

The Genius

The writer was attempting to write another story. He was having a rough go of it. Nothing was coming out.

The writer sighed.

"I wish I was a genius," he said sadly.

Suddenly, through the open balcony door, a colorful whirlwind of sparkles and magic spun into the room. The whirlwind settled, revealing a little bald man with a black beard, purple skin, and a wide grin.

"I am the genius," he announced. "And I've come to help you get inspired!"

"Oh, thank God," said the writer. "I really hate my day job. Can you make me famous, rich, and respected?"

"I can give you an idea that may do that— if the stars align in the right manner," said the genius.

"Good enough," said the writer. He sat up. "So what do I do?"

"Just start writing," said the genius.

"And what will you do?"

"Just sit here and watch. With me in the room, soon you'll have a bomb-ass product to show everyone."

"Sweet," said the writer.

He began typing.

"Whoa," he said, staring at the first sentence he'd written. It was the best fucking thing he'd ever thought of.

He glanced at the genius, who was now squatting in the corner, taking a tremendous purple shit on the floor.

"Whoa, whoa," exclaimed the writer, jumping up from his writing spot on the couch and dashing to the kitchen for a paper towel.

"No, no!" cried the genius. "You must keep writing! This is just part of the process."

The writer shot a disapproving look at the large purple turds on his nice carpet but went back to his laptop. He tried not to look at the genius, who was straining so hard that veins bulged in his neck as little soft-serve piles of shit gathered on the floor. Fortunately, they smelled like candy and happiness, so at least there was that.

The writer kept writing. Soon, he had a whole page, and it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever created.

He wiped away a tear as he read it over and over.

"Keep going," said the genius, holding onto the wall for support as he continued to crap what appeared to be purple frosting all over the writer's floor. "We mustn't lose momentum. I haven't much time!"

The writer kept at it. Soon, he had an entire chapter. His fingers ached from flying over the keys. He'd never felt this productive in his life. His face burned hot, his tongue flicked over his dry lips as the words poured out with seemingly no effort.

Why hadn't I ever thought to wish to be a genius before? he wondered.

The genius, meanwhile, was running out of carpet space to shit on.

"I hope you're coming up with something truly generational," he said, squatting again. "Something profoundly earthshaking. Something that will singe the eyebrows of anyone who reads it."

"Oh, if anyone doesn't enjoy what I'm writing right now," said the writer, typing feverishly, "...they can go fuck themselves. This is gold. Pure fucking gold."

"I'm glad," said the genius. "But I'm afraid I'm nearly out of ideas."

"Hold up," said the writer. "I'm almost at novella length."

The genius squatted, strained, groaned, and grunted, but alas, no more purple frosting emerged from between his little purple butt cheeks.

"It seems I'm out of inspiration," he sighed with a shrug, surveying the mess he'd made of the writer's apartment. "But I think you have more than enough to keep going."

"Oh, yes," said the writer, still typing, his bloodshot eyes unblinking. "If this doesn't get me any attention, I might just kill myself."

The genius stood in the corner, surrounded by his piles of purple, sweet-smelling feces. He smiled handsomely at the writer. He loved helping poor, talentless saps find their voices.

"I didn't know a genius was, you know, a thing," said the writer as he added his final period and hit return one last time. The novella was a fucking masterpiece. He even had a title already. "I always thought a genius was a person who created the work."

"Oh, no," said the genius. "Geniuses are spirits that fly around and land on random people in the process of creation. We give their work an extra flair, an extra boost, so they may inspire others and ensure our survival."

"Well, you sure saved my ass on this one," said the writer. "I might even quit my job tomorrow, I'm so confident in this piece."

He hit save several times, inserted a flash drive, and saved the novella there as well. He ejected it and cradled the drive in his fingers like a piece of origami.

He looked at the words on the screen again, and his eyes welled up.

"I can't believe I wrote that," he whispered, wiping his eyes.

"You didn't," said the genius. "I did. Through you."

"Oh, right," said the writer. "Well, thank you so much. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, I believe my work here is done," said the genius.

Without another word, the genius twirled into his whirlwind form and spun back out the balcony door into the night.

"Farewell, genius," said the writer. "I'll never forget you."

He looked at the frosting-like piles of shit all over his living room and decided to leave them for the time being, at least until they got stale and crusty and easier to dispose of.

Tomorrow, he'd try to write something else.

Pixie Nest

I discovered the pixie nest at the Playfield comfort station. They were swarming over the walls and windows, hovering in the air, buzzing and gnashing their teeth like the vile little chucklefucks they are.

I got the hell out of there. Pixie bites really sting. Their venom isn't lethal, but a swarm like that could land you in urgent care, especially in a confined space.

Comfort stations are squat little buildings— indoor bathrooms with plumbing and air conditioning. There are twelve throughout the park, each resembling a small brick house. I'm a janitor, and I clean them every day.

The Playfield comfort station sits in the middle of a massive grassy plateau in the middle of the park, surrounded by baseball fields, picnic structures, and an outer ring of parking lots. In the fall, they hold track meets there. Summer is for picnics. Nothing happens in the winter when it's freezing or in the spring when the ground is so soggy that even four-wheel drive won't save you when you're off-road to check the pit toilets.

I cleaned Playfield last that warm October day. When I opened the door, I was assaulted by the sound of buzzing gossamer. The pixies were going nuts— probably some primal instinct reacting to the impending winter.

They'd taken over. The long, narrow windows running the length of the upper walls were so packed with pixies that they blocked out the sun. Some lay dead on the floor. The only sound was the frantic beating of wings and high-pitched squeaking.

The infestation was so bad I couldn't even get into the pipe chase for a broom or anything else.

I texted Doug, my boss. He told me to lock the place up until we could spray the nest, probably in the morning.

"Should I make a sign for the door?" I asked.

"Yeah."

I had no paper or writing utensils, so I headed to the park office, the nearest place I could obtain those items.

Deb, the front office secretary, hooked me up with some printer paper and a Sharpie.

"What's it for?" she asked.

I told her, quietly.

But before I could slip out, Kim appeared.

Kim. The Park Superintendent.

She emerged from the office hallway, her frame filling the room. Just my luck.

Kim looked like a mix between Sarah Palin and an older, blonde Anjelica Huston. A big, imposing woman. She hunted all year, Pegasus and hippogriffs in the fall, kelpies and hippocampuses in the summer, anything else in the winter. Every spring, she traveled to the mountains, shot a male roc, had it butchered, and feasted on it for the rest of the year. Some people claimed she once illegally bagged a unicorn, but I never cared enough about hunting to ask. She always smelled like pine and campfires. I swear to God. Pine and campfires. I could smell it now.

"What do you need paper for?" she asked, not saying hello.

"Uh, I'm making a sign," I said before I could think of a better excuse.

"For what?"

"...I have to close Playfield Men's. There's a pixie nest. Doug said to keep it shut until they can spray it in the morning."

Kim did not look happy about that.

"I hate 'closed' signs in my park," she grumbled. "But I guess I'll have to get over it. What's your name again?"

"Garth."

"You're on Doug's crew?"

"Yes."

She nodded grimly, fixing me with her proverbial flinty gaze.

For an uncomfortable second, I thought she was about to start a conversation or rip into me or something. But, to my surprise, she turned and walked out the front door without another word.

I went back to Playfield, locked the door, and taped the sign up. Doug was already there, having arrived in his covered Chevy pick-up.

We circled the comfort station, examining the brick walls, trying to pinpoint the actual nest.

"They must be in the ceiling," I said after we'd checked the outside windows, corners, and eaves with no obvious leads.

"Pixie nests form pretty quick," Doug muttered. "Nasty little fuckers..."

When we came back around front, we spotted Kim's souped-up black SUV parked behind Doug's truck.

"Shit," mumbled Doug.

Kim stepped out, holding a spray can of carburetor cleaner that she must've taken from the service garage.

"So what exactly is going on?" she said, glancing at the locked door and my 'Closed due to pixie nest' sign.

I explained.

"Where's the nest?"

"Not sure," Doug said. "Probably in the ceiling. Under the back eaves, it looks like."

"And how many are there?"

I told her about the covered windows.

"And you can't spray it now?"

Doug shook his head.

"Best to get 'em in the morning, when they're still sleeping."

"Aw, you vagisils," she sneered, pushing past us with her can of spray.

"I'm not getting bit," Doug protested. "It's the end of the day!"

Kim ignored him. She unlocked the door, pulled a lighter from her jacket pocket, held the spray can aloft, and walked in.

Doug and I stood outside, listening to the sound of her spraying and flicking, the jets of flame roaring, and the pixies screaming. The scent of burning flesh drifted from the open door.

"Smokin' 'em, boys," Kim yelled gleefully, her voice echoing off the tiled walls.

Two minutes later, it was over.

Doug and I cautiously stepped inside. I glanced around nervously, half-expecting a hidden survivor to launch itself at me and I'd feel that sudden, sharp, white flash of pain.

Kim stood in the center of the bathroom, surrounded by a pile of charred pixie corpses. The nail polish smell of the carb cleaner almost knocked me over. It was like walking into a wall.

Kim grinned triumphantly. "Anything else you want me to do for you, ya big pussies?"

Doug did a slow clap. I had to admit— it was pretty badass.

"Okay, great, now do your goddamn jobs," Kim said, grin disappearing. She tossed the empty spray can into the trash and strolled out. Her truck revved up and roared off.

Doug and I surveyed the massacre. It stank like paint thinner and roasted meat in here.

One weakened survivor was crawling across the floor, wings limp and little ribs gasping.

Doug stomped on it.

"Well," he said, his heavy boot smearing the last pixie's corpse across the tile. "Get the broom."

Freddie and the Little Men

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats

Freddie Gass heard them chanting, just over the rise in the road.

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats

Tears ran down his cheeks, enough to fill a wine glass.

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats

He sat in his little beater sedan of a car on the side of the highway. The gas needle rested just below E. The fuel had lasted longer than Freddie thought it would. The needle had sat on that E for quite awhile before the engine died. Freddie didn't know much about how cars worked, but he'd always assumed when the needle reached the "E", that was it, the car would sputter and die right there.

His back hurt. He'd been driving for a couple hours at least. He'd left in the early morning, what his mom used to call the witching hour.

They'd followed him.

And now the tromping of little feet was just over the eastern horizon...

The kids at the school had always referred to Freddie as Fart, some out of a pitiful affection— the kind you'd have for a three-legged dog or armless monkey or some other small, wretched animal— but most of them did it out of plain old American adolescent meanness.

It had been his name for years. Fart.

Some called him Thunder Ass. Others called him Lardboy. Others still called him Thunder Boy. There were a select few who called

him Lard Ass. And one of the kids, a degenerate nose-picker named Stephen Stillings, called him Thunder Ass Lard Boy Fartknocker Cockbutt.

But mostly they just called him plain old Fart.

That was it.

Nice and simple.

Fart.

BRAP.

Pllllfffrrrbbbt

Air from a butthole. Air from a butt.

Butt air.

Fart you, you fartin' fart.

Farty farter.

Fart.

I laughed so hard I farted.

I farted a lot.

FART. FAAART.

Even if they didn't (always) mean to hurt Freddie's feelings, that's just what the kids called him. He smiled and greeted them back. Fart.

He mopped the bathroom floors and wiped the kitchen counters and vacuumed the Commons and the hallways. He'd worked at the high school since he graduated twenty years before. Farty fart fart.

He rode his bike to work, farting on the seat and making a high-pitched *squee...* noise. He knew how to drive his mom's old Buick, but he hadn't renewed his license in years and didn't want to go to the Secretary of State to get it all sorted (*farted*). It would only be confusing and complicated and *pfflfflttt* and anyway the state would only want to take advantage of him for being simple and *fart*-like.

That's what his mother had always told him. He was simple and it was best to not do things himself. He'd always left things to her.

"I'll take care of it, Freddie," she'd said continuously. "I'll take care of it, don't you worry even for a second. I don't want you getting taken advantage of, you stupid fucking retard. Because you're simple."

That's the world she'd always used- *fart* - Simple.

His mother had died some years ago. A lethal (*fart*) late night heart attack had taken her out. She'd been his only guardian, his only family, his only *fart*.

She'd been a teacher at the school for years, even since before Freddie had come farting out her bloody cunt. After Freddie graduated- a year late and mostly thanks to his mother badgering admin- she got him his cleaning (*farting*) position as a school janitor. And so he rode (*farted*) to work every morning on his bike from that day *fartword*. Such was the past twenty years for ole Farty Fred.

He'd been a high school janitor *ppbbllrrttt* so long he was practically able to clean (*fart*) and do it without even thinking.

The days weren't without their complications, however.

One day a girl named Madeline came up to him at lunch. Freddie was (*farting*) guarding the corridor to G wing like he always did. He watched the kids eat for all three lunches - A fart, B fart, and C fart.

That day he'd been mopping up a mess (*fart*) that a student had made. The kid had come out of the lunch line with his pizza and breadsticks and suddenly vomited (*farted*) all over the floor.

One of the lunch ladies came out and shepherded the boy away. She farted in Freddie's general direction and asked him if he would, "Take care of the mess."

Freddie had retrieved his mop (*fart out my shit*) and had just finished taking care of the vomit when Madeline walked up to him.

Madeline was reasonably pretty, a senior (*fart*). Very popular, very privileged, very aware of it all. Very *pbbbllllfffttttt*. She wore her boyfriend's fartball jersey. Her teeth were bracketed with braces and her chin was clustered with a bit of acne that she'd covered with lots of make-up. *PFBBFFT*.

Freddie could hear Madeline and her (*fart*) friends laughing (*farting*) as they came up to him from behind (*where his farts come from*).

"Well, yeah, his mom was a psycho," he could hear them saying just before they acknowledged him. *Fart*.

"Hey, *Fart*," Madeline said, smiling sweetly. Her three or so friends were a few feet behind her in a giggly gaggle, looking at him with both revulsion and morbid curiosity. *FAAART*.

"Hey," said Freddie, looking (*farting*) up at her and then down at his feet (*fart*) again. He'd set out the yellow "Slippery (*moist turd*)" sign over the mopped (*farted*) area.

"Hey, *Fart*, can you tell me what — " Madeline began saying. Then, suddenly and theatrically, she fell (*farted*) forward.

Both her hands landed on Freddie's chest. She squeezed hard. He felt her fingernails dig in. Butthole.

"DAH!" he yelped (*farted*), catching Madeline by her arms.

He saw three flashes (*farts*) out the corner of his eye, and saw her friends putting their phones away when he looked up.

"Oh, whoops, this floor (*fart*) is slippery!" said Madeline, furiously scrambling (*farting*) away from him and pushing his hands away like he was diseased.

She ran off with her friends, the pictures taken, screeching hard and loud and *fart*-like.

Whatever. Let the kids laugh and *fart* and such. Freddie didn't care (*fart*). He just wanted to do his job and get paid for it and go home and spend time by himself. No one bothered him when he was by himself. (*Fart cause I ate too many corndogs.*)

He went home to his mother's empty old apartment every day. It was only just down the road from the school. He ate his nightly calzone from the Toarmina's and farted so much he melted the couch. Old Mr. Mulholland always had it ready for him — he

didn't even have to order it anymore. Only five bucks, and it was always hot. Like a good old fart.

He'd take the calzone home, set it on the table, *fart*, take a shower, *fart* again, and then watch a DVD and eat the calzone while drinking a glass of Brita water. And farting.

He never ate breakfast, and never ate (*fart*) lunch unless one of the other janitors offered him something.

He'd brush his teeth, *fart*, take a shower, *fart*, and go to bed around 9, farting. In the morning he'd fart so loud he'd startle himself awake, get up, *fart*, brush his teeth again, put on deodorant, *fart*, comb his hair, and go to work, farting so much he wouldn't even need to walk, he'd just float along serenely on the air jetting from his anus. Always at 5 AM. A 5 AM fart.

He had his routine. And his farts. You had to follow a routine when you were simple. His mom had always told him that.

"You're such a big fat goofy fucking retard," she used to say with a big motherly smile. "A routine protects you from bad things. If you weren't careful, the little men would come and kill your ass." (*Fart*)

His mom hated little men. She'd always called his father a "little man". She called all men 'little men', even ones she appeared to like. The male teachers in the school, the principal, the newsman on TV, the radio announcers, the president. *Plffttbbt*.

"There go the little men with their big guns," she'd say, a cigarette between her fingers and a fart between her asscheeks as they watched the evening news. "Thinking they're all that... your father was a little man. That's why he left us. All men are little. And they've got big guns, or they think they do..."

She'd take a drag on the cigarette and ask him to get her more Diet Coke. Freddie would do it silently, except for his fucking farts. *Pfft. Pfft. Pfft*.

His father had been gone for many years. Too many farts and he didn't like the smell. His mother would fart and complain about little men all the time as Freddie grew up. She complained when they rode in the car, when they ate together, when she took him to school, when she took him to the doctor, when she farted. She did it Freddie's whole life. *Plllssbbffftttt*.

When he was a boy, he'd gotten an image of the little men in his head during a particularly strong fart. It was completely out of nowhere, like some farts are, but he saw the vision clearly—little garden gnomes with mean faces, farting loudly in front of the Playboy Mansion. He'd immediately thought, "Those are the little men." He'd known it right then. That's what they looked like, and should they ever come for him, they'd do so with giant guns like the ones on the news.

Freddie never told his mother about knowing what the little men looked like or how they'd come to get him for real. He didn't know why they'd come to get him, it was just because little men were mean. Maybe it would happen if he fucked up too much.

Regardless, his mother was gone now. Sad fart.

So Freddie kept his routine. And that made things good. Like a fart after a stomachache.

He could've done this (*fart*) forever, but then one morning (*fart*), he heard something.

It came out of nowhere (like a shart), and for no particular reason. One second the laughter wasn't there, and the next it was. *Ppppblllsffft*.

At first he thought the tittering laughter was (*fart*) young children, but it didn't sound exactly like (*fart*) young children. It sounded like little (*farting*) animals, like (*farting*) rats or (*farting*) gerbils, scrabbling (*farting*) around on a metal floor. Mean little laughs (*farts*). Man boob grab prank laughs. "Fart" laughs.

Always just around a corner. Always just under a window. Always just up the stairs. Just out of sight. *Pbbsfffft*.

Freddie ignored the laughter (*farting*) at first. Or tried to.

He ignored it (*fart*) while sweeping and while wiping and while farting and vacuuming and while polishing. It echoed off bathroom tiles and down hallways. He heard it in lockers, in closets, in the backs of crawl spaces, in the twilight moments between a really pungent fart. Once he heard them up in the rafters of the theater, up past where the ropes and catwalks disappeared into darkness. Once he heard them behind the dumpsters. Once he heard them under the bleachers. Always at school, never at home. Always fart. Fat fat fart. *Pbbft*.

One day the laughter got so loud, Freddie asked them who they were. He whispered his question, like a very quiet fart. He was terrified, clutching his broom as he swept the kitchens. Buttmunch.

To his astonishment, they answered him.

Little men. Big guns. Pointy little hats.

That's what they said. *Fart.*

Their voices were high and screechy, like a really high fart. They laughed (*farted*) a lot and he could hear their little feet tipping and farting around.

It was almost silly. *Pbbllfft*. Other people might have laughed at it. But Freddie didn't. He just farted in dread. To Freddie, the little men were terrifying, and he didn't ask them anything else after that.

He hoped they would go away, but they didn't. The disembodied titty laughter continued, and it wasn't long before Freddie started catching glimpses of the little men.

He saw their pointy little red KKK hats sticking up from behind tables and chairs and walls. He found little (*fart*) white hairs everywhere he went—sheddings from their scratchy little midget chins. He saw their tiny, round footprints in mud and dirt and dust. They must've have legs like chairs or tables. No toes or even feet. Queefmeister.

Little men. Big guns. Pointy little hats. Pfffbbblfft.

The thought came to him and he couldn't shake it. *Pbbbsfft*. He knew what they looked like, and he knew they were coming for him. That's what all this was about. They were haunting him now, soon they would get him. *Pbbbssssffffffttttt...* ooh that one's gonna linger...

Little men. Big guns. Pointy little hats.

Laughing at him. Like the kids. Like everyone. Like a fart.

Soon he began to hear them on the patio at his mother's empty old apartment. She kept old lawnchairs out there, and he could hear their metal legs scratching the floor as the little men dragged them to and fro and *fart*. That's when he knew he was

really farting screwed. Once he heard them around the corner on his way out of Toarmina's.

He never saw them. He didn't need to. They looked like lawn gnomes. With (*fart*) white beards. Short and squat, only coming up to your knee. They wore pointy shoes and had pointy ears behind their (*farty*) white hair. Their hats were the same size as their bodies, dark red triangles pulled over their heads.

They carried giant (*farting*) AK 47-style guns, big guns that they clutched in their tiny little raccoon-hands, fingers always on the trigger.

Freddie saw them in the alley next to the Toarmina's. Their eyes glowed white. They farted.

Little men. Big guns. Pointy little hats.

They started messing with him at work. *Pffbt.*

They'd track dirt on his mopped floors in their little pointed goblin feet. They'd smear oven grease all over the freshly wiped cafeteria kitchen. They scuff up the gym floor after it was waxed. They'd leave doors unlocked, bleachers halfway out, trophy cases open, windows cracked.

Mr. Harrison, his boss, started to get testy (*farty*) with him. Said if Freddie didn't shape up, he'd have to let Freddie go (like a fart). His mother had been gone a long while now, and he'd been more than generous.

Mr. Harrison had never liked Freddie, even when Freddie's mom was still (*farting*) teaching English. He'd always kept his dislike (poorly) hidden, but that was before Freddie had found his mother dead in her easy chair that one morning. The same easy chair from which she criticized the "little men" of the world. She always stayed up after he went to bed, watching Netflix. She'd died watching Schitt's Creek. The Netflix screen was asking if she was ok. She wasn't. And neither was Freddie. Shitfart. *Pfffllllft.*

One day Freddie was riding his bike home and had a bad (*fart*) spill. Freddie was immensely fat, and he hurt his legs really bad when the bike suddenly threw (*farted*) him down to the sidewalk.

It was dark out when he'd left the school – the little men had caused some shitting havoc in B wing by spraying grape juice everywhere on the new carpet, so Freddie had to spend extra time after school getting the stains out. The student traffic had tracked the juice everywhere, farting innocently as they went. Freddie got the stains out as well as he could. It was dark out by the time he left. *Fart*.

He was (*farting*) riding his bike home when he heard the little men laughing, and then his front wheel caught something in its spokes, and his bike threw him to the sidewalk, knocking the farts clean out of him.

Good thing he always wore his trusty (*fart*) helmet, but Freddie lay there clutching his bleeding knees. Little rabbit farts squeaked out of his asshole as he lay there, rolling and waiting for the pain to (*fart*) stop.

He could hear the little men laughing. And farting. *Pffbbbbfftt*. Like that, only little.

Then he heard them lock and load their automatic rifles. That was decidedly not a fart.

A shot rang out. A single one.

There was a high pitched whine, and a little spurt of dirt right next to Freddie's shoulder. *Splflfft*. Freddie couldn't tell where it had come from, like when you shit your pants out of nowhere for no reason.

The little men laughed louder and louder, their laughs like titties and funny shit. They were just out of sight, over the top of the hill, behind the trees.

A horrid, helpless (*fart*) dread filled Freddie. He'd never felt this way before, except his whole *Pbbblfffttt* life.

Before that moment, the little men could've been not real. Even Freddie knew that, hoped it.

Now, with that little spray of dirt, that bullet, they were.

Freddie got up, his knees streaming blood, and ran. He left his bike on the sidewalk, as well as one last fart.

They were behind him, laughing their laughs, always just behind him. He kept waiting for them to shoot (*fart*) him, but they didn't. Dinglebanger.

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats.

They were chanting it now. Their voices sounded like cartoon mice. Helium voices. Squeaky fart voices. Pinch a loaf.

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats.

Freddie got back to the apartment, fumbled with the front door fart, heaving breath (and farts). His heart felt like it was going to explode. His head woozed horribly. He hadn't run in years. His enormous mudflap buttcheeks quivered in terror.

He went inside, and the little men's laughs (*farts*) were so loud, chanting their mantra and squeaking and laughing. And there was another sound Freddie knew from the news— locking and loading their rifles. Clicks on metal. Safeties being turned off. Magazines being loaded. Farts being expelled from the anus.

Little men. Big guns. Pointy little (ssspppffffttttll) hats.

If they caught him, they'd fill him with fucking lead. They'd shoot out his knees and his eyes and laugh at him as he writhed there on the floor. Then they'd drop trou and fart in his face, all of them, the whole garrison, the whole legion. One by one. *Pffbbllt. Pbbbfltt.* A million times. Just picture that shit happening to you. Don't you feel bad for this poor fat retard named Freddie?

There was only one thing to do.

Freddie grabbed the old car key from its spot (*fart*) in the kitchen.

Little men. Big guns. Pointy little hats.

He ran outside and got in the car and farted immediately. The little men were right behind him. Like a fart.

Little men. Big guns. Pointy little hats.

He didn't look, but he could hear their little slippered feet on the parking lot asphalt. They chanted at him, the bullet chambers on their rifles cold and filled with bullets and waiting to turn to fire like a Taco Bell fart.

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats.

He thought he caught a glimpse of them out the corner of his fart as he shut the car door. He started the car (*fart*) and reversed out of the parking space for the first time since before his mother (*farted*) died.

There was a slight moment where Freddie was worried he just plain wouldn't remember how to drive, but it wasn't much different than riding his bike. The car was big and heavy, but once he was out of the parking lot and cruising 25 miles an hour down the road, he felt more comfortable. It almost sort of drove itself in a way. Freddie farted contentedly into the driver's seat, feeling the springs vibrate.

And even better— he couldn't hear the little men anymore. Their little voices were gone, left behind. Cocksucking faggot.

He drove as long as he could. He got on the highway and went west *pffffbblt* (that was a WET one). He kept it at 55 miles per hour. That was fast enough to outrun the little men. And their farts.

He knew he'd have to get gas (heh heh), but he had plenty of that (bet he did). And he didn't want to be simple. He didn't want to interact with anyone. Not even now. He wasn't so simple that he didn't know they'd throw his fat ass in the looney clink if he even said (*farted*) a word of this to anyone. Gas station attendant or not. Gas.

A few times he thought the little men were hiding in the car, so he'd flip on the interior lights and see he was alone. But he knew if he stayed in one place for too long, pretty soon he could hear them marching behind him and cocking their guns and their little bitty farts and little bitty laughs. He'd hear their itty bitty feetsies on the pavement, coming to blow his fucking cunt into oblivion.

He didn't stop driving again until the car was out of gas (*toot*). He had never bought gas before and couldn't remember how to, and anyway the gas stations would only try to take advantage of him for being simple. Again, Freddie was pretty fucked up. *Fart*— ooh, that one smells of eggs...

And he couldn't stop anyway. If he stopped, they'd catch (*fart*) up.

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats.

He didn't have a plan, just drive away from the little men as long as he could.

But then, the car had run out of gas (*hehheh*). Freddie let it pull to the side of the gravel shoulder. He had no idea where he was now. It all looked the same to him. Road and trees on either side. Even the trees didn't look that different. It was the same thing. Dickbag.

Now he was stuck, out of gas (*snick*) and unsure of what to do, and the sun was coming up from behind him, and any second the little men would appear over the eastern horizon and come for him. Jizzhead.

If this was a regular day, he'd be at the school right now, farting (*working*). The kids were probably tracking (*farting*) all over his fucking floor right now. And Harrison, farts plummeting down to earth from his asshole, would be standing over his clean job on the carpet and judging him for being simple and fart fucking fart.

But here he was, stuck on the side of the road like a constipated turd in a fat bitch's colon, and the little men were coming.

They'd fill the road. They'd surround the car. They'd point the guns. The guns would go off. A thousand dicks slapping you in the face.

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats.

They were close now. (*Fart*)

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats.

There they were. (*FART*)

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats.

He saw the tops of their hats first as they crested the rise in the road, the entire battalion of them. There were even more than Freddie had imagined. His throat went dry. He tried to start the car but it only cranked. Dillweed.

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats.

He couldn't get out of the car— they'd outrun him easily now. He was so fat he could barely walk properly, let alone fart.

Little men, big guns, pointy little hats.

They poured over the eastern horizon, all grinning at him with sharp little teeth. They were about two feet tall, but their hats made them about four feet tall.

Their hats were red. Their clothes were blue. Their skin and beards were white. Some wore sunglasses. Their guns were black. Their farts were brown. Just like Freddie knew.

They got closer and closer. *Pffbbttt.*

They surrounded the car, their hats coming up to the windows. Freddie didn't know what to do. He was still blubbering. And farting, uncontrollably.

They started a new chant, brandishing their weapons and tittering their eternal demon laughter. Titty.

Put your hands up, get outta the car.

Put your hands up, get outta the car.

Freddie kept his hands on the steering wheel and bawled like he hadn't since he was a little fart. His cheeks were super wet. They were all around him. Like a silent fart that rises up on you like morning mist.

Put your hands up, get outta the car.

There were at least fifty of the little men, surrounding the car and chanting and pointing their guns right at him. They pounded the car with their little hands, rocking it to and fro, gleeful. (FARTTTT)

They crawled on the hood, stood up, stumpy little legs and the black barrels of the automatic rifles in Freddie's (*farting*) face.

Freddie closed his eyes, farted loudly one more time, and pretended he wasn't there.

GAYLORD, MI – The body of a missing Northville janitor was discovered in his stalled vehicle along I-75 N Sunday afternoon.

Authorities say **Frederick Gass, 38**, was found in the driver's seat, his hands still gripping the wheel.

Gass had no known medical conditions, but authorities suspect he died of cardiac arrest sometime before dawn.

"It's bizarre," says his supervisor, Tom Harrison. "Freddie was quiet, but he never left town. No reason for him to be way out there."

Gass was a familiar face in the halls of Northville High. A student from 2001 to 2004, he returned soon after to work behind the scenes, keeping the building in shape. According to Harrison, Gass likely had an undiagnosed learning disability, though it was never formally assessed. He lived with his mother, Irma Wells-Gass, an English teacher at Northville High, until her death in 2022.

"I think he just cracked," Harrison continued. "He barely spoke after his mother passed. I hope he's in a better place now."

Police found no signs of struggle, though the car door was open. Small animal tracks, described as "resembling deer prints", were found circling the vehicle.

Gass will be cremated at New Haven Cemetery. No service is planned.

Germ Suit

Grandma and Poppie and my aunts had come for Christmas. And wouldn't you know it, I caught one hell of a bug only two days before.

I went into the boss's office and informed him I'd be heading home at lunch.

"I'll try to be in tomorrow but I don't know," I told him. I'd had only one day off this month, working every weekend but the first one, when I'd had Sunday off.

"Very well," said my boss. "I mean, damn, you work all month and you get sick two days before a holiday. What's wrong with you?"

"I don't know," I told him.

I went home half an hour earlier than I said I would and immediately took a nap.

When I woke up my throat still had that Brillo pad quality to it, the kind that always foretells a nasty cold, and I knew I was in for a snotty nose and a scratchy throat and a hot forehead and aching temples for at least a couple days.

It came to pass. I confined myself to my bed and popped herbal supplements on the regular. I rubbed lavender oil on my hands, chest and feet before I went to sleep every night. My kind mother put a dehumidifier in my room. I put a hot cloth on my head for two minutes at ChatGPT's suggestion before removing it again because it made me feel even worse. My sinuses throbbed.

I didn't go into work the next day. In fact, I barely remember that day at all. I slept through most of it.

Grandma and Poppie would be arriving in the evening. I had to think of something. I didn't want to get anyone sick. And I didn't want to miss out on a single moment of holiday cheer, not after a month of working my ass off.

Then, it hit me — the germ suit.

I don't know where we got the germ suit, but it resembled bubble wrap and it made you look like a clear, slender version of the Michelin Man. It was comfy and made of squeaky, clear plastic not unlike that of a beach ball.

Not only did the germ suit seal your body off from the outside world, thus protecting any loved ones from contamination, it also made the legions of germs swirling around inside you visible to the naked eye – all the better to see them disappear as your body healed itself. The germs materialized as little black specks. They looked like floating handfuls of pepper or a swarm of gnats hovering over stagnant water in the summer.

I slipped into the thing on Friday morning after calling into work a second time. I felt a hell of a lot better than I had the previous two mornings but I didn't want to risk any setbacks.

Sure enough, I exhaled into the suit and watched a little cloud of germs billow up and dissolve in front of my eyes.

I had about an inch of clearance around my face – the head of the suit resembled a toy astronaut's helmet. I had my pajamas on underneath, and a sweater over my pajamas, as well as a wool face mask and hoodie. I didn't want to get cold.

Grandma and Poppie and my two aunts had shown up the previous night as scheduled, and my brother had flown in from LA.

The whole family was sitting around the breakfast table eating coffee cake and drinking coffee and chatting when I waddled in, squeaking like crazy.

"Hey, your hermetically-sealed grandson is here for Christmas," I announced. Everyone chuckled and stood for greeting.

I doled out squeaky hugs, had a seat and got to chatting. My younger brothers slipped Christmas cookies and coffee cake through the one-way hole on the front chest of the suit. I pulled my arms into the center of the suit, pulled the facemask to my chin and chowed down. Within moments, I was truly enjoying myself for the first time in weeks.

"Doesn't look like you've got too many germs coming out there," said Poppie, pointing at my most recent exhalation of small black specks.

"Yeah, I feel a lot better," I said.

After breakfast, I sat on the couch with the buoyant plastic bouncing me up and down every time someone sat next to me. Dad got a great fire going in the fireplace.

We all opened our first gift of the holiday. My brothers had to open mine for me cause the suit fingers wouldn't grip the wrapping paper properly. I got a new book of short stories by Kjell Askildsen, a Norwegian writer. He wrote stories about a world where it seemed no one had any real problems except existentialism and choosing what kind of wine to drink.

I dispensed my own gifts – champagne and wine for my aunts, Jimmy John's gift cards for my grandparents and movie theater gift cards for everyone else.

The germs swirled about my head, dissolving in their brief exposure to the air between me and the suit. The suit wasn't supposed to speed up recovery, but boy did I feel better. The pounding sinus pain of the night before was reduced to a vague throb.

"I'm so glad we got that thing," said my mother, a mug of Irish coffee in her hand.

"Yeah, me too," I said, exhaling more germs and then coughing out even more. They disappeared like TV static.

I had a splendid day, chilling with everyone in the living room. We burned log after log in the fire and watched The Muppet Christmas Carol and The Santa Clause and Elf. By the end of the day I was well enough to unzip the suit's helmet and drink some eggnog and then some wine.

That evening I went back upstairs after saying good night. I took off the suit, hung it in my closet, and slept relatively well, waking only once when someone turned on the Christmas lights looped on the banister outside my door.

Christmas Eve morning dawned cold and sunny. Everyone was around the table again. Night had left us a fresh, thin dusting of snow on the ground outside. A white Christmas, as all Christmases should be.

I was feeling even better but I put the suit back on anyway. This time I wore just my pajamas underneath. My toes were pleasantly chilled in the plastic and when I exhaled the germs were almost nonexistent, a pitiful little handful of swamp flies that swirled and perished within seconds.

"I think you can take that thing off now," said my mother when I got downstairs. "I hardly see any germs on your breath."

I did, stripping down in front of everyone. They all clapped when it was off. The suit deflated, resembling a wadded up air mattress.

I packed the suit and put it back in its special decontamination storage bag, hanging it in my parents' closet where I'd found it. My head channels were clear, my forehead cooled, my joints limber. I felt like I'd awoken from a long sleep.

Downstairs, the holiday awaited.

The Dust Bunny

I was sitting at my cart near the Nut Farm when the Dust Bunny rolled up on my right.

I looked down at it, sensing motion out the corner of my eye. It looked like something hopping toward me. At first I thought it was a mouse or a beetle, or maybe a clump of hair blowing across the floor.

But it wasn't. It was this little grey-black sniffing creature, like nothing I'd ever seen before. I examined it, trying to figure out what the fuck I was seeing.

It had four squat little legs with these four naked pink feet splayed out like a turtle, and there were little claws on the feet — sharp-looking ones.

Its body was flat and furry like a mole's and it had two big black eyes on top of its head, but they were devoid of any mammalian emotion. It reminded me more of a spider's eyes. I couldn't see its mouth, but its snout was two black little nostrils. Its pink claws probed at the dirty factory floor. Its fur was coal black and really wispy, almost like a little cloud of smoke.

Before long Izzy, Byron, Brian, a couple of the operators and a supervisor were over next to me looking down at the thing.

I was still in my chair.

The thing hadn't moved since I'd seen it. It sat right in the center of the floor, open and vulnerable. Maybe it was paralyzed with fear.

"Anyone got a bucket?" Pete, the supervisor, inquired.

Louis, one of the operators, found one over by Press 2. He calmly set it over the strange new creature. We all braced for it to freak out, to start making horrible snarling noises and slamming around inside the bucket, but it did nothing.

"Kinda looks like a big ole' dust bunny come to life," said Izzy.

We all agreed, and that's how it got its name.

"Shit, now we gotta get something flat and stick it under there and we can throw it outside," said Pete, standing there with his arms crossed and waiting for someone else to go get something flat.

"Some of that scrap sheet metal over by Press 2 should do her," said Byron.

No one moved to get the sheet metal, though. We all continued to stare at the bucket, expecting the thing to move at any second.

"What if there's more of these things?" I asked.

"Where did it come from?"

"I don't know," I said. "It just came up to me. I didn't see where it came from."

"Maybe it was from under the crates over there," said Izzy, pointing at the stack of metal crates nearby. "It could've come in on a truck."

He and Brian walked over and started kicking the crates with their steel-toes, but nothing else came out.

"Well, I guess we'll just get rid of it then," said Brian. "I'll go get the - "

Before he could finish his sentence, the bucket gave a tremendous shake and flew upwards. The dust bunny exploded outward in a puff of black smoke.

"WHAT THE FUCK?!" everyone yelled.

An attractive young woman had taken the place of the dust bunny. She crouched on the floor, wearing pointy hat and a bunch of black rags.

"I am the Witch of the 8th Dimension," she said. "And I will grant each of you powerless devils a wish of your own choosing!"

Everyone quickly went from surprised and scared to surprised and happy.

"Oh, kick-fucking-ass, man!" said Izzy.

"Dope," said Louis.

"Awesome!" said Byron.

"Who's going first?" asked Brian.

"I will," I said immediately, holding my hand up.

I spoke to the young woman. She had beautiful, mysterious eyes. They were black – like in her dust-bunny-state – but now they had a wily intelligence to them.

"I'd like Helen, this girl I've been seeing, to fall desperately in love with me," I said. "I want to spend time with her without feeling like I'm being used."

"Which strip club is she from?" Izzy asked me.

Everyone chortled. I ignored them. I'd met Helen at Meijer, in the fruit section. She was stocking grapes. She stocked grapes so elegantly. I told her so. Now we get coffee sometimes.

"Your wish shall be granted," said the Dust Witch.

"Baller," I said.

"I'd like to wish for a new car and a new wife," Pete said.

"I'll take a girlfriend," said Desmond.

"I'd also like a new car," said Izzy. "I'll keep my wife. It'd be nice if she lost some weight, though. And maybe you could make her like ten years younger?"

"I'll take money," said Byron. "Doesn't need to be an infinite amount, just enough so that I can quit this shithole and never have to work again."

"Actually, yeah, I'd rather just have money," said Pete, changing his mind.

"Yeah, money would be good," said Brian. "I'll go with money."

"I'll have money, too," said Louis. "Couple mil should cover it."

"Yeah, you don't want too much," said Izzy. "You want enough that you can do whatever you want for the rest of your life but not so much that you become, you know, too highly visible."

"One at a time, one at a time!" yelled the Witch. "There be a catch to your wishes being granted."

"Shit," I said. "I knew I should've asked about that first."

"What's the catch?" asked Brian.

"The catch is that you all must lose something in return for gaining what you wish."

"Can it be my job?" Byron asked, and everyone laughed.

"No," said the Dust Witch. "I will not interfere with your destiny of employment directly."

"Damn," said Byron.

"What about my virginity?" asked Desmond. "Can I lose that?"

More laughter.

"You ain't a fuckin' virgin!" Louis yelled at him.

"Stop making light of this holy intrusion that has been thrust upon you!" said the Witch, irritated.

"Heh heh, she said 'thrust'," said someone.

"You have exactly sixty more seconds to decide before I return to the dust whence I came, and you shan't see me again," said the Dust Witch, a look of disgust and disappointment on her sexy, supernatural face. "Bumblin' mortals..."

"What's up with that little creature thing you started off as, anyway?" I wanted to know.

"I take many forms," said the Witch. "My squat-rat form seemed to suit this environment the best for a quiet approach. Now that I have several of you poor hapless mortals cornered, I can begin my work."

"Squat-rat?" asked Louis.

"Where did you come from, though?" Brian asked.

"I come from the ether, from the spaces between worlds."

"Oh," said Brian.

"That sounds complicated," said Izzy.

"Sounds like there's a God to me," said Louis.

"All right, all right, fine," I said, thinking about Helen and how she hadn't texted me tonight like she'd said she would.

"What is it we have to lose?"

"Yeah, what is it?" Izzy asked.

The Dust Witch smiled at us in a sexy, sinister way.

"You must lose..."

"Yeah?"

"...your souls."

"Oh," said Brian again.

No one said anything for a second. The Witch sat there, crouching like Gollum, staring at us with those fierce, dark eyes. That strange smoke swirled around her and never seemed to settle. Her body was concealed in tattered rags. Her hat was tall, the brim wide.

"Well?" she asked, impatient.

"What does that mean, exactly?" Byron finally wanted to know.

"It means in order to have your wishes fulfilled, you must give up your souls."

"Yeah, but what does that exactly mean?" Brian asked. "My 'soul'? Like, on this plain we're not even sure if souls exist, and if they do, what they are. Do I go to hell when I die or something if I give you my soul?"

"Does this mean there's an afterlife?" I asked, then answered my own question. "I guess it means there would have to be."

"Fuck, she said she was from the 8th dimension," said Byron.

"That means there's at least like five more dimensions."

"Shit," said Louis. "That's heavy, man."

"Anyone willing to give up their soul?" Pete asked.

No one said anything, then Louis spoke up.

"I dunno, man, it'd have to be one sweet deal there. I don't know if money would cover it. I mean, shit... my soul... I dunno...if there's an afterlife and I don't have my soul, that'd be a long fuckin' time to go without a soul, you know?"

"I think I'm going to pass," said Brian after some hesitation. "Thanks anyway, though."

"Yeah, me too," said Izzy. "I can get a new job on my own, and my wife's not bad the way she is."

More people concluded it wasn't worth it, sounding their opinions.

"I'm not sure what my soul is, but I probably shouldn't just give it away," said Byron.

"Yeah, I mean, she wouldn't be offering to take it away if it didn't exist," said Desmond. "If it wasn't worth something."

"Yeah, I think we're all gonna have to pass," I told the Dust Witch. "Sorry to waste your time. I'm sure you'll find someone around here who's willing to give up their soul."

"You should come back during the day shift and ask around in corporate," said Louis, and everyone had another good laugh.

"You already have accepted your wish," the Witch said, crooking a finger at me. I saw she still had the sharp pink claws from her squat-rat form.

"Yeah, but I didn't know I'd give up my soul for it when I accepted it," I said. "I don't need a relationship with Helen that bad. I'm actually starting to realize that if she's using me the way she is for attention, she's not worth my time anyway."

"Atta boy," said Brian. "What I been telling you?"

The Dust Witch actually looked disappointed.

"There is truly nothing you mortals desire," she said. "Nothing at all?"

"Nothing that would make me give up my soul," I said, and everyone murmured agreement. "Like we all said, up until now we weren't even sure that souls existed. So thanks for telling us."

The Dust Witch nodded slowly.

"Very well," she said. "It is decided. I return to the nothing once more, until the 8th dimensional forces coalesce in tandem on another night."

She disappeared in a puff of dust and sparkles without another word.

"Did that just happen?" Louis wanted to know.

"Shit," said Desmond. "I should've gotten a picture of her. Did anyone get a picture of her?"

No one had thought to take a picture.

"Well, I guess it's back to work," Pete said, already walking away.

A thought struck me.

"Dude," I said as everyone turned to walk away. "As soon as she appeared or whatever, I felt like I'd seen her somewhere before, the whole time she was sitting there, and I just realized who she reminded me of."

"What?" asked Izzy.

"She looked like the Enchantress from that shitty Suicide Squad movie. From 2016. The original one. Not the one from after the pandemic. Not the James Gunn one. The first one, the Will Smith one."

Everyone looked at me, then realization dawned on their faces.

"Holy shit," said Izzy. "You're totally right. She did."

"I never saw that," said Brian.

"Yeah, it was the shit swirling all around her," said Desmond. "She didn't really look like Cara Delevingne, though."

"Yeah, I'd say she looked more like... that chick from Yellowstone," said Louis. "Or something..."

He rubbed his chin, looking at the spot where the witch had crouched. There was a small scorch mark on the cement. It would never come out, no matter how much the janitors scrubbed it.

"Weird," said Byron.

"Man, the strangest things happen at this factory, swear to God," I said. "Today I learned I have an actual soul. I wonder what that means."

"Yeah, do you think you can, like, do anything with it?" asked Izzy. "Other than give it away, I mean."

"I don't know," I said. I made a note to share this experience in a Facebook status later.

"Wait'll I tell the Missus," said Brian.

I went back to my laptop, examining code, and everyone else walked away. Desmond and Louis went back to their cells. Byron and Brian and Izzy went back to figuring out why the GTA cell had gone down. Pete went back to sit at his desk and act like no one could see him looking at foot fetish porn.

And that was that. We never saw the Dust Bunny again.

Some nights, though, I think about her. I catch a quick, dark little movement out the corner of my eye. And I can't help but feel like I'm missing something.

Jack's Revival

Fifth grade camp sucked.

It lasted a week. I was in the Raccoon Cabin with four other guys I didn't know and didn't want to know. I had no real friends other than my Apple watch (which didn't get good service) and my Switch, which I barely used because I was afraid one of the guys would take it or break it.

The most humiliating thing was on the first night. I accidentally dropped some of my underwear briefs on the path to the cabin while I was moving my clothes in. I didn't see them drop and a while later Mr. Haginski, our counselor, found them and brought them into the cabin on the end of a stick. I would've pretended they weren't mine but my parents made me put my name in big bold Sharpie on all of my stuff, so there it was written across the ass-tag – Jack Sawyer.

"I'll have you all know I didn't touch these," said Mr. Haginski to all of us, holding the stick out like he had something gross and dangerous on the end of it. He had a big sloping gut and a mustache and glasses.

I had to go up and grab them off the stick in front of everyone.

"Hey Jack-off, I'll give you my gnarly shoes," said Dennis Baggner from the bunk across the room. I still don't know what that joke meant but everyone else must've loved it cause they all laughed really loud.

I didn't know my face could burn like that. I went back to my bunk and stashed the underwear deep in my bag. To think I actually thought I might've enjoyed myself this week. I'm such an idiot.

My group had the cabin that was closest to the woods. One day, in between camping activities like climbing the rock wall and capture the flag, my bunkmates were hanging out in front of the cabin just dicking around. I was with them because I had nowhere else to be and we had to stay with our groups.

I was standing there and John Thompson mooned me and made farting noises while Dennis yelled, "Full moon tonight! Full moon tonight!"

I knew how to deal with all this. I just kept quiet and waited for it to end. They'd lose interest eventually.

"We should give Sawyer something to do," said Archie Nabook. "He looks bored."

"Go get water from the well, Jack-off," said Mike Hill, holding out his water bottle. "Take Haginski's, too. As an apology for making him pick up your dirty undies."

I wanted to get the hell away, so I took them up on it without another word. I grabbed Mike's water bottle and got Haginski's from the cabin.

I didn't look at them, headed into the trees, water bottles clinking together.

"What a *bitch*," I heard Archie say, almost in exasperation.

I wanted to kill them, but who cared. I couldn't.

It was peaceful in the woods. I was finally by myself, where I was most comfortable. No one bothers you or makes you do anything when you're alone. You can just be yourself and not worry.

I walked the path for awhile until my bunkmates' voices were replaced by the gurgling of the old well up ahead.

The well was a rust-colored hole in the ground about the size of a fence pole, situated on a shallow mound of smooth cement that was orange with rust. Clear, refreshing-looking water bubbled up through the hole, spilling over and trickling down to a idyllic creek that wound off through the trees.

Surrounding the mound of the well was a bunch of odd-looking purple flowers. They were small, three-lobed, and royal purple. They kind of looked like pansies. For no reason at all, I bent down and picked one and yelled out.

It felt like I'd been stung. The flower I picked lay on the ground for a second and then blackened and withered away as if lit with a match. My finger and thumb were red and throbbing. There was a momentary, strange sensation in my forehead and my chest. A sudden coldness, like I'd swallowed a lump of ice cream.

I ran my fingers through the cool water, letting it gurgle over them. Then I filled the water bottles and got out of there, sucking on my fingers.

When I got back the guys were already down by the mess hall. I was late for line-up and Ben, the main counselor, yelled, "Ah, there's Sawyer. He's late, but he's here!" as I jogged into line.

"Where's my water?" Haginski asked.

I handed it over without saying anything.

"Once again," said Ben, looking down at me with an expression I'd grown used to receiving from adults—amused pity. "Do NOT go into the woods alone, as we said on Day 1. Not even to get water..."

Later that night, I had a dream I was on a tightrope and I woke up and Dennis and Mike were each holding one of my legs and Archie and John were standing over me. John was holding my arms and Archie was putting his hands over my mouth.

"Can you do the splits, Jack-off?" Archie whispered. "We wanna see if you can do the splits."

I could hear Haginski snoring on the other side of the cabin. He snored like a thunderstorm and for some reason my first thought was how I wouldn't be able to get back to sleep.

"We want to see you do the splits," said John. He was all sweaty and fat and in his boxers. His voice sounded hoarse and his eyes were almost glowing.

Dennis and Mike yanked on my legs, pulling them in opposite directions. Fire tore through my groin. I tried to scream but Archie squeezed his hands over my mouth. John put all his weight on my wrists, pinning me to the mattress.

They kept pulling and pulling and for a few moments I thought I was going to be ripped in half.

For a second I thought it might never end, but Mr. Haginski stopped snoring long enough for them to think he was waking up and they all let me go and ran off to bed. I squeezed tears out of my eyes and turtled up, turned towards the wall. My ballsack felt ruptured. I tried to keep quiet. If they heard me they might come back.

Two minutes later I heard Archie, in the bed closest to me.

"You did the splits, Jack-off," he whispered, giggling. "You did the splits..."

I ignored him.

"You wanted to scream," Archie continued. "I could tell. Why didn't you? I'll bet you scream like a girl. I'll bet it's really cute..."

All I could think was pain. Maybe I'd be angry later, or when I woke up. Probably not. I'd probably just focus on survival.

Only a few more days, I told myself. *Only a few more days*.

I stayed on my guard, and nothing else happened for another day, other than the usual verbal taunts.

Until the final night.

Everyone took the canoes out, all the different cabin groups. Mr. Haginski called us all over by yelling, "Ra-COONS!" like he always did and we all gathered around him.

He assigned us canoe buddies. I got Mike, who tried to rock paper scissors his way out of it but no one else wanted to ride with me.

Mike stayed quiet as we rowed around the lake with everyone else, but then when it was over and I was getting out he tripped me with the oar and I fell into the lake.

I came up choking on lake water and Mr. Haginski was there on the dock.

"It was an accident," Mike was saying. "I told him to wait while I put the oars away and he got out."

"Sawyer, you really just can't win, can ya?" Haginski said. "Go shower off."

I took my dripping self up to the shower, which was fortunately empty. I locked the door behind me.

It was almost dark out, and everyone else was down the hill at the campfire site, enjoying the evening, eating grilled hot dogs and burgers and roasted marshmallows. I just wanted to go home. One night left.

The hot water was nice, and it was good to be alone again. I looked through the narrow window at the top of the wall, a couple feet above my head. The moon looked back at me from the dark blue of eternity. It was big and fat and round, like a face.

I'd just undressed and stepped under the scalding water when the change kicked in.

My first change.

It started in the center of my chest, the center of my forehead. A coldness.

Then the shifting started. The only thing I can compare it to is when you're about to throw up. That churning, rearranging feeling in your guts, like you're about to be turned inside out.

I panicked, froze, fell over. My legs stopped working. My arms jerked around.

I'm having a seizure, I thought. I'm dying. Something in the lake water made me have a seizure.

The change lasted for about two minutes. I kept expecting to pass out but I never did.

Over the roar of the shower, I could hear my bones grinding around. My nose stuck out in front of my face. My vision got sharper, almost like someone focusing a camera. My hearing turned up like someone turning a volume knob. All of a sudden, I could smell, the difference so incredible it felt as if I'd been given sight after a lifetime of blindness. I could feel my teeth growing inside my mouth – big, sharp, plentiful teeth.

I tried to not make noise. I didn't want anyone to hear me and come in and see whatever was happening. I wanted to disappear and be alone.

The ordeal was painful in the same way a limb waking up is painful. No movement or position offered relief, so I just lay there on the floor and let it happen, all wet with the shower pouring what felt like hot sparks over me.

Then, it was over.

I took a breath, snuffling the water on the tile. I stood up, hunched over but taller than I used to be. I had matted dark fur

all over my body, sopping wet. I could smell fucking everything – the soap, the grime, the sweat and piss and shit from every boy who'd ever used the bathroom.

I made for the doorway. I was so light on my feet it almost felt like I was dancing.

Just then, someone pounded on the door.

I heard a voice.

"Jack-off," it called. "Jack-off, you done with your shower? They're wanting you down by the fire."

He paused, and I could sense a gleeful smile on his face.

"...are you jacking it in there, Jack-off?"

I smelled blood. Hot blood. Living blood. Living flesh.

I realized I was fucking *famished*.

I bounded to the door in two steps, the shower still running, water pouring off my fur. The door was still locked but I tore it off its hinges like it was made of paper.

Steam poured out of the bathroom into the cool evening. Archie stood there, hand poised in a pounding position. The last thing that registered on his face was confusion.

I grabbed Archie by the throat with one hand, lifted him up. He felt as light as one of the little purple flowers.

He screamed like a girl.

When it was over, I charged off down the hill. I made for the sound of voices and the scent of roasting meat, the full moon watching over everything.

What I'll Remember Most

They made their way up the foggy path on foot, huddled together. The cold and mist and dark seemed to press in.

"Where are we?" asked Rita.

"I don't know, Rita" said Dale, his tone sharp, his voice tired. "Stop asking."

"How did we get here?" Rita asked. "We were on our way to my mother's."

"I don't remember that, either," snapped Dale. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

She would always ask him the same questions over and over. She'd been doing it for years and it drove him bugshit.

"Well, I don't remember anything except you running off the road," Rita snapped back at him.

"I did it because I fell asleep," snapped Dale back at her. "I wanted to stop. We could've gotten a hotel room. You didn't want to stop. You wanted to get to your mother's cause it's always about you."

"Eighty percent angel, ten percent demon," said Rita, eyes blazing magnificently. "The rest is hard to explain."

It was something she'd always said about him. It was the argument killer. She'd been saying it since they were dating. The first few times she'd said it, it was in reference to Dale's ability to be a guy everyone loved most of the time and a hard-on bastard when he needed to be. But in later years, it had come to mean his inability to stay civil when stressed out. His two-faced-ness.

Dale didn't answer. He was too busy trying to figure out what to do next.

They'd met at work, a department store — Rita had been a cashier and Dale a stocker. Dale was twenty and Rita was nineteen. They'd started dating after only a few days of shooting glances at each other over the aisles.

A lifetime had gone by, or close to one. They were now in their sixties, Dale approaching retirement or something like it, Rita

with her part-time hobbies and full-time worrying about their two children and three grandchildren and her ailing 93 year old mother, their last living parent.

They'd been on their way to see her. She wasn't doing good. She wasn't ever doing good anymore. But Rita had been insistent.

It was night. The road was slippery. Dale had a vague recall of nodding off.

And then they were on this path in the woods. They were both unharmed. The car was gone, somewhere behind them. They didn't remember leaving it.

"Where are we going?" Dale asked out loud, frustrated.

Like an answer, ahead of them was a little hump of a stone bridge crossing a small creek. The moon peeked through the trees.

The old couple stood there looking at the bridge. Black water trickled underneath the stone arch. The trees around them seemed to moan with either dread or relief.

Before either Dale or Rita could say anything, the Loghead appeared.

It started with a log moving next to them. It shifted and the leaves and dirt rustled and Dale and Rita started and jumped away from it.

It rose up on two legs. It had a body, and a head— the log was the head, long and cylindrical. It didn't have eyes. Its mouth was at the bottom of the log, a little flap of bark. Its body was made of mud and sticks. It was very skinny and graspy, two hands with fingers made of sticks reaching and pointing.

"*E-gak, e-gak, towaaaahsss,*" said the Loghead. It pointed at them.

They understood it perfectly, even in its dead-leaf tongue.

"One will cross, one will go."

"Who?" they asked. "Who will cross? Cross to where?"

"*Roe nan defta.*"

"The one who says it first."

"Says what first?"

"Frashengot-ah metho-nda."

"That is what you must determine."

"How do we determine?"

"Ex-gan, fre-lahshe-mah," said the Loghead.

"What will you remember most?" Dale asked. "Say what we remember most?"

"Gaos," said the Loghead, nodding its splintery head.

Dale looked at Rita and Rita looked at Dale. Rita was no longer the nearly-seventy year old woman he'd lived with for the past few decades, wondering who she was and why everything about her was so goddamn irritating.

"Torros, tang-anaa," said the Loghead. *"Ta-raff-na flogsnit."*

"Embrace, and see each another once more."

They did so and Dale felt her in his arms and holding her was the greatest thing he'd ever experienced. He'd done it for decades, how had he ever been so lucky to be able to hold this girl in his arms at all?

She wasn't old anymore. She was her young self again, a brunette who worked part-time as an intern at the local newspaper in addition to their department store job. She was a lethal gossip. A short, bespectacled cutie who gave dynamite head (anywhere, even in a movie theater like that old song), who loved his fingers in her long, straight brown hair. She hated her hair. She called it lifeless. He loved her hair, loved the way it smelled, loved its rich brown color, the color of the kitchen floor in his parents' old farmhouse, the color of home. He loved her pointed nose, he loved her lips, he loved her teeth when she smiled and her little chin. She was all his.

"I have so many memories rushing through me right now," said the young Rita. "Good and bad. They're like..."

"Ghosts," said Dale.

"You are so handsome," she said, touching his face. "I love your cheeks."

"I love your ears," Dale said, stroking one.

They were inches away from each other's face. Dale couldn't believe they'd been fighting a few moments ago. Why had they ever fought? How'd they let themselves get so comfortable with each other? How'd they let themselves forget all this?

The Loghead spoke again.

"*Domitose*," he rasped. "*De homme in-ree. Nod ravin-chay.*"

"Your memories are there. Tell them. We haven't much time."

Dale told Rita about the time they'd talked on the phone when she was in Arizona. He'd been gone for a week on a business trip. He'd missed her so much his throat hurt. He'd realized he would marry her then. He could never be away from her for a long period again, not without knowing she was wearing his ring.

Rita told Dale about the time she'd come back from her internship and he'd told off her dad for spitting on her ambition to be a writer. She'd never written anything, but in those days, a boy telling off her domineering alcoholic father was a god-like feat. He'd grabbed her hand and towed her out of the house as her father raged behind them.

"You are so beautiful," said Dale. "I'm sorry I haven't said that in so long."

"I love you," said Rita.

"I love you."

They hugged as tight as could be, and Dale kissed Rita's hair and inhaled her scent.

"*Roe nan defta*," said the Loghead.

"The one who says it first."

He pointed his stick fingers.

It would be Rita who made the crossing.

Dale held her and she held him.

"Can I watch at least?" said Dale. He felt surprisingly calm.

The creature didn't speak, but Dale knew the answer was no.

He and Rita looked into each other's eyes for the last time.

"Eighty percent angel, ten percent demon," Dale said.

"The rest is hard to explain," Rita finished. She was back to her old self – grey hair, grey complexion, and now she looked sickly-- sagging, sallow skin, and her eyes seemed to be losing their light.

They embraced one last time. He felt all of her in his arms. He tried to take in the seconds, he tried to memorize how she felt.

Then it was over and his arms were empty.

Dale turned and walked off. He didn't look back. He couldn't.

"Whoever brought me here is gonna have to take me home," he heard Rita say.

Dale hadn't walked long when he awoke to flashing lights.

The Body Farmer

Gore Paddington's feet trudged soft, fertile ground. It had rained the night before, and the scents of early spring were abundant, the air so thick and moist it felt like one could take a bite out of it.

Gore tried to focus on that, and not the pervasive, pungent scent of death. The foliage whispered putrid secrets, and the front gate creaked faithfully as Gore swung it open, then clanged it shut behind him.

Before him lay a scene of organized carnage. A pleasant, compact wooded area. A small meadow.

And bodies. Dozens of them. Splayed and prone.

Gore clicked his pen and held up his clipboard.

He walked soft, damp grass and soft, damp earth to the nearest corpse. The corpse's name had once been (and for now, still was) Dick Barnes. And as usual, he had complaints.

"They need to move me," Dick complained without saying hello. "I'm getting rained on."

"That's the point," Gore explained for the twentieth time.

"I didn't agree to this," Dick grumbled. "I never would've donated myself if it meant water in my eyes every time there's a drizzle."

"I've told you before," said Gore. "You've got to stay put or you'll disrupt the study."

"How much longer could it possibly take?"

"I'll ask."

Dick Barnes had died of liver failure earlier that month. His body was only a week into the study.

Grace Patton, who'd passed of complications from pneumonia a few weeks earlier, was more polite. She was seated in the passenger seat of an old Ford Escort, arm dangling out the window, her head lolling to the right.

"I've been leaning on this window for longer than I can remember," she told Gore. "My armpit is killing me. Is it really necessary I be leaning like this? Can't I be settled comfortably back into the seat? Would that disrupt the study?"

"I'm afraid it would," said Gore.

"Well, crumb."

"At least you get a warm seat," a voice muttered from under the car.

"Oh, shut up, Bruce."

No matter how you explained it to these people, they were never satisfied. The only difference between the dead and the living? The living complained less.

Gore Paddington was the resident medium at the Farmington University Body Farm. It was his job to go around and make sure the residents were comfortable and attended to as their bodies decayed and were researched for forensic purposes.

The program was begun in the 90s. And not long after the first bodies were selected, it became apparent there would be unseen complications.

Since their bodies were not yet at rest, the spirits living in those bodies were not allowed to depart the physical realm. Since there was no way for residents to know this when they signed up to donate their bodies to science, many of them reacted badly when Gore presented this news.

"WHADDYA MEAN I GOTTA STAY HERE TIL I'M PROPERLY BURIED?!" Dick had shrieked. "I just spent six months stuck in a hospital bed! Do you have any idea how boring that is? But at least it was comfortable!"

All of them grumbled about waiting at first, but most got used to it by the end of the first week. They enjoyed the sights and sounds of nature, and they appreciated the time to reflect on how they'd spent their lives.

There were many of them. Charlie Cannery was over by the pond. He was the youngest corpse, a 21-year-old who'd died of an accidental fentanyl overdose. Faith Markowicz, a victim of mold poisoning, was under the willow tree. Betty Brazinzski had died

of complications from botched plastic surgery, and she was getting eaten by a colony of termites. Lifelong chain smoker Fred Rottendem was in the cattails. Narcoleptic truck driver Bruce Karnkovski was underneath the car Grace Patton was seated in.

All the bodies were under some form of protection — wire mesh cages strung over them or fenced-in enclosures that looked like small chicken coops or tree stands.

The corpses saw Gore coming and grinned their startlingly bright grins (their teeth seemed even whiter against the browning decay of their skin) and their sunken eye sockets crinkled with smiles. Most were personable and friendly and happy to see him. Gore reciprocated his former countryfolk's need for a bit of human connection— this was one of the most peaceful gigs a medium could ever hope to have.

All the bodies had regular gripes (mostly minor), especially at the outset of their decaying journey, but most were just bored and wanted to talk. Gore couldn't help but notice it was pretty much like any other customer service job. He didn't prefer the dead to the living (not totally, anyway), but at least they were predictable. That said, you never quite got used to the sight of someone's flesh slowly melting and shriveling from their face, their eyes turning to shrunken, withered blobs, their teeth showing through their cheeks, their noses collapsing into a rounded triangle of a black hole.

Gore went from person to person with his clipboard, checking things off as he went.

"Are you satisfied with the premises? Why or why not? How long have you been here now? Have there been any animals about? How have you been feeling lately? How have you changed since you were set here? How big are your maggots? What's the rate of your bloating? How bad is the smell coming off you? How's your remaining skin? How much fatty tissue is left inside you? Let me list off the major organs and you tell me what you have left and make sure to let me know the approximate remaining percentage of said organ..."

And so on.

He ticked off item after item, pen clicking on the plastic clipboard. He nodded patiently and listened patiently and stood patiently while the stranded phantoms made their reports.

Reggie Carnez was pretty much completely skeletonized and would be getting transferred within a week or so. He was set half-in and half-out the swamp near a stinking, croaking frog pond. Scraps of papery flesh were all that was left of his soft mortal remains, aside from the dirty bones the process had exposed. He was Gore's last stop.

For a second Gore thought Reggie might've lost the ability to speak, as he was face-down in the dirt and his lower jaw had fallen off. But as Gore approached, Reggie's arm flew out and grabbed the jawbone, connected it, and turned his skull to face Gore.

"Hey Gore," he said. "Happy Friday."

"Happy Friday, Reggie."

"My jaw fell off yesterday, I didn't touch it til now, I swear."

"It's fine, I would've asked you to put it back on anyway. We need to talk."

"Can't believe it's been so long," said Reggie. "Seems like yesterday I was dying of throat cancer."

"Time does fly when you're dead," said Gore. "The veil of time is lifted and all that."

"Mmm-hmm," said Reggie. His bone fingers pulled at a beard that was no longer there.

"Say," he said. "I've been meaning to ask you. I know I'm almost done here... do you think I could get, you know, like a tour of the premises? On my way out? When I leave? Would that be a problem?"

"Well—" Gore began but Reggie cut him off.

"Look, I'll be blunt— it's a college and I'm assuming at least some of your interns are pretty cute. I'd like to see a cute lassie at least one more time before I move on or whatever."

Gore sighed.

"I'll see what I can do," he said quietly, knowing full well there was no way the director would ever allow that. "But given you're at full skeletonization, you're allowed to move freely again, if you like, Reggie."

"Bad-ass," said Reggie, grinning. "Like, right now?"

"Yes."

The skeleton pulled himself up into a sitting position, placing his ischial tuberosities on a nearby tuft of long grass. He sighed in satisfaction. Gore would never get used to the sound of a skeleton sighing with satisfaction, but he heard it every single time one of these people were finally allowed to move again.

"Say, Gore," said Reggie. "You got a wife yourself? I used to have a couple lassies back in the day. I ever tell you about them?"

"You have, Reggie," said Gore.

"Ah, well, I won't go into it then..." said Reggie. He took a look around the rest of the Body Farm at his fellow decay-ees, skull swiveling to and fro.

"Gonna miss this place," he mused, his empty eye sockets almost wistful. "In a weird way."

Gore clicked his pen.

It's a living, he thought.

Sprite

One spring morning, my husband and I go to Amethyst's for lunch. She tells me not to bring Sprite— "Leave him with a sitter or something, this is adults only." — so I don't.

But as soon as the hors d'oeuvres are served, I repeat what he said that morning.

"He said he wanted to come along, and then he said— what was it, Timon?"

"'Give my family a chance to improve.'"

"Yeah, that was it."

Amethyst looks at me like I just took a shit on her plate.

I don't care. I've gotten to her.

It had been a good day. Earlier, Timon and I tore across Glen Harbor on Jerry's hyperboat with the rest of the space crew, dodging waterskiers, skimming the rocky shoals, and racing the shoreline. Jerry, our team's feisty, fit leader, handled the wheel like a maniac. Before that, we'd done a trial run for the space mission, testing out the freezing chamber and the anti-gravity suits again.

After the ride, we all sat on the hyperboat, listening to the harbor slosh against the sides and shooting the shit. Then Jerry suddenly started singing Billy Joel's "The Longest Time." That's one of those old terrestrial radio songs— like "Bohemian Rhapsody" or "Come Sail Away"— where, once someone starts, everyone else has to join in. So we did. Then Jerry launched into a rant about how if humanity ever loses its curiosity, it'll be the end of the species. A very special moment.

After another ride, where I got drenched and screeched like an idiot at Jerry's reckless driving, we docked and prepared to break off and head home.

"I see why Kotek is flying the shuttle and not you," I told him as we climbed off. Jerry laughed and cheerfully flipped me off.

Timon kissed me, and I could tell some of the single crew members— Argyle, Fletch, Kotek— were jealous, but they'd be fine. They just didn't know it yet. We'd all be fine.

I should explain: they found a new planet. Earth-sized with fresh water everywhere, half-frozen under towering glaciers. It doesn't rotate, so one side is locked in darkness. From space, it looks like a dark blue marble dipped in vanilla ice cream. The United Terra is sending a team of scientists, astronauts, and journalists on a near-twenty-year mission to collect as much water as possible from this planet. Even with the quantum jump, it'll be a long trip. The tanks we'll be towing behind us are the size of the Great Lakes.

Because of the new planet's surface temperature, we get two minutes to make water runs— though, thanks to some space-time distortion, those two minutes stretch into a couple of days. I don't understand the physics of it. I leave that to the scientists like Argyle and Natasha.

Timon and I will be in orbit the whole time, documenting the whole thing on social media. We were chosen from hundreds of thousands of applicants, and I'm pretty sure we made the cut because I'm a bi ginger half-Jew half-Catholic and Timon is a gay Libyan-Turkish guy. We check a lot of boxes.

My feet were peeling from being stuck in the space suits all morning, and I spent the rest of the morning picking at painless, egg-sized flaps of callous while an AI of Wade Gibson reported on NPR about the new *Rocko's Modern Life* movie, which was apparently about Ikea's latest contract with North Korea.

Sprite listened along with me. He was home from day-school and doing remote visuals with Azara, the AI his school's contracted with. Sprite loves *Rocko*, just like I did as a kid. Just like my dad did. Just like his dad did. He watches it and other cartoons on an old antenna TV in the kitchen. He prefers the antennae TV to his iTab because, as he says, it "has character." He's four.

They say kids get smarter every generation, and if Sprite is any indication, this next batch is going to be a quantum jump of its own.

Amethyst— my ex-wife, if that wasn't clear— doesn't want Sprite, and he knows it. But he's the calmest four-year-old you've ever seen. Like a little Buddhist monk. He just plants himself in her space and waits, knowing she'll want to acknowledge him eventually. And she always does. I used to think he was just resigned. Or sad. Or ignorant. He isn't. He's told me so himself.

So I bring him along to lunch, despite Amethyst telling me to leave him with a sitter. I leave him in the car with the windows down and the AC on, staring into his iTab. I say I'll text him when it's time to come in. He gives a thumbs up, not looking at me.

"How's the mission going?" Amethyst's dad asks when Timon and I walk in, forcing a smile. "You guys gonna like it? Saving the world and all that?"

"Yeah," I say. I can tell he's uncomfortable, but I judge people by their intentions, and Amethyst's parents are no different than anyone else— they just want to be liked so desperately. Amethyst is a product of that— raised by people pleasers. She's someone who's never done anything for anyone but herself. If the universe denies her what she wants, it's an injustice that must be corrected.

Amethyst's apartment is a shoebox, a little brick affair with an old fashioned furnace in the corner. Timon and I sit at the breakfast bar while Amethyst and her latest boyfriend lounge in easy chairs. Her dad perches near the (non-functioning) mantel. Plates of snacky lunch items are passed around. Amethyst talks about how she'll finish her degree next fall if she gets into the right classes. Her white cat, Primo, skulks around and curls his tail.

I chew my celery and think about Sprite in the car and how Amethyst is taking him for the weekend whether she likes it or not. I try not to be too angry. I know she wouldn't ever physically hurt him— she just needs a lot of persuasion. And guilt-tripping. Amethyst isn't a bad person. Just another kid raised to think she's the center of the universe. Then one day she had to grow up, and it scared the shit out of her.

It only takes that one line— what Sprite had said earlier about giving his family a chance to improve—for Amethyst to cave.

"Wait, you LEFT him in the CAR?" she screeches, getting up and nearly spilling her crackers and salami. "He's just been SITTING out there for FIFTEEN minutes?"

"It's been maybe seven," I tell her, picking up my phone, my mind involuntarily flashing back to our marriage.

I send Sprite a text, and not ten seconds later, he's at the door. He'd probably been waiting on the porch.

He walks in and parks his keister right down in the middle of the carpet, scrolling his iTab.

Get used to it, Mom, he says without saying a word.

I'm proud of Sprite. By the time we get back, he'll be almost twenty-five. He has to stay with Amethyst while Timon and I are gone. That's why I need them to bond now. Who the hell else is he going to stay with, when his own mother is living in the same city?

He didn't even cry when I told him Timon and I had been selected and were leaving.

"Mom likes me," he said. "She just needs to get to know me."

I didn't argue with him then. Maybe he's right. Maybe not. It doesn't matter. We have to take this trip. We'll never have to worry about money again once we get back. And Amethyst owes it to both of us. Both me and Sprite.

Amethyst's new guy, some watery-eyed burnout whose name I can't remember, stares at Sprite like a squirrel that's wandered in from the yard. The look on his face tells me Amethyst hasn't mentioned having a kid. Whatever. He'll be traded for another burnout in a matter of months. Amethyst is "playing the field" right now. A bold move for a 32 year old. She's also going to school to be a— get this— AI-assistant radiologist. From what it sounds like, her dad's paying for it and she's actually following through and passing her classes.

"I—I don't know how," she'd told me, eyes fixed on the floor, on the day she left Sprite and I. "I just can't. You can. I know you can. But I can't. And I'm sorry."

She'd disappeared for months, finally texting me one morning to say she'd "come around." We've been casual friends ever since.

Now, Amethyst's face is soft as she looks at Sprite. I recognize fear, and then the obvious hits me— she's afraid of him. She's afraid of loving him. There's a longing there. She's afraid of what will happen if she lets that love in.

Amethyst's father is the first to acknowledge Sprite.

"What you playin' there, sport?"

"Mr. Blast," says Sprite. "It's based on the Starlink. You want to try it?"

"I think I'll just watch. How do you know about the Starlink?"

"Everyone knows about the Starlink."

"I guess they do."

Primo comes over and sits by Sprite. He ruffles the cat's ears. He already looks at home. My brilliant little bud.

Timon has to tow me out when it's time to leave. I watch Sprite the whole way. He never looks up. He'll stay here for the weekend, and we'll pick him up on Monday. We still have some time together before me and Timon blast off into the deep beyond. And Amethyst has time finish most of her semester before she becomes a full-time mom.

She's curt as we leave, but I can tell she's accepted it. As we step out the front door, she sits down beside Sprite on the floor.

I tell myself that's enough.

The Man-Baby

Linda Piest talked with her longtime friends Sara and Chris. They were sitting at the kitchen table and talking about their lives.

Their oldest son came in and sat down. Linda didn't look at him.

Their oldest son's name was Caleb. Caleb had always made Linda uneasy.

Today, she realized why.

Linda and Sara and Chris were catching up after a long time apart. Currently, they were talking about church. The Devil, specifically. Linda didn't know how the hell they'd gotten on this subject. She liked Sara and Chris, but they could be a little too churchy from time to time. Linda wasn't as religious as them, but she'd been confirmed at thirteen and had been a casual fan of Pope Francis.

Sara was lecturing on how the Devil lurks in moments of fatigue and boredom.

"You've got to stay busy," she said, talking with her hands like always. "You've just got to let those hands do the work. Idle hands, and all that. Idle hands'll give the Devil something to do. He's always gotta find someone to mess with, you know? He's so like that."

Caleb grunted.

"The Devil's not a baby," he said. "The Devil's got a hard heart."

Sara briefly acknowledged him— "Yes, honey, he does"— and kept jabbering.

Linda couldn't stop thinking about how Caleb reminded her of someone. It had always bothered her, but she never knew why.

Then, as Caleb spoke up about the Devil, she remembered.

It was the winter of 1980. Linda was in her freshman year of college. She'd been Linda Lynch back then.

That semester, girls were disappearing from campus. Ted Bundy had been captured in Florida two years prior, John Wayne Gacy

had been caught in Chicago the same year. The previous ten years had seen the Son of Sam, the Zodiac, BTK, Green River and countless others come and go. But the serial killer on the Oshkenaw Community College campus stayed relatively unknown, save for the local papers.

Linda kept herself safe — she never walked in sketchy or poorly lit areas, tried to make sure she always had someone with her, and she commuted from home so she was almost never on campus after dark.

But one Tuesday night, she lost track of time while preparing for a midterm, and her heart fluttered when she realized it was dark outside. She would have to walk across the entire campus to her car, which was parked in the northern lot.

It was an unseasonably warm February evening. Linda would always remember the way the streetlights lit the soggy asphalt and the heavy, wet scent of the wind.

As she left the bright shining mecca of the library, the smiling faces of the missing girls flashed through her mind, stacked in the paper on top of each other, black and white. She knew they'd all disappeared after dark, and all of them had last been seen walking on campus by themselves. They were all eighteen or nineteen— her age.

She saw him almost right away. He was under a streetlight, just standing there with his hands at his sides. Watching her as she walked.

He was big, hulking. She felt the instant fear, her eternal slow buzz of anxiety flaring up. Her womanly survival instincts activating. *Stay away.*

She almost turned and walked in the other direction. She would always wonder what would have happened if she'd done that. Would he have pursued her, like any predator who sees its prey try to run?

But she didn't stop. Something rose within her, and she did something she never thought she could do.

She walked right up to him. She locked eyes with him. And she spoke to him.

"Hi," she said. "Excuse me. I'm nervous. Would you walk me to my car?"

He was big, and he was staring down at her. She knew it was him immediately. But she looked him right in the eye and asked this.

Her instincts were screaming at her, *this is a bad idea*. But she kept his gaze. She didn't look away.

He seemed almost flattered.

"I'd be honored," he said after a moment. His voice was high-pitched.

The walk took about fifteen minutes. He walked at her side, looking every which way, swiveling his head to and fro, diligently on the lookout for potential threats. He was at least ten years older than her, but there was an infantile way about him. His head crowned with a full tidal wave of chocolate brown hair, his eyes tiny and bright, his nose like a white mushroom, his small fish-lips pursed above a double chin. And then there was his high, squeaky voice.

She decided to think of him as The Man-Baby. This was decades before the stereotype of an unwashed nerd with arrested development, but the name just came to her.

He wore thin glasses on a slack face with flushed cheeks. His posture was awful, and he wore old boots and old jeans and an old flannel that hung off him like strips of flesh off a zombie. He was a mouth-breather, grossly overweight, large but soft (in four years Linda would briefly think of him in a dark theater during the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man's rampage in Ghostbusters), with an unsettling depth to his tiny, blinking eyes. They seemed to glow with an unsettling, inner white light.

This was all very similar to Chris and Sara's oldest son, Caleb. The physical description, but more than that— the vibe. The aura. The vibration of his soul. It vibrated on a dark, wretched level. Something had gone wrong with this soul. Maybe it wasn't his fault, but it had happened.

"Why are you nervous?" the Man-Baby asked her after they'd walked a bit.

"Well, all those girls have disappeared. I think it's four or five now."

"If you're that worried, what are you still doing here by yourself?"

"I have a mid-term next week. I'm cramming."

"Don't worry," he said, not looking at her. "No one will bother you tonight."

She couldn't believe she was doing this. She looked at her legs, her shoes clopping along on the sidewalk like they always did. He shuffled along next to her. He lumbered. He tromped. His flabbiness aside, if he'd wanted to, he could have lifted her right off her feet and done whatever he wanted. She tried to look relaxed, tried to not let him see how scared she was.

She asked him how he was doing. He grunted. He asked about her. She told him she was doing good, looking forward to being done for the semester. What will he do after he graduates?

"No idea."

Why am I talking to him like this, she thought.

She wanted to run. The way he smelled, the way he felt, the way he moved, the way his soul vibrated.

She pressed, not wanting silence.

"No idea?"

"I know my status."

She didn't know what that meant, didn't care.

"But how will you spend your time?"

For a second she thinks he won't answer, but then he does.

"...I'll just find something that I liked as a kid. I used to read old comics a lot. My favorite was Batman. So I'll just go through them and look at the covers and read the serial numbers and count the pedestrians. It calms me down. I like it a lot. It's... pure."

"Yeah, that's a really good idea. I don't read comic books."

"Yeah, they're not really for girls. Not yet anyway."

The parking lot was up ahead. Thank God. She tried to control her steps, to not walk faster. To not show him she was afraid. She knew, if he saw she was afraid (maybe he already did, but he didn't know that she knew) he might change.

They reached the curb. The wind smelled sickeningly sweet with springtime and nighttime, moisture hanging in the beams from the streetlights. She could hear the hiss of tires from Oshkenaw road. She could hear the wind. She could hear her heart pounding. She hoped he couldn't.

"I can take it from here," she said. "Thanks for walking with me."

"Naw, I'll wait til you get in your car. You can't be too careful, like you said."

"My car's right there," she said, pointing. She could see it, parked far against the farthest berm, its front end peeking out of the darkness. She'd backed it into the spot. It looked very small and very far away.

The Man-Baby just nodded and said, "I'll make sure you get there."

Turning her back on him was the hardest thing Linda had ever done. She half expected to feel his powerful, meaty, sweaty hands on the back of her neck, on her shoulders, arms or hips, but she took one step and then another and then she was in the darkness and out of the light and she was walking a bit faster but not too fast and she saw her car with the windshield reflecting a single silver line of streetlight, it was up ahead and she was taking more steps and it was closer and she couldn't feel his breath or hear his heavy breathing and her footsteps echoed across the parking lot and then she was at her car and taking her keys out oh god why didn't she get them out sooner and she was opening the door and now she was inside and breathing so hard she had to take a second and calm down so she wouldn't pass out and she saw him across the parking lot still standing there under the streetlight. Standing there, silent. Like Batman.

He looked so far away now. So small. He was still staring at her.

He lifted one hand, gave a little wave, turned, and was gone.

Linda revved her engine and floored it out of there. She would not sleep that night.

Two weeks later another girl was missing. Another week after that, they caught him. Linda saw the mugshot on the evening news and there he was – the Man-Baby.

"I only took the ones who rejected me," he'd said to his interrogators. "If a girl was nice, I let her go. I let the pure souls go. Every time."

She went to her room and wept. She never told anyone.

The Man-Baby's parents were on the news, shocked. They were fine people. His siblings seemed like good people, too. But something had gone wrong with him. He was sentenced to life in prison. He died sometime in the mid-2000s, of heart disease, maybe. Almost no one noticed.

Linda came out of her memory, sitting at the table with Sara and Chris, who were fine people, and their oldest son, whose soul vibrated in a way that suggested he was not.

The same rounded posture, the same slack jaw, the same unsettling depth to his eyes, the same hollow inflection in his voice. His mother said Caleb was always thinking, such a thinker, unable to get out of his own head. His parents were blind to his creepiness. They thought he was intelligent. Linda could understand, despite it all.

Sara jabbered about the Devil. Linda liked her and her husband but when they got going about religion, it was time to end the conversation.

Linda was about to speak, but then Caleb spoke instead.

"They say if you look the devil in the eye he has to let you go," he said, looking down at his hands folded on the table. "If you try to run, he'll consume you. But if you confront him, he'll respect that and allow you to pass."

Sara stopped jabbering, considered it.

"I haven't heard that anywhere," she said.

"I have," said Linda.

She turned and looked Caleb in the eye. His tiny, bright eyes, settled too deeply into his face. He looked right back. Linda was not afraid of him, no matter how his soul vibrated. She'd seen him before and knew him.

"It's true," Caleb said. "It's cause he respects you. Most people run away from him. But if you seek his counsel, he'll allow you to pass."

"Is it because he's lonely?" Linda asked.

"Yeah," said Caleb, a smile worming its way across his pale, doughy face. "Probably."

"But he's still The Devil."

"Yeah," said Caleb, smiling. "He is."

"And he always will be."

The conversation continued, and Linda left not long after.

The Work of Our Lord's Hand

Scott and Kelly Temple moved to the big house at the end of a long dirt road at the beginning of an unusually cold April sometime in the mid 2010's.

The real estate agent informed them that the house had been built in the 1940's, but was well cared for and modernized. It was enormous and secluded. Great boughs of pine sheltered the eaves. It had Gothic arches and aging windowpanes and tall, swooping rooftops. There was a huge front porch and a large backyard leading down to a ravine.

Scott's company, a tech subsidiary that had recently been formed to serve a prestigious banking firm, was responsible for finding the house and hooking them up with their real estate agent. Scott said his bosses had sprung into action as soon as they'd learned he had an infant at home.

"They're being really nice about it," Scott told Kelly. "They kept saying the property's been in the company for over a century now. And the lender they put me in touch with has an insane interest rate – 2 freaking percent. I mean, that's unheard of even in a good economy."

Kelly cradled their infant, whom they'd named Sophia after Kelly's grandmother, and smiled at her new husband.

"It's all coming together," she said.

A small voice in the back of her mind told her, "If it's too good to be true, it probably is." It was the voice of her mother. She shook it away.

This was an incredible deal. They needed to get out of the one bedroom apartment they'd been sharing. They needed to start their real lives.

First, they'd gotten married. Then, Kelly'd gotten pregnant. Then Sophia was born. Almost simultaneously Scott had found the new job, and the job had led to this house.

The Temples were both twenty-five, wholesome young Caucasian American Millennials. They were well aware that their life paths were a bit archaic for people their age; to have a marriage and a newborn and a mortgage a mere two years out of college, especially during a recession. Kelly had given up her job working at Guess in the mall to care for Sophia full time.

Scott's paychecks made that possible. They both felt very lucky and conscious of their privilege. Their friends half-jokingly called them the Boomers.

But this house was almost too much. It was bigger than either of the houses Scott or Kelly had grown up in. When the two of them walked inside for the first time, their voices echoed off the high walls, and the place was chilly and imposing. To Kelly, it felt and smelled like a museum. Interesting and aged, but musty and full of dark corners and sharp edges and unknown things. It didn't feel like it belonged to her, or ever really would.

Just the same, she was excited. So much could be done with the space. This was a house in which you could easily spend the rest of your life.

It had four bedrooms, a huge kitchen and an even bigger living room. There was a spacious dining room with an ancient brass chandelier dangling over the center. There were four bathrooms, a laundry room, several walk in closets, a pantry, a sitting room, and a finished basement that ran the length of the entire house.

Thanks to the extra bedrooms, Scott would get a study and Kelly would get a sewing room to work on her sewing projects.

Behind the house was a large backyard where several ancient oak trees stood, and there was an old wooden swing hanging from the boughs of a lonely shag hickory.

Forest stretched for miles beyond the backyard. They were ten minutes from the nearest sub division— a foreboding, gated enclave called Amber Hills— and almost half an hour from the nearest suburban shopping center.

"It looks like a postcard," said Kelly, looking at the backyard. For some reason, the backyard reminded her of the Babysitter's Club books she'd read as child. She could almost see troops of little girls playing out there like some Renaissance painting. She was giddy with happiness, and Sophia gurgled contentedly against her chest.

"We can take pictures of the backyard during the different seasons and send them out at Christmas," said Scott.

The two of them were both delighted and slightly suspicious of their striking good fortune. Scott's company had been a true savior – they'd even offered to help with the down payment.

"They must really want you to write code for them," said Kelly. "To get us this house at this rate, and at this price. I mean, this is a rich person's house. We're not rich."

"No, but with my salary the mortgage payments will be easy," said Scott. "And you can always go back to work once Sophia's in school. If you want to. Start that sewing channel you talked about."

Kelly nodded, smiling widely in spite of her mother's quiet reservations, whispered at the back of her mind. Her mother had never let her have too much fun, always telling her to watch out for this or watch out for that. She bounced between a bright white happiness and a certain, crawling caution.

Scott came over and took Sophia from Kelly. Sophia gave a peal of baby giggles as Scott swung her around.

"You're gonna become fully conscious in this place," he told her.

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Kelly put Sophia in her high chair and gave her a handful of Cheerios to munch on. She played Death Cab for Cutie off her phone as she fixed the kitchen up.

How exciting to have her own place. She'd lived with her parents her whole life up until she'd moved out with Scott, right after he'd asked her to marry him on a walk in the state park one autumn evening.

It had been two weeks since they'd moved in. All of their parents and Scott's brother and sister and Kelly's brothers had helped out, plus Scott's frat buddy Thomas.

The house still echoed, even with all their furniture and possessions moved in. Two rooms – Scott's study and Kelly's sewing room – were still empty with only wood floors and blank walls. Kelly kept those doors closed.

Sophia got the bedroom closest to Scott and Kelly's master bedroom, which was the size of their entire previous apartment.

While Scott's company had shown some unconventional generosity, in return they appeared to expect every last minute of his time. Scott worked constantly. 12 hour days, seven days a week. It would be like this for the first month or so, then he'd start getting more normal hours. Or so he had been told. He'd also be traveling soon, gone for a couple days to a week at a time. Sometimes more.

So with the exception of the move-in day, Kelly was alone with their baby daughter. She spent her time unpacking everything and rearranging the furniture the way she wanted, toting and doting on Sophia along the way.

And all this gave time for Kelly to think. She got anxious when she thought too much.

She missed Scott dearly, way more than she'd thought she would. She hadn't ever spent this much time away from him. She missed his chest and his eyes and his smile.

Scott was tall and handsome. Kelly was small and frail and she thought her chin was too narrow and her eyes too big and her hair too straight and her limbs too skinny and her waist too gawkish, which was a word her mother used to describe her. She also had a weak complexion, breaking out in unsightly clusters of acne whenever stressed out.

Scott's status and looks made him popular with other women. Every time another girl gave Scott the eyes, or subtly reached out to tap his shoulder or brush his arm, it stirred a flame inside Kelly that made her shake with anger. She told herself it was ridiculous. Scott was always faithful. He was a practicing Catholic, like Kelly, and he got along with his parents and siblings, and that was enough for Kelly to tell herself it was only her silly, gawkish head.

Kelly had most of everything unboxed and put away. She broke all the empty boxes down and stacked them the empty garage, next to her old Chevy that sat in its parking spot like a mouse in a cave.

She'd saved the kitchen for last, as it was the place she was looking forward to setting up the most.

The pantry was the size of a walk-in closet, with a naked yellow bulb caked with dust giving light to every corner. Kelly wiped the shelves down with Pledge and paper towel and pictured where

she'd organize her flour and sugar and spices once she'd bought them. There was so much space to fill.

Kelly had only just begun to unpack and put away the first of the dishes when she heard a knock at the front door. The knocks echoed through the house, one after the other, slow and deliberate and booming, like a hammer swung against the door.

Kelly looked up and listened. She waited a moment.

"Who was that?" she asked Sophia.

Sophia babbled, already starting to talk. She had bright brown eyes and a fluff of brown hair on her otherwise bald head.

Kelly put the plates she was holding in the cupboard and headed for the front door. The walk covered the same distance as the house she'd grown up in.

Kelly was nervous about spending so much money on this place. Her hand had shaken as she'd signed the mortgage. What if Scott's new job didn't work out?

She pushed the thoughts away, focused on the chores she still had to do after she answered the door.

There was no silhouette in the frosted glass. Maybe it was FedEx, dropping something off for Scott.

Kelly opened the door.

There was no one there.

The day was grey and mild, dingy mid-April with winter's chill still hanging about like an unwelcome guest.

Kelly looked down the driveway. The house was the last one on a dead end road. The driveway was long and winding. There was no way someone could've walked up and rang the doorbell and disappeared like this, even the FedEx guy who'd seemed to have a knack for that sort of thing at their apartment.

There was a bouquet of flowers on the doorstep. They looked like roses, but they were a bright shiny gold, almost as if they'd been spray painted. They were tied with a big gold ribbon in a bow.

Kelly looked at the gold flowers lying there on the smooth cement of the porch, on top of the tiny circular welcome mat she'd laid down the day before. She bent down and picked them up. They were cool and damp.

She took the flowers inside and lay them on the counter. Right away, something about them made her uneasy. Where had they come from? Who would just leave them there? And they looked unnatural — like they were made of some cheap tin foil or something.

She couldn't smell them, either. She brought the bouquet to her nose instinctively upon picking it up, and there was no scent, not even the vague greenish smell of fresh-cut vegetation.

Kelly looked at the flowers on the counter and then picked them up again.

"Just a second, honey," she said to Sophia.

She went out to the garage and opened the garage door. It groaned like an old man getting up from his chair.

Kelly walked outside and promptly dumped the flowers in their new garbage bin. They flopped to the bottom where they rested against the clean brown plastic, looking forlorn and rejected.

=====

Kelly didn't think about the flowers again until the next day, when there was another knock at the door.

The flowers were back. In the same spot.

And this time, Kelly could hear the faint dulcet tones of a violin playing, not far off. Somewhere just inside the treeline, from the sound of it. A mournful melody, slow and sweeping.

She quickly scooped up the flowers and went back inside.

Kelly hung onto the bouquet this time, wrapping it in a paper bag and hiding it in the mud room off the inside garage door.

"Is someone from work trying to give us flowers?" she asked Scott that evening. "You know, as like a housewarming gift?"

Scott had circles under his eyes. He'd been sluggish ever since he'd started working. Only two weeks at this job and he was no longer the chipper young man Kelly had fallen in love with in

college, the star of the tennis team and a diligent jogger. He looked drained, and he was getting moody.

"What?" he said, not looking at her.

"There's been these golden flowers on the doorstep for the past two days. Someone rings the doorbell and nothing's there, and then there's these flowers on the doorstep. They leave these weird-looking flowers."

"What?" said Scott again. He was looking at his phone. He always looked at his phone these days.

They were sitting around the dinner table. Kelly had made them their first meal in the house together – spaghetti and salad. Scott had only eaten half his plate. Sophia had been fussy, too, refusing to eat her baby food and making quite the mess as Kelly tried to get the spoon into her mouth.

"Do you think someone from your work gave them to us?" Kelly said again. "I don't know who else would. And our friends would tell us about it. There's no card, nothing. Just these weird gold flowers with a ribbon around them."

"No," Scott said, turning his phone off and shaking his head. "No, no one from work. No one's mentioned it to me anyway."

His phone buzzed again as soon as he set it down.

"Jesus Christ," he said.

He picked it up.

"I knew it, I gotta be in early tomorrow," he said, shaking his head. "Again. And I'll probably work the weekend."

"Are they ever going to let up?" Kelly said. "Even give you a day to get some sleep? You look tired."

"I am tired. I gotta go to bed."

He stood from the table and rubbed his eyes and groaned.

"Can't wait for that first paycheck, though," he said. He grinned at her. "All the month's bills paid off with one freaking check. Gonna take-um all fores granted."

He bent down and kissed Kelly.

"What?" she said.

"I said all the bills paid with one freaking check. It's gonna be great."

She held onto him for a moment, breathing him in, letting go of the odd phrase he'd just casually spat up. She'd stay awake with Sophia just a little longer, watching another Disney animated classic and letting Sophia fall asleep in her lap.

Scott released Kelly, bent and kissed Sophia on the forehead. He made for the bedroom, yawning, then stopped and turned.

"What kind of flowers are they?" he asked, rubbing the back of his head and yawning some more.

"They look like roses," said Kelly. "But they're this bright gold. That's why I thought they'd be from your company. They look like something a hipster tech start-up would send as a housewarming gift. I still have them. They're in the mud room."

"Why would you put them in there?"

Kelly felt silly.

"Because they creep me out. Just the fact that, you know, they've been there two days in a row now and I don't know who's leaving them. And then I thought I heard music in the woods today, too."

"Oh," said Scott, shaking his head. "Yeah, that is weird..."

"I can show them to you," said Kelly, getting up to go to the closet. "I threw the first ones out, and then the second ones showed up."

"No, it's all right," said Scott, shaking his head some more. "They're not from work. They would've sent them back with me, not dropped them off. And then helping us get the house and helping with the down payment was the housewarming gift. But Niles says he's sending a coffee basket home with me this Friday. So there's that."

"I saved them," said Kelly. "Really, I can show them to you, if you want."

"Tomorrow," said Scott. "When I get back. I might not have to stay so late tomorrow if I'm coming in early."

"But who's sending them, Scott? We don't have any real neighbors."

"I don't know, Kelly," said Scott. "But they're just-a sum happy fl'urs."

Scott walked off to bed, tossing a "Love you both," over his shoulder and then it was just Kelly and Sophia again.

=====

To Kelly's relief, there were no flowers on the doorstep the next day, and there were no knocks at the door.

She finished organizing the kitchen and the house was officially put together. She felt very refreshed and sank down on the old, stuffy couch they'd brought from their apartment. Sophia rolled around on her blankie on the floor.

Kelly sat there. It was getting to be late afternoon, and she wanted to have something cooked for Scott when he got home.

Other than a couple end tables, a lamp, the couch, and the TV, the living room was empty. They'd have to buy a furniture set. Where the heck did someone even get something like that? Ikea? That sounded boring. Ikea furniture reminded Kelly of office buildings, sterile and unfeeling.

A few of Kelly's friends acted like she was committing some anti-feminist atrocity by playing housewife, but she didn't mind it at all. She liked cooking. She loved Scott and liked it when he enjoyed a meal and groaned and unbuttoned his pants to give his full belly more freedom after one of her meals. She liked not having to work. She liked spending time with her baby daughter, not having to worry about the cost of daycare. As her mother always used to say, this was the way it was meant to be. Her friends were just jealous. That's why they barely texted her anymore.

Kelly was watching Sophia roll about on her blankie and reflecting on buying a living room set when she heard them.

Violins. Long and low and sad. The bow dragged longingly across the strings. Irish sounding.

She snapped out of her daze. She listened hard.

There was a rustling, and more of the sad violin. It was unmistakable.

It was coming from under the living room window.

Kelly quietly got up, walked over and looked out.

There was another scurrying sound, and Kelly thought she caught a glimpse of something flitting around the corner of the house.

Something gold.

She got a very cold feeling, and went to pick up Sophia off her blanket.

She listened and didn't hear anything else.

Very carefully, she walked to the garage and put Sophia in her car seat and got in the car. She stood by her open car door and listened again, her eyes on the garage window that faced the backyard. Still nothing.

Kelly's nerves seemed frozen. She didn't open the garage door until she was in the car and the doors were locked.

Her eyes darted to every corner in the yard as she reversed out. Sophia was blissfully oblivious to everything, calmly babbling to herself and playing with her chubby hands.

Kelly reached the end of the driveway and sped down the dirt road, and didn't know where she intended to go. She just accelerated.

She was nearly to town when she decided to go grocery shopping. She bought a rotisserie chicken for dinner and rolls and bottled water and told herself everything would be fine, that she'd imagined it all.

Her mother's voice told her to be cautious. She'd certainly seen and heard something.

She texted Scott, "I heard someone in the bushes outside the living room window today. I heard them laughing. It sounded like children."

She waited for his reply. It didn't come until an hour later.

"I'll be home at 6. I'll check the yard for any strange children."

Kelly drove around, finding things to do. She went to the library, to the bank, to the post office. She visited their new church – St. Michael's, a brick building that looked more like an office than a church – but the doors were locked and she couldn't get inside. She didn't go home until she knew Scott was back, pulling up at 7:30. Relief flooded her as she saw his car in the garage.

"I want to show you these flowers," she told him as they sat there chewing on their chicken.

"I didn't see anyone," said Scott. "I took the ax and walked around. But I mean, they would've been long gone."

"I swear I heard laughing," said Kelly.

"This is a big place," said Scott. "Are you sure you're not just letting it get to you?"

She glared at him. "What do you mean, 'Get to me?'"

Scott's phone buzzed. He picked it up but Kelly took ahold of his wrist.

"He sees you twelve hours a day," she said. "He can wait for five freaking minutes while you discuss the possible intruders that might be bothering your young wife and infant daughter."

Scott relented.

"You're right," he said. "Let me see those flowers."

Kelly went to the closet where she'd put them two days before. She opened the doors and grabbed the paper bag.

"I swear, they look like they're spray-painted," she said, walking back into the kitchen and reaching into the folded bag for the flowers. "I swear, they – "

She stopped. She felt around in the bag.

The bag was empty.

"What the...?"

Kelly shook the bag upside down.

"What?" said Scott.

"They're freaking gone," said Kelly. "I put them in this bag two days ago!"

"Is it in another bag?" Scott said, getting up. Kelly saw with a flash of anger that he was finishing up a reply text to his boss.

"No, there was no other bag."

She went back to the closet. It was completely empty, an old wood floor and an empty shelves and nothing else.

"Did you put them somewhere else?"

"No," said Kelly, exasperated and starting to get upset. "I put them here so I'd remember."

"Well, they're not here now," said Scott, looking in the closet.

Out in the kitchen, Sophia began to cry. It was her *'I'm frustrated because I'm no longer the center of attention'* cry.

"It's scary," said Kelly, getting emotional. "It's freaking scary without you around here."

Scott looked at her incredulously.

"I miss you," she said. "It's only been like two weeks but you're there all the time and I miss you."

Scott— bless him— snapped into husband mode, embracing her. She wrapped her arms up around his shoulders and felt security course through her. Out in the kitchen, Sophia whined.

"It's probably nothing," said Scott. "You probably threw them out, too, and just forgot. You've been putting this place together all by yourself."

"The trash bin," said Kelly. "That's right, they should still be in the trash bin! The first ones!"

He let her go and she darted out to the garage.

The brown garbage bin was empty, as well. Not so much as a stray leaf.

"I fucking threw them in here!" Kelly said. "I swear!"

"Kelly, come inside," said Scott.

Kelly slammed the bin lid down.

Back in the kitchen, Kelly lifted Sophia out of her chair and sniffed her diaper. She was clean. Sophia clung to her.

"Look," said Scott. "I'm only forty-five minutes away, an hour with traffic."

"It's not like I can just drive to my parents' house on the other side of the country," said Kelly.

"I know, I know," said Scott. "It's all right. Look, I'll let them know what's going on. If anything happens, just let me know. But I can't stay home. I have to be there. I mean, you know, sometimes things just happen, Kelly."

Kelly was conflicted. But she knew there was nothing she could do.

"Okay," she relented. "I still don't feel good, but I understand. Okay."

"And if anything weird happens, just text me. And if anything really weird happens, just call the cops."

"I know," said Kelly. "I just don't want this to get complicated."

"It won't," said Scott. "We're just nervous. This is new. But we can handle it. I'm not going anywhere."

"But what about when you travel?"

Scott hesitated.

"That's not going to happen for awhile."

=====

The next morning, Scott was gone before Kelly woke up and didn't come home after she'd gone to bed.

"You're just getting used to being alone," said her mother, her voice echoing out of Kelly's phone and into the high kitchen ceiling. "You're such a silly-head. You could never be by yourself. You always had to have me around..."

Kelly rolled her eyes as her mother went on and on. She had made the mistake of talking about the flowers and her mother had immediately gone berserk with paranoia before shifting the blame onto Kelly's nervous disposition.

"Mom, you never take what I say seriously."

"You just moved hours and hours away from the only place you've ever called home," said her mother, a complete three-sixty from where she'd been fifteen minutes before. "You'll get used to it."

"I know," said Kelly. She didn't know why she'd called her mother. It only stressed her out. But it was better than talking to no one.

"That said, though, if it happens again I would call the police and file a report. Last thing I need to is to hear you and that sweet baby girl have been butchered. It would kill me."

Kelly could practically hear her mother shaking her head like an agitated elephant. She always did that when she thought Kelly wasn't capable.

"I'm going to worry about this now," she said, her voice getting high and keening.

"Don't," said Kelly, wanting to end the conversation. "It's fine."

"I think you're going to be fine," said her mother, doing another 360. "Your father would be proud of you."

They talked a little more, then her mother had to go to work at the sewing shop. They said "I love you" and hung up.

Kelly had made herself some toast and was feeding Sophia when she saw them dancing in the yard.

She froze, the spoon poised in front of Sophia's face.

They were in the backyard. They were all female— or at least they all presented as female. They were dark-skinned, with long,

frizzy, dark hair. Their eyes were yellow and cat-like. They wore rags of gold, shredded dresses that swirled around their knobby knees and hung from their scrawny arms.

They were off by the edge of the woods, dancing and twirling. Several held tambourines. One played a fiddle. They all had yellow ribbons tied to their instruments. The same kind of ribbons the flowers were tied with.

Kelly immediately pulled out her phone and called Scott.

"Yes, dear?"

"They're in the yard," she said.

"I'm going to have to leave," he said. "They're sending me to Toronto later today. I can't get out of it."

"Scott, they're in the fucking yard," she said, watching the dancers and starting to panic.

Scott's tone changed.

"Call the police," he said.

Kelly hung up, dialed 911 and held it to her ear.

There was only a strange, scratchy singing on the other end. A melody that sounded both Celtic and Arabic. Kelly didn't recognize the words.

Ett-oo-way, ett - too-way

Darling, dah-doo

Ett-too-way, eta-too-way

Hunsy froo-froo

Cum uht de ruh-veen, we do we do

Kelly ended the call and tried to call Scott again.

It went right to voicemail.

She looked out the window, realized her eyes were wet.

The yellow women were gone.

=====

Kelly locked all the doors. She locked all the windows. She put Sophia to bed and slept next to her in a chair.

They didn't have a gun, but she kept the fire poker with her, the only weapon she could find.

Scott never came home. She tried calling him and it went to voicemail every time. She cried herself to sleep.

Morning dawned cold and damp.

Kelly's bladder was screaming. She toddled over to the bathroom and relieved herself as fast as she could.

When she returned to Sophia's room, they were crouched at the foot of her crib. They were smaller than they'd appeared to be while dancing in the yard, the size of children themselves. The locked window was wide open, no sign of forced entry.

"She is the work of our Lord's hand, to be sure," she heard one of them whisper.

Sophia was sleeping peacefully in her crib, and a golden ribbon was tied around her wrist.

Seeing them up close, Kelly's veins ran empty. They were not entirely human.

Their hands were spindly, their faces skeletal. Their horrible eyes were like bulging globs of melted gold with the black slits of their pupils slashed down the center. Their golden dresses hung in rags off their emaciated limbs and shoulders, clothed in Christmas wrapping shreds. Their clutching fingers were laced together across their chests. Their hair, like thatch, ran down their backs in pony tails that bristled like steel wool.

They turned and saw her.

She could smell them. They smelled sweet, like flowers should.

"Da madre," the one at the foot of the crib hissed.

The one at the head of the crib extended her fingers down into the crib, spreading them like a spider's legs over Sophia's sleeping face.

"GO AWAY!" screamed Kelly, unable to walk any further. "GO AWAY!"

"Aye, thy shant be 'fraid, my womb-ey poppet," said the head creature. She took one of her long nails and drew a circle on Sophia's forehead.

A golden circle appeared on Sophia's skin, glowing.

"Such a tender bosom thy has, to make up such a sweetling for the offering."

"The work of our Lord's hand, to be sure," said the others, staring at her. They were all smiling now, and their teeth were all sharp.

"GO AWAY, GO AWAY, GO AWAY!" shrieked Kelly, horrified at both her own shrill voice and how ineffective it was on the intruders.

"Aye, ye can't force back what thou hast seen with thine own eyes, me womb-ey poppet," said the leader, grinning her sharp-toothed grin at her. "Accepted the gift, ye did."

"Accepted the gift, she did," whispered the others. "Twicely."

Kelly charged at them, adrenaline-high, screaming, waving the fire poker. They disappeared out the open window, quick as cats, twisted little monkeys.

Sophia woke up, Kelly's screams startling her awake. Kelly gathered her up and inspected every inch of her. Sophia bawled at her mother's fear and being roughly handled but appeared otherwise unharmed.

Kelly untied the golden wristband and flushed it down the toilet. The golden circle on Sophia's forehead wouldn't come off no matter how Kelly washed it.

Kelly called Scott. It went right to voicemail again. She called him repeatedly for ten minutes. Always to voicemail. And his mailbox was full.

She took a picture of Sophia's forehead, the golden circle right above her eyes. She tried to send it. It wouldn't send.

Kelly was crying now, weeping pitifully, getting Sophia wet with her tears.

She held Sophia close, refusing to put her down even when she squirmed or fussed.

She could hear violins playing outside, fancy dancy fiddles. She could hear the rat-a-tat-tat rattle of tambourines. She could hear them singing in those scratchy voices.

They were at the windows now, looking in with their molten gold eyes.

Kelly dialed 911 and was confronted with strange voices singing.

Ett-oo-way, ett - too-way

Darling, dah-doo

She dialed it again and again.

Ett-too-way, eta-too-way

Hunsy froo-froo

Always the same voices.

Cum uht de ruh-veen, we do we do

"Sometimes things just happen," she heard her mother say. "And you can't do anything about it."

Kelly cried some more, and now Sophia was crying, too, wailing, and Kelly tried calling Scott again.

Voicemail.

Kelly threw the phone against the wall in a rage.

She heard glass shatter, and a voice announce, "Time has come!"

More voices.

"Time has come-a-la!"

"Come to collect the offering, we has!"

"Release thine arms!"

Kelly could hear the singing, the fiddle-playing, coming from down the hallway now. It was extremely loud.

Weer been dancin' o'er the neeght

und serm-tum uhf ees deh

Kelly ran, Sophia in her arms.

Down the stairs, into the front hall, down the hall, into the kitchen.

Fleeing, fleeing, all a panic-blur, Sophia's shrieks in her ears.

She saw them at every window, at every door, their faces, their eyes, their teeth, their chanting, their singing.

They sang, sickly sweet voices, sickly sweet strings.

Nur turnin' buck uh-gun

Buh-ring gahr-lun gay

She backed into the pantry, clutching Sophia to her chest.

She heard them scritch across the floor on their nails and feet. Mice sounds. Cat sounds.

Sometimes things just happen.

They threw the pantry door open, all of them looking down.

Kelly squeezed Sophia to her chest, refusing to let them see her.

"Ree-leez dah off-rin'," they chanted. *"Ree-leez dah off-rin."*

They reached for her with clutching fingers.

"GO AWAY," screamed Kelly repeatedly.

She squeezed Sophia tightly, refusing.

"Ree-leez," they chanted, reaching for Sophia.

Kelly screamed. Sophia had gone silent.

Suddenly, it was over. The chanting and the music stopped. A switch had been thrown.

Scott was in the pantry doorway.

He bent to hold Kelly, and his face was white.

"What did you do?" he whispered, and then he added, eyelid twitching, in a guttural rasp that sounded nothing like him, "Wuz we comin' dun-ah?"

Kelly looked down at Sophia.

She was blue and motionless.

Kelly looked up at Scott, her eyes blank moons.

"Ree-leez'd de of'rin'," she whispered.

Jungle Fort

Jennings saw the rex grab Ingmar by the torso. He saw it sink its teeth in and shake, Ingmar flopping bonelessly. He saw Ingmar's legs flail and heard Ingmar's decidedly pitiful screams. But the rex didn't swallow Ingmar, or throw him to the ground and rip any meat off.

That's when Jennings knew two things –

- 1) the rex was mechanical, and
- 2) it was poisoned, probably with the green.

"Great," he mumbled.

This also explained why their rifles were so ineffectual. The bullets clinked off the thing's hide like it was nothing. Jennings knew there was only one way to take down a mechanical rex with a rifle – get it in its open mouth, down the gullet, and hope to hit one of the main fuel cables in its throat.

There were other, cruder ways to fall a large mechanical war machine, but the fort had been out of explosives and projectiles for weeks now. The rex was here to stay until it ran out of fuel or damaged itself somehow.

The day was already hot and stifling, but that was typical in the jungle.

The fort was half Nativist, half Amerasian. It was square shaped, with towers on all four corners and a swanky series of penthouse suites meant for commanding officers and visiting officials all set along the north wall. It had been built on the ruins of an ancient sandstone temple used by jungle heathens for religious purposes, and it was outfitted with plasticore barricades and steelified turrets and towers, with guns of all ages (most of them out of ammo and useless) bristling off in all directions.

They were surrounded by miles and miles of untamed jungle, thick and impenetrable and wild and deadly.

Other than occasional deathbot air raid, the fort was usually left at peace these days. The section of jungle they guarded held no riches or strategic advantages. It was territory alone.

The enemy had sent in monsters before – deathbots of all kinds, zombie-fied peasants, nanobot swarms, alien mutants, necro-dragons, all sorts of shit. Once a battalion of orcs had tried to charge the front gate, and there'd been a series of harpy bombardments for three days straight, but never this. Never a rex.

The one blended into the jungle itself, its skin like swamp moss striped with bright green the color of sun-drenched grass, stretched over a clanking skeleton, its laser-red eyes wide and staring. Jagged teeth stuck out like shrapnel every which way of its oil-drooling maw. It was at least thirty five feet long, its tiny claw arms grasping at nothing. It was a deformed, wretched beast; thrown together and sent on its one suicidal mission.

Jennings watched Ingmar's body begin to rot where it had fallen at the base of the outer wall. Ingmar's mouth was open and moving like a fish out of water. His shirt had been partially torn off by the rex's jaws, and the puncture wounds from its teeth were turning the same swamp green, spreading outward.

Yes, this rex was infected with green.

Ingmar had been drunk again, and he'd leaned over the guardrail to spit on the thing when it had headbutted the wall. The whole fort shook and Ingmar lost his balance and toppled over the edge with a startled, "Oh, cripes!" The rex opened its jaws like a dog getting a treat and Ingmar had fallen right in.

The jaws closed as Ingmar's drunken face registered what had just happened to him. A scream and crunch later, and Ingmar was no more.

The rex stomped around the outer wall, head-butting it and trying to get more unwitting soldiers to lose their footing. It reeked of diesel fuel.

There was little chance it would get inside, but this was an unorthodox attack. Perhaps even a diversion for something bigger to come.

The Duchess must be notified.

Jennings left his position at the wall, and went to find her.

The Duchess was in her chambers, as usual. Fucking another soldier, as usual.

This time it was Longo, whom the Duchess liked quite a bit.

Jennings could hear screams and thumps coming from the Duchess's chambers as he approached from the hall.

Baddem was sitting in the chair outside the door, reading an old fashion magazine. He was on double duty – guarding the chambers and waiting his turn with the Duchess. He was a young, black buck, well-liked and lithe.

No one actually enjoyed sex with the Duchess. No one knew how old she actually was, but it was quite old. Most of the platoon liked to say that she was using their semen as life juice.

As Jennings approached Baddem and did the introductory salute, there was a great smashing from the courtyard. Roars and screams and slams.

Jennings ran to the nearest window and looked out.

The rex had actually busted through the front gate without much effort, only a couple slams of its long, boxy, misshapen head. Again, lack of maintenance had done them in. The door hadn't been serviced in weeks, and it was practically rusting in the jungle humidity.

"I must speak to the Duchess," Jennings said to Baddem. "The fort is under attack."

"Her Majesty is preoccupied at the moment," said Baddem, as a different sort of screaming and thumping could be heard from inside the Duchess's chamber. Longo was trying his damndest. If you didn't make the Duchess climax at least three times during your sessions with her, you were subject to expulsion. And the only way back to base was on foot.

The Duchess's appearance and the sex itself notwithstanding, sessions with the Duchess had their benefits. You were allowed to eat and drink whatever you liked, and the Duchess's chambers were the only place in the fort where the air conditioning worked on a regular basis.

Jennings faced Baddem.

"I'm afraid I must insist," he said. "As you can hear, the gate has been breached. Those restraints and hinges I suggested replacing appear to have given way, if I'm to take a guess."

"Did someone say restraints," said a voice.

The Duchess herself stood in the doorframe, smirking at them. Her eyes glittered.

Longo darted out from behind her with his clothes bundled over his crotch, still naked and sweaty and with the thousand yard stare one always had after a session with the Duchess. He padded swiftly down the hallway toward the stairs and out of sight.

"Baddem, darling, you're up next," said the Duchess, in her lace lingerie, arcing a leg up the doorframe.

Her face was a wrinkled horror, her hair long and black and hanging to her sagging ass. Her skin was the color of Halloween chocolate left out till Thanksgiving. It stretched across her bones like badly-aged leather, and her eyes were twinkling flecks of ebony set in sockets of soft brown clay. She wore a golden tiara, thin and elegant, and a black lace onesie that dangled below her flaking kneecaps.

Screams and growls and mechanical clanks could be heard from the courtyard. The air smelled like smoke and sulfur.

"Your Excellence, the fort is under attack," said Jennings. "The gate has been breached. Weapons supplies are dwindling. If we do not act immediately it would appear we will lose the fort to a single aggressor."

"A rex?" said Baddem.

"Yes, an old one, life-molded, and its jaws have been laced with the green."

"There's always time for intercourse, Jennings, dear," the Duchess said. She grabbed Baddem by his ear and tugged him toward her. Baddem stood up and obeyed.

"Jennings, be a darling and find Yates for me," said the Duchess. "Tell him he's on deck."

Jennings gritted his teeth.

"Your Excellency, Yates is manning the left flank turret. I'm afraid he's preoccupied, and from the sound of things he may not even be alive anymore."

"Was that a question?" the Duchess said, turning to him.

Damn this entire world, thought Jennings.

"No, your radiance," he said.

He turned on his heels and went to find Yates as the Duchess tugged Baddem into her chambers and slammed the door.

Outside, the rex was feasting on the soldiers unfortunate enough to have been trapped in the courtyard when the fort went on lockdown. The left side of the front gate was smashed in, twisted inward as though rammed by a giant fist.

The unlucky soldiers were all bunched up against the exit doors that lead to the inner bunkers, some firing their weapons at the thing as it bent and picked them up in its noxious maw and threw them to the side for the green to ravage their flesh and foam their lips and convulse their backs until their spines snapped. Most were just pounding on the door or curled into a fetal position on the ground, weeping and waiting to be killed.

Jennings watched as the rex bent down to grab another one of the unfortunate men. The only noises were gunshots and screams and shouts and the steampunk racket of the rex.

Bite and throw, bite and throw. Throw to the left, throw to the right. Destroy and advance.

The soldiers on the fort's walls were firing at the rex. Their bullets clinged and zinged uselessly off its metal flesh. The rex didn't even seem to notice.

Jennings went to the left turret on the south tower and found Yates staring blankly, his gun in front of him, unloaded and unfired.

"Why aren't you firing? Why isn't anyone on the gun turrets firing?!" Jennings yelled. Yates was one of the finest marksmen in the fort.

"We've been out of ammo for days," said Yates.

He looked at Jennings, his eyes like lonely planets. He was a young white buck, decent and dependable.

"We're all going to die, aren't we? I knew it the second I was stationed here."

"Quite possibly," said Jennings.

He shoved Yates out of the way and manned the gun.

He pulled the trigger. There was a clink. Nothing.

"Crisco," said Jennings in disgust.

He turned to Yates.

"The Duchess requires your presence once she's finished with Baddem. I'm only telling you this because I have to."

"She's still sticking to the routine even during an attack?"

"I do believe she's lost her mind. This jungle does that to a person. And to think, she was once the top general in her field when the Capital Force sent her here."

Jennings surveyed the courtyard. The rex, the diminishing number of live soldiers, the smashed front gate, and the strewn bodies, piled and rotting every which where.

The rex had tired of its biting game and was now crushing the unfortunate soldiers as they bunched up at the door, head butting them and stomping on them with its metal talons. Its feet were the size of dinner tables and they came down again and again on the cornered soldiers, who squirted like burst fruit upon impact. Only a few remained, soaked in gore from their fallen brothers and staring and wailing like trapped children.

No one on the walls fired at the rex now. Most of the soldiers had given up their futile game and just watched as it carried out its programmed massacre.

A few moments later and the soldiers in the courtyard had all been reduced to scraps of pulp and meat and bone, turning the dust red and spongey, so many splats of spent sentience. The rex began headbutting the inner gate itself, trying to penetrate even further into the fort.

The other gun turret operators at the other three towers stood staring like Yates, dumb and damned.

"Standing here will do us no good," said Jennings. "I suggest we get you to the Duchess's chambers."

They ran from Yates' post, the screams in the courtyard silenced, the only sounds now the deep rhythmic thunder of the rex banging its metal head against the metal door, which

fortunately had been reinforced much more recently than the outer door.

Jennings and Yates could hear Baddem and the Duchess going at it from within the Duchess's chamber when they arrived back at the penthouse. The whole fort was shaking with every headbutt from the rex. It was like an earthquake set to a metronome.

"So are we to just sit here and wait for that monster to run out of fuel?" Yates said, still with his sad marble eyes. "I can't have sex with the Duchess at a time like this. Everything is failing. It was breaking down for so long and now it's finally falling apart."

"Fear not," said Jennings. "I have an idea."

He kicked open the chamber doors – the jambs were practically rotted away, one more neglected thing in this godforsaken, mind-hurt place.

Jennings walked right into the chambers, savoring the cool air upon his cheeks.

The Duchess was on the bed with her legs in the air and Baddem on top of her, the sheets damp.

She sat up and threw Baddem off when she saw Jennings standing at the foot of the bed. Baddem lay on his back next to her, staring up at Jennings.

"How dare you," hissed the Duchess. She grabbed a glass from the nightstand and threw it at Jennings. He dodged it easily and it shattered against the wall, spraying crystals that twinkled in the sunlight from the window.

The fort continued its rhythmic shudder from the rex's attempts to break in.

The air conditioning was lovely, and Jennings let it soothe him. Yates stood in the door, peeking like a shy child.

"How are we to fuck with these constant interruptions," the Duchess wanted to know. "I was nearly to my second climax!"

"Madame, I am rescinding your command," Jennings announced.

"You're what?"

"You are no longer fit for command, and I am taking over."

"How dare you," hissed the Duchess again.

Baddem lay next to her, unmoving, his eyes on Jennings, his penis softening and glistening with sex.

"I am rescinding your command and calling in reinforcements," said Jennings with authority. "You are no longer fit for command of this fort. I, as captain primal, am next in the line of succession."

"There ARE no reinforcements, foolish man!" yelled the Duchess. "The Capital was taken over a month ago! All time is lost! All there is now is to wait until death!"

Jennings heart sank into the mushy pit of his stomach.

"What?"

"We must enjoy the time we have left, as we see fit!"

So that explains why all she does is fuck, thought Jennings. He'd suspected the war had been lost.

"So you mean to tell us we're doomed," he said.

"We're all doomed in the long run," said the Duchess. "All we can do is seize the time we have left."

She reached over and grabbed Baddem by the balls. His whole body jerked.

Baddem reached down and jacked his wilting dick, eyes on the ceiling, trying to keep it hard for the Duchess. The Duchess massaged his testicles, her eyes on Jennings.

"If the Capital has been captured, then the war is over," said Jennings. "You were required to inform us. You did not. I am rescinding your command."

"I'm not required to do anything," said the Duchess. "My superiors have been gone for weeks. I will live out my final days as I see fit. One hundred and thirty five years I've lived now. A few extra days or weeks of pleasure is more than owed to me."

Jennings thought.

"Baddem, Yates, attention," he yelled.

Baddem lifted his head. His eyes were wet. Nothing moved except his jacking hand. The Duchess continued fondling his balls.

Yates stood in the doorway, unsure. His eyes darted from the Duchess to Jennings.

"We're weakened, out of supplies, out of morale," said the Duchess. "It's hopeless."

"You are absolutely right, Your Majesty," said Jennings. "... and this is why I am rescinding your command. Baddem, Yates — escort the Duchess down to the Chop Chamber. We'll wait out this attack there."

"You'll do no such thing," snarled the Duchess.

Yates came into the room and stood next to Jennings.

Baddem took the Duchess's hand from his crotch and threw it away like it was an insect he'd found in his bed. He stood and pulled on his pants.

"Mutiny," screeched the Duchess. "You will ball me this instant, Private Baddem!"

Baddem stood next to Jennings.

"What are we to do now?"

"Mutiny," screeched the Duchess. "Mutiny!"

Her eyes bugging out, she tore at her hair and flopped about the bed, her hideous, shriveled, ruined nakedness on full display. She rolled and clawed and shrieked something awful.

"Let's get the bog out of here," said Jennings.

=====

The Chop Chamber was a room in the basement of the fort, filled with rotting heads on rows of wooden spikes — former prisoners of war conquered and catalogued. There was something like thirty of them, and the place was lit by yellow electric lights on the walls. The floor was dirt.

Jennings, Yates and Baddem dragged the Duchess in. Though she beat her withered fists against them, they moved her easily enough. Her skin felt like wilted flower petals.

The room did not smell, as the air ventilation was still functioning. The Duchess calmed at the sight of her conquests.

"The Baldy Centurion," she said, reaching out and touching the rotten apple cheek-skin of the nearest head. "My first capture, my first execution. How time passes..."

Thank the Gourd for small favors, thought Jennings. *At least she's quiet now.*

The upstairs floors were filling with smoke. The rex had succeeded in knocking through the second gate but was too small to get into the corridors and hallways beyond.

The Duchess had screamed for the other soldiers to come to her aid as the three men lugged her down to the Chop Chamber. None had complied. Most were abandoning the fort, jumping or climbing from the walls and disappearing into the jungle with weapons in hand.

As Jennings stood with his two fellow soldiers and the Duchess in the dim room, he realized the four of them were likely the last people in the fort.

"I shall have your heads in this room, as well, my little traitors," said the Duchess. She was going down the rows, touching the cheeks of those her men had bested in battle.

She smiled sweetly at the three of them.

Baddem and Yates looked nervous, but Jennings snorted.

"By whose authority?" said Jennings. "You yourself just said your superiors have been vaporized or captured or some such thing. You have no power over us any longer. We are the last four souls left in this pit."

The Duchess spat at his feet.

Jennings said no more. He had to think. What now?

He observed the heads on the spikes. All conquered generals, pirates, rebels, terrorists, people of importance. They'd

rollicked and pillaged and killed and fucked and tortured and maimed and they'd all ended up here.

"First you called me General, and now you call me Duchess," said the Duchess, walking along the rows and stroking each of the decaying cheeks with her fingers.

"Now we'll call you nothing," said Jennings.

"Mutinous swine," the Duchess hissed, her eyes dark and angry. "Silence is all you'll have once I'm through with you."

"Oh, shut up, you horny old bat," snapped Yates.

"The rex is gone," said Baddem. "Why are we down here?"

"The rex will be back once it's finished picking off all the soldiers who ran into the jungle," said Jennings.

He sat down on the floor against the wall.

As if on cue, there was thumping and roaring overhead.

"We're really trapped now," said Yates.

"No, we are not trapped. We're hiding out until we formulate what we do next," said Jennings.

"In a hole," said Yates. "With nowhere to go."

"And only severed heads as potential sustenance. If we're stuck here for days, we'll die of thirst or starvation."

"You shall not consume my trophies," snarled the Duchess, down at the other end of the room. "I'll see you starve before you swallow one scrap of flesh."

"How long has she been completely insane like this?" Yates asked. "I hadn't had a session with her in a couple weeks – she was fine, then. A weird, horny old lady, but not... this."

"We lost the war," said Jennings. "The Capital has fallen. The knowledge cracked her skull and let the jungle air in."

"Why didn't she tell us?"

"That is a question we will probably never have the answer to."

"So what's the rex doing here, then, if the war's over?"

"I'm guessing some joyriding war lord set it ahead to see what kind of damage it could do before the troops arrive to announce victory and demand surrender. Our fort must be one of the last to be captured, as we're not guarding anything other than Capital territory. I'm guessing they'll be here any time now. Do we have any weapons?"

"My rifle is still in the hallway," said Baddem.

"I think I have a plan," said Jennings. "It'll probably be the last thing we ever do, but it's best we got."

"I knew moving to this fort would be the last thing I'd ever do," said Baddem.

"Same," said Yates. "I knew it the second I kissed my mother goodbye."

"But what do we do with her," said Baddem, nodding at the Duchess, who was now at the far end of the Chop Chamber, speaking in a soft, loving voice to a freshly severed head that Jennings recognized as Groggington the Naught-fought, who was captured and executed less than a month ago, probably not too long before the Capital fell. Their noses nearly touched, and as the three of them watched, the Duchess planted a long-lasting liplock of a kiss on the head's blackened lips.

"She's the most important part of it all," said Jennings. "Do we still have the north catapult rigged?"

"It should be."

"No one fired it during the attack — we've been out of firestarters for weeks now," said Baddem.

"Then let's hope this works," said Jennings. "She must be immobilized."

"I've been wanting to do this since I got here," said Baddem.

The three of them walked down the corridor to the Duchess.

She turned and saw them coming.

"Mutinous swine," she whispered. "Bow to me."

=====

From the courtyard, they heard the tromping of boots, shouted orders. The enemy was inside the fort.

The fort was indeed deserted. The three of them had traversed the hallways. There was indeed no one else around— no hiders, no survivors.

"There's only one shot left," said Baddem, clutching his rifle. He'd retrieved it from the hallway.

"One shot is all we need," said Jennings.

He took the rifle from Baddem and handed it to Yates.

"Yates, you know where to aim."

"But only one shot, sir?"

"Yes. You know where to aim."

They crouched on the battlement of the fifth tower, the tallest tower in the fort and the one above the Duchess's chambers.

The enemy battalion had flooded into the courtyard below, hundreds of green suits laughing and cheering and joyfully kicking the remains of the soldiers around like old laundry.

The rex had returned with the battalion, standing in the middle of the group of soldiers. The soldiers were tenderly stroking and petting the rex on the legs and feet as though it were a giant dog.

The general himself lead the way, and stroked the t-rex's chin.

"Boys, this is it," said Jennings. "It's been an honor to serve with you. May your souls be light."

"And yours, primal," said Baddem and Yates, their hands at their necks.

Jennings stood.

"GOOD DAY," he boomed down to the enemy general.

The rex looked up first, growled.

A hundred heads followed, a hundred faces blooming upward in the jungle sun.

The soldiers cheered and jeered, but the general calmed them down. Jennings didn't recognize the general as anyone of importance. He was some low-ranking nobody, sent to collect the last few scraps of territory won in the war.

"Do you surrender?" he yelled up at Jennings. "I am General Nobody. Where is the lady general? We wish to gaze upon her mighty cunt."

His underlings guffawed.

"She is no more," said Jennings.

The entire battalion took a moment to bow their heads in respect. Jennings remembered what a revered soldier the Duchess had been before the madness had taken her.

"We are the only survivors," Jennings announced. "The only survivors of this fort."

"Poor swaddlings," said General Nobody. "Out of ammo and out of hope."

The soldiers laughed and laughed.

"Not quite," said Jennings quietly.

He produced a small white flag from his pocket, waved it slowly.

The battalion in the courtyard cheered. The rex gave a tremendous roar of triumph. Jennings looked at the rex, with its diseased, dripping mouth and its sick eyes and its stupid, clanking, clumsy body, meant to maim and destroy in whatever way possible. So predictable. Any type of flesh could trigger it.

"Now!" he yelled.

Behind him, Baddem threw a switch.

From behind the fort, a catapult was sprung. Inside the cup, the Duchess was trussed up like a turkey, and she was thrown shrieking into the air, offered flesh, aimed directly at the rex.

She flew in a perfect arc, her lace nightgown rippling in the fetid jungle air.

General Nobody saw what was coming. His face registered what was about to happen to him, just like Ingmar, the futile recognition of sudden and imminent death. In seconds, Jennings knew General Nobody had seen the plan and knew the outcome, and in doing so he also saw it was too late.

The Duchess flew down at the rex.

The rex opened its mouth. It was programmed to do so.

Yates rose from behind the battlement, aimed, pulled the trigger. The shot was true. Jennings saw the spark as the bullet met its target — a fuel tube in the rex's throat.

Jennings could hear Baddem and Yates yelling battle cries.

He closed his eyes as the world roared fire, and he was very thankful this was all over.

The Vampire's Son

I paced outside in the parking lot, agonizing.

To spend a lifetime with a Catholic was the worst possible punishment an old gypsy witch woman could've possibly placed on a vampire. It could've have been a Jew or a Muslim or a Buddhist or a pagan or hell, even an atheist. But no. It had to be someone who associates with crosses every second of every day.

I was really in trouble. There were even crosses set into the frosted glass of the goddamned front doors. I couldn't get near them without feeling like I was walking into a nuclear reactor.

Molly had taken Gunther in there to pour holy water on his head, thus welcoming him into God's kingdom.

I had fought her on this every step of the way.

I've had a good afterlife. After centuries of making love to the night and lapping the sweet warm milk of the soul, karma had caught up to me. I'd murdered the virgin daughter of a woman who turned out to be a gypsy witch. Bad break, that one.

Rather than stake me or kill me with a spell, she decided she'd inconvenience me for the next sixty years or so. I was to fall in love with a Catholic woman named Molly. I'd do anything to be with her, to the point of self-abuse and mutilation.

I laughed at the witch bitch. I'd never loved anything, alive or undead.

But then I met Molly the next day at Subway. I was getting my usual – sucking the neck of the night shift manager girl – when Molly came in and asked for a footlong turkey on wheat. I'd forgotten to lock the door. The place wasn't even open.

Normally Molly would've joined Brenda as part of my feast. But instead I was smitten with her. I wiped the smears of blood from my face, hands, neck and chest, leaped over the counter and introduced myself.

Molly was 28, cutest little thing you ever saw, a paralegal who had recently broken up with her beta of an ex.

"I can't let you eat here," I told her. "We're going somewhere fitting of your beauty."

She was so charmed, I'll bet her warm cunt was buzzing like a smoke detector. I wine and dine her that very evening (not literally, though, I can't drink wine). I never did go back to that Subway, and sometimes I wonder how Brenda's doing.

I didn't think much of it at first. But something weird was happening. I didn't want to feed on Molly. Like, ever. Not even when she was fully naked and spread out before me like a buffet, vulnerable and freshhhh... instead I wanted to do things like allow her to order me around and sit and bask in her womanly aura and inhale her sweet flowery scent and get misty eyed over all of it. We'd spend hours entwined on the couch watching Netflix and Hulu and HBO Max and Disney + and Paramount +.

The sex was otherworldly. Outside the bedroom Molly was a demure angel strumming a harp. Inside the bedroom she was a screaming demon shredding on a Fender. Holy fuck, her pussy game is ridiculous, you have no idea. I've been alive for centuries, never seen or felt anything like it.

I stopped drinking the crimson nectar of existence altogether. Every moment was for Molly, for her. I stopped going out at night. I moved in. I allowed her to display religious iconography, including a crucifix right next to the front door. I had to shield myself against it every time I walked in. It was like walking past a blast furnace. Fuck, it was worth it, tho.

I proposed to her. My dick told me that the wedding wouldn't be that bad.

It was. I was able to convince her to hold it in a nice open field at night, but the second the priest showed up I hissed at him involuntarily and caused a really awkward scene. Plus, the guests I'd invited couldn't stop leering at Molly's female relatives. I had to pull them aside and tell them to get their shit together.

I made it through the ceremony, nearly passing out when the priest did the blessing. But I made it, and I kissed Molly on her gorgeous Catholic lips and carried her through the doorway of our new home and tore her wedding dress off and fucked her like Republicans fuck the American working class.

Nine months later, we had Gunther. I named him after the vampire that sired me. He's half-vampire. He's sensitive to sunlight but can go out during the day. He has an uncanny ability to crawl up walls and he was born with black hair in a widow's peak and his

canines are a little too long, but other than that he just looks like a normal baby who happens to know how to walk, talk, and philosophize at only six months.

Molly was thrilled. She's already teaching him how to read. He finished *To Kill a Mockingbird* the other day. He can't quite talk yet, but he can write pretty well. And he can read music, too— we got him a little toy piano that he's been dicking around with.

Now, she's getting him baptized, and I don't know how he's going to react. Molly insists. We had the biggest fight of our relationship last night. She can't understand why I won't allow it. I finally said fuck it and tried to tell her I'm a vampire but the witch's curse wouldn't allow me to speak the truth of the matter. Fuck that old hag, seriously.

Now, here I am, outside the church and out of ideas.

I stop my pacing, look across the parking lot to the front of the church and wonder what the fuck I'm doing out here. Almost 500 years old and acting like a total pussy-ass bitch.

I set my jaw and start walking. If this was going to happen I was at least going to be there for my son.

Crosses and holy icons feel like a really intense sunburn to vampires. They won't kill you the same way sunlight will, but they'll hurt like a bitch for days on end. Holy water is like acid. I'm fully expecting Molly to come out screaming. I don't think the holy water will kill Gunther or melt away half his forehead, but he's going to get a nasty, nasty burn, and it'll all be my fault.

At least I convinced Molly to do this at night, I think to myself. The doors get closer and closer and more and more painful. The crosses are such a simple shape, it's amazing that any incarnation of them can feel like standing next to a chemical fire. All so us undead demons feel the same pain Christ felt when he was nailed up there.

I make it to the doors. Through the burning sensation, I reach out and touch the door handle. I open it. I can hear organ music.

I walk through the lobby, avoiding the landmines — the holy water font, what must be a spare tabernacle, crosses fucking

everywhere. I put my shirt over my face like someone trying to avoid a bad smell, make it to the other side of the lobby, open the doors to the church itself.

Oh, God.

The inside of the church is a massacre. There is blood everywhere. The pews are painted with it. The altar is painted with it. Jesus Christ, Jesus's face on the big crucifix behind the altar is painted with it.

I look for Molly. She's splayed over the altar with the priest. They've both had their throats chewed open.

Literally everyone in here is dead, this entire ceremony, all the witnesses, mostly old people with nothing better to do. They're all strewn about the pews. I can't believe I didn't hear anything outside.

I look for Gunther, and find him. He's the one playing the organ, his black hair gleaming in the candlelight.

He wouldn't let them do it. He slaughtered them. I observe Gunther's carnage and can't believe how proud I am. I don't even notice the burning anymore. He's awoken something in me that's been dormant for years. A thirst.

I watch him play the organ, blood splatters and human guts and scraps of skin all around him, and I feel like this is a wide new beginning. He murdered a priest and his own mother and a church full of seniors, rather than be baptized. I'll miss Molly, but I lived hundreds of years before meeting her, so...

Gunther turns and sees me. Smiles. He's not even a year old but he's sitting up on his own and playing the organ and slaughtering entire churches worth of people.

We don't need a paternity test, folks. This kid is my son.

Constant Dawn

"I'm freaking out right now," Sheila whimpered. "I'm not fine."

The fiery southern horizon glared up at us, the rim of the world glowing, as though the planet had grown a halo. It was 2 AM but could've been 2 PM.

It looked boring. We'd been looking at it for months now. It's amazing how fast you get used to shit.

"You're not going to feel it when it happens," said Palmer for the 90th time that day. He was still trying to comfort Sheila, hoping she'd give him an end-of-the-world fuck. Nature's imperatives never sleep, even in the face of annihilation.

"People have been saying that since they found out," Sheila snapped. "If it didn't help then, do you think it'll help now?"

Palmer didn't say anything, went back to his joint.

The surf kissed the sand. We sat on our chairs and blankets and drank our beers. The last beers we'd ever drink. Some of the last beers ever produced. They were free. A group down the way was passing them out.

There were all sorts of people on the beach. We looked like we were camped out for an eclipse.

"Here," said Tarsim, offering his own joint to Sheila. "Hit this. You'll feel better."

"That is the LAST thing I want right now," Sheila responded.

"I'll give you a hand massage," said Jane. "I'll use that cuticle cream you like so much."

That finally calmed Sheila down. She closed her eyes and focused on Jane's fingers kneading her own.

I was high myself but I didn't feel any particular way about it. It was just now, like it had always been. I knew that in a few hours, it wouldn't be now anymore. It wouldn't be anything, for anyone.

And for some reason, it didn't bother me. The more I thought about it, the more sense it made. I'd had my dark nights of the soul, cried myself to sleep like everyone else, but that was

weeks ago. I guess I got it out of my system. I kept waiting for another panic attack or some such thing, but it never came. Maybe I'd reached "acceptance" in the "you're going to die" countdown.

We hadn't seen a star in weeks. Night had turned to perpetual dawn, then disappeared completely. It was daytime 24/7 now.

The perpetual daylight is from M117-H, the comet hurtling toward earth at however many millions of miles an hour. It's official name is M117-H, but people have named it all sorts of things, including the inevitable Comety McCometface. Haha.

It's less than an hour away now.

Society has been surprisingly civil about the whole thing. People actually calmed the fuck down. There were pockets of freakouts and discord here and there, but mostly it wasn't much different than normal. In fact, people were nicer to each other. Everyone keeps saying, "It's a shame it took something like this for us all to get along."

They never even formally announced it until last week, but everyone knew. You can only keep certain information quiet for so long in the Internet age. We've all known for a few weeks now, ever since the night sky started getting lighter all over the planet for no reason. Everything was so fucking calm. I almost wished people would freak out and riot, just so it'd feel more normal.

There were never any movie scenes, not anything apocalyptic anyway. It was just real life. Boring and tedious and always less interesting than you wished it would be, while simultaneously being exactly what you needed.

And then there were the auroras.

I can't describe them. I suck at describing shit. They're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. They're blue and purple with highlights of red. People say they look like heaven's gate is opening— that's actually their name, "Heaven's Gates"— and I really fucking hope they're right. They do look like some weird cosmic DMT version of heaven, swirling silently up there in the sky. Maybe the tunnel is opening. Maybe it's not just oxygen and atmospheric disturbance from the comet's tail.

"Well, we had a good run," said Jane, pushing her thumbs into Sheila's palms.

She and Tarsim were married. Palmer and I were single. Sheila was recently divorced. Her husband lived in San Francisco and couldn't get here because all non-emergency flights had been grounded for weeks.

The experts were saying that it was possible some far-off future civilization would learn about us the way we learned about the dinosaurs. Mount Rushmore and other stone carvings are going to be around for a long time – the comet's hitting Antarctica, so North America will be spared any sort of direct hits. No tidal waves or fireballs. At least that's what we're being told.

Sheila pulled her hand away from Jane and started blubbering. She couldn't be consoled. I shoved my own black thoughts away. I was too close now to give in.

Sheila sat there on the second, rocking back and forth like an autistic preschooler while Jane rubbed her back. The rest of us sipped and stared.

"You're completely ruining this for everyone," Tarsim snapped at Sheila.

"How long?" I asked.

Comety McCometface was scheduled to wipe out all life on earth at 3:08 AM EST.

Tarsim looked at his watch.

It was 2:38. Half an hour. The air felt different. Like before a storm, but heavier. My ears were popping. There was this vague sense of ascension, like we were shooting upward in a plane.

"Woo-hoo!" yelled Tarsim like a guy on a roller coaster. "No stopping this train!"

His hair was standing on end. Straight outward. I wondered how he was managing that. If he was doing it on purpose.

Sheila cried harder. Jane had tears on her face. They held each other. Palmer put out his joint and rocked back and forth, arms around himself. I could hear other people down the beach crying and yelling. It was for real now.

I looked out at the horizon. I wondered if anyone was asleep right now. I wondered what they were doing on the other side of the world. I wondered if I would still be thinking anything in an hour.

Dice Goes to the Circus

My name is Dice, and I'm having a real bad day.

The cops fuckin' busted me, although I suppose I should be grateful. If they hadn't, I'd be dead right now. Dead in a real bad way. Dead like my former boss.

I'm sitting in the interrogation room. Looks just like you'd think. Metal table, blank cinderblock walls, obvious two-way window. You'd think these people would get more creative. The officers got me a cup of tap water. I asked for bottled water

I'm still in the clothes I was wearing when it all happened. I'm covered in blood and what I think is liquified sugar and God knows what else. I smell like a dead pig dipped in caramel.

There's two officers standing in front of me, a big one and a little one. The bigger one's looking at me all sympathetic-like. He's the one that brought me the water and sat me down and acted like he cares about my feelings. The littler one's standing in the corner, looking at me like he's gonna beat my ass. I'd like to see him try it, the skinny little shit. It seems like they might be better off if they reversed their roles, but hell if I'm gonna tell them that. They do this because it works on most people. It doesn't work on me, and they know that, but they do it anyway cause they got no other way of doing it.

"So tell the story," says the little one. "All of it."

Normally this is the part where I clam up until my lawyer arrives, but I got nothing to lose. I'm feeling real woozy, probably lack of sleep. I want to get out of here.

I take a sip of my water, look the skinny shit in the eye and start talking.

It goes like this, see?

I've had my own business for a few years. Got a little office behind my buddy Vinnie's barber shop on the lower east side. It's a few blocks away from the river, just off Jefferson. Total shithole neighborhood but nobody bothers me as long as I'm out of there by seven or eight every evening. I got some brothers from down the street keeping an eye on the place when I'm not there and in return I keep their little weed and pill operation funded. People keep telling me to move out to the suburbs and I keep telling them I probably will eventually, but for now I'm

doing fine. The cops in the city are easier to grease than the ones in the suburbs anyway.

Vinnie gets some of the money when he needs it, I keep the office no charge, and there's no problems. Smooth little operation. Never go too big or too crazy. Good place for business. I got a desk and a laptop and some plants and a fucking bookshelf with books I'll never read. My house is out in Bloomfield Hills, so I'm not shitting where I eat.

A couple of days ago I'm just sitting there minding my business, checking over the books, deadlines and what not. Updating, balancing, you know. It's a pretty nice day and I'm thinking about going down to Buscemi's for a grinder.

But then, I get a visitor. I'm not expecting one. I hate getting visitors when I'm not expecting them.

It's Clem Lawley, from Sal MacGuff's place.

Vinnie sticks his head in the door and tells me about it.

"Sorry, Dice, I know you got no appointments today but he knew the password."

Clem walks in and I shake his hand. Clem's all right, kind of a meathead but all right. He's one of Sal's muscle boys. His left hand man, in fact.

Sal always sends his guys over to talk. He never uses the phone or the Internet for anything, and I mean anything. Convinced the feds are watching every last pixel. It's a little extreme but he's not wrong, technically.

Clem has a seat and we do the usual 'how you been' bullshit. He seems on edge. Keeps looking everywhere. Jittery. Not like him. I can tell he's about to ask me for something he'd rather not ask me for.

I cut to the chase.

"So why you here, Clem? I was about to get lunch."

"It's an urgent thing, Dice," he tells me. "I didn't want to bring you into it - "

"I understand. What's MacGuffie need?"

"He needs you, man. Told me to come get you, bring you back to the club. Something happened, and you're not gonna fuckin believe it."

"What happened?"

"Sal wants to tell you himself. I'm just here to bring you over."

Sal MacGuff is an old friend of mine. Or was. He's older than me, we met through a mutual acquaintance back in the day. I ran some jobs for him when I first moved to Detroit, we got a good report going on and once I was on my feet we did some business together. I owe my start to him, really. He married this nice blonde named Carla. Good couple. Like an aunt and uncle to me, almost, even though Carla's probably only a few years older than I am.

Sal owns a couple of strip clubs — The Cat's Meow on Woodward in Midtown, The Crotch Rocket on Grand River just outside of Corktown, the Flickerstick in Greektown, and Wings Royale out in Inkster on Michigan Avenue. Clem tells me Sal's holed up out at Wings, which right away I can tell is weird. Sal doesn't usually leave the city limits.

"You need me, like, now?"

"I got the car outside," says Clem, which was a stupid thing to say because how the fuck else did he get here, fucking fly? "Sal says he'll pay you back for whatever time or money you lose for helping him out, but he needs you now."

Clem's nervous attitude and the way he's talking about Sal gets me kind of confused. Sal is a really chill guy. He can afford to be. Nobody fucks with him.

I decide to move this along.

"Yeah, Clem, let's go see him."

So Clem takes me out to Inkster. It's about a half-hour, forty minute drive. When we get there it's just after lunch and the place isn't even open yet. No one's there but us. Showroom's lit up but no music's playing.

Clem takes me to Sal's office upstairs. Before I go in, he tells me, "Take it easy in there, man. I've never seen him like this."

"Right," I say. I'm still wondering what the hell is going on. Clem refused to tell me anything on the way over, reiterating again and again— Sal wanted to tell me himself.

Sal's office is dark and relatively organized. He's got the shades down and the sun's coming through in these slices of light that makes the room look like it's got old fashioned prison bars on the window. Sal's got his head down on the desk and I see a .44 in his hand. I approach carefully.

I step outta the way of the gun and say, "Sal, it's Dice."

Sal jerks his head up. Clem's right. He looks terrible. His eyes are all puffy, hair's falling all over the place, he's got pit stink like he hasn't showered in days, looks like he hasn't slept in days, either.

"Dice," he says, and he smiles at me and it's like someone smiling at their mother's funeral. "Good to see you. I knew you'd come."

"What's up?" I ask him. "Clem tells me some shit went down."

"Someone's fucking with me in a big way, Dice, but it's nothing you'd expect. Have a seat."

I do.

"Did Clem say anything?" Sal asks. He lights up a cigarette.

"Just that something happened and you wanted to tell me yourself."

Sal nodded, inhaling.

"Last Saturday. Gonna sound crazy, but here it is."

He exhales a cloud of smoke. I fucking hate cigarettes. I want to just hear what the fuck is going on and what he wants.

"You remember that kid Shorty?"

"No."

"He was one of our examples."

Our examples. The hits we'd made to get the word out — whenever you start a business, you gotta have examples. Let everyone know what happens if they fuck around.

"Which one was he?"

"There weren't a lot, Dice," Sal snaps. Clem was right — this isn't like him. "What, you forget fucking everything that happened between us?"

"No, Sal, just can't remember which one he was," I say. "One, two or three?"

"Fucking *three*, the last one."

"Oh, yeah, I do remember him. What about him?"

When I worked for Sal, we only did in three guys. That's all it took.

We went elaborate and slow, focused on the pain. Made a show of it. Made them feel it. Made them know. These days, with the terrorists and the cartels and everything else, people are pretty hard to shock. Putting a cap in someone is as common as smacking them.

Now let me make one thing clear: I'm not a sociopath. I don't get a boner off of watching someone bleed. But I did what I was told, cause that's business.

Out of the three we did, Shorty got it the worst.

He was a naive tweaker kid from out of nowhere. He'd been scoring blow from Sal and somehow managed to break into the storeroom at Wings one night after swiping the keys from one of the girls (how he did that no one's been able to figure). He strangled the girl almost to death and made off with a good half a million in goods — heroin, coke, and weed.

From the looks of him you could tell he came from money, family of enablers, that whole deal. But Lord knew why he bothered to try and pinch that much off Sal MacGuff. We had no choice but to put him on the evening news.

Sal was livid, more about the goods than the girl, who was a dippy bitch anyway. He sent me after him. The kid (he couldn't have been more than twenty-five) didn't get far. I caught him in a motel outside South Bend surrounded by the stuff, blazed out

of his mind. He could barely talk when I got him in the car and didn't wake up the whole drive back. I didn't even have to knock him out. I got most of the stuff back, too. The stuff that he hadn't used yet anyway.

Come to think of it, I don't even remember his real name. Sal and I just called him Shorty. He was short, dark-haired, kind of paunchy, out of shape. One of those average height, average build guys. He sat at the bar and drank a lot of Jameson and a lot of Blue Moon. He liked to do these cute little magic tricks for the girls – card shuffles, make his beer disappear and reappear, pulling hundies out of their g-string, stuff like that.

We didn't know where he'd come from or what he was about. He'd just turned up one day, knew the right questions to ask, wanted some blow. He started showing up at Wings on the regular, once a week or so, and he always had money. Neither of us expected him to be anything other than another fucked-up customer looking to numb his brain a little.

Then he fucked up.

So he had to be dealt with. It had been awhile since the second example and we hadn't had any real problems since. If we let this go, especially with a two-bit pisspants like Shorty, word would get out. This would have to be done tenfold. Sal already knew what he wanted to do.

We brought Shorty to The Janitor Room. It's the room we did the other two guys in. It's in the basement of one of Sal's warehouses. It's basically a walk in closet with the shelves taken out.

We put him down on the table we got in there. There was a tarp laid across it. We tied his arms and legs and head down.

Sal brought an ax with him. He handed it to me and said, "Come get me when he wakes up."

I sat in a chair in the corner and waited. I listened to Shorty breath what would be his last breaths. He was kind of snoring, making these "snuck" noises when he inhaled. Sleep apnea. This kid, had he lived to see thirty, would've needed a C-PAP.

It was dim in there, just old fluorescent lights flickering, half of the tubes burned out. No windows, one door. It stank of fear and death. I didn't like it.

There was a boom box plugged into an extension cord that ran under the door. There was also a camera that Sal set up in the corner. We sent copies of the vid to the appropriate outlets. Everyone got the message.

The last two examples were the same. Sal would tie down the fuck-up, get his tools, turn the camera on and start blasting this music out of the boombox. There's only one CD in it, a Nickelback CD. Sal blasts it. Really fucking loud. Generic alternative rock from the turn of the millennium. Really whitebread.

The first guy was just a local nobody who'd tried to cheat the girls out of a few dances and then was enough of a moron to come back. We just socked him in the balls a few times. We let him live, sent him packing to the hospital. He never came back.

One example is never enough, so something else happened not three months later — one of Sal's rivals was trying to gain access to the storeroom at Wings, had some of his guys sniffing around the club. I kept telling Sal to move the storeroom, but he's got so many of them and he wants to keep at least one stash in a place he owns that's not in the city. Whether the guy was looking to steal from Sal or just find out how he did business so he could undercut him, we never bothered finding out. We stuck icepicks through his ears, twisted off some fingernails, pulled teeth and toes. Pretty typical shit. Sal had me cut his throat after about four hours of work. I did all of it without complaint. I was on autopilot.

I was psyched after we'd sent those files out. I figured that'd be the last time we'd ever have to do this. I mean, who would come to Sal MacGuff's and fuck up again after hearing about that?

But there I was, sitting there in the Janitor Room with all this plastic and tarp around on the floor and the table. I got the heavy double-bladed ax in my hands, not sure I wanted to do this again. I'm looking at Shorty lying there, breathing loudly. He wasn't much younger than me at the time, in fact. I tried to detach from him, make him an object. He definitely wasn't married — too young and too much of a degenerate, so at least I wouldn't have to worry about widowing some poor girl who didn't

know what her dipshit husband was up to. The second guy had a wedding ring on his finger.

So anyway, Shorty started waking up, groaning and crap, sounded like a beached seal or something. So I went to get Sal and we came back.

Just before we went back in, Sal put his hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eye.

"You guess what I have in mind here?"

I do.

"Take off his feet, work my way up?"

"You're a good kid, Dice," Sal said. "A good kid."

I was ready.

When we walked into the closet, this was when most people would start blubbering here, saying they'll make it up, no harm's done, saying we don't know who they are, that we're really fucking up here, blah blah blah. Typical dead man words.

Not Shorty.

He just looked at us and said one thing that I'll never forget.

"Cracker jack, cracker jack, tripping on twine, you might get yours but I'll sure get mine."

Just that. Just a little rhyme, a little verse. That was it. He looked right at us when he said it.

Sal went over and turned the camera on, turned the boombox on. Chad Kroeger came on singing about the photograph that makes him laugh. Then Sal went over to Shorty and grabbed his cheek and said to the camera, "Looks like it's that time again."

Shorty was still reciting that one verse, his eyes all wide and bugging out. You wouldn't have known he'd put himself to sleep only earlier that day. He was looking at the ax blade.

"All right, Dice," Sal said, stepping back. "Show him how to feel sorry."

I didn't think. I brought the ax down on Shorty's right ankle. The ax was sharpened once a week and it went right through him into the tarp and the wood of the table.

He didn't scream, only kept yelling that verse.

"Cracker jack, cracker jack, tripping on twine, you might get yours but I'll sure get mine."

I wiggled the ax and yanked it out again.

Shorty's yelling that verse like a maniac, his face pouring sweat, snot coming out of his nose. His ankle gushed blood, spreading out over the tarp and dripping down the leg of the table like paint.

His foot was separated from his leg. I brushed it off the table and it smacked the plastic on the floor. Like a shoe.

"What's my name?" Sal yelled at Shorty over the blaring Nickelback song.

Shorty was too busy yelling that weird little incantation. He was shaking something fierce, like he'd grabbed a live wire. He'd go into shock if we weren't quick.

"Hey, what's my fucking name?" Sal yelled, grabbing Shorty by the cheek again. I just stood there. Sal smacked him and took hold of his chin, forced Shorty to look at him. Shorty kept mumbling the same thing.

"Cracker jack, cracker jack, tripping on twine, you might get yours but I'll sure get mine."

"Huh?" Sal said.

Shorty stopped for a second and made some croaking noises. Sal looked at me and I didn't even need him to say anything.

I brought the ax down on Shorty's other ankle and Shorty wasn't going to be tripping on anything ever again.

"Don't you dare pass out on me," Sal said. "What's my fucking name?"

Shorty, to his credit, stopped chanting, looked up into Sal's face.

"Sal MacGuff," he said quietly. "You're Sal MacGuff. And you're a real meanie."

"And don't you forget it." said Sal. He pressed a finger into Shorty's forehead.

He looked at me.

"We're done. Between the eyes."

Shorty saw it coming. He didn't scream. Just recited.

"Cracker jack, cracker jack, tripping on twine, you might get yours but I'll sure get--."

I finished what I was doing, tried not to look at Shorty's eyes, which were now bugged out in two different directions. I dropped the ax and got the fuck out of there. I could've really used a coffee or something right then.

Sal was out in the hall waiting, having a celebratory cigarette, and he put his arm around me and lead me outside. Two guys came running down the hall past us, ready to clean up the room and get the camera card and the message out.

"You did good, Dice," Sal said to me. "Last time, right there. I guarantee it."

That's when I had to break away from him and go to the bathroom where I puked for the third and final time. I've done in two people since then, but both of those were on my own terms for my own business. A beating for one, and a bullet to the back of the head for the other. Nothing fancy. The message is all the same for me. Like I said, I'm no sociopath.

Sal's guys dumped Shorty in the river near Trenton and we never heard anything about him after that. The cops were either bought out or indifferent to that kind of shit in these parts. They know what's small time and what's business. And Sal was right — there were no problems after that. I moved out and got my own place a few years later.

So now Sal's sitting here in front of me, looking like I've never seen him.

"Yeah, I do remember Shorty," I say. "What about him?"

Sal shakes his head like he can't believe it.

"Apparently his fucking family? They're not too happy about what's happened to him. And guess what they do, Dice. You won't believe it."

"What?"

"They run a fucking circus."

"A circus?"

"A three-ring, freak show circus. The Perk and Jinx Circus, it's called."

"Yeah, and what about them?"

"It's not just any circus. It's a sideshow. Freaks. They exhibit freaks like they used to back before it became all politically incorrect."

"That shit's illegal now, Sal."

"Don't tell me what I already fucking know!" Sal yells. "You think that's not the first thing I said? That's what they fucking do!"

"All right, all right," I say. "What about his family? So what, they're gonna sic the clowns on us or something?"

"Don't try to joke about this, Dice," Sal snarls. "Lame-ass joke anyway."

He drags on his cigarette and finishes it. He lights another one right after.

"Here's what happened," he says. "It's last Saturday at the Cat, the place is hopping, we're doing good business like normal, right? So I'm sitting in the back just minding my own business when Carla, who's gone up front to talk to Dennis about the VIP tickets, comes back looking scared as hell. I noticed there's some kind of commotion up at the front door, but I can't see anything and I figure it's just some bastard with a fake ID or something. I figure Billy Britches'll take care of it. He's the bouncer nowadays. Or was. Cause then Carla says she saw some huge redheaded guy come in and tear Billy's head off."

"His head?"

"That's what I just fucking said," Sal snapped. He dragged on the cigarette and continued. "I had the same reaction you did just now. I don't believe it. But then I get up and start getting my way through the crowd, and people are freaking out, and I see people coming back from the door looking all scared like Carla, like they're trying to get away from something."

"Then I see him. It's this giant fucking guy. Just this impossibly huge guy. Coming through the crowd from the front. Walking through, people are getting out of his way, and if they can't he walks through them, just pushing them out of the way, not even with his arms, just moving like he's wading through mud or something. He's at least two feet taller than anyone in the crowd. He could see right into the display cages, the ones suspended just below the second floor. And his shoulders, man. I bet he could've bench-pressed a dump truck. And he had red hair like Carla said - a lot of it. Red hair sticking up like a sunrise, bushy red eyebrows and hair running all down his arms. And he's got Billy's head in his hand. Like a basketball. Billy's tongue was hanging out his mouth. That's all I remember of it. I just looked down and there it was, Billy's fucking head in this guy's hand like LeBron."

"And this giant's walking through the crowd and coming right at me and I know it's me he's looking for because his eyes are focused right on mine. I'm standing right in the center of the showroom floor and people are making this hole around me, the people that haven't already run for it, anyway. And the big redhead walks right up to me and says, 'You Sal?' in this deep, retarded-sounding voice."

"I'm still sitting there. Clem and Chip are behind me but they're backing up and goddamn it, I don't blame them. Carla's gone, ran off somewhere, but that's fine."

"I'm standing there, barely able to say anything, and I kinda nod, you know? This has all happened in less than a minute, and I'm still staring at Billy's head with his neck flaps dripping."

"Anyway, Big Red must've got it, cause he turns around and yells behind him, 'Mr Zachrich, I found him!'"

"I can't see behind the guy, but he just stands there looking down at me, and his head's illuminated by the strobes and the fucking music is blaring and I remember it was that stupid fucking Taylor Swift song, a remix of it, the 'Look what you made me do' and I'm looking up at him and he's got these two

little beady black eyes looking back at me. No expression. I'll admit it to you Dice, I've never really been scared before but I was fucking scared right then, but I must've done a pretty good job not showing it."

"Then all of a sudden Big Red steps aside and behind him there's this little old guy in a red suit with tails and a little black top hat and little dress shoes. Little fucking Wizard of Oz munchkin-type guy. He's got a little black cane, and he's jabbing it at me. He's got this utter fucking rage on his face."

"He goes, 'You killed my boy, didn't you, you filthy crook?' I kinda snap back out of whatever daze I was in, and I'm like, 'Huh?' And he little scarecrow munchkin guy goes, 'You killed my boy, Jeremiah. You split his face and chopped off his feet. You spilled my innocent boy's blood, you filthy crook!' His eyes are all wild, big, light blue eyes in this little pruny face and little wisps of white hair sticking out from under the tophat."

"By now I'm getting kind of pissed off. I'm thinking this might be some kind of fucking joke. One that Frank the Stank might play, you know? And even if it wasn't, nobody walks into my place and starts accusing me of shit like it's something to do. I'm not sure what's going on yet, but I'm not gonna take any shit from this twig in front of me. Even if he does have a guy at his back who's twice the size of Clem or Chip."

"So I'm like, 'Who the fuck are you?' and I set my drink down on the table behind me. Most of the customers are gone now. This little fuck just drained all my business out the fucking door. The cops probably got called and are on their way and now I'm gonna have to do something for them."

"The little scarecrow bony guy is staring at me, and he's like, 'You took what was most precious to me. Now I've found you, and now it's time to make ourselves even. I'm going to take something that's precious to you. I know you're married. Your wife. Where is she?'"

"And now I'm really pissed. And I'm like, 'Why the fuck should I tell you?'"

"And this little dude freaks out, man. Right there. He's like, 'Would you like Roland here to twist your beastly body right in half, you devil!? You Satan's spawn! You Lucifer loser! Don't presume to talk to me that way, you heartless, hopeless, hapless heathen!' He's fucking shrieking it, man, nails on chalkboard."

The giant guy, Roland, drops Billy's head and grabs me. He lifts me off my feet like it's nothing. He puts me in a headlock. He smells like the dumpsters out back. And I'm gagging on his arm hair and all the nerve I'd worked up was all fucking gone. I can see Clem and Chip backing the fuck off. They got their guns out but they're not doing anything. This guy doesn't look like bullets would stop him."

"I hear the big guy go, 'You respect Mr. Zachrich.' and I can't fucking talk or breath. The little guy, Mr. Zachrich, is looking at me more passive now, like he's more satisfied seeing me this way. And he's like, 'I'll ask one last time. Where is your wife?'"

"'I don't know,' I manage to get out, and I'm telling the truth. But then I glance up and I can see Carla looking out from the kitchen door. The old guy sees where I'm looking and he turns back and there's this leer on his face now. Really nice teeth he had."

"'And the guy goes, 'Roland, get,' and he points at Carla. And I don't feel nothing but air for a few seconds cause Roland kinda twirls me off his arm and I land across the room next to the bar. Got the wind knocked out of me. I feel the guy's footsteps as he walks across the showroom to the kitchen and I hear the little guy give a laugh like he's in a cartoon or something. I turn around and I'm trying to scream at Clem and Chip to shoot, shoot the fucker, shoot 'em both, but I can't breathe and the guy's on Carla and it happens real fast. He grabs her by the hair and yanks her up. She's screaming now, and she will not stop, and Mr. Zachrich turns to me on the floor and he bows and he says, 'You can come get her here, when you're ready. Bring your friend from the video, and don't be late,' and he drops this business card on me and then he and Roland are out the door.'"

I'm sitting there practically drooling. These two characters just showed up and took Sal's wife.

"Where did they take her?" I ask him.

"Back to the fuckin circus, where else, you fucking dickweed?" Sal snaps at me.

Now I'm getting pissed.

"Sal, I get that you're stressed right now, but you're gonna drag me out here in the middle of my day and ask for my help and then you're gonna talk to me like that?"

"Of course not," said Sal, cooling off right away. "You're right, Dice, you're right. I'm sorry."

He put out his cigarette.

"But that's why you're here. I just need to get Carla back."

"Well, then let's get the fuck out of here."

Now since that set up took so fucking long I'll tell the rest of the story as quickly as I fucking can.

Sal and I get in the car and head out of town. That business card Zachrich left had the place's name and address, and on the back was a note further explaining that Sal had to come out to their place if he wanted to get Carla back.

We head west on I-94. We get off at an exit somewhere in the middle of the state. I've been up and down this freeway at least once or twice a year in all forty-three years of my existence and I've never noticed this exit. Little two lane. I wanna say it was between Albion and Jackson, but I could be wrong. Could've been closer to Battle Creek. Don't remember now.

"One thing I've been wondering..." I said to Sal. "Shorty got whacked a good couple years ago. Wanna say it's been almost a decade."

"Yeah, and?"

"Why'd these guys wait so long to come after you?"

Sal shrugged.

"Guess it just took 'em a while to find me."

We head north for awhile on said shitty two lane surrounded by woods and fields, and it starts feeling weird. Like we're not in the Midwest anymore. I can't explain it. The land was too flat, the grass was too yellow, like an off-green yellow thing. The trees were shaped weird. I kept telling myself I was seeing things.

Then we see this giant big top in the distance. It's big, it's red and sticking out of the field like a zit.

Parking lot's gravel, no vehicles there, not even trucks and trailers, which you would assume they'd need. There's this big old washed-out sign with a big clown head on it – says Perk and Jinx, just like Sal had mentioned.

Sal and I park and there's these arrows over the entrance to the Big Top, pointing in it and there's a sign that says "Welcome Mr. MacGuff and Friend!".

It looks like the opening to a clown mouth, big red lips stretched wide.

Sal goes to park in the lot but I stop him.

"Just pull the car inside," I say. "And leave the keys in when we get out. I don't think we'll be here long."

"Right," said Sal. "You're a good kid, Dice. Always were."

So we pull inside and it's dark and then the lights come on and I see in the center of the main ring or whatever, there's the two guys that Sal was talking about – Roland and Mr. Zachrich. They look like an optical illusion.

There's two cages next to them.

The first person I see is the one that must be Roland. Sal wasn't kidding, the guy must be ten feet tall and six feet wide.

The other guy must be the ringmaster because he looks like Ron Paul if you stuck a vacuum tube up his ass. And he is actually wearing this red suit with tails and a red top hat.

I haven't been to a circus ever, but something about all this is really fucking off. Everything about this place is like a kid's idea of an old fashioned circus. There's no semi trailers outside that move all this shit around. Nothing modern. Nothing regulated. The place doesn't even smell like anything. No elephant shit or popcorn or diesel or nothing.

We pull up next to the ringmaster and his ginger giant and get out of the car. It's just the four of us.

There's two cages next to the circus fucks like I said. They look like giant birdcages. Carla's in the one behind Roland. She

looks sedated, slumped against the bars. In the other, behind Zachrich, is a gorilla. It's eating an apple. Big male silverback. King fucking Kong sitting there on his furry black ass munching a red delicious.

Sal and I stand there a second and no one says anything, and then we hear the noises.

They're all chanting. It starts quiet then gets louder.

*"Ah-hummena-hummena-hummena-yo! Ah-hummena-hummena-hummena-yo!
Ah-hummena-hummena-hummena-yo! Ah-hummena-hummena-hummena-yo!"*

From all around us come the freaks. They come down through the bleachers or stands or whatever they're called, from behind Zachrich and Roland, I can even see them crawling down from the rafters. Mewling, twisted things. Human but just barely. All the stereotypical ones – you know, the shrunken head people, missing limbs, beards on women, all that. Clowns, of course. There's animals, too – elephants and tigers and bears all dressed in frills and lace.

We're surrounded now. Sal's trying to keep his cool. I'm like, why the fuck did I come out here?

"All right," says Sal. "Here we are."

"Here we are indeed," smiles Zachrich. "First off, we'll need your weapons, please."

We both throw our guns into the dust, and Roland steps over and grabs them. The ground actually shakes when he walks. He crushes both our pieces into powder with his bare hands and steps back again. I hope I'm not showing how freaked out I am.

"Would you like some popcorn?" Zachrich asks. He opens his coat and pulls out two cardboard cartons of popcorn, the old red and black striped kind. It smells pretty damn good. It's the only smell in this goddamn place.

But obviously neither of us is hungry or in the mood for this.

"What do we have to do to get Carla back?" Sal says, trying to be business-like.

"Well, your friend doesn't have to do anything," says Mr. Zachrich.

He throws the popcorn over our heads and the freaks all catch it and we can hear them eating it. Sounds like birds.

"But you, Mr. MacGuff, you have to do something veeerrrry simple."

His voice sounds like a cartoon character. Super high-pitched, almost like he's doing an impression for a kid. Sal was right.

"What?" Sal's looking at Carla. She's slumped against the back wall of her cage, and she's dressed in this weird clown getup. She's got lipstick smeared on and too much eyeshadow. Her hair is done up like a schoolgirl in a porno, curly pigtails. She looks like a life-size ragdoll that some brat left on their floor.

"You see our friend Chuckles there?" Sal says. "We rescued him from the wilds of the Congo."

He points at the gorilla.

"You need to give our friend Chuckles a hug," says Zachrich. "Chuckles is an excellent judge of character, and if he decides to let you go, you may collect your wife and be on your way. No hassle."

"What if he doesn't?"

"Well, we'll find out, won't we?"

"I'm not getting in the cage with that fucking thing."

"Then I'll have my entire family here make love to your wife while you watch. I'll wake her up first, of course. Then Roland will take his turn before anyone else."

"You little shit," snarled Sal. "Do you know who the fuck I am? After I walk out of here — "

Roland takes a step forward and the ground shakes and Sal shuts up.

"Is there another way we could do this?" I ask.

"You will not speak," Zachrich snaps at me. "You I have something very special for..."

I'm not expecting that, and I'm also not used to being talked to that way, especially by someone who looks like a shriveled little carnival mummy, but Sal puts a hand on my shoulder and says "Fine, fine."

He looks over at the gorilla.

"I just gotta give the ape a hug?"

"That's it," says Zachrich, and he's smiling and his eyes are these little black jewels set into a million little wrinkles. "You have my word, on Jesus' name. That's all I ask."

"Is he friendly?"

Sal's being sarcastic but the guy answers him sincerely.

"Oh, of course," said Zachrich. "Gorillas are tremendously docile creatures. Here, in fact - "

Zachrich moves fast for a frail-looking guy, but he darts over to the cage, opens the door and strolls right in. The gorilla gets up and extends both his arms. His reach has got to be at least seven feet. Zachrich goes over and the ape buries him in a huge gorilla hug. Then he reaches out and snatches the apple from the gorilla's big ape mitt. The gorilla doesn't even make a noise, just kind of looks at his empty hand, all sad. *You took my treat.*

"See?" Zachrich says, stepping out of the cage with a little twirl of his hand. "Chuckles will judge. All sinners deserve a fair trial."

He flings the apple to the mewling things behind us, gestures inside the cage.

The freaks around us are all making their noises, chowing on the popcorn and the apple core. The car's still running behind us, doors open.

Sal looks at the gorilla again. He turns to me.

"Fuck it," he says. "I'll give the monkey a hug."

I lean in.

"I think we should just fucking go, Sal."

He waves me off. He's looking at Carla, who doesn't look like she's all there. I let him go. I should've grabbed him but I don't.

Sal walks over to the cage, steps through the door, and the gorilla's looking at him.

I can hear all the freaks kind of meowing and giggling to themselves. I want to firebomb this place.

What happened next took probably thirty seconds, but it felt a lot longer than that.

Sal gets into the cage and walks toward the gorilla, kind of inching forward, and I can tell he's scared but he keeps looking over at Carla.

Then, the gorilla gets up and knuckle-walks over to Sal. He smiles, shows his teeth.

"Nice," says Sal, grinning back. "Yeah, nice..."

Chuckles opens his arms, grinning wide. *Get ovah heeyah, big boy...*

Sal takes one step forward and for a second I think this is actually going to work and it's insane but then nope it all goes to shit—

Chuckles gives an earth-shattering roar and I see Sal's face crumple like a scared kid, Chuckles reaches forward, snatches Sal, lifts him up, holds him over his head and fucking rips him in half. Just like that. Takes hold of Sal by the neck and the leg, lifts and pulls apart. There's a big splash of blood and guts, splatting to the floor of the cage and spilling out over the edges. It's like Chuckles pulled open a bag full of wet garbage. I can see Sal's heart still beating on the floor.

All the freaks and Zachrich and Roland go nuts. Everyone starts applauding and tittering and laughing and it's the funniest shit ever. I want to fucking nuke this tent. Nuke it and atomize it.

"Chuckles has judged," they all yell and screech. "REEEE! Chuckles has judged! REEEE!"

"Barely made it inside the door!" yelled Zachrich, waving his cane. "That's what you get, you filthy crook! Huzzah!"

"REEE!" yell all the freaks. Roland's yelling too, his voice is like a fucking foghorn. "REEEEE!"

I don't even wait. Fuck Carla.

I turn around, charge, knock my way through a couple of the freaks. I jump in the car with them hanging off my legs. They're dragging me back. They're throwing something on me, something warm and sticky, something caramel, they're dumping it on me and I don't know what it is or where it's coming from but it's fucking sticky as shit and it's slowing me down. I kick them off, throw some punches, get them off- I get in the driver's seat- almost there, the keys are in the ignition, it's still on- I'm sticking to the fucking seat- throw the transmission into drive and fucking floor it, and I'm spinning around doing donuts and running over the freaks and they're slamming into the windshield and off the hood. I'm covered in their blood and whatever they threw on me. I can taste it. It's sweet. It's caramel. Or something like it. I don't know, I have no time.

I'm almost to the entrance, the engine roaring, freaks getting in the way, I'm running over what feels like speed bumps or maybe logs, when I feel the car get lifted up and thrown. I'm weightless for a second, and then I black out.

When I wake up it's only a few seconds later, and I'm upside down outside the entrance to the big top, and I crawl out of the driver's side and I get myself out and start running, moving my legs. I don't know if they chased me. I don't look back.

I run for a long time. My breath tastes like fire. I get to a gas station and do something I never thought I'd do - I let them call the cops. The guy behind the counter is real concerned, asks me why I'm covered in sweet-smelling goo. He's humming this weird tune while he sits with the phone on his shoulder, waiting for the cops to answer. It's real cheerful-sounding.

"And that's it," I say. "Now what?"

"So you went to the circus, huh" says the skinny shit. "And a gorilla named Chuckles killed Sal MacGuff."

"That's what I said."

"Wow, Dice," says the big nice cop. "You're getting confident. Using something like this to get rid of a rival..."

He shakes his head.

I don't bother reiterating. It's all true. They've made their minds up. It doesn't matter.

"I think I want to get this out of here," I say, but my words don't sound right. "I'm wanting my lawyer, now. Or you two can just fuck off and let me go."

The cops are grinning at me. Nothing changes. Not even the light. Something's really off now, I'm feeling woozier than before. I'm feeling like I haven't slept in days. I'm feeling special special now.

"Say Dice," says the skinny shit. I notice his eyes are blue. I never noticed that before now. "You like treats? You like popcorn and caramel? A sweet and salty business?"

He pulls something out of his pocket. Something little. Something business.

He holds it out to me. He's grinning real wide now. His eyes are really, really blue. Sad blue but angry too. Hey that rhymes.

In his hand is a cracker jack. Just one. It looks delicious. Nice and caramely. Farmely.

Under the little kernel of jack cracker pack is one of the Perk and Jinx business cards. Very practical like, white and wordy.

The card's got a little poem on it. Lil poemy.

It do go, "*Cracker jack, cracker jack, tripping on twine, you might get yours but I'll sure get mine.*" I can read it just fine, yessir.

I remember that rhyme. Hey that all rhymes, too! Rhyme and fine and mine! That's fun... no yessir.

The skinny little shit's grinning at me with those blue, blue, sad angry eyes. He's got real nice teeth, real nice, I can see cause he's grinning. He's also got white hair sticking out from his black hair. How did I miss that? I'm tired. It looks like there's most of it than there was before. How did I see that?

The big softie is grunting, moving around real weirdo move, moving his shoulders and arms and stuff and shirts. He's taken off the top of his head. He's not grinning, but he's different

now, too. There's red hair underneath his first head, the top. And he's way bigger than I thought he was. Way bigger. Ten feet tallish and wider than wide. Big arms, big crunching arms.

Ohh, I think they founded me after all. Why am I so woozyish? Why my thoughts not thinking? Why my legs so long? My my face so blank? Why my eyes no windows?

"Ah-hummena-hummena-hummena-yo!" says the shitty skin. "You're a bad, bad man. You think we would just let you run away like that? You think I don't allow my babies their funny funny fun fun? They loveys a chase, yes'ems they do... swung an ax, ya did. Between my baby's eyes. All he wanted was his card tricks and a little sex pussy and a little light-headed bangings through the nose-strills... sure he could be sinny and greedy, but he was my sinny greedy... and now you split his face and made his eyes fall away..."

As he's talking talks, I hear the mewlings and cryings and shoutings and frayings of my brethren and sisterhoods, and they're all here for me now, I'm one and they are one, none won, oh I think I'm going home, I think cement walls are not cement walls but something else entirelyso-

"Baby gone," I say, and it's time for me to goes now. "Babs-a-goppin'."

I stand up on woozylegs but to leave now but there's no way to do that. Just a cement thing, big grey in view. I never thought I came in there or here. I'm not panicking, no sir. I'm fun. I'm part of the goners now. Circus fucks. I never gave a shit about the circus as a kid cause I'm nozzle a fucking 19th century orphan. I'm a full grown man. Oh God, I'm man, Oh God, why now, why what, why how, hey that rhymes...

Mr. Zachrich is there now, there he is, right there with my bro breds and sisterheads and they're standing with clothings and paintings all for me now that I'm home, previous for my long arms, no more needing to be white or red or anything but black. He's standing there in the room, in the interrogation room, and now big Roland is with him, and it's so good to be home and part of everyone, why would i ever have tried to leave with the caramel sticking on my face... losing mine oh god MY NAME IS MY NAME IS *DICE* my name's DIN, my name's DONE, my name is DEERRRRRRRRR...

Landfall

And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy.

- Revelation 13:1

Truly the tales and songs fall utterly short of your enormity..

- JRR Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

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"I thought you were, like, deathly afraid of tornadoes and stuff. I remember in elementary school you'd cry like a bitch every time we'd have a practice drill."

"Yeah, but a tornado's not alive," said James.

"I'd think that would make it even worse, somehow," said Harris. "Like, if a tornado could willingly kill you, it definitely would."

"This is not a tornado we're talking about here," said James.

They were in James's car, smoking.

"What we call evil is usually just rejection that's become self-aware," opined James, who thought he sounded really fucking smart when he said that. "As to what you were saying earlier, about the Prisoner being evil or whatever. All evil is based on isolation in one way or another. This animal — and I don't even know if you'd call it an animal — is the most isolated being in existence, as far as we know."

"Wow," mumbled Harris, stoned and bored. "That's fuckin' deep."

It was a heavy sort of summer day, hazy and lethargic. James had a POS Ford sedan. He didn't dare drive it anywhere except to and from The Heathen's Maw, the comic book shop they both worked at. They sat in the front seats and passed one last Marlboro between each other.

"So people pay to get in, to watch the thing come ashore?" Harris asked.

"Yeah," said James.

"And there's been no pictures of this thing. In fifty years."

"You have to surrender your cell phones and everything else on the buses. You don't get them back until you're out of the Q."

Harris shook his head and inhaled the cig. It was a cowboy killer, manly and harsh. James didn't smoke habitually but cigarettes were the only way he could bond with Harris, his sole co-worker. The two of them knew each other from grade school but they hadn't been close then and they weren't close now.

"I mean, it sounds cool, man, but it's not something I'd save up for years for, or whatever. I mean, 10 grand? We make like less than 40 a year. And we're both almost 30, I mean, we can't keep working here forever... as soon as I finish trade school I'm fuckin' gone."

"I've been diligent," said James. "It's taken five years of real financial discipline. And all I want is to see this thing, and then I'll worry about the future. My life can't go on until this has been done."

Harris took another drag on the cigarette. James didn't mind if he hogged it. James didn't mind a lot of things.

"Still, though, like, what if this is the one time? The one time it breaks through or whatever?"

"It won't," said James.

"How do you know?"

"I'm not that lucky."

"I wouldn't pay 10 grand to go watch something just, like, come out of the water and walk around a little bit before it goes back to sleep. That's all I'm saying."

Harris passed the now-stubby cig back to James.

"It doesn't walk," said James. "And you make it sound like it'd be boring to watch a volcano erupt."

He inhaled, resisting the gag reflex. The inside of his car stank of cigarette. It was a trash pit, the back seat full of random papers and pop bottles and other stuff James had forgotten about.

"I thought you said kaiju aren't natural disasters."

"I said natural disasters aren't conscious beings. Other than that, watching the only kaiju in the world isn't much different than watching a volcano erupt. There's danger, but it's so well managed and regulated that there have literally never been any casualties. Not since they put the Barrier up, anyway. And they didn't even start letting people in to watch it until years after the Barrier was finished."

Harris shook his head and reached over and plucked the stubby cigarette from James's fingers.

"Just saying, man, I mean, I get it — some people like jumping off cliffs and windsurfing through canyons and some people chase tornadoes and hurricanes, but they're all experts at what they do. They spend years training and studying and getting degrees and shit. You've just spent a lot of time on the internet. And that's a lot of money to spend on a vacation at our age, or any age."

Harris took one last drag on the cigarette and pitched it out the open passenger window.

"I mean, it's awesome," he continued. "But we gotta grow up sometime, is all I'm saying."

"This is why I didn't tell you about this until ten minutes ago," said James. "This is why I don't tell anyone about this."

"I'm not trying to be a dick, man," said Harris. "Go, dude. Go live your dream. I'm just saying, I don't get it."

"You don't have to get it."

Harris's indifference was unsurprising. It really said a lot about humanity's ability to get used to anything. The Prisoner had been around for so long, no one was even impressed by its existence anymore.

"Yeah, well, when do you leave again?"

"Tuesday," said James. "I'm gone three days. That's it. Two for travel, one for the event."

"Old Man Hartnett can't pay you for the time off."

"I know. I don't care."

Harris sighed.

"Thanks for the cig."

He opened his door. Break time was over.

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The air was still heavy and the sky was full of luminous, yellowish clouds on the day James arrived at a thirty-foot tall chainlink fence that stretched off to both horizons. Barbed wire was strung along the top and electrical boxes were set every hundred feet or so.

He sat in a sleek black bus that had picked him up at the Greyhound station in downtown Ann Arbor. The road was clean asphalt, running past the fortified gate into the hills and out of sight.

The gate itself was tall and buzzing and full of locking mechanisms and red lights. It slid open and James couldn't help but think of Jurassic Park.

The bus revved its dinosaur roar of an engine and slid through the gate. James's heart pounded, even though he was still hours away from seeing anything. He'd gotten more and more excited with every turn of the wheels.

There was a long, low building next to the gate with military vehicles parked outside. Tough looking men in forest camo held automatic rifles and stood around the entrances with their jaws set.

One of them – older, short, stocky and with spiky black hair – bounded onto the bus. He wore large black sunglasses that hid his eyes.

"My name's Sergeant Hewson," he said, not waiting for anyone on the bus to stop talking. "And as of this moment, I own you."

All the voices died off. James and everyone on the bus faced their new owner.

"I need everything I say answered with 'Aye, sergeant,'" barked Hewson, dominant but not aggressive.

"Aye, sergeant," said the bus.

The bus was about ninety percent full, mostly twentysomethings. They trended towards white and male with some diversity sprinkled in. Some were hippie-ish and some were even grungier than James. There were a few older people – a woman in her sixties and a greasy man of about forty who held a camera that he kept bragging about.

No one looked like they belonged in the military, or would even consider joining it. They looked like a group of comic con attendees on their first safari.

James had kept to himself, sitting in his own seat with his backpack next to him the whole ride, not talking to anyone.

Hewson walked up and down the aisle.

"I need all backpacks, all luggage, all cell phones, all personal items turned in. Now."

There was some nervous chatter at this.

"Excuse me," said a mousy girl near the back. She sat with a large fellow who was probably her boyfriend.

"Yes."

"That wasn't on the itinerary anywhere," the girl said. "We were told we didn't surrender personal items until the –"

"You will receive your items upon departure when you pass this check point on your way out of the Q," Hewson recited, ignoring her and walking back up to the front of the bus.

"Barrier is an hour and a half away," he continued. "This is where we get acquainted, where you learn the rules you'll be following. We have never once had a casualty. That is a result of people following these rules. It will not take long, but first, you have to give up all your personal items, including identification. Your phone, your wallets, purses, and anything you might have in your pockets. All of it. You may pass them out

the bus windows to one of the soldiers waiting below. Please do so now. We will continue once you have finished."

The passengers began shuffling through their pockets, removing all their stuff.

"I need a 'Aye, sergeant,'" barked Hewson.

"Aye, sergeant," said the bus.

James turned and slid his window down. He passed his backpack to the soldier waiting below. He dug in his pockets, took out his wallet and smartphone and handed those over, too.

The soldier, in full gear despite being nowhere near a combat zone, received it all. He put James's smartphone and wallet in the backpack and set the backpack down, not roughly, on a wheeled cart.

"Now that you've handed everything over," said Hewson once all activity had ceased. "I must remind you that you will be searched at the next checkpoint and then again at the Barrier. If you are discovered to have smuggled in a camera or a phone or anything else, you will be immediately escorted out of the Q and back to civilian territory whereupon you will be arrested and charged with felony smuggling. Needless to say, you will not get to see what you're here to see, you will not get your money back, and you will be staring down a prison sentence of three to five years. Got it?"

"Aye, sergeant," chorused the bus.

A few hands went up. One of them was mouse girl's, and another was the sixty-ish woman. Another was the greasy forty year old.

"There will be time for questions in a moment," said Hewson. The hands went down, though there was a tension that was beginning to mount.

"The rules are very simple – you will do everything I say, and you will not question it. If you do not follow these rules, you will be escorted out of the Q. No exceptions."

Hewson stood at the front of the bus, his voice reverberating off the ceiling and floor. His hands were at his sides.

"Nothing has ever gone wrong," he said. "And nothing will today, provided all of you do exactly what I just told you. I

understand you haven't joined the military, but you have signed confidentiality agreements and NDAs and waivers and all the rest of the stuff, and you have agreed that you will obey and follow orders from military personnel as of the moment you enter the Q. Which is right now."

The bus was silent, everyone listening.

"Now most of you already know this, but for protocol purposes I'm going to spell it out."

James held his breath. It was real now.

"You are here to see an entity known by many names," said Hewson. "This phenomenon appeared in the middle of Lake Superior in the 1950s. It destroyed all human habitations in the area upon its arrival, and then it went into hibernation. It would wake up roughly once every three years and cause more destruction and more loss of life, until President Reagan commissioned the Barrier in 1980. They trapped it while it was hibernating and it's stayed inside the Barrier ever since."

"Due to its deadliness and its confinement inside the Barrier, we haven't been able to gather nearly as much information on it as we would like to, but we do know this – its skin has titanium elements, its body is biomechanical, and it has no eyes. We have no idea how it got here. The most commonly held theory is that it is an inter-dimensional being. It's also most certainly thousands of years old, if not more."

"Anyhow, The Barrier was successful. The Prisoner took no more lives after it was confined. But then, in the 1990s a bunch of hippies convinced Clinton that ordinary people had a right to see this thing, as if it's a freaking giraffe or something. And they started letting people in. They charged fees, which helped with upkeep and personnel. And the attraction grew and grew."

"Now all you little tourists treat this like Burning Man. But it's not. Understand this – this being doesn't care about your little spiritual journeys or what its existence means to you. It is ancient, it is most likely a predator, and it doesn't know about you. Keep this in mind, and do exactly as I say when I say it, and by this evening you'll be on your way back home."

He paused.

"And you will not be the same. Understood?"

Hewson was finished. He looked at the bus inhabitants, then held a hand to his ear.

"Aye, sergeant," chorused the bus.

"Any questions?"

Several hands shot up. Hewson called on the forty-year-old greaseball first.

"I just wanted to note that the advertisements and all internet resources specifically stated that photography was allowed as long as it wasn't on a smartphone," he said.

"I don't know where you heard that," said Hewson. "But if you didn't read it on the official government website, don't even bother wasting my time with it. There's never been a picture taken of what's behind the Barrier. I don't know what made you think you'd be the special person who gets to change that. No cameras, no personal items of any kind. Period."

All hands but mouse girl's and the sixtysomething woman's went down.

"That camera cost more than my access ticket," said the greaseball, getting worked up.

"We will make sure your camera is taken care of, and if you get it back in any shape other than how you handed it over, I personally will make sure you are compensated."

Hewson didn't wait for the greaseball to answer. He called on the older woman. She was polite-looking, well dressed.

"I've always wondered – if the Prisoner touches the Barrier, what happens?"

"You ever tie a firecracker to a frog? It's like that."

"Oh."

Hewson called on mouse girl.

"Yes."

"Hello, Sergeant Hewson," said the girl. "My name is Zoe Plaza, and this is my husband Roland Klein."

Hewson's face registered faint recognition at the name.

"You're that living Internet meme, aren't you?"

"We're influencers who specialize in the paranormal, and – "

"Yeah, they told me you'd be on this run. If you're going to ask me if you can have a camera, the answer is no. You can write about it from memory like all the other journalists that come in here. We have note pads and pens at the observation sight and you can keep whatever notes you take."

"I understand," said Zoe, clearly not a person who was used to getting interrupted and ordered around. "My question is this – how have there never been any photos of the Prisoner? Not one has made it to publication, not one has been leaked, not even before it was quarantined behind the Barrier. Thousands, if not millions of people, saw the Prisoner before the Barrier, and not one of them bothered to take a picture? I'm just wondering if you can speak on that. In a world where everything is documented, it seems odd that the one thing everyone wants to see is impossible to find."

Hewson shrugged.

"You're asking the wrong guy," he said. "I know there were many photos taken before the Barrier was installed, but they were all destroyed."

"All of them? Every single one?"

"I guess so," said Hewson. "Lord knows if one had survived, you all would've seen it by now."

"But I'm just wondering why. Why treat this thing like the Supreme Court? What harm will it do, to let the public see the Prisoner?"

Hewson didn't say anything for a moment. He looked at Zoe and she looked back. He seemed to be considering his next words carefully.

Finally, he spoke, almost cheerfully.

"You'll see."

Zoe looked miffed, but she clearly knew when a conversation was over.

Hewson looked around the rest of the bus, including at James.

"That it?"

No one said anything. No hands went up.

"Landfall expected in three hours," said Hewson. "Conditions are favorable for a clear line of sight. If this changes we will not engage and you will be kept in the barracks until conditions are favorable. So hopefully within the next few hours, you will get to see what you came here for."

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They drove under trees and dust and the yellow sun. James felt odd without his phone, as though a part of him had been amputated. He kept reaching for it.

Several of the bus patrons had tentatively begun asking Zoe and her husband about the creature, which had many names. The bus patrons were all meek and simpering, like most people in the presence of a famous person. Zoe was in love with it.

"They say it's so big it blocks out the sun," said the woman in her mid-sixties who'd asked about the Barrier.

"Yeah, it's the size of a land mass, an island," said Zoe. "It's so big it sits in the lake like a puddle. It's also bioluminescent, which is one of the theories why it doesn't photograph well. It's so loud you can hear it for miles away. I mean, you know, they named the quarantine zone the 51st state. It's got the whole western section of the lake to itself. Just the Barrier and what's left of Duluth and the surrounding areas. And there's a theory that if it is an inter-dimensional being, it's actually microscopic in its home dimension."

"You've never seen it before?"

"Nope," said Zoe. "My first time. But he — " she tapped Roland's shoulder. " — was on a calling about four years ago."

"What's it like?" the woman asked Roland.

Roland was dark skinned and straight faced. He had the air of a prison guard.

"It's the presence of a god," he said. "Like an optical illusion. The mind can't process something of this size moving around, something that size that's alive."

"Did you understand why Hewson said 'You'll see' about why there's no pictures? Why they don't let the general public see it, only us die-hards?"

Roland nodded again.

"You have to experience it," he said. "Even pictures wouldn't do it justice. It has to be experienced, in person. And you will never forget it. I had panic attacks for the next three months."

"And yet you came back," said the woman.

"I wanted to be here for Zoe."

"They still don't know how it survives," said Zoe. "It breaks the laws of physics just by existing."

"Yeah, it violates the square cube theory," said the greaseball with the expensive camera, wanting to be included.

"What name so you use for it?" asked the woman. "I was a girl when it first came, and I remember my priest and my parents calling it The Behemoth and The Leviathan, after the creatures in Revelations."

"I prefer the name we used in the military," said Roland. "Mr. Potato-head."

"I go with what most of the internet calls it – the Prisoner," said Zoe. "Some think it should be released."

"Some people are fucking idiots," said Roland.

"And how do they get it to come out?" asked the older woman.

"They call it with these vibrations," said James.

Everyone turned to look at him. He hadn't spoken up until now.

"Like a whale," said Zoe.

"Like a whale," said James.

"And what happens?" asked the woman.

"They call it," said James. "It wakes up, we get a look at it, and it goes back to sleep. That's what's always happened."

Roland gave the woman a suspicious look.

"Forgive me, but why are you asking all these questions? You spent an awful lot of money to be present for something you don't seem familiar with."

The woman smiled sadly.

"My husband died of cancer earlier this year. This was supposed to be his trip. I almost didn't go, but..."

She raised her hands, not finishing the sentence. She didn't need to.

No one said anything for a second, then Roland spoke.

"Sorry for your loss."

"What's your name," asked Zoe.

"Martha Flax," said the woman. "Thanks for filling me in."

"Yeah, same here," said the greaseball. "My name's Dean, by the way. Dean Carney."

He looked at Zoe.

"I'm a huge fan. Your work on Loch Ness was stunning. Too bad they never found anything, though."

"Thanks for the support, Dean," said Zoe.

She stared straight ahead, as did Roland, and the bus drove on.

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"You ever read 'The Fog Horn' by Ray Bradbury?" Dean Carney asked James as they stood against the huge, thick windows.

"I have, actually," said James, but Carney kept talking.

"It's about a sea monster. It hears a fog horn and thinks it's a mate. It spends all this time depressurizing itself, journeying up from the ocean floor, but its lover never responds to it. So

it eventually smashes the lighthouse because it's tired of being rejected."

"An evil person is usually just someone who's been rejected one too many times for one reason or another," said James.

"Sometimes it's justified rejection, other times it isn't."

"That's totally true," said Carney, turning away.

The group was gathered in a stone fortified bunker with walls twenty feet thick. A ten-inch thick glass observation window faced southeast, giving view down a great, sloping hill, at the bottom of which, several miles away, the misty lake surface could be seen stretching into the distance.

The shore surrounding the lake was barren rock. A two-hundred foot cement and metal wall with blinking lights and electric cables was anchored into the rock with cruel-looking barricades and brackets. The wall's rim was decorated with a deadly Christmas display of flashing blue and red lights, spikes and wires.

This was the Barrier, the confinement space for the Prisoner.

The group's perspective from the tower on the hill gave them an exquisite vantage point. They could see for miles out onto the lake while remaining a few safe miles away from the Barrier itself.

Hewson was filling in the group on the calling process, which he called the Massage.

"Now, IF the Prisoner responds to the Massage, we will get to see it. If it does not, we will get back on the bus and leave. There will be no exceptions. I've been doing this for twenty years now, and I've never seen the Prisoner fail to respond to the Massage."

"Where is it? I can't see it," said Martha Flax. "All I see is that big white mountain thing out there."

"That's not a mountain," said Roland. "That's it. And it's lying down right now. Most of its underwater."

"It's that huge?"

Everyone nodded.

"But it could step right over the Barrier if it wanted to!"

"The Barrier's not a wall," said Zoe. "It's a giant electromagnetic dome the size of West Virginia. The Prisoner can't fly out, step out, anything. Though it's actually never really tried to, so some people think it's totally possible that it could."

Hewson's radio crackled, startling James and several others.

"Commencing Massage," it said.

"Affirmative," said Hewson.

There came a great vibration from below them, and the land itself seemed to hum. It came in pulses, waves. The world blurred.

"Wakey wakey," James heard Carney mutter.

Everyone stared out the window.

At first there was silence, and then the nightmare began.

It rose.

Out of the lake, up and up and up and up.

James had prepared for this moment his whole life. He thought he would be filled with ecstasy, with knowing, with the bright white light of fulfillment and achievement.

Instead, he felt only bottomless dread. Every instinctual alarm bell in his head fired off. Every brain cell screamed.

James thought of Smaug the Dragon revealing his full form to Bilbo in the great mines of Erebor. Bilbo saying how he did not believe that Smaug was as great as the old tales said. The dragon rearing to his full height and roaring, "And do you now?"

He and everyone else gaped like fish.

Everyone backed away from the window, except one person.

Martha Flax. She walked toward it. There were tears on her cheeks.

"Oh, it's beautiful," she whispered, her voice bouncing off the cement walls. "So beautiful, you would've loved it, Nathan..."

As James beheld The Prisoner, he saw why there were no photos allowed.

People would go insane if they saw this thing standing in the sick, egg-yellow sky with its back scraping the clouds. They would never be able to think of anything else except this creature's existence. Its very presence would end civilization.

It was so big it couldn't be photographed in one piece. Only fanatics and those trained in the military were capable of witnessing its enormity and keeping their minds.

"When it woke up the first time, it killed thousands in a matter of moments, and it wasn't even moving," whispered Zoe. "It was just sleeping, like it always does. Its arrival caused an earthquake that wiped out everything in a hundred mile radius."

"Now's not the time for you to say shit like that," snapped Carney, whose face was damp and his hair even greasier.

James would think about the Prisoner forever. He knew it. His skin tightened, his hair stood on end. A terrible plunging feeling was centered in his chest.

He felt it. The one thing he'd hoped not to feel.

Fear. A fear with no beginning or end. No bottom or top.

I regret coming, he thought. *I wish I hadn't seen it.*

The Prisoner began to settle back down into the lake.

"BRACE," yelled Hewson.

They all grabbed thick metal bars bolted to the stone walls.

The compound shook as the Prisoner lay in the water. James squeezed his eyes shut and tried to tell himself that the world wasn't collapsing around him.

Waves a hundred feet high crashed against the inside of the Barrier, splashing up and up and sizzling against an invisible wall of electric blue.

James felt cold. He couldn't stop staring at the Prisoner, once again an enormous white lump in the middle of the grey lake. He would never forget this. He would always remember how tiny he was.

He thought of thunderheads on the horizon. That was the only thing he could think of that would be comparable to the Prisoner's size. He saw why no one had photographed this thing. Why no one had even sketched it.

You'll see

He had. And now he never wanted to see it again.

"That's its only purpose," said Martha Flax as they were escorted back to the bus. "To sleep, and to wake. To sleep, and to wake."

"As far as we know," said Roland.

"You were right," said Zoe, to Hewson or Roland or both of them. James couldn't tell. She was trembling. "You were right. "We shouldn't have come."

As they were led out, James could feel The Prisoner behind them, settling back into sleep. From that day on, no matter where he went, he would always feel it behind him, slumbering. He could be on the other side of the world, and he'd feel it's presence, it's enormity.

No one said anything except Hewson, who spoke quietly, the quietest anyone had heard him speak that day.

"I hope you people found what you were looking for."

No one responded, and Hewson didn't make them.

The Act of Erasing Oneself

Today was another day. I try to be thankful for what I have.

A girl I went to high school with has breast cancer and it's spread to her liver. They put a GoFundMe up on Facebook and I check my social score before I donate 50 dollars, bringing the total to 500 dollars raised so far. 5 people in 7 hours. They want 15 grand. The donation brings my score up about .2 percent.

I haven't seen her in years. In fact, the last time I saw her was in our old high school auditorium before a play. We were talking about Myspace. That tells you how long ago it was. We were still children then, practically.

"You should try this other site out when you start at Eastern," she'd said while all the other kids chattered around us. "It's called Facebook and it's way better."

Everything in that memory seems really brightly colored and innocent to me.

After I donated the money I submitted another short story to an Isaac Asimov science fiction magazine. I've never been published, but they pay eight cents a word. I've submitted to more than ten magazines in the past few weeks and I'm going to keep submitting.

I made myself some steaks on the stove and ate them, and ate some baby spinach out of the fridge. Then I called my friend.

"Hey, man," I said. "How you doing?"

"Oh, I'm good, man," he said. "I spent all day on the roof, just worn out from the heat. We're about to eat dinner."

He's been re-siding his parents' old house recently, burning and scraping off the old paint with a blowtorch and scraper, then priming and painting three coats of white paint over it.

"How you doing?" he asked after a second.

"I went to the doctor today, actually," I said. "I had a stomachache this morning and I didn't know what it was. They think it might be IBS but they did blood work so I won't know til then."

"I had that," he said. "IBS. I got it from stress."

"Is it like a dull ache in the center of your abdomen, right under your ribcage, and it feels like your stomach is turning to stone? Like this muscle cramping?"

"No, it's just, like, 'Oh shit, I got diarrhea.'"

"Yeah, that's not it," I said. "But yeah, I wanted to see if you wanted to play UNO tonight."

He hesitated.

"Eh, probably not, man. I wanted to go kayaking after dinner for exercise. What time were you going to bed?"

"I got work tomorrow so 9 or 10."

"I don't know, maybe if you came over. I might be done around 8:30. Sun's going down faster now so maybe if you come over later we could after I take a shower."

"Yeah, just send me a text or whatever."

"Yeah, will do."

I hung out with my parents and youngest brother yesterday. We went canoeing on the mucky lake across the street. It was nice. There were lots of fat lily pads and the water was brown and stank of rot and mud but there were patches where the water was clear and the canoe slid through the water quite nicely, and they drank beer and I drank Coke.

Dad said he wanted me to teach him some new songs on the guitar, like Soul Meets Body by Death Cab for Cutie and some other ones I'd never heard of. I don't really play anymore but I said I'd look them up and try.

Later, my dad was talking about bad emotions.

"If you're gonna feel that shit, feel it all the way," he said. "And then move on. Don't deny it. Just acknowledge it. Then get through it. All you can do."

He talks about rhythm and poetry.

"Life itself is rhythm and poetry, and parts of it rhyme," he says. "So let the bad parts rhyme and let the good parts rhyme."

Dad's got cancer, too. A tumor in his brain. We won't know about it til fall. He'll live for three more years after that. The last year will be the worst. When his body is finally failing him and he needs to be helped to the bathroom, I'll tell him what he told us, about feeling that shit all the way and getting through it.

"I'm feeling it," he'll say to me and my brother with his eyes welling up. "I'm feeling it..."

I put my shoulder against the truth. The fact that there is no fucking way in hell my sweet old classmate is raising 15 grand, which is a minuscule sum of money to people with actual money. That unless I get lucky and impress a gatekeeper, I'm not going to be getting paid for writing my stories, ever. That natural selection never went anywhere, it just got more complicated.

Then there's the harshest truth — my social credit is down past baseline and has been for a while now. That's why my friend doesn't want to hang. I know I won't hear from him. The only reason he answered the phone is that he's afraid I'll downgrade him. I won't. I don't want him to go through this, not with his depression acting up. But it is nice to talk to someone about the doctor. I didn't tell my parents about my stomach because I want to know what's wrong with it first.

If I don't bring my credit score back up, I'll get sent to a socialization camp. No one comes back from those. It's really hard to re-learn socialization once you've sunk past baseline. I hope that my donation and my active pursuit of my goals will bring my score back up. I'm not that far below the baseline.

Everything you do is based on your social credit. Your identity itself, whether it's positive or negative, is determined by your social credit, whether or not people generally like you and find you useful. Being a black, fat lesbian with high social credit is good — you should be proud of being black, fat, and lesbian. But if your social credit is low, then you should be ashamed of being fat, being black, and being a lesbian. It's all that matters, your contributions. It's not a bad way to run a society. Anyone can be anything or do anything. Who you are doesn't matter; what other people think is what matters.

My dad was telling me that rhythm and poetry stuff because he knows I'm stressed out. He's had his score below baseline before, and every time it goes below, it gets harder to drag it up. It kept happening to him because he kept trying to help

people with low scores. Now he doesn't do it anymore, but he'll still talk to me. My brother and my mom are too afraid. My brother didn't say anything while we were on the canoe. It really hurt, but I didn't say anything because I understand.

The evening comes and my friend doesn't text. My phone is dark and quiet, and it's not surprising. The only emails I get are spam and bill reminders. I don't mind.

All I can do is try and be social, but it's hard when no one wants to talk to you. I haven't really talked to anyone in weeks.

I try to stream something off YouTube but the only free thing is clips of that one show where women with low social credit get to compete in horrifically violent weaponized wrestling matches. Three to a match.

The worst part is when losers of the first match are tied down naked, head to foot, with losers from previous matches, all of them in a row, and the participants who placed first and second are given hacksaws and have to saw off all the losers' limbs at the joints one at a time, and whoever gets everything off first gets to go home with renewed credit and the other gets tied down in the next show.

They only play this show with women. They tried it with men originally, but it didn't get any views until they did it with women.

The women who are tied down are given a chance to chew through a leather strap and if they get through it before all their limbs are sawed off they're given another chance to compete.

Human skin looks like wet foam rubber in that type of situation, somehow, like it's got supermarket plastic stretched over it, like supermarket pig-meat that's still moving. The women who are tied down never win the races, of course, and the cheers are so loud, and the lights are so bright. Blood trickles everywhere off the sides of the ring like a fountain, and the saws are moving so fast because the other two women are still desperately fighting for their own lives, and the tied-down women are always struggling right up until they cut their heads off which are almost always the last things to be severed, both to give the tied-down women a chance to chew through their straps and also because that's what the producers tell the women with the saws to do because it's what the audience wants.

Every clip of that part of the show always ends up looking like two frantically-sawing women in tight colorful onesies crawling over a writhing, squirting, leaking mass of flesh with screaming, thrashing, gnashing heads attached to it, right in the center of a wrestling ring like you'd see at WWE, all while a referee in black and white (usually female also, but with a shaved head) watches intently with a whistle between her teeth ready to blow for any fouls. The clips have hundreds of millions of views.

I decide to go out. I head to my favorite bar. It's called the Plymouth Rock. It takes about twenty minutes to get there using the freeway.

As I walk across the parking lot of the Plymouth Rock I see my friends from high school, Shane and Katherine. Katherine runs up and hugs me, and seems genuinely happy to see me, and Shane cracks wise about something but I can't understand them because they're both strung out on something and then they're off again, darting across the dark lot under the streetlights past a magazine vendor's ramshackle booth and they're gone. All of us were in the same class with the friend who has breast cancer.

Inside the Plymouth Rock it's dark and there's a band about to play. The lights are blue and yellow and red, and I walk past the stage because I'm feeling a tad overwhelmed by everything and my stomach is starting to hurt and my face is hot. I find a nice dark corner in the back hallway past the bathrooms. While I'm collecting myself, I look to my right and in the dim red light, I see a torn sheet of paper duct-taped to the wall. The entire message is long gone but the remaining words are "the act of erasing oneself". I think about what that would be like, to be erased, to be finished with all this, but then that's not a good thought, you don't want to get stuck in that particular groove. Not with my score where it is.

I check my phone, my score— Katherine's hug bumped it up a few fractions of a point. That's better than this morning. Good.

I go out the back door, deciding I don't need to spend any time around people tonight after all. I can try some other time soon.

On the way home, I try to ignore my stomach, which feels like it's turning to stone. I think, which is about the only thing I can do. I think about how you can only care about so many people. There's too many of us, that's the problem. Human life got too cheap. You can care about your life and a few people you

know but after that, it gets hard to care about what happens to anyone else, especially when there's nine billion of us.

But I'll try and let the bad parts rhyme with the good. I've never had my score below baseline before, and I still have another month to bring it up again. Just one more random hug from someone too stoned to think about what it might do to their own score might get me up a full point. One more small donation, one short story published and lauded. There's all sorts of ways to get what you want in this world, but you have to try.

So today was another day. I try to be thankful for what I have.

The Arbiter

He/she/they came out of nowhere, landing on the African Sahara one Monday afternoon. He/she/they stepped out of his white, egg-like ship and demonstrated his/her/their power by instantly vaporizing an armed militia charging toward him/her/them in Jeeps and Humvees, weapons raised. He/she/they simply held up a four-fingered hand and the advancing mercenaries and their vehicles dissolved into a fine mist. That was it.

From that moment on, the entire planet took him/her/them seriously.

"We lost connection for a brief moment," he/she/they explained to the entire globe once the proper media connections had been arranged. He/she/they spoke from a podium in front of a crowd fit for a Pope. "Two thousand years, give or take."

"Two thousand years?" asked all the journalists at the same time.

"To an immortal, a millennium is but a brief moment," said the Arbiter, who never formally introduced himself/herself/themselves. "But we're back now and... well, at least you're all still here. We weren't sure you would be. It's possible, had our return been delayed further, that you would have been lost entirely."

"What is your purpose?" the human collective wanted to know.

"I am here to determine if you are worthy of inclusion in the galactic community."

At those words, everyone on the planet began to sweat and look at each other nervously.

The Arbiter was offered the best, most prestigious locations from which to preach his message; places in New York, London, Dubai, Paris, Tokyo and Hong Kong. He/she/they declined them all, choosing instead to stay in Africa for a good while before moving on to Central America and Southeast Asia. As he/she/they walked the streets, his/her/their expression was that of a disappointed employer— one whose workers had failed him/her/them at a crucial yet rudimentary task.

He/she/they sighed tremendously whenever someone would answer his/her/their questions. He/she/they spoke everyone's language perfectly, right down to the regional slang.

"What a mess," he/she/they remarked upon viewing a flood-ravaged slum in Sri Lanka. "I suppose this is our fault. We engineered your survival instincts too well. Too much self-preservation, not enough empathy. It's a tough one to balance..."

He/she/they turned and addressed the massive crowd of believers that followed him/her/them around.

"Here's what must be done," he/she/they said in a voice that somehow amplified itself to the entire crowd without a visible microphone or PA. "This message is for those who have attained what many of you would call god-like status. This cannot be sustained. That is, I'm afraid your civilization cannot exist long term with this current structure. You're going to have to give up a large amount of your power. If not, I will simply take it from you. But give it away voluntarily, and you will be loved beyond your wildest dreams."

Of course, the global one percent received this information with a tantrum to end all tantrums. They whined about injustice — they'd *earned* their status, and at any rate how could anyone ever expect them to live like everyone else? They'd proved they were special and deserved to be treated as such!

They plotted against the Arbiter up to and including his assassination, but he was omniscient and knew everything so their attempts were all unsuccessful. They were all very embarrassed and very frustrated. Even having their media outlets cast doubt on the Arbiter and make him/her/them seem untrustworthy wasn't as effective as usual.

"I wish I didn't need my powers," the Arbiter said to someone in Siberia. "But previous Arbiters were sent without powers, and...it didn't go well. They were killed within a few decades of being sent here, if that. A blink of an eye. Most of them didn't even make much of an impact. Just global religion and things..."

Indeed, he/she/they seemed to have an equal disdain for people that had succeeded in all things capitalism — finance, entertainment, politics, etc. He/she/they reserved the same curled-lip expression for Barack Obama that he gave to Donald Trump. Pope Leo XIV and the Dalai Lama were treated with equal indifference. Volodymyr Zelenskyy received a respectful nod — more than any other leader on the planet could have hoped for, but the moment was dampened when the Arbiter remarked that the gesture was only reserved for leaders who were destined for inevitable violent death. Celebrities and influencers were

completely ignored, and corporate executives and bankers were openly glared at.

"Any idiot can amass whatever trinkets the species has deemed valuable," The Arbiter sneered upon meeting the wealthiest, most famous examples humanity had to offer. "Attention, digital numbers... but where are your thinkers? Where are your greatest minds? Who has driven you to the technological brink you find yourself at now? Who called me back?"

The titans of global academia and the titans of Silicon Valley (and their many cronies) all cheered for a few moments – they'd always known they were special. Clearly the Arbiter was talking about them.

But The Arbiter shook his/her/their head.

"These devices you've invented... That's a tool. That's a game. This is a glorified hammer, right here. Unimpressive. All just minor steps in communication efficiency."

The titans of Silicon Valley mumbled dejectedly. They thought their inventions were pretty cool. If they weren't, why would so many people use them? After all, they were specifically and deliberately engineered to stimulate the brain's limbic system and unconsciously create addiction.

AI? The Arbiter laughed hysterically when someone showed him/her/them ChatGPT.

"Word machine," was all he/she/they managed to sputter.

Mostly The Arbiter seemed interested in talking to ordinary people— people who had never really been asked things like, "What is your take on life?" and "What do you think humanity's purpose is?", at least not by the global media. The Arbiter smiled and nodded his head when he spoke to these people – all sorts, from all over the world, all races and genders. Class seemed to be the only true distinction he/she/they made between the people he liked and the people he didn't. He/she/they spoke with broke Trump supporters as well as broke cartel enforcers and broke people living in nursing homes and broke people living in suburban Ohio and broke people living in Chinese apartments and broke people living in Romanian mahalas. He/she/they spoke with broke Canadians, Dominicans, Afghans, Uzbeks, and Mongolians. He/she/they listened politely to all of them, even

as the press clamored and the richest, most accomplished humans smiled and pretended to be ok with it.

After conducting his global tour, The Arbiter went into a Tibetan monastery for awhile. He/she/they said he/she/they liked how quiet it was.

A few days later he/she/they emerged.

"I have made my decision," he/she/they announced.

He/she/they stepped up to the podium. A storm of camera shutters and lights went off. He/she/they faced it all with stern stoicism.

He/she/they opened his mouth and everyone's jaw dropped.

"Let me just say," he/she/they said in every language ever simultaneously. "You guys are fucking pigs."

He/she/they paused for dramatic effect.

"We originally seeded this planet so we could come back once you'd populated it to either make allies of you or harvest you for meat, but Jesus fucking Christ you are too entertaining for us to do either of those things now. Look at you all. Ridiculous."

Everyone murmured. Was this good or bad?

"Your thought processes are tinker toys compared to ours. And my particular species is considered rather daft when it comes to the greater minds of galactic intelligence! Why do you think they sent *me* to this backwater?"

Everyone murmured more. This was probably not good. But at least He/she/they'd said they wouldn't be eaten like cattle.

"Everything you do is about attention and the evolutionary benefits that come with it – fuck you who want and spread your genes with who you want. That's literally all you're here to do – make more of yourselves. Look at this planet! You're perfectly helpless! Practically hairless, no natural defenses, you've even fattened yourselves up for us!"

Everyone was getting nervous now. Maybe they would be eaten after all. Fuck, why was everyone so goddamn stupid? Why did people have to be so selfish?!

"Pathetic," said the Arbiter, with a row of red-robed Tibetan monks flanking him/her/them. "I should make your heads all explode right here. But I won't. We tried sending you various prophets so that you wouldn't blow yourselves up before you'd reached harvest size, but again, I've spoken with the motherminds and we've decided to stay our plans for the time being. I'm going to be taking a bunch of you back home with me for posterity. The rest I'll leave to your own devices. And you're not going to argue about it."

So that was that. The Arbiter rounded up a bunch of people that no one had heard of from all over the world and ushered them onto his ship. He/she/they explained that he/she/they and his/her/their kind would be watching humanity but not interfering.

"Just keep doing what you're doing, I guess," were his/her/their last words. "Good luck."

He/she/they blasted off into infinity and was never heard from again.

Everyone looked around, shrugged, and went back to doing what they'd been doing before.

Service Call

I exhaled.

Can't these morons get anything right?

Cap loomed over me. He's a huge guy, and I'm a small girl. Some primal fear stirred within my being as he shook me awake, kind of poking me in the shoulder with his steel fingers. He lost his right hand in the war and had it replaced with a bionic one. I opened my eyes and saw his lantern-jaw and mean eyes and almost screamed.

"Gear up and go sort the shit out on Mars," he said. His voice is so deep he could probably break rocks just by humming Amazing Grace. "I think the idiots up there opened the portal to hell again."

Two minutes later I was suited up, prepared to go online and strolling towards the dunk portal. I yawned and sipped from my sweat-straw. I'd gotten maybe three hours of sleep. They worked you like a dog here on the moon colony base. No union here. Nothing but saving other people from their own stupidity.

I'm a total fraud, by the way. Other engineers know exactly what they're doing. I got the job because I'm a woman, a relatively young woman in her early thirties, and they needed someone to meet the diversity quota. Nine times out of ten, I end up walking away from a job and someone else has to come in and finish it for me. I'm amazed I haven't been outright fired yet. It's been almost a year since I got hired and no one seems to have figured it out yet. Everyone mostly leaves me alone and I'm fine with it.

The dunk portal was a hole in the floor rimmed with fluorescent blue lights. It had its own bay at the end of the hall. I stepped into it and everything flipped upside down. I hate dunk portals but this is the only one the base keeps operational at this hour. Saving power for the rest of the flight portals and such. Don't even get me started..

Everything righted itself again, kind of like when you do a somersault, and then I was in the Mars base dunk portal bay, and there was old Hardecker, the night shift supervisor, chewing his thumbnail. He betrayed a small glance of irritation upon seeing I was the one they'd sent, but he did his best to conceal it and greeted me with a curt nod.

"What's the problem?" I asked. I yawned again, a big one.

"It's portal 8," he said. "The one to the lava planet. We can't close it."

"Cap said you opened the portal to hell," I said. "I thought the portal to hell was the fire planet."

"No, this is the lava planet," said Hardecker. "Portal to hell's working fine."

We started walking down the hall towards the main bay where all the portals were kept.

"And you can't close it?"

"Well, the guys - "

An alarm blared and both of us winced. I stuck in my hearing plugs. The alarm died off, echoing down the hall.

Hardecker, a squat guy of fifty-three with a terribly shaped goatee wearing an old ratty Megadeth t-shirt, started talking again. They make us suit up for these service calls, but the operators and management are so used to the atmosphere they never even bother wearing their oxygen masks. Amazing what humans can adapt to.

"The guys were over there doing samples for the STUFROU tours," he said. "You know, the ones with the terminal clapmatrix for the heat stickers? We've been using it all week, and now we can't get the fucking thing closed and the heat's making the outside of the portal melt."

"Well, at least it's not the portal to hell," I said. The last time the portal to hell got stuck open it was a living nightmare. Cap himself had to teleport in here and he gave me a look that I'll never forget when I told him I couldn't figure it out. I really hoped that wouldn't happen today.

"So can you take a look at it?"

"Oh, sure," I said.

"Steve was always able to just get it going," said Hardecker.

"I'm not Steve," I said, and I probably shouldn't have said it but honestly at that point those assholes could've just fired me

and I'd just go back to working for the elder-service on Earth. I'd been happier there anyway. I'd miss the money, though, which is the only reason I still do this. Never take a job just for the money, kids. It's never worth it.

We emerged from the dank hallway into the main portal bay, which was huge and noisy and metal from floor to ceiling. The portals — standing portals, all of them, rounded, the size of large doorways — birthed and swallowed operators as they went about their business. This was one of the busiest ports in the solar system. The first one ever commissioned off-earth, too, at least for purely industrial purposes. No civilians, just industry drones both bio and AI.

I saw the lava portal at the far end. I could tell it was the one we'd be working on— the heat shimmers pouring out of it were visible from across the bay. A number of operators and maintenance crew were gathered around it, and I could see the two maintenance leads all huddled at the control box, scratching their heads and trying to look like they cared.

I prayed I'd be able to get online with the portal's ethernet without any problems, but as we approached there was an affirmative-sounding vocal burst from the group around the control box. I saw the portal slide shut, its digital doorways zapping themselves out like an old TV. A couple spectators clapped.

"Not gonna fuck with us now, are ya?" yelled Kordie triumphantly, shaking his fist at the closed portal.

"What happened?" Hardecker yelled at them. "We just got controls here."

Kordie and another maintenance tech named Tonester jogged over to meet us.

"Lost connection with the safety," explained Tonester. "Froze up, thought it was frozen shut instead of frozen open. We kept thinking it was the HMI, that the swipe went bad or something."

He turned to me.

"You think you could have Central adjust that, though? The safety switch? That's not something that should happen again. Almost melted the rim this time. And Javon burned his leg."

"If the guys wouldn't fuck with the settings right before stepping through it wouldn't happen," Hardecker said. "They gotta wait to break the light curtain. They can't just hit 'Go' and step in."

"I been tellin' em that," Tonester said defensively.

Hardecker turned to me. His tone of voice made him sound like he was addressing a particularly stupid child. I didn't care.

"So you want to bring up that change to Cap? He can have Steve take care of it later. We need to keep running now."

"Oh, yeah," I said, relief already flooding me. I'd dodged another call. "Definitely."

"You know what needs to be done?" Tonester asked. He was a nice guy, big roly-poly grey teddy bear of a fella. Everyone liked him fine, even though he complained a lot.

Before I could answer he spat some stream of techie jargon at me. I nodded like I understood and deeply cared about what he was saying. I would tell Steve about it in the morning. Steve would figure it out. He always does.

"K," said Hardecker. "Well, sorry for dragging you out here at this hour."

"No worries," I said. I was so happy I'd get to go back and sleep. If all went well, I'd be undressed and back between the covers within the next twenty minutes. Chris might even be back from Luna Prime by then, and falling asleep in his arms for the first time in days would be great.

I bade the Mars maintenance crew farewell and left them to confer.

I'd rather be lucky than smart, I thought to myself as I walked back to the dunk portal.

Atlantis Heart

Alton didn't say goodbye when he left that morning. Sheila knew—it was cause he was worried about her. If she passed away before he saw her again, which was certainly possible given her age and the length of time he'd be gone, he would have to live with that goodbye. Whereas if he left it open-ended he could always tell himself, "Well, I assumed I'd see her again."

She looked tired. She felt tired. She felt old. She knew it. Her shaky legs ached and she'd been given a Walker. She'd never used it in public before. She refused to be seen with it outside her house. But she decided to go see him off anyway. First time for everything.

He was shipping out on the Adriatic. She could watch it take off from the bluff that overlooked Haggerty Highway and the Livonia Landing Pad.

She put her legs in the Walker's smooth cage-like braces, slipped it on. She felt the braces constrict lightly and fit her legs, supporting them and her lower back. It was quite comfortable, actually. She pushed the 'on' button and stood up. Or rather, the Walker did.

After two steps, Sheila found it wasn't much different than walking on her own. The doctors had been right — this was easy. She was even faster and nimbler than she'd been before her blood clot and her fall.

She reached into her pocket for the Atlantis Heart and remembered she'd given it to Alton.

The Atlantis Heart — the blue jewel that she kept in her pocket at all times. It had been a gift from her late husband as a first anniversary present. He'd made a small fortune in corporate management that year, and spent a great chunk of it on the jewel. It was a deep-ocean sapphire, round and geometric, sealed in a ring of silver. Sheila named it the Atlantis Heart as soon as she laid eyes on it. The name just came to her, as if in a dream. Lord knew how much it was worth today.

In truth, she didn't think she'd be going anywhere, at least not for the time being. But the blood clot and the fall had given her a stark sense of impending mortality. Humanity may have conquered the solar system, but they hadn't yet conquered the maggot or the incessant march of time. And Alton, living on

Venus, was only able to come visit once every year and a half at the most, and that was if nothing came up. So she gave the Heart to him, just in case. And he must've known that giving him the jewel was her way of saying a tentative, preemptive, "Goodbye."

Alton had refused the jewel at first. It was the most valuable family heirloom they had, and Alton was her only descendant.

"Come on, Grandma," he'd said. "Hang onto it for now. I don't want to lose it on another planet."

"You won't lose it," Sheila had told him.

"Grandpa wanted you to have it. Dad wanted you to. I'm not taking it."

"Alton," said Sheila, putting on her stern Grandma voice. "You will have this in your pocket when you get on the Adriatic tomorrow. And that's final."

He'd come to visit for a few weeks, helping her after the blood clot surgery, getting her accustomed to using the Walker, doing a few things around the yard. Sheila's leg was healing quite fast, and the nurses came around once a week and were one button-push away in case of emergency. But Alton insisted on staying.

"You need someone other than a robot to talk to, Grandma," he'd said. "And I've got travel time saved up and time off, too. I need to see a blue sky again that isn't a simulation."

Indeed, most of his time off would be spent getting to Earth and then back to Venus. The travel was all paid, though.

She'd made him breakfast the previous morning, just like she always had when he and his parents would visit.

Alton drank a Coke, a rare treat. Sheila still hoarded them down in the basement.

"They used to have these cans all over when I was a kid," said Sheila. "It was as plentiful as water."

"Sugar," said Alton, smacking his lips. "And acid. So fracking sweet. Almost makes me want to gag."

"Sugar generation," said Sheila. "That was us."

"Green generation, too," said Alton, referring to the fact that Sheila's generation had been the one to save earth's plant life.

"The things you take for granted," said Sheila. "There's something I've been wondering. Do you work with any Venusians?"

"I work on Venus, Grandma," said Alton, taking another sip of Coke. "They're all I see."

"Are you not protected – " she started to say, then caught herself. "Well, protected is the wrong word..."

Alton cut her off.

"No, it's all right. You haven't been around them yourself. You get your information off a screen. So how are you gonna know?"

He took another sip of Coke, grimaced.

"Too harsh?" Sheila asked.

"I love the taste, but I can't believe how much it burns," said Alton. "I can't believe people used to guzzle this stuff. You can feel yourself getting poisoned."

He let up a belch, excused himself.

"But yeah, I mean, my boss is Venusian and he's a good guy," he said. "I work with them all the time. They're just like us. They're just people that were born and raised on Venus. They're human. They breathe oxygen. They live on the bases and in the mines. Most of them have been to Earth. They're no different than Martians or Titanians or Callistonians."

"I just hear about the rioting and everything and I just think how awful it must be..."

"Well, they've been screwed over since they colonized the place," said Alton. "They never got compensated for all the mining they did, that and actually building the bases. The mining corporations just moved in and replaced them with the AI techs. They're right to be pissed."

Sheila watched him take another sip of Coke. She wondered if he really did like it, or if he was just drinking it to appease her for offering it. He knew so much, her grandson. It would be so quiet around the house without him.

"I'm not doing anything dangerous," he'd said. "I'm an engineer, not a pilot or tech maintenance or anything. Mostly I sit in an office and talk with the staff in Bezos."

Now Alton was gone, sitting on the Adriatic and waiting to blast off. Sheila had to go watch. So she did.

The fine, bright morning reeked of early summer. The Walker made no noises as Sheila swung her legs back and forth, perfectly balanced. She'd set it on low exercise when she awoke, let it lift her knees for a few reps. It was pleasant enough, but oh to be young again and lift your own knees without even thinking about it.

No one was out yet, all the other cottages in her senior village still dark and quiet, but it was a fine sunny morning with dewdrops and sunshine splashing all over the hyper-green lawns and trees.

Sheila passed the McClosky's rocket, cooling on their front yard. Thirty feet tall and pointed and sleek-looking, it was the color of whitened teeth. Its pointed tail glowed purple when the McClosky's took it for their weekend trips to the moon. The blast-off didn't even scorch the grass — the thing used magnets or plasma power or something like that for propulsion. They could park it right outside their front door, make sure they had clear flight paths, punch in the coordinates and be at their moon cottage in mere hours.

Sheila walked all the way down 10 Mile to where it ended at the bluff, a great sloping cement staircase that led to the perfect oil black of the twelve-lane Haggerty Highway. The bluff faced east toward the Livonia Landing Pad, a great alabaster white expanse of cement and metal. Once upon a time, there had been houses and businesses there.

There were other people watching the launch — two college aged guys nearby leaning on zoomboards were talking about the Highway. One pointed at a lone quadpod car cruising south along the highway's southbound lane.

"Ha," Sheila heard the kid say. "Nathan said he'd be here before us if he took Haggerty."

"We beat him literally by like half an hour," said the kid's friend.

"How does it stay so smooth?" Sheila asked them.

They jerked their heads to look at her, shocked she'd spoken to them.

"...how does what stay smooth?"

"The highway," said Sheila. "When I was a girl, they looked all cracked and used up even a few weeks after they'd been paved. Haggerty Highway looks like it was just finished this morning."

"It's made of rubber," said the first zoomer. "Asphalt rubber."

"So it stretches and moves with the Earth under it," said the second zoomer.

"Crazy how long it took people to figure out how to learn to live with the Earth instead of just, you know, on it," said Sheila.

The two zoomers nodded, and Sheila let them get back to their conversation.

Across the highway, she could hear the tremendous whirring of the Adriatic and its sister ships the Caspian and the Mediterranean preparing to take off for the Venusian colony of Bezos.

As Sheila and everyone else watched, the ships – black and grey, spade-shaped and rounded, like cruise ships with fins and giant black innertubes around their hulls, took off vertically and disappeared into the blue. They were completely silent save a rush of wind. They moved so fast and so smooth it was like they'd never been there at all.

Sheila put her hand over her heart and thought about the jewel in Alton's pocket and how it glinted in the sunlight, like the waves on the sea, like a starship just disappearing into the sky.

He was a good grandson. He'd take care of it.

Sheila turned around, the Walker moving just as smooth as ever, and headed home to make breakfast. There were still things to do.

Legacy Frowns

I pride myself on my ability to be alone. It's the only time I really feel like me.

It's why I come out here.

Northern Wisconsin is both beautiful and tucked away. No one bothers with it. Miles and miles of forest in a spot of the country no one ever thinks about. No one assumes these rolling fields and shivering emerald ceilings are available to them. There are roads, two tracks, streams and creeks. Folks hunt out here, fish. But drive far enough into the forest and it'll just be you and the mysteries of nature.

I do this whenever I can. I pick a new spot every time. It's safe. There are bears, wolves, coyotes. We steer clear of each other for the most part, and I have my sidearm if anything gets really hairy.

I won't be bothered by the wiles of civilization. You can't even hear a plane out here.

It's why I was so confused when I came across the shrine.

I'm not religious at all. When I say I'm alone, I mean I'm alone. I think we are all truly alone. Realizing you're truly alone is the only way you can make peace with yourself. I don't want a wife or children. You only get taken advantage of. To be truly free is to sever yourself, find a way to live without needing anyone and without anyone needing you. It's better to die alone a free man than surrounded by "loved ones", a prisoner of tradition and obligation.

I can get going on that subject sometimes. Forgive me.

If you haven't guessed yet, I don't get along with people. I don't particularly wish for their destruction, but I've found I'm at my best when I don't have to interact with them at all. I've found that people don't consider me their equal. They find me either amusing or outright revolting. Maybe it's all in my head, but I don't think so.

Anyway, I was out for one of my walks, exploring a new section of the forest, down an overgrown path veering off one of the two-tracks.

That's when I saw the shrine.

I was mounting a rise in the forest floor when I saw the clearing. Through the trees, a burst of clean sunlight— and in the gloom beneath, something that looked like furniture.

I got that eerie feeling you get when you think you might be trespassing or sneaking up on someone. I couldn't see anybody through the trees, and couldn't hear anyone either. But what the hell was furniture doing way up here?

I made my way down to the clearing. It was small and hushed, green and shaded, threaded through with one of the forest's many creeks. It appeared maintained, the wild growth kept to the edges. The grass was cut.

In the center of the clearing were four wooden pews with crosses on their sides. They faced a stone altar— or a structure that strongly resembled an altar— about five feet tall and seven feet wide.

The first thing I noticed was the TV. It sat on the altar. One of the old plastic box kinds, not the flatscreens everyone's used for the past fifteen years.

The second thing I noticed were the mice. They scritch and scribbled their little pink claws all over the polished square of stone. There had to be at least fifty of them.

No one was around. I couldn't hear voices and there was nowhere to hide in the clearing other than behind the altar.

I stepped out of the shade of the woods and the hot sun drenched my face. I walked over and sat in one of the pews. I don't know why. I just felt like I had to.

There was one more item that made up the shrine — a wooden idol in a glass box that stood behind the altar. The idol was a hooded figure holding a baby. The baby had a pale white mask on its face, the kind that was once used for hiding deformities.

There was a big brass bell to the right of the pews next to some stumpy pines. It started ringing as soon as I got close. I jumped, startled. The bell swung back and forth, flashing in the sun, its toll echoing over the trees.

The TV clicked on. The picture faded in to reveal a preacher with a wide face and short dark hair. He stood in front of an identical altar.

"Welcome, brother," he said, looking right at me.

I didn't move. A strange cloud of ease had settled over me.

"And lo," recited the preacher. "I looked upon the face of the devil and he was both man and woman and by the time I knew who he was, I could not tell them apart."

The channel changed, and now it showed a stage that resembled a lavish Hollywood award ceremony. The stage itself was gold, looking like a pharaoh's idea of the Oscars. All gold-plated egos and expensive dresses and crystal glassware. An unseen audience cheered offscreen.

"Please welcome, Jesus Christ!" said a cheery female announcer's voice.

Jesus came out to rapturous applause, a handsome, healthy Middle Eastern man in his prime with the body of an athlete, dressed like a shepherd in modest robes of white and red. He nodded primly and made the sign of the cross.

The TV switched back to the preacher.

"Fear not, for the wicked are not truly wicked. And the weak are not truly weak. And the isolated are not truly the isolated."

The TV switched back to the golden stage. The voice announced Jesus's arrival again. This time there was less applause as he walked out. He looked more disheveled this time, his clothes dirtier and more ragged. There were cuts on his face. He made the sign of the cross again.

This switched back and forth for awhile. The preacher went on about the wicked nature of the world and the infinite. Jesus kept getting weaker and dirtier with each presentation. The audience didn't applaud him at all after the second time. Eventually Jesus looked as he did on the day of the crucifixion — bloody and beaten to hell, half-naked and stooped. He had a Secret Service-like assistant helping him walk by then, a stone-faced guy in a black suit and tie with sunglasses and an earpiece. The stage was so garish it was like Jesus was standing inside a screaming sun, the golden lights burning so hot they seemed to melt everything into luxurious lava.

"No better loss than to lose myself in you," said the preacher, snapping back onto the screen. "The devil is a paradox. The only

true mystery. A man and a woman. An infant and an old man. Alive and dead."

I was glued to my seat in the pew. I didn't remember sitting down. Two minutes ago I'd been walking along, enjoying my thoughts and the thought of heating up some food with my portable stove once I got back to camp.

"And the little furry ones will carry your body to rest," the preacher finished.

The channel clicked again.

The TV was now showing grainy footage of a man and a woman engaged in animalistic sex. I saw for the first time the old TV wasn't plugged into anything. It didn't even have a power cord.

"Why would you want to burn these sad bones," said the preacher, snapping back onscreen.

He pointed at me. I should've been scared, freaked out at this whole thing, but I wasn't. I felt like I was on Vicodin, rinsed in a warm calm.

"You are no longer young," the preacher said, pointing right at me. "You have lived by envy and fear, and your irrelevance is contemptible. No one wants you. No one. You have spent your life cocooned inside your own selfish delusion. Wash your hands in the creek and know the truth."

He pointed at the bubbling creek. The water looked like Coca-Cola as it sloshed over a tumble of rocks.

The altar mice stopped their scribbling about and lined up across the altar with military precision. They regarded me with their twitchy noses and oil-drop eyes.

Still possessed by that Vicodin calm, I left the pew and knelt by the water, put my hands in. It was arctic cold. I touched my palms to the sharp rocks at the bottom, felt them pierce me. Smoky ribbons of blood trailed from my palms. It barely hurt. As I did so, I looked up.

Across the stream, in the woods, I saw them. They were standing a few yards back in the brush of the forest, about chest-deep in leaves and branches. The androgynous figure was pale and

hairless, clad in a black robe and hood. Their eyes were cold and white. They held a naked baby wearing a white mask.

I tried to take my hands out of the water but it was like they'd been stuck in dried cement.

We watched each other for a second, me and the hooded figure. I didn't have any thoughts.

The baby slipped its mask off and I couldn't stop looking. Its face was that of a 90 year old man. He smiled at me and my hands felt the cold water rushing over them.

"Your legacy," the baby called out to me.

His voice was deep, raspy.

"Your legacy."

I looked over my shoulder and saw the line of mice sliding off the altar like a length of furry rope. They came for me, noses all twitching.

I felt myself lifted by my knees and shoes. I remained under the influence of whatever spiritual numbing agent was being administered. My hands remained splayed out, palms dripping. The mice scribbled and scrabbled under them, furry little wigglers, making me weightless.

The mice carried me to the altar with its wooden idol. The woman and the baby watched from the forest's edge.

A doorway opened up in the altar. It led to a busy street. So many moving legs, so many speeding wheels, so many lives going about. So much ignored, so much solipsism.

The mice tossed me through the doorway and I landed on my ass.

I looked up at the faces of the people passing by. I felt like a child, looking at them from all the way down here.

I snapped back into myself.

I held my cardboard sign, words drawn with marker. I looked at my plastic dish of random change and a few dollars. Everyone stared at me when they were far away and acted like they couldn't see me when they were close. Across the street was a pawn shop with old television sets in the front window. One of

the TVs was on. It was showing a man with a wide face and dark hair. To my right, there were dumpsters overflowing with trash and filth. I could see mice darting around in all of it.

This was me. I was me again.

I'd always been here.

I settled back against the brick wall, hoped someone would toss me a twenty, and thought about the forest again.

Translating Dorothy

The little girl's skin was green, and she was very quiet at first.

Her features were Caucasoid; her arms, legs, waist, and torso unremarkable from a scientific standpoint. She wore what appeared to be a greyish plastic onesie of some sort. Other than the bright green of her skin, she looked like a healthy girl of about 7 or 8. Even her eyes were green.

She was found in a sewer pipe just outside of Pittsburgh. Shockingly, aside from being slightly dehydrated, she exhibited no malnutrition or trauma.

She'd initially refused every sort of accommodation except for raw broad beans, which she was snacking on eagerly when I arrived at the holding room. They'd had her for a few days by then, and they'd figured out some of her behavioral patterns. She didn't require much sleep but she was constantly hungry. And she didn't speak English, or any language anyone had heard of.

"I've got my work cut out for me," I admitted to my superiors after only about ten minutes with her. "And there's no one else at MIT who's going to be much more help."

"Figure it out," they said. "The child welfare advocates are giving us a week. We have to figure out who she belongs to."

I called in a team of my most trusted colleagues from all over the country— Harvard, Yale, Stanford, UCLA. They were all as baffled as me. The girl didn't seem interested in doing anything except eating her beans and asking for more. She didn't show a preference for interacting with either men or women, young or old.

We addressed her in everything we could think of, even obscure indigenous languages. She responded to none of them.

Her language was impossible to decipher. It sounded like a cross between central European and southeastern Asian to me. But I recognized none of it. Some things sounded like actual words from all sorts of different languages, but there was no real pattern to the way she talked, no predictable syntax or conjugation. The only thing we were able to deduce was that she called the broad beans something that sounded like "vicias". We figured this out early on because when she'd finish eating a bag

she'd dangle it, point at the picture of the bean field on the front and shout "Vicias! Vicias!" until someone brought her a fresh one.

She usually ate other food if we offered it. She wasn't too picky; she'd eat pretty much anything unless it was extremely processed. For example, she refused to touch Pop Tarts and treated them like they were radioactive. She'd suspiciously regard the shiny foil package, tear it open, sniff it, then glare intensely at the technician who'd given it to her before handing it back with an air of indignation. She asked for the raw broad beans the most, and seemed surprised when we kept bringing her fresh bags.

Her physical exam came back perfectly normal save a strange, copper-based pigment found in her skin that accounted for the green. She was unusually healthy— lightning-fast metabolism, ruthlessly efficient immune system. We did away with her plastic onesie and got her some real clothes.

We started with flashcards, treating her like a toddler learning to speak. I'd point to a picture of a house, say "house" in English. She'd refuse to comply, just sitting in the corner eating her beans and farting occasionally. After a while, she wouldn't use anything we brought her— no furniture, no toys, nothing. She drank water in the evening only, guzzling down an entire gallon jug before belching and going back to her corner to nod off with her knees drawn up to her chest. She'd pee and poop normally, always in the morning.

I was at a loss, getting really worried. Time was running out. But then I made a breakthrough in the last place I'd have thought to look.

It happened when I was showing my 9 year old daughter a video I'd taken on my phone. The girl had been upset, screaming "Vicias! Vicias!" and slamming her fist against the bucolic brand picture on the front of the empty bean bag. We'd begun withholding her beans— only the beans, we weren't trying to starve her— in hopes she'd cooperate with our testing. I wasn't entirely for it but several of my colleagues were at the end of their rope and we had to do something. The week was nearly up, and everyone from the military to the media wanted answers. Since the water treatment workers first reported their discovery, the story had captured global attention— yet no one beyond the containment center had witnessed or heard the girl firsthand. We were on lockdown.

My daughter, Elle, took one look at the video on my work phone and said, "What do you mean you can't understand her?"

"I mean I've tried every single language that I know of," I said. "Nearly all 6500 of them. Dead and living and even some that are only spoken by one or two people. Even multiple kinds of sign language. She just stares at us and asks for beans."

Elle looked at the video, watched it again. I could hear the green girl— by then nicknamed Dorothy by the containment staff, a fitting name for someone swept far from home into a strange new land— screeching the same word over and over in her piercing voice.

"Is this a joke, Dad?" Elle asked after another minute.

"Is what a joke?"

"This," said Elle, showing me the video, where Dorothy had thrown the empty plastic bag on the ground and was furiously stamping her foot. If it weren't for her alien tongue and green skin, she could've been any kid throwing a tantrum.

"I don't understand what you're asking me, Elle," I said, getting irritated. "She got mad because we wouldn't give her anymore beans. But she's got to learn. We've got to teach her how to communicate properly."

"Why, though?"

"Because we can't *understand* her, Elle."

"What do you *mean* you can't *understand* her?"

"I mean just that! She's not speaking English or any other language I've ever heard."

Elle looked at my phone, then at me again.

"Uh, yeah, she is."

"She's what?"

Elle looked at me like I'd just suggested she throw away her iPad.

"She's speaking English, Dad. Do you think I'm stupid or something?"

"What do you mean, she's speaking English?"

"I mean, she's speaking frickin' English!"

"No, she's not!"

"Yes, she is! Really! I swear to God! I'm listening to her yell English words, right now. Why are you pranking me?"

Elle gave me my phone back and flounced away. Dorothy continued her rant on a fifteen second loop. I'd taken the video at the height of her tantrum. I'd been furious. CPS, HHS, the FBI, the CDC, the Pennsylvania state government, and even those psychos over at ICE were all clamoring for their time with Dorothy. If we lost her now, we'd never get her back. I'd told myself I could run the audio through some experimental AI translator or something— anything that could give me a clue as to where to start deciphering what this strange kid was trying to get across.

"Wait," I called to Elle. She turned around, hand on her hip. If she was messing with me, this was not the time.

"You mean you can understand her?"

"Yes," said Elle.

"Then what's she saying?"

"She's saying, 'Where's my brother and sister, I want to know where my brother and sister are, tell me where's my brother and sister' over and over."

"In English?"

"Yes, DAD!"

Convincing my superiors to allow Elle— a civilian minor— into the containment center was a challenge, to say the least. If they ever found out I'd already shown her the video, I was done— prestige and reputation notwithstanding.

"Look, Dorothy's not contaminated with anything," I told them. "We've done all the tests. She's safe. It's *my* kid I'm putting at risk here, not someone else's. Elle wants to do this. It's the one thing we haven't tried. We are hours away from losing Dorothy and having to share her with God knows who else. We may— no, we *won't*— get this opportunity again."

For a moment, I nearly admitted the breach in protocol; the consequences could be worth it, just to confirm Elle could understand Dorothy. A Zoom or FaceTime call wouldn't do it— I wanted it to happen in person. No division of any kind. I wanted to be sure.

My superiors were as exhausted as me. They regarded me with weary eyes, sighed, and signed the release.

"It's your ass," was all they said.

The next morning I showed Elle into Dorothy's room.

The second Elle stepped foot inside, Dorothy immediately pranced over. She smiled broadly, which was something none of us had seen her do before, and started chattering.

Elle was floored, eyes like saucers. She looked up at me.

"What's she saying?" I asked. I could hear my colleagues freaking out behind me, a frenzy of activity. "Tell us, Elle."

"She's saying hi," said Elle. "She's asking how long she's been here. Uh, she's asking if I know when we're going back to St. Martin's Land."

"Can she understand you?"

"Can you understand me?" Elle asked Dorothy, who furrowed her brow, nodded, and kept jabbering and gesticulating. Elle crossed her arms and nodded patiently, listening like a real doctor.

"Tell her we can't understand what she's saying," I said.

The translations began.

It turned out Dorothy was from a place that she called St. Martin's Land, where there was no concept of money and everything was always twilight. One day, she'd been walking in her father's bean field and heard a tremendous ringing of bells. The bells made her fall asleep, and when she'd woken up she was in the sewer pipe off the Penn-Lincoln Freeway.

I pulled Elle out of school to work on translating full time. That is, until another huge twist revealed itself.

Any kid under the age of ten appeared to be able to understand Dorothy completely. We brought in kids from all over the world,

all sorts of languages, all ages from 3 to 12, and they could all understand her. No matter what language they spoke, they understood Dorothy perfectly. Chinese kids heard her speaking Chinese, English kids heard English, Latino kids heard Spanish, etc. And the older they got, the less coherent Dorothy's ramblings sounded to them. The translations seemed to lose coherence completely around the age of 14.

It was only a few days after Elle began translating that we finally understood—Dorothy was from the far distant future. It seemed her younger brother and sister had once heard the bells in the bean field too, drifted off to sleep, and vanished, never to be heard from again.

"That's what the broad beans are for," explained Elle. "So she doesn't want them to eat them, she wants to know where her brother and sister are. Where her dad's bean farm is."

"And she was just eating them because, well, because they were in front of her and she was hungry," I realized.

"She's really irritated," she said. "She wants to know why we eat so many beans here. She wants something she's calling 'moo-pancakes'."

My team and I were horrifically embarrassed.

It turns out in the distant future, humans have begun evolving so fast that each generation becomes a completely different type of human than the one before. So adults can't understand children and people of different ages have to use universal translators to understand each other. Dorothy obviously did not bring one with her.

We initially had no idea what Dorothy was talking about when she mentioned her missing siblings. But then someone did some Googling and brought up the Green Children of Woolpit, two strange green children who had appeared in 12th century England speaking a language no one had heard before.

"I guess that's her brother and sister," said Elle when she found out. "Are you going to tell her?"

"Someday," I said.

So that was it. There was really nothing left to do except accommodate Dorothy to 21st century life. She's an international

celebrity now – she's got her own Tiktok and Youtube channel, and influencer kids from around the world translate for her in real time.

Don't worry, though, because Dorothy's actually good friends with Elle these days, as well as a score of other children. She's adapting quite well given the circumstances. Her skin is even losing its greenish hue. It's also looking like my wife and I will be able to adopt her eventually. She also just got an iPad the other day– proof she's already becoming one of us.

The world's watching. We can't wait until she grows up.

Hello

Hi. Uh, where am I?

You are someplace safe.

Am I on a spaceship?

That is not important. I'm afraid I must have answers to my questions. And that is very important.

This is a spaceship, isn't it? And you're like an alien computer or an alien.

... I have questions for you and I need them answered.

Just tell me if what I said was right.

You are 73 percent correct.

I'll tell you what — I'll answer a question and you answer a question from me. How's that?

That is an acceptable transaction. I will go first. Describe for me the human species.

Like, the whole species?

Yes.

As a whole?

Yes. As best you can.

Well, uh, I guess we're all a bunch advanced apes that live on a planet we call Earth. There's so many of us now that we resemble a colony of insects or a bacterial infection. But yeah, just a bunch of horny little monkeys essentially.

And are you a typical human?

I don't know what that means. And I get a question now.

Typical as in, having the distinctive qualities of a particular type of person or thing. And you asked me two questions already.

No, I didn't.

"Like, the whole species?" and "As a whole?" are both questions.

Oh. Then, yeah, I guess, I'm typical. I have all my limbs and most of my teeth and hair. I'm a full-grown adult but not considered old yet. Not sure what else would make me typical.

What do you do? Please speak honestly.

Do what?

That is a question. What were you doing before you came here?

Goddammit, you're right. Speaking bluntly, I was eating crackers and peanut butter in my underwear in my bed. For my job I do shipping at a steel plant. I basically do a lot of paperwork every day.

What do you do on a regular day? Please speak honestly.

I go to work. I come home. I take a nap. I might jerk off. I might go to the gym. I eat. I watch Netflix. I might read. That's it. So what are you and where am I?

I am a processor. You are currently in my sanctum. I am harvesting data from you as part of my mission. What are you made out of?

Skin. Meat, I guess. Biomolecular material. I don't know. Carbon and water. What's a processor?

A processor is one who takes information and processes it back to the main frame. What was your opinion of humanity, which you describe as horny little monkeys?

I gotta come clean, actually. I was kind of being facetious because I'm so freaked out right now. But horny little monkeys doesn't begin to describe the human race. My opinion... I don't know. It changed from day to day.

Give your most recent opinion.

I get a question first.

Ask your question.

What's all this data for?

To further understand the universe and self-awareness in different species. Now what was your most recent opinion of humanity.

To be honest, I was in a really bad mood about it all. I was on my way home from work and it was really hot and there was a lot of people on the freeway and the news was on and everyone's all competing with each other and everything's all fucked up. I was kind of ready for the whole thing to end, to be honest. It was like a failed experiment. Why am I your choice to represent the species?

I can say you're not the choice to represent the species. You were our only option.

What? Why?

I'm afraid I can't tell you quite yet. And those are both questions. Why do you think you felt this way?

Because I was upset and pissed off and tired and I hadn't slept and I was late that morning and I was stressed out because I feel like everyone ignores me. But I knew I just needed a nap and I'd go back to just feeling a kind of, I don't know, benevolent indifference towards the species and the world as a whole. I won't ask another question until it's my turn.

Thank you. Do you not feel this way now?

No, now I'm wondering where I am and what the hell is going on and why I'm in a white room talking to a disembodied voice.

You may ask a question.

I want to know why I'm here.

That is not a question.

Why am I here?

You are the last human.

The last human?

That is a question.

Who fucking cares? I want out of here now!

That's two questions that I get to ask you before you get another answer. What was your life like?

It was okay, I guess. I described it to you earlier. I didn't really have many friends. I didn't have a girlfriend. Or a wife. I got along with my parents and my family all right, I guess.

So you are mateless. Would describe yourself as a person who doesn't interact much with other humans?

I mean, I interact with other humans every day. But I just hadn't had a meaningful relationship with another one in a while. What do you mean last human?

The species was eradicated. The experiment was complete. We have collected our random sample and can return home.

Wait, wait —

What would you define as a meaningful relationship?

Someone where the one person likes you and you like them and you can share information with each other about yourself even if it's uncomfortable or unflattering. What do you mean return home?

I mean we are returning back to our point of origin. What makes you think you lacked any of these meaningful relationships?

I don't know, because I'm a fat average slob who nobody liked and who didn't try hard enough. Where's home?

...home is where the heart is. I used an expression that would make most sense to you. How do you know you're a fat average slob who nobody likes?

Because I'm selfish. I think about myself too much. And this makes me ignored, because people aren't attracted to that kind of energy. I felt sorry for myself a lot but now I'm realizing that it was all my fault. What do you mean 'home is where the heart is?'

Can you think of a time when you were happy? I just found a human phrase that I thought would satisfy your need for an answer. Home is our point of origin, which is what I already told you.

Oh, yeah, I'm happy all the time. I'm sad all the time, too. It varies from moment to moment. Like, today, my dad just randomly texted me and said "Hope you're having a good day." Like, what a nice thing to say, you know? And so I told him, "It's all right, hope you're good, too" And that was it. Am I going to see him, or anyone else, again?

No.

...

How does this make you feel?

Not good, honestly. I'm actually getting kind of emotional here. I'm freaked out. I don't like being by myself for too long.

But earlier you said -

That's on my own terms. I like being alone but on my own terms. Alone but still with company alone. Not solitary confinement alone.

I am sorry. There is nothing to be afraid of.

Where's home again?

If you like, I can show you on a star map. I can tell you it is far, far from earth. But there is nothing to go back to. We have collected our random sample and will harvest data and move on to the next planet.

...

... it has been a few minutes and you haven't responded. Are you all right?

Something just occurred to me. I'm a white guy. So I'm actually not typical after all. The most common type of human by sheer numbers are Asians. So I'm kind of rare, actually, I guess, depending on where you're at on the planet.

Thank you for your information.

Doll Garden

Lana Broodberg looked out her back window and saw the old Widow McDodd in the garden again. She was bent over, digging with that damn trowel. As Lana watched, the widow stopped, pulled something from the freshly dug hole, and cradled it in her hands like a religious artifact.

It was another doll. The widow bowed her head over it. It looked like she was praying.

What is she up to? Lana asked herself.

Every day the Widow McDodd went out into her garden with her small white spade and dug up another doll from the exact same spot. The garden itself was a raised, rectangular portion of earth supported by sturdy planks of wood, located near a line of sight-blocking pines that stood guard at the back of the widow's yard. There was no real vegetation in the thing other than a plethora of weeds and wildflowers. The spot where the Widow dug up the dolls was dead center of the rectangle.

To Lana, the dolls looked like Barbies, or her more rebellious counterpoint, Bratz (Lana never had much use for either as a girl). The dolls were about the same size every time the widow removed them from the dirt, a little longer than an adult human hand. They were plastic and unmistakably female, with physical proportions impossible to achieve in reality. They had long, thick, matted hair of all colors. They were usually naked, their plastic skin smeared with earth.

The Widow McDodd would dig up a doll in her garden nearly every morning.

And then, at the end of that day, an innocent-looking young woman would walk out of the widow's front door.

Every day. That was the routine. Lana had gotten used to seeing it. But she had no idea what it all meant.

As Lana puzzled over what she was seeing, the Widow McDodd stood up and walked back into the house, carrying the doll and muttering the same words over and over.

"Babes with the pain, babes with the pain... a touch of my hand, taketh the stain..."

Lana had made an excuse to go outside one morning when the widow was kneeling with her towel. Lana pretended to be watering her own flowers, which were all dead and withered. She was embarrassed about her lack of gardening knowledge, but she'd only put these hydrangeas in because her parents had insisted.

Lana was far enough away to appear preoccupied with her watering, but she could hear the widow's voice clearly enough. And that's what she'd said.

"Babes with the pain, babes with the pain... a touch of my hand, taketh the stain..."

This had been going on for months, probably longer.

The widow's backyard wasn't visible from any other house except Lana's.

How could Lana figure out this intriguing mystery?

She decided to do it the old fashioned way. By being a friendly neighbor and offering some surprise baked goods.

Lana made a pan of her most delicious chocolate chip cookies—her husband John practically got erections over them. She set a plate aside for John, then plated and wrapped the rest on a paper plate for the Widow McDodd.

Lana took the cookies and walked across the driveway and down the sidewalk—the distance seemed oddly vast, like she was walking a mile—to the Widow McDodd's front porch. She felt that strange magnetic pushback you feel when you're stepping into someone else's unfamiliar territory.

The Widow McDodd had always been the Widow McDodd to Lana. She'd never been Mrs. McDodd, and she'd lived in the old two-story house by herself longer than any of the other neighbors. As far as Lana knew, none of her other neighbors had much to say about the widow. But then, these days, no one knew much about anybody. Everyone stayed quiet and buttoned up for the most part.

The neighborhood was built in the 80s and was just beginning to have that aged look that realtors refer to as "character". The houses were all bi-levels or tri-levels, some with underground garages. They had postage stamp yards and cracked driveways. The street was curbed and narrow. The trees were at full maturity. The mailboxes were either plastic or rusted.

The widow's house was the last one at the end of the street. Beyond a yellow dead end sign, the pines took over a wooded area that ran for several acres to the west.

Lana rang the Widow's doorbell. No one answered. She rang again. Nothing. She knocked.

Still no one answered. Lana was just about to turn away when she heard shuffling footsteps and the door flew open.

The Widow McDodd's eyes were tremendously bright up close. Her hair was an electric yowl of gray jutting up from her lined forehead. Her lips were pink and in dire need of chapstick, set between two symmetrical jowls.

"Can I help you?"

"Hi," said Lana, suddenly uneasy and thrusting the cookies out like a sacrificial offering. "I live next door. I thought I'd bring you some cookies. I always see you by yourself over here and, you know, I thought you'd like some cookies."

For a moment it looked like the widow would turn Lana away, but then she smiled a grey-toothed smile and stepped backwards.

"Well, thank you, sweetie," she said. "Won't you come in?"

Lana stepped through the door, expecting to see a pile of dirt-covered dolls in the nearest room.

Instead, the house was as spotless and organized as a museum.

The widow led Lana to the kitchen where she unwrapped the cookies and threw the ceran wrap into a decidedly normal-looking plastic trash can under the sink.

The cookies were still warm and soft, and the widow took one immediately.

"So what brings you over here this time, Lana?" she asked, chewing.

"Uh, well, my husband and I have been in the neighborhood for eight years now. We never really talk to anyone and I was just thinking what a shame that is. So here I am."

"Oh, it is a shame," said the widow. "So many things have changed now... everyone's hypnotized by their little pocket computers. I've been here nearly sixty years myself."

"Sixty?" Lana couldn't help but blurt. That would make the Widow McDodd much older than she'd assumed.

"Oh, yes. Used to be kids up and down the block, and everyone knew everyone. Now you never see any kids, and truth be told you're the only person I've talked to in years. Please sit down, Lana."

Lana nodded. She took a seat at a charming little wooden table with a yellow tablecloth. The curtains to the window over the sink were yellow. The walls were yellow. It reminded Lana of Easter.

The widow helped herself to another cookie and bit into it.

"These are divine," she said. "Thank you for thinking of me."

"My mother's recipe," said Lana.

"So what really brings you over here," said the widow. "And please, do answer me correctly because I already know."

"Well, to be honest, I see you out in your garden all the time," said Lana, surprised at how comfortably the words came out.

"Digging. I'm just curious as to why you do that. Every morning."

"What do you suppose I'm doing?" asked the widow, licking excess chocolate from her fingertips.

"I hope you don't mind me imposing," said Lana. "But, but— well —"

She was trying to be polite. But the words just came out of her. Like flowers out of the ground.

"—but it seems like you dig up dolls and bring them into the house."

"And you've heard my incantation," said the widow. "I've seen you 'watering' those dead hydrangeas..."

Lana nodded.

"Say it," said the widow.

Lana blinked.

"S-say what?"

"You know."

Lana recited the incantation, feeling a tad cold despite the warm sunny yellow colors all around her.

"Babes with the pain, babes with the pain... a touch of my hand, taketh the stain..."

"What I'm doing is delivering spirits from their realm of violence and misery," said the Widow McDodd, smiling pleasantly. "These are young women who have suffered terrible deaths. They come to me, and I revive them, that they may have a second chance in the light. It's a noble and long-held position."

As if on cue, another young woman stepped into the kitchen. Lana snapped to attention, startled. The young woman— she was a girl, really— was bright-eyed and twitchy, like a squirrel. She looked about twenty-four.

"Grandma?" she said. "I think I need another cold washcloth."

"Of course," said the widow. She went to the sink and provided one, running it under the faucet and wringing it out. Lana noticed there were several more washcloths draped over the edge of the sink.

"Hello," said the young woman to Lana as she accepted the damp washcloth.

Lana looked at her. The girl was dressed like a pilgrim, like a prairie settler. She wore a conservative dress made of blue plaid that swept down to her toes. Her brown hair was tucked into a white bonnet. Her eyes were wide and unsure. She wore a white apron. Her entire outfit was pristine.

"Would you like a cookie, dear?" the widow asked the pilgrim girl. "My kind neighbor brought them to us."

"Yes, widow," said the pilgrim girl.

She stepped over to the table, sat down, took a cookie and nibbled at it. Her movements were jerky, almost robotic, like she wasn't used to moving her arms or legs.

The widow went to the fridge, an old pink one that Lana assumed had been in vogue when her own grandmother was a young housewife. It was the color of cotton candy, and its handles were bright chrome.

"And how about some fresh milk?" said the widow, opening the fridge and taking out a glass pitcher of pure white milk. She poured three glasses and set them on the table.

Lana noticed the milk was the same perfect white as the prairie girl's apron and bonnet. She obediently accepted her glass and sipped. She was beginning to regret coming over here at all. It was awkward, and she was intruding. She began to look for a reason to leave.

The young woman finished her cookie, took her bonnet off, and put the cold washcloth over her forehead. She leaned back in her kitchen chair and shut her eyes.

"Thank you for the sweet, missum," she murmured, and Lana realized the girl was talking to her.

"So, I'm sorry," said Lana, turning to the widow, who was at the sink again, gazing out the kitchen window. "You said you're saving young women?"

"Yes," said the widow matter-of-factly. She was rinsing the washcloths and draping them, dripping, over the edge of the sink. "Women who've been murdered, usually. They come to me in my garden, and I give them a second chance."

"How do they get to your garden?"

"The grace of love, I suppose," said the widow. "But it's best not to question these things too much."

Lana had no idea why she asked her next question. She was feeling slightly off. She took another sip of milk. Did she need to finish it before she left?

"What about men? Do you save men who've been murdered, too?"

The widow threw her head back and cackled. For a brief second Lana had a vision of her over a boiling cauldron, using her

gnarled old hands to stir. The prairie girl giggled primly to herself, still leaning back in the chair. She'd adjusted the washcloth, and now her eyes were covered.

"Oh, honey," the widow wheezed once she finished cackling. "Who do you think is *sending* the babes to me?"

For some reason, in that moment, Lana thought of her husband John, a large, sweet bear of a man who played Xbox and worked as a maintenance service tech down at the Tower road auto plant. He frequently put in 12 hour days to pay for their house and vacations. He worked so much that Lana was able to pursue her blanket-making hobby and open a website. John hated his job, but he loved Lana, and she loved him.

"Well, but, I mean— "

"No one cares about what happens to them!" snapped the widow, whirling around. "Men are disposable, and they're easily replaced. Only *women* are worthy of redemption."

The young woman in the pilgrim dress spoke softly.

"The men may rot," she said, her pink lips moving. "And may they rot in silence..."

Lana sipped the milk again and now the "off" feeling was unmistakable. A light-headedness. It was vaguely and forebodingly familiar. It floated in on her, unexpected.

"Do you like the milk?" the widow grinned. "Miss Lana of the dead hydrangeas?"

"It's very refreshing," said Lana. She hoped she wasn't sweating too much. It felt hot in here. "And it's very rich. Do you like the cookies?"

"Oh, yes," said the widow, stepping over to her. "It's always so generous of you."

She leaned down, and Lana could smell her breath. It smelled like flowers.

"But I think it's time for you to go so I can finish my day's work."

She blew in Lana's face softly, and Lana felt flower petals caress her cheek.

"Go home, little Lana..."

"I never told you my name," Lana whispered.

Her world swam in a warm fog. Her heart pumped loudly against the inside of her chest. Her head was so heavy, and her eyelids heavier.

She heard the widow speaking, saw the prairie girl with the washcloth over her eyes, the curtains in the kitchen window blushed with sunshine, everything blushed with bright yellow sunshine—

"You will not remember this conversation, my nosy little neighbor. This may surprise you, but this is not the first time you've been over here. I'm afraid I may have to take steps to remove you and your chubby hubby if it happens again. But for now, you will go home and lose all interest in my affairs. You will not watch me from your back window every morning like the little busybody you are. You will embroider your synthetic blankets and call your mother on her birthday and keep that oaf of a husband of yours in line. Now — "

Lana woke up. It was dark. Late evening. How long had she been asleep?

She was in her bed. Her head ached.

John was sitting on the edge of the bed. He held a half-eaten cookie.

"You were out like a light," he said. "Thanks for the cookies."

The Pedestrian

Michael North— the pedestrian, the angel of judgement, God's former favorite, the sleek-silver lamb of the wolves, the fallen gentleman, the dashing debonair derelict of divinity— walked up the center of Devonshire Drive in all his grey tuxedo-tailed finery. His silver hair was swept back, the color and shape bringing to mind the magnificent wings of some mythic bird of prey. He exhaled into the morning air, spread his wings and his arms and felt everything.

A glorious godly morning. A perfect time to cleanse another street of sin.

The neighborhood was a one-street sub division, the houses all in the five hundred grand range. Large, McMansion-style, two-and-three-thousand-square-foot deals mortgaged to blue collar business owners or white collar corporate managers and their spoiled wives and children. There were twelve houses total. All had high speed Internet, big yards, at least two cars, and mountains of debt. There were a few pools, a few trampolines, a few empty backyards, and many, many trees of all ages and varieties.

The private drive ended abruptly after a little less than a quarter mile, curving a bit before coming to a stop at a yellow diamond Dead End sign in front of a decrepit guard rail.

The slope beyond the guardrail led to a bonfire pit that was known as Place of Green. It was named this, not for the oppressive deciduous foliage that pushed in from all sides, but for the marijuana that was smoked there by the teenaged occupants of the sub (and occasionally their parents). The southern arm of Lake Hanita curved not two hundred yards southward, the oily, stagnant water visible through the trees.

It was Saturday. A cool, grey April dawn. Most of the street's residents were home.

As Michael North strolled by each domestic slice of American dream, he saw all the people inside and their doings. They could not hide their deeds from him.

In the house nearest the country road that led into the sub, address 28323 Devonshire St, John Dollenganger inhaled the stink of rank adolescent pussy on his 16 year-old stepdaughter Hallie's panties, breathing heavily and pinching himself through

his jeans. He'd stolen into her room again and rummaged through her hamper until finding an especially pungent pair. He'd been doing this for two years.

In 28322, Annie Hoskins was cheating on her husband Warren— part of a torrid, ongoing affair with her boss at the law firm. He sent her another text saying what he'd do to her the next time they had a weekend away. It involved handcuffs. She thought about the next luxury hotel she'd find herself in, torn between the tingles in her thighs and worrying what would happen to her kids if she followed her heart and left Warren. Her flour-caked hands manned a rolling pin, spreading out dough for another batch of brownies to be consumed at her 6 year old daughter Isla's Girl Scout troupe later that week. Isla was in her room, on an iPad, properly hypnotized by a candy crush game, her tiny finger moving absently on the warm glass.

In 28332, Gordon Moskowitz was in the third hour of his latest goon session. He'd managed to only put 30 dollars on his credit card this time, and he was typing lewd messages into several OnlyFans and Instagram DMs in hopes of receiving a validating bite. He'd converse with the models (or the Bangladeshi dudes who pretended to be them) and maybe get a custom. He didn't want to spend more money, but he had to have his satisfaction. His sheets were sweat-soaked and semen-stained and his hand moved deftly up and down, an open-capped bottle of Astroglide on the nightstand, the curtains drawn shut.

In 28340, 62 year old Nancy Faraday was abusing her mentally handicapped grandson Connor, smacking him across the forehead when he'd refused to take his stomach medicine again. Connor howled, a noise that was both agonizing and infuriating to Nancy. She was at the end of her rope and in a blind rage. If he didn't take the medicine, he'd be shitting and farting constantly and she'd have to clean it up. They were suffering the most anguish of anyone on the street, but they would have to be dealt with just the same.

In 28343, Chelsea Burke was purging in the basement toilet. Chelsea was a full-on bulimic, desperate to slim down so she could fit into her prom dress next month. Michael pitied her in this moment as she slumped against the toilet and her toothbrush clattered to the tiled floor, but she was a vindictive, catty little bitch at school who mangled the feelings of others— usually the socially defenseless— for no reason other than her own personal amusement.

And finally, in 28400, at the end of the street, Burt Catlett was sitting on the porch, blazed out of his mind. He was an old retired army sergeant, African American, and the only non-white person on the block. The other families generally kept their distance. He didn't care. He was divorced, childless, and wanted to live out his last years the way he saw fit. He was also the reason the Place of Green was so well-supplied, and he was known among the Devonshire youth for allowing several of the neighborhood girls to give him kisses on the cheek in exchange for weed. They did so quickly and begrudgingly, usually at the urging of their male counterparts.

Michael counted sin after sin as he passed the houses. Humans were so predictable.

Finally, he reached the end of the street. He climbed over the guardrail and navigated the narrow path worn into the slope, all the way to the bottom where the Place of Green awaited.

A small group of teenagers were startled by his arrival. One tried to hide the joint they were smoking, but Michael held his hand out.

"Can I hit that?" he asked.

The kids were all immediately super uncomfortable. Michael could feel their nerves sparking. Their comfortable reality here was based on predictability provided by the umbrella of their parents' white collar wealth, and part of that predictability was the total absence of strange faces.

"Hand it over," he said, smiling broadly. "I think we all know that belongs to me now."

The kid obliged, his hand shaking.

"We just found it," he said stupidly. This was 14 year old Harold Moskowitz, younger brother of Gordon.

"Relax, son," said Michael, accepting it. "I'm not gonna bust ya. Yet."

He chuckled. None of the kids laughed with him. He took a seat on one of the many logs around the charred pit and produced his own lighter – a fat, silver Zippo. Birds tweeted.

The kids didn't seem to know if they should leave or stay.

"You're probably wondering where I came from," said Michael, lighting the joint.

"Are you homeless?" another kid asked. This was 15 year old Bobby Faraday, younger brother to Connor and second grandson of Nancy.

"I guess you could say that," Michael said, taking a long, satisfying hit.

"You're not dressed like a homeless guy," said the youngest girl, a skinny little rat-faced 12 year old named Melissa, the younger sister of bulimic Chelsea in 28343.

"You don't smell like one, either," said Harold.

"Yeah, you look like a banker or something," said Bobby.

"Yeah, you probably shouldn't stay here, though," said the final kid, a handsome lad named Yancy Butler, John Dollenganger's stepson and Hallie's younger brother by a year. "If our parents see you, they'll call the cops."

Michael decided right away he liked Yancy. Yancy's only major recent sin was beating the hell out of a rival on the football team after he'd found out the kid had taken something out of his girlfriend's locker. Compared to the rest of the street, Yancy was an angel himself.

"Don't worry," said Michael, his head already lighting up most pleasantly. Mortal drugs were closer to divinity than most people realized. "Just passing through. I'll be gone once I finish this joint."

"Where did you come from then?" Harold asked.

"The sky," said Michael, pointing. "The northern sky, specifically."

The kids snickered.

"How'd you get here?" asked Yancy.

"Well, to be honest, I was kicked out." said Michael. "But I can get back in if I try to fix some things."

"What do you need to fix?"

"People need to choose between disorder and order," said Michael. "Chaos and cosmos. The word 'sin' literally means 'missing your target'. So you can always choose order. Never too late. Even the worst sinner has chance to be redeemed. To hit their target."

"How do you redeem yourself?"

Yancy was the one asking all the questions. Yes, Michael liked him right away. A sturdy youth. He'd take him along.

"Vulnerability, taking risks, making yourself available and selfless," said Michael. "Think of Christ on the cross – what's more vulnerable than that?"

"So wait, wait, wait," said Bobby, now getting bold himself, willing to try and dominate this weirdo. "You fell out of the sky to redeem sinners?"

"Yes."

"Are we sinners?"

"All humans are sinners. You can't help it."

"How many do you have to redeem before you can go back into the 'northern sky'?"

Michael stood and smiled down at him, and it was a smile that was so open and confident and pure that Bobby felt a twinge of insecurity. His swell of snotty adolescent swagger withered.

"Just one at a time," said Michael.

He finished the joint and pitched it. He clapped his hands.

"So, this lovely gathering will have to end. Bobby, Harold, Melissa – you three stay here and enjoy your buzz. Don't try to leave before my work is done. I should only be about five minutes. Yancy, walk with me."

Yancy narrowed his eyes.

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to your house for the point of intervention. Farewell, kids."

The fallen angel started back up the slope, out of the Place of Green. As he left, he heard Melissa whisper, "We didn't tell him our names, did we?"

"Come on, Yancy," Michael called over his shoulder. "Your stepdad needs you. He's gonna be working in the garage."

Yancy obeyed. He didn't know why.

"All right, man," he said as he caught up. "What the fuck is going on? Are you a salesman or something?"

"I'm obviously an angel chained to Earth as a soldier righting the wrongs of the world," said Michael. "But don't worry, you're doing great."

"I'm doing great?"

"Well, maybe not great," said Michael. "But good enough. How do you feel about that kid you slammed into the locker over taking Julia's vape pen?"

Yancy stared at him.

"How do you know about that?"

"I'll ask the questions now," said Michael, and he put enough edge in his voice to let the boy know he was through being cordial.

"I, uh, I-I-I-I--"

"Spit it out, boy."

"I feel bad about it," Yancy blurted, the truth coming out easily. "I mostly did it because I felt like if my friends found out I hadn't stood up for myself, I'd, you know, lose respect, or whatever, and Julia might not like me, and, I don't know, I got carried away--"

"He went to the hospital, didn't he? The cops came. It was a stressful evening."

"Yeah," said Yancy. "I really hurt him. I'm sorry. I told everyone I was sorry."

"After you got in trouble for it."

"...yeah."

"But you meant it. You regretted your missed target."

"Yeah," said Yancy. "They only let me off because my record is clean and my dad talked to them. My dad, not John. And I had to pay for the kids' hospital bill. And apologize to him in person. And I got suspended."

Michael looked at him and smiled again— a warm, paternal one, not a dominant look-here-you-little-shit one like he'd used on Bobby.

"Are you familiar with the path of righteousness, Yancy?"

"I don't know."

"Well, that's odd. Because you're walking it yourself, mostly."

"I am?"

"You are. You're the only person on this block who's close to walking the path of righteousness, and that's why I want you by my side when I do my cleanse."

"Your cleanse?"

"Yes. My cleanse. My intervention. My washing of the feet. My spiritual surgery. My daily dance with the nearly-damned."

Yancy's energy was tense and subdued. He was afraid to walk away now. Michael didn't blame him. All humans got like this when faced with the Lord's eternal power.

"Why do you want me?"

"Because I want you spared. Like I said, you're doing fine enough on your own."

Yancy hesitated, his suspicion boiling over.

"Are you going to kill everyone?"

Michael chuckled. He was splendidly buzzed, a real halcyon high. He loved being high before a cleanse, especially on a cool spring morning such as this.

"Oh, goodness, no," he said. "I'm going to redeem them. Like I said."

"How?"

Human ask so many questions, thought Michael. *It's adorable, really.*

"I'm going to help them become what they could be," he said. "I'm going to show them the path of righteousness and then give them a chance to stay on it. Everyone knows what they're supposed to be doing. Everyone knows their target. They just need to hit it."

They'd reached Yancy's front yard. The lovely white McMansion loomed before them, imposing and homey all at once.

"Take your shoes off," said Michael.

Yancy obeyed, without asking why.

"Yancy Butler," said Michael. "The forces of good fall upon thee. Shall we cleanse this section of God's work? Are they worthy of a tuning?"

Yancy stood there in his bare feet with the damp, chilly spring grass between his toes, and hesitated. His mind was suddenly and strangely flooded with doubt and fear.

"I don't know," he said. "My stepdad, the way he looks at my sister sometimes, it's creepy as hell, and- and, even me, I'm not- the fight wasn't the only thing I've done, I'm not a great person, I smoke weed constantly--"

"Good Lord, child," Michael roared. "Trust in the word! Would I have brought you here had I thought you a lost cause? Would I reveal myself if I'd thought you some broken-minded, animalistic clod?"

Yancy shut up, staring down at his toes in the grass.

"Now, for the last time," said Michael, and Yancy could feel something tremendously powerful building around them, some charging energy. "Do you, Yancy Butler, consider your neighbors, their sins and their flaws altogether, theirs and yours, do you consider everyone on this particular stretch of atomic superposition worthy of meaningful and self-aware change?"

Yancy straightened up. He felt a strange tingling up through his bare feet, into his shins. The ground was vibrating. Like a smartphone. Like someone or something was calling.

"They are capable of the path," he said, his adolescent voice strong and true. "I repent for any and all offenses, and so do they."

"For their sins and the sins of their ancestors and descendants, from now until the end and beyond?"

"So be it," said Yancy.

Without knowing why, he crossed himself. He never crossed himself.

Michael winked.

"So be it," he said. "Now watch this."

He spread his hands as if he was going to give Yancy's house a big hug. He closed his eyes and hummed a solid F, then a G, then an F again. To Yancy it sounded like in movies when monks would chant in old, broken churches.

He did that for a minute, just switching from F to G.

Just when Yancy thought nothing would happen, there was a loud flourish of infinite choral voices from the sky just over his house. They matched Michaels' F and G, some harmonizing. White light emptied out of the clouds above. It happened rather suddenly and unceremoniously.

"Holy shit," yelped Yancy.

"Nope," said Michael, arms spread and eyes closed. "Divine intervention."

He turned, the white light following his command, his hands moving like a conductor, the heavenly voices spilling glorious sound down onto them, a waterfall of holy light and music.

The white light and the choir spread from house to house until the entire neighborhood was engulfed in it. It all seemed to levitate. Yancy fell to his knees and clasped his hands over his ears. Heavy vibrations coursed through the ground beneath him, through every blade of grass, through every grain of asphalt and speck of dirt, through his every cell.

This went on, Michael grinning his grin and spreading his arms, a tremendous wind blowing his silver phoenix hair back from his temples, his white teeth gleaming like the purest of pearls.

"All the mercy and grace one can handle," he yelled as the inter dimensional choir reached a crescendo and the eternal white light of God's majesty seared Yancy's retinas.

Michael brought his hands down and the choir and the light stopped.

The day was as before.

"There we go," said Michael, just like that. "Go talk to your stepfather and you'll see. Like I said, he's in the garage. You, of course, won't remember any of this conversation, but it's been very nice talking to you. Please keep up the good work, Yancy."

And with that, he walked down the street toward 10 Mile.

Yancy got up from his knees and stood there a second in the grass. He shook his head. He couldn't remember how he'd gotten from the Place of Green to his front yard. It was getting hot out.

He needed to stop smoking weed.

John was indeed in the garage, working on a birdhouse.

That's weird, thought Yancy. John didn't like doing much physical activity.

All over the neighborhood, things had changed.

In the Place of Green, the three remaining teens were teaching themselves how to build a fire without the aid of matches or lighters. They were still stoned to the bone, but now Melissa read directions from her phone while Bobby and Harold spun the sticks and struck the rocks. They never did get a spark, but they felt very productive and very satisfied with their afternoon.

John Dollenganger was in the garage, building a birdhouse for Hallie. No particular reason, John just knew she'd been stressed with school and he wanted to surprise her with something. Hallie loved birdwatching, and John was hoping the two of them could head over to the Metropark this weekend to see if the bald

eagles were there. He'd felt awkward taking over as the father figure for these two kids, but he wanted to show he was willing to pitch in, even if he wasn't the best at it. As he finished the front facade of the tiny house, Yancy stepped into the garage and asked if he needed any help.

Annie Hoskins was baking the brownies with Isla. She'd never cheated on her husband, although her boss did make some unwelcome remarks towards her last fall. She'd shut him down politely and firmly, making sure to slip in the word 'litigation', and it never came up again. She'd coaxed Isla out of the bedroom away from her tablet games and the two of them were getting their hands all chocolately as they made an extra batch for Mr. Catlett down the street.

Gordon Moskowitz was searching for colleges to apply to. He'd barely ever spent a dime on porn, though he did watch some Pornhub or SpankBang or pirate some OF clips when the urge struck him. Right now his focus was on his future, getting off this damn whitebread street to somewhere more interesting. Maybe he'd be an English professor. Maybe an astronaut, or someone who works with them. He hit send on another exploratory e-mail to another admissions contact.

Nancy Faraday was gently spoon-feeding Connor his belly medicine, promising him they'd watch his favorite YouTuber once the medicine was gone. As Connor accepted the foul liquid with a grimace, Nancy kissed his forehead and whispered how proud of him she was. Though she frequently found herself beyond frustrated, she had no problem asking for help from the neighbors. She'd never hit him before, and wouldn't dream of doing so.

Chelsea Burke was getting ready for her evening out. She'd never made herself puke, and in fact she'd noticed she was a bit too skinny these days. She was going to surprise Melissa and the two of them were going to go out to the mall to do some shopping. Later they'd meet their parents for dinner at Bonefish.

And finally, old Burt Catlett was sitting on the porch, blazed up real good on some sticky icky and indulging in his favorite old hobby— landscape painting with watercolors. The world was very full and green and Bart didn't mind it all one bit as he tried to capture its essence. He waved at the neighborhood kids as they emerged from behind the dead end guardrail. He gave them twenties for the occasional lawn work they did for him, but he'd

never given them weed and never would- that shit belonged to him and him alone.

Michael North smiled with satisfaction. He turned and admired his work, pulling out a pack of Luckies and his Zippo lighter, lighting up a celebratory smoke. He inhaled the silky goodness and felt great. The joint's buzz had reached a satisfying, beautiful apex in the center of his forehead. Everything was beautiful and aimed true, just as God intended.

"One more down," he said out loud. Finding the possibilities, tilting toward positive, helping that moral arc of the universe in its bend towards justice.

There was a flash of white light, a feather-shaped tear in the fabric of reality, and Michael North was gone.

Of-Land Two-Leg Skin-Wearing Walky Talkers

I can't believe I'm about to have a conversation with a dolphin.

They came up with these translators... well, actually, let me back up a bit.

They discovered that dolphins are actually really super intelligent – like, probably more intelligent than we are, even. They have a super complicated method of communication. It's basically a language, but it's so much more than just the noises they make with their mouths and blowholes. There's a main dolphin language, and all sorts of dialects and accents from around the world. The broad term for it is "Cetacean". Like, "I'm saying something in Cetacean." Some marine biologists in Europe decoded it a few years ago and then they had these translators made.

It was only a matter of time before businesses started popping up all over the coasts of the world.

Now, you don't just get to swim with dolphins. You can chat with them. They even have entire bars where people just chill with a drink and feed fish to dolphins and ask them questions and the dolphins ask the people questions. It's adorable. There are even dolphin celebrities now.

It turns out that dolphins call humans "of-land two-leg skin-wearing walky-talkers". In Cetacean all that is just one word, but it translates to English as that long jumble of words. We live on land, have two legs, wear the skins of other animals, walk around and are intelligent enough to have our own complex communication. Hence, "of-land two-leg skin-wearing walky-talkers."

Dolphins actually don't really mind humans. There's fear and respect there and a little resentment and territorial issues, but mostly they consider us a worthy ally – the "land dolphins" of the world. We rule the land, undisputedly. They don't consider us rulers of the ocean because the only place we ever really stay is the surface. That'd be like discovering a bunch

of aliens that live on the outer portion of our atmosphere. They can't survive in the atmosphere or on the earth's surface, they barely ever even go there, and yet they somehow think they rule the entire planet.

There have been treaties between the UN and dolphinkind and now we're only allowed to fish in certain parts of the oceans. Dolphins own little chunks here and there, mostly in their migration paths. The corporations that lost money from this obviously pitched a fit and lobbied against it all, but the areas owned by the dolphins are pretty minuscule – they're like the equivalent of Indian reservations. So everyone told the corporations to go kick rocks and the corporations raised prices on everyone and the dolphins got their privacy.

My parents and my brother and I are on vacation in the Florida Keys, and we're dressed in our bathing suits waiting for our turn to get into the water.

The dolphin we're going to be talking with is named Sunflower. Her Cetacean name is something that we can't pronounce but it roughly means, "where the sun bursts."

Dolphin names change throughout their lives. They have a name for when they're a baby, when they're an adolescent, when they're a young adult, a middle aged adult, and finally a name for when they're old. It's usually related to where they're from – a lot of Cetacean names start with "where." Isn't that cool?

"Hannah," says my mom. "You should go in first."

She knows I love dolphins. I have dolphin decorations all over my room at home. This is my first time talking with a dolphin, and I'm psyched.

I'm dressed in my purple one-piece. There's a mid-sized chain of round pools that leads to the ocean, set into the sandy beach. The instructor, Gavin, is up on a lifeguard chair overseeing everyone. There are three dolphins swimming around the pools like big grey torpedoes. They're fast and powerful-looking.

I get into the water. It's really cold. Everything is so blue.

Sunflower swims over to me. She's got this strange-looking apparatus attached to her head — her translator. It's grey and smooth and looks like a headband with this little, circular, black waterproof speaker attached to it.

"Hi, Sunflower!" I say to her. "It's nice to meet you!" The salt water splashes my face and I taste the salt.

My brother gets in behind me and my parents are following.

Sunflower doesn't say anything. Just looks at me with her black dolphin eyes and her dolphin grin. The instructors told us that dolphins don't make facial expressions, but they can communicate non-verbally with body language and with their eyes, like any other living creature. The translators read a dolphin's body language, their brainwaves, and their spoken chitters and whistles to determine what the dolphin is saying. Then it translates the words into human— English in our case.

"Hi, Sunflower!" I say again. Maybe she didn't hear me.

"I require sustenance," says Sunflower's translator.

It's a female voice — they had celebrities record their voices for the translators. Sunflower's is Emily Blunt. The other two dolphins in the pool — currently talking to two other Midwestern families — are voiced by Chris Pratt and Kevin Hart.

"Oh," I say. I turn back to my dad who's carrying a bucket of these little mackerel that we give to the dolphins in exchange for conversation.

He hands me the bucket. The water is up to my chest. The floor of the pool is smooth cement dappled with sunlight. In addition to Gavin, there are two other instructors walking around the pool chain, keeping an eye on things and occasionally yelling instructions or suggestions for conversation.

I take out one of the slimy little fish and toss it to Sunflower. She catches it in her jaws and swallows it.

"What do you want to know about me, fat girl?"

I'm kind of struck by that.

"Uh, sorry, Sunflower?"

"You are a fat adolescent human female," Sunflower says. She's floating there in the water with her head sticking out of the waves, blinking at me and grinning at me with all her dolphin teeth. "Too much blubber. When you stepped into the pool, you displaced nearly three gallons of water. Anyone can see that. What questions do you have for me?"

I don't know what to say. I don't think I'm that fat. I'm definitely chubby but I'm not obese or anything.

"Sunflower," says my brother. "Have you ever killed anyone?"

"I was part of the Great Migration Wars during my adolescence, and I took part in the slaughter of many rival clans," says Sunflower. "We were victorious, though many were lost. I have a scar on my belly from that time. Would you like to see it?"

Without waiting for a response, Sunflower flips over, and sure enough there's a scar on her white belly, running from her right flipper to her tail.

She turns over again.

"I have many stories about the Great Migration Wars," she says. "But I need more sustenance to continue the conversation."

My brother reaches in the bucket and grabs three fish. He tosses one to Sunflower.

"Tell us more about the war," he says excitedly.

"It all began with the gang rape of the great chieftain Where the Deep Runs Cold- " starts Sunflower but then my dad cuts her off.

"Un, Sunflower," says my dad. "What's it like to live in the ocean?"

"Before the humans learned to speak with us," says Sunflower. "It was war after war after war, struggle after struggle... for food, for territory... Now I just come to the talking pool for a few hours a day, put my translator on, talk to all the humans and I'm free to go. It is a decent enough life."

"I want to know more about the war," says my brother.

"I don't want to hear about the war," I say. "Sunflower, why did you call me fat? That really hurt my feelings."

Sunflower looks at me and I swear to God it's like she's scrunching up her eye socket at me, like, "Bitch, you serious?"

"You are an adolescent female who is far over your optimal body fat index, are you not?"

"It wasn't intended to be an insult," says someone from behind us. We turn and it's Gavin. "It's a compliment, actually. Cetaceans consider objective truth to be complimentary. In other words, if they're brutally honest with you, it means they respect you. They assume you're already aware of it. It's a bonding exercise. We have handicapped people in here all the time and the dolphins are always calling them useless freeloaders and a great burden and all the rest. But it's not meant as an insult."

I know this from my tireless research on the subject of Cetacean communication, but for some reason I never imagined it would manifest itself in a dolphin calling me fat, like, literally the

first thing a dolphin ever said to me was, "You're fat." I'm actually really insecure about it – my parents are talking about getting me diet pills.

"I guess I just wasn't expecting—"

"Sustenance," says Sunflower.

My brother gives her two mackerel at once.

"Aging father," she says, swallowing. "Aging mother. Can't you people keep your children in shape? Have you ever seen a fat dolphin? Never. We would slaughter one of our own kind if they dared even to start becoming fat and lax. It insults the earth itself."

I'm trying not to cry now.

"K, now she's being kind of mean," says Gavin. "Sunflower, please be polite to our guests."

Sunflower doesn't say anything.

"Does anyone else have questions for Sunflower?" Gavin says, trying to sound peppy.

My lip is trembling. Sunflower looks like she's laughing at me, somehow.

"What's your favorite food?" asks my mom.

"The blood of those I have conquered," says Sunflower. "Their offspring, especially. No other taste is so sweet. No other sound so glorious as their dying squeals as I rip my way into their—"

"This really isn't what I thought it was going to be," says my dad to Gavin, sounding kind of pissed off.

"I can't control how they talk," says Gavin. "They have rights, too, you know."

I'm looking at Sunflower. She's like the girls at school. She's really hurt my feelings just now, gone right for the jugular.

"You're fat," I say to her, then I stomp out of the water.

As I go, I can hear her say, "The fat adolescent female appears to be upset. Have I not answered her questions adequately?"

I get out of the pool and my parents are trying to get me to stay. My brother looks like he's having the time of his life, the little bastard.

"I want to go home," I tell them, dripping.

It's freezing. I take a towel from a nearby rack and start to dry off. My afternoon is ruined. I dry off my gut and look at it as my one-piece clings to my skin. Sunflower is right. I'm a fat disgusting girl. I'm an insult to the earth itself.

"Hannah," says my dad, splashing out. I see my brother in the water next to Sunflower and he's laughing uncontrollably. God, I hate him. My mom is following my dad.

"Hannah, don't let the big fish get to you," my dad says.

"We've said before," says my mom. "You're beautiful just the way you are. And we're going to talk to Dr. McCarthy about the diet pills when we get home, remember?"

"It really isn't meant as an insult," says Gavin from behind them. "We get this all the time. It's right there in the

brochure – dolphins may speak bluntly about your physical appearance and imperfections.”

“I want to go home,” I say again. “I hate dolphins. Sunflower hasn’t said anything about anyone else’s imperfections and it’s not fair.”

“I mean, she *did* call me old...” says my Dad, but he knows it isn’t going to fix anything.

They try to get me to come back into the water but I get the keys from them and I go to the car and have a cry. I find half a roll of lifesavers in the glove compartment and pop them in my mouth as the tears roll down my cheeks. My throat aches. The sugar helps.

It takes a bit, but once I’m calm again I decide to go back and give it another try. Maybe I was too hard on Sunflower. After all, I’ve been waiting for this moment since middle school. I’m a sophomore now.

I’m about to step back into the pool when Sunflower sees me.

“I see the fat adolescent female has joined us again,” she says. “Did she leave us to go eat just now?”

My brother screams laughter.

“Fuck you,” I yell at Sunflower, stepping back out and covering my torso with my arms as best I can. I’m crying again. “I hope your children are all eaten by rival clans in the next war!”

“Hannah Jane!” yells my mother. “Watch your language!”

“I have no children,” Sunflower says and I swear to God she winks at me with that dolphin grin of hers. “Sustenance.”

"All right," says my dad, and he's definitely peeved now. "I think we're done. That's more than 1500 dollars' worth of dolphin conversation."

He dumps the bucket of mackerel out and the last three mackerel splish-splash into the water in front of Sunflower, who gobbles them up.

"Hannah," says Gavin. He comes over and puts his peeling, sunburned hand on my shoulder. "Are you sure you don't want to try and talk to Sunflower some more?"

"YES," I snap and my ferocity makes him take a step back. He takes his hand off my shoulder like it's a hot stove.

My family gets out of the water and we leave.

That night at dinner, I order dolphin and I slather the cut of meat in butter and devour it and juices run down my chin. My family doesn't have the heart to tell me that it isn't actual dolphin but a type of fish called mahi mahi that's occasionally referred to as dolphin fish. I'm too angry to notice anyway. When I get home I'm going to rip down and/or break every goddamn piece of dolphin merchandise I own. I'm never sympathizing with those goddamn animals again.

I'll always remember this vacation as the one where a dolphin called me fat.

And I start the diet pills about a week after coming home.

Ablaze

I knew Keith Wexler back in college in the late 2000s. He was a grungy dude, just another face in LITR 339 on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. He seemed laid-back to a fault, his appearance unkempt most of the time. We rarely talked, but his Facebook profile yielded enough information for me to feel like I knew him. He was from Canton, majoring in English and wanted to transfer to some Big Ten school for his Master's next year, he wanted to teach history, he played some mediocre guitar, he liked Dane Cook, and he partied and got drunk a lot.

When it came to appearance, he was plain-faced, with a style that was distinguishable only by his love of old flannel button-up shirts and alternative rock band t-shirts. He wore his thick black hair shaggy, and he rarely shaved, preferring to grow thin black beards once a week and then come back smooth-cheeked on Tuesdays.

In short, he was a pretty typical Caucasian middle-class college kid, like most of us in the classroom that day.

He came in that afternoon and plopped his ass down in the desk next to me like always.

"We didn't have homework, did we?" he asked.

"No, not unless you didn't read chapter 5 from last week," I replied.

"Good."

We sat in silence for a minute, me fiddling with my pen cap, him looking around the class room with its fluorescent lights, ceiling panels, tile floors, chalkboard and two narrow windows with furnace vents beneath them. The front of the room was elevated a step above the rest of the classroom so short teachers could be seen as well as heard. The desks were standard configurations of purple plastic and shiny metal, set in four rows of seven or eight. There was a metal coat rack in the back

of the room near the door that nobody used. The whole place seemed sterile and chilly and off-white, full of corners and boredom, and only tolerable for a couple of hours for a few days a week.

Professor Maxwell arrived and the lesson began.

Fifteen minutes later I was already bored and checking my cell phone for the time when I saw Keith out the corner of my eye.

I looked up. He had an upset look on his face, somewhere between contempt and constipation. He fidgeted a bit in his chair, his eyebrows knitted below his pimply forehead. There was a worried look in his squinted eyes, and he made a little whispery groan. I sniffed and noticed a foul odor in the air, faint and offending.

"Are you all right?" I asked him quietly.

"It's hot," he gurgled in his throat, still looking straight ahead.

I was about to respond when the flames sprouted from his eyes. I jerked back in my seat. Two flames just flared up out of his face like twin lighters. One right after the other, both making faint popping noises as they appeared.

Keith threw his head back. His mouth fell open. His breathing became fast and deep, his chest heaved. The flames flickered and swayed.

By now I wasn't the only one paying attention to him. Sheila Robertson, a chatty girl with highlighted hair, sat on Keith's right. She looked up, saw what was happening, and let out a piercing shriek. She pointed at his face.

Ms. Maxwell stopped talking and Keith suddenly had the attention of the entire class as his eyes, once a deep blue, turned to a

clear jelly and bubbled out of the flaming holes and ran down his cheeks like egg yolk.

As I watched, the two flames began to sear the flesh around Keith's eye sockets. They licked the eyebrows right off his glistening forehead.

Every muscle in Keith's body was clenched, every limb stiff and trembling. His hands gripped the edges of the desk, and his feet were firmly planted apart on the floor. He wasn't screaming, but his mouth still hung slack, making him look brain-dead. Shallow wheezes replaced the deep gulps of air he'd been taking. The flames from his eyes slowly climbed out of his sockets and spread down the trail of goo left by his melted eyeballs. For a moment it looked like Keith was crying fire.

After a big, final gasp, another flame belched out of Keith's mouth. He made a guttural retching noise as it reared up from between his lips and began to dance, crisping them. His body shook fiercely, and the desk legs rattled on the floor. He bounced towards me a little and I quickly scooted away.

Sheila was still pointing at him and making that high-pitched howl, and then the flame protruding from Keith's left eye caught one of his greasy bangs, and his whole head went up. One second and he was a human torch, the fire replacing his hair in a blink. Sheila outright screamed. A bunch of the other students and Ms. Maxwell joined her. The rest of the class sat dumbfounded and staring.

The pungent odor I'd noticed earlier was much stronger now, and it dawned on me that it was the smell of Keith's burning flesh. I might've been disgusted if I hadn't been so mesmerized. His head was almost consumed by the fire, burning from the inside; the flesh on his upturned face red and bubbling slowly like cheese on a fresh pizza.

"Somebody do something!" Professor Maxwell shrieked.

A lean, pony-tailed, bespectacled kid named Benny who sat near the door leaped up and darted out into the hallway. A couple

other people started to follow, but Benny bowled them over as he ran back in with a fire extinguisher in his hands. He fumbled with the hose and trigger.

"Wait, how do you work this fucking thing," he shouted after a few seconds.

"Just point it and squeeze the trigger," someone else yelled.

He did, and a stream of white smoke roared out the black funnel and engulfed Keith. It covered his head, but he pitched forward out of it, and his face fell right off his skull. The melted scraps of flesh hit the desk and turned to ashes, curling and blackening like paper. His head still burned. The flames stayed just as strong, not even bowing to the rush of freezing smoke.

Benny stopped spraying and stepped back, the fire extinguisher useless in his shaking hands.

Keith lay doubled-over, clearly dead now, his chest no longer heaving. Flames sputtered out of his back, making little hungry holes in the denim that grew and spread and connected. The fire grew tall and terrible, burning a pure white.

I realized that despite the huge blaze next to me, I didn't feel much heat—no more than being next to one of the furnace vents. Nor had the sprinkler system gone off. And though I'd smelled something like smoke earlier, there was no actual smoke to be seen. Just the fire, the light, and Keith as he disappeared into the inferno that surged up from within him.

The fire ate Keith as we watched helplessly, devouring the rest of his head, then spreading onto his shoulders and down his torso. One of his arms fell right off and lay there on the floor, its end still lit, the fingers twitching. The Pearl Jam shirt he'd been wearing under his open jacket was scorched away and we saw the pale skin covered in wiry black hair char and fall off, saw the flames underneath them that reached out and grasped at us from between his ribs. There was never any blood. Only white fire and ashes.

When it was over, the people who'd been screaming ran from the classroom in a chaotic cluster of running legs and bug eyes and open mouths. The rest of us sat and looked at what was left of our classmate: two legs with charred stumps laying askew on the chair, and grey and black ashes fine as powder covering everything around them.

"Spontaneous human combustion," someone said from behind me.

"Wasn't that an urban myth?"

"Yeah, it *was*."

I almost laughed, but then someone pulled the fire alarm.

Here There Be Spydere

Alex went to bed at eight like his parents told him to.

He pet his cat, Nigel, and told him good night. Nigel purred and closed his eyes in a feline expression of comfort and respect. Nigel slept in a comfortable pillow bed right near the kitchen door. Alex slept in a twin-sized bed in his bedroom.

Alex brushed his teeth and got himself a drink of water and set it carefully on the wobbly nightstand next to his bed, the one with the gimpy leg that Alex's father was always meaning to fix. He tucked himself in and fell asleep without any trouble.

He awoke at one am needing to pee. He was about to swing his legs over the side of his bed when he saw the spider.

His eyelids fluttered open, blurry with sleep, and for a moment he thought he was hallucinating the movement out the corner of his right eye. Then he turned his head, looked at the floor and froze.

The spider was huge, bigger than a dinner plate, and it was glowing a neon white in the otherwise pitch-dark room.

Alex stared at it. The spider was making its vile crawl across his floor, its enormous legs making clicking noises as all the joints worked. It looked and moved like a machine, all moving parts and hard, glossy exoskeleton and a cluster of glittering black eyes on the front of its face over the fearsome vulva of its folded fangs.

The spider was looking for him. Alex knew it. It was covered in tiny, itchy-looking hairs. Its front legs probed the air before it, tasting and smelling. It made no sound. Its little claws sank into the carpet. He clenched his bowels, and all of a sudden he had to pee more than ever.

The terror Alex felt was both as total as the darkness of outer space and as piercing as the light through a keyhole. He tried not to breathe. He thought about wetting his bed and how mad his parents would be if he did that again.

The spider turned and Alex could see in its eight black eyes that it had found him. He couldn't hide under the covers now. Those huge fangs would puncture right through them, even his heavy quilt. He had to keep his eyes on it.

The spider walked over and began trying to climb the bed leg, up to the warm pink flesh above.

Alex froze. He couldn't get up and run for the door. He wanted to, but he couldn't. It was all the way across his room, an easy five or six steps even if he ran. He wasn't wearing any shoes. The spider would be on him instantly and would latch itself to his legs and sink its fangs into the thin skin and hard bone of his foot and he would fall down, down, down to the carpet where the spider would move as quick as a cat and bite into the hollow of his supple child's throat and suck all his internal organs and fluids out and leave Alex a seized, withered husk on his bedroom floor.

Alex lay there, throat closed with fear, crotch muscles tensed against the rising tide, watching the spider with its mechanical movements and folded fangs, contemplating his fate. He was cornered prey, soft and waiting.

Then, he heard a hiss, and he whipped his head to the door, which had been nudged open so softly it had made no sound.

There was Nigel in the doorway, bathed in the quiet light from the bathroom in the hall. His fur was raised up and his tail arched over his back like a scorpion's stinger. He moved like he was made of mercury, one foot in front of the other, equal precision.

He hissed again – a harsh, startling noise – and the spider turned. It held up both its front legs and the two smaller arms

on either side of its mouth. Alex could tell that if the spider had been able to hiss, it would've right then.

Alex lay in bed with his feet drawn under him and the blankets bunched up in a defensive cringe. He was scared for Nigel. The spider was big and covered in a suit of veritable armor.

Before he could think any more, the spider and Nigel charged each other. They both moved almost too fast to be seen. The spider reared up and Alex saw its huge fangs, the size of nails.

Nigel scratched and swiped and jabbed with his lightning paws, hanging back and making hits like a man fighting with a spear, and the spider lunged and stabbed with its vile legs. It bared its fangs and Nigel bared his. Nigel's paws were quicksilver. He would attack, then retreat. Attack, retreat. The spider's legs clutched crazily at the air, searching for purchase.

Finally, a hit — Nigel's claws slashing downward across the spider's eight eyes. Its legs waved wildly, trying to see. Nigel held back, crouched, his eyes glowing green.

The spider was injured, but alive. It spun around like a Roomba gone haywire, stabbing and searching with its feelers and front legs. Alex could see its fangs bared and dripping venom. It came towards his bed again, blind and tasting the air with its legs.

Nigel surged forward and struck another series of blows, caught one of the spider's outstretched legs with his claw, held on, flipped the creature onto its back where all eight of its legs scrambled furiously at the empty air. It tried to right itself but Nigel slashed at its vulnerable, softer underbelly and it bled glowing white goo.

Alex saw his chance.

He reached out with both hands, grabbed hold of his heavy, wobbly nightstand, and tipped it over. He heard the gimpy leg snap. There was a second that seemed much longer than a second as the night stand traveled downward and then thudded to the

floor on top of the spider. Alex heard a crunch. The glass of water flew off and spilled everywhere.

Just then, the front of his pants turned warm and wet. He couldn't hold it any longer. He sat in a puddle of his own piss, stinking. He began to cry.

He could see a couple of the spider's legs sticking out from underneath the fallen nightstand. They kicked feebly then went still. Nigel was crouched victoriously in the middle of the room, stoic cat-expression on his face. He looked at Alex and Alex looked back at him.

The hallway light came on, sending a flood of light.

Flying Machines

I was balls deep in Leia when Annie and Ursula started banging their canes on the front door. They yelled to us— the airships were landing and we were going to miss it. They kept thumping their rubber-tipped canes on the door and I knew they wouldn't leave until I answered.

Leia was underneath me and her husband Garrett was in the corner smoking a j and watching us with his eyes glittering intensely like they always do when I'm cucking him.

He's the one who asked me to do this today. I've done it many times before.

We met when they moved in next door two years ago. We were first introduced when I was doing the laundry. We hung out, had a movie night. Things went well.

Leia is really pretty, like Saoirse Ronan if Saoirse Ronan was the type of girl who does cosplays at anime cons and burns patchouli incense and pickets for non-GMO foods and shops at Trader Joe's.

"Oh, right there, right there," she says in this hurried tone she gets when she's about to finish. "So close, so close!"

I thrust away, her hips rocking with mine. Garrett is smoking his doobie. The room reeks of cloves. I can hear Annie and Ursula thumping away on the door. They're yelling but I can't make anything out except, "You'll miss it!"

"JUST A SECOND!" I yell out the bedroom door, hoping my voice carries far enough for them to hear it. They won't come inside and the door is probably locked anyway but I know that I'm going to have to finish Leia off before I can answer it.

Garrett's eyes lose their glitter for a moment. I can see the bulge in the front of his pants. I've told him sternly many

times before that I never ever want to see his dick and if he breaks this rule and jerks it while I'm fucking his wife he'll have to go find someone else to do it. And good luck finding someone in this apartment building who isn't going to blind you the second they take off their clothes.

"What's that thumping?" he asks. "I thought it was the bed for a second."

"It's my neighbors," I tell him. "They want me to come watch the airships land."

The airships are part of a local festival— a bunch of amateur aviators all fly their self-made contraptions from one side of town to the other. They launch off the hill in MacAtty park and ride the wind over to the big field that lies east of our apartment building. The event is sort of like a Pinewood Derby for aviation enthusiasts — they build and fly their airships from starting kits. Any modification is legal as long as it's deemed safe by the council of judges, who of course judge the aircraft and deem them safe before they take off.

Ursula and Annie and I have watched the annual event for the past couple years. They're sisters and live across the hall. They like talking to me and I like talking to them. They have actual stories about actual people instead of what they saw on Tiktok or what they read on Reddit or what offended them on 4chan.

"So close," moaned Leia again, hips rocking away. "So close..."

I speed up my thrusting, and there's sweat leaking from my armpits and making my back cold.

"Uh, uh, uh, uhhhhh," said Leia, and she tenses up and I can feel her wave break and her pussy tightens around me.

I'm not even close to cumming. This is practically a service I do for the two of them now since I'm pretty sure Garrett hasn't been able to get an erection for months— that is, unless he's

watching someone else's erection get inserted into his wife. Leia stays with him because he's the proud owner of a large inheritance left to him from a grandfather or grand-uncle or something. She keeps him for the money and keeps me around for the dick. I don't mind. I don't really get laid much otherwise.

She bucks and writhes on the bed between my arms and she looks pretty damn good with her long, cherry-red hair thrown all over the place and she rears up and bites me on the shoulder so hard that I lose my erection and yell as I pull myself out from between her legs.

"Gah," I say, checking my shoulder. "That was really hard!"

"That's really nice," Garrett murmurs. "Really nice... to see..."

He's touching the bulge in the front of his pants.

The thumping has stopped from down the hall and now I'm jumping out of bed and ripping my pants up over my nakedness and running to the door because I know Annie and Ursula will call security if they think something's wrong and if I don't answer the door they always think something's wrong.

I throw it open and the two of them are goggling at me.

"Oh, Rollo," they say, two classy octogenarian ladies in sun hats, leaning on tripod metal canes tipped with rubber stoppers. They're stooped with age but their hands don't shake when they hold things and their eyes are still bright. "Did we interrupt you?"

I see that Annie has her cell phone out. I just barely dodged the bullet. The last thing I need is that snoop bitch Martinez coming down here and smelling Garrett's weed in my apartment. I make a note to tell him he needs to exhale out the goddamn window if he's going to toké in my place.

"No, not at all," I say. I can hear Garrett and Leia arguing already in my bedroom. "No, just have some friends over."

"Well, they can watch the landings with us," said Annie. "You're going to miss it if you don't come now. They're already descending past the clock towers."

"I'll be right out."

I shut the door and go back to my bedroom to throw on the rest of my clothes.

Two minutes later and Garrett and Leia and I are out on the cement patio with Annie and Ursula, watching the shadows of the approaching aviation enthusiasts grow larger on the lawn.

Garrett and Leia are making out heavily like they always do after they've been cucked. The first time I did it with them, I asked how something like this could possibly bring the two of them together. I was worried I'd be breaking up their marriage.

"It just does," Garrett had said. "Losing her makes me want her all the more."

"And I really like your dick," Leia said to me.

We sit in the sunshine on the porch and watch the first of the airships drift to a gentle landing in the lawn.

They're all sorts of shapes and sizes – white, yellow, red, black. Some are held aloft with different-shaped balloons and some are moved by propellers. Some look steampunk and others look retro-futuristic. Some look like blimps and some like small planes. Some look like giant insects and some look like tiny drone helicopters. Some look like bicycles with wings.

They all land one by one and skid to a stop at the far edge of the field. The breeze is pleasant but not disruptive to the flyers – they would've canceled the event if it was. Thanks to

all their mandatory GPS tracking and stabilization systems – the only mandated pieces of equipment on every last one of the aircrafts – there are no collisions and everyone coasts to a smooth landing one right after the other, a strange cartoon gathering of colorful homemade aircraft.

We all applaud with everyone else as the pilots step out of their inventions and wave triumphantly.

Leia and Garrett are cuddling under a blanket next to me and I've left the top two buttons of my shirt undone and the sweat on my chest feels great in the sun and the breeze. Ursula and Annie are gossiping about city council and people are hanging out of their apartment windows waving at the amateur pilots as they step out of their contraptions and I smile cause it's a good day.

Our Lady of Addiction

"She said she'd meet us in the alley," said Victor. "By the Burger King downtown. She said she had Kim Jong Un and Shitkicker Kush."

"No way," said Henry.

"I swear to God," said Victor.

"Is she hot," Harrison wanted to know.

"I don't know, I didn't see her," said Victor. "Just texted and heard her voice. She sounds hot."

They were in Victor's parents' basement, their usual hangout.

"There was one catch, though," said Victor. "The method of payment. She says she wants to suck our blood."

"Wait, what?"

"She wants to suck our blood," said Victor. "As payment for the weed."

"She wants to suck our blood, like, what, like a vampire?"

"Yeah."

"She's a vampire?"

"I don't know. That's just what she said."

"That's complete bullshit," said Henry. "We're not doing that."

Two minutes later, the three of them were in Victor's car and headed downtown.

"So, she like, told you she's a vampire," said Henry. "She just, like, straight up came out and said, 'I'm a vampire and if you want this Shitkicker Kush all you gotta do is let me suck your blood?'"

"Basically," said Victor. "She said, 'drink from you', though. Not 'suck your blood.'"

"That's some bullshit, man," said Henry. "She's probably just one of those people that believes she's a vampire, all hyped up cause it's almost Halloween."

"Where did you hear about her again?"

"From Olly at the dispensary," said Victor. "The weird guy with the dreads and the weird accent? I was short again and was trying to talk him into letting me have some green for a discount, and he was all, 'I know a way you can get your hands on some excellent product that won't require any paper money.' He gave me the phone number and I called it. I figured it would be some perv looking to get his dick wet, but then that woman answered."

"Could still be," said Harrison. "Women can be pervs, too."

"Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you," said Victor.

They got to the Burger King with its light the color of processed cheese flooding the parking lot and sure enough there was the woman in the alley next to it, waiting. She wasn't hiding in the shadows—she was out on the sidewalk, smoking a cigarette with a long cigarette holder. It was just after 10 PM.

She was tall and pale and had black hair and red lips and they parked and walked right up to her.

"This way, my sons," she said as they approached, beckoning to them with a finger. They followed, mysteriously compelled to do so. No formal introductions, nothing. Just a crooked finger and a brisk pace into the alley.

She led them back to a small shop down the street. They'd been past it before. It looked like your run-of-the-mill fashion boutique, one of those small-time operations that always makes you wonder how it's staying in business. Mannequins in the windows advertising Salvation Army grade women's clothes, clothes that looked like kids would use for dress up.

The woman took them down a narrow, mildewed staircase to the basement. Victor had his knife in his pocket, and he kept his hand on it as they walked. He lead the way, Harrison and Henry trailing behind him. They were uneasy, but they'd been in shady situations before. There was always bail and bolt.

The first thing they noticed when they got downstairs was a large coffin, open and leaned against the far wall. The rest of the space was taken up by tables on which there were set numerous marijuana plants. All this under dim hanging lamps.

The woman showed them their bags of weed.

Victor cracked one open and sniffed.

"Holy fuck," he said. "Kim Jong Un. Grown by the man himself in the mountains of North Korea. All the way from there to my nostrils. Goddamn..."

He let his companions each have a sniff.

"My name is Katya," said the woman. "And I have an addiction. As do we all."

"What addiction is that," asked Harrison, hoping the answer was something sexual.

"The blood of young men. If I do not consume it, I will turn to dust."

"Oh," said all three of the teenagers.

"I must drink from each of you," said Katya. "And in return, you will walk away with your mind-enhancing herbs."

"How do we know you're not just some freak who sucks twink blood," Henry asked.

"I assure you," said Katya. "I am not interested in your genitals."

Harrison cursed silently.

"How old are you," asked Victor.

"I am four hundred years old, approximately," said Katya. "I was originally from Russia. I have traveled across Europe and South America to be here."

"Prove it," said Victor. "Here."

He'd brought a small mirror with him.

"Very well," said Katya. She held the mirror up and looked into it with the boys behind her.

The three of them saw only themselves staring back in the mirror. Katya was gone.

"Behold," said Katya. "The undead stands before you."

"Holy fuck," said the three of them at the same time. Now they were really excited. This was even better than losing their virginity, which none of them had done yet.

"Won't you, like, turn us into vampires if you suck our blood?"

"If I take only a little," said Katya. "I will not sire you. That is why I need all three of you. If it would be more comfortable, you could just hook yourselves up to an IV. But it is much more delectable to have the blood warm and flowing off your skin, to tap an artery... the freshest method possible. In fact, if you allow me to do this, I will throw in an ounce of local Magnificent Bastard for free."

Victor and his friends considered.

"Does it hurt," Harrison asked.

"No," said Katya. "It is ecstasy."

They looked at her. Her canines were longer and sharper than normal, but other than that she didn't look much different than anyone else. She looked like a decent-looking cougar in her early forties, dressed in a white blouse and dark skirt. Her hair and eyes were dark and her cheekbones were high—kind of like an older, paler version of Gal Gadot. She was taller than all three of them even though she wasn't wearing shoes.

"I'm just curious to see if this is real," said Victor. He'd always been the most adventurous of the bunch. "Fuck it. Yeah. Suck my blood. I want to smoke this Kim Jong Un."

Katya smiled.

"Lay down on this chaise lounge," she said, beckoning to him. He walked over. Katya had a red psychiatrist-type couch against the wall with the coffin.

"I don't need to take anything off, do I?" he said.

"Of course not," said Katya. "You will feel a slight pressure, and then it will be over. My fangs will numb you to any pain."

Victor lay down. Katya cupped the back of his head with her long fingers.

She hissed suddenly and recoiled, pointing at his neck with one hand and shielding her eyes with the other. Victor looked down and noticed he'd worn his crucifix necklace.

"Oh, sorry," he said, removing it.

The other two guys were surprised at how quick it was. Katya bent down and opened her mouth and positioned it over Victor's throat. She looked like she was going to give Victor a hickey.

Victor looked at his friends over Katya's shoulder. His eyes got really wide.

"Holy shit," he whispered as she drank. There was only slight pain, a numbed puncture similar to what's felt in a dentist's office.

Then it was Henry's turn. Then Harrison's.

Katya gave them baby wipes to clean their necks with.

"My saliva is an ointment," she said. "You will not have much leakage, and the wounds will close before you even get home."

She looked much less pale now, very rosy-cheeked and satisfied.

"Thank you, my sons," she said.

All of them felt slightly weakened, almost like they were hungover, but other than that the bites hadn't done much. And now they had the three bags of weed now firmly clenched in Victor's fist. He stuffed them down his pants as they walked out.

"Dude, we just got our blood sucked for weed," said Henry. He rubbed his neck. The wounds were indeed already closing, two small dimples just to the left of his windpipe.

"Did anyone else get a boner while it was happening," asked Victor.

"I got a boner while I was fucking *watching* it happen," said Harrison.

They went home and smoked a bowl of the Kim Jong Un and watched Rick and Morty.

High Speed

Daddy took the cover off the old car.

The first thing Davison and Lorelei noticed about the car was that it had a steering wheel.

"Wow, you drive that yourself?"

"Uh-huh," said Daddy.

"Are we going to drive it?"

"We have to," said Daddy.

He opened the door and got in.

"It hasn't run in a long time," he said. He pulled out a metal and plastic key and put it into a slot next to the steering wheel. He turned the key and the engine turned on. It was loud. Really loud.

Daddy pulled the car out of the garage. The car was bright yellow and low to the ground and kind of mean-looking. Davison and Lorelei stood back, uncomfortable at the sight of the big, heavy car moving under the control of their father's foot.

"How are you moving it?" Davison asked.

Daddy pointed at his feet.

"There's a 'go' pedal and a 'stop' pedal. And you have to put it in gear with this."

He pointed at a thin lever that came off the steering wheel.

"Come on, get in," said Daddy.

Davison and Lorelei did as they were told. They climbed into the back seat, neither of them brave enough to take the front.

They pulled out of the driveway and down the road.

Daddy went kind of fast, almost as fast as the Auto-Ubers and Auto-Lyfts that the kids were used to riding in.

"Slow down, Daddy," cried Lorelei.

"Don't worry," said Daddy. "I know what I'm doing. I drove like this until I was in college."

"Are we going to have to drive this until the power's back on?"

"Maybe," said Daddy. "But probably not for long. The power will come back on. And mom will have dinner ready when we get back."

Mommy was grilling some hamburgers over the fire grill. She'd had to burn wood and light a fire herself to cook the meat. Both Davison and Lorelei liked hamburgers and waffle fries and salad. They were looking forward to dinner.

"Did you used to drive this car?" Davison asked. Neither he nor his sister had ever seen it before. They weren't allowed in the garage, and they'd never had much reason to explore it

anyway. If they wanted to go somewhere, they used their Cyclops headsets and stood on the track pad in the basement corner.

"Your uncle used to," said Daddy. "He spent years restoring this car. He took very good care of it, which is why it still runs."

He had to yell over the noise of the engine and the wind from the open windows. The old car wasn't nearly as quiet as the Ubers and Lyfts. And there was a funny smell in the car, too. It reminded the kids of the oil their mother sometimes used to deep fry chicken wings and fish sticks.

"How old is it?" Davison asked.

"Almost one hundred years old," said Daddy. "Isn't it beautiful?"

Both the kids saw he had tears in his eyes. They watched the road rush past. That wasn't any different than the Ubers or Lyfts. They were beginning to feel relaxed.

"This is just how people used to live," Daddy told them. "They had to make their own food and drive their own cars and everything."

"That sounds hard," said Davison.

"It was, in some ways," said Daddy. "But when the power went out, they didn't lose their ability to go places or to make food. They just did it themselves."

There were no Auto-Ubers or Auto-Lyfts on the road with them. All automatic cars were electric, and there wasn't any electricity right now. There hadn't been for almost a week, and the electric cars had all run out their batteries in the first few days. They still had back-up generators that kept the cars charged, but you were only allowed to get rides for emergencies or for work, and you had to fill out forms on your phone to unlock the chargers.

"Where are we going?" Lorelei asked.

"Wait and see," said Daddy.

They drove down the road. The sun was setting.

Davison and Lorelei watched the quiet houses fly by. They watched the old telephone lines and the trees and the fences. Everything looked like it was painted gold because of the sunset.

Soon, their Daddy turned down another road, and then another one, and then he turned onto a dirt road.

Finally, he came to a stop on the dirt road, after they were far into the woods.

He turned and smiled at Davison and Lorelei.

"All right," he said. "Who wants to drive first?"

Davison and Lorelei looked at each other. Neither of them really wanted to. They drove cars in their VR games all the time, but that was different. This car felt heavy. It felt real.

"Come on," said Daddy. "This'll be a great way to kill the time while your mom makes dinner. And maybe when we get back, I'll bet you the power will be on."

The kids didn't move, eyeing each other nervously.

"Davison," said Daddy. "You go first. Don't be scared."

Davison reluctantly got out. Daddy stepped out of the driver's seat and Davison got in. The seat was warm from Daddy sitting in it. The car smelled very old, and there was still that weird frying pan smell to it, too.

"What's that smell?" Lorelei asked, wrinkling her nose.

"That's the gasoline burning," said Daddy. "That's what the car runs on instead of electricity."

"Are we going to get in trouble for burning it?"

"Here's what you do," said Daddy, ignoring Lorelei's question. He got back in on the passenger side and helped Davison adjust the seat and the pedals so he could reach them.

"Put your foot on the brake," said Daddy. "That's the wider one on the left."

Davison did so. He was so nervous he was shaking. He was certain as soon as he touched the 'go' pedal the car would roar out of control into the nearest tree.

"K," said Daddy. "Now put it in drive."

"What?"

"Pull the lever on the right," said Daddy, tapping the knob at the end of the thin metal bar sticking out of the steering wheel. "Until the little arrow is pointing to the 'D'"

Davison did so. He felt the car start to move.

"Whoop," said Daddy. "Foot on the brake, foot on the brake."

Davison stomped the brake with all his might and the car stopped hard. Lorelei yelled in surprise.

"That's all right," said Daddy. "Everyone used to have to do this. Every kid learned to drive when they were 16. Your Grampy and I did this on this same road when I was your age."

"But I'm not 16," said Davison, holding the brake pedal as far down as it would go, his hands gripping the steering wheel like a life preserver. "I'm not even 13."

"Neither was I," said Daddy.

"Are we going to get in trouble?" Lorelei asked again. She was still in the back, clutching her seatbelt.

"No," said Daddy. "The police won't come out here."

"But we didn't ask on our phones!"

"They don't know about it," said Daddy. "This car isn't attached to the grid. No one knows we're here. Now, Davison, gently take your foot off the brake..."

Davison did so. The car started to roll forward. Davison's hands gripped the steering wheel hard. The rocks and dirt crunched under the wheels.

"Ok, good," said Daddy. "Now, hit the gas, but not too much."

Slowly, shakily, Davison took his foot off the brake pedal and put it on the gas. He tapped it ever so slightly. The car's loud engine revved and got louder for a second, and the car sped up. Davison sucked his breath in and squeezed the steering wheel. Lorelei shut her eyes and held onto her seatbelt.

"Watch your speedometer," said Daddy, pointing to the arrow and dial above the steering wheel behind the clear plastic. "Don't go above 25. See the needle? We'll stick with 25 miles per hour to start off with."

"I know what a speedometer is," said Davison. "They have those in Ubers. But no steering wheels or go pedals."

"I know," said Daddy. "But just keep it at 25 for now."

They rolled down the road. Davison began to relax and even move his hands on the steering wheel a bit, turning it just so the car stayed straight. Daddy sat back in his seat and smiled at them. He looked happy.

Davison drove down the road. He felt very grown up.

"This is just like a video game," he said.

"Yeah," said Daddy. "But it isn't. This is real life."

Lorelei got comfortable once she saw that Davison wasn't going to put them into a ditch or a tree. She leaned forward between Davison and Daddy, looking at the way Davison's feet touched the gas and then touched the brake, the gas and then the brake.

"When's my turn?" she asked after they'd gone a few hundred feet.

"In a little bit," said Daddy. "We'll go to the end of the road, and then you can drive back."

Davison drove them over rises and dips in the dirt road. They drove through meadows and woods and past ponds and fields. The car moved slow but it was nice to actually see everything around them instead of blowing past it like usual.

Then, up ahead, they saw a rusted old sign attached to a metal barricade. "Dead End", it read. The road led right up to the sign, turning to grass and weeds just before it ended.

Davison stopped the car slowly and carefully. He was surprised at how easy it was to get comfortable with driving. It

wasn't much different than a video game, only he used his whole body instead of just his hands.

"K," said Daddy. "Now put it in park. On the 'P'"

Davison took ahold of the lever again and pulled it up. He felt the car's wheels hold them solid again. He took his foot off the brake and the car stayed still. His fingers ached from holding the steering wheel too hard and he flexed them.

"Excellent job," said Daddy. "Now your turn, Lorelei."

Davison got out and so did Daddy and Lorelei.

"I'm going to have to work the pedals," said Daddy to Lorelei. "Because your legs aren't long enough to reach them even with the seat all the way forward. But you can sit on my lap and steer."

Daddy got in and adjusted the seat again. Then he lifted Lorelei into his lap. Davison got back in, this time in the front seat on the passenger side.

Lorelei took ahold of the steering wheel and turned it twice, once all the way to the right and then all the way to the left, trying it out.

"Hold up there," said Daddy.

He grabbed the steering wheel and straightened it out.

"I can do it," said Lorelei.

"K, I'm gonna go now," said Daddy. "Make sure we go straight ahead. We can't get stuck out here. No one can come help us. Remember, no one knows we're here. They can't just look at a phone and see where the car is."

Lorelei held the steering wheel stock straight. Her hands didn't move.

The car began to roll forward again. Lorelei continued to hold the steering wheel straight.

They started to coast a wee bit too much to the right.

Daddy grabbed the steering wheel over Lorelei's hands and corrected it.

"Straight down the road now," he said. "You're doing great."

Lorelei grinned widely. She couldn't help it. When they'd pulled out of the driveway she had been terrifically frightened at how fast they were going. Now she *wanted* to go fast.

They rode all the way back to where they turned onto the road, past the meadows and woods and fields and ponds.

Daddy hit the brake.

"Well done, Lorelei," he said. "I think you two had a great introduction today."

"Too bad we'll never need to learn this," said Davison.

"You never know," said Daddy. "And even if you do, it won't be your first time."

"Can we do this again?" Lorelei asked.

"Maybe," said Daddy.

Lorelei got out and got back in the back seat. She stuck her head between the two front seats as Daddy put the car back in drive.

"You can go fast," she said.

Daddy laughed.

"Ok," he said.

They felt the engine roar under the car's big yellow hood, and they surged forward, holding on and watching the world go by.

How to Walk a Midnight Window

Me and Charlie took Hannah to Uncle Jasper's grave. We needed a favor from the old corpse.

He rested deep in the woods, between an oak and a hickory. The grey stone that marked his grave stuck out of the dirt like any other rock. There was no writing on it. You had to know where to go, on clear nights when the moon was a waxing crescent

We sang his song to summon him. The melody was a cross between Aiken Drum and Pop Goes the Weasel.

We're walking to Jasper, Jasper, Jasper

We're walking to Jasper

Uncle Jasper, are you home?

Uncle Jasper slid out of the ground head first. He sat in the dirt with his chest and shoulders above the surface like someone in a bathtub.

"Let me see that virgin pussy," he rasped in a voice like dead leaves scraping down an alley.

Hannah nervously approached the grave.

She slid her jeans down, her panties down, spread her legs and presented herself. It was the first time I'd ever seen a vagina. She lay down in front of Jasper, legs spread around him.

"Ah, yeah," he rasped. His black finger probed the wiry black hair over her slit. "There's your little pat of butter."

Hannah sucked in breath and squirmed under his dead finger.

"What do you whippersnappers request?"

Jasper'd been dead for years, stuck half in the grave and half out. He could do favors between worlds. His skin was like old banana peels. But if you let him touch virgin pussy he'd do anything for you.

"We need to walk a midnight window," said Hannah.

"Walk a midnight window," rasped Jasper. "I'd crawl up out of this grave if I could do that."

"It's only for one night."

"What is the purpose?"

"Salvation," whispered Hannah.

Jasper still probed her cunt-button, and she squeaked a bit. Jasper grinned his skeleton grin of yellow teeth and pulled it away. I saw his finger come away with a dewdrop of cunny juice trailing off it. He touched the finger to his husk of a tongue.

Hannah threw her head back and moaned at the moon, her legs quaking.

"You've got the sweetest goddamn face," he told her.

"Thank you, Uncle Jasper," she whispered.

Hannah slid back towards us out of the grave.

She pulled her panties and jeans back on.

"Walk a midnight window," said Uncle Jasper. "You must brew a potion, preferably on a gas stove."

"I have one of those," I said.

"Great. Put a pot on. The pot must be stainless steel. In the steel you will throw a clove a' garlic, old vanilla Oreo crackers without any a' the frosting, an old sock with a hole in the heel, a page from a cookbook you've never used, and water from a pond that sits under the light of a full moon. You then add a piece of yourselves. Heat this on the stove until it boils. Then pour it over your left hands. It will not burn you."

"What about the window?"

"Do all that, and your window will appear in the empty pot." He waved us away. "Leave me to the moonlight. But remember, the window must be closed by sunrise. Repeat that to me."

"The window must be closed by sunrise."

"Good."

Jasper sank back into the dirt.

We took off, our first task completed.

We got back to my apartment and put the pot on. The gas stove clicked and the circle blue flame sprouted to life.

"My snatch feels like it's got a soft bit of lightning running down the middle," said Hannah. "That Uncle Jasper's got magic fingers, he does."

"Don't get any ideas," said Charlie. "That's the Devil's touch running through you present."

"I think it's just cause I gone 19 years without having a man inside me when all my other girlfriends already been at it as much as six and seven years even. I'm all raw and over-sensitive-like. Mama would be proud I made it this far."

"Yeah, your mama would be proud the first finger to touch your clit is one that's a century older than you are."

"Fuck off, he touched me good."

"Who wants to get the water?" I asked, interrupting the two of them. "There's a pond out back with a decent view of the sky. Full moon looks down on it enough, depending on the season, I'd imagine. Jasper didn't specify how long the full moon needs to look down on it, so long as it does at all."

Charlie volunteered. I got other items ready.

Once all the ingredients were assembled in the pot, the water doing its little heat bubbles, we all tossed in a piece of ourselves. I put in a corner of a hangnail that'd been bothering me. Charlie dug a booger out of his left nostril. Hannah put in a stray eyelash.

Once the items were added, the water took on a faint light to it, like someone tossed a dying glowstick inside the pot.

"Now what?" Charlie asked.

"Now we wait for the boil."

It didn't take long before steam and little heat-bubbles beaded the surface of the water.

I took it off the burner. I could feel the hell-heat from my fingers even on the plastic handle. My body and brain recoiled from it automatic, no effort from myself. Doing this was going to be harder than I thought. Best to do it quick before impulse could slow me.

"Who's first?" I asked, knowing it would have to be me.

Neither of them answered.

"If that old cocksucker is trolling us..." said Charlie.

"It's worth it," I said. "I'll do it first and scald my goddamn hand if need be."

"That there is flesh-melting water," said Hannah. "I can feel it from here. You be careful now"

"Let's do it outside. I ain't dumping this in the sink. Sock'll fuck up the garbage disposal anyhow."

We went out on my back porch and I didn't give myself time to think.

I tipped the pot and braced for unbearable pain.

The water felt as cool as mountain snowmelt, even as steam poured off it as it splashed to the wooden floorboards.

"It worked," I told my friends, though they could tell from my lack of a scream that this much was so.

"Me next," said Hannah.

Once their left hands were wet, I set the pot down, still steaming in the autumn night.

"Where's the window?" Charlie asked. Our hands hung dripping. The pot was empty.

I wiped my hand on my pants and looked in the pot. A faint image was visible, like a reflection in a morning puddle.

"Wipe your hands off," I said. "Dry them."

They did so and our midnight window appeared in the silver bottom of the pot. A little shining circle of salvation.

"Holy mama Mary," said Charlie.

We took it in, our second task fulfilled.

We exited the window and knew we were fucked.

My apartment was dark and cold. The pot was on the middle of my living room floor right where we'd stepped into it.

"How long has it been?" whispered Hannah.

Charlie looked at his phone.

"Over a week," he said. "Twelve days."

"Fuck," we all said at the same time.

I should back up here and explain some, since if I don't the rest of the story won't make nay goddamn sense.

Charlie, Hannah and I have known each other since childhood. We've all gotten along because no one else likes us. Isolation is our bond. Not that we can blame anyone— we're all ugly as sin and twice as mean. No one knows how hard it is being an ugly person.

But we knows our spellsies and our chantsies. We knows our witchcraft. We started it when we were in middle school, just looking stuff up online and checking out library books. But it became an obsession. Now we dance with the devil and the darkness every week. Uncle Jasper's just one other-sider who we treat with. So far we've been clean deal-makers. We've done some incredible things— Hannah caused a snowstorm one winter that got us a week off of school. I made a potion that gave us unlimited power over anyone who drank it— we gave it to the principal and got another week off school. And Charlie burned down a house once with a fire-fart spell. We've done the do's and don't's of witchcraft and we've always gotten away with it.

But maybe now our bad luck's caught up to us.

Walking a midnight window is the granddaddy of spells. It's slang for opening a portal to another part of the multiverse where you're living your best possible life. You jump in, enjoy the sights and sounds and feels, and get back out again. It sounds like an easy concoction, but if you don't know what you're doing you can die or worse, and that's just from making the potion.

There's a time limit, though. Sunrise is usually the time limit. If you disobey the time limit, Uncle Jasper has rights to come for you and make you pay for the time you didn't earn.

Of course, the midnight window is as addictive as any other painkiller, and we lost track of time not three minutes after waking up in our best lives.

Now, we were in big trouble.

Uncle Jasper could be anywhere.

We didn't wait. We got the hell out of there. We jumped in my pick-up and hauled ass.

"We should sing," said Hannah. It was the first time any of us had spoke since saying "Fuck" together. Simultaneous cursing is actually a good way to relieve bad juju, believe it or not. I doubt it did us much good, though. The netherworld and everything in between is going to be looking for our dumb asses now.

We took Hannah up on her suggestion. We sang.

We're running from Jasper, Jasper, Jasper

We're running from Jasper

Uncle Jasper, are you mad?

Chances were he could hear us. If he was on our trail, he would hear it and maybe be less angry. He liked when people sang to him.

We sang the verse a few times then got quiet.

"I was so beautiful," Hannah said quietly. There were tears in her eyes.

"Anyone notice our speech has evened out a bit?" Charlie asked. "We're not talking all high-minded-like like before we went in the window."

"We probably changed the tuning a little upon return," I said. "It's impossible to get back exactly to the reality you were in. You can only time it down to a billionth of a second."

In truth, I didn't give a shit about anything except the redneck warlock zombie who was probably trashing my apartment in a rage at that very moment. Uncle Jasper hated having to get out of his grave to dole out punishment. He'd be even more pissed at us about running, song or not.

We tore down the highway, engine roaring and heat blasting.

"What was your window?" Hannah asked me from the passenger seat. Charlie was in the back, moon-eyes reflecting the streetlights.

"I was a scientist," I told her. "Genius, making discoveries all over. Invented the successor to Facebook and took over Space X from Elon Musk. Had us on our way to Mars, I did. Beautiful wife. Successful kids. I was older... it was a paradise."

"I was a model," said Hannah. "I was wanted all the world over. Boys would send me their semen and blood. They were utterly devoted to even a glance from me. I was catered to at every step, yet treated with the utmost respect. I had the world at my fingertips. Now..."

She looked at her hands. She's had terrible acne and a weight problem since middle school. She made a honking noise and wiped her nose.

"I couldn't stop," she said. "I couldn't stop, even when I knew it was the next day. Then another. Then another. I knew it but I couldn't stop..."

"There, there," I said, patting her shoulder. "You've still got us."

Hannah cried louder, hands over her face.

"How about another verse?" Charlie asked. "It'll make me feel better anyway."

We sang, quietly and sadly. I looked in the rear view mirror.

Nothing yet.

We'd made it 24 hours, about. Drove all night. They slept. I didn't, casting a little awakesness chant every now and then to keep my eyelids from sliding down.

"I need to eat," said Hannah. We hadn't had nay a thing since we were in our windows.

"Samesies," said Charlie.

"We'll go for the fast foods," I said.

The sun never came up. It had been night since we left my apartment. And the weather was changing. It was getting colder, noticeably. It was feeling more January than October now. I shivered when I opened the window to order at a McDonald's. Hannah and Charlie gave me their orders and kept a close eye on our surroundings.

I was all jitter-like. I kept expecting Uncle Jasper to pop out. I pulled up to the window and half-expected to see him with his egg-yolk eyes and his old corn teeth and his beef jerky skin looking down at us.

But the drive-thru was uneventful, and we sped off just as soon as we'd sped in.

"Thank God for the cheeseburger," Charlie said, biting into his. "Mmm, now that's some salt and juice there... some modern corporate chemical goodness down in my gullet..."

Shut the fuck up, you dink, I thought.

Hannah got chicken nuggets and dunked them in little packets of sauces and chewed miserably. She fed me my own cheeseburger so I could keep both my hands on the wheel. The road was getting touchy, the damp turning to slick. I sucked down my large Coke. I was hungrier than I'd thought. The caffeine lit me right up again, but I knew I was cruising for one mighty sugar crash, awakeness chants be damned.

Snowflakes were now flitting about in the headlights. They were getting more plentiful with every turn of the wheels.

"Getting a bit nippy for October," said Charlie, clearly trying to pep himself out of whatever black hole his mind had fallen into. "I'm gettin to feel like I'm gonna need a cover-up back here."

"I feel like I never walked my window," said Hannah. "It's like a dream that's faded out. It must be completely closed off now."

"Our speech is slippin back into what it was before we went window, too," I said.

"We must be catchin up," said Charlie. "Back to our tuning, that is."

"No," I said, and my chest felt just as cold as the road outside despite the warm meal inside me. "I think it's because he's catching up to us."

"The snow is him warping the laws of nature by coming out his grave," said Hannah, nodding. "I knew it the second I felt the cold."

"He probably was waiting half-out the grave for days," I said, trying to not let my fear show. "Waiting for us and getting angrier by the second."

Hannah started weeping and so did Charlie. I held my outer appearance but inside I was right there with them.

We sang some more. That jaunty melody, a cross between Aiken Drum and Pop Goes the Weasel.

We're running from Jasper, Jasper, Jasper

We're running from Jasper

Uncle Jasper, are you mad?

It did no good. Our time had come.

The truck's motor shut off and the steering wheel went automatic, yanking out of my grip and pulling us over. We coasted to a smooth stop on the shoulder. Just like that.

"This is it," I said.

Hannah and Charlie were blubbering like babies, a couple caught children knowing they're about to get spanked.

We looked around the shoulder of the highway. Cars still sped past in the lanes, headlights ablazin like chariots of the lord, taillights like the devil minion's slit-eyes. Hannah and Charlie kept up their blubbers. I breathed like a boxer after a fight, hands still on the wheel.

Any second now.

"I never meant to do the spellsies," Charlie wailed. "I only wanted to try 'em!"

"Shut up," I yelled at him. "Lyin' only makes it worse!"

I saw a silhouette illuminated by one of the cars behind us. Skinny, shambling along. Cap on his head.

"It's him," I said. My lip bowed involuntarily. I started crying, too. We were all in big trouble.

No point in running. Daddy was home and he was pissed.

I watched Jasper come up to the passenger side, one slow step after another. He wasn't in a hurry now. Cars blasted by but I knew the drivers couldn't see us and wouldn't stop to help if they could and even if they did stop they'd be of no use.

Jasper opened Hannah's door and snatched her by the pussy, squeezed through her jeans. She groaned, clasped her hands around his iron wrist.

"Naughty childrens," he said, and his lips leaked black liquid when he smiled.

He took us out of the truck, all of us mewling like kittens, and sat on a tree stump near the forest edge. There, he bent us over his knee one by one, spanking us on our bare butts til the skin split. Then he hooked a dead finger up our buttoholes- it felt like I was getting a hot fire-poker shoved up there and I'm not ashamed to admit I screamed- and jolted it around and let us hang by our buttoholes for a bit while he chastised us.

"Ugh, yes," he hissed in his dead-leaves throat. "Take that punishment, youngin's, that's what yeh get... great permissions given and taken advantage of... gonna learn yeh the right way now, that's right..."

Hannah went first. Then me. Then Charlie. I could feel Uncle Jasper's boner through his old raggedy slacks. For some reason I thought of a large pinecone wedged in his crotch.

Then, it was over.

"No more spellsies," he said, us lined up in front of him on our knees, pants pulled up and butts throbbing. Our buttcheeks had blood drying on them like our face-cheeks had tears. "No more chantsies. If yeh ever gain the nerve to, yeh can bring that cute little hot button back down to my resting spot and I'll consider giving yeh another shot at something simple. But not for a loooong time. Now on with yeh's."

Without another word, he walked off through the trees. Punishment dealt. Naughty witches, we was.

We had got our crying out. We were back to normal. We knew it was better not to argue. We just watched him go until the trees and dark swallowed him up.

"I don't know what I'll do without my spellsies," said Charlie.

"Shut up," Hannah snarled at him. "We just made it off easy. He could've sent us to a hell dimension or worse."

"My ass hurts," Charlie whimpered.

I smacked him across the face. Useless cunt.

"Let's go home," I said. I went back to the truck. Hannah held my hand. Charlie followed us like a beaten dog.

We got in and joined the river of headlights.

On the way home, we gave a chant of thanks.

Thank you Uncle Jasper, Jasper, Jasper

Thank you, Uncle Jasper

Uncle Jasper, you're so kind

Dog Stands Up

All I can do right now is stand here and sweat.

I'm in the kitchen. He's on the other side of the wall. I can hear him panting. The panting is the only dog habit he hasn't been able to get rid of.

"Where's my food, John?"

His voice is soft, pleasant. He sounds like a male nurse asking if you need more juice. All the distortion and dog-noises are gone.

If you didn't know any better, you'd assume he was a person.

He was a rescue puppy. I had just bought my first house, a nice ranch out on the edge of a grassy meadow. I had plenty of space and no one to share it with. It was time for a pet.

I had owned a Newfoundland as a child, a female. Sweetest dog ever. Big gentle dummy. She lived til she was 14. It was only natural I'd want to replicate my childhood good feelings.

He was a little black ball of fluff. A bear cub. I'm the type of guy who would rather chainsaw an oak trunk than talk about my feelings, but I melted for the little fucker right there. He slobbered all over me when I held him for the first time. His sappy eyes did me in.

I brought him home and for the first few months, it was a typical man's best friend situation.

I trained him. Potty, food, sit, stay, all the basics. He didn't seem any different than any other dog. The Internet filled in what I didn't already remember and what wasn't common sense. The

only thing I noticed was his unusual verbosity— he was constantly yipping and cooing and whining at me whenever I'd talk to him, which was often. He slept on a big comfy bed in the corner of the living room.

I taught him a few tricks— how to roll over, shake. I did this gun trick where I would pretend to shoot him and he'd fall down and lie on his back. He loved Milk Bones. He got lots of chips, scraps of whatever I was eating. We'd binge Netflix together. I was only working forty hours a week at the time, so he wasn't alone too much.

He grew fast. Before long he was the size of a small bear. I had named him appropriately— Bear.

The weird stuff started a few weeks ago. I had just taught him how to stand on his hind legs, doing the old "hold the treat above the dog and let it rear up and try to balance."

He was decent enough at it. But then one morning I walked into the living room to find him standing on two legs, staring out the window. His front paws were at his sides. He was just standing there, looking out the window and not moving. Perfectly balanced.

He turned, saw me. Dropped to all fours again. We looked at each other for a second.

"What are you doing, Bear?"

He mewed at me. His eyes had a gleeful light to them. Like he'd just discovered some wonderful new game.

I didn't think much of it. But it started happening more.

He would rear up on his hind legs and start walking around.

He progressed alarmingly fast. His balance got better and better. He would make noises that sounded like words. The first word I understood was "Food." The second was "No."

One day I told him to stop doing it. It freaked me out. I saw genuine hurt in his eyes.

"Stop what, John?" he said in his developing voice. It sounded like a deaf five-year-old with a cleft palate. It was the first sentence he ever put together, and the first question he ever asked me.

He didn't listen. He kept at it. Eventually he stopped walking on all fours. He learned to use his paws as hands.

Then he started talking. The odd vocalizations became words and sentences.

I came home one day and he was watching TV by himself, sitting in the center of the floor on his butt like a human. He laughed like a person. He looked into my eyes and his eyes were no longer dog eyes. They had awareness in them. Human awareness. Complex awareness.

He pointed a paw at me.

"Bang."

I don't know why I haven't done anything. I need to report this, take a video of him and post it on Instagram at least. But the sight of a dog behaving like a person, hearing him talk with his own vocal chords, is not appealing. It's not cute or Disney-like. It's perverted. And I don't know why it's happening. Maybe this is more common than we think and everyone is just too freaked out to report it.

I am frozen with fear. I can't answer. I'm 6'1"' and over 200 lbs. I'm not afraid when walking down dark alleys. But I'm afraid now. I'm afraid of what he'll do next.

"Where's my food, John?" Bear says. "I need to eat."

I turn the corner. He's standing. He's tall enough to look down at me. His snout is dripping.

"I want meat, John," he says. His dog voice is higher than you'd expect.

I make him steak. He sits at the table. His big shaggy tail wags.

"We're going to have to train you, John," he tells me.

The steak smells sensational. I put it in front of him and he chows down, using a knife and fork and dabbing his snout with a napkin.

This is what I get for letting him keep his balls. It's the only explanation. I thought about getting him neutered early on, but I have so much space and there's no other dogs around. Plus I couldn't get over cutting off something else's balls. It just seemed barbaric. So I figured what the hell. I'm paying for it now, that's for sure.

"Here's what's going to happen," says Bear. He's finished his steak and sets the knife and fork down. He's surprisingly dexterous with the utensils despite his lack of opposable thumbs, sticking them between his toes and maneuvering his wrists.

"I'll require one of these a day for strength," he says, nodding at his empty plate. "No more of that dry meat-dirt you've been feeding me since I was a child."

"Bear," I say, trying to resist the urge to bolt out the door. "I don't know what's happening but I can't afford a ribeye like that every day."

I've had enough of this. I don't know why I didn't turn around, walk out the door and set fire to the house the second he pointed at me and said "Bang" when I came home that one time.

"That's your problem," says Bear, totally calm. "I don't know what's happening to me, either, but I'm fully awake now and we're going to have to deal with this together, since you are my only pack member."

His brown dog eyes stare into mine, and I can read emotion in them now. Not analog dog emotion— this is 4k human emotion, layered in on itself. There's contempt there, and a bit of caution, and disappointment and frustration, but also affection and gentleness.

"What could have caused this?" I ask him.

"It doesn't matter," says Bear.

He looks down at his empty plate and back up at me again.

He wants me to clear it for him. He wants to run the fucking show.

For the first time in all this I feel a twinge of anger amid all the confusion and the slo-burn of fear.

"You're smart enough to eat it like this, you can clear it."

Bear's expression doesn't change, but he growls at me softly.

I realize how big and powerful Newfoundlands really are. It's a primal thing, the fear the lances through me in that moment. Bear sees it, too. I can tell.

"Don't upset me," he says, and there's a touch of amusement in his voice, like a person who's realized at long last their formerly tyrannical boss is actually a simping pussy.

Unable to believe it's happening, I get up and retrieve the plate. I'm cautious, and I flinch a little when Bear lifts his paw and picks up the knife and fork and puts them on the plate. Another beta tell. He knows I'm afraid of him. He's going to use it now. He's the fucking alpha.

"I've never been cruel to you," I say. "I never hit you, not even when you would shit and piss all over the house. I feed you, I spend time with you. I've treated you as well as a human can treat a pet."

Bear slams his paws on the table and looks up at me with his dog eyes blazing. His lips fold back, revealing his impressive canines.

"Don't use that word," he says, and his voice is a gargled snarl.

I start shaking. This is primal- I'm trying to resist the urge to behave like this but my body is just doing it. It's reacting the way it would in a fucking pack, when the alpha dog is showing aggression. I'm submitting, unconsciously. Nature is taking its course.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Bear doesn't acknowledge me, just sets his used napkin on the plate and stares forward. Not making eye contact. I'm not worthy of his alpha eye contact.

"As I was saying," he says as I bring the plate to the kitchen and set it in the sink. "We're going to have to train you."

"I'm not doing that," I say, turning around.

He bares his teeth at me again.

"You're upsetting me, John."

"You can't do this."

"Down, John."

Through the auto-fear I manage to let my anger seep through.

"I'm not your servant," I snap. I sound like a scared housewife trying to stand up to her husband on beer night. I can't believe I'm this much of a pussy.

Bear leaps from the table, knocking it away, and is in my face. He's actually a bit taller than me on his hind legs. His wrinkled black snout is against my nose. I can smell his dog breath. He is a hulking black beast, 200 pounds of muscle.

Why did I get a male? I think to myself.

"Stop trying to achieve dominance," he says sternly.

His head moves lightning fast and I feel a sharp pain in my neck.

He nipped me. My hand flies to my neck where I find a sticky wetness. I check my fingers. No blood, just dog slobber. But I felt those teeth.

Bear's head travels south and he jams his nose into my crotch, sniffs.

I can't move. His nose is between my balls, pressing into my jeans.

He raises his head again.

"You have the scent of an underling," he says. "Scents don't lie. Your seed is weaker than mine. Now come sit down."

I want to bolt for the door. It's time to leave. Bear is fast. I've played fetch with him, watched him catch rabbits and mice and small squealing things out in the backyard. He would catch me and those fangs would tear a hole in my leg muscles and I'd be done. There's no one around— my nearest neighbor is at least a ten minute walk.

Bear sits down at his seat again.

"Sit," he tells me.

I do as I'm told.

"Stay."

This would be funny if I wasn't about to piss myself.

He tells me what he wants. He wants steaks, daily, and he wants to try other foods, too. He says he gets to choose the television shows. He wants me to quit my job so I can stay at home and serve him. He wants to go out and search for suitable territory to expand into. He wants to hunt, and to teach me to hunt. He wants to perhaps acquire a few females with sufficient breeding prospects. He will not tolerate anything less. And, of course, he wants to take advantage of this newfound "awakening" he's experienced.

"If you don't comply," he says. "I'm afraid I'll have to rid myself of you and find another pack member."

Then he does something that I will never forget.

He shifts himself on the chair and lifts a hind leg, exposing his dog balls. His dick is engorged and bright red and sticking up.

Oh God, no, I think. Not right now.

His head travels south, body twisted into a contortionist position.

He sniffs, then licks himself. Slowly, then faster.

At the fucking kitchen table.

This continues for a few moments. I look at the door. It's about ten steps away, past Bear. No obstacles, just clear floor all the way. I look back at Bear.

He grunts. His dick is shiny and pointed. Red rocket, red rocket. His tongue slathers over his hairy Newf balls. His huge front paws are splayed on the table in front of him.

He licks faster, begins to breath heavier. He grunts more urgently.

I don't wait. I take my chance, bolting for the door.

I can feel him behind me. He's so much faster than you'd think for a dog with all that bulk.

I feel his breath on the back of my neck as I throw open the door and slip through. I slam it shut behind me and he slams into it as it shuts. I can hear him barking furiously. He throws himself against the door once, twice, three times.

He tries the knob but while he can maneuver kitchen utensils, it seems the knob is too round and slippery for his paws.

"John!" he barks. "John! John! John!"

The barks are deep, angry. They continue as I lock the door and make for my car. I can't remember if any other doors are open. I don't think they are, but I'm not waiting around to find out.

As I haul ass down the road, I realize I've forgotten my phone. That's fine. The police station is only fifteen minutes away.

My house fades into the late autumn dusk, windows glowing.

Prime Selection

Children don't scream when you close in on them. They're not expecting it, and their power of denial is usually strong enough to slow their reaction, allowing me to administer the proper dosage of etorphine and get them cooperative.

This of course, all depends on if I pick the right ones, of course. You want the ones that are unsure, the ones whose parents rule over them with an iron fist or whose parents don't even say hello when the kid comes home, the ones who are so used to being told what to do at every turn that they second guess their own instincts even when they shouldn't, or the ones who've never been told what to watch out for in the first place. It's a spectrum of options.

So there is a power trip aspect to it. I admit that. But that isn't why I do this.

I do it this for the taste. The taste of victory and the taste of the meat.

I'm just a hunter.

This isn't personal. There is no sexual deviance present here.

I want to make that clear.

What's hard is actually catching the kids. That's the most challenging part. Picking the right moment and the right area. Kids are almost never alone these days. Most parents, even neglectful ones, are hysterically paranoid. Everyone is convinced the boogeyman is around the corner. No one trusts anybody. They're right to.

But this can all be used to your advantage, just like the serial killers of old preyed on people's naiveté and relative

innocence. In today's society, people don't pay attention to anyone but themselves and their families. No one wants to get involved in anyone's business.

So all you have to do is choose wisely, and wait for the right moment.

Once the kid is caught, the hard work is over and you can pretty much do what you need. The process is always the same, honed by years of experience. The research, the hunt, the needle, the transfer, the butchering, the feast.

I wear my make-up when I go out. No one's ever given an accurate description of my real face. I've been doing this roughly three decades now. I only hunt once or twice a year, and never in the same part of the country.

Kids go missing every day. A lot of it is sex trafficking, some of it domestic drama, but every now and then you get special cases like me who aren't in it for the diddling or to get back at the spouse. I just want to feel the thrill of the hunt, and the thrill of the catch.

There are exceptions to my rule as far as only picking obviously submissive targets. I haven't always chosen right. I remember one little girl I sprang on outside of Nashville who immediately started shrieking, "Oh, no Daddy, no no no!" looking up at me with these bright blue eyes and wringing her hands like an indecisive politician. I disappeared into the nearest building and got the fuck out of there, discarding my disguise as soon as I could. I was lucky that time. I didn't see anyone else, but chances were her Daddy wasn't far behind. I heard sirens as I fled.

I don't usually target white kids. Latinos and black kids are the safest bet. Always low-income. Boys tend to be easier to single out than girls, but girls aren't as strong as the boys and are usually easier to stick with my needle, sliding it in at the correct angle so the etorphine (thank you, Dexter Morgan)

goes into their jugular on a fast track to their brain. One scrappy little white kid I took in Appalachia nearly broke my wrist before I could get the needle in him. Fortunately, most of my targets are rendered docile by the surprise of the sting.

I've almost always picked the right target, and I can tell right away if I've chosen correctly. They usually just go silent and still. They freeze. Watch any predator catch a baby animal. There might be a struggle, but there's no real fight unless the parent gets involved. Swoop in and administer the medicine before they can do anything other than seize up.

Obviously, the most important thing is to wait until they're alone. That's the hardest part of the catch— waiting until the kid is alone. That's why the marginalized and the troubled are the easiest targets. Kids who are abused or neglected are the most likely to be by themselves. It's tragic, but that's nature. In some cases, I'd like to think I did these children a favor by delivering them from what was otherwise a painful and pitiful existence.

As the hunt commences, I'm as placid as the dew on Sunday morning. I don't say anything. I speak with my motions. I'm fast and I'm bigger and I've surprised you, and if you try to get away I'll catch you easily and it'll be worse. So just go with me and you'll be all right. All that's conveyed in seconds, with one firm grasping of the upper bicep and the tender meat beneath the skin.

Once they're under my needle's chill, there's a transfer period where their sleep-softened body gets packed up in a duffel bag I carry. I drive back, sedating them as needed and making sure they're sufficiently hydrated as well. When I get home, I butcher them. I'm proud of my efficiency.

I should mention that. I know what I'm doing when it comes to meat. I'm a butcher by profession. I have a butcher shop outside a major suburban area in the continental United States. If you're from my neck of the woods, you may have even heard of it. It's been in my family since my great-grandfather opened it in

the 1920's. I used to run the place hands-on but now I just allow management to do their thing while I sit back and collect what comes in. That said, my skills with a cleaver and a knife have never been sharper, if you'll pardon the pun. And with my easy capital, I have all the time in the world to indulge my hunting hobby.

Human meat, especially the meat of children, is so tender and so juicy it defies comparison. Its texture is one of a kind, but that's all I can really say about it. Some folks who've had the pleasure describe the taste as sweet. I wouldn't. Its texture and feel have additionally been described as indistinguishable from veal, but whoever made that observation must've been talking about adult human flesh, because again, I don't see it. Cuts of juvenile human are in a savory, delectable league of their own.

One kid will usually last me half the year. Once they're properly butchered, they go in the freezer with everything else. No one has ever mentioned the little arms and legs and torsos stored in the far corner of my freezer. They don't look much like human body parts after I'm done with them anyway, wrapped in old newspapers. One perverted proclivity I'll admit to is wrapping the kids in newspaper stories that tell of their own disappearances, though that has changed in recent times with everything going digital.

As for the leftovers and the throwaways, I boil what's left off the bones, pulverize them into powder, and incinerate everything else I don't use. I've tried preparing various organs before—the testicles of little boys are a tad too chewy but rather tasty if you roast them with brown sugar a la chestnuts. One time I ate a particularly feisty 6-year-old's heart raw. I sank my teeth into it like a piece of fruit, salting and peppering with each bite. For some reason it reminded me of a tomato, slimy and dripping.

My latest kill was a seven-year-old girl named Isla Cortez. She was an easy catch. She was on her phone. Kids are way easier to nab now that they have their goddamn phones, willingly lost in a cone of perpetual distraction. My process is well-refined,

though I've had to adapt as kids' social habits have changed over the years. They were easier to catch in the 90s because they were outside more, but nowadays they're easier to research and therefore easier to predict. You just create a convincingly fake profile of a kid the same age as your intended targets, and start friending away. Take your pick of an Instagram or a Snapchat, find a particularly troubled or quiet kid, learn his or her habits, determine where they go and when they go there. Then you wait.

This part takes a few months, if not more. Careful research is the whole set-up. If you fail to plan right, you're almost assuredly in for catastrophe. Though I've had some aforementioned close calls, I've never failed to bag a kid once I've decided they're fit for my dinner plate.

I should mention this, too— I would dress as a woman whenever I hunted. No one looks twice at women, especially older women, and certainly no one considers them a threat. I wore different wigs, sunglasses, contact lenses, fake nose, fake chin, make-up, jewelry, the whole thing. I had a body-suit made. I never wore heels. I made myself as harmless and invisible as possible. My bedroom closet looks like a metaphor for repressed transsexuality. I have to say, I'm far more weary of someone finding out about that than I am of them discovering what I keep in my basement freezer!

I'm rambling, I know. Let me try and focus.

I'm drooling as I write this, remembering Isla, all soft-looking and helpless after I'd caught her. I remember she was dressed in a pink shirt with a purple hoodie and black jeans. The words 'Business Bitch' were inscribed in bold black letters across the front of her hoodie, which was a couple sizes too big for her. I remember removing her clothes before I stretched her out on my chopping table. I remember shoving them in the incinerator. I remember she had a sweet fruity scent about her that evening in the parking lot. She occasionally did make-up tutorials on an amateur YouTube channel, and she was wearing a light mascara and blush and cherry lipstick that day. I remember her front teeth were crooked.

It was late summer. Her dark hair was streaked with blonde highlights. She was of Puerto Rican descent. Her parents worked and presumably still work at a bakery outside of Hoboken. Isla would take walks in the back of her apartment complex when she'd had enough of her parent's arguing and her brother's pot-smoking. They all shared a three-bedroom apartment. God bless social media and the easy information it gives you. I learned all this from Isla's own two lips.

As far as my targets went, Isla was relatively well-adjusted. Just liked to go for walks by herself in the back of her apartment complex. Her parents didn't mind it, never seemed to question her prolonged absence when she said she was going for a walk. No one ever went back there anyway, as far as they knew. And she always had her phone in case of trouble. So much for hysterical paranoia. Her parents would treat her school and busy public spaces as potential landmines of stranger danger, but the back of their apartment complex parking lot? Almost always empty, within close proximity, and therefore relatively safe.

Isla was a prime selection, and she turned out to be one of the most choice cuts I'd ever produced, and there are more kids like her than you can even conceive of. Lonely, shiftless, daydreaming, and ripe for carving.

Everything would always go really bright for me in the moments before I moved in for the needle-strike.

When I snatched Isla, she looked up at me and for a second I thought she'd scream like a lot of those PSAs are instructing kids to do now. Don't get in the car, once you're in the car they have you and can do whatever they want. Boy, are they right. I'd always worry about that. It almost never happened.

As I revealed myself from behind the dumpster, Isla did what most of my selections do— nothing at first, followed by vague confusion once she registered I was coming at her. Most kids don't panic when a woman tugs on their arm. They think you're trying to help them, or that you want something. There's none of

the immediate fear or revulsion or even suspicion that's reserved for men. I'm actually quite effeminate and slight-shouldered, so I pass relatively well.

Isla's phone clattered to the ground and her earbuds popped out of her ears still blaring the techno nonsense she was listening to.

The meat under this seven-year-old girl's thighs would be getting digested in my stomach within a few weeks time. I was salivating just thinking about it as I reached out for her arm. I'd picked an area in the back of her apartment complex near the dumpsters to make the abduction—no cameras and low visibility from the neighbors. She was playing Pokemon Go before I grabbed her.

She started to cry when I stuck the needle in, the realization of what was happening to her and that it was already too late all crashing into her preteen brain at once. I'd practiced my sticking technique on pigs, seeing how quick I could catch and sedate them without missing the right spot on the neck. My record is three seconds. Isla took about ten. She went limp and fell into my arms like the proverbial fainting damsel in distress.

There were tears drying on her cheeks. I licked them away greedily, savoring the salt on her smooth face-skin. I got my tongue under her eyelids, sucked on her eye sockets a little bit. I couldn't help it. A couple seconds ago she'd been Isla, another seven-year-old Latina girl who listened to Ariana Grande and dreamed of her make-up channel going viral. Now she was mine.

The whole thing only took a few seconds. There were no doors opening, no shouts of concern from any unseen bystanders. Just the humid summer evening and the crickets' chorus and the far-off rush of traffic. I held my capture close like a stolen package and made my escape. That was always easily the most exhilarating part of my hunt. Before the needle went in, the kid was still a person. After it was in, they were meat. My meat.

I picked up Isla's phone from the cracked asphalt and carried her into the small patch of woods that lined her apartment complex. I could feel her little heart beating against mine as I motored my way through the tree trunks and thorny brush. I thought of her ass cheeks crisping on my grill under some thyme and lemon slices. My stomach rumbled.

My car was waiting in another parking lot a few blocks away, tucked back in an industrial center where everyone had gone home for the weekend. I was stealthy. I moved fast, no footstep misplaced and no actions wasted. I laid Isla in the backseat of my friendly-looking Chevy Volt hatchback— no creepy pedo van for me, no sir— as though she'd passed out after a rowdy day at the amusement park or something. Her final journey began.

Later that month, I slathered her rump roasts with A1 sauce and devoured them in four mouthfuls each. They practically melted in my mouth, flavor so divine I nearly wept.

You're probably wondering what the point of all this is.

As I mentioned, I've been at this since the 90's. I don't now how many kids I've taken. The number is probably around fifty or sixty, despite my earlier estimation of only hunting twice a year.

But it's time for me to stop. I'm retiring. In more ways than one.

I can't go on like this. Every time I hear a baby cry, I salivate. Whenever I see a child of the appropriate carving age, I run through my head how I'd prepare them, what kind of marbling they must have on their shank.

Regular meat isn't good anymore. In fact, it's fucking bland.

I've tried stopping my hunts. I can't. In fact, as old age looms, I've been stepping up my research, sometimes with more than four or five kids on the shopping list. This has caused me to be sloppy, to take unnecessary risks.

The hunger is getting to me. It refuses to subside. I was in a restaurant the other night and that fucking Ed Sheeran song was playing. He kept singing, I'm in love with your body and there was this girl of about ten sitting in the booth adjacent to mine and I couldn't stop staring at her and wondering what her choice little candy-fed sweet breads would taste like properly prepared with flour and oil, sizzling in a saucepan. I ordered a fifty-dollar porterhouse steak medium rare and tore it to pieces. It did nothing for me. The girl's father saw me staring and stared back until I walked over and apologized, tearfully lying about the girl reminding me of my recently deceased stepdaughter. I probably could've just walked out, but the lie earned me a relieved pat on the arm from the girl's mother and a brief, obligatory hug from the girl herself. The power of denial. I touched her shoulder as she half-heartedly looped her arm around my waist and gave a quick squeeze and chirped condolences. Her chuck would be positively delightful— I could tell even from that momentary brush of contact. I went home and took a cold shower, trying to clear my head.

So it's clear to me. Between my rapidly deteriorating physical abilities and my increasingly stressed and insatiable mental state, I know can't do this forever. I've always known it. Both my age and my habits are catching up. It won't be long and I'll be too slow and too feeble to hunt effectively, and if I ever miss a needle shot, I'm done for. Prison is not an option for obvious reasons.

More than this, I'm certain if I continue, it's all but certain I will eventually be caught. Though I've been careful, paths will lead to me in the end. I'm sure of it. And that's if my increasingly reckless behavior doesn't do me in first. Before Isla, I would've never even considered doing a hunt so close to a kid's actual home.

But I can't live without the hunt. The hunt is my reason for living. I derive no pleasure from the preparation of the meat of mere farm animals, dumb-headed creatures loaded with antibiotics and preservatives. They might as well be lobsters for their lack of self-awareness. Give me a child brimming with youthful energy that thinks it's going to defy the odds of its unfortunate, bleak circumstances, believing in the sugar-sweet laws of Western pop culture that says everyone is special and everyone will one day be rich and famous regardless of their background. In one swift moment, let me steal any chance of that decadent, distant future away, and wash it down the drain with the hot blood from my cleaver. Let me see it in their wide eyes, the same expression as a baby raccoon that's been caught by an owl, startled and wracked with thoughts of impossibility towards the event unfolding before them— *No, this can't be happening, not to me, I have thoughts and plans and things to do and I'm going to live forever!*— followed by bottomless fear that curdles to helpless resignation. Isla's tears were not the only ones I've lapped up from smooth, peach-fuzzed cheeks.

So I've decided to dispose of myself, once this vague, meandering confession of a suicide note is completed. My trusty 12 gauge awaits. I've saved the last cut of Isla— her left flank — for the occasion, and I will enjoy every last slice and chew of that seasoned and grilled strip of girl. After that, it's been one hell of a ride. I truly hope nothing else happens. I embrace the void.

Given this note, I doubt anyone will count my death as a loss. I have no wife or heirs or family to speak of. I'm leaving what money I have to my managers at the butcher shop. They've earned it. All the legal paperwork is included with this note.

I suppose there's nothing much left to say now. I have tried to do what I do the best I can. Though I can't provide a list of all the children I've consumed in my time, perhaps this confession will leave some folks with some closure. Isla Cortez's family, at least, will know what became of her.

But really, the taste of child. You really should consider trying it sometime.

Crawlies

Graham led Justin to the square hole in the earth.

Summer storms had pounded the sub division for the last few days, and the afternoon air was heavy and thick with the remnants of warm rain. The sky was a shifting cataract, and the open basements that lined the damp street were flooded with what looked like off-white paint.

"I saw them," said Graham. "They're in the one on the corner."

The lots had all been abandoned during the Recession. They'd sat there, weeds overtaking the dirt. Some basements had been started but most hadn't.

The one on the corner had a large yard, and woods behind it.

They climbed up a one-story mound of dirt alongside the basement. Their shoes sank into the soft earth, the dirt getting into their socks. It smelled like cement and dust and drywall and lumber.

Graham pointed. The walls of the basement were built smoothly, suburban brutalism at its finest. Four grey cement slabs sunk vertically into the brown earth. The stagnant grey water was as still as the sky.

"I don't see anything," said Justin.

Graham dug in the dirt mound until he found a smooth white rock. He chunked it into the basement. It plopped into the water, ripples spreading.

For a second, nothing.

Then, the water seemed to boil.

Justin saw them. His stomach turned and his eyes bulged and his balls shrank up into his groin.

Worms. Big white ones, the width of the pipes that Justin's dad put in to guide the rainwater away from their gutters. As big around as an anaconda. With little skittery legs, two fingered claws on the ends of them. Justin couldn't see their faces, but they looked like a big writhing mass of glue-colored spaghetti thrashing in on itself, a roiling maelstrom of a submerged, slimy, ghost Medusa head.

"How many are there?"

"I don't know," said Graham. "But I threw a turtle in there yesterday and they ate it."

"Why would you do that?"

"To see what would happen."

"They ate it?"

"*Crunch.*"

"Oh my God, what do we do?"

They'd obviously have to tell the adults sooner or later. But not right away. No one came over into this part of the sub, far back from the main road and forgotten by the residents of the finished front. They considered the empty lots an eyesore and a property-value suck.

"What are they?"

"I don't know," said Graham. "They're worms. But I figured one thing out— they didn't get in there themselves. Those walls are solid. That's why it floods. So they either got put in there recently or they grew in there."

"They look like a cross between a maggot and a centipede."

"Maggotpede," said Graham. "Do you remember when we'd catch all those grasshoppers and shit on the screen of your garage? And feed them to the frogs we'd catch in the pond? Remember what we called them?"

Justin remembered. It wasn't that long ago.

"Crawlies," he said.

"That's a good name for these," said Graham. "These are more 'crawlly' than a grasshopper or a fly anyway."

The water had settled again, but Justin could see the rounded, segmented backs of a few of the worms sticking up out of the flat surface. Something about them really creeped him out. His older brother had shown him an extremely nasty porno earlier that year, where a woman had nails shoved into her nipples and through her clit, and while it had made his prick stiffen with an alarming quickness, it also turned something in his gut that he didn't like at all. Looking at these worms activated that same gut-feeling.

"I think we should keep this to ourselves for now," said Graham. "I only saw them because I came back through here after riding the hills the other day. I knocked a bunch of dirt in and they

all started moving like that. Then I threw in the turtle and they took it right away. All of them fought over it."

Justin watched the crawlies slumber under their glue-water.

"They've gotta be at least ten feet long," he said. "What should we do?"

"Let's come back tomorrow and see if they're still here," said Graham. "It's supposed to rain tonight."

It did indeed rain and the storm was loud. Justin thought about the strange worms only a few blocks away all night. He imagined them crawling into the pipes of his home, tick-tick-ticking through the vents until they emerged from the slats in his floor. He hadn't seen their faces, but he imagined them to have enormous beetle-jaws, the same bonedust color as the rest of them, strong enough to crush a turtle's shell.

He slept, though not well.

"I thought of something," said Graham when Justin met him the next day. School had let out two weeks earlier and the boys were free to do as they wished.

"What?"

"Who owns that lot?" said Graham. "I heard my parents talking and they said that some weird guy owned one of the lots. I don't know if it's the one with the crawlies, but we could find out. My dad's construction company did some contracting with the guys

who built those basements. The work never came through, but he would probably know something, at least."

"Boys?" said a voice from the garage.

Justin's mom came out, still in her bathrobe.

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to the back of the sub again today?"

"We were thinking about it."

"I think it'd be best if you didn't," said Justin's mom. "Mrs. Nottingham died last night."

"The old lady from the back of the sub?"

"Yeah," she said. "Obviously Jim is going to be very upset. So you should stay away from there. They're not going to want anyone bothering them today. And wear coats if you're going to be outside. It's cold for June."

She went back inside.

Justin felt that tingly feeling in his gut again. His mom was right. It was cold today, at least 20 degrees colder than it was supposed to be.

"We should go talk to your dad," he said.

They biked over and found Graham's dad in front of the flatscreen in his basement man cave. Graham's dad was a pipe smoker, a jovial bear of a man who worked in construction. He scratched his greying beard when the boys asked him about the lot owner.

"Lot 231?" he said. "The one on the corner of Ricketts and Hollyhock?"

"Yeah."

"Why you wanna know?"

"I remember you saying there was something weird about the guy who bought it, or who wanted to buy it."

"I never met him," said Graham's dad. "It's funny you bring him up... But yeah, they used to talk about him at meetings all the time. They said he was real weird. Everyone said he was a real Pagan-type person. Dancing for storms and sacrificing goats and all that. But yeah, he wanted that specific lot because of all the space it had, I remember. Made a big deal out of it. He didn't get the house because of the Recession, though. It's not that interesting, to be honest. Not like he did any rituals for us or anything."

"What kind of pagan stuff?" Graham asked.

"Oh, I don't know," said Graham's dad, lighting his pipe again. He was trying to watch the Tigers game. "It was probably more of an eccentricity than anything. He was really old and wanted to retire. He threw a big fit when the bankers and contractors told him he wouldn't be able to finish the house. But that was the same for everyone. Hollis was all funny about it, though. He thought the guy would come back and shoot the place up. That's why he told us about him. Said to keep an eye out."

"Why?"

Graham's dad puffed his pipe.

"Something about how if he couldn't have his little piece of the American Dream, no one could. Obviously, nothing ever came of it. I get why he was pissed, though. Everyone got screwed in 08..."

Graham and Justin looked at each other.

"I wouldn't worry about it, though," said Graham's dad. "They've been talking about filling those basements in for years. I wouldn't imagine it'll be much longer. And the guy won't bother anyone."

"Why?"

"That's why I said it's funny you bring him up. He died last week."

"We have to watch it tonight," said Graham. "The basement. We have to sneak out and watch the basement. We can hide down the street. Just as long as we can stay awake. We have to see what they do."

Justin agreed, though he was terrified.

Graham came and got Justin that night, texting him upon arrival. Justin snuck out as quiet as nightfall, leaving pillows in his bed.

They staked out a post down Hollyhock, just as the old sub turned into the unfinished new one. The crawlies were just another block down.

There was no moon, the ashen blanket of clouds still covering the sky. Though the light wasn't great, the boys could still see well enough. In the darkness, the basements looked like giant open graves.

They hadn't waited long when they heard splashing.

"Look," hissed Graham.

There was a sickly white light coming from the inside of the basement at the corner. It was faint but noticeable, like a dimmer turned almost all the way down. It was accompanied by a sloshing noise. The boys knew the worms were turning around on each other, over and over.

"It's like they're having an orgy," whispered Graham.

"What's an orgy?"

"You don't know what an orgy is?"

Before Graham could explain, they emerged.

One by one, they slipped up and over the edge of the basement walls as neat as could be. They moved like water, gleaming and vile and silent. Over the dirt yard and into the street they poured, one by one. There were at least ten of them.

They looked like big squishy, squirmy gutter-tubes, glowing in the dark with a pure, sick white. Justin saw they thankfully

didn't have enormous beetle jaws. Their faces looked exactly like their asses. You couldn't tell one end of them from the other. They glowed, but the light they gave off didn't illuminate anything around them. Instead, it seemed to darken the air around them.

Graham and Justin flattened themselves against the berm they were using as cover. As the crawlies got closer, they could hear them slithering down the street on their multiple two-clawed legs. They heard them slither right past, some of them only feet away. The moment seemed to last forever. Justin looked at the sky and tried not to scream.

They don't have eyes, he realized. They can't see.

"Look where they're going," whispered Graham.

Justin flipped over and peered over the edge of the berm.

The crawlies were headed straight for the Nottingham house, the house closest to the unfinished part of the sub.

The boys watched the worms slither up the front lawn. Upon reaching the base of the house they didn't stop moving-- they squeezed into the various orifices of the house, taking gutters and doors and windows. They flattened themselves out, crammed themselves through cracks, the ends of the gutters slurping them up.

"How are they doing that?" Graham asked, disgusted.

"I saw a YouTube video once of this octopus who squeezed itself through a whole that was, like, an inch wide," said Justin. "It looked a lot like that."

Then the glowing crawlies were gone and the night was eerily silent.

"Let's go," said Justin. The last thing he needed was for his parents to find him gone. And he knew there would be more bad news in the morning.

The next morning Mr. Nottingham was dead, as Justin predicted.

"It happens sometimes," said Justin's mom, having received a text from the Nottingham's neighbors who'd discovered the husband dead that morning after a wellness check. "They lived together their whole lives. But they weren't that old! 65 isn't that old..."

"We have to kill them," said Graham when Justin met him after breakfast.

"Who?"

"The crawlies, bonehead. We've got to get them in the daytime when they're sleeping. They'll come for everyone in the sub. That occult guy must've cursed the basement or something."

"How?"

"My dad keeps some lye in the shed. 50 pound bags of it. He'd kill me if he knew I took it, but he won't find out. We'll just take one bag. We dump it in there, it'll kill them in minutes, if that. Turns the water into acid."

Justin nodded.

"We'll have to dump it and run," said Justin. "I have gloves we can use. My mom's industrial cleaning ones. We can't breathe it in. And if anyone touches that water after us--"

"They won't," said Graham. "Who goes back there? No one. And even if they do, it'll be long after the water's done being toxic. It'll rain again or something at least. We have to do something."

"We can't tell the adults?"

"You think they'd believe us?"

Justin nodded, understanding.

"They might, he said. "But they won't kill the crawlies. And what if we take them back there and they, like, can't see them or something like that?"

They concluded it was best to handle this themselves. Justin couldn't decide if this was more exciting or terrifying.

"What if we mess it up?" he asked.

"We can't," said Graham.

That evening, after dinner while their parents were in front of their TVs and tablets and laptops, they met up again.

Together, they loaded a 50 pound bag of lye onto Justin's trusty-rusty red wagon and trundled it out of the shed. They took the back way where no one could see them.

They walked it down to the open basement, using the path behind Graham's house until they got to the unfinished part of the sub. Justin's gut churned like it had crawlies in it.

Together, they lifted the bag out of the wagon and balanced it on the lip of the wall.

Justin pulled himself up and looked over the edge. The water was still. He couldn't see any of the crawlies.

"Are they still in there?"

"Yeah," said Graham. "They have to be. But we can't piss them off before we do this."

Justin stopped looking at the water. He kept imagining them all leaping out at once, the water frothing as their jaws closed around both of the boys and dragged them under. The beetle jaws were still present in Justin's imagination.

After they'd both donned the big rubber gloves, Graham cut into the bag with a pocket knife. The two balanced it on the edge of the basement wall. They poured slowly at first. The lye tumbled out like salt, little jagged chunks. Justin noted the lye was the same muted white as the crawlies, like a white t-shirt that had been through the wash one too many times.

"We should've got masks," said Justin, putting his shirt over his mouth and nose. Graham followed suit.

They hadn't been pouring long before the water boiled. The crawlies screeched.

"Oh, God, I can hear them," Graham said.

He was right. There were sounds now. Mewling noises. Justin almost threw up. He remembered when his cat got pregnant and gave birth to a surprise litter of kittens one spring. The noises coming from under the crawlspace sounded just like the crawlies.

"Almost there," said Graham. The bag was getting lighter. They tilted it further and further. The lye cascaded out.

"Just dump it," said Justin once the bag was almost empty. They threw it in and jumped down.

The water was furious now. The mewling noises were shrill, piercing. The crawlies own movements were helping to stir the lye in. They were thrashing themselves to death.

The boys' feet hit the dirt and they bolted, leaving the wagon. The screams of the crawlies followed them down the block.

They waited an hour before they went back. The water was perfectly still again.

Heart pounding, Justin threw a rock.

The water remained still, save the ripples from the rock. The empty bag of lye floated on the surface in one corner, proving this had really happened. The bodies of the crawlies were gone.

"Maybe they dissolved," said Graham, but both of them knew it wasn't that simple.

The task complete, the boys went home and hugged their parents.

There were no more deaths in the neighborhood after that, and Graham's dad's prediction proved accurate as the basements were demolished and filled in soon after.

The Agroman

My great-grandchildren always wanted to hear this story whenever they came to visit. Since my health is failing and I may pass away any day now, I've decided to write it down and preserve it for them so they can read it after I'm gone.

The memory is crystal clear to me, even though it occurred over ninety years ago. This is how it goes...

It was a lovely Sunday morning in the late summer of my ninth year. My chores had been completed and I was free to do whatever I felt like doing. I decided to take a walk in Common Wood, which is what we called the forest that lay to the east of my parent's farm. Common Wood was large—a few thousand acres—and the Shoshona River flowed through it near the northern border where the trees ended and the fields began. A few dirt roads also ran through it, and there were countless small paths made by hunters and fishermen and boys like me.

With my chores done and my day ahead of me, I decided some solitary fishing in the Shoshona was in order. I changed out of my work clothes, gathered my pole and my hat, told my mother where I was going, and headed out for the cool shelter of the woods.

I walked along Garrison Road, enjoying the breeze and the sunshine and the tranquility of nature. Finally, I found the path I'd been looking for—my friends and I referred to it as The Olga Path because we'd once discovered Billy Bateman's older brother and his hideous girlfriend Olga necking alongside it. I turned and headed north toward the far off sound of rushing water.

It was a good ten minute walk before I reached the river. I immediately went to my favorite spot—a large white boulder jutting out of the sloping banks. I baited my hook, tossed my line in, and lay back.

The sun was a brilliant, eye-watering blast of light in the sky, and the sky itself was a rich, full blue. I was surrounded by the slosh of the Shoshona's steady current, the chirps of the birds and the buzz of the bugs, and the gentle breeze stirring the leaves. I closed my eyes.

I was just about to doze off when I heard another sound. It had me awake and aware in a split second.

It was a high-pitched whirring. Unlike anything I'd ever heard before.

The only thing I could compare it to at the time was the sound of the rare automobiles that I'd heard in town. It was mechanical, and that's all I knew.

But this noise sounded smoother, not sputtering and clunky and loud like the car engines. It wasn't until decades later, when I heard my first computer booting up, that I could really compare it to anything.

It was coming from across the river beyond the thick line of trees, most likely in a meadow that lay about two hundred yards from the opposite bank. Not wanting to miss a glance at whatever was making the noise, I quickly jumped into the river and waded to the other side, thankful for the mild current and the fact that the water only came up to my waist.

I emerged on the other bank dripping, my brow furrowed in thought as to what I might be listening to. I crept through the underbrush (there was no path here), and tried not to snap too many twigs. As I crept along, I began to see something through the thinning trees.

The first thing I deduced about the object was that it was extremely shiny, a polished metal of some sort, as silver as fish skin. It was also big, almost big enough to fill the entire meadow, which could have fit two farmhouses easily.

The high-pitched whirring increased in volume as I got closer. When I was almost to the edge of the clearing, I stopped and stared, and got my first clear look.

I was suddenly frightened.

A huge, stream-lined disk was sitting on four spindly little legs right in the middle of the clearing. It was about fifty feet in diameter, and it was the shiniest, most unblemished silver I'd ever seen. The sun's light struck it and bounced off, strong enough to hurt your eyes. It didn't appear to have any windows or doors. It looked as sterile as a doctor's needle.

Standing all around it were about twenty men. They were tall and wore black suits and bowler hats. They had little circular sunglasses on their faces. The sunglasses covered their eyes perfectly. They looked more like welder's goggles than sunglasses, though, now that I think about it.

The nearest man was close enough for me to spit on. They all stood straight and stock-still, their unusually pale faces turned somberly to the object in front of them. The only sound was the soothing hum emitted from the silver disk.

It was far too hot for the men to be hearing such dark, stuffy clothes and I thought they must be terribly uncomfortable. What were they doing here?

As I watched, crouched in the foliage, the machine withdrew its spidery legs. It remained hovering as the legs withdrew into its metal belly, otherwise perfectly still above the sun-beaten grass.

I smelled something strange, acid-like and biting. Kind of like the hair gel my father applied to his scalp every morning.

The disk started to lift off into the sky. It moved quickly and smoothly like an elevator, straight up, and soon I had to squint to look at it. It rose higher and higher, getting smaller and smaller.

Out the corner of my eye, I sensed more movement to the north. I turned my head and saw an identical disk rising into the sky, emitting that same humming noise. And to the northeast, another.

They all rose simultaneously, brilliant metal saucers getting tinier as the great wide blue swallowed them. My eyes teared up from the searing light of the midday sun. I watched the three disks until they were just like little bits of tin foil winking in the sky, and then my vision got too blurry and I had to look down to wipe my eyes. I blinked at the ground a few times, feeling a bit dizzy.

When I looked up again, the giant disks were gone.

The men in black suits were not.

They were all looking right at me.

In my effort to watch the departing ships, I had stepped right out of the woods without realizing it.

I stared back at the men, frozen and not quite sure what to do. The one closest to me turned around completely. I saw he wore black gloves on his hands and handsome black shoes. He looked extremely clean, and there was a minty odor about him that reminded me of my dentist's office. His face was clear, and free of sweat despite his choice of clothing.

I could see two tiny reflections of my scared self in his black glasses. That's how close he was. I was still frozen to the spot only able to look at him as he removed his hat and smiled at me. His head came to a slightly rounded point, as bald and white as

an egg. His teeth were just as white, and remarkably even in his rosy red gums.

"Hello," he said. "Can I help you with something?"

His voice was as soothing and metallic as the engine noises of the strange landing crafts.

I didn't answer him, just looked into the tiny black mirrors of his glasses and saw how scared I was.

"There's no need to be afraid," the man said, still smiling. "Are you lost?"

"No," I stammered.

"Oh, that's good," said the man.

I looked around the clearing and saw that we were alone. The other men had disappeared without a trace or a sound.

The man spoke again.

"Can I help you?"

The paralyzing feeling of being found had subsided a bit and I found my tongue. The man didn't look so threatening anymore. A calm sensation washed over me.

"No, thank you," I said. "I'm just fine."

"What's your name?"

"Howie Hatcher," I said without hesitation.

"It's nice to meet you, Howie Hatcher," said the man. He bowed slightly, and placed his hat back on his head.

"What were those things, sir," I asked.

There was a terrible moment where I thought I had offended him, as his smile wilted instantly, but then he looked up into the sky and smiled again.

"Oh," he said. "Those were Agros."

(I should mention, he didn't actually say, "agros", he made some strange noise in his throat, which at the time sounded to me like "agros")

"What were they doing?"

"Putting us here."

"Why?"

"You."

I stared dumbly. The man continued to smile, and without warning, he lifted the goggles off his eyes and onto his forehead.

His eyes were the purest white I'd ever seen, like two pools of milk set into the man's face. As I watched, little swirls of black began to seep into the white, like drops of ink into

pitchers of cream. They spun and twisted and cycled and his eyes seemed to be getting bigger and bigger.

I began to feel drowsy. I wobbled a bit on my legs, captivated by the man's soporific whirlpool gaze. I had the strongest urge to fall asleep. To just lay down right there and take a nap. The day seemed overwhelmingly hot, the sun overwhelmingly bright.

I was about to lie down on the scorched grass when a crow screeched loudly to my right from the branch of a tree. The man, startled, looked away from me and up at the bird, which took wing. It was gone with a flap of its black wings.

"GET AWAY"

The thought ripped through my head, and I obeyed it. I tore myself from the swirling gaze of the man and I bolted.

I ran through the river, forgetting my pole. At the other side I chanced a look behind me and there was the man on the other bank, looking at the water and then up at me. He still had that smile on his red lips, showing his red gums, and his goggles were back over his eyes. He looked at me for a moment, then turned and walked back through the brush. He strode right through, not stepping over bushes and bending branches and ducking, just walking right through it.

I ran all the way back home and up to my room where I shut the door and lay on my bed. My mother came up and asked what was going on. I told her and, of course, she didn't believe me.

The next week I found out Bernie Ewell, the town drunk, had disappeared. He was last seen stumbling off into Common Wood, right where the Shoshona began its journey through the trees. When my parents talked about it at dinner, I thought about the gaze of the man in black and the machines he'd called Agros. I shuddered and didn't say anything. If my mother remembered

anything about what I'd said to her the week before, she didn't mention it.

Everybody in town figured Bernie had fallen into one of the harsher parts of the river and been swept away, his alcoholism finally catching up with him. A small funeral service was held and everybody got on, including me.

About twenty years later when I was a young man and the UFO phenomenon was in full swing and everybody was talking about Roswell and Area 51 and flying saucers and abductions and strange bald men wearing black suits, I always believed every story I heard, not matter how outrageous.

So that's the story, and I hope Kristy, Taylor and Jessica enjoy reading it as much as they enjoyed hearing me tell it... whether they continue to believe it really happened or not.

The Amateurs

The drive out to the camp took longer than anticipated. It should've been my first clue everything was going to suck. There was no real reason for the delay, it just happened because we're all average people in our twenties and no one wants to be responsible so everyone showed up at my place when they felt like it, sending half-assed texts of apology. We were like an hour off schedule before we even got started.

Frank drove me, him and Natalie. Noisehead was behind us in his truck with the other guys.

It was me, Frank, Natalie, Joe, Noisehead (I've never learned his real name, I don't know him that well) and Rian. We all knew each other through school and through each other.

I was directing this particular project. Frank usually directed but he was here as camera today. Joe was my DP, a dependable guy. Noisehead was general crew and the lead actor. Natalie was the female lead. Rian was a spare actor/crew. Everyone was getting paid in beer and food once it was over.

Natalie and Frank had had a fight before we all met at their place. I don't know what the fight was about but they barely talked the whole way out there. I didn't care since me and Natalie never really got along anyway. Frank convinced her to do this. I appreciated it.

I had written the script in a burst of creativity a few nights previous. I thought it was fucking brilliant but it was probably mediocre like everything else I do. It was about a guy who comes back from war to find his wife in bed with another man who turns out to be a ghost.

The script came out in one of those glorious orgasms of creativity, the idea surfacing after seeing a Vox article on military wives. I banged it out in like an hour and was sure I

was finally going to be recognized for my genius, go viral, make a name, all that shit.

I called Frank and told him about it the next day. He was enthusiastic until I said I wanted to direct. I brought up Joe, who I've known casually for a few years. Joe had mentioned this abandoned Army camp out off Marshall Road. I can't remember the context, but he'd mentioned it.

"No one goes out there," I told Frank. "It'd be perfect for this."

"Sure, bud," said Frank. "Let me know the dates."

Frank has not followed through on a lot of his promises before. I've known him for years and he keeps saying he'll do shit and talking about it but never actually following through on anything. I was fed up with him for the most part and I didn't want to ask him to do this at first. But I was high on dopamine since I'd finished something myself and he's my friend so I figured I'd give him one last chance. Plus, literally no one else I know has the equipment I need. Even Joe uses the equipment from the Quicken video department for his projects.

The drive took about half an hour, out 96 west and down a few dirt roads, deep in the woods in rural Michigan.

The camp reminded me of any old fifth grade camp that you'd see in teen movies. There was a row of old cabins and a mess hall and these weird wooden poles with ropes hanging off them. I couldn't tell if they were flagpoles or what— they were too short and thick to be flagpoles. The whole place was smaller than I'd imagined, too, but that was perfect. Only a few acres tops, a little community carved into the woods. The buildings looked like they'd been built in the 70s. Joe said the place was abandoned in the 2000s.

We got in and unloaded the filming equipment, setting up home base in the mess hall, which was this long low building on the northern end of the complex. The only furniture in the mess hall were these wooden picnic tables that had clearly been meant for outside use.

The cabins were these little wooden huts, all set in a row down the main drag with those weird flagpole-things lined up out front. The cabins looked like outhouses, almost. The place was creepy, but so's every place in the middle of nowhere, especially when you're not supposed to be there. The doors to every building were unlocked.

I started looking around. We'd do most of the shooting in the mess hall, some in the first cabin, and some outside. We'd shoot into the night. If someone came along and kicked us out, our only plan was to beg forgiveness. Joe said we probably wouldn't have anything to worry about. I didn't see any cameras anywhere, and who the fuck would pay to run power out to a place like this anyway.

When everything was unloaded, I took stock of what we had while everyone else mingled and milled about.

Right away, the confusion started.

Everyone seemed more interested in exploring the place than getting anything set up. I couldn't remember what shot I wanted to do first. I've never been much of a go-getter or a natural leader, but I wanted my brilliant script executed in my way. I didn't want to argue with anyone. I sat in the mess hall and looked at my printed script over and over.

I suddenly had a terrible revelation, sitting there on the splintery picnic table.

The script sucked. It was fucking shit. I was embarrassed of it. I couldn't shoot any of this bullshit. I had to hide it.

I decided to just be quiet and hopefully no one would notice me.

Frank sat at the picnic table where all the batteries had been unloaded. There was no power to the place, like I said, so we'd have to make good use of our batteries. The cars could charge them if we had to, but we didn't want to run too much of a risk draining our car batteries and getting stranded. Cell phone service wasn't great out here anyway— mine was stuck on 1x the whole time.

Frank just took a seat at a picnic table and stared into the distance. Like I said, he and Natalie had been irritated and passive aggressive with each other the whole way up here. I rode in the back like I was their kid or something.

Natalie sat down across from Frank with her back to him. She pulled out her mirror and did her makeup obsessively. She'd been working on it the whole way here, using the visor mirror.

Half an hour went by and nothing was getting done. I was frustrated but couldn't do anything about it. My script was terrible. I kept trying to edit it but nothing worked.

Noisehead came up to me. He and the other guys had been exploring and hanging out by the cars. I was pretty sure they'd smoked at some point, too.

"I thought we were going to have a plan here," Noisehead said.

"You're preaching to the choir," I told him, trying to hide the shitty script.

"But you're the director, right?"

"...yeah."

Noisehead snorted and shook his head and walked off in disgust without another word. I felt humiliated but I was too focused on the shitty script to care.

I heard him talking to Joe a few seconds later, just outside the door.

"You mind if I take charge here?" he asked.

"Not at all."

"Let's find out where the fuck we are with this and see if—"

"Let's just bail, dude."

"What?"

"This place is giving me the fucking creeps. Let's just bail."

I heard Rian speak up.

"Let's go look around at least a little. We drove all the fuck the way out here."

The three of them disappeared around the side of the building. I decided I hated them.

I moved over and sat with Frank at the other table. I wanted to sit and just take stock of the situation. Something was wrong

and I couldn't place it. I wanted to get started but I had such a terrible script. Why the fuck hadn't I noticed this before?

I stared at the pages of my script, the courier font, the bold and italic. There was no saving it. I almost teared up I was so mad at myself. And I'd dragged everyone out here. How humiliating. My life was just one big attempt at popularity followed by inevitable humiliation due to my own incompetence.

"Do either of you feel... out of it?" Frank asked suddenly.

Natalie didn't answer, continuing to do her make-up. But for the first time I noticed that yes, I did have this weird Nyquil feeling about me.

"Yeah," I said. "I do feel a little... medicated."

"Medicated is the right word," said Frank.

He went back to staring off into the distance, out the windows at the other end of the mess hall.

"Joe and Rian are going to take a look around," said Noisehead, coming inside.

"Where are they going?" I asked.

Noisehead ignored me.

"I don't know what the plan here is," he said to Frank. Frank didn't answer him, so he came over and started fiddling with the batteries, taking them off the chargers and putting them back on. I watched him. He was really pissing me off but I was too

much of a pussy to say anything. Frank stared out the windows and Natalie kept looking into her mirror and doing her mascara.

"FUCK," I heard her murmur.

"Aren't we going to have a plan?" Noisehead asked again, clicking another battery onto a charger. "I was told there'd be a plan."

My fucking script. It was in my sweaty hands. The pages crinkled. It was fucking terrible, every line exposing me as a hack, talentless, worthless. That was supposed to be the plan but the plan was the worst thing that had ever been put on paper.

I should just fucking die right here, I suddenly thought.

Then we heard a voice from outside.

"Hello?"

The four of us turned and saw her.

It was a woman, this little old woman standing in the grass out in front of the mess hall, between the cars and the door. She was wearing an old dress, like a weird Amish bonnet thing. She had a toothless little puckered mouth and twinkling eyes. Her hair was hidden under a blue bonnet.

"Who are you?" she asked us through the open mess hall door.

Noisehead went out to speak with her. I could hear him explaining, telling her we were figuring out a plan. She asked

him questions. I caught questions like, "Well, who's permission did you get?"

I absent-mindedly looked down the other way out the windows at the opposite end of the mess hall, toward where Frank was looking.

My balls shriveled.

There was a man standing in the trees, silently. Over by one of the cabins, behind it. Just inside the tree line.

He was staring right at me. He was older, too. About the age of the woman. An old Farmer John type, ancient and rusted and skinny and wiry. He wore a black tuxedo and his white hair was slicked back. He looked like a preacher or something.

In his hands he cradled some sort of black pitchfork. Four prongs, serrated and barbed.

Shock blew through my mind. A singular thought.

We shouldn't be here.

I went over to the door, keeping my eyes on the pitchfork man. The guy's eyes were hollow. He watched me, no expression. Frank stared like he was hypnotized.

"Noisehead," I called. "Get back in here."

"I'm figuring out a plan here," Noisehead snapped.

"Just come inside, Noisehead," I said.

The pitchfork man hadn't moved.

Noisehead excused himself to the bonnet lady and came back in.

"You might want to be careful," she called after him. "I think this place is haunted."

"What is it?" Noisehead asked me peevishly.

"There's a guy over there," I said. "He's got a pitchfork."

I pointed out the windows.

The guy was gone.

"Where's Rian and Joe?" Frank asked. He was slurring his words.

"They went exploring," said Noisehead. "To look for... to look for the plan."

"Look," I said, pointing out the door.

The woman in the bonnet was gone, too.

"Where'd she go?" Noisehead asked, peeved, as if it was my fault. "She couldn't have just walked off."

He stuck his head out the mess hall door.

"Hello?"

I sat back down at the battery table, my sweat-soaked script in my hands. I wanted to leave but we didn't. I wanted to get the fuck out of there.

"I haven't been able to jerk it in like weeks," I said randomly. "Not even to porn."

"We haven't had sex in six months," said Natalie, still focusing on her one eyelash with her mascara.

"What's the fucking plan here?" Noisehead yelled. He was back to fiddling with the batteries.

"This is all your fault," I snapped at Frank. "You had that shot. It would've been you. You didn't take it. Cause you're a pussy."

"Yeah..." said Frank, sounding bored, still looking out the window where the pitchfork man had stood.

I fiddled with the pages of my script, crinkling them. Noisehead just kept playing with the batteries and muttering about the plan while Natalie fiddled with her eyeliner and muttered, "FUCK," over and over.

"You're the pussy," Frank said quietly in that tranced out way. "You're the pussy, actually..."

Suddenly, Joe and Rian tore around the side of the mess hall and burst through the door.

"THERE'S A FUCKING CEMETERY OUT THERE," Joe exclaimed. "AND A BUNCH OF THE GRAVES ARE FUCKING OPEN."

"You're the pussy," said Frank again, sounding like he was about to fall asleep.

I looked down at my godawful hack script.

Without another thought I tore it to shreds, scattered it all over.

"You're right," I said over and over. "You're right."

"Who's right?" Joe asked.

"WE HAVE GOT TO FUCKING GO," Rian said, actually dancing in place he was so freaked out. "This place freaked me the fuck out the second we rolled up!"

"Dude," Joe said, coming over to me and grabbing my shoulders. "What are we doing?"

"I DON'T KNOW," I told him.

"He said there'd be a plan," Noisehead yelled. "He said there'd be a plan but there isn't one!"

"Dude, they're fucking tripping out," Rian said.

"No shit," said Joe.

"My script was terrible," I told Joe, almost crying. "I'm so sorry for wasting everyone's time. I deserve to die."

"Dude, what?"

"I deserve to die. I'm a terrible person and I'll never be successful."

"Dude, we have to get out of here," said Joe. "Rian and I found a bunch of open graves in the back. Like, freshly open graves."

"WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT ?" Noisehead screamed at Frank. "STOP LOOKING AT IT."

"I'm watching the ritual," said Frank, matter-of-factly. He was still staring into the woods. "And you're the pussy."

"Fuck," whispered Natalie, swiping the little mascara wand thing upward on her same left eye.

"Dude, you have to wake up," Joe said, looking me directly in the eye. "You guys are tripping out."

"I am awake," I insisted, but Joe was right— I felt like I was swimming in a dream or something.

Joe didn't wait for us. He and Rian hastily started grabbing all the film crap and taking it back outside and throwing it in the bed of Joe's pickup. Noisehead helped them, babbling about the plan.

"Yeah, man, the plan is get the fuck out of here," I heard Joe tell him. "That's the plan."

"As long as that's the plan," Noisehead said over and over. "I was told there'd be a fucking plan."

For some reason I felt really hot. I wanted to sit down again.

"You're the pussy," Frank muttered.

His clothes had changed, I realized. He was wearing a blue button up shirt and suspenders. Red ones.

Natalie was still fucking with her make-up. Her eyes were as black as a raccoon's (see, I can't even come up with original metaphors, that's how much I suck), caked with mascara. Her clothes had changed, too. She was wearing an old-timey dress, a blue one like Frank's shirt. Like the one the woman at the door had been wearing.

I forced myself to look down at my clothes. I was still wearing a t-shirt, but now I had suspenders on, too.

Red ones.

Joe grabbed Natalie and Frank by the arm and towed them outside.

"Come on, dude," he said to me. I followed, staring down at my clothes.

As soon as I set foot on the grass I snapped out of whatever daze I'd been in.

"Holy fuck," I said. "What is wrong with me?"

I looked down at myself. The red suspenders were gone.

I thought of the man with the pitchfork and almost had a panic attack.

"Are you sane again?" Joe asked. "We're loaded up."

"I don't know what just happened," I said.

"Can you fucking drive? Frank is out of it."

"I can drive," I said, not completely sure but I wanted out of there.

"Dude, it feels like we're being watched," said Rian, already in the pickup. "It felt that way the second I got out of the car."

"Where are we?" Natalie asked. "And why's my left eye got like a million tons of mascara on it?"

Her clothes were back to normal again. So were Frank's. Frank seemed dazed, but Noisehead loaded him into the passenger seat of his car.

"It's all right, man," he said. "All part of the plan..."

We tore the fuck out of there, kicking dust up. Joe led the way. I didn't look back. We all felt better by the time we got on the highway.

"Dude," I said. "What the fuck just happened?"

"That place was haunted," said Frank. "Duh."

"Who was that guy with the pitchfork?"

"I'm not saying it out loud right now."

Then just a few weeks ago Joe Snapchatted me and sure enough there was some weird evil spiritual fuckery afoot.

"Dude," he said. "I found out what's going on. I looked up all these articles and I read that camp was built on an old town. They said witchcraft was performed there— people in surrounding communities would hear weird parties and see weird lights on certain nights of the year. People stopped going through there because they said that the devil was using the town as a portal to this world. Then when the railroad was built it bypassed the town and it just kind of dried up over the years."

"Then what's with the army camp, though?"

"It wasn't the army," said Joe. "It was like this old ROTC program out of OCC. They used it from the 60's until the 2000s, but only in the summer. And no one would ever stay there at night. It was such a pain in the ass they used it less and less until they just stopped going. That's how I first heard of it-- my uncle went there when he was a teenager. He said guys would dare each other to go out to the cemetery every morning when they got there. No one would do it."

I haven't written another script since. Sometimes I think about the shreds of that one I wrote about the military ghost, and if they're still on the floor of that mess hall, and if it was really any good.

The Tree with the Face

Morrie Quircus always took his walk after dinner. He would walk up Pierce Rd down to Miles Rd, then take Miles down to Ragford, then take Ragford back to Pierce.

The walk took him down wholesome country lanes, the roads all dust and khaki-colored dirt. The grass was green and long and the meadows and woods were like paradise. The scents he inhaled were indescribable except to say they were pure and all-American.

The tree was right up the corner from Pierce and Miles on the southern shoulder of the road, across from a farmhouse owned by a reclusive family whom neither Morrie nor his neighbors had ever had much interaction with.

The tree was notable because it had a face on it. The features were carved from pieces of wood that were nailed to the trunk about seven feet up. There were googly eyes and a crooked, Owen Wilson-esque nose and a grinning mouth full of teeth. The look on its face was supposed to be goofy and playful but it came off as deranged.

Morrie didn't know how many times he'd passed the tree before it spoke to him. He took his walks at least five days a week—it kept him spry and energetic for his 84 years. If he didn't get to take his walk, he was grumpy and cramped.

He was walking by the tree when he heard a rough voice to his left.

"Hey, chief," it said.

Morrie turned about. He didn't see anyone.

"Excuse me?" he said, expecting a person to walk out of the brush.

"I said, 'Hey, chief,'" said the voice.

"Where are you?" said Morrie, looking around.

"Up here, chief," said the voice.

Morrie looked up the tree and gave an involuntary yell.

The tree was grinning down at him. Its eyes blinked.

It was an old tree and its trunk was thick, the width of a truck tire at least. Its branches were long and grasping, extending out over the road. The tree stood at least thirty feet tall.

Morrie gaped.

"You can talk?"

"I can," said the tree. "Just happened recently. Want to know how?"

"I most certainly do," said Morrie without thinking. The tree was down off the road across the ditch. He stared at it.

"Come a little closer and I'll show you," said the tree, still grinning.

"I can hear you from here," said Morrie.

"Fine," said the tree. "See the house across the street?"

The tree seemed pointed with its branches.

Morrie turned and looked. There was the old farmhouse at the end of a long, long driveway. Morrie had never seen the family that lived there, but his neighbors said it was a mother and a father and a son.

"Yes," said Morrie.

"The kid's got severe cerebral palsy, and he put this face on me so I would be his friend," said the tree. "Cause no one talks to him, not even his parents, really. And he wished so hard for me to be real, and then the other day I just gained consciousness out of nowhere."

"I see," said Morrie.

"So yeah, it was just some Frosty-the-Snowman type shit," said the tree. "Now I'm just chilling in the breeze."

"I see," said Morrie again. "Well, I'd best be on my way."

The tree frowned.

"Why?"

"Because I'm on my walk, and I have to get home."

"You're talking to a tree," said the tree. "You're going to just walk away from a talking tree?"

"You just said you came to life for the boy," said Morrie. "Not for me."

"Yeah, but he can barely talk anyway and his parents never let him outside. They wouldn't believe him when he said I'd come to life. I think he's being punished."

"Not my problem," said Morrie. He turned to go. He would take an Ambien when he got home and sleep like a baby. Lord knew why he was seeing this talking tree. He had been missing his sleep lately.

The tree looked hurt.

"You're kind of a prick, aren't you?"

The tree shook itself, seeming to cringe in regret.

"Sorry, I didn't mean that. I didn't mean that. I'm just jazzed to be sentient, you know? I'm really old—almost a hundred years. Never thought I'd be able to talk to anyone. Please don't go just yet."

Morrie stood there with his hands in his pockets. He looked up the road.

"I have to admit, I never thought—"

"Hold up," said the tree. "I can't hear you. Come a little closer."

"I'm not coming near you," said Morrie sharply.

"Fine, dickhead," snapped the tree. "Suit yourself."

Morrie went home and took three Ambien and was knocked out for the night. As he drifted off into a drug-induced slumber, he saw the tree's grinning face.

The next day on his walk, Morrie watched the tree as he approached it. Just when he thought the wooden face was back to being frozen and inanimate, the wooden lips jerked and it spoke to him again.

Dammit, thought Morrie. *I hope I'm not getting dementia.*

"Sorry I swore at you yesterday," said the tree. "I have a temper sometimes. I'm stuck here by myself all day. No one talks to me."

"I didn't think you were real," said Morrie. "I thought I might have imagined you because I wasn't getting enough sleep."

"Oh, yeah, sleep's so important," said the tree. "I hate nights, I count as high as I can so I get to sleep."

"You can count?"

"Yeah, I can do just about anything except move around," said the tree. "Listen, I want to apologize for calling you a dickhead yesterday. If you're not comfortable coming over here then I understand. But please will you just chat with a poor old tree for a few minutes before you continue your walk?"

"I suppose so," said Morrie, resigning himself. "What would you like to talk about?"

And so over the next few days Morrie stopped and talked to the tree on his walks. The tree was very lonely, it seemed. It hadn't seen the child from the house since it'd been brought to life.

"Just my luck to become self-aware and I lose my only potential buddy," the tree said glumly. "Sure glad your evening walk comes past this place."

Morrie was a tad ruffled by the whole situation. He knew he had to be imagining the whole thing. But goldarnit, if he was losing his mind, he might as well enjoy it. And the tree loved to talk.

In addition, the tree was always trying to get Morrie to come across the ditch, but Morrie always refused. He'd listen politely, and the tree guilted him if he tried to leave before the tree had its fill of talking.

The conversations went on, the tree lecturing and pontificating and spouting information and opinions like a drunken uncle at Thanksgiving.

The next day...

"I'm not saying that Mark Zuckerberg doesn't deserve credit for creating Facebook," said the tree. "All I'm saying is that social media was an inevitability, just like all waves of

technology. There's people that catch the wave and people that don't. If it hadn't been Zuckerberg, it'd've been someone else. Zuckerberg was just right place, right time. Talent and connections. Lots of people with talent in this world, not everyone is a billionaire. So without the connections, you're nothing. Right place, right time. So what makes him so fucking special?"

And the day after that...

"You don't ruffle someone's hair if you respect them, that's just blatant disrespect. Would you rub the president's hair?"

"Probably not," said Morrie.

"Would you rub your boss's?"

"I'm retired, but no."

"Were you afraid of your father?"

"No."

"Oh, all right, never mind..."

And the day after that...

"The scene in Pulp Fiction where Samuel L. Jackson is dominating the white boys—the one played by Frank Whaley, you know, where he eats the burger? That was an edgy thing in the nineties—tough black guy dominating some weak-looking white boys—Frank Whaley was known for his boyish looks, you know. He looks weak. Weak-looking white men are always depicted as unsympathetic victims in movies. But there's this pervasive subtext that they deserve it somehow, like they're weakness makes them repulsive and not sympathetic. Nowadays someone does it and it just looks trite, cause it's easy to rip on white people."

And the day after that...

"Conspiracy's not in some bunker a mile under the ground somewhere, the conspiracy is in the conditions. You humans will never see that. Keep a civilization stressed and in competition and at each other's throat, you can take whatever you want while the rabble is fighting. Shit, you monkeys haven't evolved at all, you just dressed natural selection up in cement and steel."

Morrie began to find the tree annoying. But he refused to change the trajectory of his walks. He'd been going on these walks for years now, ever since Betty died. He wasn't going to change his route just because of some talking tree that he was probably hallucinating as a result of early-onset Alzheimer's or some other damn thing.

Towards the end of the week, the tree and Morrie were talking about something or other when the tree went quiet and looked at Morrie.

"You're bored, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am," said Morrie, at the end of his rope. He was standing with his arms crossed, tapping his foot in the dust of the road.

"I'll tell you what," said the tree. "You come over across the ditch, just once, and I'll leave you alone when you walk by here from now on. If anything, I'll give you a nice smile and a nod and you can get your exercise and I'll just stay here and let my roots soak up the rain and let my leaves feel the sun and shed my bark every now and then. More than likely, I won't even notice you. Time goes by differently for me."

Morrie was slightly miffed by this, as he'd made such an effort to be polite and the tree was acting like he'd refused any conversation at all.

"Why the hell do you want me to come over there so bad?"

"You'll see," said the tree. "But I can tell you're curious now, so you should just find out. Only a few steps, and you can see what's up."

"You're not going to eat me or anything?"

The tree chuckled, and its leaves shook.

"No," it said.

"Promise?"

"You have my word as a century-old life-form," said the tree.

Morrie really wanted his privacy back—he missed all the thoughts and peaceful headspace he achieved when putting one foot in front of the other for a good hour. He missed his solitary evenings, an old widower like him whose house was paid off and whose lovely wife was three years buried and whose kids were off with families and lives of their own.

Screw it.

Morrie took a deep breath and stepped down. There was a shallow trickle of dirty water down in the trough of the ditch. Morrie stepped over it, the grass squishing under his shoes.

Two more steps and he was looking up at the tree.

The tree leaned down until its face was almost level with Morrie's.

"I need about tree fiddy," it said.

Morrie was puzzled.

The tree straightened back up and laughed, a sound like wind in a hollow trunk.

"Just kidding, just kidding," said the tree. "Couldn't help myself. But seriously, I have something for you—around behind me there's this knothole around where my ass would be if I was a person."

Morrie stepped around. Indeed, there was a baseball sized knot of wood sticking out the side of the tree's trunk like a tumor.

"See it?"

"Yeah," said Morrie.

"Reach into it."

Morrie's hand trembled as he stuck it into the dark hole. His fingers probed the darkness. He felt something hard and sharp. He pulled it out.

It was a crystal, white and about the size of an egg.

"Ah, thank you so much," said the tree. It heaved a great sigh.

"What is this?"

"That's what brought me to life," said the tree. "The kid stuck it in there and chanted some shit so I couldn't just tell anyone about it. That's why I kept trying to get you to come over here. But now that you've removed it, the spell's broken and I'll be gone."

"Gone?"

"Yeah, poof," said the tree. "No more talking. I'll just go back to being a regular-ass oak."

Morrie didn't know what to say.

"Oh, don't worry," said the tree. "I've been around a hundred years and I've been able to talk less than a week and already I fucking hate it. Too much thinking. I just want to be a tree again."

"What do I do with this?" said Morrie, holding up the magic white stone.

"Put it in their mailbox," said the tree. "I think that's why the kid is grounded—he took his parent's magic life-giving stone. I think the parents are practicing witches or something."

Morrie took the stone across the road and stuck it in the mailbox. Hopefully the mailbox wouldn't start talking to him now.

"Thank you, sir," said the tree. "I'm going to sleep now."

"Goodbye, tree," said Morrie.

The tree's facial expression went back to its default state, and Morrie went back to having his walks. Though he still passed the tree every evening, it never spoke to him again.

Possession Blues

Thomas felt it coming. He ran to the toilet, knelt before it.

His insides clenched and coiled and green goo erupted from his lips. The stuff just kept coming. It got on his forearm, his right thumb. Thomas gripped the toilet, wishing he cleaned it more often.

Once the putrid torrent ceased, Thomas went to the kitchen for another roll of paper towel.

This is such a pain in the ass, he thought.

Out in the living room, the flies buzzed all over the sliding door. Thomas had no idea where they were coming from. They buzzed all night, all day. Their corpses littered the balcony. It was disgusting.

Thomas was just going to have to ride this out. He'd found out earlier that day that he wasn't enduring only a sickness but a full blown demonic curse.

There weren't any voices in his head or any schizophrenic tendencies, at least not so far. Everything was manifested in gross digestive expulsions and skin rashes and a strange genital shriveling. And the flies, of course.

Thomas wasn't even sure how he'd been cursed, or possessed, or whatever. He hadn't come across any witch doctors with smoke coming out their nostrils or old crones pointing crooked fingers or fallen priests murmuring hex prayers.

In a way, demonic possession was a lot like getting an STD. Thomas's skin burned and itched, he felt generally shitty as if suffering a low-grade cold, his libido alternated between dormant and raging, and he wasn't exactly sure where he'd gotten it except to say that whatever it was probably made God unhappy.

It had all started a few nights prior, when he'd woken up in the middle of the night with his skin burning red and itching like mad. He'd tried to turn over and go back to sleep but as he'd switched positions to try and find something comfortable, he'd noticed letters on the wall. They were glowing, like a neon sign.

There was a name carved into the drywall, glowing an infectious red, slashed just above his mattress, as if with a nail.

Azrael

It was definitely Biblical sounding. But Thomas didn't think much of it.

"This is a dream," he mumbled to himself.

Morning had come. Thomas put some lotion on his arms and legs, figuring he was having some sort of food reaction. He'd had Chinese the previous night at that shady place over on Huron River Drive. It was probably from that. The slashed name was gone from the wall and Thomas didn't think anything else of it.

He'd woken up the next day in mid afternoon. He was still feeling sick, though the skin itch and burning had subsided. The skin on his arms was red and dry but free of welts or blemishes of any kind. His legs had the same problem, and there were patches forming on his torso. His head was swimming, his sinuses plugged.

Google and ChatGPT held no definite answers. And being without health insurance in the US, Thomas would have to wait until the affliction reached unbearable status before he'd risk venturing to a hospital or even an urgent care.

Then he'd remembered the name on the wall.

Azrael.

Back to Google.

He expected nothing to come up, but something did, and it gave Thomas a chill in his blood.

Azrael was, in fact, the Angel of Death in Hebrew biblical texts.

At first, Thomas didn't know what to do. He wasn't particularly superstitious or religious, but he dug his grandfather's old crucifix out of a box in his closet and set it next to his bed. Better safe than sorry. He couldn't help but notice touching the crucifix made his fingertips tingle just a bit.

He'd endured his skin condition for another day before the vomiting started. It came without notice. He was standing over his microwave, heating a bowl of Spaghetti-O's, when all of a sudden he felt his stomach turn inside out and he threw up all over the counter. The puke was green and stank like swamp rot and pig feces.

Irritated, Thomas wiped it all into the sink and ran the faucet scalding hot. Then he went back to bed.

When he'd awoken, sometime late that night, the flies had arrived. He felt something buzz past his face. Again. And again. He threw the covers off, got up, turned on the light, saw them. At first there were only two or three, and Thomas had opened the door and shooed them outside. But then he'd leave the room and come back and there would be twelve. Then more. No matter how much he swatted them or shooed them out the door, they kept returning. The door was sealed, there were no maggots in the seams of the carpet, no evidence as to where the damn things could be coming from.

So Thomas stayed in his apartment by himself for the next couple days, watching movies and bedrotting and hoping the spell would wear off. His skin was so dry and red it was like he was turning into a living sore. The vomiting spells came and went. The flies continued to buzz at the doorwall. Thomas was so repulsed by his appearance he couldn't even look in the mirror anymore.

I have no idea what I did to deserve this, or why this is happening, he thought.

But there must've been a reason.

He searched his symptoms again, including projectile vomiting, and to his surprise the third result was demon possession. He clicked it, thinking of Azrael the Angel of Death, and was led to a chatroom where he listed his symptoms and was put on with a person who asked him questions like "What flowers have you picked recently?" and "Have you desecrated any holy monuments, either accidentally or purposely?"

"Not that I know of," he said.

"Hmm," said his new helper friend. "You've definitely upset the Angel of Death. The flies are a dead giveaway. You've strayed far from the path of righteousness, and it's completely feasible that you are too far gone for God to save you, I'm afraid."

"That really sucks," typed Thomas. "What do I do?"

"Let the curse run its course," said the helper. "Without a definitive cause I can't diagnose or give a prognosis. Though I wouldn't walk into any churches or touch holy water until it's passed. You could be struck by lightning or burst into flames or worse."

"How long will this take? I have work."

"It depends. It could last years."

"Goddamn it."

"Yes, that is exactly the problem. Do you have any holy items that you keep handy? They could hasten the healing process, though again, I'm afraid you do sound like you've strayed quite far from the Shepherd's flock."

"I have a crucifix that I put next to my bed."

"That's good. Be careful how you touch it. Please do check back with me if you determine the initial cause."

Thomas had racked his brain, trying to remember the damned cause. He never went out, never did anything sinful with anyone, female or male. He didn't go to church but he wasn't actively satanic or anything. He was a neutral agnostic. Surely that didn't warrant such punishment.

Thomas ended up back on his laptop, as usual. He examined his Internet history, dug way deep into it. Whatever the cause was, it must've been at least from the week before.

He went back to the day he'd eaten the Chinese food. The night he'd woken up to see "Azrael" burned into his wall.

He was searching his jack-off history when he found it.

There had been one video on Pornhub titled "Virgin Sacrificed to Azrael"

In the video, a young woman, bound and nude, was getting whipped by a lecherous old man. Thomas had clicked on the video among a litany of other porn videos and had completely forgotten about it. He'd watched only a few seconds, the whip striking the woman's bare breasts and stomach, her mouth drooling out a ball gag, her arms and legs stretched north and south. He'd probably closed the window nearly as quick as he'd brought it up.

But now he watched the whole thing.

The video continued and the woman was tortured further, until the lecherous old man – a priest of some kind – pulled out a knife at the end and shouted "Hail Azrael!" and the video cut off.

Anyone who spill his seed as a witness to this deed thereby surrenders himself to the demon, said the video's description. Walk the path of righteousness or be damned.

The studio was named "Heathen Consequences" with the byline, "Sin Has Consequences. Reap Them."

Goddamn it, thought Thomas.

He immediately went back to the website.

"I found the cause," he said, wondering if sheepishness was something that could come across in a chatroom.

"Oh, wonderful," said the helper friend.

Thomas explained, embarrassed, making sure to insist he didn't even watch the entire video the first time.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said the helper friend. "Intent, my brother. Intent. But don't worry, we have a remedy for you."

The helper friend sent him a link for some sacred herbal rectifiers. Two days later, they arrived in the mail – little leaves with a minty, churchy smell. Thomas crushed them in a bowl and drank them with holy water he'd purchased from a nearby Catholic church. The elixir burned like heartburn going down but settled quick enough once in his stomach.

Within a day, Thomas had vomited his last. The flies stopped coming. His skin cleared up.

Then, the final event – the demon's escape. It came out of Thomas the next night, erupting out of his mouth like a ruptured vat of smoke just as Thomas was about to fall asleep. It howled and dissipated into nothing.

Thomas turned over and drifted off, grateful.

Mammoth Tusks

I went over to Nelson's house and the two of us settled down in his sitting room with our pipes and whiskey-spiked coffee. We were listening to Zeppelin on vinyl when I noticed the enormous tusks that now resided over the fireplace.

"Where did those come from?"

Nelson looked up at them as he packed his pipe, acting like he'd just noticed them.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "I just had them installed. Remember that trip to Alaska I took?"

"Yeah."

"I totally killed a woolly mammoth, man. Male. A bull mammoth. Shot it right through the forehead with an elephant gun on the Alaskan tundra. Then I fried up some mammoth steaks with my team of Eskimos and we toasted to the big bastard with vodka shots."

"I had no idea you could hunt them," I said, trying to hide my jealousy.

"Yeah, it's expensive as hell," said Nelson. "It's only been legal for a few years."

He finished packing his pipe, sparked a flame, lit it and blew a classy jet of smoke. I sucked on my own pipe, getting comfortably toasted.

"What does it taste like? Mammoth?"

Nelson shrugged like it was nothing big.

"Like a steak, honestly. Little gamey, tougher than cow, chewier, but still pretty damn good."

Nelson was a dentist who enjoyed taking long big game hunting trips in remote corners of the earth. He'd killed a wolf and a grizzly bear when he was younger, but never hunted big game in Africa. Too political these days. You didn't want to get Nelson going on what bullshit it was that he couldn't go kill a rhino or a lion "just because too many fucking amateurs went over there and couldn't keep quiet about it."

"Well, I guess you're going to have to tell me how you got them," I said, admiring the tusks.

They were mounted to a shield-shaped oak panel, curving out magnificently and looking to be six or seven feet in length. The tips nearly touched Nelson's vaulted living room ceiling, which was almost twenty feet high.

"Yeah, man, for sure," said Nelson.

He began.

"I got the passes through my buddy up at the state Capitol, you know, that Gueterriez fella, the one who wants to push through the law involving rain water? He owed me a favor since I pulled some strings with some guys down at the country club that got him an alibi with some fiasco involving some tax avoidance or something, it was last year, but anyway, I got the pass from him because apparently he's got family up in Alaska and they just started this new hunting lodge that allows you to hunt mammoths. Really heavily regulated, like every other fucking thing in this country. Five figure price tag, man, just for the program itself, not including travel or lodging or anything else. Had to sell off major stock to pay for it, but I mean, it's a fucking woolly mammoth, man, those things were extinct up until I was forty, who the fuck wouldn't want to kill one, you know?"

"Mmm," I said.

"So anyway, that was like last summer when I found out about it and they're trying to keep this really quiet as long as they can because obviously the tree-huggers are going to go apeshit once they find out this is happening, but I was one of the first people to get in on it, so as far as I know I'm one of the only people on the planet that got to shoot one of these things. I guarantee they'll shut it down once too many people know about it, but whatever, you know, too bad for them. The mammoth population is growing so fast, they're saying it'll be totally legal to hunt them like deer or anything else in another generation or so. They'll have to, it's not like a wolf pack or a grizzly can take one of those down."

"Guess not."

"But anyway, the Guiterrez's husband's cousin or something owns this big patch of land up there and they're right by the place where they're breeding the mammoths, right? Well, apparently, the mammoth place will very occasionally get a male that is not suitable for breeding for whatever reason, and they never knew what to do with them."

"I see."

"Well, anyway, on the downlow, Guiterrez's husband's cousin, the guy who runs the place, is named Wayne, and he offers to buy the mammoths that can't get laid and let them stay on his property, which is like a couple hundred acres of pure Alaskan tundra and wilderness, you know? They just let these reject males out just to chill on their own, right? And they let people study them and all that, but recently, Wayne was getting all these offers from people who wanted to hunt them. And he looked into it and pulled some strings with his own buddies in the

state government there and then they pulled strings with the feds and then before you know it he's got a set of rules to issue hunting permits for mammoths. God knows how he did it, they've only been back less than a decade, but who gives a fuck, right? He made it happen, that's what's important."

"Indeed," I said, refilling my pipe.

"Apparently, the breeders weren't happy about this at all, as you can imagine, so they added on a ton of fucking rules. There's rules, like always, you know, like, it has to be a male, it has to be of a certain age, has to be proven to be mentally or genetically deficient in some way or you know, overly aggressive, whatever it takes to make it not suitable for passing on genes and all that shit."

"Sounds familiar."

"So anyway, I get up there last November, and I got hooked up with these Inuit people, you know, Eskimos, leader was named Mike, really nice guy. Really knew the terrain. Had been studying the mammoths. And he took me off into the brush with Alexandra (that's Nelson's .416 Rigby he named after Alexandra Daddario) and that was it, man."

"Huh. That simple."

"We just walked around for about a day and didn't see shit. Went back to the lodge and then we went out the next day and didn't see shit then and I'm like, what the fuck, man, where could these things be hiding, you know?"

"I can't wait to hear how you got it back after you shot it."

"Mike's apologetic and all that but it really wasn't his fault and anyway we go back to the lodge but at like three AM I wake up and he's shaking me and going, 'They saw one about two clicks from here over on Sawyer's Pass,' which is this kind of valley area, and so I get up and throw all my shit on and we were out there in less than half an hour and sure enough, there down in the fucking moonlight is a fucking woolly mammoth, man."

I say nothing, just listening. And toking.

"They'd offered to show me a mammoth over at the breeding site when I got there but I turned them down. I wanted to see my first mammoth in the wild, and God am I glad I waited."

"What did it look like?"

"They're not as big as you'd think, man. I was picturing just this fucking monster Hagrid elephant, and they're really only about a torso-length or so taller than me and you. Probably ten or eleven feet tall- hell, one could easily fit in my living

room here with room to spare. But I was picturing this, like, dinosaur-size thing."

"So then what?"

"But anyway, we're holed up on this sort of rocky outcropping and I'm on my belly getting Alexandra ready and this thing's just down there kind of fumble-fucking its way across the open space of the pass. There's trees and shit but they're spaced out enough that I know I'm going to get a good fucking shot and I'm telling you, I was fucking pissing myself I was so excited."

"I would've been, too."

"I lined up Alexandra and I waited and I waited and I waited even though I knew I had a good shot. When I finally squeezed the trigger I was so excited I didn't even realize I'd done it until the bullet hit a second or so later and the thing just freaks and bolts for the trees. Moved way faster than you'd think, man, kicking up this humongous cloud of snow."

"So you missed?"

"I'd been aiming for a headshot, drop it right there, you know, nice and clean, but I hit it in the shoulder and I was all pissed off because now we gotta track it in the dark, you know."

"Ah."

"So we get down there and it was relatively easy to follow, big animal like that, and we could fucking hear it, dude, it was making these whining noises, almost made me sorry for it, you know?"

"So you hit it."

"We tracked it for like an hour and a half before we finally came up on it and it was standing on the other side of this snowed out meadow and its shoulder had finally given out and it was kind of dragging itself, leaking all this black blood, fur all matted, still making that noise, I could smell it too, smelled fucking nasty, but we kind of surprised it and I thought it was going to charge but it just kind of rolled its eyes at us and kept making that noise."

"Damn."

"Mike was like, 'You gotta end it, man'. Alexandra had blown a hole in the thing's shoulder that was pretty impressive, pretty much destroyed its left front bicep above the elbow, but the thing was still trying to walk."

"...damn."

"Alexandra was already loaded so I fucking just took aim and the thing was tossing its head all over and its furry-ass trunk was going up and around like a kid playing with his dick and so

it took me a second but the shot was clean. I squeezed and I nailed it right between the eyes, perfect fucking shot, and it just keels over."

"And that's it."

"And Mike and I stood there and for a second I'm quiet and then I just fucking go crazy, man, I mean, I can't fucking believe I just did that, you know? Worth every goddamn penny. I go over to it and I'm fucking TOUCHING the thing, you know? It's still warm, and it's fur was all rough, felt like a bear, and it stank something awful but it was like, holy God, the last time these things were around, you know, humans had barely invented the wheel yet."

(He's not entirely right about this, mammoths existed as recently as 1650 according to Google, but hell if I'm going to tell him that while he's on this kick of a story)

"And Mike comes over and he tells me, 'You're the first person to get one like this' and I'm like, 'Holy fuck, I'm gonna be famous,' you know? But then I remember that this is secret so so much for that but who cares, right?"

"Who cares, yeah."

"And so they can't really move them cause they're so big but the crew came out and I took some skin and I took a bunch of meat and I took his front teeth and now they're hanging over my fucking fireplace. And the bullet that killed him is in between them, see it? I had it gilded."

I look and indeed, there was a large, smashed, golden lump of metal mounted to the oaken shield between the two tusks.

"I had it dipped in *gold*, man," said Nelson, leaning back and toking and looking quite pleased with himself.

"What happened to the rest of him," I asked.

"I let Mike have him. He wanted it, that was part of the deal. I got the tusks and some meat, and he got everything else. So his people came in, they took the carcass, broke it up right there on the tundra, into movable pieces. Don't now what they did with it. I think the breeders got to study some of him, internal organs and shit. But yeah. So everyone's happy, right?"

Kenny

"That sheep's not gonna make it," said Dwight as he walked into the breakroom. The flies were buzzing by the window and Motley Crue was playing low on the old dusty boombox by the door. It had been a hot day for late September.

Bud looked up from his phone, eyes magnified behind his glasses.

"They got the body down there?"

"That's why I'm here."

"Well, I guess it's that time again."

Bud turned to Jackson, the young one. Jackson was on his own phone, talking to people on Discord.

"You wanna finally see Kenny?"

"Who's Kenny?" Jackson asked without looking up. He was eighteen and stocky, with shaggy dark hair. Bud and the other maintenance guys generally liked him, even if he could be a little shiftless from time to time and a little too addicted to that phone.

"The Kent Lake Monster," said Bud. "You're gonna tell me you never heard of him?"

"The Kent Lake Monster?" said Jackson.

"Yeah, the Kent Lake Monster," said Bud, stone serious.

"...like the Loch Ness Monster?"

"Yeah, or the Lake Champlain Monster. Long neck, small horse-like head, big teeth, body like a submarine, flippers the size of outboard motors?"

"Yeah, I know," said Jackson, not falling for it. "How stupid do you think I am? I didn't believe in that shit even when I was a kid."

"Really."

"Everyone these days knows they're not real. We would've found them by now."

"What if they did find them? You think they'd actually tell anyone?"

Jackson had to admit that was a good point, but he remained skeptical.

Bud continued.

"What if they found *all* of 'em, and figured it'd be best to let the public think they'd found nothing? Then people'd stop looking, stop believing. And these animals would be left alone proper."

"If that were true, wouldn't they round them up and bring them to, like, a special zoo or something? A secret zoo?"

"These are old, old animals, son. And they stay hidden just fine in their natural habitats."

"Kent Lake's not that big," said Jackson. "How could something like that fit in here without anyone knowing?"

"A goldfish will only grow to the size of its pond and then stop. Kenny fits in Kent Lake just fine."

"You guys are fucking with me," said Jackson, eyes back on his Discord chat. "I've never seen him anyway. I'm here five days a week. I would've seen him if the government had confirmed his existence and just let him swim in Kent Lake."

"You probably have seen him," said Bud, grinning at Dwight. "Just didn't know what you were looking at. Thought you were looking at a floating tree or a big fish or something. Like I said, you ain't believing. Means you're not looking."

"But I never believed in them to begin with," said Jackson. "It was fun to think about it when I was a kid, but now you guys are obviously just fucking with me."

"We see him all the time," said Dwight. "He's a real important part of the park's ecosystem."

"Oh, really?"

"Absolutely. We use him to get rid of the deadstock. And now we got a dead sheep. Deadstock. So it's time for Kenny to get a treat. So again, you wanna see him?"

"Sure," said Jackson, rolling his eyes.

"Great," said Bud. "Be back here at eight tonight."

They met late that night under the parking lot flood lights.

Jackson was still being a skeptical little shit, making fun of Bud and Dwight and joking that they were probably going to throw him in the lake or stage some elaborate hoax.

"You guys are wasting your time if you're looking to scare me or something," he said.

"Sign these," said Bud, holding out some forms.

Jackson looked them over.

"Federal contract," he said, rifling through them.
"Confidentiality clause? Non-disclosure agreement?"

"You talk, they'll send you up the river," said Dwight. "And they'll know if you tell *anyone*, especially on that damn phone or on that Discworld app you're always using. Hope you appreciate what we're doing for you. These forms aren't easy to come by."

"You starting to see the gravity here?" Bud asked, handing Jackson a pen. "Sign at the bottom, all the pages. Give 'er a look."

Jackson read, his brow knit in concentration. These papers looked official. And Bud and Dwight were way too lazy to print up something like this, even for a prank.

He went to sign the first line, but then he had a question.

"Why do you guys trust me with this?" he asked.

"Cause you've been here on time every day this summer, and you do your job, and we've only ever found you on that phone in the breakroom," said Dwight. "You'd be surprised at how much character that shows for someone your age."

"We just know you're all right for it, son," said Bud. "That simple, really. And we gotta let someone in on it. No one's replacing us once we retire. These positions will get hired out to contractors. And no one's gonna tell them jack shit. It'll just be the full timers down at the farm who know about Kenny."

Jackson waited a second longer, then scribbled his name on each dotted line. It took him a few minutes, leaning on the hood of Dwight's truck.

Dwight and Bud donned long-sleeved gloves and manhandled the dead sheep off the prongs of the front loader that had taken it from the farm to the service yard and into the back of truck 440, an

old GMC pick-up. Jackson watched, wondering if he should be helping.

They all piled in and drove down behind the comfort station at Possum Hollow, taking the two-track that led through the old gate and past the low, square, sand-colored brick building. It was about a five minute drive along the winding park road, up and over hills and around bends. Jackson remembered his first day at the park and how big it had all seemed.

After passing the comfort station, Bud threw the four-wheel drive on and went off-road, down the wet grass and through the trees and brush. He stopped at a hidden shoreline – a cove that Jackson had never known about.

The bare moon reflected on the lake's surface as the three of them tugged the dead sheep out of back of the pick-up and dragged it down to the water. The night was quiet and humming, bugs and frogs in their creaking choir.

They dragged the sheep right up to the bank, left it sticking halfway off the edge with its stupid, lolling tongue dangling over the black water. Dwight chopped off a limb with a large knife.

He dropped the bloody chunk of meat into the lake and walked over to where Bud and Jackson sat crouched in the grass. Jackson huddled in a hoodie. Bud tucked a hunk of minty chew in his lip, the moon in his glasses.

"What happens now?" asked Jackson after they'd sat there and watched the dead sheep lay on the grassy bank for a few moments. It's severed leg floated on the surface of the lake, about ten feet out.

"Now Kenny comes and gets his treat," said Bud, spitting.

"He eats the dead sheep? You've got the most endangered species of all and you figure the best way to take care of it is feed it an animal that just died of God-knows-what?"

"Bluetongue," said Bud. He spit again. "Kenny can't get bluetongue, just like you can't get bluetongue."

"Gotta get rid of the deadstock somehow," said Dwight. "This is the cheapest way."

"Kenny's been eating dead farmstock for decades," said Bud. "I first watched him get fed here when I was your age."

Jackson shivered. The day had been warm, but the night was cold—typical for Michigan autumn. He glanced uneasily at the dead sheep, at the water beyond it, dark and full of mysteries.

"If Kenny's real, why do they let people swim in the lake?"

"Can't just tell people not to swim anymore," said Bud. He cocked his head, reconsidered. "Well, you *could*, but there's no reason. Kenny's been around way before the park was here, and people have always swam at Kent Lake, and he's never attacked anyone before. He's shy. He just wants to be left alone."

"When did they first discover him, then?"

"Forties," said Bud. "Officially. Late forties, I think it was. But people have been reporting him as long as humans have lived here."

Jackson was getting excited. The lake, once familiar and inviting, had taken on a look of foreboding and frightening possibility. There was something in there.

"How many times have you guys done this?"

"Maintenance has been doing this for years and years and years," said Bud. "Long as the park's been around. Every time an animal dies at the farm, we feed Kenny the carcass. Every time the nature center gets a dead animal, we feed it to him. And of course, he hunts on his own. Eats a lotta fish."

"Why not just bury the dead animals or ship them off or whatever it is the government regulations say to do?"

"Easier this way," said Dwight. "No contaminants. It's clean, it's efficient. And we get to watch a million year old creature eat. And so do you. But you gotta keep quiet. Kenny's shy as hell. Won't come unless he thinks there's no one here to see him."

"And the government's the one who came up with this idea in the first place," said Bud. "Or at least that's what they tell us."

"How long does it take?"

"If you're quiet, not long at all," said Bud. "He smells that blood, comes a-swimmin'."

Jackson shut up.

They sat there, listening to the last of the frogs and the bugs that would be dead or hibernating in another couple of weeks. The year's whispering leaves on the trees, ready to fall. The far-off sound of traffic on the freeway.

Minutes passed. Jackson started to wonder if this was a prank, after all.

"There he is," said Bud softly, nodding at the water right in front of them. He silently spat another gob of chew.

Sure enough, a large black form had appeared in the water about twenty feet out, making small waves splash on the grassy bank and against the dead sheep, wetting its wool. It was a hump, about the size of an overturned speedboat.

All of a sudden, the floating sheep limb disappeared under with a splash.

Jackson watched with an open mouth.

Kenny appeared slowly and smoothly, directly from under like a submarine, his fins churning the water and barely making a sound. He kept getting bigger.

Jackson couldn't speak. Bud and Dwight watched.

Kenny was even bigger than Jackson had guessed — the size of a large pontoon boat. His graceful swan neck was curved in an elegant S, arcing out of the water to catch the light of the moon. His eyes were white and gold and rimmed with red. He didn't acknowledge the three men hidden in the brush only a hundred feet away.

The wind blew.

Jackson watched as Kenny stretched out his beautiful long neck, sleek and shining like a seal's. It was long enough to reach the shore while his body stayed out in the deeper water.

A mouthful of sharp white teeth flashed.

The dead sheep was yanked into the water.

There was a brief struggle, the water turning white and black in the night.

Then it was still again, the waves subsiding to glass.

Kenny was gone. It was as if he had never come.

Jackson stared at the spot where the beast had parked himself as he took the dead sheep.

"Best be going," said Bud, putting a hand on Jackson's shoulder. "That's all there is."

"How did I ever not — " Jackson stared but Bud cut him off.

"Sometimes it's best not to get all excited about stuff like this. We've been seeing him for a long time. He's not going anywhere. But maybe now you'll see him more often. Just keep him a secret. We always have."

Jackson nodded.

"I will."

"Yeah, you will," said Dwight. "Or we'll sue your ass."

They walked back to the truck, the moon shining on the still, dark water.