

It couldn't have been more than a couple months since I'd left—yet, all I saw driving in was that this dumb little hamlet had been deserted. The all-night diner I passed by first, rolling in around the time they did most of their business—the deadest part of the night—empty. My buddy's fog lights (this was my buddy's car I borrowed to make it back here) broke the fog and stared down the red cloth seating through the diner front windows. Twenty tables, booths and chairs—a nice little corner booth you can get all wrapped up in with your sweetheart, the town priestess. I saw all three corners of the diner and the fog outside the front windows from my corner booth, from this little piece of my mind that wasn't all wrapped up in Polly's hand traipsing up my left thigh. God, my other leg just wouldn't stop shaking—a dumb habit, nothing anxious or aroused about it. Although what it was was a decent way to get some nearby patrons throwing their disapproving, inattentive looks towards you. They saw from their tables their spiritual leader feeling up the new guy in town who was, by all accounts they'd gathered from their family members and close friends (these two categories in total comprising the entire citizenry of this dumb little hamlet), homeless and derelict. The fella they see slouched against one of the pillars behind that once-proud young woman's pulpit, coloring with crayons in a coloring book and sipping his juice box and staring at her ass—no regard for her achievements, her stature in that community he surely wouldn't ever be part of.

I could see out the front window from that corner booth, Polly working up my thigh with one hand and wrapping the other around my neck, pushing her fingers up the nape through my hair that way she knew I liked, to about where I was slinking by in my buddy's hatchback, his fog lights pushing all the way across that polished diner floor and refracting off the empty corner booth in the back. And you can't think that maybe everybody had gone elsewhere for the night—there's nowhere else to go. Only one diner in town, no bars or restaurants. I doubt these folks would've stood for a bar, as dry and puritanical as they were—are? Maybe you thought they were busy sleeping it off within their respective abodes—whatever “it” may be—which is what I'd've thought had I the presence of mind to think it. My mind was still all wrapped up in those chills Polly sent flowing down my neck to my thighs. And then I thought about her up in the steeple, on her knees and looking up at me with that trained smirk she knew I really liked, that *look ma, two hands!* face. And then there I was flat on my back and the sweat beading down my sides, she pinning my arms above my head, looming and ready to lower herself onto me, and I'm twitching in anticipation (not my whole body, of course), and then there she was drooping off the driver's seat, suspended mid-air by the seatbelt and the branch just beneath her breasts pinning her against the back of the cabin—and then that abject lurch of the truck sliding wordlessly off the cliff, that noise like a moist slurping...

I drove my buddy's hatchback past where the homeopath lived—the light on her porch her husband left on overnight was off. No moving shadows behind the windows. The municipal building across the street looked about as barren as it always had, and here I expected to walk in and see that god awful woman ready with the pink and green forms for me to fill out in order to declare my “intent to declare” something else.

I always thought the fog made this hamlet feel a lot bigger than it was. One street, the same one street stretching miles and miles away in either direction, covered in a thick fog and surrounded by cracked, scorched earth. Twenty-three houses in total, eleven on one side of the road and eleven plus the church on the other—from the all-night diner you can't see the church in the middle of town, and from the church you can just barely make out where the homeopath lived just two doors down, just barely the municipal building, and not at all the all-night diner or the inn at the other end of town where I stayed my first few nights. Compounding the myopia, I spent most of my time in or in front of the church, either with Polly or fending off Mel, and it was only with Polly walking beside me that I ventured as far as the diner. The houses are all jammed together, so you can't see behind them—not that you'd want to. The people and their houses all bunched up against the two sides of the road like the metal rails they install along highways and the first row of trees lined up and opaque behind them. You can't see behind them—not that you'd even want to. I was running from Mel one day, and got enough distance on the diner-side of town that I could sort of see around the side of the diner—the last building in its row. I could've sworn that the building only went back as far as it needed to to convince an audience that it was real, that somebody installed a diner facade against an enormous fog-white wall and if you went all the way around the back you could see where the kitchen door really just led backstage, where the studs weren't painted because nobody was going to see them anyway and the stagehands running around wordlessly prepping for the next queues. You go all the way around the back of the diner and see the dead ground beneath you and the thick fog blanketing your world, supposedly for miles, and your brain overlays flashes of that backstage hustle and bustle over the empty scene because it's what you were expecting. But you're still in the audience, so canonically those unpainted studs and black-clothed stagehands do not exist, and when you walk around back all you'll see is what you see—whiteness and a finished building. The ideal audience member, of course, would never dare get up on stage and root around for glitches in the matrix, because hey, there's an overpriced show going on and you came here to make your wife happy so suck it up and try and enjoy the dumb singing or at least the fading memories of the last time you two had sex.

I could've sworn that the building only went back as far as it needed to convince an audience that it was real, but really I hadn't gone far enough to see for certain. And even if I had gone farther, the fog would've jammed up the view. There was one time I really had gone out far into this fog running from Mel—although I wasn't looking back. I met Cleo again out there, only for the second time. The first was back before I ever made it to town, hiking along the side of the road for miles and finally setting up camp for the night where I was fortunate enough to encounter a group of vagabonds who had already set up camp themselves—fire and all, Cleo among them. And then Callie after that, hitchhiking those last few miles into town and arriving at the far side of the two rows of houses where I stationed my buddy's hatchback in front of the inn, fog lights trained on the storefront. I put it in park, stepped out—god, those disgusting puddles accumulating against the curb and in the potholes, I hadn't even gotten all the way out

and I felt this cold slime tickling my right foot. How this scorched, barren earth goes on for miles in every direction and yet this ground, right here, is always soggy—I didn't know.

Finally I regain my footing after the scramble to hop out of the puddle I stepped full-force into, and my gaze went right to wall my buddy's fog lights lit up. I chuckled—the moron who owned the place didn't score any creativity points when he named his inn (sic) “inn” and shellacked the dumb name across the top of the entryway. It was faded now, the scorch marks concealed the i's dot and the right leg of the first n, left of the second. I chuckled again—sort of looked like somebody tried to spell “err” but swapped out an e for an i and wrote the second r backwards.

Words have a way of catching the eye; this inn was, of course, more decorated than a standalone section of stucco with faded lettering. You've also got this crack running up from the ground right of the door, above the door, then up a story to where it got started—the giant hole in the wall. A window to the left of the large hole gave way *to* the large hole, finished up in a window to the right of the large hole. I was quite certain this large hole replaced a missing wall which once belonged to my room here. Cracks webbed away in all directions, one of the most prominent having featured recently in my descriptions. One more window on either side of the windows sandwiching the large hole, then the building peeled off around the corner on the left and melded into the rightward adjacent building. You've got a larger bay window left of the door—the lobby—and that's it. And all of the glass was shattered. I saw in one jagged fragment jutting out the side of the center pane the piece that tore along the outside of my left thigh climbing out and then over the cabin's front window. A person is obviously far smaller than a freight truck, but every time this dumb thing creaked, or lurched just a little farther forward, I cut my movement speed in half—like you'd freeze in fright, but not forgetting that you still need to evacuate the cabin, angled down and pointing towards a couple of trees a short walk away from where the truck would eventually collapse in the vast forest below. But what I saw was how I slowed to a crawl on one nasty lurch with the piece *still in my leg*—moving like I had an extra point of contact to throw some weight on, only this one was connected to the cabin and also me. The interior was similarly disrepaired—torn-up-upholstery, front desk with a piece of ceiling pinning it to the floor, door to the den on the right on the ground, blah blah blah.

So far, this trip wasn't worth the time. I had had a vision earlier tonight—it was of me, breaking down a burnt door with a crowbar and stepping into a dark room. An empty, dark room. But, I had to get in, so I broke down the door with a crowbar—I stood outside the room in a dark hallway—stretching into darkness in each direction—and I got up to that hallway...somehow, and I knocked on the door. Then I realized no one would answer, so I broke down the door with a crowbar, and stepped over it into this empty, dark room—except it wasn't empty, because I immediately tripped over something heavy, amorphous. I turned to look at it but it was too dark. Whatever I tripped over, I couldn't tell if it was gone—I began my panic.

I took this vision as I took it, and borrowed my buddy's hatchback. I took the staircase leading up away from the lobby and landed on the top floor, a short hallway which juttet

forward briefly and wrapped back around itself past the staircase and a few doors strewn along both walls. My room was at the end of the hall. I pushed my fingers into the wall and dragged them along as I went—the wood grain, the scorched wood, the chips splintering off the wall and *shit*, one caught my middle finger.