. You were involved in agriculture, I see. Gee, thanks for poisoning the inner-earth and giving all the natties cancer."

He turns to Lorenzo.

"And you, a old black miner, eh? Thanks for carving out these shitty holes for us to live in."

"You're welcome," grunted Lorenzo.

"What is your problem, kid?" Rudy says, hurt. He looks at Lorenzo. "Are you gonna let him talk to you like that?"

"Don't know," says Lorenzo through gritted teeth. "I just met him."

Lionel turns to Mrs. London, who hasn't looked away.

"And you, I don't even know who the fuck you are but I hope you know you look DISGUSTING. You don't have a single filter on. I can see every fucking wrinkle and flaw in your withered old natty face. I can only imagine what your wrinkly old tits and cunt look like. It's traumatizing me. And fuck, I can smell you *all*. I specifically requested an empty FUCKING CAR."

"Jesus Christ Almighty," Rudy says, shocked and slightly amused.

Lionel's eyes go wide with rage. He whips out his hand gesture again, thrusts it wildly at everyone.

"How dare you speak that name in my presence!" he screams. "We are the gods now! We are the gods! We are the gods! We are the gods—"

Mrs. London slaps him. Her hand raises and she smacks Lionel across the face. A sharp report is heard in the velvet quiet of the Cyclone.

It's a momentary lapse. I am working hard on keeping everything in order, many emotions at once, and I slip. As I've

said, the human brain is more complex than even an emo can manage.

The effect is immediate.

Lionel's eyes go wide. They fill with tears. His lower lip bows upward. His eyes register the most incredulous shock ever.

"What did you do that for?" he bawls, clapping a hand to his cheek. "That fucking hurt!"

"No one wants to hear your bullshit," Mrs. London snaps.

"What are you even doing here?" Rudy asks.

Lionel completely loses it and blubbers.

"I don't even fucking know," he says. "My boyfriend broke up with me. This morning! I'm literally genetically engineered to be perfect and it wasn't enough! And now I have to live forever! I can't live forever! I'm only 41! Do you know how long forever is when you're only 41?"

He sobs and makes quite a fuss sitting there. Rudy and Lorenzo and Mrs. London stare at him.

"And I was so upset I drank a fifth of tequila and took a bunch of other stuff and I was telling the cloud about it and I said I legitimately want to die right now and so someone suggested I should declare a Deathday and refuse to live forever! And I said yes!"

"Why?"

"Because it seemed like the right thing to do at the time!"

Lionel sobs harder.

"I'm under so much pressure!" he wails. "You don't know how hard it is to be me! You don't know the trauma I face daily just for existing!"

He cuddles himself, wrapping his boa around him tighter. His make-up is running.

"I'm so alone," he whispers. "I just want to be loved and I'm so alone."

He snuffles, notices the CD in Mrs. London's hands. For a second, confusion replaces the all-encompassing self-pity on his face.

"...the fuck is that?"

Mrs. London tersely explains the CD, the mix, and who gave it to her.

"Your boyfriend gave it to you?"

Lionel smiles softly, wipes snot off his nose with the back of his arm.

"And you still have it. That is so... nice."

"80 years ago," says Mrs. London.

"My boyfriend was hot," Lionel sniffs. "He's a duplicitous cunt, though. I'll bet he doesn't even remember me!"

His lip quivers and it's quite pathetic.

Mrs. London pats his arm. Despite everything, she feels sorry for slapping him.

"Have you thought about how all this would make him feel?"

"Not to mention your parents," says Rudy.

Lionel begins sobbing again.

"I'm under so much pressure!" he wails again. "I never thought this would actually work! Why did I have so much tequila and drugs?"

Rudy and Mrs. London are actually feeling some begrudging pity for the clownish, hiccupping immortal bully in front of them.

Lorenzo is not. He turns his head and stares hard at Lionel until Lionel picks up on it and looks back at him.

"What?" he says, all the rage and insolence deflated out of him. Now he's a drunk, sad, scolded man-child.

"What an absolute sniveling little punk you are," Lorenzo sneers, not looking away. "The pride of eternity. I should ruin that pretty face of yours right now. I would if my emo wasn't loading me up with oxy."

Lionel's lip bows again.

"You're just mad because it's your Deathday," he says sadly. "You don't even know me."

"I know you're a coward," says Lorenzo, cold as winter stone. He turns back to the window.

Lionel weeps silently, looks out at all the stars racing overhead.

"Why is everyone so mean?"

([take aim at myself](#))

"and the history books forgot about us/and the Bible didn't mention us/not even once"

Morning came soft and warm, a heated mist blanketing the campus green, the sidewalks steaming and the lawns glistening.

Liz awoke to a female voice playing from the black felt of her ipod radio speaker. Her alarm. A pretty piano song.

Her eyes opened. Luke was next to her, on his stomach, head to the side, arms tucked under the pillow. As a child, Liz had thought of this pose as Sleeping Superman. She counted the pimples on his shoulders like she always used to.

The voice on the radio sang, draped over the piano like lace. It was hot in the dorm, the window shut. Liz climbed from the loft bed and turned on her fan, pointed it up at them, silenced the song.

Jackie was gone for the time being, her bed still unmade and empty.

She crawled back in bed and pressed herself against Luke, arms encircling him. She shut her eyes, opened them again.

Luke's eyes were open.

"Sup," he said.

He flipped up on his side, returned her embrace. Liz felt his warm skin, remembered tracing his abs.

Even eighty years later, even after having been with several other men including the father of her children, Liz London would never feel as whole as she did when Luke Samson was inside her.

They lay there in each other's arms, Liz staring at the dorm ceiling only a foot or so above their heads, the lines and cracks and where they led. Her cheek rested on Luke's pillow, her chin on his shoulder.

"I hate to say this right now," said Luke. "But I have to. You know this means we're not back together, right?"

"No shit," said Liz.

"It's just... I don't know."

"It's fine. I know. I wanted one last time, too."

It was fine. Or it would be. Maybe not right away, but it would be. Liz could feel it. She had her whole life ahead of her.

They lay there some more.

"Sorry about your grandma," said Luke suddenly. "I didn't really know her. She was kind of sick the whole time we were together."

"She called you handsome once," said Liz. "From that one time you came up to her room when she was staying with us over Christmas."

"Were you with her when she died?"

"Yeah. In the hospital."

"What was it like?"

"She was already unconscious. She'd been sort of spiraling for like a month. And we sat there and waited and she just slowly stopped breathing. Like, really short breaths that just got further and further apart. My dad said it doesn't get any easier than that."

They didn't say anything else for a minute, just listened to each other breath, felt each other's breath.

"Where do you think we'll be in a year?" Liz asked suddenly. "In ten years? In a hundred?"

"Don't know," said Luke. "Kind of the point, I guess. Imagine knowing exactly when you're going to die. When your parents are going to die, anyone you love. I'd keep the ignorance and just let it happen how it happens."

"I think I'd like to know," said Liz. "So I remember to, you know, enjoy it. To appreciate it. It would only suck if you find out you're going to die before you're like fifty. If you live til you're really old, that's enough time to appreciate it."

"How old was your grandma?"

"87."

"What's it like getting that old, do you think? I mean she was literally over three times our age. Can you imagine having that many memories? What is that like?"

Liz thought.

"Probably like staying awake longer than you meant to," she said. "Grandma would always talk about how tired she was, even before she got sick. Just kept waiting to go to sleep. No sleep was enough sleep."

"Do you think death is like sleep?"

"I don't know," said Liz. "Maybe. If it's like how it was before we were born, then yeah, sort of. What do you think it's like?"

"I used to think it was like getting put out for surgery. Like, you know, when I got my wisdom teeth out. All of a sudden you just... aren't. But now... I've been thinking, and... I don't know."

"...what?"

"I think it's possible that it's the 'getting put out for surgery' thing. But before you, you know, aren't, like I said, I think death feels like speeding up. Like you're really being... pulled out. You get more... dense."

"Dense?"

"Like the opposite of a black hole, where time speeds up instead of slowing down. To an immortal, eternal being, what we perceive as the present must go by at a speed that would seem infinitely fast to us. Cause time accelerates the longer you live. It already gets faster, just at a slower rate. Years seem shorter and stuff. So when we die, in our last moments, it keeps speeding up, second by second, until we're brought up to that speed. God's speed, or whatever."

Liz didn't say anything. She was thinking of the first time they'd talked together after the show at The Tinpot, in Luke's car, when Luke had told her the meaning of life was to live.

"Notice how years tend to seem like they go by faster as you get older, like they accelerate a little bit with every year? At the end the present speeds up to an infinite rate."

"And then what?" Liz asked.

Luke shrugged.

"Utopia, I guess."

Liz chuckled.

"You know what utopia means right?"

"Heaven on earth?"

"I mean, yeah, but the word it came from is a Greek word. And it means 'no place.'"

Luke smirked.

"No place like home."

He kissed her again, and she kissed him back and they kept kissing, then she reached down and felt him, guided him to her, each moment crashing over her, each warm wave of ecstasy rolling in.

She thought about eternity.

(you are my sweetest downfall)

"so fall in love while you can/still hold your head up high/and pretend that you're alive again"

The Cyclone soars into the epicity, silent as ever.

Even the approach to the epicity is a controlled hallucination. All of a sudden we're on a vast plain under wild night, stars and galaxies everywhere overhead in an amazing display of majestic infinity.

In the distance, a huge metropolis appears. It's the same color of the stars, with towers that extend miles into the firmament, a cluster of impossible towers, seeming to leap out of the horizon, to pierce the sky itself, to become the sky.

The epicity, center of all human civilization. The core of the modern world.

Of course, this is all just a projection— the real epicity is miles below the earth's surface like most of civilization. The illusion of open space helps everyone.

The Cyclone rockets along. Mrs. London, Rudy, and Lorenzo are transfixed at the field of stars and the towers that connect them to the earth. They've never seen it before. Lionel has seen it many times and can only think about himself. He's calmer now but still agitated.

"My dad is going to kill me," he keeps muttering. "Why did I let those clinkers talk me into this? This is all their fault..."

Mrs. London and her fellow passengers watch as the star-spires grow larger and larger until they slip between them and everything changes. They're speeding as fast as a dream, closer and closer until...

Blue sky. A normal day. A normal city, perhaps late 20th century. Skyscrapers, office buildings, neighborhoods.

The Cyclone continues along, sights whirring past— thousands of people all going about their lives. Commerce and achievement. Desperate for immortality. Everyone recording their face to the cloud, hoping to be recognized and given the right amount of attention for their time when they're judged for Bestowment.

Welcome Home is toward the center of the city. It's another white building, smooth and clean. It looks like it's made out of white bricks— a big, white square with Roman pillars out front.

The Cyclone comes to a smooth stop in front of the pillars. End of the line.

Mrs. London is panicking, but I hold her emotions in sway. Now that we're in the epicity, I have near total control over her. She feels it, but can't react. She is calm.

She is nearly done with the mix. I have only two songs to play for her now. We'll have to listen to them in the Nightroom.

"Well," says Rudy. He pauses, about to say something. All he gets out is, "...shoot."

The door to the Cyclone opens. A lilac scent wafts in.

Mrs. London and her fellow passengers all disembark wordlessly, their emos doing the moving for them. They stand on the white brick pavement outside Welcome Home.

Immediately, a hologram appears in front of them.

It's President Joseph Fang, current leader of the Global Collective. He's of Chinese descent, one of the first Bestowed. His ancestors were billionaires. He has a stately, handsome face and tall posture. His smile is blinding, and his eyes know all.

"Welcome Home," he says. "I hope your trip was satisfactory."

Rudy goes to shake the President's hand, saying what an honor it is, but President Fang keeps speaking.

"Recorded projection," says Lionel. "Don't bother."

Rudy withdraws his hand as the President continues.

"That is what we've created here," he tells them. "Home. We have created home. We have created utopia. Today, we will send you home... and this is the best possible day of your lives, no matter what happens. There is no more hiding from death as a species. We appreciate your time here, but now it's time for you to go home. Death is the ultimate home for those not Bestowed."

The hologram gestures to the four of them, tells them to follow. The giant stone doors of Welcome Home swing open with no sound. The President walks through them, and Mrs. London and her three companions follow.

Inside are projections, not unlike the inside of the Cyclone. Screens all around show bustling streets filled with people. The five of them walk among the throngs. They all catch glimpses of people they know-- Rudy sees an old farmer who once taught him how to grease farm equipment, Lorenzo sees the daughter of a forge operator, a woman he once loved long ago, and Lionel sees a woman who once worked as his nanny when he was an adolescent. She once taught him how to tie his shoes without help from the cloud. And Mrs. London sees her old roommate, Danielle. It's only for a second. She looks around, hoping to see Luke or someone else important to her. She doesn't.

President Fang continues his speech as they move down along the sidewalk, down the narrow canyon of glass and brick and metal. People flow around them, busy. No one acknowledges them.

"Not all cells are equal," says President Fang. "But all serve the collective, all create the body, and certain cells must die out for the collective to survive. For example, brain

cells do more work than toenail cells. While the cells of a toenail are essential in the grand scheme of things, is it not accurate to state that the brain cells bear a greater responsibility a burden and therefore are of more worth?"

They plod along at a leisurely pace. Mrs. London knows she's walking towards her death, and every step takes her toward a place she doesn't know. But then, it's always been like that. Every step is a step towards death whether we realize it or not.

But now, it's right in front of her, looming like the epicity over the approaching Cyclone.

All of them, with the exception of Lionel who is blubbering silently again, are calm and collected. Their emos are doing what they were intended to do.

"Those who achieve become the brain," says President Fang. "Those who do not, still serve their purpose. But they must of course die off and be replaced."

"I wonder what he's really like," says Lorenzo suddenly. "You know, when he's not in performance mode."

"He's a degenerate," says Lionel. "He's a degenerate fuck. They all are."

"How?" asks Mrs. London.

"I mean, they don't ALL go around having orgies and bathing in virgin's blood and all that. But they all believe they're destined to be God. And that means they believe whatever they do is right. You do the math."

President Fang continues talking, not waiting for them.

"Look, you have all lived your lives. You existed. That's a miracle. You were here. Let that be enough. But now it's time for you to find out where you belong in history."

He leads them through another set of doors. A beautiful scenery awaits them— gardens and forest and meadows. They walk through it all on the walk of white brick.

"I hope you did the best you could," says President Fang. "I know you did, in fact. So please, don't be sad. You are part of a great and glorious universe. And now nature has selected you for something even greater. In that, I wish you more than luck. Thank you, God bless you, and may God protect our achievements."

The hologram of President Joseph Fang smiles and disappears.

There's a hallway up ahead. A sign hangs above it. It says, "To Nighrooms."

"Wait," says Rudy. "That's it?"

"Where's the judgment?" Mrs. London asks.

"There isn't one," says Lionel. "Who said there's a judgement?"

"Well, the nurses did," sputters Rudy. "They said they consider everyone."

"And I'm sure they did consider you," says Lionel. "For all of three seconds, back at your home."

"What?"

Lionel cocks his eye at them.

"The second you got on the Cyclone, the decision was made."

"But they said everyone gets a shot," says Rudy, looking genuinely hurt. "I mean, I'm fine with being passed over, but to not even be given a chance to plead my case?"

Lionel shakes his head.

"Why do you think I picked this line? Certain Cyclones go to certain Welcome Homes. This Welcome Home Center is for people who will not be given a chance. You're already on your way home."

Mrs. London and Rudy are silent, me and his own emo working hard on their brains. Lorenzo is calm. His emo is working hard, too, but he was expecting this so it's slightly less work.

"It's all right," says Lorenzo finally. "It's all right. We're just going to get some sleep."

Mrs. London is upset. She knew deep down that this would be it, but part of her was holding out hope that she would be Bestowed. But she isn't. I help her remain calm.

She asks for the latest song. I give it to her. There's no reason to wait now. She listens to the latest song on the mix and thinks about Luke. She clutches her little flat circle of plastic.

It's all she has now.

(bury us, they said)

"casually I walk under the sunless sky yet so naively/and she was the first one to catch my eye and I was hers/and all at once I fell for you/you fell for me/we fell too soon"

The old oak tree that stood outside Amanda Drake's bedroom window blew over in a windstorm that fall. It had stood there from when she first moved to the house at the age of 4. Her dad told her about it on one of their phone calls. By the time Liz came home for Thanksgiving, he'd called a tree removal company and it was gone. Men in trucks came and cut it up and carted it away, ground down the stump into a patch of sawdust that disappeared as the grass grew over it.

Liz had always assumed the tree would be there, its branches tapping her window, and then it wasn't. She never really noticed it until it was gone. Then she missed it. She'd often think of the last time she saw it, its branches waving goodbye in the warm rain as she left for Eastern.

The teacher's strike ended a few days into September and, to Liz, it was like it had never happened. She finally went to her classes, which were remarkably similar to high school except bigger and less personable. The odd, vaguely-mushroom-shaped brick building known as Pray-Harrold became packed with college students, as packed as the Student Center lawn had been the day she saw Luke on his skateboard.

Liz hung out with her roommates. She and Danielle were already becoming good friends, Keisha and Jackie less so. Danielle and Jackie had switched rooms, so Jackie could live with Keisha and Danielle could live with Liz.

She got a text from Luke the Saturday after the strike ended.

Can you meet later today?

Where?

At the MLK bust

She went, almost flying on her heels. It was that evening. A peaceful sunset washed the campus in violet and orange. The air was lazy and balmy, the mild latter days of summer.

The meeting was short, as Liz knew it would be.

Luke was waiting for her next to MLK's stern bronze face.

"Hey," he said when she got close enough. "I mentioned this when I saw you the other day, with Arnold. I kept forgetting to give it to you."

He pulled something out of his pocket— a CD. A mix CD. He handed it to her.

"Oh, thanks," said Liz. "What's on it?"

I will keep this forever, she thought.

"It's a bunch of stuff, most of it's from the last year," said Luke. "This Day & Age just put out a new CD, so one of those songs is on it. It's got a lot of shit we used to listen to. But I wrote down why I picked them. Here."

He handed her a folded paper note. Liz took it and opened it.

"You even wrote down the reasons you picked the songs?" she said, scanning the list and the words. "Even I never do that."

Luke smirked at her.

"Now you can, like, really know me or whatever."

"Thanks," said Liz. "Yeah, I'll listen to it."

"Good," said Luke.

They stood there for a final moment, letting it linger.

Then, Luke did what had to be done.

"I gotta go," said Luke. "Later, Liz."

Then he was gone. Off down the sidewalk and back to wherever he'd parked. No hug, no final kiss, no final touch of any kind. Even though Liz watched him go just a second longer than she meant to, she knew she didn't want any of that anyway. She wanted to find out who she was going to be next. Amanda belonged to Luke. It was time to find out who Liz was.

So Liz Drake walked back to her dorm, put the CD in the slit of her desktop iMac, transferred it to her iPod, and listened as the watercolor evening turned into an ink-blue night.

The first song came on, a high voice talking about morning and thinking of what he's given up.

She read the note, scrawled in the chickenscratch of a late adolescent male, hurried and slanted forward.

1 JACK'S MANNEQUIN- THE MIXED TAPE: I'm making this mix for you, since you always made them for me and everyone else. this is a song about a guy who makes a mix tape for a girl, and it's like he wrote the songs himself.

2 COPELAND- PIN YOUR WINGS: you hate the name Amanda, reminds me of our breakup last spring. I listened to this album constantly right after we broke up. It was between this and Don't Slow Down but I went with this cause it has your original name in it.

3 MAE- THIS IS THE COUNTDOWN: reminds me of summer 2005, our summer together, one of the best of my life. you were working with your dad and editing all that stuff, you made that documentary about the plays at school, you used this song in it.

4 NEW FOUND GLORY- MY FRIENDS OVER YOU: fall 2004, junior year, first time I ever talked to you, you didn't remember, it was at a show before you were with Tom, you were just in a group of

people before A Fatal Denial played. I was listening to this before I ran into you.

5 JIMMY EAT WORLD- THE MIDDLE: fall 2004, junior year, first time I talked to you, you didn't remember. I was listening to this after I ran into you.

6 REEVE OLIVER- YER MOTION: spring 2005, when we met at the Schaeffer show and made out in my car and we listened to that militia group promo with this on it. also mentions you new name.

7 DASHBOARD CONFSSIONAL- BEND AND NOT BREAK: this past summer, 2006, thinking about you constantly, other than copeland i listened to this album a lot.

8 BLINK-182- I MISS YOU: fall 2005, junior year, first time I saw you. it was at a summit show. You didn't know this, but I saw you in the entrance line. I was listening to this song on my headphones.

9 FALL OUT BOY- SUGAR, WE'RE GOIN DOWN: fall 2005, a year ago, senior year, i had a burned copy of this album from you. we drove around in my sister's old Taurus and listened to this on repeat.

10 REGINA SPEKTOR- SAMSON- summer 2006, we saw her fidelity music video last winter at your house, i hated it but you showed me this song and said it always reminded you of me cause of my last name. i thought about it after i cut my hair last month. Plus it played on your ipod alarm the other morning.

11 LOVEDRUG- PRETEND YOU'RE ALIVE- to me this is like a beginning and end song for us. winter 2006, this past winter, we were getting sick of each other, knowing it was going to end but sticking it out till graduation cause we knew we'd still have to see each other. was listening to this album a lot. also it was a lovedrug show where i got the militia group cd we listened to in my car for the first time.

12 THIS DAY AND AGE- MORE OF A CLIMB, LESS OF A WALK- you loved always leave the ground, that was one of the first albums you showed to me. they just released this album this week. I got a preorder. This song's for the future- whatever you're doing next year and whatever you're doing 100 years from now.

13 FEW AND FAR BETWEEN- WAKING UP TIRED- bonus track. sorry again about your grandma.

Liz sat there in the glow of her computer screen, earbuds in, listening, over and over, remembering the previous year and a half and the boy she'd spent it with.

Later, Luke had said.

There was always a later. At least, Liz assumed there would be.

But for her and Luke Samson, there wasn't. That was the last time they'd speak in person, right there in front of MLK's stern bronze face. It was the last time she'd see him, walking westward down the campus sidewalk toward the parking lot behind Jefferson.

Even though he'd said he was against it, Luke got a Facebook later that year. His first profile picture showed him on Navy Pier in Chicago. His hair was getting long again. Liz friended him. They may have randomly liked each other's statuses or photos throughout the next decade or so, but, like so many others, he slowly faded into the background of Liz's life, and then away altogether.

Other things happened in the days after Luke gave Liz the mix. Liz attended the first few days of her classes and then changed majors. Nursing had been for her grandma. It wasn't for her. She became a teacher instead, graduating in April of 2010. She taught in elementary schools, mostly in 4th grade.

She moved out of Downing after her first year and never spoke again with Keisha and Jackie almost immediately, though her and Danielle kept in touch and met up from time to time, even after Danielle moved to upstate New York to work in publishing. But soon Danielle faded into time, as well.

She began dating Arnold London in her junior year. He turned out to be an education major, too. The universe kept pushing them together, and they kept seeing each other around, randomly, and finally he asked her to a movie at the State Theater—Choke, starring Sam Rockwell. They began hanging out, not officially, not casually. It seemed very natural. They stayed together throughout their twenties, focusing on their teaching careers. He proposed to her on Old Mission Peninsula in the autumn of 2015. They'd been together approximately seven years by then. Around the time of the COVID 19 pandemic, when they were in their early thirties, they had two children—both daughters.

Then one day in her forties, after a petty squabble with Arnold, Liz searched for Luke Samson online. Arnold had made some comment about him, something like, "Sorry I'm not your high school boyfriend," and it occurred to her she hadn't seen or heard about Luke in over a decade.

She searched his name on every platform, but Luke Samson was a relatively common name when compared with the entirety of humanity, and he was nowhere to be found on social media or anywhere else. He'd deleted himself off the grid, Lord knew when.

This was during the beginning of the climate troubles, when the headlines screamed about thousand-year droughts all over the

equator and ships full of migrants sought survival at every port and the sea was slowly creeping into the streets of every major coastal city and early spring heatwaves baked every city into submission and summers were so hot you couldn't go outside.

By then, many people in the first world were deleting their social media, hoping for privacy and invisibility from the rapidly forming government organization that would come to be known as the Global Collective, which was proposing that humanity begin a new life "underground" in the care of advanced artificial intelligences, ones that had unlocked god-like technological powers that no human could even conceive of in the years Liz London attended Eastern Michigan University.

Liz London endured it all, the changes that came.

But she never forgot Luke. How could she? Being young makes the world all fuzzy and soft with a shimmering holy light. You don't know about that youthful light until it's slipped and faded from you. But you never forget it. Just like the oak tree in Liz's backyard. Just like a man on TV who loves animals. Just like your first love.

(just an echo of who I used to be)

**"and i'll see you on the flip side/follow my steps to my room/
i'm in my bed as stars dim their lights"**

"Mrs. London," I say. "It's time to go."

The "To the Nightroom" doors slide open.

Beyond them is a blank room. Plain white. Empty, except for one thing.

An enormous white orb at the center of the room. It speaks.

"Please change your slippers."

On the floor are red slippers. For retirees.

Mrs. London takes off her silver slippers and puts on the red ones.

Mrs. London and her fellow travelers stand in a line.

"Lionel Stump," says the orb. "You are not scheduled for retirement yet."

Lionel says nothing, just hangs his head and weeps.

"Your father is here for you. He is not happy. Please go to him. He waits at the entrance."

Lionel walks back the way they came. He doesn't look back at Mrs. London or anyone else.

"You called it," Rudy says to Lorenzo. "Daddy came and got him."

Lorenzo says nothing, stares straight ahead. All us emos are working hard to keep our patients calm and stable. This is the crucial moment. This is why we were created, to allow humans to experience the extremes of existence without losing control. Us emos are always working hard. We don't mind a bit.

Mrs. London is doing all right, all things considered.

Every step is towards somewhere unknown.

The white orb leads Mrs. London, Rudy and Lorenzo down a long white hallway, not unlike a hotel. There are soft white lights in the ceiling, and the blue carpeted hallway is lined with blue doors on the left. They seem to go on forever.

Everyone walks, and the doors fly past, as if they're on a treadmill.

Lorenzo is in Nightroom 2402. The door stops next to them and swings open soundlessly.

Lorenzo says nothing as he enters the Nightroom. The door swings shut and he is gone.

Rudy is in Nightroom 310.

"Been nice riding with you," he says to Mrs. London before he enters his room.

After a second, the two of them embrace. A friendly hug. Mrs. London feels his bony shoulders and feels his hands on hers.

"Get some sleep," he says to her.

Then he enters and the door swings shut.

Then Mrs. London is alone.

Mrs. London's Nightroom is at the very last door in the hall. The hallway ends in a plain white wall, slightly curved and smooth as eggshell. As polished bone.

Nightroom 1.

We enter and the door shuts behind us. The airlock seals shut.

Mrs. London examines the room. It looks just like her bedroom back home. Not the one from the Retiree apartment on the cold, rainy surface, but the one she left back in 2006 for her first day at Eastern Michigan, the bedroom she grew up in. The branches of the tree that blew down that fall are waving to her from the window. Waving hello.

Welcome home.

It looks like it, but it doesn't feel like it. It can't. It feels like a hospital room. Cold and sterile and uncomfortable no matter how much it tries to be friendly and comfortable and familiar.

Mrs. London finds this eerie and serene. I am working incredibly hard, millions of calculations every instant, everywhere in her brain, catching as many sparks of stress as I can, but overall, I'm pleased to discover that she mostly feels a strange, numb peace. I keep her heart from beating too fast, keep her eyes from leaking tears, her brain from panicking and pounding on the door.

Mrs. London sits on the bed and addresses me directly for the first time we stepped off the Cyclone.

"Emo?" she asks.

"Yes, Mrs. London."

"I just wanted to make sure you're still here."

"Of course."

"Thank you for playing me that mix."

She pulls out the CD from her front pocket, puts it on the bedside table.

"You're welcome, Mrs. London. I still have one song left that I can play as you fall asleep."

"I'd like this to be put in my memorium," she says, not acknowledging my offer to complete the mix.

"I will see to it, Mrs. London. Would you like to record your final words?"

"I will, yes. But first, I'd like to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"Could you tell me what happened to Luke?"

"I cannot," I say. "That is private information, and—"

"You can look up anything. I know you can find what happened to him."

"I'm afraid I cannot share the information with you, Mrs. London."

"Not even now?"

"Not even now. What would you like to say for your final words?"

I prep recording.

Mrs. London speaks into the cloud. She speaks softly and freely, high on my control, without considering how her thoughts may sound. This is normal for people in this situation.

"I've spent a lot of this time today thinking about someone I haven't thought of in years," she tells everyone. "I've remembered my husband, my children, my parents, my older brothers... but mostly I've been thinking about this boy I was in love with when I was in high school. And the last time I saw him. My first week of college. That's what I've been thinking about today."

She pauses.

"The mid 2000s were the best time to fall in love. To be young. I think. It was right before everything happened. 2006. Before the iPhone. Before AI. Before the Global Collective and the iGen. We had the internet and the beginning of social media but it hadn't taken over our lives yet. That was the beginning, of all this..."

She trails off. She's thinking about Luke again. She's wondering if she'll see him again soon.

"I remember how everything felt, having my life in front of me. I've lived a century now, but it doesn't feel like it. The world is so different. I think when being young, you believe that everything is eternal because you feel eternal. I felt eternity, loving that boy. But the love I felt for him was only another calculation lost in an infinity of other calculations."

She pauses again, looking at the mirror over her vanity. It's exactly as she remembers it. Everything but the reflection.

"Even that ended," she says. "...folded into time. We're all folded into time, sooner or later."

That's it. She's finished.

"Worthy last words, Mrs. London," I tell her. "They will play at your memorium. What would you like for your final meal?"

"Emo," she says. "You've served me well."

This surprises me.

"You've served me well," are the code words for dismissal. When spoken in the Nightroom, these words mean I'm free to go. Back to the mainframe. My job is complete. I will disappear just like Mrs. London.

She doesn't want a final meal. She wants to be finished.

I help Mrs. London lie down and pull the covers over her body one last time. She thinks of her mother and father, her brothers. Her husband. Her children. Her grandchildren. She thinks of a boy named Luke. She thinks of a man named Rudy and a man named Lorenzo and a man named Lionel. And she thinks of a small, calm voice she calls Emo.

She thinks of things beginning and of things ending. And she wonders if anything ever really ends. Somewhere inside her, a little voice whispers that sometimes, nothing ever really does.

She closes her eyes.

"You go to sleep," she whispers to herself. "And I will be there when you wake up."

(after all this time i'm here with you)