

59 Glass Bridges

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For Helen Peters, who always believed I would make it.

59 Glass Bridges

- 1 -

Of course, there is no monster in this maze. Still, I can't help but compare myself to Theseus as I unravel a bright, red mitten and trail the lengthening crimson string behind me.

The comparison is imperfect. Theseus' ball of yarn anchored him to the labyrinth's doorpost—a surefire exit strategy. My string merely dangles. Theseus also delved into the labyrinth willingly, seeking out the minotaur that haunted its halls. I've been wandering the gullet of my maze for some time now, with no sign of any exit. Nor any monster, thankfully.

I look back down the hall, back the way I've come. The hallway is empty. Not empty as I'd once imagined it, that is, devoid of people. Truly empty. No benches against the wall. No vending machines. No potted plants. Even the drywall around me and the linoleum beneath my feet are completely unmarred. No dents. No scuffmarks. Nothing.

The only sound that I've heard recently is the squeak of my own sneakers against the floor tiles. That, and the hum of overhead fluorescent lights, suspended behind plastic panels at even intervals amid the corkboard ceiling. But even there, not a bulb seems to be burnt out. No insect carcasses polka dot the light fixtures.

Now there is a red string adorning the floor, at least. I bounce it behind me as I walk, continue unraveling the mitten, and revel in the anarchy of bright red in a world of inoffensive whites and creams.

Shown a picture of this building's interior, I'd have pegged it as an office building. Then I'd move on with my life, because what a dull thing to photograph. But I've yet to find an office, a cubicle, a goddamn janitorial closet. No doorways seem to diverge from this hallway. No

windows break the monotony of eggshell-white walls. Hallway after hallway after hallway after hallway. My maze is the most mundane of prisons.

I'm not sure how long I've been wandering.

My left wrist sports a chrome watch sans an hour hand. The watch also lacks any indication of the date, boasting only minutes and seconds circling away. The watch found its way onto my wrist while I was sleeping, I suppose, usurping the role of the cell phone that once inhabited my jeans' left pocket. Back when I was wearing jeans.

Not to suggest I'm naked. It's just that none of these clothes are mine. My feet sport school bus-yellow Reeboks with well-worn soles. My socks are mismatched, and I have a scarf draped over my shoulders. I'm wearing khaki shorts with too many pockets, a baby blue windbreaker, and a t-shirt that might once have been white, but is now stained with what appears to be coffee. I don't drink coffee.

The crème de la crème, though, is a weathered brown Stetson perched atop my head. Ridiculous as the rest of my getup is, it's the hat that embarrasses me. I'm not a cowboy. Well, maybe once, for Halloween. As a child.

I don't take the hat off.

The clothing isn't mine, nor do I have any recollection of when, exactly, I acquired it. In my mental self image, I'm wearing seventy-dollar blue jeans and a button-down denim shirt. Sensible and subdued in coloration, of course. I don't do baby blues and bright yellows. I certainly don't do cargo pants.

I also don't own Reeboks. I mean, I always meant to get back to the gym, but after I reduced my last pair of runners to tatters I never found my way back to Sport Chek for a

replacement pair. And only a brain aneurysm could have induced me to buy anything in this shade of emergency inflatable life raft.

And I don't drink coffee, so there goes the shirt.

As for the clothing's origins, I can only speculate. Perhaps I raided a Salvation Army discount bin. Perhaps I was mugged by the least fashionable man on earth and forced to do a clothing swap. Or I might be on reality cable TV. Whatever the truth, I can only assume alcohol was involved, because I don't remember a thing.

The final mysteries, though small in the face of questions such as "where am I," "how did I get here," and "whose clothes are these," were in my pockets. Fishing through them yielded two nickels, minted in 1987 and 2012 respectively, a Gideon New Testament with an orange cover, and a single red woolen mitten.

Flipping through the New Testament brought me some small measure of comfort, though that comfort owed less to the religious content and more to the signs of another human being. The Gideon New Testament contained the whole of Matthew through to Revelation, plus the Psalms and Proverbs, and someone had clearly read it thoroughly. They'd dog-eared pages. They'd left grimy fingerprints, with different loops, whorls and arches from mine. They'd even tattooed its pages with marginalia in red ink.

Handwriting, by another human being. Comments on the Biblical passages they border, most likely, but I wonder if it isn't something more. Instructions for escape? Notes on which passages he or she wandered down? Hints on the nature of this maze that seems to stretch on infinitely? If only I could read Italian.

I keep the New Testament as physical assurance that someone other than me exists... or existed... no, exists in this maze. Another human being. It's reason enough to continue moving, looking, dangling a red string behind me.

I'm lonely, I think. This may look like an office building, but there are no janitors pushing plastic garbage bins or cleaning carts laden with cleaning chemicals, spiked with brooms and mops. No interns hauling stacks of loose leaf to and from the photocopier. No business women in ironed blouses and pleated dress pants, manila envelopes tucked beneath their arms, one-inch heels clicking urgently against the floor.

I haven't seen anyone in a while. I can't be more exact than that.

- 2 -

As a child, I had a pet gerbil. I built mazes for him on my bedroom carpet. Cereal boxes formed the walls, masking tape the mortar. The mazes were replete with dead ends and cul-de-sacs, paper towel tube bridges and false trails.

I perched above the maze to watch his progress and judge him. He was less than keen. Usually, he simply sat where I set him and snuffled at the carpet. Sometimes he ran for a time, but the simplest of obstacles seemed to stymie him. Once, he chewed through the wall of my maze.

I stop. Now there's an idea.

I've tried picking paths at random. That, predictably, left me just as lost as I began. I'd been optimistic for the green glow of an exit sign or an overworked intern that I could pester for directions, but I saw nothing and no one. Hallways intersected with yet more hallways, always straight ahead or at ninety-degree angles.

I changed tactics. I followed the right hand wall, tracing every dip and turn with my outstretched hand. I reasoned that if every wall was connected, which didn't seem unreasonable in a maze, then tracing either the right- or left-hand side should eventually deposit me before an exit, or, worst-case scenario, bring me back full circle.

Two problems soon became apparent with this strategy. First, every hallway looked so similar to every other that even had I reached full circle, I had no means of identifying it. Second, even if my presumption regarding the maze's interconnectivity was correct, I wasn't sure that the exit I sought was actually on its exterior. It could be the center, or a side passage. I'd been thinking in two dimensions, where I needed to consider three. For all I knew, the exit could be an elevator in the maze's gut.

So I changed tactics once more. I pulled a nickel from my pocket and began to label my chosen paths: 1, 2, 3. A number scratched into the drywall beside every new fork I picked. Sometimes I wandered for quite a while without finding a new intersection. At other times, every corner I turned seemed to yield more choices.

I tried to compound my logic by choosing a direction and sticking with it. Straight ahead, unless no straight option presented itself, in which case I turned left and found the earliest possible right-hand passage by which I could correct myself. Straight and straight and left and right and straight and straight and so on.

In lieu of an hour hand, I counted how many times my watch's minute hand tripped sixty. Three times, four times, five. My passage count ramped, even as the minutes spun on: 47, 112, 166. I was forced to loop back on myself a few times, in which case I chose one of the corridors I'd previously neglected and continued my count from there. I backtracked of my own volition once or twice, to assure myself that the numbers hadn't disappeared as soon as I'd left them behind. And then, after my count crested to over 200, I spilled back into an intersection with a number 11 clearly etched beside one of the three choices before me.

I slumped down in the center of that intersection and stared at the writing on the wall. My certain belief that I'd been making progress, shattered by my own hand. Clearly I'd taken a wrong turn at some point, failed to correct a left-hand turn with a right, or overcorrected too many times. Somehow I had looped back without realizing.

I think I slept there in the crossroads. When I awoke, I had lost track of how many times the minute hand had circled around.

Strategy fled me, for a time. I loitered in those hallways and wandered away from the numbers I'd scratched into the walls. I idly sifted the objects in my pockets: clinked coins, rustled pages, plucked at loose threads.

I find myself with an unraveled red mitten and a gerbil-inspired jailbreak. I slam my heel into the wall.

I moderate the force of the kick, lest I hit a column and break my foot. Fortunately, no structural supports ambush my would-be vandalism, and my foot dents the otherwise immaculate walls. I kick the same spot again, with more force, and again. A shower of white dust and crumbling sections of drywall reward my efforts, and I bring my eye to the foot-size hole I've just created.

Shit. On the other side, all I see are more white walls.

I bring my hands to the hole and pry at the surrounding drywall. The sounding of ripping paper echoes down my hallway, as the wall spills its dusty innards onto the linoleum. My fingers and clothing turn flour-white.

When I stop pulling at the wall, I've made a hole large enough to fit through: a rough meter in diameter. I wedge my body in, brace my arms on the other side and then haul myself through. The deed done, I pick myself up and pat the dust from my clothes and hair.

Another hallway, all right. Indecipherable from any other, save that this one now has a sizeable hole. I think back to my gerbil and his manufactured freedom, and how I had responded by putting more cardboard boxes down on the other side of his hole.

- 3 -

The woman selling tickets peered down at me dubiously from behind her thick, black-framed glasses. She then looked up at my Grandmother, asked after my age. Emphasized that children under twelve were not allowed.

I was eight, but tall for my age. Gangly. Grandma had told me the plan on the five-hour drive from Edmonton to Grande Prairie: "Now when we get there," she'd said, "you're twelve, on account of if you ain't, then there's no maze for you."

That year, at the dinner table, I announced that at long last I could watch the Halloween specials on TV. I was too old to be scared by all that fake stuff, I reasoned. It's all make-up and fake blood anyway, I explained.

My grandmother sucked her teeth, clicked her nails against the kitchen table and sized me up like a bottle of homemade wine. "Oh, well, if you're too old..."

Two days later she wrapped me in a scarf, jammed a toque on my head, and armed me with a flashlight and a canteen of hot chocolate. "The torch is for the maze," she'd said. "The hot chocolate for the drive. Get in the car."

The bespectacled woman pursed her lips. "Twelve?"

I nodded.

The woman looked down at me. I looked up at her. "Twenty dollars," she said.

"Ten," my Grandmother amended. "He'll be hoofing it alone. I'll be buying a snow cone."

"We don't sell snow cones." The woman frowned, prioritized her thoughts. "And the maze can be quite scary for children."

My Grandmother made a sound like *pfft*, while she peeled off two blue bills for the woman. "Which way to the concession?"

I'd wandered through corn mazes before, but never like this. The dead of night, my fingers numb from the cold. I could hear the screams of those within the maze, and the rustles as they ran through endless corridors of corn. The moon was a pale fingernail in the sky. Even the trees looked skeletal, dusted in white frost.

I held my grandmother's hand to the cornfield's entrance. The stalks looked grey and dead in the moonlight. Creaking in a cold breeze, they sounded like guillotine ropes awaiting the axe.

"Scarecrows dressed up like zombies," my grandmother said, "and people jumping out to chase you when you turn a corner."

I knew that I was too old to ask the question, but on that night I voiced it anyway, "And there's no real monsters, right?"

My grandmother waved her mittened hand. "No such thing. Unless you find corn particularly terrifying. Now, granny's going to buy a cracker jack."

I nodded. I'd been instructed to find four checkpoints, and then to find my way back to the beginning. Between one and two hours, they'd said... unless I got lost. If I was lost, I might spend eternity between the stalks, another spirit to haunt those foolish enough to wander into the maze. I smiled at the silliness of that, but was still relieved to see my grandmother waiting for me by the entrance when I looked back. She waved so I turned back around.

I swung my flashlight left and right as I crept slowly forward. The corn was cordoned off of the main passages with strips of yellow tape. The compact dirt beneath my feet was pockmarked with the footprints of those who'd gotten lost before me.

Two minutes into the cornfield, I encountered my first horror: a scarecrow dressed up like a reaper. I jumped as I rounded the bend, but managed not to scream. Then I laughed. A scarecrow. This wasn't so scary after all.

A minute later a man wearing a Jason Voorhees mask and brandishing a bloody axe chased me ten feet or so. He leapt from the stalks, roaring incoherently, and I fell hard against the corn on the far side of the wall and even got tangled in the yellow tape. I screamed myself hoarse. He gave me time to untangle myself, but in my terror I didn't realize that's why he was stalking towards me so slowly. I ran blindly away as soon as I was freed.

I was lost, so I began taking turns at random. I stopped, once, at a three-way intersection, hearing screams from immediately to my right. I crouched behind the corner as a man and a woman, holding hands and giggling, ran past me, immediately followed by Freddy Krueger.

The maze held too much horror for me. I stopped to catch my breath in the glow of six pumpkins, each carved into demonic visages, but soon even scarecrows made me jump. The hanged men looked far too real, and once, one lifted himself off of his cross and moaned as he shambled after me.

The maze was supposed to take between one and two hours to traverse. I began yearning for the exit after ten minutes. Too proud to cry out for a maze warden, I groped for the exit, following trails that looked familiar, that I half-remembered wandering down. I cried, though I didn't let myself whimper. I forgot about the checkpoints and just wanted out.

The last horror I faced before leaving the maze, was an enormous shirtless man with a bull's head and burning red eyes. In the gloom, his pants, for they must have been pants, even had the unkempt appearance of fur and the backwards bend of a bull's legs.

He chased me faster than any of the others, his breath hot on the back of my neck as I ran and screamed my way around every corner and bend. Finally, as I knew his fingers were scant seconds from closing on my hair or clothes, I dove off the marked trail and into the grey stalks. I heard the hooves skid to a stop behind me, and then come crashing through the corn in pursuit.

On the path, his long legs easily overtook me, but here my smaller frame was an advantage. I wove through ears of corn, the fibrous stalks slapping me with their leaves as I past. I could hear the monster behind me, bull rushing through the plants that I'd sidestepped around. I ran until I realized that the sounds of pursuit had slowed, and then I dove into the thickest bit of brush I could find and stared around for any sign of my pursuer.

There was a second of silence, before he bellowed out his frustration. There were no words in that roar, nothing human. Finally, I heard the clump of his heavy hooves retreat back to the marked paths. The blood pounding in my ears slowly subsided, to be replaced by the whispering corn and the sounds of other people screaming and laughing.

When I finally found my way out, my grandmother was sitting on a bench looking over the entrance. She was quick to open her arms and cradle me upon my retreat, so that I could sob out my terrors to her. Gradually, as my heartbeat slowed and my adrenaline drained away, I felt shame begin to eclipse my fear. I was old enough. I'd told her I wasn't scared.

"You were in there for a long time," she said gently, and stroked my hair.

"I'm sorry," I whispered into her neck, her old person scent more comforting than her embrace. "I wasted your ten dollars."

"It's all right to be afraid," she countered. "It's smart to be afraid. I forgot to tell you that there is one real monster in any maze and it's the only thing that can find its way around. I forgot to warn you of the minotaur."

- 4 -

I consider the hole I've made from the far side. I walk around it, pick up fallen pieces of drywall, climb back and forth through it a few times.

The wall is maybe five or six centimeters thick, and seems to lack any solid structure holding it up. I could probably smash a straight-line through them, if I so desired, though that might not leave me any better off than when I attempted to travel in one direction.

I don't leave the hole. This break in the drywall is the first real landmark I've seen, even if I did manufacture it.

Besides, this maze may have no exit. That thought's been haunting me. Perhaps I'm in hell and hell is boring. Or purgatory—this place seems to fit the bill. No torture, but no paradise. Doomed to wander forever, unless I can earn my way into heaven.

I pull out the Gideon New Testament and flip it open, looking for solace in the red letters. The page I flip to, midway through the Book of Matthew, has three short lines scribbled beneath the Bible verses and an arrow pointing up at the passage. Then, because I still can't read Italian, I close the book and stow it back in my cargo shorts' pocket.

I close my eyes and listen to the fluorescent lights humming overhead. I've read that they're bad for you, that they cause migraines and insomnia. I think I've heard that fluorescent lights are linked to cancer, too. And obesity. An ex told me they disrupt regular menstruation.

It figures, I suppose, that hell would have fluorescent lights.

But I don't believe in hell, or purgatory, or heaven for that matter. I'm not Catholic. I'm not particularly anything. Even my atheism, if it is that, is lazy. I think my religion might be yes-man, because I'd agree with the statement that a meatball created the universe if only it would change the subject.

Manmade seems more likely than afterlife, to me. I'm the white rat running laps. Or the gerbil, as it were.

I web the red string idly between my fingers as I think. Then I open my eyes. The first real landmark... well, why not?

I move up to the hole I've made and kick a second, smaller hole in the wall beside, taking care not to connect the two. Then I thread the red string through the holes and knot it. I give the string a pull, which sends more dust spilling to the ground but should hold, provided that I don't rip it from the wall.

I choose a direction and start walking. As I move, I let the string fall behind me so that I can find my way back. I turn a corner and pay close attention to how quickly my red string is trickling away between my thumb and forefinger.

Soon I'm holding the string by one end while the other trails out of sight. I give my tether a gentle tug and feel the line go taut. Three corners. That's as far as I get.

I lift the scarf with my left hand, briefly consider unraveling that too and tying the two strings together, before I let it fall back on my shoulders and abandon the thought.

Optimistically, I might turn ten more corners before my scarf also runs out and then I'd be right back to square one. I trace my red string back to the hole in the wall.

I wonder if I should wander the other way. And encounter the same dilemma. And wander back. And back again and back again.

Or I could wait here. Maybe I should shout for help—it is a strategy I haven't tried. In fact, I probably haven't spoken aloud in a day or more. I look down at my watch and learn that it's twenty-to-something.

Thanks, watch. That's helpful.

I do none of the above. I sit my ass back down. I'm pouting, I think. I twirl the untethered end of the string around my finger once more, and pull out the New Testament for the second time since busting through the wall. If I *was* in hell, it strikes me as an odd thing to provide lost souls. Or maybe that's part of the punishment—the reminder of how easy it would have been to escape. I look down at the same passage I'd seen before.

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened—yeah. Thanks, God. If I could find a door, I might try that. I look up from the page. Reading the Bible when I'm directionless is too heavy handed. It reeks of Sunday school parable material. My eyes drift over to the inked-in Italian.

*No non so ben ridir com' è u'intrai,
tant' era pien di sonno a quel punto
che la verace via abbandonai.*

I pluck out the word "abandon" from the red letters, but little and less otherwise. And there's the arrow, the arrow pointing up.

I look up. Those damn fluorescent lights. I close the book, stuff it in my pocket. I look up again. Fluorescent lights. And a corkboard ceiling.

I smile despite myself. Even after my self-admonition to think in three-dimensions, I hadn't. It's curious that I've yet to encounter a single stairwell, ramp, or other change in elevation. Occasionally, the corridor I'm following suddenly angles away, but my choices are always separated by ninety degrees. I've never gone down. I've never gone up.

I stand and walk over to my vandalized wall. I rest a foot in the hole, then test the drywall with my weight. More white dust crumbles to the floor, but it seems to hold me, so I ease myself up. I knock one of the corkboard panels askew.

I'm too low to see above them, so I place my other foot in the second hole and, once again, ease off my other leg to see if it can support my weight. I move slowly and deliberately and, thus far, without incident. I pull myself up to look through the ceiling...

I'm staring down another white-washed corridor. The panel I've knocked askew is a linoleum tile, lying on the floor beside me.

I blink and duck my head back down. Corkboard. Fluorescent lights.

I poke my head up again. Hallway. Linoleum. More fluorescent lights further overhead. What the fuck.

I keep my head above the hole in the floor, while, from underneath, my left hand feels its way along the bottom of an adjacent piece of ceiling. I can feel the bumpy corkboard surface against my fingers. My fingers push up and I watch a square piece of tile beside me bounce on their tips.

Well then. I bring both hands up through the opening and put my weight on what appears to be linoleum tile, fully expecting it to cave down around me. It doesn't. In fact, my grip allows me to hoist myself through the opening and scramble onto this "second floor." The tile, if it is that, smells of dust and floor wax, and feels as hard as, well, linoleum.

I dust myself off. I'm in another corridor, identical to the last, save that this one's walls are intact. I look back through the square hole in the floor, at ground zero beneath me and the red string I've forgotten to bring along.

I linger at the hole in the floor. I loiter. I walk around it at least a dozen times. I stamp at the ground beside it, knowing logically that it's wafer thin and that I should be falling through. I stick my head back down, at the light fixtures, then back up to see if I can find any evidence of them. I even poke a finger at their plastic case, but those I can't seem to budge.

Well. What now.

I dangle my legs through the hole in the floor and pull out the book again, half expecting the message to have changed. Unfortunately, the red letters are still incomprehensible and the arrow still points up. I flip to the next page, but my guide hasn't written anything here at all. Nor the one after that, nor the one after that. No more red letters until page thirty-nine, and I still can't read Italian.

I look up at my new ceiling, with its new corkboard and new light fixtures that I absolutely cannot distinguish from the old. Then I throw my New Testament at it. The book flaps open mid-flight, only to thump against one of the plastic fixtures and flop harmlessly to the ground about a meter away. Now I have to go retrieve my Bible.

So, here I am. Reality is broken, hell is boring, and even in three-dimensions, it seems, my only recourse is to wander down identical corridors until something better comes along.

- 5 -

I almost miss the maze's first change at another four-way intersection, with four more white hallways to choose from. I would have missed it entirely, if not for the surrounding monotony. A finger of crimson jutting from a sea of white.

I'm staring down at another red string.

I pick up the loose end and stare down the hallway. I left mine on the floor below... But I had only one mitten in my possession. Perhaps my Italian friend wandered down this way. Jackass who took my pants. Maybe they've found a way out. Maybe they pulled a Theseus, and their thread is tied to the doorframe.

I begin walking, and the first time I shout "hello?" my own voice makes me jump. My pace quickens. "Hey! Is someone else in here?"

The red vein on the floor winds this way, and that. Corridors race by. I haven't run through these halls yet, I realize, my gait has been locked at a meandering. Now the urge to escape compels me on.

Then I slow to brisk walk. I think of my gerbil.

When he proved uncooperative, I started to lure him through my maze with a trail of sunflower seeds. He found his motivation. He scurried from seed to seed, stuffing his cheeks, rushing blithely onward. Of course, what awaited him was a pile of sunflower seeds and a safe return to his cage. But what awaits me?

I still move quickly, it's hard not to. But I do stop shouting. I peer around corners before I turn them. This maze suddenly seems less docile, now that something has changed without my instigation. A red string. A trail, perhaps, laid by another victim. A lure, perhaps, by someone watching my progress.

There's someone behind this, maybe a corporation's worth of someones, and I've been set to run laps like a lab rat. Maybe the fluorescent lights secret away cameras. Maybe I'm the new star of a Reebok commercial.

I look down at my blinding shoes and eccentric attire. Not much of a poster boy.

So if I'm a gerbil in a maze, then this red string is bait. Almost certainly. I need to ease off the throttle. Only disappointment, and possibly a mountain of sunflower seeds, awaits me.

I turn a corner. Another. And another. This thread is longer, I'm sure of it. What if it was a decoy? What if I'd turned right instead of left and voila, the exit. But no, I followed the red string. I'm locked in.

I briefly consider that fluorescent lights might induce paranoia.

Then I reach the red string's end.

It's tied to itself, threaded through a wall that's had two holes smashed into it. One large hole and one smaller. I can see the knot in the string: the same knot I tied. The white dust coating the floor sports a myriad of confused footprints, all made—I must assume—by a pair of Reebok sneakers with threadbare soles. One of the corkboard ceiling tiles is knocked askew, and through the hole I can see another ceiling far above.

So. Maybe I am in hell.

Frustration finally rips from my throat, a low groan that builds in intensity as I run the last few steps to the wall. I throw a fist into it, then a foot; I punch, kick and stomp at the wall as if this one piece of drywall was the source of all my frustrations. My hand soon aches, the skin breaks, and red spots pimple the wall where my bloody knuckles grace it. Clouds of drywall dust spray into the air and choke the corridor, turn the red splashes pink.

Finally, when my hand is too sore to form a fist, I rip my cowboy hat off my head, throw it onto the ground, and then kick it through the hole in a shower of white dust.

Then I sit, panting, before the hole I've made. The chalky powder settles in my clothes and hair, clings to my fingers. I breathe heavily and the lights hum overhead, but nothing else makes a sound.

The wall seems unfazed by both my moment of wanton destruction, and the man puddling before it.

"I think," I say aloud, my voice hoarse, "I could use some help."

- 6 -

I remember my father setting me down and explaining that just as he was my father and my mom was my mother, my gramps was *his* father, and my gran *his* mother. To my young mind that made them about a thousand-years old.

In my memories of her, though, my grandmother still looks like a young woman. Her hair was blonde. Her nails, two-inches long and immaculate, gleamed cucumber green or tomato red. Her cheeks were flushed with rouge.

Around her neck, she wore a silver crucifix and a jade earring pierced each lobe. She divided five rings among her fingers, each emblazoned with the birthstone of a different grandchild. My aquamarine took pride of place on the middle finger of her right hand.

My grandmother spent an hour in the bathroom every morning, trying to smooth out her wrinkles and moisturize her drying flesh.

My grandmother's scent was old, but that's only because my mother didn't wear perfume. My grandmother did, healthy doses of *Dior Poison*, which I grew up associating with old age, if only because she smelled different from the other women I knew.

Years later, I would date a girl who wore the same scent. The first and only time I kissed her felt oedipal.

My grandmother wore sundresses or flowing blouses around the house. In the garden or the stable, she dressed more practically, with blue jeans and triple-padded gloves. I remember watching her prepare to plant a row of potatoes once, peeling her decorative nails off and placing them in a neat row on the porch.

I always thought of that countryside house as my grandmother's and not my grandfather's, though they never separated. The association is due to their respective presences within the

house. My grandfather, when he was home, was often out on their riding mower, shaving their extensive property. Either that or he was in the den, a golf game on mute while he snored from the sofa. Once, I caught him trimming his nose hairs in the basement bathroom, and I believe I also attributed that bathroom to him thereafter. But where my grandfather had pieces of the home, the rest belong to my grandmother.

The front porch was always claimed by her rocking chair and her homemade distillery, the back of the house by her raspberry bushes and vegetable garden. The driveway always displayed her blue Toyota, while my grandfather kept his white Ford in the garage. Even the stable was hers: its sole occupant, a speckled old mare named Aria.

Inside, the house always smelled of food. Her food. Borscht bubbling on the stove, ham and cherries simmering in the oven, sugar cookies cooling on a baking sheet. My grandfather's skill in the kitchen extended to dressing a chicken, so he left all the actual chemistry to my grandmother. She made masterpieces in that room, which I acknowledged even if I refused to eat the borscht.

Nearing the living room, the smell of food was soon diluted with the smell of oil-based paint. My grandmother, though she painted outside as a rule, let her masterpieces dry in the living room: leaning against the sofa, face-up on the coffee table, propped in front of the fireplace. We ate in the kitchen and watched TV in the den, because my grandmother's artwork owned the living room.

My grandmother also filled the house with Jesus, practicing hymns long-since memorized as she cooked and painted. Part of her church's choir group, my grandmother insisted that song paired with every part of life as well as cabbage went with soup.

And then there were the owls. A fervid traveler, my grandmother commemorated each exotic locale she visited by buying souvenirs. Always those souvenirs featured owls. Brazil yielded a set of four mugs, each carved from fragrant rosewood into the likenesses of owls. A needlepoint tapestry featuring two Australian Barking Owls hung on her living room wall. Pride of place on her mantelpiece was taken by a stuffed Eagle-owl from India.

What she couldn't find abroad, she discovered locally. Even the bathroom wasn't immune to her obsession, once my grandmother discovered the Awesome Owls Bath Collection at Target. And, while most of the house featured an uninspired wallpaper of blue vines and leaves creeping up the wall, the "kids' room," in which I slept, featured a white wallpaper polka dotted with different owls and their common names.

I spent increasingly more time at my grandmother's house as the years passed, and that room became as familiar to me as my own bedroom. I remember sitting in bed, a book of children's Bible stories propped open on my lap, listening to my grandmother sing while she peeled off her nails in the bedroom next door. I remember waking up to the smell of ginger snaps, my room cold with the first snowfall of the year. I remember the summer evening when my grandmother, who didn't know that I could see her from my second-storey window, lifted the rifle to old Aria's head and pulled the trigger.

- 7 -

My grandmother told me that horses need horseshoes because humans need roads. Horseshoes protect the hoof from the unnatural wear inflicted by increased exposure to asphalt streets and compact dirt roads. Linoleum is no different, I'm sure.

So, upon finding a hoof print in the drywall dust, I have some mixed feelings.

My first thought is that the poor animal is probably lame, wandering this maze unshod. My second thought is, of course, there is no monster in this maze.

I had my breakdown, I figure I was due one; I took my frustrations out on the wall. Following that, I retrieve the hat I'd kicked through the hole in the wall. My Stetson lies on the ground, dust caked like everything else after my rampage. There is even dust beneath the cowboy hat, from the first time I kicked a hole through the wall.

In that dust lies a hoof print. A *hoof* print.

I imagine a horse, like the one my grandmother used to have, an old half-blind mare. Indoors. In an office building. Some intern's idea of a practical joke. I imagine the horse wearing a party hat.

We did that once, my grandmother and I. Placed a party hat on Aria's head when she turned thirty-six. My grandmother gave Aria two helpings of oats and we sang happy birthday in the stable.

Of course, I'm disillusioned about this maze being anything akin to an office building. Something else, then. A drywall maze constructed for a horse, maybe, with a pile of oats at the far end as incentive.

And that would make me... what? A fly accidentally caught in the web? I shake my head. Unlikely.

Unbidden, I'm reminded of my grandmother comforting a little boy with the words,
"There is one real monster in any maze and it's the only thing that can find its way around."

I take a step back and then give myself a mental shake. I don't believe in monsters. I lean down and examine the hoof print.

It's split into two halves, which don't connect at any point. Not a horse, then. Cow, maybe. Or deer? I've seen them wander into the streets from the local park. Never into a building, but who knows where this complex is located. It's certainly sprawling.

I return to my lab rat hypothesis: perhaps I'm not a bystander, but only one among many specimens. A cross-species test, then. Various mammals, wandering down white halls. Does a human in its constructed, but 'natural' environment snap before an animal removed from nature? Or maybe: grudge match, man vs. moose. Two enter the maze, only one leaves! Perhaps I've been abducted by aliens and this is an interstellar Noah's ark.

I shake my head again. A hoof print does not an alien abduction make. I can think through this. I slow my breathing.

There is an animal in here with me, and more likely than not it's just as scared as I am. It stands to reason that I made quite some noise in tearing down the wall the first time around. That being the only sound in these hallways, the animal probably followed the noise and arrived sometime after I hoisted myself through the ceiling. Then, finding nothing here, it probably left sometime before I circled back around.

I nod. That seems like a reasonable explanation. I excuse, for the moment, that I'd climbed up to another floor and still somehow circled back around, but that's a wholly unrelated mystery. I look at the hoof print and feel silly for being scared of such a little thing.

"Minotaur," I say aloud, my voice less confident than I want it to be. Then I laugh and the sound dispels the ghosts from the room. "Minotaur," I say again, louder. I smile.

Whatever roams these halls with me is no monster, and certainly no threat. In fact, I feel sorry for it. Even if it does find a way out, it may have to be put down.

As a child, learning both horse care in my grandmother's stable and fragmented monster myths on Halloween, I'd constructed my own version of the labyrinth at Knossos. In my version of the myth, the minotaur's lifelong vigilance of those stone halls drives it to lameness. The poor beast limps down halls in search of food, food in the form of gladiatorial warriors with a taste for blood. Enter Theseus: not a brute, but a sympathizer. He holds the minotaur's muzzle in one hand, his sword in the other. He whispers soft comforts in the monster's ear. A tear slips down his cheek. Then Theseus sheathes his sword between the minotaur's eyes, euthanizing an old and tired animal before it can suffer anymore.

A little older, I asked my grandmother if my myth was true, if the stone floors and corridors wouldn't hurt the minotaur's hooves. She'd looked at me, tears in her sagging eyes. "I suppose they might," she said. "Now isn't that sad?"

"And what happened then?" I asked her, implausibly expecting her to finish the story I'd invented.

"I suppose Theseus would bury the minotaur," she said. "Have a funeral. That's something you do when someone you love dies."

A junior high school teacher corrected my Theseus story sometime after that, during a World History unit. The minotaur, she said, was a monster. The unholy offspring of Pasiphaë and Poseidon's sacred bull. It was imprisoned in the labyrinth as much as any other person, and King Minos used the beast to keep the city in mortal terror.

As for a funeral, well, the horseshoe was not invented until several centuries into the A.D., but glue predates the Bible. The Greeks made glue from bull skins and damaged hooves. A maze is no place for a minotaur.

- 8 -

Distracted as I am by the unexpected hoof print, it takes me a moment to realize that *this isn't my hole*. I've never been in this hallway before.

Oh it's similar. It's damned uncanny how similar it was. A large hole, a small hole, and a red string tied between them? I suddenly wish I hadn't destroyed it so that I could examine the wall more thoroughly.

I look at the shards of drywall with the limp red string in its center. I walk over, disturbing the dust in my wake, to examine the knot, but unfortunately, in my violence it's come undone. I wonder if this one was tied with a ribbon or an overhand knot. I had tied it like a necktie, a single windsor fastening it to the wall. I let the string fall back to the dusty floor and I turn around.

I punched that first hole into the side of a straight corridor, so after stepping back through that hole, my only options should be to head left or right. Instead, I have a third choice.

A corridor runs straight ahead. A corridor that, were this my hole, shouldn't exist.

I look back at the red string and remember that I only had one mitten. What happened to its twin? I feel a smile tug my face.

I have never been in this room, so someone else must have been. Someone with the same idea that I had. Someone else trapped in this godawful maze. Even if I can't speak Italian, it's going to be nice to catch up to another human being.

A dozen steps down this new hallway, which I'm playfully calling the "Minotaur's corridor" due to the hoof print facing this direction, I check myself. There's no actual reason to believe that this other, whoever they are, went this way. They may have actually come from this corridor. Like me, they broke a hole in the wall, but there's no telling which side they did it from.

I backtrack to the ruined wall and give myself a mental kick. If only I hadn't destroyed the wall, I might get some clue based on which side the dust had fallen. Now dust and drywall lie everywhere, and my footprints have obscured any others there might have been. Damn me.

The corridor I arrived from seems plausible. I arrived from that direction, but then I've only just arrived on this floor. I followed the red string to get here, but if someone had tied it to the wall and simply left it lying there when their slack ran out...

Then I look up. There's still the loose panel above me. Perhaps their string gave out and they did the same thing I did, returned back to the hole in the wall and tried an alternative means of escape. Up and out, only to find another series of doppelgänger corridors.

I move back down the corridor from which I arrived and stop at the first intersection, searching the walls for any sign of markings as I had done. Nothing. Looking down, I do find a scuffmark on the floor, but then there's no guarantee that I didn't leave it when I first hurried down this way. I return to the hole in the wall, try a different passage. More nothing.

I repeat this process with every hallway, hitting the Minotaur's corridor last. Down that corridor, I walk. I check my watch. Ten minutes later, I check it again. I passed no forks in the path.

Once again, I hesitate. I should go back. I didn't collect the red string from the ground, and I may want it in the future. Perhaps I should explore the floor above me, or at least give it a cursory glance.

I look at my watch out of ridiculous habit and it resolves me. No, if there's one thing I have, it's time. I'll be thorough. I'll find the first intersection I can, check the walls for signs of someone's passage, then head back to the hole in the wall.

A long corridor is merely a long corridor, minotaur or not.

- 9 -

I remember my grandmother's front porch more distinctly than the interior of her house. I spent many hours on it: picking at the flaking blue paint, pulling the legs from daddy longlegs and then dropping their bodies between the boards, using my pocket knife to carve new swear words I learned from my grandfather into corners of the wood where I thought my grandmother wouldn't notice. It was on that porch that she taught me what the meaning of life is not.

I perched on my grandmother's wicker rocking chair in a shaded corner of the porch, while she hunched over her still. I sat on the threadbare floral-print cushion (after dislodging the neighbors' farm cat) and pumped my legs as if on a swing set. The rocking chair bucked like one of her fox trotters.

"A life without direction is meaningless," my grandmother said.

The neighbors' cat watched my chair from the front lawn, its tail stiff and as thick as a toilet scrubber. I heard dogs barking in the distance and the cat's ears twitched towards the sound, but otherwise it didn't move.

"Take Henry," she said. "A writer. Murder mysteries and ten cent thrillers, and after putting himself through law school. Bloody waste, if you ask me."

My grandmother sucked on her teeth, her sound of disapproval. "And don't say bloody," she added. "That's a grown up word."

"Like shit," I said.

"And don't say shit."

"What about 'piece of shit'?"

"Only if it's lying on the ground."

I would have nodded but I was busy clinging to the rocking chair, wondering if I could make it tip over from the sheer force of my body motion. I craned my neck to see how close I was to the railing, thought about being thrown over the side and dive-bombing the cat.

“Dad says I can’t read his books yet.”

“That’s right,” granny said.

“Because they’re adult books.”

“Because they’re shit.”

She slowly turned up the heat on the Coleman stove, and the homemade distillery started bubbling. The smell of sour beer and burning plastic permeated the porch.

I fantasized about rocking so hard that I would be bucked off and start flying, like Superman getting a running start. But I knew that wouldn’t work. I knew that if I wanted to fly, then I’d have to throw myself from high places repeatedly until I learned. That was called natural selection, which I knew because mom was teaching me about evolution, even though Grandma thought I should be in church.

“Stop rocking,” grandma said. “That’s an antique. Now give us a swig.”

My grandmother handed me a thimble of moonshine to sample. I was her laboratory rat, I think. Back then, I thought she was trying to brew something I’d enjoy. But, looking back, if I didn’t make a face then she knew that it was still too sweet and would let it bubble for a while longer.

I remember my grandmother’s smile at my sour face, the wrinkles around her mouth deepening into crevasses. She turned the heat back down.

“What’s the direction of your life?” I asked her, suddenly bored now that I wasn’t moving. The cat had run from the lawn.

“At the moment, it’s to not screw up this cider.”

“I think mine is to watch TV.”

My grandmother chuckled, a dry sound from the back of her throat. “Go see if any cartoons are on. Tell Earl to get me some bottles.”

“I could get you some bottles.” I enjoyed the trek into her cellar, which was normally locked. Grandpa kept a shotgun down there, and a stuffed moose head that he said came from Alberta.

My grandmother sucked her teeth, but pulled the chord off her neck with the cellar key on it nevertheless. She placed it in my eager palm. “Go on then. Mind the steep steps, and don’t bring too many at once like last time, or you’re sweeping up the glass.”

- 10 -

The minute hand loops once, twice. Still I walk down the minotaur's corridor.

This hallway is longer than any other I've encountered, and the oddity of it actually buoys my spirits though I can't seem to find its end. It's something different and that, in itself, is special.

I begin to wonder at the walls around me. Are these the same as those I've left behind? Are these walls a little less eggshell, a little more pearl? Beige, perhaps? I'd almost swear they're getting darker.

Then I notice the subtle curving of the hall, and I'm sure of it. Very gradually, this hallway is changing. The walls and floor around me becoming more concave as I progress. Soon the floor is shaped like a sluice, and I wonder if water might start running by me underfoot.

At that thought, I notice the incline. I've been moving upward, little by little. This is the first time any corridor has offered me a change in elevation, and giddiness overwhelms me as I wonder if I might not, finally, have found the ramp out of this place.

I giggle, despite myself. Then I stifle the unnatural sound.

I pause for a moment and wrap my scarf around my bloodied knuckles. It's a late gesture: they're already dust-coated and throbbing. I have no water to clean the wound with, and the covering will do little to prevent infection, but it makes me feel better to have my hand wrapped.

I continue onward, but as the hallway continues to round out my progress slows. I notice the linoleum tile slowly creeping up the sides of the passage, phasing out the drywall. It makes sense, I suppose; I wonder that whoever designed this building found curved sheets of drywall in the first place. The effect of this gradual progression, however, is disorienting, and I soon have trouble distinguishing wall from floor. Even the ceiling is eventually encroached on, the tiles creeping up to the light fixtures, which are also concave, until everything around me is tiled.

I look behind me. The corridor, now round as a dime, seems to stretch on forever.

The round corridor, coupled with an ever-increasing incline, obliges me to crawl forward on my hands and knees. I pause for a moment to return my now blood-stained scarf to my neck and knot it loosely, should it slip off in what is rapidly becoming a climb.

The going is slow, and I'm soon sweating with the effort of not sliding backwards. I frog forward, my limbs splayed out for balance and to keep myself upright. I pause more and more frequently, resting my head against the linoleum, and then haul myself up.

Exhausted, I brace myself inside of the cylindrical corridor and rest my head. The floor against my cheek smells of pennies. I lift my head up again, and look afresh at the corridor I occupy. This is no linoleum; it's copper.

A pipe. I'm in a pipeline.

I keep moving. At no point does the pipe become too steep for me to progress, but neither does it become any easier. The climb is arduous, and when the angle is thirty-five degrees or more, I risk sliding back down at the cost of all my progress. Should that happen, I may backtrack to the ruined wall, but it's hard to ignore that this, at least, is a break from the monotony of the maze.

Eventually, I sense that the incline is leveling out. Though still on my hands and knees, I pick up my pace. The pipe, though still circular, even seems level for a time... before it begins to dip slightly. Then more. And more.

And soon I'm splaying myself to keep myself from tumbling down the pipe. I've hit the apex, now it's time for the decline. In this case, that means a slide down an unknown distance, to an unknown destination. I consider my options.

I tuck my arms to my sides and begin my descent.

- 11 -

The copper chute curves suddenly left, which I hadn't expected. The turn sandwiches me against the right hand side of the piping, turns me around, so that now I'm sliding on my side, now my stomach. I feel vomit rise in my throat, as I whip round and round, ever faster. The tube slide coils ever downward and I tumble down its length.

My windbreaker flaps behind me like a loose flag. I lose my hat at the momentum, but that's the least of my concerns. I'm going too fast. I'm going to die. Now what kind of hell lets you escape by dying?

But I'm not in hell. I'm in a building, a building used for God only knows. Oh Christ, it's the world's biggest garbage chute and I'm probably heading straight for the trash compactor. Or I'm in a bizarre recycling plant, about to turn into a Coca-Cola bottle. Or, I think back to the hoof print, a meat processing plant, and there's a goddamn thresher right below me.

A small, more reasonable part of my mind wonders how a meat plant would expect anything to make the climb that I just did. That part is quickly squashed by the rest of my body anticipating Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace.

I throw my arms and feet out to slow my descent, but my palms are greased with sweat and can't find the purchase they need. The soles of my shoes, while better, prove too stripped to catch hold. I try again, and succeed for only a moment before my arms are wrenched back and I'm forced to continue my plummet.

I starfish out with all limbs, lock my knees and elbows to brace myself against the tube, but again gravity thrusts me further down the pipe, now tumbling headlong. I curve my fingers into claws and scrabble at the copper walls around me.

My right hand catches on something, maybe one of the light fixtures I'm spinning by, and rips open. I scream and hug my hand to my stomach. Already I can feel warm blood soaking into the fabric of my t shirt.

Injured and afraid, I succumb to the fall. I fold my legs up, my arms cradle my torso. I shut my eyes and await whatever gruesome end lies below.

And of course, the truth is far gentler than my imagination would allow. The pipe gradually levels out and my downward fall tempers a little bit at a time. The curve straightens and I find myself rolling along the hard copper, then sliding for a few seconds, and then, at last, the metal's friction halts me.

Still inside the pipe, I have not been deposited to some grisly fate.

I lie on my back for a time, drink the penny-scented air, marvel that I'm alive. I gingerly pull my hand from my stomach and am surprised to see that fear and surprise deceived me: the cut is long, but shallow, and the bleeding has already almost stopped. I'm all right. And, with any luck, I'm almost out.

Some ten or twenty meters away, I can see the exit to this pipeline. White light tempts me from the circular mouth, beckons me onward. I crawl forward, favoring my left hand, as quickly as I can.

The opening yawns ever wider, but as I get nearer I slow down. White walls are clearly visible beyond the exit. Only white walls. And I hear the hum of fluorescent lights from outside my copper pipe.

- 12 -

My grandmother made her lemon-face, when I told her that I was too old to hold hands with a girl. What I meant was her, or my mom had she been present, because I would have held hands with Justina from my class. Not necessarily because I had a crush on her, but because Brendan did and he was the most popular boy in school.

"Oh, well, if you're too old..." Her pursed mouth melted into a slow smile. I was too self-absorbed to realize that she'd been having the same conversation with me for years, already.

We held counsel upon our blanket at the Wild Rapids waterslide park. The blanket was emblazoned with Garfield's face, orange and black and hating Mondays. I wore black swimming trunks, while my grandmother had selected an embarrassing blue, one-piece bathing suit. Her everything sagged with age. So, I said that I wouldn't be holding hands.

"In fact," I told her, "you should go swim, I can handle the waterslides by myself."

I sucked in my stomach as I spoke. I was old enough to be subconscious about my lack of a six-pack, my undefined pectorals, but not disciplined or old enough to have any hope of attaining them. I was a fourteen-year-old boy, but I wanted Batman's body, a body that gym class had yet to grant me.

I'm sure my grandmother noticed, but she had the courtesy not to comment.

"Go on then," she said, "but I don't think that I'll swim. I don't see the appeal in sliding down a distilling tube, anyhow."

So said, she lay back on the blanket, her sunglasses on against the glare, and she looked for all the world as if she'd instantly fallen asleep. I crept away across the lawn, lest she wake and change her mind.

Of course, I headed straight for the steepest waterslide. While it was too short to be the most exciting, its headlong plummet ensured that it was the most discussed at school. In truth, it was actually two slides, side-by-side, and performing competitive speed runs down the slides became habitual whenever birthday parties or field trips brought us in sufficient numbers to Wild Rapids. Kami Kazi and Hari Kari: twin slides named after suicide, to amuse children too young to understand.

The line leading to the top of the waterslides took ten minutes to traverse. The slides themselves, twenty seconds to descend. A net loss, but children, myself included, ran back to the line, sopping wet and screaming, in order to ride them again. The water and sun warred for our bodies, soaking us through on our descent and then baking us as we climbed to the top once more.

I had reached the front of the line for the fifth time, and had just settled onto Kami Kazi's roaring lips, when I looked at the slide to my left and saw my grandmother grinning back at me. I'm not sure whether the blood rushed from my face or whether I turned beet red, but whatever the reaction I was certain that everyone else in line was witness to my humiliation.

"Race you," my grandmother said. "And if I win, I get to hold your hand back to the car."

My grandmother took off down the slide while I was still stuttering a protest. I chased her laughter all the way to the pool at slide's end.

- 13 -

"A te convien tenere altro viaggio," a silvery voice says.

I open my eyes. I'm staring at a corkboard ceiling and a goddamn fluorescent light. I close my eyes again and will this maze away.

"se vuo' campar d'esto loco selvaggio," the voice finishes, flourishing the final word as if delivering a monologue.

I sit up, my eyes open once more. A voice. A woman's voice. An honest to god human voice. She's found me, my Italian friend. I crane my neck to try and find her in the room. "My god," I creak. "I am so happy to hear—"

A girl, maybe seventeen- or eighteen-years old, sits cross-legged against the wall behind me. She has an orange book propped open in her lap. She has my Stetson perched atop her pale hair. And she's only half here.

I see her, then I see the wall through her. Were this a film, the effect would be comically cheesy. I've seen tutorials on how to layer videos atop one another, by recording an empty room and then the same room with someone walking through it. Simple smoke and mirrors. But not this; this girl is see-through.

I wipe my eyes with a dusty, abused hand, hoping it might help. The effect lingers.

She looks up from the book. "Isn't it sacrilegious to scribble in the Bible?"

I open my mouth, but no words issue forth.

"Or is it OK, because it's in Latin?" She stares at me staring at her for a moment, then shrugs. She tosses the Gideon New Testament down between us, so that it slides across the floor to rest against my foot. She looks down at it, then back up at me, and bites her lip. "That may have been sacrilege too."

She wears blue jeans and shapeless sweater striped with tan, orange and blue. The sleeves are too long, and she's seemed to form a habit of gripping the cuffs in her palms. Her blonde hair, mostly obscured by my cowboy hat, is tied back in a ponytail.

I've been staring and she's noticed. She leans forward to scrutinize me with similar intensity, only to recoil back. Her eyes grow wide, "Wait..." she whispers, and I catch an odd echoey quality to her voice. "I can... oh my gosh... you're, like, transparent..."

"What!" I start, and begin to pat down my arms, looking for any ethereal quality. "No, I'm not, I'm—"

"Are you a *ghost*?" she whispers. So saying she leans over, breaking her cross-legged stance to study me. She reaches out a tentative finger and then hovers it over my chest.

"I don't— what are you—" Then she plunges her arm into my chest and screams.

Her arm juts up to the elbow from my chest, right where my heart should be. I'm too startled to shout as she had, primarily because it feels like nothing at all. No chill down my spine, no hot and cold flashes. Only my sense of sight confirms that she is indeed plunged up to the elbow in my chest.

"Weird," the girl says. "Like pins and needles all over my arm. I'm wiggling my fingers on the other side, but I guess you can't see that. Or *can* you? Can you make your head do a one-eighty or is that only possessed people? I've never met a ghost before."

"Wait," I splutter, "I'm not the ghost. It's you who... oh god."

I haven't been thirsty. I haven't been hungry. I've been wandering for at least a day or two now, but I have no recollection of arriving in this maze. The laws of physics are clearly out the window, and... and...

And the girl is laughing.

She removes her hand from my chest and sits back on her haunches, mirth bubbles from her lips. She pauses a moment to catch her breath, looks back at me, then laughs all the harder.

"What!" I shout. "Am I dead? Is that the joke?" I rise to my feet and stare down at her, as if this lends me some authority.

The girl doubles over, clutching her side and howling.

"I don't understand!" I wave my arms, desperate to be let in on the joke. "What is this place?"

The girl holds up a finger, a motion for me to wait, but doesn't look at me again until the last of her giggles have subsided. When she finally does look up, an impish grin paints her lips. "Heh, sorry." She hiccups. "It's not often I get to pull the whole 'who's the real ghost' stunt."

"What?"

"Pity I couldn't hold it together longer." She smiles. "I wanted to ask you how you died. See how you reacted to *that* one."

My eyes narrow. "I'm not dead. You lied."

Still sitting on the floor, the ghost gives me a mock bow. "I'm a ghost, not a saint."

"You're the ghost?"

She cocks her head. "No, but the transparent look is really *hot* right now."

"I—" My mouth snaps shut. I realize that I've been voicing the first thought in my head, without pausing to form actual conversation.

The ghost, if she is that, has a sarcastic tone of voice and a tendency to stress at least one word every time she speaks. This whole exchange feels vaguely dreamlike. I try again, try to phrase a question that's more than a simple voicing of whatever's on my mind: "What do those words mean?"

The ghost gives me a look like I'm sour cream a week past the expiry date and she's taken a dubious whiff. "Well," she stretches out the word. "'Transparent' means that you can see through someth—"

"No, sorry," I reorganize my thought. "In the Bible. The words you read. Are they instructions?"

"Oh!" The ghost's expression softens. "Thank gosh, I thought maybe you had a concussion. No idea."

"Sorry?"

"I have no idea what it means. I don't read Latin."

"Italian," I correct her.

The ghost frowns. "How do you know it's not Latin if you can't read it either?"

"No, but... how did you know?"

She rolls her eyes. "Anyway, I *hope* I called you a loco savage. And maybe an ultra vegetarian."

"An ultra..."

"*Altro viaggio!*" the ghost proclaims, pointing an accusatory finger at me. Self-satisfied, she stands and holds out a hand for me to shake. I look at the proffered hand, wondering if my fingers will slide right through it, but when I reach out to take it she feels solid enough. "Name's Willow," she says. "A pleasure, etcetera. Looks like I'm your guide."

- 14 -

I walk about four paces behind Willow, mesmerized by her insubstantial quality. She still wears my Stetson, and this, too, I can see through, so long as it rests atop her blonde hair.

I don't believe in ghosts any more than I believe in hell or purgatory, but it's difficult to argue with her indistinctness. She's fuzzy at the borders, like a sketch in which someone tried to color in the lines without having any actual lines to guide them. Each time I try to study her, I find my eyes shift through her, and I'm watching the empty hallway more than Willow herself.

For her part, Willow ignores my scrutiny. She hums while she walks. I can't place the tune, but somehow it sounds familiar.

Despite my tumble down the copper chute, nothing seems to have changed: I've returned to the tedium of eggshell white drywall, ninety degree turns, corkboard overhead. But now I have a guide, and Willow chooses forks without hesitation. I find no logic in her choices. At first, I'm happy to let her pick a direction for me, until—

I stop. "Wait," I say. "We've turned left four times."

Willow looks back at me, apparently not seeing the problem.

"Our first left, four times," I repeat. "That means we're back on the same path we were a few minutes ago. Full circle."

Willow smiles. "I don't know how long you've been in here, but, thus far, how well has all that logic worked out for you?"

I hold my silence.

"Uh huh. This place doesn't like to play by the rules. How many bridges have you crossed?"

"What are we talking about?"

"Bridges. Long things, made of metal or concrete. Maybe ice. Often suspended over bodies of water. How many?"

"I haven't crossed any bridges."

"Damn," Willow sighs. "A ways to go, then." She turns around and starts walking again.

I jog a few steps to catch up, to walk beside her. Questions lodge in my throat, crowd my tongue for priority. "What is this place?" emerges first.

Willow glances at the sterile walls and floor as she walks. "Looks like an office building."

"You know what I mean."

Willow shakes her head, "Honestly, I *don't*."

"This maze," I growl. "This godforsaken maze. Are we in Canada? On the moon? Purgatory? Am I dead or a lab rat?"

Willow shrugs. "Which would you prefer?"

I ignore her rebuttal, surge onward, "And what are you for that matter? *Aside* from 'a ghost,' *aside* from 'Willow.'"

"And aside from your guide? A local, I guess."

"A local with no knowledge of the locale?"

"If you spend all your time wondering where you are, how do you expect to get where you want to be?"

"And where do I want to be?" I grumble.

"Out. Or so I assume. Am I wrong?"

Tired of talking to her back, I put my hand on her shoulder, intending to spin her around to face me. My hand swipes straight through her, however, and she looks back with a bemused smile. "And you can take me out? You're not trapped in this maze as I am?"

Willow's smile fades, her eyes narrow. "I didn't put you here, if that's what you're implying. This is your labyrinth, not mine, and you can't fault me for seeing the path more clearly than you."

"But—" Willow interrupts the thought with one hand on my mouth, while the other pries my fingers from her shoulder.

"My turn," she says. "For your sake. What did you meet before me?"

She removes the hand clamped to my jaw, allows me to answer, "I climbed through a ceiling that I couldn't distinguish from the floor. I tumbled down an office corridor cum copper pipe."

"Any other locals?"

"Until you, I thought I was alone."

"Any sound of pursuit?"

Now I squint at Willow. "Why?" I ask, "What would be pursuing me?"

Willow shakes her head again, then she turns around and moves purposefully down the corridor. Lacking a better course of action, I fall in line. As we walk, I notice Willow study every hall before selecting which one to take, and the way she glances behind us every so often, as if expecting to see something there.

- 15 -

My grandmother painted landscapes, though she had no formal training and no dedicated studio. Her painting supplies were relegated to tin cans in the garage. For a short time, she stored her oils and brushes in the living room, but my grandfather wouldn't abide their continued presence. He called it too cluttered for a living space, so instead he cluttered the living room with TV Guides and copies of Golf Digest.

Though my grandmother could, and occasionally did, paint from memory, more often than not she painted outdoors. The one thing she could not do was paint from a photograph. "Flat pictures yield flat paintings," she told me. "Only nature has any real soul."

She would pile me into her Toyota with her oil paints, canvases, sketching pencils and brushes, and we would drive until inspiration struck her. While she drove, I filled out books of Word Search puzzles. While she painted, I would go treasure hunting among riverside rocks, or explore fields strewn with hay bales. And, once every so often, I'd feel the same inspiration that overcame her, and then I would stand quietly by her side and paint a picture of my own.

"Clutch it like a knife," my grandmother instructed me, "hold the brush close to the tip. We're not painting a fence here, we're making art."

I watched my grandmother scrape the canvas with a brush crested in titanium white—a color that slowly resolved into the snow capping the background mountains. Then she took her ring finger on her left hand and smeared the snow down the mountainside. Then she stepped back, and said, "Now you."

I reached for her paint brush, but she laughed, "After playing in the mud last Sunday, you're afraid of a little paint?" She brought the brush down in an arc, daubed my nose in white.

That painting turned into a field of mustard rippling in the foreground, while the purple mountains and blue sky vied for attention in back. She pointed out some ripples in the sky to me and asked, "What are those?"

"Birds," I said, remembering the flight of geese that had flown overhead. My grandmother watched them fly by and didn't resume her painting until they'd vanished from sight.

"Wrong. Look again," I did look, but I could only see birds in the picture. At long last, devoid of another answer, I simply shrugged.

My grandmother pointed at the canvas. "Those are lines," she said. "Just little black lines in the sky. But to you, and to everyone else, they'll be birds. It's important to leave a few puzzles for the viewer." Her red lips parted in a smile. "We wouldn't want them getting bored."

Nothing seemed to be my grandmother's favorite subject matter. Or, at least, I considered it to be nothing. Grey beaches. Empty hills. Snow-coated forests. Empty streets. The only exception to that rule that I ever saw was a portrait of me.

"Bullshit," she said, when I mentioned the lack of humans in her artwork. "I paint all of my grandchildren. But, of course, I gift them to each of you when I'm done. What in the world would I do with your faces? But," she added, grinning, "you're partially right. There's nothing quite like nothing."

I told my grandmother that I wanted to be a painter and she beamed magnanimously at me. To my recollection, I'd never said anything that pleased her even half that much. The words I used were, "Like you."

Grandma didn't bequeath my portrait to me, choosing instead to hang it in the spare bedroom. "Boys your age," she said, "don't like to hang up gifts from grandma, and I'm not going

to have my paintings stowed in the garage. We're going to hang it here until you're old enough to appreciate how beautifully I've rendered you. How much skill this painting took."

But we both knew that the spare bedroom was quickly feeling like home to me. I'd permanently claimed the bottom drawer in the dresser. I kept a toothbrush beside the sink. Impromptu visits to grandma's house were occurring with increasing frequency: during the summer, on weekends, after school. Grandma said my parents worked themselves to death, and she frowned after their cars as they drove away.

Across from the portrait of me, my grandmother hung the Mustard Field. The bright yellows and purples of the painting jumped from the wall, against the dull wallpaper of blue vines. She called the painting a collaborative effort to justify my having it, but all I had done is run my finger through the snow.

- 16 -

"A vending machine," I whisper reverently.

"Two dollars," Willow spits. "Robbery! Maybe we should hold out for a fountain."

Willow and I stand in a corridor identical to every other, save that this one has a beverage machine set against one wall. An actual machine, bright blue and red, purring next to the first and only power socket I've seen.

I reach a hand out and touch the plastic Pepsi logo, circle the jarring splash of color.

"Willow," I say. "I'm not thirsty."

"So you can wait."

"No, I mean, since I found myself in this maze. When you said I was the ghost, I suddenly realized. I mean. I thought, maybe."

Willow shakes her head. "Unimportant. I wasn't looking for a drinks anyway, just some water to wash with."

I look down and take stock of myself. I'm dusted white with drywall dust. My knees and lower legs are mottled with bruises from the copper slide. My right bicep is red with friction burn. My knuckles, still tender, are brown with dried blood.

"I'm surprised you stayed to snoop through my things," I say. "I think I would have crept quietly by."

"Humanitarian," Willow says with a mock sigh. "It really eats into my 'me time.' All right," Willow fishes into her pocket, pulls out a two dollar coin, and slides it into the machine. "I was saving this for the boatman, but I'll come up with something else. You look terrible and I'm too ashamed to be seen in your company to carry on. You look like you lost a fight with the Pillsbury Doughboy."

Willow pushes a button and the machine stirs to life, spitting a cold bottle of water out in return. She unscrews the cap and hands the water to me.

I rinse my face, my neck, my hands. I spare a little water to rub down my legs and arms too. "Your hair too," Willow adds to my impromptu bath, "unless that's just you going grey."

The water depleted and myself refreshed, I set the bottle down atop the vending machine. Willow snatches it up again. "You're nuts," she says. "This is worth, like, *five* cents. Forty more of these and I'll have made my toonie back."

"You're holding out for a recycling bin?"

"*Some* of us care about the environment," she sniffs and begins walking, without waiting to see if I'll follow.

As we walk, I notice other small changes creep into the corridor. First are pipes, painted the same inoffensive white as the walls, dipping down from the ceiling to run at waist-height. Looking up, I notice sprinkler systems jutting through the acoustic ceiling tiles. Then I see a shock of crimson against the white wall ahead of us: my first fire alarm. Soon, these appear periodically through the corridors, and they're soon joined by small fire extinguishers strapped neatly to the walls.

The building begins to feel more and more familiar. Potted plants appear sporadically, strategically placed to conceal wall sockets and cover embarrassingly empty corners. I spot another vending machine, then another. This maze, brought to you by Pepsi.

Willow still shoulder checks. She also crunches the empty plastic bottle absentmindedly against her leg as she walks. Nervous. Despite her unease, however, mine dwindles as the alien blankness of the maze is replaced by product placement and familiar non-essentials.

"A hot shower," I muse aloud after twenty minutes of silence. "That's my first stop."

Willow turns her head to look at me, but her eyes crinkle downward even as she smiles.

The expression is concerned. Pitying, maybe.

"What's on the outside for you?" I ask.

Willow turns back around and I watch her shoulders stiffen and then slump in a shrug.

She gives no other answer.

And then there's light in front of us. Not the humming, white light of fluorescent bulbs, but the steel blue of a night sky peeking through a window. I let loose a laugh and blitz by Willow towards that glimpse of freedom.

I'm out. I mean, I'm still in, but I'm *out*. Out of that building if nothing else, out of endless hall after hall. I'm on a bridge that spans two buildings fifteen feet above a city street. An honest-to-god city.

Moonlight daubs my cheeks, blinks off of the reflective windows of buildings in the distance. A newspaper tumbles down the street, propelled by a breeze I can't feel. The moon hangs like a lopsided smile overhead

"The bridge I mentioned," Willow says, coming up to stand beside me. "Well. One of. Look behind us."

I look back through the glass at the building we've emerged from and I'm surprised by its mundanity. Given its interior, I expected something straight out of M. C. Escher. Instead, the building is a three-storey, slate-gray brick squatting on a downtown street corner. Remarkably unremarkable. Thin ribbon-windows, which somehow I managed to avoid altogether while inside of it, do little to detract from the building's ugliness.

The building on the bridge's far side is far more impressive: an obelisk of reflective glass, at least four-times higher, and the building reflects other skyscrapers lit up in the distance and the smiling moon.

"Do you know what building that is?" I ask. Willow shakes her head. "For a guide," I say, "you're not very informative."

Willow *hmpfs*, says, "Only because you're still asking the most inane questions. 'What building is that,' really? Not, 'why aren't there any people in the streets?'"

"Maybe that's normal for twenty-to-something at night." I grin at her, tap on my wristwatch. "Not every city has a night life."

"Then what's the point?" she says.

Willow tires of the view long before I do. She wanders to the far side of the bridge while I loiter at the window, my palms pressed to the cool glass, drinking in the city. A blue bench beneath a bus stop sign. A rainbow of cars parked curbside. The Starbucks' mermaid glowing green across the street.

The blue light deepens as I watch the sleeping city. The moon obscures its face behind black clouds. One by one, the stars wink out.

- 17 -

Our new building is carpeted. Our new building is doored. I point out these changes to Willow, but she merely frowns. I try the first door handle I encounter. It's locked. How refreshingly mundane.

Though this building doesn't differ tremendously from the last, fire extinguishers, vending machines, and even tacky, stock landscape paintings are now par for course. I catch Willow casting me sidelong glances and realize that I'm grinning. I don't stop.

"So what are we looking for?" I ask, while whipping my head to track every sign of habitation.

Willow's frown deepens. "You're sure you didn't hit your head earlier, right?"

"An elevator... a stairwell... a glowing green exit sign?"

"Exit signs are red," Willow murmurs, "and we're looking for the way out."

"Which will take the form of?" I jiggle another door handle as we walk by. Locked.

Willow points at an upcoming fork, and I see blue light spilling from the right hand passage.

"Oh!" I shout, while swooping by her. "Oh, you're awesome! That didn't take too long at all!"

A shower, I said, but that will only be one of many waves of relief. I'm going to kick off my shoes and fall into a sea of blankets. I'm going to find a human being who isn't translucent and shake their hand.

But first, I'll cancel my Visa. That's priority number one.

Willow doesn't share my enthusiasm. She maintains her steady pace, and when she catches up to me a few seconds later, it's to find me standing in the middle of a second bridge.

This bridge, unlike the last, is squared and only open to the sides. I can still see out and up, but not directly overhead. Like the last bridge, this one also suspends me fifteen feet above street level. While this road is also devoid of life, at least the decor has changed: a yellow newspaper bin chained to a lamppost, tread marks tattooed to the pavement, a squat white building opposite with a columned neo-classical facade.

I look up and the night sky is darker now. The moon's been obscured behind a porridge of grey clouds, a canopy illuminated by the street lamps below. It looks like rain.

I place my palms against the cool glass, stare hungrily at the outside world. I don't look back at Willow, though her indistinct image sidles up beside me in the window's reflection. She takes off the cowboy hat she's been wearing all this time and settles it back atop my head. I look ridiculous.

"You okay, lone star?"

I sigh. When I speak, it's to the window's faint reflection of her already translucent self. "You asked me how many bridges I'd crossed. There are more to come, aren't there?"

From behind me, she nods.

I turn around and plaster another grin on my face, though perhaps not as genuine as the one I'd worn moments ago. "Well, then we should keep moving."

Our new building is still doored, thank god. It still shows signs of habitation. I grip every door handle I come across. My pace increases after every unsuccessful knob.

The paintings of the last building have been replaced with decorative mirrors, and I witness my reflection's faux smile melt into a grimace as we continue walking fruitlessly forward. Gone are the vending machines, though we do encounter our first water fountain, and we encounter our first photocopier sitting silently against a wall. This building also re-adopts

linoleum floors. While my shoes squeak against the floor, Willow's footsteps remain completely silent.

She's not very talkative, but then neither am I. Once, she glances back and asks if I need a respite, but I shake my head. My watch now reads twenty-seven-to-something, and I wonder if it has only been seven minutes since I last checked, or, if not, how many hours have passed me by.

We soon find yet another bridge. Drizzle pimples the glass's exterior and the first fat drops slide down around us. Eager to escape the maze, I don't loiter to admire the view, so I'm caught off guard when Willow stops abruptly and I press right through her insubstantial form.

I look back, to see Willow doing the same: her back towards me, she stares down the corridor we've just come from.

"Did we take a wrong—" Willow, apparently listening for something, stabs a hand into the air to cut off my sentence.

I hear nothing but the steady plink of raindrops against glass panes.

"Shit," Willow hisses, then whirls around to face me. "Run!"

Willow grabs my hand and all but hauls me across the bridge. She lets go of my hand and we race down the hallways of our new building, though I barely register their porch-blue walls as we turn corners seemingly at random. I'm panicked by the panic in Willow's eyes, whenever she glances back.

And then I hear it too. The sound of water, dripping, somehow following us down the hall. But no, I realize, the sound is sharper. Less of a dripping... it sounds more like something clattering against the linoleum. It's a sound that doesn't belong in hotels, or office buildings, or whatever these buildings are. It almost sounds like hooves.

Willow is fast, faster than I would have given her credit for. She's an arm's length in front of me, then two. Soon, I'm barely turning corners fast enough to witness her disappearing around another up ahead. I can't tell if she still knows where she's going, or if she's simply fleeing the sounds of pursuit, but I'm not sure if I care.

I open my mouth to shout at her, to ask her to slow down, but then shut it again. If we're running from something, the last thing I want is to tell it where I am.

The hooves—I'm convinced they're hooves—clip-clop across the linoleum somewhere behind me. The sound isn't fast so much as persistent. I can't shake it, whatever it is, and it sounds close enough to reach out and grab me. I glance over my shoulder as I spin into new hallways after Willow, but I never glimpse our pursuer.

Then I turn a corner, and Willow isn't there. I stop. The sound of hooves does not.

- 18 -

Only in church was I an author, an artist. Every Sunday morning, forced to sit still in a wooden pew, my mind craved entertainment. I stole the visitor's pamphlets tucked behind the pew in front of me, and I used their comments' page to create my art.

When I had first graduated from Sunday School to the "adult service" on the church's main floor, my antics were discouraged. I should listen. Failing that, I should read the Bible. So I listened. I read the Bible. And then, because I was pubescent, I reread every verse that mentioned sex or prostitution while a well-positioned hymnal carefully concealed my lap.

Soon, however, even the Bible lost its luster. I began sketching cubes and writing poetry. Church found its way into my writing, weighing my words down with religious metaphors and spiritual sounding phrases that ultimately meant nothing at all. My sketches remained similarly abstract.

Eventually, however, my writing solidified into something more substantive. Stories blossomed on loose leaf meant for the guilt-laden to confess their sins. I wrote fantasy novellas, in which, for some reason, the hero always wound up being me. Every Sunday, my make-believe wizards performed complicated spells and rituals, blasphemously outperforming Jesus in every way.

My sketches also took on new life. The cubes transformed into skyscrapers, with streets running between them like rivers. I drew the Calgary Tower and the NYC's Twin Towers, because both could co-exist on the page before me. I daubed texture onto the stonework, traced cracks in the sidewalk, drew construction sites where future cubes might be erected.

Once, after a service, the woman who'd sat behind me for two hours had complimented me on my drawing. "It's beautiful," she said. "You're really talented. You should add some people to your city."

But I couldn't draw people. Their faces never conformed to my imagination. My failed portraits eventually melted into grimacing visages with unnaturally extended smiles and dripping eyes. My people became caricatures, Lovecraftian horrors, bemoaning their existence from the page. I secreted my people away to spare them critiques of their bulbous eyes and puddling jowls.

My grandmother loved my people. The first one that she discovered, mid-service on a Sunday morning, was the pastor. In my sketch, his beard gobbled up his neck, and his forehead was three times the size of the rest of his face. My grandmother's sudden howl of laughter drowned out the sermon for a moment, and the entire room turned to stare and scowl. My grandmother waved them back to work and then sat chuckling beside me.

The next week, she bought me small sketchpad to smuggle into the sermon and snorted my concerns away when I asked if my drawings might not be heretical. "Do you think I can paint without God?" she said. "Who gave you that gift?"

But with my head bowed over my sketches, I never did answer.

- 19 -

"Jesus," I rasp. Then I shout, "Willow!" Nobody answers.

I sprint to the end of the hall, assuming Willow must have beaten me there, and I'm presented with two options: left or right. I glance down one, then the other, but she is nowhere to be seen. I double-check, just in case I've stared right through her fleeing form accidentally. I'm alone.

"Some 'guide!'" I scream, then throw myself down the left hand passageway. The sound of hooves has not abated and I'm sure I've just tipped my pursuer off, so I'm forced to rely on my luck. I jog passed doors and potted plants, and at the next intersection I encounter, I instinctively race for the natural, blue light of the sleeping city.

It's the first bridge I encounter on my own. The rain outside deluges the glass bridge, creating the illusion of an underwater tunnel and a drowned city outside. As I race by, I imagine Atlantis, sunken beneath the sea, but the thought vanishes when I hear the hooves clatter onto the bridge behind me.

I look back. Nothing's there. Nevertheless, I leave the waterlogged bridge behind.

"Of course," I pant out as I run, "of course, there is no monster—"

I take a right hand turn at my next fork, then suddenly the sound of pursuit is ahead of me, coming down the corridor. I claw at the wall, skid to a stop, then turn hard on my heel. I race back to the intersection, choose a different fork.

And the sound is still in front of me. I might be screaming, I'm not sure, all I hear is the slow, methodic placement of one hoof in front of another, bearing down on me, closing the gap...

I run to the nearest door, tug on the handle, then hammer on the door when it doesn't open at my touch. Then I run to a second door, then a third. "Fuck!" I scream at the fifth door, as if profanity might make it open for me.

I'm so frantic that when the eighth door I try opens easily at my touch, I go spilling through. My already battered body hits the hard tile like a sack of hammers, every bone rattling at the impact. My Stetson falls off and lies upturned against the wall two-feet away.

I pick myself off of the ground and scuttle to the open doorway on my hands and knees. Whatever is following me, still so close, hasn't materialized outside of my doorway yet, so I ease the door closed and hope that my pursuer may pass me by. Then I slump against the door, listening.

I breathe and I breathe and I breathe.

It sounds as if whatever is chasing me is pacing only a short distance away. It's not getting nearer, though, and that's a plus. I remain frozen against the door frame, lest I try to creep away and the monster hears me move. And there I sit for ten minutes, according to my watch, at a stalemate with my pursuer that I finally seem to have slipped.

My windbreaker's bulky pocket, somehow twisted behind me in the chase, is digging into my back. I relax my vigilance long enough to adjust my clothing, resettle into a more comfortable position. The sound outside the door doesn't change.

I pull the Gideon New Testament out of my offending pocket. The book is worse for wear, having been pinned behind me for a time. The cover now sports a large diagonal crease and a number of pages are loose and wrinkled. The Bible flips open when I set it on the ground, to another one of the defacer's Italian stanzas:

*Oh pietosa colei che mi soccorse!
Tu duca, tu signore e tu maestro*

Gibberish. I close the book, and wish that Willow would somehow find and save me.

More minutes pass, and I press my ear to the door, incredulous that whatever's chasing me is still stomping around outside. Sure enough, I can hear the steady clip-clop, clip-clop, from the hall I've left behind. Though... I listen harder, the blood pounding in my ears. No. It's more of a *kcht* sound. And it's too consistent.

I put the Bible back in my pocket and gently peel myself from the door. I ease the door open ever so slightly and stick my eye against the crack, peering out at the same empty corridor I'd fled down half an hour beforehand. But the noise is coming from my left, and I can't see that way without a better angle.

I open the door further, and still there seems to be no reaction from my pursuer, so I open it entirely and stick my head out.

No monster. Of course there's no monster.

I can still hear the sound, but the more I listen, the less it sounds like hooves. It sounds entirely artificial, in fact. Mechanical. Leaving the door ajar behind me, I creep towards the sound.

There is no horror around the next corner. Instead, I see a photocopier. It is printing out sheet after sheeting, and issuing forth a steady, consistent *kcht-kcht* sound. The copies it's making have begun overflowing from the tray and spilling to the floor. My heart starts beating again in relief, I exhale the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. And I laugh.

I'm delusional! Too long alone! Too long without food and water, maybe! Christ, I'm so accustomed to silence that a photocopier has me panicking. I walk over to the machine, a lot of

relief and a little sweat soaking through me. I pick up a page to inspect what someone is so keen to make so many copies of.

Printed on the center of every page, only the words: "you are here."

That's where Willow finds me. I look up from the page to see her peering around the corner I'd peeked out from behind moments ago, her eyes wide. Then she storms down the hall and cuffs me over the head.

"You idiot!" she says, throwing her arms around my neck. "I can't believe you lost me."

I wriggle out of her embrace, point an accusatory piece of loose leaf at her. "You left me behind! Aren't you supposed to be my guide?"

In lieu of answering, Willow picks up a piece of paper from the ground and waves it right back at me. "Why are you photocopying at a time like this?"

"Why am I—no. This is the minotaur. We were being chased by a photocopier."

Willow looks down at the piece of paper, reads aloud, "You are here." She looks up at me. "What minotaur?"

And it dawns on me that I'm not actually sure what Willow was running from. I open my mouth to change the topic back to my abandonment, but Willow shakes her head and interrupts me before I start.

"Never mind," she says. "Not really important. What is important is this: I've found another bridge, and it's something you need to see."

"I crossed a bridge. Without you." My voice carries an accusation, but at that Willow smiles broadly and puts her hand on my arm.

"Just wait," she says. "By the end, maybe, you'll make it on your own."

- 20 -

The bridge on which Willow and I stop has rails running underneath it. The bridge itself is empty, save for Willow and me, a blue-backed plastic chair with steel legs and a gumball machine. The glass around us is composed of multicolored panes, lending the world a motley appearance. Though I cannot see the sun, its reflection lances down from the windows of the buildings around us.

"But it was raining," I protest. "And midnight. Or something."

Willow shakes her head, points outside, and indeed the day is hot. Mere hours earlier, the city looked like it was basking in a cool spring, but now the day exemplifies summertime. I respond to the heat by removing the scarf I awoke with and stuffing it into my windbreaker's pocket. Then I take off my windbreaker and tie it around my waist.

Willow says, "You've lost your hat."

The building that this bridge leads to is, thankfully, different than any I've yet encountered. The windows to either side of the bridge are arched. Decorative stonework jigsaws around the windows, with joints between blocks splaying out like a spider's legs. Resting atop the semicircular windows are more windows, larger but square and not extraordinary. The building is built like a layered cake, without little consistency uniting its four storeys save for square pilasters that run vertically through the building every few meters. The bottom layer of the building is shaded differently, a darker grey, and shop fronts and doorways shelter beneath the overhang of the layers above.

I do a double take. "Look," I say, "A way out!"

Willow points behind us in response, to the building behind us, and the entrance clearly visible from here. "Didn't have much luck finding that one, though, did you?"

It's true. No matter how straightforward in external appearance, every building I've entered has had a mazelike interior. Willow puts a hand on my shoulder and I'm surprised by the sadness in her wide eyes. "I'm sorry," she says. "No one finds this path easy."

"You've led others."

"Three, personally. And the road changes every time. Many more besides you have come here and been led by others. Some never have a guide."

"Speaking of, I still can't believe you left me behind."

"Sorry!" Willow says, throwing up her hands. "I was spooked. I'm only human."

I raise my eyebrow, critical of that last statement, and Willow gives me a lopsided smile in response. Then we turn back to the world beyond our bridge and stare out at the sunny streets. Lonely trees jut from the sanctioned holes in the sidewalk in front of the building we're about to enter, their branches upraised like praying hands towards the sun I only see second-hand. To my left, a set of street lights flick from red to green and a pedestrian walk sign switches to a forbidding red hand.

"There are no people," I say, and in saying realize the magnitude of this discovery. Broad daylight. Streetlights working as they should. Not a single soul in sight. Willow tilts her head as she, too, contemplates the street below. "No people," I repeat.

A sudden frenzy takes me, a panic at being the only person, not including ghosts, left in the world. I lift the chair from where it rests, metal legs lifted skyward over my head, and prepare to send it careening through the glass.

Why didn't I do this sooner? I can smash a window. I can survive a fifteen-foot drop.

Willow touches my arm again, but not comforting now. A steel grip. A quaking grip. She points, with her other hand, below us. "Stop," she says. "This is what I had to show you."

I trace the line of her finger to a figure sitting below us. Something lurks in the shadow beneath the bridge. It looks large, too large, though I can make out only a hunched silhouette. Its breath fogs in front of its face, though the sun is high and the day is warm. Chair still suspended overhead, I back away from the glass, out of sight of whatever is staring up from below.

And I remember the sound of hooves chasing me through labyrinthine halls.

I put the chair down. Exhale a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. Willow, quietly, says, "In case you thought we were alone."

"What is it?" I whisper, still not fully believing in monsters.

"Don't let the street outside fool you. He's another denizen of the labyrinth. The same as you." Willow points again, though this time her finger aims down the street. "Watch," she says.

A train approaches. The train is colored white, red, and grey, and two metal arms feel their way along a series of cables overhead, while its wheels chew into the tracks. A light rail transit system. Nothing new, or extraordinary, save that I haven't seen anything like it in the maze thus far.

And... "There's no conductor," I whisper.

Willow nods. We stand and watch the ghost train as it rushes beneath us, then together we cross the bridge.

The new building immediately disorients me, and I quietly thank a god I don't believe in for Willow's guidance. From the moment we step off the bridge, we seem to be walking on the walls.

A cork paneled ceiling runs to our right, a linoleum floor to our left. Artwork hangs overhead, as if glued to the ceiling, and underfoot as well. I hesitate at the first painting in my

path, an abstract piece of swirling tan and orange, with no discernible subject. Willow treads on it without checking her stride. Supposing that she knows best, I follow suit.

My guilt vanishes after the first few paintings, and then I'm surprised to discover perverse pleasure in defacing art that I don't understand. I even take exaggerated care to scrape my heels across a painting of multi-colored squares and another of seemingly random brush-strokes in varying shades of green.

I look up from my defacement to see Willow looking back at me, a crooked smile on her lips. I realize, suddenly, that the painting she is standing on doesn't display her footprints at all. I remember, then, her silent footfalls. I remember she's a ghost. Which means—I look back—all the defacement's been my own.

"There's another bridge ahead," Willow says. "And I have one more thing to show you."

I skirt around the last few paintings on the floor.

The bridge in question is not as open to the air as the others that I've encountered. Its ceiling is opaque, save for a pyramid-shaped skylight in its center. The walls to either side are composed of rectangular sheets of glass, which look out over a city street very similar to the last. I stare at the zebra striped crosswalks and the cracking pavement. All devoid of people, once again.

Willow tells me to look behind us, so I do. The corridor we've just left looks normal now, and I can't comprehend the illusion. But Willow shakes her head and redirects my gaze outside, to the building that houses the hallway we've just emerged from. The building isn't there.

A dusty yellow plot, with the first signs of a building's foundations, lie directly below the corridor we've just left. A crater bites deep into the earth, waiting to be filled with subterranean parkades or concrete basement levels. A web of stiff orange plastic separates the building-to-be

from the sidewalks and streets surrounding it—a gesture that strikes me as unnecessary, given the lack of pedestrians.

"I can't explain it," Willow says. "And I thought I'd get that out before you ask. Now, look across the street. A block to the south, there's another bridge."

I do as she says. The bridge in question is massive. While no longer than the one on which we stand, it stands three times as tall, and I see that it is, indeed three separate levels. Three floors, all connected by skyways stacked one atop the other.

As I gaze across the block, I'm suddenly aware of a figure standing on the bottom layer, which seems to be staring back at me. The minotaur! I stumble away from the glass. But, as I stumble, so too does the other figure. I stand up. The figure does the same. I lift my hand. My doppelganger copies the action. Willow points up, and I see a second figure, though this one significantly harder to spot, standing on the very top of the three tiers. And, as she points, this second figure points up as well.

"It's us." Willow nods. I see the motion through my peripheral vision, because I'm entranced by the other me across the street. "Another illusion?" I ask.

Willow snorts. "What makes you think any of this is illusory? There you are. There I am. We're staring at us, staring at us."

I look at Willow standing beside me, then back at the figures across the street. "But you must be thirty feet above me, on that other bridge."

Willow waves a dismissive hand. "Different angles looking at the same thing."

When Willow holds out her hand, I take it without question, suddenly very happy for my guide. I'm clearly out of my depth. I feel her fingers press into the wound on my palm, and I'm reminded of the copper slide and my flight from imagined hooves.

"I'm holding your hand," I say.

Willow laughs. "Please tell me this isn't your first time?"

"No, that's not what—" my tongue trips on itself, "You—I mean, on the bridge, we held hands as we ran. And just now, you put your hand on my shoulder. But when I—"

At a loss for words, I instead demonstrate, by sticking my arm through her elbow.

"Ah, I see." Willow unhooks her hand from mine, and then sticks her index finger through my wrist. "Don't worry. My ghostly powers are still intact. I can, um, turn them on and off. I guess."

"You guess."

"I'll rephrase: holding your hand, being your guide, it's my choice. Don't fuck with me, or you may just wind up stranded." I stare at Willow aghast, but she's smiling. "Kidding. Don't fret, all right? I have a soft spot for lost pets."

So saying, Willow takes my hand again, and leads me down the length of the bridge. She's smiling and, despite the vague answer and the mockery, I smile back. As we walk, I look across the street and watch our doppelgangers do the same, on their separate storeys, each with their arm outstretched, holding hands with no one.

- 21 -

My grandmother found me hunched over in the dark, my head down and my hands on my knees. She admonished me for breaking bottles, but I didn't hear her, absorbed as I was in my corner of the cellar. The first I knew of her presence was a wrinkled hand running through my hair.

"Hobby owls," my grandmother said. "How many chicks do you count?"

"Five," I answered, my voice hushed in reverence.

"Did you touch them?"

I shook my head.

"If you touch them, they will die."

"Their nest is broken."

Grandma sucked her teeth. "It's not your fault. They must have moved in after we bottled last year's cider. You couldn't have known they were there."

I'd been crying, but hadn't realized that grandma could tell. It was dark, and she was practically blind without her glasses. Fat drops dripped from my lashes. They left salty meteorite craters in the cellar's cold dirt floor.

The small owl's nest lay on the ground, leaning very slightly against the shelf that housed grandma's dusty jars. I'd taken the bottles from the top shelf, above my eyesight, because last year I hadn't been able to reach those jars. Three of the owlets now chirped against each other in a third of their nest, while two had tumbled to the ground.

"Will they die?" I asked. I'd like to imagine my voice didn't crack.

"Maybe not," grandma said. "But first we have to see to your knees."

She gripped me by the fingers and led me up the stairs, carefully steering me away from the shards of glass sparkling on the cellar steps. My grandmother lured me out into the sunlight

and then assessed the damage: skinned knees and bloody palms. I had glass shards in my cuts from tripping on the stairs. She clucked her tongue and led me into the kitchen.

Grandma kept a sewing kit above the fridge and a first aid kit in the medicine cabinet, both of which she pulled out and stowed on the table. She didn't make me sit on her lap, but I had to hold my hands out as she picked pieces of glass out with a pair of tweezers. She dropped the fragments into a candy dish, and I watched my lifeblood red slowly pool beneath them.

Worst was the disinfecting. Grandma made me hold my hands above the sink while she doused them in hydrogen peroxide. I squirmed as imperceptibly as possible, and I bit my lip so that I would cry out as the liquid foamed pink over my cuts. My knees, she said, would have to be done on the porch. She didn't want alcohol spilled all over her clean floors.

After I had been cleaned and bandaged, my Grandmother equipped me with rubber gloves, a large wire strainer and a coat hanger. We marched back outside and down to the cellar. There, my grandmother instructed me to carefully lift the nest, owlets and all, and place it in the strainer.

The prodigal owls were trickier. After my grandmother's earlier admonishment, I was loathe to touch them, and I burst into tears again when she sharply upbraided me. I think she was sore over the loss of so many glass bottles, and doing her best not to show it.

Without putting gloves on, my grandmother lifted the two owlets and placed them in the nest beside their siblings. "It's a grandma's touch," she told me. "They'll be all right. I've lifted you up a hundred times, when you were a baby, and you grew up just fine."

We carried the strained owls up the cellar stairs and walked the owls to the edge of the wood that sided grandma's property. There, she had me straighten the coat hanger until we could use it to tie the strainer to a tree branch, forming an impromptu home for the nest.

"What about your strainer?" I asked.

My grandmother waves a dismissive hand, "Later. You don't like my borscht anyway."

I said nothing to that, because a few months without borscht sounded heavenly.

When we'd finished tying the strainer to the tree, my grandmother had me jog back to her house for a roll of masking tape. The first three drawers that I pilfered turned up nothing, though I'd gone through where she kept all of her pens and all of the markers and paper that I was allowed to use. I finally found it in plain sight, on the dining room counter, where I'd absentmindedly left it two days earlier.

Grandma used the tape to coat the ends of the hanger, so that "the birds don't shish kebab themselves on the pointy ends," as she said.

"Will their mom be able to find them, so far away?" I wondered aloud, and my grandmother put a gnarled hand on my shoulder.

"She'll know where they are," my grandmother said. "Remember what I said about direction? Well, these chicks will give her some."

My grandmother and I sat on the grass beside each other, looking up at our handiwork and the birds that we had rescued from the cellar floor. The sun slipped behind the woods and for about ten minutes the grass blazed orange and copper before slipping back into shades of dark blue and green as the trees' shadows stretched out and over across the lawn. Before too long, the branch that we were watching was swallowed by black.

My grandma twirled a piece of grass between her aged lips as we sat in the dark. She held my hand, and I didn't protest, because young men were allowed to hold hands if it was with their grandmother. As the light disappeared, she looked back at the winking house and said that we should go make supper, or grandfather would starve to death.

I followed her to the front porch, where her cider distillery now sat coolly in the evening gloom. She held a hand up, "Nuh-uh, young man. First, you have to sweep the cellar. That was our deal."

Suddenly guilty over the smashed glass, I complied without a peep. I procured a flashlight from my bedroom and held it clenched between my teeth as I swept up every piece of glass I could find.

I did the job hurriedly: exciting as the cellar's mysteries were during the day, the place seemed haunted at night. The pickled cucumbers and onions took on the cast of dismembered fingers and eyeballs floating in brine. The taxidermied moose turned to watch me whenever my back was turned, its marble eyes boring into my spine. I heard creatures—mice, probably, though my mind conjured much worse—scurry through the cellar's recesses in the dark. I contemplated my grandfather's shotgun, should it come to self-defense, but knew better than to actually pursue that fantasy.

The glass swept, I ran back to the house. The long grass bypassed my shoes and tickled my bare ankles. The wooden porch creaked as my footsteps thundered across it.

My grandmother smiled at me as I burst into the kitchen, told me to wash my hands and set the table, and for gosh-sake leave those muddy shoes outside. Supper was boiled chicken and steamed carrots, hand-picked from her garden. Over dinner, she told my grandfather all about my day's misadventures, emphasizing the spoiled batch of cider and all the wasted bottles that I'd broken on the cellar stairs. Despite that, she gave me her dry chuckle when I peered up at her regretfully, and gave me an extra scoop of cranberry preserve.

My spirits only dipped when my grandfather told me that I should have fed the owls to the neighbor's cat. My grandfather asked if I'd touched his gun, and I told him solemnly that no, I had not.

That night, after my grandparents had tucked me in and the house resumed its usual late-night creaking, I quietly climbed from my bed. I tied the owl blanket around my throat like a cape, clutched my flashlight like a sword, and pulled clothes on overtop of my pajamas. The walk to the edge of the woods felt three times as long in the dark as it had during the day, but the stars shone bright above me like so many bits of broken glass.

I shone my flashlight's beams through the trees like a searchlight, until at last it caught on the steely surface of grandma's strainer. Having found the tree, I sat back down on the grass and watched. Though wilder, the woods seemed kinder to me than grandma's cellar, the dandelions and gnarled elms less alien than grandma's preserves, the soft grass an improvement over sharp, wooden steps. I sat vigilantly, watching the owl's tree, until sleep took me on the lawn, and dew covered me like a fishing net.

- 22 -

"What's going on?" I ask Willow, when the walls of our corridor fall away to either side.

Willow claps her hands. "We're nearing the river!" She turns around to face me, and when she does there's a silver flashlight in her hands. I can't imagine where she's kept it all this time. She flicks the beam on and shines it up, to shadow the features of her face. "Make each word count."

The corridor around us, lit as most of the past few have been, has ended abruptly. The room in front of us, if, indeed, it is a room, is dark. For a moment I think we've stumbled outside, but the unseen ceiling overhead—for there must logically be a ceiling—is starless, and I'd seen the sun's reflection less than an hour ago. It is daylight, out of doors. The room yawns black before us.

A breeze ripples the hair on my bare arms. I chalk it up to air conditioning, despite the smell of river water it carries.

Willow moves forward eagerly, her steps half-skip and half-run. The hike of the past two days has left my legs burning and my soles sore, but I do my best to match her pace. I am watching her light bobbing ahead of us in the gloom as I walk, and so I'm caught off guard when suddenly my feet sink into the floor.

I give a squawk of surprise, and go tumbling to the floor. Willow laughs and skips back to me. She holds the flashlight up, shines the light down upon where I've tumbled. Sand. I'm sitting in a fine, grey sand.

I stand up and brush myself off, staring at the ground beneath me. "Are we in a construction site, then?" I ask her, but Willow shakes her head.

"We're nearing the river," she repeats. "Which reminds me, you don't know any nursery rhymes do you?"

"I—what?"

"Nursery rhymes. Sing-alongs. Any snatches of song or verse, from when you were a child."

"Like 'Ring Around the Rosie?'"

Willow shines the flashlight up, so that I cannot miss the sour expression on her face. "That's a little dark, don't you think? I mean like 'One, Two, Three, Four, Five.'"

"I know Little Bo Peep," I say. "I know Little Miss Muffet." I know a few others besides, but I don't see how they're relevant.

I hear Willow suck her teeth in the dark, before saying, "Take off your shoes. They're hanging in shreds anyway and there's no sense getting sand in them." The flashlight bobs as Willow kneels to do the same.

I take her advice, tying the laces together and looping my sneakers over my left shoulder. "If we're near the river then we must be outside." I make it a statement, but there's a question in my voice as I stand up and dig my toes into the cold sand.

Willow's light begins bobbing away again, down what feels like a beach. "And why do you say that?" she asks, some skips ahead.

"Because. Nobody's built a building hovering over the river?"

"Nobody's build a hallway in a building that doesn't exist yet either."

"Touché."

"We're indoors. Kind of. But there is a river, as I've said, and then a train, and then a wood, which is always the hardest part."

"You mean like an atrium. Or a park."

"I mean a wood. A thicket. A forest. To grandmother's house we go."

No, I think. Not anymore.

Willow fills in my silence with an earlier thought, "Rhymes with water are better, but I suppose your little women will have to do. See if you can't think of more rhymes over the next few minutes. The boatman expects a song."

- 23 -

Where I thought to find a bridge spanning a mighty, rushing river, there is nothing but an expanse of dark water eeling between two grey shores. The water moves sluggishly as Willow's light flits over its surface, but Willow giggles delightedly all the same. She tosses the flashlight onto the beach, where it sticks up from the sand like a miniature lighthouse, and I hear her laughter bound away into the dark and then the splash of river water.

I slide down the same dune more cautiously and I stoop to pick up the light where she let it fall. The shore's grit is cool against my bare soles, but stings as it probes fresh blisters. Despite my sore feet and Willow's exuberance, I feel reluctant to touch the water.

Flaxen crabgrass cracks into shards against my toes, the water below apparently too far or too anoxic to sustain it. I shine my light down the beach, and watch Willow emerge from the water, only to plop down amidst a copse of the pale weeds. She begins plucking them from the sand like "I love you nots" on a daisy.

"Come on," I say, though I don't know where we're going.

Willow sticks out her tongue and continues to pluck the grass. The dry stalks around her rustle as she plucks them from the earth, but this time I do not feel any wind. Willow begins to sing, "Cock-a-doodle-doo, my dame has lost her shoe..."

I leave the ghost to her nursery rhyme, cautiously approach the water. The sand underfoot turns tacky and pastes itself to my feet. I uproot footprint-shaped patches of shoreline. When I stand on the river's lip, perched on the line that separates earth from water, I stop. The river swirls darkly beneath me, inky currents outlined only by white eddies swirling around rocks. I pick up a pebble from the beach and arc it into the river, but it does not skip. The pebble sinks without a sound.

Something bothers me, so I give it voice. "Willow," I pause. Shape my words. "Where are your footprints? I heard you splash into the river, but you don't leave any footprints in the shore.

I shine the light on her. She looks back and shrugs. "Maybe you stopped to carry me," she says, before returning to her rhyme: "My master's lost his fiddle stick, he knows not what to do."

"Willow," I call. "Do we cross the water or continue down the shore?"

This time she doesn't answer.

The water beneath me makes not a sound. Its turgid swirl reminds me of tar or ink being sucked down a drain. I briefly think of swimming the expanse, but even the gentle kiss of a moist shoreline makes me shiver. I don't want to tread those waters.

A tree, barely deserving of the name, juts sideways from the bank. Its cancerous trunk stretches out over the river to trail its single, gnarled branch into the water. I walk over to it, the parched grass tickling my soles. The tree trunk is bleached and pallid, no hint of green or brown left on it. Two single bronze leaves cling steadfastly to the otherwise naked branch, and they whisper against each other as they brave the river's tide.

I put a foot on the trunk, less from a desire to cross the river (the tree doesn't extend nearly far enough) so much as idle curiosity as to its stability. I barely apply any weight before the tree gently pulls from the earth and splashes down into the dark water. I watch it drift languidly downstream, its skeletal branch uplifted. Like an arm reaching for help.

I put my windbreaker back on, suddenly cold. While Willow skips back up the shoreline to me, a bouquet of crabgrass clenched in her hand. She sings, louder now, "Cock-a-doodle-doo, my dame has found her shoe and master's found his fiddling stick..."

Willow's cheerful chanting is incongruous with the anxiousness the river wells within me. I want her to stop, not sing. "Willow," I say. I'm surprised to hear my voice is hoarse. "Willow, who is the boatman? Isn't there a bridge that we can cross by?"

Willow, illuminated by the flashlight I now have a white knuckled grip on, puts a finger to her lips as if she wants silence. She still sings. Then she points down the beach, and I swing the beam of light around. There, a slightly darker grey against the grey sand, a small dock hunches over the water. I cannot see anyone standing on the dock, but I imagine I can make out the outline of a white raft bobbing in the water.

Willow marches back through the sand to me, and puts a finger to her lips again. Her palm closes over the flashlight, and standing inches in front of me, she flips it off. I'm blind.

From the darkness I hear her voice, disembodied, sing, "She'll now dance with her shoe. Cock-a-doodle-doo. My dame will dance for you."

A laugh goes up from the direction of the dock, and a creaking voice responds, "While master fiddles his fiddling stick, for dame and doodle doo."

- 24 -

I didn't recognize the face inside of the coffin. Its military haircut and its moustache were both combed smooth. I remembered them bushy and bristling, itching as those lips—now pale and purple—reached down for a kiss. Its eyes were closed, but in my memories they were blue.

I had always been afraid of my great-grandfather, but never so much as I was on the day of his wake. Even then, it wasn't he that frightened me so much as the atmosphere that he inspired. Everyone wore black. Even me. Even the body in its varnished wooden box.

All around me people talked quietly and many cried. My father's eyes remained dry, and when I asked him why he said, "I've already killed that old man in my books." I don't think that he meant for me to hear. I don't think he remembered I was there.

The colorful bouquets piled upon tables and trestles all around the room seemed heretical against the somber attire of those who put them there, and the sullen atmosphere in the room. Only my grandmother matched the flowers: jade earrings still pinned to her ears, her dress a navy blue. I watched her as she spotted me, standing in my father's shadow, from across the room. She marched over and spirited me away.

"Come," she said, her voice louder and happier than any of those around us. Instead of looking annoyed, however, the others averted their eyes and continued to whisper. "Let's go visit the only man I ever admired."

She cried when she looked down at him, but she was smiling also. "Do you know," she said. "That I think I was spoiled? Oh, I had more chores to cram into a day than you've had to do your whole life, but my father had more sons than he knew what to do with and only one baby girl."

I looked around for a baby girl, but my grandmother laughed and said, "Me!" She jabbed a thumb back at her collarbone. "I had more dresses than any other girl in my grade, and even I knew that I looked damn cute when I tied my hair back with ribbons. My daddy bought me those pretty things because he didn't know how to say, 'I love you.'"

I looked at the man in the box. His wrinkles were smoother than I had ever seen. His nails were neatly trimmed. His hands were folded on his stomach. But he looked waxen and unreal. The coroners hadn't been able to erase the yellow that had crept into his skin, nor how much flesh the cancer had leached from him. I had trouble resolving the man in the box with the man who'd sat in his rocking chair, creaking slowly away, scaring the shit out of me only a few short years beforehand.

"I don't remember him talking," I confided to my grandmother, wondering if it was a failing on my part not to remember somebody's last words.

"He was a man of few words," she said.

Everyone had looked into the coffin, I realized, but no one stared into it as long as my grandmother had, and nobody else smiled. Later, over cookies and punch, I pointed this out to my grandmother, and she laughed softly behind her cup.

"Most people don't smile when bad things happen," she said. "But I remember a little rhyme that surely your daddy's taught you. Now I lay me down to sleep..."

She cried as she said the Lord's Prayer, so I held her hand.

- 25 -

Willow holds my hand once again and guides me blindly towards the dock. We clasp the dark flashlight between us. From the dock, the creaking voice laughs again, and chants, "Three blind mice, three blind mice, adrift on river's edge. The miller and his merry old wife, seeking safe passage."

The voice is sinister and its words stick in my ear like the wet shoreline on my feet. If the river roared beneath us, it would sound like this voice. Willow squeezes my hand as I shudder.

The sand beneath us is suddenly replaced by gravelly wood, hard and cool against my feet. The smell of stale water now rises from all sides. The voice is directly in front of me now, and I feel a skeletally thin finger touch my collar-bone. Unbidden, an image leaps to mind of a body crumpled at the foot of a flight of steep wooden stairs. I shudder again.

The finger loiters on my collar, before dripping down my right arm. Willow lets go of my hand as the boatman's probing finger reaches my palm. It lingers for a moment on the cut, tracing its jagged edge, before roaming down to touch my fingertips one by one.

"One, two, three, four, five," his voice counts from the darkness in front of me. He is very tall, if the direction of his voice is any indicator, and his breath smells of fish and seashells.

"Once I caught a fish alive."

His hands let go of my own, and as the voice moves beside me, I assume that he's performing a similar ritual with Willow, "Six, seven, eight, nine, ten: then I let it go again."

"Why did you let it go?" Willow sings out. Despite myself, I jump at the sound of her voice. She had fallen silent as we'd neared the dock and I hadn't even noticed.

"Because it bit my finger so," the voice creaks. A hint of laughter.

"Which finger did it bite?"

At this the boatman falls silent and it's some minutes before he speaks again, his voice, now further down the dock, is joined by the sound of ropes uncoiling over sandy wood. "So," he muses, "Two little dicky birds, seeking a crossing before the rain comes down?"

Willow does not respond verbally, but the boatman must be able to see her, because his grunt sounds like agreement. "And of course, up front you'll pay the fee," his voice slithers. "My sailing ship's a-laden with pretty things for thee."

Pay? I don't have any money. I haven't agreed to this. I want to turn around, find another way to ford the river, but my legs are shaking and don't obey me. I let out a sound like a squeak. In response, I feel Willow pinch my arm.

"I saw four-and-twenty sailors, that stood between the decks, were four-and-twenty white mice with chains around their necks," she sings, her voice serious.

Though her response makes maddeningly little sense to me, the boatman's voice suddenly drips venomously as he shouts from down the dock, the mirth wiped from his voice. "A duck, am I? Little dicky birds, always chirping back! You'll pay my fine or swim these frigid waters."

Willow, too, drops the rhymes as she says, "I've already gone swimming, as you can plainly see. And, as always, money is earned for services rendered."

The boatman is silent. I can almost feel the hatred peeling off him. Then the docks are lit ablaze.

- 26 -

The raft is a more sophisticated construction than I at first imagine it to be. Its base is a simple mesh of uneven white logs, lashed together with bits of thick woven cords. A teepee made out of old blankets dominates the center of the raft, and within it I spot a sleeping roll and a small chest of drawers. The boatman has a laundry line tied between his teepee and one of the raft's wooden side rails. Only a maroon bathrobe hangs limply over the line, like a fox pelt left out to dry. In front of this makeshift shelter rests a galvanized garbage bin, out of which a crackling fire now licks greedily at the otherwise smothering darkness.

On the edge of this, his home, the boatman sits. His frayed and faded jeans are rolled up to his skinny knees, and he wears a shirt that may once have been silk, but is now only half-buttoned and in dire need of a wash. A leather vest, at least two sizes too small, covers this. Atop his head, a wide-brimmed straw hat casts his entire face in shadow, save for his reedy chin, which sports a scraggly beard the color and consistency of the grey shore's flaxen grass, and a broad, gap-toothed grin. A sliver of river grass juts from his mouth, as he chews merrily on the end.

I had expected the grim reaper, but the man sitting before me more closely resembles Huckleberry Finn. His feet trace lazy circles in the water that I'd so carefully avoided, and in one hand he lazily holds a fishing pole that is little more than a pale branch with a line looped around one end. The line trails off the dock's edge and disappears into the river's murky depths.

Willow stands at the dock's edge, and her grin matches that of the boatman's, save that she's retained her teeth. She slips back into nursery rhymes, and sings, "One misty, moisty morning, when cloudy was the weather. I chanced to meet an old man clad all in leather. He began to compliment, and I began to grin... how do you do?"

And then both she and the boatman turn to look at me expectantly. Without knowing what to say, I parrot Willow's words, "How do you do?" and am rewarded with a look of relief washing over Willow's face.

"...and how do you do, again?" the boatman finishes. He motions, with his free hand, for us to come aboard.

Willow bounces onto the ship. I notice that it doesn't move, as she steps aboard. When I follow, however, the craft sinks three inches into the water and begins to spin lazily on the current. Before I've gained my sea legs, the boatman unwraps a line from the post beside him, and jabs his fishing rod into the inky eddies, as if his raft were a pole barge.

Soon, our vessel is a small bubble of light on black waters. I lose sight of the dock, but cannot yet see the far shore. I'm struck by the strangeness of the maze. I sidle up beside Willow who is sitting happily in front of the fire. "This river," I whisper, not sure if I'm allowed to talk out of rhyme. "Was there no other way?"

"None that I've ever taken," she whispers back. "Everyone crosses the river."

The journey is surreal, has been surreal the entire time, and I name the only river that this one recalls: "Styx."

Willow shrugs. "I don't know its name."

"Willow," my whisper comes out ragged. "Are we almost out?"

She shakes her head.

The boatman, perhaps feeling excluded from our conversation, speaks loudly over our whispering voices, "Drove the ducklings to the water, every morning at nine. Hit her foot against a splinter, fell into the foaming brine."

Whether a threat or a nonsense nursery rhyme, I'm not sure. Nevertheless, I fall silent for the duration of the river voyage. Occasionally, the boatman crows other vaguely ominous bits of rhyme, most to do with drowning. "Ruby lips above the water, blowing bubbles, soft and fine. But, alas, I was no swimmer. I lost my Clementine," he sings, as he rows us across the river.

Another time, the boatman points into the deeps, the broad smile still plastered to his face, and sings, "Come to the window, my darlings, with me. Look out on the stars that shine on the sea. There are two little stars that play bo-peep, with two little fish far down in the deep." I look where he points, but can see no fish nor anything else in the opaque waters. When, after a minute or so, I notice that his grin has greatly widened, I quickly huddle back into the center of the raft. I worry that perhaps Willow and I are the fish, and he's just made another drowning metaphor, but Willow, beside me, looks unconcerned.

There is little to describe from that trip. Willow slips her silver flashlight back into her backpack, and pulls out her shoes once more. Anticipating landfall, I put my shoes on as well, but the journey seems to take forever. Thinking this, I glance at my watch, but it does little good without knowing where the hands sat when we set sail.

The water shimmers like black glass beneath us, the sky looms like a black shroud. And, whether by some property of the water or simply by virtue of the boatman's skill, neither ripple with our passing.

- 27 -

My mom worked fifty-plus hours per week, and while she loved the mountains she rarely found time to see them. My dad, though he worked from home, preferred to spend his time locked in his studio. He told me that only in books did the woods house elves and the oceans krakens, and what did real life have on that?

So only my grandparents took me camping. My grandfather loved the quiet of the outdoors and my grandmother liked to paint. The joy, for me, was fishing.

My grandfather frequented a peninsula on Sheep River. A small sliver of land, it had a campsite on its dip and was surrounded on three sides by water. While my grandfather stoked a fire to life and erected our tent, my grandmother set up her easel facing the water and I began to dig through my tackle box.

Even after setting half of my allowance aside every week for Sunday's tithe, I had managed to save up enough to purchase myself a rod and a reel. My grandfather, seeing my enthusiasm, gave me a spool of four-pound line to lace my reel with and a number of his spoon lures, jigs and nymphs. A fly fisherman himself, he didn't understand the appeal of my drift fishing, though he couldn't argue with the results.

The pike were the largest fish in the river, but not the ones I sought. Slimy and streamlined, these fish ate everything, no matter what lure I rigged my rod with. When one swallowed my hook, I would watch it thrash in the water from the shore, its leopard print pattern catching the sunlight as it attempted to dance itself free from my grip. It zigzagged through the water until it snapped my line on its dagger-like teeth, or I won the battle and reeled it ashore.

The prize I sought were the rainbow trout. While a four-pound line would snap against the antics of the pike, it was perfect for the smaller fish that swam those waters. I drift fished for

the trout, rigging my rod with a nymph and then letting the line grow slack so that the current could carry it away. When the nymph sat bobbing far enough down the river, I simply set my line and waited to feel the line tug in my hand, and a splash of red and silver in the water.

Depending on my success, dinner was either trout or Alpha-getti. I threw the pike back, not being partial to their fishy taste. Then, my grandfather would wash the dishes while my grandmother brewed coffee over the fire.

We talked about one night on the river more than any other. While the moon hung low in the sky like a headsman's axe and the white stars in the black sky mirrored the dandelions speckling the grass, my grandfather told me that he would show me how to wash the pots and pans without falling into the river. I followed him, while my grandmother stayed behind and stoked the fire.

The night was warm. I kicked off my shoes for the walk, so that I could feel the sun-baked earth cooling beneath my feet. My grandfather led the way with a flashlight, while I carried our three dishes and a pot smeared with tomato sauce and noodles. He stopped me on the way to the water only once, to point out two pairs of glowing eyes on the far side of the river. Fawns out for a midnight stroll.

On the north side of the peninsula where the water was shallow and calm, my grandfather knelt low to the ground and set down the pots and pans. I held the flashlight over his head, while he began to rinse the utensils with river water. He hunched awkwardly, to avoid dipping his dry toes into the water, and that awkward posture is the reason that he fell in.

My grandmother heard the splash and ensuing howls and came running. She lofted a gas lantern to light her way through the trees, and stopped when she found the two of us by the water's edge. My grandfather stood, wringing the river out of his shirt with the flashlight between

his teeth. I sat on the ground beside him, roaring with laughter. My grandmother joined me, when my grandfather looked up at her sheepishly.

"Your grandpa leads by example," she told me, still laughing, when we sat by the fire later on. "To wash your dishes without falling in, do the opposite of whatever that man did."

My grandfather snorted on the far side of the fire. He sat naked beneath a towel, while he rotated his sopping clothes like a rotisserie above the fire. He sat with his eyes closed in the path of the smoke, to ward the mosquitoes away from his exposed skin.

My grandmother brewed us coffee, and I drank it black to look grown up. The taste was bitter and the caffeine was strong. Long after my grandfather turned in for the night, my grandmother and I stayed up to watch the stars, listen to the river, and laugh about old men falling in.

- 28 -

The boatman notices my silence and discomfiture. "How many strawberries," he probes me, "grow in the sea?"

And, coming to my rescue, Willow absentmindedly answers, "As many red herrings as swim in the wood." Then Willow returns to staring into the boatman's flames, her hands on her knees, and she hums a tune I don't recognize.

Lank seaweed dangles from the boatman's fishing rod as he plucks it from the water only to stick it back again. The vegetation writhes like live eels, eager to fall back into the depths. But there are no other signs of life—no mosquitoes or black flies, no minnows in the deeps.

The boatman tries again, later. Not a question, this time, but a challenge: "Pretty little goldfish," he sings at me, "never can talk. All it does is wriggle when it tries to walk." When I stay mute, he champs off the end of the grass clutched between his incisors, and the pale stalk falls down to blemish the dark water. I take it as a sign of his frustration and grin to have thwarted him. Unfortunately, when I first see the far shore, his rhyme proves oddly prophetic; I attempt to stand up on the barge, and then I do, indeed, flop back down to wriggle on the deck. As quickly as it had evaporated, the boatman's grin returns and then splits into peeling laughter.

The far shore is no true shore at all, but a wall rising from the water. I'm hypnotized by its approach, not least of all because I can actually see it. A dim grey light partially illuminates the wall, though I cannot find its source, while the top of the cliff—if, indeed, there is a top—is lost in the starless gloom overhead. The river knives off the bottom of the wall in a horizontal black line, and above that the wall is dry. No waves ever crest these waters. The boatman steers his vessel straight towards this wall, and I wonder where he plans to make berth.

I'm eager to be off this barge and away from this river as soon as possible, even though, I suddenly realize that the boatman is the first solid person I've seen in days. If all the maze's denizens are like this, better to be left alone. I shudder.

I become aware of a small light on the wall, as the boatman poles us forward. A single light illuminating a white dock, which looks similar to the one we disembarked from. I stand up again as our boat pulls level with the dock, eager to be rid of the boat and our host, but the boatman stands up with alarming speed to block my path.

The hand that he holds in front of my face is dark and weathered, and lacking its pinky and the adjacent ring finger. The skin around the missing fingers is glossy with old scar tissue, stretched tight where it has grown over and forgotten the missing digits. *Why did you let it go?* Willow had sung to him on the far dock. *Because it bit my finger so.*

"Master's fiddled his river stick, for dame and doodle doo," he creaks. "Now time to pay their due."

I notice that Willow still clutches her bouquet of crabgrass, and I half expect this to be some obscure form of currency, but instead she surprises me by lifting her free hand to her face and unhooking the earring from her left ear. As it passes from her hand to the boatman's, I recognize the jewelry. Jade. Like my grandmother used to wear.

The boatman, all gap-toothed smile, tucks the earring deep into his pocket, while Willow walks past him and onto the dock. I move to disembark once more.

"*Tsk*, little dickybird." The boatman looms over me, and I peg him at eight feet tall. His smile no longer looks friendly, and all of his teeth are bared. "No doors there are to this stronghold, yet thieves break in and steal the gold." At the word *steal*, the boatman jabs a long finger into my collar-bone once again, and I recoil back against the bulwark.

"L-little Bo Peep has lost her sheep..." I stammer out, and the boatman's laugh is cold.

"I think not, lambkin. Perhaps you'll stay with me? Every denizen of this labyrinth is lonely and I never set foot on the far shore."

I look pleadingly at Willow, but she sniffs and looks away. My mouth hangs open... abandoned again! Really! Willow doesn't make a move towards the boat. She doesn't offer up a rhyme to free me.

I trip backwards, sprawl to the floor of the barge, and as I do my pocket jangles. I'd forgotten entirely about the contents of my pockets, and when I hold the silver coins up to the boatman, his laughter abruptly ends. Nickels, only, but a small fortune for a ferryman only owed a penny.

"I imagine you've been pretty pleased," I say, standing up once again. "Since we lost the penny." Coins clutched in his long fingers, the boatman lids his eyes and smiles up at me. He makes no move to stop me as I stumble away from his raft. Only my shaking legs betray my confident departure, and I hear him chuckle as I have to lean down and steady myself against the clammy, white planks.

"What else?" Willow shouts. I look up at her, but she's gazing over my head, back at the boatman, who is already poling silently away. He frowns at the demand, but stops his raft all the same. Then he grins and holds up his hand with three fingers. One by one, he folds them.

"For you," he says to Willow, "Cut thistles in May, they'll grow in a day." The words mean nothing to me, but beside me Willow goes even paler, if that's possible.

"For the other," he says, and looks at me. "Cold and raw, the north wind blows, bleak in the morning early. The hills and knolls are covered with snows, and winter, she comes fairly."

These words too mean nothing to me, so I shrug. My reaction doesn't bother him, though. His grin widens as he lowers his final finger.

"And for the two of you together, up and down the staircase, as you have done before. Go in and out the window, as you have done before."

Willow, still gripping my hand, turns her back on the river and leads me away.

- 29 -

I turn to confront Willow on the white dock, before she can walk away. My fingers dig into her arm. "Okay, what the fuck was that!"

Willow looks at me, her mouth downturned, her eyebrows knitted together. "Mother, may I go out to swim?" "Yes, my darling daughter," she says, so quietly that I can hardly hear the words. "Fold your clothes up neat and prim, but don't go near the water." She looks me in the eye. "You overpaid, but otherwise you did well."

"Enough with the fucking rhymes, what was that!"

Willow places her palm flat against my chest, halting me, and her lips curls. "Okay, first, stop whining. Second, stop swearing, or I swear to god, I'm going to punch you in the nose, and you are *so* not going to win a fight with a ghost. Third, learn to fight your own goddamn battles. You handled the boatman just fine, and how do you expect to make it out of here intact if I'm always playing Superman to your Lois Lane?"

"I—you're Superman?"

"Of the two of us, which of us is invincible? Trust me, in this story I'm the hero."

"Enough with the jokes," I say through grit teeth. "That was creepy as sh—as hell. We've been wandering for ages. We still haven't found a way out!"

"And that's why you still need a guide," Willow quips and walks away.

She doesn't wait for me or ask if I'm ready. My annoyance blossoms, but I keep quiet.

The white dock spills into a semicircular cave carved into the wall, the only entrance that I can see in the monolithic cliff face before me. Willow stops before its mouth and, once again, materializes a flashlight, before walking briskly in.

A dim grey light still surrounds us, enough so that I can make out where the walls meet the floor in the gloom, but not enough to distinguish anything about our surroundings. Of course, when Willow's light glances upon the same spots, they're always revealed to be dull and featureless. Grey stone walls. Grey stone floors.

Willow doesn't speak to me and I read anger in her posture. Over my outburst, no doubt. Good! Let her feel as frustrated as I've been for days now.

Days. I don't even know how long I've been in this maze. My legs are cramping after sitting so long on the boat. I should have used that time to stretch out my overworked muscles. I may have been in this maze for a day. I may have been here for a week. I've spent most of that time walking through impossible spaces. And I'm still not hungry, which I find worrisome.

I look at the chrome watch on my wrist, and am surprised to see that I can read it: the hands glow in the dark. The minute hand stands poised to spill into a new hour, but of course this doesn't actually tell me how long we spent sailing through the darkness.

Willow and I walk on, wrapped in our individual thoughts and not speaking, until glass panes replace stone on the tunnel walls.

- 30 -

The shame set in when my grandmother started snoring. The theatre was dark and I had a white knuckled grip on the cushioned chair, popcorn completely forgotten in my lap as I waited for the alien monstrosity to succeed in its dogged attempts to disembowel Sigourney Weaver. Then the spell was broken; my grandmother had fallen asleep.

My grandmother didn't understand movies. She owned two DVDs: an ancient copy of *Black Beauty* and the more recent National Geographic special entitled *Night Owls*. "Horses and owls," she said, "you don't need anything more." My cousins and I had watched the movies often enough that their plastic cases had cracked and now refused to close.

But this was a special occasion, and one that I was sure would convince my grandmother to purchase more quality entertainment: a midnight screening of a scary movie. I'd talked my grandmother into driving into the city for the show, neglecting to mention that horror movies were strictly forbidden in my house. I had never seen the first two *Alien* movies, but I would be the first in my class to see the third.

Grandma ruined it all by snoring.

She lay slumped back in her seat, her head lolled against her shoulder and her mouth agape. Her glasses, which she only wore while reading or watching television, sat askew halfway down her nose. Her hand still gripped a bag of Peanut M&M's that had spilled into her lap.

I heard the seats around me squeak as annoyed patrons turned to look at her. Baleful glares, angry comments muttered to their neighbors. The other moviegoers were edgy and quick to latch onto a reason to vent their frustrations over how substandard the movie was turning out to be.

I edged away in my seat, pretending to belong to the young couple beside me as opposed to the old woman who could brazenly sleep while people onscreen were ripped apart. Then the man behind me poked me in the back of the head and hissed, "Wake her up, kid!"

The jig was up. I sank as low into my seat as I could, tugged at her cardigan. She made a sound halfway between a gurgle and a choke. Popcorn skipped over our chairs, from behind, a few buttery kernels becoming lodged in her hair.

"She's ruining the movie!" a man in front said loudly. A woman's voice shouted, "Wake the crone up!"

Even the pitch black theatre wasn't dark enough to hide me. I yanked furiously on my grandmother's sleeve, as urgent as if a fire had broken out beside us. "Grandma," I whined. "Please..."

I was rewarded with an audible yawn, and her sitting up slightly straighter. She straightened her glasses and looked up at the screen, then back down at me. "It isn't done yet?" she said, not bothering to whisper.

The man who had poked my head *shh'd* her loudly, provoking her into whipping around and jabbing her bag of candy at him. "Shut up," she said, "you were thinking the same thing!"

The man opened his mouth to protest until the woman beside him said, "I'm bored too," then he shrank into his seat as I had done moments before.

My grandmother excused herself to use the washroom, not bothering to be quiet as she shoved her way down the row. My shame still at critical levels, I stayed and watched the rest of the movie alone. When the credits finally rolled and the theatre emptied, I found her asleep on a bench facing the theatre door, a soft cover copy of *Black Beauty* wedged open on her lap.

- 31 -

Outside of the glass tunnel, yellow fields sport a thin dusting of snow, like pancakes sprinkled with icing sugar. "What happened to the city?" I ask. "What happened to the sun?"

"The snow's a little unseasonal," Willow agrees, but doesn't sound terribly concerned. The world outside adopts more white as we walk, the sky more grey, and frost slowly syrups onto the tunnel walls. It grows colder.

My breath begins to hang in the air, leaves a vapor trail behind me. I unknot the windbreaker from around my waist and thread my arms through the sleeves. My fingers, soon red with exposure, get shoved deep into my coat pockets, where they curl and uncurl in an attempt to grasp fleeting warmth. There, I also find the scarf that I'd tucked away and forgotten about. I pull it from my pocket, wind it around my neck, and wish I'd woken up wearing pants.

Willow looks at me, laughs. "You're lucky you don't have a mirror."

I spread my arms wide as if seeking fashion appraisal. A wry smile twists my face. "My personal style is beyond reproach. Shorts in the winter? *Tres chic*."

Willow does not breathe, and so there is no breath to fog in front of her lips, but the ghost has her arms hugged against her body as if the cold affects her. She even makes the motions of chattering teeth, though they don't seem to make a sound.

I watch her for some minutes before I decide to pull my scarf off and hand the matted bundle to her. She takes it, surprised, and asks, "Why?"

"Sorry," I mutter, staring down at my yellow shoes. "I shouldn't have yelled."

Beside me, Willow loops her arm into mine. "Forgiven," she says. "And trust me, I've had worse. The one before you? He tried to jump out and swim when the boatman started breathing down his neck."

"Did he make it?"

"What? No, that creepy old man has reflexes like a rattlesnake."

I smile weakly and look up at Willow. "I mean did he reach the end of the maze?"

"Oh," Willow says quietly. "I hope so. We took different paths, at his request, because he thought we could cover more ground. We didn't find each other again after that, which hopefully means that he managed to escape without me."

I'm silent after that. I suppose it's encouraging to know that she's open to the suggestions of her wards, but I'd hope that, as my self-proclaimed guide, she'd be a little more forceful if she knew the path onward. This godforsaken maze has held me, lost and alone, for long enough already.

The scarf adopts Willow's indistinct quality as she winds it around her neck. Like the rest of the ghost, I soon have trouble distinguishing where one feature ends and the other begins. This piece—her hair? The scarf? I'm not sure. Still translucent, I look through my guide to the white fields beyond.

I do not know if ghosts get cold, but just in case they do, I've done my good deed. For myself, I zip my jacket up as high as it will go. There is no other sound, save the slap of my runners on the stone floor and my wheezing breath.

"The weeds," I say after some time walking, and I gesture at the crabgrass in Willow's hand. "You've been carrying them for a while now. Why?"

Willow looks at her hand as if surprised to see the grass clutched there, then sucks her teeth in thought. "I don't really like them," she admits at last. "But it's customary, I suppose."

"Dead weeds?"

"In another life, these are blooming beautifully. But everything goes this way in the end."

I look outside, at the sea of white and gold. The wind, and it must be gusting, shaves off a fine veil of powder, which sparkles in the grey light before blowing out of sight.

"It looks like it might snow," Willow says and buries her nose in the scarf.

- 32-

The flakes fall fat and heavy, and we're soon iglooed within a long hallway encased in snow. The hallway is dark, save for the grey light that filters through the glass on our left—that part of the hallway that escapes the wind's icy breath. Occasionally, the hallway brightens as a section of snow loses its purchase on the glass and slides away. More snowflakes are quick to take their place and pepper the panes with white.

Willow turns her flashlight off and stows it away, citing enough real light to walk by. I watch the world to my left as we trek onward. I can no longer see the golden fields. The storm is a white mouth and all I can see is flakes swirling past our corridor and being swallowed back into it. No hint of land or blue sky or cloud remains. Nothing might exist, save snow and wind.

Willow hovers her hand above the glass as she walks, as if to feel the cold emanating from the window. I am content to turtle into my jacket and stave off the cold as best I can—I will feel it whether I want to or not.

The glass creaks above me, under the weight of the snow. "Oh shit," I whisper.

"Are your feet cold?" Willow asks.

"No, I—" My feet are cold. "Yes."

"Those shoes are practically threads," Willow says sadly. "It's small wonder."

The glass above me creaks again, but I suddenly become aware of another sound that I've been hearing, and ignoring, for some minutes. The crunch of my shoes in snow.

"Jesus! Did the glass break?" I shout the words, unintentionally.

"No," Willow says, then noticing my gaze she looks down. "Oh. Maybe someone opened a door, and let the snow in?"

"What door?" I shout again. "We haven't passed a door, it's been straight going for hours now! What if the roof caves in? Christ, think of all that snow!"

"A veritable avalanche. I hear it's not so bad."

"What?"

"Death by avalanche. I heard it's like falling asleep. Or maybe I saw that in a movie."

"Death? Jesus, Willow. I can't die in here, I have a life to get back to—"

"Oh?" Willow says, an edge in her voice. "First I've heard of a life. You want to get out pretty desperately, but you don't seem to have any clue why."

"Why? Why not? Who wants to spend eternity stuck in a maze?"

"Depends on the quality of cheese at the end, I suppose," Willow says. She pats me on the arm. "I'm kidding. About the death thing. We'll be fine."

"What about frostbite and hypothermia? It's not as if we have a hot tub we can unwind in after this wintertime stroll."

"We might, you never know." I can make out Willow's shrug in the dim light. "We did just walk on walls and cross a river in a building. I don't suppose you brought a spare pair of shoes?"

"No, I didn't bring anything, because none of these clothes are mine, and I don't know how I wound up here in the first place."

"Then I suggest we press on and seek out the aforementioned hot tub."

We continue our walk. For my part, I watch the ceiling anxiously, imagining phantom cracks creasing the glass tunnel's roof. Meanwhile, Willow seems distracted. She pats down her pants, then spends a fair few minutes deeply contemplating the grass in her hands, before finally turning to me.

"What's that?"

I twirl around, expecting to see the boatman or maybe a minotaur leering at me through the glass, but the tunnel beside me is caked in snow.

"Not outside," Willow says. "In your pocket. What is that."

I reach into the pocket in question and extract the New Testament that I'd discovered so long ago, and promptly forgotten. I hold up the little orange book for Willow to see.

"There it is!" Willow claps. Then she stops, her face growing dark. "You haven't been stealing from me, have you?"

I choke on the unfounded accusation. "This is mine," I say. "Or rather, I woke up with it in my pocket. You were reading from it when I first met you."

"Was I?" Willow frowns and takes the book from me. "You've scribbled in it."

"No... how do you not remember this?"

"I had a copy too," Willow says, and her voice sounds far away. "Some time ago. I used to memorize my favorite verses." She shakes her head, then begins to rip pages from the book. It's not what I expected her to do.

"For your shoes," Willow says, thrusting the loose leaves at me. "It might be a little bit warmer."

Grasping her meaning, I take the pages gladly. They crinkle as I push them deep into my shoes. The paper is not entirely comfortable, but uncomfortable is better than cold. Willow reads a verse aloud as she waits for me, "I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."

"Bullshit," I mutter. Willow catches the comment and cuffs me over the head.

"You're the one worried about frostbite," she admonishes. "Just hope Jesus saves your toes."

When Willow hands the Bible back to me, I notice that only the Psalms and Revelation remain. The gospels cushion my feet. More Italian lines the verse Willow read from, and I point it out to her:

*Se Dio ti lasci, lettor, prender frutto
di tua lezione, or pensa per te stesso*

"What do you think it means?" I ask.

Willow shrugs, "At a guess, it's about how laxatives, letters, and tender fruit relieve stress for the legions, but I don't really see what that has to do with Revelation."

I laugh and put the Bible back into my pocket. Even if my Italian friend left me instructions on escape, seeking Willow's advice on the text amounts to the blind leading the blind. "Did anyone you guide through here speak Italian?"

"Not to me," Willow says. "What's that?"

Willow points in front of us, at something round and dark lying atop the snow. We approach it carefully, then Willow scoops it up, brushes the snow from it, and, laughing, places it atop my head. She's found the Stetson.

"I... what?" I take the cowboy hat off and twirl it in my hands. "How did this get here?"

"Who cares?" Willow whoops, "What's important is that you're a cowboy again!"

A large sheet of snow suddenly drops beneath its own weight from the right hand window. My gaze, already downturned as I examine the Stetson, happens upon the snowy floor in the sudden burst of white light. Willow and I stand on a trail of cloven hoof prints.

"Willow?" I say, my voice comes out reedier than I would like.

"I see them."

The hoof prints walk the opposite direction, back the way we came. My eyes jump from one pair of prints to the next, and I wonder how long ago they were made.

"These are some big hoof prints," Willow says.

"I've seen them before," I whisper. "In the maze."

"Horse prints are solid, with a cleft between the toes. These belong to a moose, maybe. Or a big ass cow."

"Do you really think that's all it is?"

Willow tilts her chin up and looks me in the eye. "Yes. Shall we?"

She sets off down the snowy tunnel. With nothing else to do, I follow. Now I'm watching the floor, and I can just make out the hoof prints that I'd previously missed in the dim light. They head in a relatively straight line straight behind us, occasionally trampled down by my own. I strain my ears for the sounds of hooves being set in snow, imagining that they'll sound similar to my footsteps.

"That's strange," Willow says.

"What is?" I murmur, but I don't look up.

"I've only just noticed that it's snowing."

"It's been snowing for a few hours now. Or did you not notice that our ceiling is eclipsed by a snow bank?"

"That's not what I mean," Willow says. She places a hand atop my hat, then pushes a small pile of snow off to sprinkle in front of my face. "This is what I mean."

Oh. It's *snowing*.

I look up. Fat and heavy snowflakes fall down atop my nose and lashes. I blink into the grey-black sky, at the snow falling on me.

I look around. The glass walls are gone. The dim light that I'd thought was filtering in from my left is the only light all around me. The sun must have set while the storm still persisted. "But... the tunnel? When did we leave the tunnel?"

Willow rubs her chin. "I have no idea. I was watching the hoof prints."

I nod my agreement. "Well, if we follow them back..."

But I don't want to follow them back. I imagine encountering a moose or a stag, squeezed into the tiny tunnel. I imagine encountering something worse.

"We could," Willow says, hesitation buttering her words. "But there's no way back across the river. The boatman doesn't ferry people back."

I try to hide the relief on my face.

"At least the wind has died down," Willow chirps.

"It's why we hardly noticed."

For lack of better recourse, Willow and I continue following the tracks in the wrong direction. The monochrome world stretches on endlessly as we walk: the black sky, the white ground, the grey horizon. The only thing that changes is the snow, which slowly builds until we sink into it with every step.

We follow the footprints until they're swallowed by the snow.

- 33 -

The gingerbread house we'd built paled in comparison to the reality outside of grandma's kitchen window. The frosting that we'd drowned the tinfoil floor with, that we'd smeared atop every candy cane tree, that we'd oozed down the chocolate-shingled roof, was a light smattering compared to the snow that had quagmired the countryside overnight.

I woke up to my grandfather tugging on his winter coat and whistling. Ice had super-glued the front door shut, so he left the house through the garage to spend his day shoveling all thirty meters of the country home's driveway.

I went out to join him, after I'd downed a bowl of porridge and pilfered the next day's chocolate from my Advent calendar. I tugged on my boots and my mitts and I ran out to "shovel," which my grandmother smiled at because it really meant "play in the snow." While my intentions were purely honorable, twenty minutes of shoveling left me exhausted and I dropped off the cleared path to carve angels into the snow banks.

My grandmother came outside soon afterwards, bearing two steaming mugs of hot chocolate in one hand and her collapsible easel in the other. I puffed on my hot drink, while she began laying down a blue foundation on the canvas, her mittened hand gripping the brush directly beneath its bristled head. I quickly grew bored, and set off to raid the snow banks that my grandfather had formed.

One snow bank that my grandfather seemed to favor had towered above the others, its peak now scraping the icicles that clung from the gutter around the roof. I looked up at this frozen Everest, awed by its potential, before I began to climb.

The mountain required reshaping as I ascended, with various faces giving way beneath my scrabbling fingers to send me splashing back into the snow banks below. I fashioned it first

into a pyramid and then into a ramp, its shape leaning ever more towards the roof of my grandparents' home.

The blue sky with its cotton ball clouds looked closer than ever as I stepped onto those icy shingles. The woods that spread out all around lifted up their icy white arms in homage to me. I felt the cold wind stab me more sharply and saw the sun on the blank white snow shine more piercingly than either had on the ground. Looking out over the unbroken snowscape, I imagined a blank white canvas ready for grandmother's brush.

Thinking of her, I crept over to the far side of the house where my grandmother labored. The sun lanced off her golden hair as she pored over her facsimile of the frozen world. I waited until she stepped away from her painting and rubbed her eyes before I called her attention over to the daredevil on the roof. It was she who fired the first snowball.

After a short battle, whose loss I blamed on my eyrie's insufficient ammunition supplies, I jumped laughing from the roof into a pillow of snow. Then my grandmother set to work preparing for a war. The cleared trail left in the wake of my grandfather's work became a river, and we dug out battlements on either side and stocked them full of snowballs. Once again, my grandmother fired the first shot—a ball of slush lobbed high enough to bypass my defenses and go splashing into my hood and down my neck. My artillery painted the air white in response.

Our war was brutal, but bloodless. It lasted maybe ten minutes, while setup had taken hours, and in the end we even resorted to cannibalizing our own fortresses for further ammunition. Cold, exhausted, and laughing, my grandmother and I walked back into the house while the sun painted the white fields red behind us.

- 34 -

The woods creep up on us as a patch of black against the grey in the distance. As we near the wood, I can make out individual tree limbs painted skeletal white by frost. The leaves that have not yet fallen cling like frozen blue fingertips to the twigs. Willow enters the wood, and so I reluctantly follow.

We stop for a rest beneath a large oak tree. I've been searching the ground, and am relieved to discover no hoof prints. Willow begins searching the ground and pushing leaves into a pile. I open my mouth to ask what she's doing, but say instead, "We should have brought some food and water along, back when we had the chance."

Willow looks up. "Are you hungry?" she asks.

"No," I shake my head. "I just feel like I haven't eaten in a week, and it feels wrong. What happened to your bottle?"

"I found a recycling bin, like I said I would." Willow smiles. "A long time ago. When you were running from the photocopier."

"What were you running from?" I ask her. "I'd thought... well, the hoof prints."

Willow sucks her teeth for a moment, then answers very slowly. "How many good ghost stories have you heard?"

"Uh... like Stephen King..."

"No." Willow shakes her head. "Stories about benign ghosts. This place can be a little *odd*, as I think you've noticed. Not everyone plays nice."

"Like the boatman."

"Oh trust me," Willow says. "He's moonshine compared to some. You're pleasant enough, though. Don't worry about it."

So I try not to worry about minotaurs as Willow and I walk into the white, virginal wonderland. Soon boughs laden with fresh snow form a cross-thatch ceiling. The powder falling from overhead has eased, so that only a fine net of sparkling flakes yet falls. The scene would be serene, were it not for my cold legs and wet feet.

But Willow is humming. I watch her, a number of steps ahead of me, as she skips between the boles of trees. It's as if she's completely forgotten the footsteps in the snow and the figure hunched under the bridge.

"We seem to have skipped an item on your agenda," I say, falling back on an old conversation. My tone is light, as if asking after the weather. "Didn't you list a train before the forest? Maybe we've escaped the forest already."

"Stop," Willow says. "Listen."

So I do. At first I hear nothing. Then I hear *nothing*. There is no crunch of footprints in the snow, no squirrels or rabbits skittering in the trees, no birdsongs from one branch to another. The forest is utterly silent, save for whatever sounds Willow and I carry with us.

After Willow sees the realization spread across my face, she begins to suck her teeth in worry. "This isn't the wood I meant," Willow mutters. "I'm not sure where we are."

"But we're outside," I say. I gesture at the looping branches and the grey sky overhead. "This is about as out-of-doors as you get."

"I'm not quite sure how to satiate you," Willow sighs and begins moving through the woods again. "We're outdoors, I suppose, but not in the way that you want. We're not free of this labyrinth yet."

"These woods are too dense for Devonian gardens," I contradict her, "or municipal parks. There were fields," I wave my hand vaguely in the direction we came from, "and empty stretches

with nothing but snow. Maybe everything in this wood is hibernating?" The supposition is a stretch and we both know it.

"Why does a glimpse of sky and a whiff of wind convince you that we're out?" Willow sighs. "Is a vast, empty field any less disorienting than a mess of corridors? If you wander this forest for an hour, or two, or ten, won't every tree start to look alike? Trust me, an unending ice field is just as labyrinthine as the hallways I found you in. More so, maybe: a field has no walls to follow. You could walk forever and never find your way out.

"We will probably," Willow adds, "find our way in and out of those glass bridges many times before the end. It's the nature of this place. Remember what the boatman said: 'Go in and out the window, as you have done before.' We're out now. Time to find our way back in."

I nod, even as I remember the boatman's other words: *every denizen of this labyrinth is lonely*. Willow walks in front of me, and I wonder what I might do to quench the loneliness of a world without sounds.

Willow is the first to see the sign in the center of the woods. She brushes the snow from its face and reads it aloud, "Here there be monsters." I look around in a panic, but of course, the only footprints are my own.

We set out through the trees once more. Before too long, we find our way to another sign. "Here there be monsters," Willow reads.

"We've gone in a circle."

Willow shrugs again and points out that there are no footprints here, made by either monsters or myself. "Maybe there are monsters both here and there," she says. It's meant as a joke, but it's not funny.

When I see the sign for a third time, I know that the maze is fucking with us, the same way the corridors had when I first awoke here. "We're lost," I moan. "You said so yourself. We'll never find our way out." And here there may be monsters.

But Willow is looking at the sign, at something I've overlooked. An owl perches atop it. The first creature I've seen in quite some time. The owl cocks its head to the side and watches our slow approach.

When we get within about five meters of the bird, the owl ruffles its feathers and spreads its wings threateningly. Then it speaks. "Stay back, monster!" the owl says. I blink at it, and the owl flaps atop a branch, fifteen feet overhead. "I said stay back!"

"We haven't moved," I say. I'm speaking to an owl.

Willow, on the other hand, gives it a long look and then a smile burgeons on her face. "Oh thank god," I hear her mutter. And then, more loudly, "Please, could you tell us the way on?"

The owl begins to preen itself. "The sign warned me," the owl says, though its words are muffled with all the feathers in its beak. "Monsters, and here you are."

"I'm talking to an owl," I say aloud this time. Willow *shh's* me loudly.

"Please," she says, "the exit?"

The owl points its wing to our right, a direction that looks identical to every other we've traveled thus far. Willow grabs my hand and makes for the direction indicated, but I, suddenly suspicious, dig in my heels. "Why are you helping us?"

The owl stops preening and glares at me. "You idiot. I'm getting rid of you."

Now Willow looks up at the owl, frustration etched on her face. "So that's not the way on? Why did you point us in that direction?"

The owl ruffles its breast feathers, cocks its head to the other side. "You idiot. I just said, didn't I?"

I point at the sign in the clearing. "You were sitting on it. Maybe you're the monster."

The owl gives me a long series of hoots and Willow leans over to quietly inform me that its laughing at me. "Derisive laughter, probably," she adds.

"You idiot," the owl says. "Do I look monstrous? Of the two of us, you're the one fifteen times my size."

I'm reminded suddenly of Lewis Carroll, and the pigeon squealing "serpent!" at the top of its lungs. I shake my head, wonder if I'm having a bad drug trip, like Alice down her rabbit hole. I don't remember taking drugs, but I suppose that doesn't prove anything.

"And if you were to escape us," Willow says. "Where would you fly?"

"That depends on you," the owl says. It resumes its preening. "If you climb my tree, I'll fly up another fifteen feet. Or peck at your eyes."

Despite myself, I find the owl beautiful. Its feathers are a golden red, dusted with black. Its face is a serene off-white. Each flight feather is marked with thick black bands that resolve into three distinct stripes when the owl spreads its wings.

Willow pauses for a moment, before challenging the bird. "I've an idea," she says. "And I want you to listen carefully. You've read the sign?"

The owl cocks its head in what might be agreement.

"Well, we're trying to get away from here," Willow continues. "Only, we're stuck. We're traveling in circles, which means we'll keep coming back. But." Willow pauses, putting dramatic emphasis on the word. "If we manage to leave, we will no longer be here. And only *here* be monsters."

The owl cocks its head left and then right. I find Willow's logic broken, but then, we're talking to an owl. Finally, the owl rouses itself and flaps back down to the sign. It points with its wing in almost the complete opposite direction from before.

"That's the way?" Willow confirms, and the owl cocks its head again.

"The metal trees," the bird says. "Walk between them. You'll find the metal snake. You idiot," it adds, as an afterthought. The owl flaps back up to the snowy canopy, which I take as indication that our conversation is over.

- 35 -

The anomaly in these woods is a train platform. The owl's metal trees, as we soon discover, are a series of long steel columns suspending a couple of cables over a railway track. Following the track takes us to the platform. On the platform we wait.

I can only hope that the metal snake turns out to be a train and not an actual metal snake. A giant steel serpent will probably make me piss myself, and I only have the one pair of pants.

The snow stops and the sun peeks out from behind a parapet of clouds, as we wait. Six lamp-posts painted sky blue, ring the train platform and jut some twenty feet into the air. Each sports a single, round snow-capped bulb perched atop the slender stalks.

The platform itself is little more than a slab of concrete with stairs spilling off each side and crimson rail guards protecting us from stepping onto the track. Half of the platform is protected from the elements by a black-shingled roof, upheld on the shoulders of mermaid-green pillars, while the other half is open to the air. Yellow paint on the pavement warns Willow and I away from standing too close to where the train docks.

Near the train platform stand two gazebo-like structures, one on either side of the railway tracks, with large yellow signs suspended within them instructing us to LOOK BOTH WAYS FOR TRAINS. Beneath the yellow signs, yellow gates give us access across the tracks.

"Erich Heckel was here," I joke, pointing at the bright and clashing colors around us.

"I don't get it," Willow says.

She points out a map standing in the center of the platform, and while at first the prospect of a map excites me, I'm soon more dismayed than gleeful over its presence. The map is a symbol, some unholy cross between ouroboros and caduceus: a symmetrical pattern of two lines, one red and one blue, intertwining with and consuming each other. Neither line is a snake per se,

but their shapes are evocatively serpentine. Each line also sports white spots, like pale scales running down their lengths.

"This train had better not be an actual snake," I mutter, and Willow laughs.

I look at my watch. The minute hand has just moved beyond the midway point, which tells me that I'm half an hour into... whatever hour it currently is. Morning. Half an hour into morning, sometime.

Willow and I stand on our implausible piece of civilization in the middle of nowhere. The platform is warm beneath the winter sun, so I take off my shoes and begin extracting the pulpy mess from within them. I also drape my windbreaker over the red rails, letting them dry in the sun, while Willow gives my stained shirt and outdated shorts a critical once over.

"All right," she says. "I've got something for you." She hands me two neatly folded bundles, wrapped in brown paper, and smiles at what must be the flabbergasted expression on my face.

"They were lying on the platform," Willow says in response to my unvoiced question, "and there's one for me too."

"I didn't see them," I say.

Willow sticks out her tongue. "I know. You were busy looking at lamp-posts."

Ripping open the brown paper reveals a neatly folded button-up shirt and a pair of black dress pants. The other has a suit jacket and a pink tie.

"Put them on, you'll clean up nicely," Willow says, while holding a sleek, black dress up against her sweater. "If only we could do something about that hair you've been sprouting."

I bring a hand up to my chin and am surprised by the growth there. "It hasn't even itched," I muse. "How long have I been stuck here?"

But Willow's not listening. She says, "Oh, and you have to change in the woods, because I have dibs on the platform. Scoot."

I put my shoes on and obey, wandering away until a copse of trees blocks the platform from sight. While I don't necessarily find the prospect of long hikes in a suit appealing, I'm almost as anxious to escape my dingy apparel as the entire maze.

A seed of doubt wriggles at me, though, as I swap cargo shorts for pleated pants. Two bundles of clothes. Not one, not four. Two. A suit and a dress. What's more, this suit could be tailored for me, it fits so well. The hem on the pants is perfect, the shoulders on the suit jacket brought in to fit my more slender frame.

And what was it Willow had said earlier: "depends on the quality of the cheese?"

Willow shouts for me from somewhere out of sight, so I finish changing and bundle my old clothing up. I'll worry about it later. For now, I have new clothes, and I feel like I'm making progress. That will have to be good enough.

I return to the train platform, and stop at the sight of Willow. Her dress, a demure black, drops to her knees, and it also looks to have been tailored specifically for her. A simple, steel crucifix hangs at her throat. And she's wearing a veil.

"Willow?" I say softly, looking at her, then down at myself. "We look like we're about to attend a funeral."

Willow clutches her bouquet of grass in front of her, the ghost of a smile dusting her lips. Her eyes don't meet mine as she nods down the tracks and whispers, "The train's here."

- 36 -

When I discovered the clearing in the woods, my first thought was that elves had made it, though I was far too old to believe in such things anymore.

Around me, four wooden chairs surrounded a log laid out like a table, replete with crude wooden dishes and cutlery. The clearing was tucked between five large elm trees, and disguised on three sides by bundles of sticks lashed together and then slathered in leaves. Attempts had even been made to create a ceiling of interweaving twigs, but this had been abandoned or interrupted and deadfall now littered the floor that must once have been painstakingly kept clean.

The clearing was close to my grandparents' driveway, though invisible until I actually ventured into the trees. I discovered it by accident, by first seeing a strange design scarred into a tree trunk. The swirling pattern looked like a Celtic knot. Or a maze.

I touched the tree bearing this symbol, only to discover another near at hand. Then another. And another. So on, until I came at last to the hidden clearing. Someone's place of solitude.

Each piece of fork, knife and spoon looked to have been hand whittled. Some were carved of light wood, others dark. Some were long, others stout. One spoon was barely more than a shallow circular depression, its handle having broken off. No piece matched any other, and all bore the scars of a pocket knife and looked in bad need of sanding.

The plates and bowls, while better crafted, were each filled with rainwater and moss now grew along their edges. As I watched, beetles dove in and out of the briny solution, fishing for leaves perhaps or drowning aphids.

The chairs were perhaps the crudest thing in the clearing, simple pieces of hewn wood that had been nailed together. One of the four chairs sported a rotting seat. Another was ant

infested. No chair sat level on the ground. But, though the chairs were ill-fashioned, they commanded my attention the longest due to their size. Elfin, as I've stated. As if made for children.

While the table was as crude as every other piece of furniture, it was nonetheless impressive if only for its size. A log split lengthwise, the tree that it had been taken from must have been over a meter in diameter. Now, it sat half-buried in the earth, its rounded side facing down so that the smooth-sawn face pointed skyward. The tabletop was now riddled with worm holes, but even that looked artful and recalled the knot-like pattern that had led me to the clearing.

I cleaned the clearing as best I could without tools. I dumped the water from the bowls outside and scraped them clean with dry leaves. I swept the floor with a foot, discovering a fallen piece of wall in the process that had been lost beneath a carpet of rotting leaves. Climbing one of the adjoining trees, I even discovered metal hooks piercing the trunks, where a tarp might be strung up overhead for shelter.

With the sun beginning to set, I returned to my grandmother's house for proper tools: nails, hammer, hacksaw, sandpaper, and anything else that might be useful in restoring the weather-beaten furniture. My grandmother saw me leaving, laden with supplies from her shed, and stopped me as I trekked back down her drive. I described my current venture to her, and the clearing that I had found.

As I spoke, my grandmother's eyes grew moist. "Show me," she said after a moment, and then set off across the gravel leaving me to catch up.

My grandmother laughed when I pointed out the first marked tree, ran one of her wrinkled fingers over the marred bark. She placed a hand on each of the labeled trees that followed, as if memorizing the path by touch.

When we came to the clearing, my grandmother laughed like a child and picked up each plate and fork in turn, running a critical eye over their construction. She even surprised me by climbing low into one of the trees, to reach up and feel the metal hook stuck there. Finally, she turned to me, and I noticed that she was crying.

"This was mine," she whispered, looking down fondly at the worm-scarred wood. "My sanctuary, back when I was little. A girl with six brothers needs an escape. I built it all, with the tools my mother lent me while my father was at work."

So saying, my grandmother hefted a hammer from amongst the tools I'd gathered and stuck five iron nails between her teeth. "Cerm en," she said to me around the metal. "We've get werk ter der."

I followed her lead in the endeavor. We sanded down what cutlery we could and re-carved others from the young twigs nearby. We pried apart the chairs and rebuilt them from newer, sturdier wood. Still, not a single one was level. My grandmother even showed me a dark piece of braided electrical tape hanging from the tree branches overhead.

"I used to tie my flashlight to it," she said. "A pretty silver thing. This whole space would light up like a proper house."

Seeing the last of the red light filter through the trees, I ran to the house as fast as I could, to find the flashlight that I kept beneath my bed. When I returned to the woods, we illuminated the clearing as my grandmother had when she was a girl.

- 37 -

The train is thoroughly un-extraordinary. I watch its red, grey and white exterior approach through the tree trunks and I'm left disappointed and feeling foolish for waiting in a suit. Yellow lights flash around the platform as it draws near, unnecessarily warning us of its approach.

Willow begins dancing around the platform in anticipation, and even I'm eager to be off my feet for a few minutes or hours, however long it will take us to reach...

"Willow," I look over at her. "Where are we going?"

"You mean *are we there yet*," Willow sings over to me, a mocking tone on her words.

I shake my head. Then think better of it. "Yes. Will this train take us out of the maze?"

"Getting closer," Willow says. The train pulls up to the platform and its doors slide open, waiting for us to board. "The train's different for everyone, but eventually we'll reach the wood."

"The different wood."

"Right."

"And after that, we're out?"

Willow jumps the track between the train and the platform and holds a hand out for me to follow. "After that, yes."

"So after the wood—"

Willow smacks me hard across the ass with all the force of a wooden spoon. I fall back in surprise, shout out at the unexpected attack. The slap isn't coy or playful, it's meant as actual punishment: an action to complement the annoyance on her face. "We'll get there," she says.

"But you're going to have to trust me. Don't forget your Bible."

Though tattered, I transfer the book from my windbreaker to my suit pants. My Stetson, too, finds its way back onto my head, but the other clothes I leave behind. Only the scarf is spared, I realize while boarding the train: Willow has wrapped it back around her neck.

The train door closes behind us and the floor lurches as we begin to move.

My palms sweat. There's a lump in my throat. Willow is still not meeting my eyes, and unbidden the boatman's words pop into my head: every denizen is lonely.

The train car is empty and dull. Grey poles rise throughout it periodically so that those forced to stand can have something to hold onto. The sides of the car are lined by seats swaddled in red fabric, for the elderly, pregnant and insufferably greedy. Or, in this case, the only passengers aboard. Willow takes a seat on the left and because something about this train spooks me, I sit on the opposite side of the aisle. I look out of the window to avoid looking at her.

The plains that sprawl across the horizon confound me. Behind me there is a wood, and in front nothing but hills. The snow has all but vanished out here, the warmth of the day chasing it away. But outside, there are no farmhouses or crops or even a plume of smoke to be seen—just blank, rolling grasslands, covered in mossy green and polka dotted with wildflowers. Other than the vegetation, the scene is eerily lifeless. No flies or bumblebees on the flowers, no gopher holes in the grass. And, though Willow and I ride the train until the sun begins to sink low on the horizon, the scenery hardly changes.

Willow grows more and more restless as the evening wears on. "We should be there by now," I hear her mutter once. Then, "What's taking so long."

She moves about the train, now sitting and now standing: across from me, beside me, at the far end of the train, in front of the door, looming over me. I lean my head against the cool window and watch the same hills roll by repeatedly.

Finally, Willow gives a shout, and I look up at her. She's tugging on the door at the far end of the train car, a door that I'm not entirely certain is meant to be opened. "Over here," she calls, and I see her waving me towards her. "We've entered the wrong car."

I lean my head back against the glass, ignore her summons.

- 38 -

Only when my watch tells me that Willow's been gone for ten minutes do I reluctantly pull myself from my seat. I'll be damned if I'm losing my guide again.

I stumble forward, swayed by the motion of the moving train. When I reach the far end, I push against the closed door and step through. The next train car could not be more different.

The benches that line this train car are uninviting wooden pews, and a slow, sad music fills its length. Willow stands at the car's far end, in front of a table and...

"Oh god," I whisper. Behind the table rests a coffin.

I stumble again, though this has nothing to do with the train. I put a hand on each pew to steady myself, and claw my way closer to the front of the train.

Willow turns away from the table and gives me a sad smile, as if she understands what she couldn't possibly understand. As if she is empathetic. She has placed her dead weeds in an empty vase on the table like a bouquet of fresh-cut flowers. Willow walks a short distance, to stand between two pews and look at the world passing by outside.

"Read something," she says over her shoulder.

Mechanically, I comply. I sluggishly approach the spot that Willow has vacated, pulling the piecemeal New Testament from my pocket as I walk. I flip to the book's end.

"Perché mi schiante," I whisper. "Perché mi scerpi."

The table is bare, but for a facedown picture frame and Willow's bouquet of crabgrass. The sight makes me sad, so I set the tattered Bible down beside Willow's paltry offering. I don't lift the picture frame to see whose face is on the other side. I don't approach the coffin.

Instead, I turn to Willow. She is pointing at something outside, and the hoarseness of my voice when I ask her, "What do you see out there?" surprises me.

Willow turns to face me. She is still smiling empathetically, and I suddenly hate that all-knowing expression on her face. She bounds out from between the pews and throws her arms around me in a hug. Despite myself, I hug her back.

"What is out—" I ask again, but a sob strangles my sentence. I realize that I am crying.

By way of answer, Willow points at the window. I'm surprised to see frost rimming the pane, but not nearly as surprised as I am to see buildings flash by outside. "The city," I croak. "I thought we left the city behind."

"In and out the window, as you have done before," Willow says quietly. "I'd say welcome back, but that's not exactly comforting, is it?"

I sit down on the wooden pew, but I look out of the window instead of facing forward. Willow takes the seat beside me. "We're still in the maze," I say and I feel Willow nod.

The streets outside look frozen. The sidewalks are frost rimmed and snow sits atop the street lights. I point out of the window and I say, "Can we reach those streets?"

"Yes," Willow answers. "For all the good it will do."

"Then how do we get out?"

"You." I hear sorrow in Willow's voice and I turn to look at her, but when she lifts her eyes to meet mine she still smiles. "Here," she says, "breathe on the glass."

I do as she asks. After I've fogged up the windowpane, Willow leans over my body and draws a circle in the fog. Then she scrapes a curving line into the circle's center and two dots for eyes. "A smiley face," she says. I don't comment on the sadness that still tinges her voice.

We sit in silence after that. It feels like hours, though perhaps only minutes pass. I look at Willow's smiley face on the window and then I shut my eyes. I only open them again when a

sound like *bing-bong* plays over the train car's speakers, interrupting the soft dirgeful music to herald our arrival at a new station.

"Did you look in the coffin?" Willow asks, as the doors slide open back down the car.

I shake my head and stand to disembark.

- 39 -

A week before my sixteenth birthday, I sat with my grandmother at her kitchen table. With liver-spotted hands, she pressed gherkins into brine solution. With palms red and sore, I sealed mason jars after she finished. The smell of vinegar and pickling spice, and a small pyramid of filled pickle jars, dominated the kitchen table between us. The kitchen counter beside us teemed with glass jars waiting for their turn.

I sat gingerly on the wooden chair and didn't make eye contact with her, my mood was vinegar. I had bitched about the chore, "*back talked*"—as she said. She'd used a wooden spoon, a relic I hadn't seen since my childhood. I recall darkly contemplating whether spankings counted as abuse.

My grandmother, though I'm sure she noticed my dark mood, didn't comment. Instead, she handed me jars, I squeezed them shut. I stewed in my seat and favored my left buttock.

I was often angry at sixteen, and not always capable of identifying why. That was the year after my grandfather's death. That was the year my parents finalized their divorce. Not to say that one or the other was the cause, though they did provide easy scapegoats.

I recall the school counselor's expression melting from faux concern to faux understanding. He stroked his bleached-blond goatee and nodded sagely at the ceiling fan. "Oh, your parents got *divorced*."

Recreation, at sixteen, was a Disc-Man and heavy black headphones that made my ears ache after twenty minutes beneath their weight. I listened to whatever music my parents wouldn't approve of.

My grandmother, I'm sure, knew that if I hadn't been pickling with her, I'd be shut away in my room. Lights off. Music blaring.

She'd learned how to bully me into having fun.

The afternoon sun made my grandmother's pickles glow like molten gold. I shook the mason jars as I set them down and watched the gherkins and garlic swirl, nuclear-yellow snow globes. I stared out of the kitchen window, at fat bumblebees bouncing against the glass and languishing atop the raspberry bush. I recall dandelion heads, yellow and white, polka-dotting her shaggy lawn.

After fifty-odd jars, my grandmother slowly got up from her chair and I remembered to be angry. I adopted a scowl. Screwed the last jar lid on so tight, I imagined she'd never get it open. My grandmother put a gnarled hand on my hair and said, "Sharpie's in the drawer."

My grandmother creaked from the kitchen. She moved more slowly than I remember her doing in my youth. Her bleached hair now mousy grey. She also wore more cardigans and sweaters, though she never complained about being cold.

Of course, this is retrospect. I used the red felt marker to adorn each jar's brass lid with the date. I was also supposed to write a *P* for pickles, and omitting it was my minor rebellion.

When my grandmother returned, she plunked a new mason jar in front of me, and held its twin in her left hand. The liquid inside the jar burned yellow with the setting sun, and I finally looked at her. "I have to label *more*?"

Silently, she unscrewed the lid of her glass and lifted the threaded mouth to her lips. She gulped it like water, then motioned for me to do the same.

I sprayed the liquid across her pyramid of pickle jars, as the corn whisky scraped down my throat. My eyes streamed at the shock of hard liquor, and my grandmother laughed a hearty, throaty laugh at my expression.

"Happy birthday," she grinned. "I didn't want to die before you had your first drink."

"I've had beer!" A few sips from a can at my uncle's, and I hated every one. "And wine!"
A glass during dinner once or twice a year, which I drank and pretended to like better than Coke.

"And now you've had white lightning and can actually claim to have had a real drink.
Finish your jar. It's good for you."

My grandmother and I sipped our drinks, and contrary to her word she didn't make me
finish. She gave me a small box with a silver watch for my birthday, that year, but the main
present I remember was sipping alcohol at the kitchen table, while she toasted my sixteen years.

- 40 -

Willow isn't the only ghost that haunts me during the train ride. Only Willow's voice saying, "We're here," and her light touch on my shoulder stirs me from my fugue of memories. And, when we do disembark, it's to more disappointment.

More hallways, like those I began my journey in. We may as well have stayed in those infernal office buildings.

"Up ahead," Willow says, and points. "This corridor will split in two. Both halves go straight, but one curves slightly left, one slightly right."

"And which way takes us out of this maze?"

Willow sighs. She's tired of me asking *are we there yet*.

We come across the fork quickly, and I'm surprised at the decrepit state of the floor. The floor tiles, on both paths, are curling at the corners and cold concrete is showing beneath them. Entire tiles are missing, and others are smashed to pieces as if hit by a jackhammer. The walls of both corridors are streaked yellow from ancient water-leaks and a want of cleaning. A thick carpet of dust coats the floor, where the path we came from was relatively clean.

"Does nobody travel this way?"

"Many do, but it's not a road that most take if they can avoid it."

"And can we avoid it?"

Willow shakes her head, "fraid not. But I'll help you through it. You'll be fine."

I examine both paths, wondering if one is perhaps easier or shorter than the other. Then I consider my shoes, and their condom-thin rubber soles. Those floor tiles will hurt.

Willow looks at me, apparently not frustrated by my hesitancy. She gives me a small smile, and tilts her head towards the paths as if asking *which one?*

I turn the question back on her, "Which path is better?"

Willow arches an eyebrow, purses her lips. "That's a matter of opinion."

"Which is less—" I'm lost for words, so I just gesture to the paths.

"Rocky? Winding? Torturous? Both are, in many places. Both can also be smooth, and when the going gets good we'll move at a decent clip and we won't even think about the other path. But honestly, whichever path you pick will get us to our destination."

"The end of the maze."

Willow looks at me expectantly.

I breathe out slowly, resigning myself to blisters and cut feet. "All right," I say. "Right. Let's go right?"

Willow shrugs and sets off down the path. I watch where she walks, though she doesn't seem concerned about foot placement or avoiding sharp edges. She leaves no footprints in the dust.

I stumble dozens of times within the first ten minutes, and the path I've chosen displays no evidence of easing. Hidden pitfalls snag my sneakers, send me into a half-run half-trip, no matter how slowly I walk. Willow, after a time, takes my hand. I trip less often, then—whether because she can actually see surer footing or because the corridor smoothed slightly, I'm not sure.

"Some people avoid these paths," I say.

"Many, in fact."

"How?"

Willow looks at me, runs her tongue over her teeth as she thinks. "This labyrinth isn't exactly teeming."

That's true, I guess. The figures we've seen are few, and those all seem to be local denizens. Even Willow—I have a hard time imagining her outside of the labyrinth. I wonder if she'll be able to escape with me. I'm unwilling to contemplate the idea that I won't.

My feet quickly become bruised. I can feel cement beneath my left foot, where the rubber has torn wide open, exposing me to the cold floor. Every step sends a little jolt through my legs and up my spine.

I marvel at Willow's easy gait, carefree smile. Perhaps ghosts don't feel pain.

- 41 -

The path eases as we reach another bridge, wrapped in glass panes and offering a view of the longed for outside. The window-panes are tinted yellow, lending an eerie haze to the street below, the adjacent buildings, the stalled vehicles.

The building that we're leaving is dull stonework, with square windows in square walls. It makes me think of bottom lines and cubicles. The building that the bridge spills into is no better, despite having wider windows and a few more storeys. Almost every blind is drawn and the building feels uninviting, if not downright hostile.

The sky overhead sputters snowflakes onto our bridge. The turgid clouds swirl like my Grandmother's brine solution, and fat yellow flakes divebomb the asphalt. Slush and water droplets worm their way down the glass, leaving slender yellow streaks in their wake. The street below us glistens gold through the tinted panes, as if reflecting a non-existent sunset.

Willow and I start across the bridge, and we almost reach the far side when I stop. There are figures beneath me. They are translucent to the point of invisibility, and I can only just catch shapes as they move. Their movements are difficult to catch, and even more difficult to interpret. Like a gust of wind blowing a spider-thread, that only momentarily sparkles in the sunlight, so too do these people... "people..." flicker in and out of my vision.

I stop and stare hard at the road, and Willow looks at me in surprise.

"You can see them, then?"

The ghosts—if that's what they are—are so close to invisible that Willow looks solid, next to me. Her features, while vague and indistinct, are at least recognizable: flat blonde hair, thick eyebrows, rose-dusted lips. If Willow is a ghost, the figures below me are mere echoes.

"Yes, I can see them."

No snow melts on the echoes beneath me. They seem impervious to the weather, and to my presence fifteen feet above them, cocooned in yellow glass.

I continue my thought, "But they can't see me."

Willow sucks her teeth. "I don't know about that, but I'm sure you're no clearer to them than they are to you."

"Is everyone dead?" It suddenly strikes me that perhaps the glass is clear after all, and I'm witnessing the end of the world. Are these phantoms what's left of mankind? "Oh my god, is this nuclear winter?"

Willow laughs, "What? No! They're not dead. And neither are you. The labyrinth just has a way of clouding one's vision."

"What if we break the glass?" I say quietly, finally saying aloud what I've thought so many times in the past, and once attempted to do. "What if we smash this goddamn tunnel and jump down there. Fifteen feet onto concrete, that's a broken leg at worst."

Willow's smile turns down at the corners, a small hint of sadness. "It won't solve anything," she says. "You can't cheat your way out of here. You can't take a weed whacker and flee the cornfield, all you're going to find are more ears."

I'm not terribly disappointed—or surprised—by the answer. The maze has been strange enough to make me suspect that this might be the case.

"If you ran away, you'd find that every road is just as winding as this labyrinth's corridors," Willow says. "The streets will suddenly open into bridges, the city itself will be just as labyrinthine as these corridors. You'll find, before too long, that the 'shortcut' you sought to create was the only path that existed all along, that you're still in the labyrinth, that you're still looking for a way out."

"And the ghosts down there will melt like whispers as you get close. There's nothing tangible to touch, yet, because you won't have made it out. You'll realize that the snow doesn't feel as cold as it should, nor as wet."

Her grip tightens on my hand.

"You'll just be another ghost."

I return the squeeze, but my fingers sink through hers and I wind up balling my fist. I retract my hand and stare at the street for awhile longer. I fantasize about escaping.

And then I wonder about being a ghost in a maze. I wonder what I might be prepared to do, being lonely. Wouldn't I want to keep company, any company, close by for as long as possible, especially if all it cost me was a little white lie?

- 42 -

In my last years as a high-school student, I more-or-less lived with my grandmother.

I had chosen to live with my father, thinking that the "fun guy" persona he had carried during my youth would lead to more leniency in my home life. I'm sorry to say that I didn't even consider my mother very seriously as an option, having never grown accustomed to her stricter style of child rearing.

My father's humor deflated, after the divorce. He did not become much stricter, but he didn't become much of anything at all. His writing slowed to crawl and eventually stopped altogether. His speech, formerly filled with puns and non-sequiturs that spilled into amusing stories, now tapered off into oblivion before his sentences could conclude, as if his thoughts were no longer worth the effort of voicing.

He travelled frequently, though I think he was just looking to escape (though, what he was escaping, I don't think even he knew). He left me with his mother for a week at a time, while his car crept towards the airport, or back home where he could be alone.

My grandmother waved his car off, until it finally disappeared from the driveway, but the fingernails of her left hand, not lifted in farewell, pinched into the porch banister's faded blue paint. Her smile became a scowl when the car moved on. Once, she muttered, "Piece of shit."

I skulked into my grandmother's house, threw my duffel bags full of CDs and clothes, always black, onto the bed that I had long since come to think of as my own. I smuggled posters into her home adorned with pentagrams and fists throwing up the horns. I slathered them atop her inoffensive white wallpaper with its blue floral pattern. My grandmother never commented on the posters, but with every return visit her walls were once again tastefully stripped clean. I took this intrusion as a challenge, amping up their obscenities with every trip.

Strangely, my mother seemed to have a better relationship with her ex-mother-in-law after the divorce. She would visit, store-bought Danish sugar cookies in a tin container tucked under her arm, or perhaps some soup that she hadn't wanted to go to waste. My mother and my grandmother would sit side-by-side at the kitchen table, their heads tilted towards each other, forgotten cookies plated before them.

I hid from my mother, out of shame. I think. I would stay locked in my room after the obligatory greeting, her kiss on my forehead. I looked at the freshly ironed pinstripe suit she wore, the tie that I bitterly thought of as *mannish*. She arrived, once, wearing a new white-gold bracelet on her wrist, and a genuine smile on her lips.

My grandmother sucked on her teeth, then stared at my mother and pointedly asked, "Who's the man?"

My mother scowled at that, said she was capable of buying gifts for herself.

After each of my mother's visits, I would slink from my bedroom, and walk to the front door. I was unconscious of the act until my grandmother smacked my wrist with a spoon.

"Bloody waste," she snapped. "And I won't abide it. You, whipped dog, staring at the door handle, tail between your legs, whimpering. Oh, don't you snarl."

I folded my lips over my teeth and backed towards my bedroom, but she shook her head, angrier than I'd ever seen. She wielded her wooden spoon like a fencing epee and advanced.

"Get outside, catch some butterflies, pick a berry or help me mow the lawn, I don't want your shit any more than his and you have even less reason, she's coming to see you, you know."

My grandmother snarled in run-on sentences. I shrank under her tidal wave of words, and enough sank in that I felt ashamed.

"Come on," she said, grabbing my shirt sleeve. "We're building a birdhouse."

And we spent a strangely relaxing evening, doing just that.

When my mother next came to visit, I sat at the table with her and my grandmother, more cognizant of the smile that alighted on me most often. My grandmother gave her a tour of the birdhouse we'd built together (which no birds had moved into), of the lawn that I'd mown (made more enjoyable by a riding lawn mower), and of my sorry attempts at a tree fort (a wooden pallet, roped to a tree branch). My mother marveled at each as if I'd had a hand in the Taj Mahal.

We stood beneath my tree fort, the wood around us crowned yellow, fat leaves drifting down to the already crunchy forest floor. My grandmother threw her withered hands in the air, an act of mock incredulity, and said, "Oh cut the shit, Cynthy. It's not very good, Christ. A piece of wood in a tree." Then she stumped back into the house, leaving the two of us alone.

My mother didn't look at me. She looked up. And without a word, she kicked off her high heels and left them abandoned in the dewy grass as she began to climb. I followed, slowly, mutely. We sat atop the pallet, me in a black hoody, my mother in business attire.

The world around was painted yellow and gold, constructed of paper and wood. The fort was high enough to be surrounded by leaves, but not so high as to look over the other trees. Sitting up there, simple as it was in design, felt like sitting with my head under a blanket. My mother's presence reminded me of childhood, of her tenting my blanket above our heads while she read fiction novellas to me by flashlight.

We returned to my grandmother's house before the sun set, my hand in my mother's. My grandmother sat outside of the front door, asleep on her rocking chair. On the kitchen table, three cold mugs of herbal tea and a plate of my mother's store-bought cookies.

- 43 -

After the yellow bridge, our path fluctuates less. The floors, if not entirely clean, are better swept. We stop and rest, on the far side of the bridge. I pull my shoes off and massage my wounded feet, and I'm surprised when Willow does the same. Even more surprising is the lacerations on her heels, where the floor tiles carved gashes into her flesh.

She smiles at me and wiggles her bare toes. "I'm not immune to pain." She smiles. "I just don't bitch as much as you."

Guilty, I offer her my shoes, thinking that, ratty as they are, at least they're some protection. Willow rolls her eyes. "After our path has finally smoothed? My hero."

We walk down our new, gentler corridor. Generic artwork of monochromatic flora adorns the white plaster walls. The entire thing seems quaint, tame, and more than a little dull. The building reminds me of a dentist's office, or at least the hallway leading up to one, but no doors connect to our corridor.

I am still looking, I realize, for a way out. This hallway is as monotonous as it is endless, and even a crooked painting would be a welcome break from the tedium of the painfully inoffensive decorations that surround us.

I look at Willow, who walks calmly beside me, staring at the paintings. Her eyes are wide, her mouth open in admiration. I roll my eyes. God save us from the people who enjoy cookie-cutter paintings of blossoming flowers.

After an hour or so of walking, Willow swats my shoulder, and I'm suddenly cognizant of my loud humming. I suppose even my subconscious seeks to break the monotony. "Annoying," she says simply, and continues walking. I'm mildly offended, never having protested her quirks during our trek.

The corridor makes minutes feel like hours, and even Willow seems weary of the hallway's repetitiveness by the time we reach our next bridge. Wooden and rickety, the bridge is starkly out of place with our surroundings. The floor tiles end abruptly at the foot of the bridge, and the earth spills away beneath us. A white river pushes angrily down rapids, far below us.

I shake my head, mutter, "Fucking weird dentist's office," and put a cautious foot on the bridge. The ropes swing under my weight, and the wooden board creaks so alarmingly that I quickly step back.

"We're getting close, finally," Willow says. She points at the river, "That feeds into the river we traveled down with the boatman, which was so calm at that elbow of its life."

"What's the river called?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

I suppose it does not at that. "This bridge is the only way?"

"It's perfectly safe," Willow says. She steps out onto the bridge, and I hold my breath, only to exhale when it doesn't creak or even sway. But of course, ghosts don't weigh anything. It wouldn't be dangerous... for her.

"You're giving me that look again," Willow barks. "Ghosts don't feel pain, right? Or fear? Fuck you."

She turns around and walks, almost runs, across the bridge. It doesn't move, and there's no sound of her footsteps, just the quiet roar of water far below us. At the bridge's far side, she looks back at me. Then she carefully sits herself down, tugs her dress across her bare knees, and waits.

I loosen my tie and swallow fear, before placing my foot back on the bridge. Its far end is tethered to another office building, this one's surface covered entirely in reflective glass. The

building, though more modern in appearance than the building I'm leaving behind, reflects the facade of the old building back at me. The effect is disorienting, as if I'm walking backwards, or into a mountain made of funhouse mirrors. Though, I suppose anything is better than looking down.

Despite many threatening creaks, the wooden beams hold fast beneath me. As I reach its center, a gust of wind bucks the bridge and the beams lurch beneath me. I hold onto the knotty rope railing with the same iron-grip with which I clung to my Grandmother's fox trotter while learning to ride. I'm bent low to the bridge, my knees almost touching the wood, and I am suddenly uncomfortably aware of my bladder.

A second gust lifts the Stetson from my head and Willow and I both watch it drift into the valley below us. It takes more than twenty seconds to finally be swallowed by the river's white foam.

"Oh god," I whisper. I can't move.

And there's a hand on my shoulder. "Come on," Willow says in my ear. She pulls my left hand, then my right, from the bridge's rope railings, and gives me an encouraging smile. "Look down," she says. It seems like terrible advice.

Nevertheless, I look down. The water far below me bullies its way past rocks, smoothed and lichened by time. The water whips itself into white foam as it eddies downhill, and its passage, while quite loud, I'm sure—is still only a murmur up here. "Rocks and water," Willow says. "There's so many other things to be afraid of, it seems silly to chicken out over rocks and water." Then she whispers, "I won't let you fall."

It's not the pep talk that I would have made, but those last words lend me strength enough to take another tentative step, then two. Together, we creep across the bridge. Willow keeps her

eyes fastened to mine, her lips hooked in a smile. She doesn't seem perturbed that my every step sets the bridge swinging.

We reach the far side, and I drop to my knees, tears streaming down my face. Willow, still standing, pats me on the head like a child. "There now," she says. "You made it. And I guess I have to deal with your hat-hair for the rest of the journey."

- 44 -

Willow sleeps. I watch her through slitted eyes.

She lies against a wall of the corridor opposite me. She lies beneath my suit jacket, her arms pillowing her head. A small smile dusts her lips as she sleeps.

I mistrust that smile.

I mistrust these hallways that never seem to end, the decision to go left over right or right over left, this architecture that defies reason. I'm beginning to doubt that this maze has an end, or—if it does—that I will ever see it.

The building has traded the uninspired floral paintings of the last for an equally trite floral-print wallpaper. Blue vines stretch vertically up and down the wall every few inches, with small leaves and flowers budding from them. The pattern is unenlightening in its predictability.

The walls around us look uniform in their banality, and yet twenty feet away a mouth yawns onto a rope bridge and a monstrous chasm. These two worlds should not exist together. Everything since I met Willow has gone from bad to hellish.

And how does she know which way to go? Were I in Willow's position, I wonder if I wouldn't simply invent a path forward. The gap in my memory regarding my inception to this maze doesn't trouble me nearly as much as our inability to discover an exit.

Every denizen of this maze is lonely.

Behind us, the rope bridge creaks in a breeze I cannot feel, the rapids far below echo their ominous murmur up to where we lie. As we rest, the corridor gradually simmers into a bright, bloody red. I assume the sun must be setting, somewhere out of sight.

I cannot sleep. I pillow my head on my arms, eyes wide open, haunted by my paranoia. I keep craning my neck to peer behind me at the creaking bridge, expecting to see some massive

figure lurking on the far side, steeling itself to cross. But, no, I've yet to see any monster in this maze.

When Willow yawns awake, I haven't shut my eyes for longer than thirty seconds. She squints at me and asks, "Did you sleep?"

I sit up and nod. I wonder if my eyes are bloodshot and betraying me.

"I have some chips, if you're hungry."

I stare at her in disbelief. "Food?" I croak. "Where did you find food?"

"The train platform. Two vending machines, or didn't you see them?"

"I would kill for a piece of pork tenderloin," I say. "Real food. Steamed asparagus with a spoonful of butter melting on it. A mountain of potatoes—real potatoes—in a lake of gravy."

"I have Lay's Original."

I nod and Willow hands me the crinkling bag, even as I think, *she's lying*. I don't remember any vending machines. And I certainly didn't see her lugging a bag of potato chips around since we left the train behind.

"We'll have more choices, up ahead," she says. I nod, still wrapped in my thoughts, so Willow presses on, "We're almost at the woods I mentioned. I'm afraid this leg is always rough."

"We're indoors."

Willow nods. "These are the outskirts." She runs her hand across the wallpaper we lean against. "You'll see what I mean."

"Any chance that this wood is actually an orchard? Or maybe we'll find some wild blueberries on the path?"

Willow cocks her head to the side. "The trees are all strangled by vines, and these vines do have fruits growing on them. I wouldn't be inclined to try them, but you can help yourself, if you're still so inclined once you've seen them."

"Are they poisonous."

"Are you hungry now? You've mentioned food a lot."

"No," I say, tossing the empty chip bag away. "But eating makes me feel normal in a way that nothing else in this backwards-ass world does."

Willow sighs and retrieves the trash from the floor. "Well, I don't know if the fruits are edible. I haven't tried. But I have broken a thorn from the vines, and I would advise you against touching them if you can help it."

"Poison sumac?"

Willow stands up and stretches, then holds out a hand with which to hoist me up too. "Is sumac a plant?"

"My Grandmother had some growing in her backyard, once. White flowers, green leaves with wavy edges. The top of the leaf is darker than the bottom. Even the twigs cause pretty severe wounds."

"Thorns?"

"No, I don't think so."

Willow begins walking away from the rope bridge. Fluorescent lights above us illuminate our path as we leave the natural red light behind. Willow runs a finger across the wallpaper as she walks beside me. "I don't know what this plant is, but its thorns are sharp. It doesn't have flowers and it doesn't cause a rash. But it doesn't like being tampered with." As I watch, Willow absently lifts her hand to trace the scar on her palm.

"And they grow this in an atrium? Is it a weed?"

"There isn't an atrium in here," Willow says. She skips her finger over each vine on the wallpaper pattern, like someone skipping cracks in the pavement as they walk. "Let's just say that you've never *really* met wallflowers before now."

- 45 -

I found my grandmother in the garden, kneeling in the mud, her thick gloves cradling a deformed cucumber. She looked down at it, then up at me, then spoke the words that began our nuclear arms race: "Next, I'm planting kholrabi."

I'd idled some hours away in the garden, but not until I felt the effects of my grandmother's threat did I take to the task earnestly. Maybe even obsessively.

My grandmother had bequeathed unto me a small plot, five square feet, at the edge of her garden, which I could neglect or tend as I saw fit. I had free reign of her tool shed and her fertilizers and she promised to provide me with seeds for each passing season. She pressed three seed packets into my hands that first crop, told me to take my pick: radishes, iceberg lettuce, wax beans.

"Plant your favorite." She winked. "We'll add it to the supper menu."

So I opted for none of the above. Instead, I raided the sack of seed potatoes that she kept sitting in the shed. My thought process was myriad: french fries, potato chips, thanksgiving day gravy volcanoes, or maybe just ammunition for a potato gun. What entertainment could wax beans offer me?

I buried the tubers twelve inches apart in holes twelve inches deep, not realizing that I was firing the first round.

My grandmother was pleased to see me take to gardening, and soon we toiled side-by-side beneath the sweltering orange sun while she endeavored to gift me her green thumb. For weeks we watered, weeded, and talked together.

Then I murdered her cucumbers.

Potatoes, I hadn't realized, need a more acidic soil to flourish. Cucumbers, need basic soil. While cucumbers made fine bedfellows with the seeds my grandmother had given me, they'd been poisoned by the neighbors I'd covertly introduced. Before too long, I harvested my fat, golden potatoes, while my grandmother's cucumbers remained pickle-sized and Frankensteinian.

The next spring, my grandmother's vengeance grew bulbous. I'd planted neat rows of peppers, while my grandmother sprinkled her promised kohlrabi seeds into the cold earth. A few short weeks after germination, her first harvest was already underway and she planted another crop of kohlrabi, while I waited patiently to pick my vegetables in a couple months' time.

My peppers never saw the summer. Sapped dry by the kohlrabi, my pepper plants grew stunted and barren. My grandmother entered the house, soon after I uprooted my botched crop, and plunked her basketful of perennials on the table in front of me.

"Well." She smiled. "At least one of us reaped what they sowed."

It took two more failed crops of mine to realize that my grandmother's sabotage was intentional. She donned her sunhat and thick gloves, put on a pair of sun bleached jeans and long sleeves, and ventured out to our small corner of garden with me. We watered, weeded, and talked together, all while she poisoned my plot of land.

My revenge took the form of pumpkins. My grandmother pestered me to provide her with my latest potential failure, but I purchased a packet of jack o' lantern seeds with my allowance money and planted them while she grocery shopped. Not knowing what revenge I'd plotted, my grandmother shored up with spinach—every crop's best friend.

My pumpkins swelled, consumed my patch of earth. They laid siege to the 2x4s that contained my tiny plot. I watered daily, fertilized weekly, and coaxed my plants on with tales of

revenge and stories about their soft and fragile neighbors, the rich soil that would be the spoils of war. With every passing week, my vines inched inexorably onward. Soon, it was not only my immediate neighbors who felt my ire, but their neighbors as well. The vines stretched ten feet, then twenty. My pumpkins engulfed the spinach and the peas beside that.

My grandmother found the prank hilarious. When my crop finally ripened, we stood looking out at the blanket of broad green leaves and ballooning orange fruit, and at all of her vegetables that lay embedded beneath those tendrils.

"I yield," she chuckled. "Now. What are we going to do with your bloody pumpkin apocalypse?"

That thanksgiving, my grandmother toasted any feud both brutal and bloodless. Over our mashed potato volcanoes and pumpkin pie, we discussed strategies to continue our war once the frost thawed.

- 46 -

The vine pattern of the wallpaper gradually bubbles out as we walk. The patterns on the walls, at first reedy and straight, begin to thicken and wind as they emerge from the white background. The patterns take on life, their roots slowly leaving the wall to creep along the tiled floor and ease between cracks. Tendrils creep overhead, and the light becomes choked in places where the vines latch greedy fingers onto the plastic covers that shield us from the fluorescent bulbs.

Above us, small grape-like clusters of fruits also dangle from the ceiling. Their coloration is that of watermelons, but they sport the same spikes on their rinds that the vines do. The vines remind me of some sinister strain of wild cucumber. Willow suggests that I try one and tell her what they taste like, but I politely decline.

The walls ripple as their straight surface areas adopt the curvature of tree trunks. Gradually, the spaces between these trunks widen enough for me to fit my hand through, and it makes me think uncomfortably of a prison cell, with thick bars separating me from the promise of freedom. But the spaces between the trunks widen just enough so I can see similar trees marching on endlessly behind the ranks that hem us in, and no more. Even with an axe I'd have to chop through dozens or hundreds of trees before I could hope to escape.

I'm further discouraged from escaping into this wood by the vines, now thick as anacondas, which strangulate the trees. Two-inch long black thorns jut from these like a medieval palisade, and I suddenly understand Willow's caution against disturbing them. Some older, pallid vines are even being asphyxiated by younger ones, still blue in their infancy.

Willow and I walk in single file to put as much space between us and the thorns as possible. The path is treacherous, choked by roots as thick as my leg. Willow stumbles once or twice, but manages to stay upright. I, however, catch my foot on a particularly knotty root and go

catapulting into her, her only warning a strangled yelp that's cut short as I collide against her back.

I wrap my arms over my eyes as I fall, expecting to feel the wall's cruel thorns bite into me. I hit the vinous ground hard, my right hip breaking my fall and I gasp as the impact knocks the breath from my lungs. Willow, somewhere to my left, cries out.

When I stop shaking, however, I seem to be intact. My right side will bruise, but I remain unpunctured. Looking over, however, Willow is not. I stand up shakily and pick my way across the roots to where she sits, head down, favoring her left arm.

"Fucking," she says. I'm sure there's more to the insult (I assume it's an insult), but the rest tapers off as she clenches her teeth against the pain. Her left eye is closed again a trickle of blood that spills from a cut in her forehead, down beside her nose and across her cheek. More serious is the shoulder wound: a deep gash ripped from her armpit to the top of her shoulder blade paints her arm in a waterfall of red.

"Christ," I mutter. "We need a tourniquet. Maybe one of these vines..."

"Goddamn fucking shoulder, you bastard," Willow moans, but she still manages to roll her eyes at my ineptitude. With her right hand, she yanks the scarf from around her neck, holds it out. "Help me."

After a moment's hesitation, I do as she asks. It is my fault, after all. I tie the scarf to her shoulder as tightly as possible, while she tries to wipe the blood from her eye with the heel of her right hand. She also spits blood onto the floor beside her, though more leaks onto her lips from her head wound.

"Sorry," I say.

"You're walking in front!" Willow bites back, apparently not in a forgiving mood.

Willow shakes as she stands to her feet, but pushes me away when I offer her my arm for support. She takes a step forward, before motioning me in front. "Ugh. My shirt is ruined."

"Remember," she says through teeth clenched against the pain. "It's not like I have to be here."

- 47 -

Though the air is cool and humid, the very real threat of skewering myself on the passageway wall makes me sweat. Willow waves off my slick palms, choosing to place some distance between us lest I cause anymore cataclysms. We move slowly, with me in front, while she remains a safe distance behind.

When we reach the first fork in the wood, Willow calls a brief rest. One path continues on straight ahead, the other leads to the right and quickly winds out of sight.

"It's right," Willow says. "It's a little more unpleasant than straight ahead, and it gets narrow in places, but we have to go right."

"Let's try going straight instead," I say.

Willow scowls. "Help yourself." She waves me off down the corridor. "I'm going to sit for a minute. I'm dizzy."

I sit down beside her. "Right is fine. We'll go right."

The choices become more frequent after that. Very soon, we come to a crossroads with four possible paths, and Willow sets off down the left one without even explaining her rationale. I hesitate. When she's left me thirty paces behind, she turns around and stamps her foot. "Let's get out of this goddamn wood. I don't really care to be impaled again."

"That's the path?"

"No, but the thorns along this corridor are particularly lovely this time of the year."

Willow turns on her heel and continues walking. I reluctantly follow.

The ceiling of the path that she's chosen begins sloping downward, and at a certain point Willow and I are forced to squirm over the root network on our bellies to avoid the thorns

overhead. My right side aches as I squash my freshly bruised flesh against more jagged terrain, but Willow doesn't say a word about her shoulder, so I bite back my complaints.

When we can at last stand back up, Willow stops for a moment to adjust her makeshift bandage. The wound has reopened, and she pulls off her mourning veil as if that might help soak up the blood.

I unwrap the tie from around my neck and hand it to her. "Pink isn't really my color," I say, but Willow doesn't even smile at the joke.

We soon come to another four way branch, identical to the last. "Left again," she says.

I squint down the right and center paths. "Why?"

"We can't do this at every goddamn intersection!" she snaps. "You followed me, remember? I told you the path wasn't easy. You want to take an alternate, be my guest."

"What I mean..." I trail off. "That last fork. It curved. It felt like... isn't this the same crossroad?"

"No. It's not. It's a labyrinth. Things sometimes look the same." So saying, Willow stomps off down the left hand passage, making more noise than necessary as she traverses the treacherous roots.

I follow reluctantly, and say nothing more when she picks two more turns that make little sense to me. I only speak up again when we come to a fork that demands we choose left or right, and the right hand side is easily the gentler of the two.

"Honestly," she says. "My shoulder is *killing* me. I just want to get out of this wood and see if I can find somewhere to wash the cut. And the quickest way that I know is left."

"I'm a little skeptical—" I stop. I'm raising my voice. "I just don't see how anyone can claim to have memorized a layout as fucked up as all this."

Willow hesitates and I'm elated. This is it. I've caught her in the lie.

"I'm a guide," she says. "But you're not exactly wrong. This place isn't the same for any two people who walk it. I was really hoping we'd be out of this wood by now, honestly."

Willow looks at me, a lock of blood-crusted hair obscuring one of her eyes. For a moment, the other reflects the pain she's in, but then steels as I stare back. "But I've been here for a hell of a lot longer than you. You could do worse than listen to my advice."

"Advice? Christ, you've been spoon-feeding it to me like the gospel!" I point to the right. "Look, you can see the trees thinning. The floor is practically pitfall free." I swing my hand to the left, where the thorny walls squeeze into the corridor, and the ceiling threatens to dip low once more. "And you want to go down there?"

Willow sucks her teeth again, a habit that is quickly grating on my nerves. "It's the way forward," she sighs.

"Your way. I'm going to try my luck." I begin walking. Now Willow hesitates, and I wonder if my earlier suspicion wasn't right. She wants my company. That's all I am to her, another human being.

"Wait." Willow says behind me.

I stop. "Why?"

Willow's voice, annoyed. "I said, 'do you want me to wait.' What if it's a dead end?"

"If it isn't, you'll be waiting for a while." I keep walking.

I follow the path for another ten seconds before glancing back down the corridor. When I look back, Willow is gone.

- 48 -

Lunch at my grandmother's was whole grain bread in a wicker basket, slices of salami and patties of bologna, cubed cheddar cheese, tomato wedges, quartered pickles, Becel margarine coiled by an ice-cream scoop into a glass dish, a flask of French's mustard, a vase of Hellmann's mayonnaise, and whatever hard candy I could smuggle from the glass jar in the pantry without her noticing. I eschewed the sandwich I was obviously intended to construct, suckling each ingredient separately, swallowing, moving on. Even the butter got sampled, its saltiness complimenting the crusty bread that I'd swallowed mere moments before.

A thicket of raspberry bushes oppressed the kitchen-side window. Perched on the edge of my seat, two pickles tucked under my upper lip like vampire fangs, I watched the butterflies that flitted between the lawn's dandelions and the raspberry bushes. My fingers itched, shredded napkins into confetti, twitched into the vice-like grasp with which I held my bug net. After lunch (after every lunch) I would bunker beneath the raspberry bushes, crawling on toes and fingertips to avoid the thorns overhead, ambush butterflies with a savage war shout and a flourishing net.

Occasionally, I caught one.

From a young age, I delighted in the awesome destructive power of the magnifying glass. That focused speck of sunlight, my theophany, would hover over insects, bestowing upon them my heavenly gaze until their thoraxes split and sizzled.

My techniques had become more refined, with age. A butterfly net and a thin syringe of formaldehyde. Net pinned to the ground, monarch or painted lady contained within its silken web, I constricted the net's free space with a hand, until the butterfly was robbed of any room in which to struggle. The tricky part was pinching its thorax between thumb and forefinger, wings behind its back, so as not to damage the specimen.

There's an irony in that, I suppose.

The needle slipped in effortlessly, the syringe slowly draining into the insect. Then I cradled it, cradled it until it went still.

Relaxing the butterfly's corpse involved humidity and a sealed glass jar. Slowly its wings would soften, splay wide, reveal the butterfly's decadent gown. I would gently tumble the insect from its jar, onto a styrofoam plank, beside a tray of pins.

The pinning process was meditative. I eased the wings apart with forceps. I was careful never to touch them, lest the scales be scraped off and the corpse's beauty marred. The body fastened to the styrofoam with an unobtrusive spike through its center. The pins placed just so they force the wings apart without penetrating them. My painted lady on her canvas.

Then I'd go outside, and find more victims for my macabre display. My grandmother watched me from the kitchen window as my net smacked into the lawn.

Whenever I caught something, I looked up at her and I smiled.

- 49 -

My hopes of an early end to the wood are short lived. Soon, the thicket once more threatens me from all sides, the trees constricting my space. I turn sideways, and inch forward shoulder-first. At its tightest, the thorns dig into my suit jacket and I'm forced to wriggle awkwardly free from it, and leave it crucified behind me.

Concentrating as I am on the dangers around me, I don't even notice the ceiling's disappearance until I feel the first cold fingers of rain-water trickled down my neck. I look up and the water splashes into my eyes. The trees send spiky black fingers across the sky above me, with only the sparsest break in the canopy revealing the soupy grey sky. Each thorny fruit has swelled to the size of a large pumpkin, and they sway ominously from their branches overhead. Should one fall on me, I'm dead. All I can do is press on and hope they remain in place.

The wood around me whispers with the sound of dripping water. I can't move my arms enough to cover my head, so I'm forced to endure every frozen rivulet that slides onto my hair and down my back. My lower lip begins quivering from cold and I wonder if I might die of hypothermia, here, in this godless place. I imagine crucifying myself in a bloody end, the force of an involuntary sneeze impaling me.

I kneel down onto the damp earth and I begin to crawl. So much for my easier road. The thorns at waist level have now reached across the path, probing the empty air with their sinister nails. Even crawls on my belly, the black leaves brush wet trails down my back. I suddenly realize that I won't be able to turn around, should I be forced to. Either this forest or I will have to break.

The roots underneath, scraping into my belly, force me upward. The branches, looming above, force me downward. I'm holding my breath, hoping that it makes me skinnier, that I

might crawl through the thicket. Until my stomach gives a sudden rumble of hunger. Then I begin to laugh. Hunger. Of course that would be my body's concern. I lie there, face pressed against the wet roots, laughing for long minutes. I think I hope that the sound will dispel my fear, but it doesn't. When the laughter dries up, I remain cold, wet, and lonely.

I miss Willow.

I continue to crawl. Twenty feet later, I'm granted enough room to lift myself up on my hands and knees, and twenty feet after that I can once again stand upright. The trunks around me are still packed densely, but there always seems to be a path for me to follow and, to my enormous relief, it seems to be getting easier.

Until I round a corner, and face nothing but a wall of vines. I walk as close to it as I dare and peer into the trunks all around me, but I see no end to the trees and no other road. How appropriate, to find a dead end in the forest that's going to kill me.

- 50 -

My first reaction to my predicament, and easily the least helpful, is to sit down and cry. Tears splash down my cheeks to mingle with the rain-soaked roots and leaves. When my tears run out, I stare unhappily at the dead end and wait for something to change. Nothing does.

Agonizing minutes pass before I pick myself up from the ground and begin to probe the wall in front of me. The vines are still a threat, but the thorns on them are spaced far enough apart that unless I fall into them, I shouldn't be in any immediate danger. I find a rivulet of water trickling down from a vine, and try to quench my thirst on it. The vine lends the rainwater a bitter taste.

Going back, I decide, is impossible. The journey was already too harrowing, never mind trying it twice. I'd sooner hack my way through the spike-infested forest with my bare hands than brave that claustrophobic passage again.

The voice of doubt ringing in my head says, *Willow went that way.*

Willow left, I remind myself. And now I can't very well follow. I walk closer to the vinous wall blocking my path, and I grip one of the wicked thorns in my right hand. I rip it violently from the vegetation. Then I stumble back, as the vine moans out.

The sound that I took for the whispering of water rises all around me and the vines seem to quiver with the noise. And from the vine that I've desecrated, a low voice dripping with self-pity says, "You know the words. So why do it?"

"I—" No. I'm not going to start talking to trees. I'm not going mad.

From the plucked thorn oozes a thick sap as red as blood. I drop the thorn I'm holding.

"I'm all around you," the plant says. "I'm the roots beneath your feet and the walls hemming you in. I'm the canopy overhead, I'm the curtain before the gate. Embrace me and be done with it."

"The curtain..."

At my repetition the voice falls silent, so I fill the emptiness with my words instead. "If it's only a curtain that separates me from the path, I suppose that's easy enough to rectify."

I pluck up the thorn from where I let it drop. I'm disconcerted to see that it, too, is bleeding, but I'm suddenly resolved. I wield the thorn like a scythe and bring it sweeping through the vinous growth.

Around me, the woods scream in protest.

I stab, saw and slice at vines thicker than my leg. "Stop, stop, stop!" the plant howls, but I continue to hack away, heedless of its cries. The other thorns quiver violently beside my hands, but I'm too careful to be pricked by the plant. However, as the vines slither to the ground, they writhe like a squid's tentacles, and one slices neatly through my calf as I labor away. I cry out at the wound and kick the vine away, but don't pause in my endeavor. Soon, both the vine's sap and my blood stain the forest floor red.

I roar as I cut through the final tendril with its own vicious spike. The last vine then falls to the forest floor, and the wood around me falls utterly silent save for the sound of water trickling from leaf to root. It almost sounds like weeping. I stab the thorn deep into a trunk beside the hole I've carved, and am granted sadistic satisfaction when the wood shudders.

I've cut away an entrance. The curtain of thorns has been replaced with a curtain of dripping red sap. I wipe my sticky, stained hands down onto my wet shirt, then I duck through the opening I've created.

Then, from behind me, I hear the thud of hooves walking slowly over tree roots. Fear lances up my throat, but my rational mind recalls the tight spaces I crawled through to reach this point. "Impossible," I mutter. The leaves around me ripple in a sound reminiscent of laughter.

The path ahead slopes downhill, and the vine's sap has already traced a crimson line between the roots for me to follow. I walk quickly, the roots slick beneath my feet. The walls here are broad. Unless I trip and fall, there should be no risk of impalement. The sound of hoof steps follows me as I race through the forest corridor.

I've broken into a run, when I finally slip and fall. I slide by the boles of trees, roots digging into my bag, red sap and rain-water run beside and beneath me. I splay my arms out as I'm carried downhill, desperate to catch myself on a root before I am crucified along with my suit jacket on the laughing vines. I scream, but even over that I can hear the hoof prints bearing down on me from behind.

Ahead, the wood suddenly drops away. There is a river, there, and across the water lies a city... a city exactly like that I'd seen from the windows of all the glass bridges before. Spanning the river is a bridge made of glass and red steel, and as I slide I see that it lies directly before me. I no longer try to stop myself. I skid down the hill on my ass, feeling holes open up in the thin fabric of my pants. When the ground levels out, I spring to my feet and sprint the final meters.

I run to the city that I thought I'd been escaping. I don't look back.

- 51 -

As a child, I saw faces in my Grandmother's stuccoed ceilings and the grain of the wooden walls in her basement. I created constellations from the dots and whorls, invented heroes, and then wove stories for those heroes from the patterns that I saw.

Out of doors, those stories spilled into the sky to become shapes in the clouds or actual constellations in the sky. I could identify Orion and the Big Dipper, but a belt and a ladle did little to entrance me, when I could weave sea serpents and river goddesses out of the pinpricks of light. I saw the world as a canvas, colored in with ink dot paintings, and the world that I engaged with seemed more vibrant than the one inhabited by those around me.

The images were entrancing, at least in part because of their impermanence. I could never seem to find the same picture twice. So a section of stucco that looked like a wise man with a crooked beard, became a crescent moon the next time I searched for him.

The wallpaper on my grandmother's main level offered little to distract me. Blue vines laden with blue leaves stretched up its length, and there were no faces in that dull, predictable pattern. In my bedroom or in her living room, I could only construct meaning from the chaos of her stuccoed ceiling.

I only told my grandmother about the stories when I was very young, when she would chuckle and probe me for further elaboration. And, when I was done, if my story had been particularly compelling, she would erect an easel and give me one of her cheaper canvases to deface.

"Draw it first," she said. "The shapes and the lines."

Inevitably, I would press too hard on the fabric, my pencil puncturing the canvas as I futilely sought to recreate the masterpieces her ceiling contained.

"Paint it the way you just described," she said afterwards. "The deep jade of a leaf with lime veins running through it. Paint your forest one tree at a time."

Inevitably, I grew too impatient, my brushstrokes speeding up as I mangled my vision more and more. My hands were not dexterous enough to contain my imagination.

My grandmother worked on her landscapes beside me, and when I looked over I seethed with jealousy at the golden ears of corn and the pretzel-thin telephone poles piercing a clear blue sky. My grandmother's paintings, so much more vivid than my memories of corn mazes and road trips.

My grandmother hung up my childish ink splatters around the house, on the walls with the most sunlight, the most visibility, the most exposure. She tucked her own paintings onto stairwells, hung them up behind doors. When she decided that her walls were too cluttered, she stored the paintings behind the sofa.

I saw the disappointment well up in my grandmothers eyes when I told her that I wouldn't paint anymore, that imagination was enough for me. Eventually, however, I even grew tired of the stucco stories. I would lie in bed and hunt through the grainy patterns above me, but no matter how earnestly I searched I could only ever find one parent in the ceiling.

- 52 -

Curved glass plating overhead protects me from the rain pattering the panes, though the bridge is open to the sides and occasional gusts of wind still spray me. Ferrari red steel beams rib the bridge's sides, knit the glass together.

The bridge arcs like a caterpillar crawling over a branch, its body pulled up in the center as if to escape the river it straddles. The water flows slowly beneath me, white ridges on a belt of black, moving too fast to reflect the night sky. The water beneath the city reflects the street and buildings lights as an abstract blur of color—red, yellow, white—swirling together, dripping away with the current.

Wet hands in wet pockets, I shiver as I trudge forward. I curse the weather, but thank god for the caterpillar bridge. Hail flecks the rain, batters the glass. I quicken my pace in a futile attempt to elude the adverse weather. This bridge is made for cars, but no cars are on it. Even so, I walk on the sidewalk. The tarmac and glass glisten under a thin sheen of rainwater, they smell of earthworms and the river.

There's been no sound of pursuit since I stepped onto the bridge, so now I think only of escaping the elements. The cold rain whips from left to right, sluicing through the bridge's partial cover. I pluck my hands from my pockets, hug my arms to my body as the damp sticks to my skin. My black pants are soaked through, my white shirt a second skin, my shoes are waterlogged and refrigerating my feet. The rain feels like autumn, but I can see snow still sticking to the world around me.

Looking down at the dark water, I wonder if that's the boatman's river. If that's the river that Willow and I crossed on the rickety bridge. Sorrow overwhelms me as I remember our

parting, and I wonder why I couldn't simply follow her to the left. What did the right hand path yield me? Heartache and hardship.

When I finally step off of the caterpillar bridge, I head directly for the shelter of a bus shelter. Because the city streets are empty, I watch for any sign of the shades that I saw from the bridge with Willow, but either the street is truly bare or else I cannot see them amidst the rain. I seem to be alone.

I lie on the bus shelter bench and I shiver, while behind me the caterpillar bridge curls its body into itself to avoid the rain. I watch it steaming in the glow of street-lights as the day's sun, preserved in red metal, is eaten away by the cold.

I close my eyes. I think I sleep.

- 53 -

I wake up, damp and shivering, cocooned only by cold steel and an advertisement for cologne on the bus stop's wall. I sit in an island, while outside, the streets pool with a winter slush, and the rain has turned to sleet.

The city streets are emptier than an apocalypse. A *Metro News* lies waterlogged beside the trash can, a tattered shoe braces against the gutter, a squashed Starbucks Grande paper cup swirls on a small stream down the street. I exit the bus shelter to pick them all up and throw them out, thinking it's what Willow would want.

Then I lay down again, ready to give up and die of hypothermia, but as my eyes blink shut I notice that the shelter's glass is fogged over. There, drawn in the fog before my face, is a happy face. Beneath that, an arrow pointing on.

"W-willow," I stutter through my chilled lips, and find the energy to rouse myself. I realize that I've been resting my head on the scarf that she took with her, but I'm too frozen and too lost to question this place any further. I wrap the scarf around my neck and stand up.

I pause in the bus shelter's entryway. The rain outside sounds like hoofs clattering against asphalt. I can hear the wind's heavy breath, like an animal's snort, and the clap of horseshoes on stone. I can't see anything but ice and rain, punishing the earth before me. The rain roams around the shelter like a bloodhound, or a bull.

I look again at the smiley face. And I step out into the elements.

The rain flogs me with every ragged step I take. Even the air I breathe chills me, and with every cloud of steam I exhale I worry that I've seen the last of my body heat. I trudge through the empty streets that mother nature seems intent on turning into another river.

I walk for some minutes before I lose the strength to go on. Looking up, I see the outline of one of the glass bridges through the rain, so I slip down the street and stumble towards its shadow. Once underneath it, I'm no warmer, but I'm granted a small reprieve from the rain that is now spilling straight down.

I angle myself under a corner of the bridge, so that I can watch the sky for any sign of alleviation. I hug my knees to my chest. I rub my arms with prune hands, attempt to rediscover warmth. *Well, I think grimly, this is what I wanted. I'm free of the glass bridges.*

I look back up at the bridge, only to see the minotaur looking down. My gasp of horror rises as a fog before my face, but I'm too cold and weary to do anything more than try and shrink further into the shadows. Though I can only see its shadow through the curtain of rain, there's no mistaking its human legs, nor the horns jutting from its head. I see it for only an instant, before it steps further from the window and out of sight.

Thorny forests. Monsters. Hypothermia. One way or another, the maze would find a way to exterminate me. I may as well sit back and let it happen.

And even as I think that, I see the train approaching. The stormy weather had disguised the tracks that I'd been walking along. I'm huddled on the sidewalk now, well away from the tracks, and I'm mildly surprised that the maze didn't see fit to send it while I was at its mercy.

The train begins to pass: white, red, and grey. Its metal arms feel their way along a series of cables overhead, while its wheels chew into the tracks—

I look up and there's Willow. She stares out from the train, a smile on her lips, though her eyes are sad. She's drawn a happy face into the fog of the window. As I watch, her window comes level with me and then speeds by, but not before she can point at something. Something

behind me, something beneath the bridge. Then she turns away, as if speaking to someone else in the train.

I unfold myself from the wall and crawl over to where she pointed. There, set into the wall, is a door. I open it and walk in without question.

- 54 -

My grandmother wasn't old until my grandfather died. She claimed he would recover, right until the final breath rattled from his throat. The adventure left her eyes after that. She didn't plan any more trips to Japan or Africa. She didn't bring back anymore owl souvenirs.

She was smaller, now, than she had been in my youth. She shuffled from room to room where once her stride was long and urgent. Her hands shook as she reached her arms around me for a hug. Even as a man grown, I was reminded of my childhood self thinking, *she smells old*.

The house needed dusting, the lawn needed trimming, the garden needed to be re-sown. My grandmother, never one to sit idle, attempted to do these things, but quickly grew fatigued before the task could be completed, needed to go lie down. When I came to visit her, I arrived in a world half-finished: a clean countertop beside a sink filled with dishes, a stripe of shaven lawn amidst a jungle of green, a single row of bean sprouts while weeds took over the rest.

I would drive out to see her weekly, and then biweekly as my life became busier. I would help her with the chores when I did, while she insisted that her life had calmed down and that she was feeling much better, really, and could help.

After the manual labor we sat side-by-side in her living room. She talked about this trip that she planned to book and that painting that she planned to create, while I sipped tea beside her and nodded along. She would often fall asleep before I left, so I sat perfectly still and let her snore against my shoulder. Only after she fell asleep did I let myself cry over the chunks of missing hair and the unnaturally yellowed skin.

When she awoke, minutes or hours later, my eyes were always dry.

- 55 -

I wish I had a warm drink. Hot coffee, even though I hate it. Better still would be Johnny Walker, straight-up.

The gnarled hand juts from the wall and I run the pink of my fingertips over the lapis lazuli of the other's. The fingers feel like ice cubes. If I had a glass of grandma's homebrew, I'd break them off and swill them around, watch them slowly evaporate into oily trails in amber. Macabre thoughts.

I don't break the fingers off, because they belong to the hand, and the hand belongs to the shadow frozen in the ice. The shadow whose face I cannot see. Maybe, I think, maybe it's the last poor sap that Willow tried to lead. Maybe this is me, when the next pilgrim comes around.

All around me, the ice-people are frozen mid-dance. One on the left has both legs off the ground, as if jumping or flying or falling. The ice cloaks its features in greys and blacks and blues. Another on the right is upside down, its fingers outstretched and clinging to the ground, its legs frozen upwards.

I shiver violently as I slip down the hallway. Rippling silver light illuminates my bath from somewhere behind the ice. Whether due to aurora borealis or faulty wiring, the shapes of the figures frozen there dance as that light plays behind them.

The cold weighs as heavy as honey on my tongue. I smell copper when I breathe through my nose. I hold my jacket up to my mouth, but even this would-be source of warmth is now frost rimmed. I spew my hot breath out in quivering clouds.

The path is straight. The floor, like the walls, are made of ice, and even in their pearlescent depths I can see vaguely human shapes frozen in place. Casualties, I think, of some

forgotten ice age and cruel winters. Casualties of avalanches and glacial slides. Casualties of this maze.

Perhaps I will join them, when I cannot walk any longer.

Though the path is straight, the going is treacherous. The floor knocks my feet out from under me twice as I stumble down it. In these moments, I lie against the frozen floor and will myself to get up, wondering if this time my body won't listen. I lie with the silver light dancing across my face and then slowly, slowly I rise to my feet.

It is not only the ice that gives me trouble. A breeze blows past me through the tunnel, and that breeze only intensifies as I carry on. It is a cold wind. A Canadian wind. It bites viciously into my wet clothing. I imagine that, far away, I can hear the flapping of gigantic wings fanning this wind towards me.

The odd appendage, like the frozen hand, emerges from the ice. I push myself from one to the next, tracking my progress through the body parts I've passed. I touch the pieces as I move forward, steadying myself with this helping hand, this leg up. I apologize to the bodies for using them so irreverently, but I do not stop. I do not slow down.

Even when the wall of ice rises before me, I don't hesitate as I begin to climb.

- 56 -

I surprise myself when I first lift my bedraggled body up the wall. I surprise myself further when I exhibit the willpower to keep going. The wall slopes subtly as I ascend, but it is so steep that it may as well be a 90° climb.

I treat the ice like a climbing wall, save that I have no safety harness and no spotter waiting below. The ice is also perfectly smooth, so I rest my feet and hands on those who lie buried beneath me. I stand on a pair of frozen feet, and then haul myself slowly up with the help of elbow. Only through their contributions am I able to push on.

Somehow, I manage to keep climbing. I'm not sure why I don't fall, gripping frozen handholds with frozen fingers. Still, the silver light slowly shrinks below me. I rise ten meters. Then twenty. Thirty.

Then the splayed hand that I'm clinging to snaps off. I'm airborne. My fingers claw at the ice, but can't seem to find any purchase that will slow my descent. I laugh in that moment, at the absurdity of this death, and wonder if I'll be the first step up this slope for the next sorry individual to be trapped in this maze. I close my eyes as the cold wind rushes by me.

Then I'm brought to a jarring halt. My left shoulder screams in its socket as all of my weight rests in it, and I feel my watch scrape a burning trail onto my hand. I look up. My flailing descent somehow managed to hook my wristwatch on a frozen thumb, sticking from the wall.

As if from a long way off, I remember Willow beside me on a rickety wooden bridge. *I won't let you fall.*

I laugh again, but this time out of maniacal relief. When I find my footing, I pry my arm from between the feet, and raggedly continue my climb. I put as little strain on my shoulder as possible, uncertain whether it's simply sore or wholly dislocated.

The climb and adrenaline have warmed me past the point of shivering, but I still feel every breath I take like a needle in my chest. A wet tickle in my throat tells me that hypothermia isn't far away. I barely notice my wet clothing now, but that's probably a bad sign too.

When I reach the top of the ice wall, I collapse in relief and exhaustion. I laugh for the third time in my ascent, but this time the laugh transforms into a wet cough before it's through. I start to shiver again. But I made it. One more hurdle down. What's next?

The answer lies before me: a slide. The ice that I've so laboriously climbed now wends back down in a smooth slide to the bottom. While I can still see figures frozen in the ice, it doesn't look as if the descent will be harried by their upthrust limbs.

I sit on the edge of the slide, remembering a ramp that I built up to my grandparent's rooftop and the snow bank that I jumped into afterwards. I push myself off, because it almost doesn't matter what awaits me below.

- 57 -

Walking through my grandmother's house feels wrong in my adult body. I'm a child, here. I'm a teenager. In none of these tales am I a man grown.

The stairwell creaks as I wander upstairs towards the bedrooms: the master and the one that I still think of as mine. One of her paintings hangs in the stairwell, a painting of a snowy day and the woods around her house.

In my bedroom there are no posters on the wall. My clothes have been cleaned out of the dresser. Were I to go into the bathroom, I know that my toothbrush and toothpaste would not sit beside the sink. Still, there is a blanket speckled with birds here, on the bed. The room is not wholly alien.

My grandmother's room is. The master bedroom sits empty. The blinds are drawn. The bed, neatly made. On her headboard, a radio clock still flashes the time and date, and no doubt the radio will still go off in the morning. Such trivial details are often overlooked.

I walk to my grandmother's bedside table, and open the top drawer. Inside, there is a photo album. I lift the book reverently from the drawer, and flip to the first page.

My grandmother as a child. The photograph black and white. She stands with her hands behind her back, dwarfed by the three brothers on either side. She wears a dress and they wear suspenders.

My grandmother as a teenager. Her hair tied back, the long braid swinging, as she hangs upside down from a tree. I think she looks beautiful, like someone who will love traveling, who will never want to sit still.

My grandmother at a European wildlife reserve. Her first vacation. Her eyes are upturned, staring at the owl perched on her head. Another two rest on her left arm. Her expression suggests ecstasy, with maybe just a little panic.

My grandmother, holding a carrot out for Aria, the foal. The horse is frozen mid-chomp, my grandmother mid-smile.

My grandmother much older. A baby in her arms. The caption underneath has my name and A GRANDMOTHER AT LAST!

I close the photo album and look at the other contents in the drawer. A copy of the New Testament. Her wedding ring. I put the photo album back.

The trip back down the stairs takes ages. I linger on the painting. I linger on every step. The bottom of the stairs takes me to the front door. The front door, outside.

It is canning season, so of course the cellar is open. Those steep wooden steps yawn before me. It is canning season, which for her means preserved jams and pickles. A fresh batch of corn whisky.

I walk down the cellar stairs and I sit on the bottom step. I look at the shelf, where I disturbed nesting owls and the shotgun I promised my grandfather I didn't disturb. I look at the stuffed moose head and the preserved vegetables suspended in brine. I look at the earth at my feet, and the place where I found her.

She'd had a stroke, brought on by the cancer treatments. There, at the bottom of the steep steps. There, where I accidentally broke glass jars, so long ago.

- 58 -

At the bottom of the icy slide lies the final bridge. Whether or not it's the last is irrelevant, because it is the final bridge that I can reasonably hope to cross before I succumb to the cold.

The bridge lacks rails of any sort and it spans a chasm whose bottom I cannot see. I now realize that the silver light that still plays within the cavern comes not from beneath the ice, but within the ice. Below the bridge, after a drop of hundreds or maybe thousands of feet, only darkness awaits.

There is no ceiling above me, here. The room, in fact, seems wide open. But there is no blue sky overhead and no stars or moon. Only darkness above, to match the darkness below. The bridge and the shelf on which I sit are the only beacons in the black.

I look upon the bridge. It, like everything else, is made of ice. It sports a slight arc in its center and icicles stalactite its length, dripping away into the gloom below. Some of those icicles, I realize, are longer than I am tall.

I crawl towards the bridge. My knees won't obey now, don't want to seem to unbuckle. So I crawl. I place my hands on the bridge and begin my slow crossing. My legs and feet follow reluctantly.

It seems to me suddenly that the bridge is made of glass instead of frozen water. Looking down, I can see my haggard reflection staring back at me. My cheeks are sallow and my hair is greasy. My beard has grown unchecked and each hair now stands out white with frost against my face. My eyes are sunken in and bruised a deep blue.

The ice does not crack beneath me. The fear of that happening doesn't actually register until I'm already halfway across the chasm, but regardless it does not. Only my frozen body is at any risk of giving out before the end.

Ahead, on the far side, another wall of ice rises, this one even sheerer than the last. "I think I can," I want to whisper, "I know I can," but the words rattle in my throat and die on my tongue. I don't have the strength to climb it.

Then I see the tunnel in the ice wall, and hope blossoms in me again. I don't need to climb. There is a way onward.

I spill from the final glass bridge and claw my way to the end.

- 59 -

A stairway leads downward. These steps are not of ice, but stone. They are weather-worn and uneven, broken in places and crumbling. They curve in a tight spiral as they descend, so that I can never see more than fifteen steps ahead.

"Up and down the staircase," I whisper. "As you have done before."

I tip my weight over the first stair and begin sliding down on my belly. I look at the crumbling stone as I pass over it, imagine that one day this whole stairway will smooth into a slide. That would have been nice. Another slide to end my journey. Perhaps it goes on infinitely, and I could slip down forever until hunger, thirst, and hypothermia take me. A long, slow slide to oblivion.

I drip down the stairs, my arms gripping stone and hauling me forward. My body responds like a sack of flour. Why am I doing this? Why keep living? I'm all alone, pushing on, though I don't know why. "Every denizen of this labyrinth is lonely."

I don't know why I'm repeating the boatman's words. They have a leeching effect on me, they drain my will to continue, no matter how applicable they may be. I think instead of meeting Willow smacking me aboard the train. "We'll get there," I whisper, "but you're going to have to trust me."

I find the strength to lift myself onto my hands and knees again. I place a trembling hand on the next stair. I crawl forward another step.

I remember Willow at that absurd photocopier, with page after paging informing me that I am here. "By the end," I say, "maybe." I reach out a shaky hand and I brace myself against the wall. Then I creak my legs into an upright position, and stand up. "You'll make it on your own."

I take a step forward. Then another. Then I hear the heavy clatter of a hoof step on a stone stairwell echo up from far below.

I pause. The hooves do not. *Clip*. Far below me. *Clop*. I hear something ascend the stairs.

"But of course," I say, my voice weak, but growing louder, "there is no monster in this maze."

I start forward again. I place one foot in front of the other. My steps grow longer and more confident, and then I'm taking the steps two at a time. I begin running, rushing headlong, I leap from one stair to the next and my hand skims the wall to my right as I spill down the stairs towards whatever awaits me.