A DEVASTATING SAVIOUR

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IT has been a week since life as I knew it ended. I am lying in a purple nylon hammock on my left side, staring into the creases of the synthetic fabric in which I am wrapped. Tightly bunched together at the top left of my periphery, the translucent ripples fan out to the right, their amplitude gradually decreasing, until brought into tension by the weight of my head and spread flat. I breathe in slowly and hold my breath until I can hear my heartbeat, and my entire body seems to pulse, before exhaling and adjusting my head. This causes my ear to rub against the fabric and a high-pitched, scratchy noise is sent into it. I continue to shift and fidget, then draw my left hand out from under me to the front of my body. The arm has gone almost completely numb, leaving the fingers involuntarily curled and everything from the shoulder down unresponsive and heavy. I turn to lie on my back and grab hold of the appendage with my other arm, plopping it on my chest like I would a tub of ice cream on a particularly pathetic evening, and wait for my blood to circulate back into the arm and for the pins and needles to dissipate.

It is late October 2004 and I am beneath Gary Moore's estate in Champaign County, Illinois. He was my uncle. And to the chagrin of my grandparents on my mother's side, he had no children and lived alone in a large, sprawling residence which the neighbors allegedly complained resembled a tree house more than a home. My mom told me that when they were kids, Gary—or Mr. Moore as I came to know him—would disappear alone into the woods for several hours before returning with muddy shoes and glass jars full of coruscating beetles and dead leaves. My mom said he scared the hell out of everyone the first time it happened, and while he received a very good talking-to about how he should never do something like that again and how he should have thought about how worried sick everyone else was and how they were 'this' close to calling the police, he just stared into his lap at the confused brown and green ovals frantically attempting to scale their transparent enclosure. It wasn't long before he disappeared a second time—though no one ended up calling the police—and a third, and a fourth,

and so on, until it became a regular event, and his family gave as much notice to his absence as he did to their original concerns. His fascination with bugs, and more broadly biology, only grew as he aged and unsurprisingly came at the expense of everything else: he did not go to other children's birthday parties or school dances, play any instruments or sports, or hang out with friends. He wore jeans and a T-shirt every day and ate whatever was convenient. His uncomplicated love for insects led to his matriculation at both undergraduate and graduate universities, and later landed him the position of assistant professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in the School of Integrative Biology—which was why, I, along with my family, were visiting him to tour the campus and others nearby.

I sit up and rotate to the left, lifting a gray wool blanket off of me and allowing my feet to dangle a few inches from the floor. The hammock sways back and forth, creaking with an obnoxious, grating timbre. I stare at the concrete wall opposite of me and sag into a hunch that leaves my neck feeling stiff and my whole body as uncomfortable as I had expected from assuming the posture. I continue to stare at the blank wall but take in the rest of the room peripherally. A single uncovered fluorescent tube rests in the ceiling, about eight feet high, and emits uniform, clinical light. Staring near it leaves one with horizontal red-blue after-images for much longer than you'd expect—whether you keep your eyes open or shut. A high-frequency, buzzing hum emanates from the light which seems to exacerbate the pain at my temples. I straighten up a bit, the back of my head and my neck lightly brushing the thin synthetic material of another hammock—this one blue—which is above the one I am sitting in, causing the hair on my neck to stand on end. The cold concrete floor is partially covered by a thin brown mat and is no more than thirteen by twenty-five feet in area. To my right are gray, iron racks that neatly hold several hundred 15-ounce cans. Every single one is labeled 'Chef Boyardee Beef Ravioli'; a battalion of long-dead cooks stare at me with plastered grins and are adorned in their distinctive red scarf and toque. Closer to me and to the right of the canned army is a rectangular stack of Poland Spring bottled water in plastic wrap and a wooden chair. I left my Nintendo Game Boy Advance, which I got last Christmas in addition to a cartridge containing *Donkey Kong Country*, sitting in the broad, shallow indent of the chair's seat. At the end of the room, in the corner to the right of where I've been vaguely staring, is a metal ladder whose rungs lead to a heavy, cast-iron hatch some additional feet into the ceiling. In the opposite corner is a modest bathroom, housing a single porcelain seat and several rolls of toilet paper haphazardly stacked behind it. There are dozens of mason jars and display cases full of insects and

several books on entomology along the left wall, which like all the others, is otherwise bare. I look to my left hand where a black and gray digital watch is wrapped and the dark border at the bottom of the display reads INDIGLO. It is 6:17 p.m.

I have slept for fourteen hours and my skull pulses painfully. My brain feels like it's unraveling, layers of it sloughing off each day and dwindling until only a primitive core remains. Though that doesn't keep me from remembering what happened or where I am. It is a fluke that I am still alive. I should have been sleeping upstairs with the rest of my family when the world was incinerated. I should have gone back to bed upon sitting up and seeing my younger sister Charlotte's moonlight-illuminated closed eyelids in the bed across from me. I shouldn't have gotten up and tiptoed down the stairs to go back to the repurposed nuclear bunker built with the house in 1965 that my uncle then said he "used for extra space and occasionally unwinded in." But the *Playboy* magazine that I found under a pile of books I knocked over while searching for *Wright's 4th Edition of Insect Morphology and Phylogeny*, as my uncle asked me to fetch, and that I quickly covered up and tried to forget about seeing while returning up the ladder, had been all I could think about. And upon returning to that place where the magazine was still as I remembered it, only visible by the protrusion of one of its yellow corners, I peeked my head out from the bunker, turned it back and forth, then moved to close the hatch as quietly as possible—cringing when what might as well have been a deafeningly loud creak resounded from the hinge halfway through the process—then scampered down the ladder to unearth the magazine and ravenously ogle each page by the light emitted from my Game Boy Advance. I had never felt more elated in my life.