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The Younger Sally Jacobs

Publishing this report will be a challenge. Verifying it may be impossible. I can only assure you that, unlike many other accounts that cross your desk, it has been meticulously researched. Like my mentor, the Doctor Daniel Chabon, I base my paranormal studies solely on scientific research and historical documents. Personal accounts are considered and fact-checked. Hunches are discarded if they cannot be proven. These stories take time to take form, and when the stories lack merit, you have seen me publish evidence against the paranormal. It is only by publishing the good and the bad that we can prove that the paranormal exists.

In most of my studies, I am searching for a shred of proof which can tie one story to another. For this case, I found a preponderance of evidence which was supported by all persons involved. I found myself searching for one piece out of place, and found none. If anyone on the peer review committee can comment on the quantum physics explanation provided by the perpetrator, please contact me.

This is the account of the Younger Sally Jacobs.

I took on Sally's case for two reasons: a sweet pumpkin pie and a note attached, reading:

My husband is a paranormal researcher
He never solved his greatest case
He too was a student of Dr. Daniel Chabon

The leaves were starting to turn and the cold wind beat them against the windows of my office. I run a practice in a shared office space in Cambridge, Massachusetts, not far from where Dr. Chabon's school was founded. The other tenants - a real estate broker, a rail logistics specialist - seem to take little interest in my work. While I am out, though, they ask the receptionist questions.

"They wanted to know," she whispered, "if you were a Scientologist, or whether you could do magic." She was much too polite to reveal whether it had been mean-spirited or curious questioning.

It was unusual to get a pie, but much more unusual to have another researcher's case referred. There were only a couple of hours before the first client arrived, continuing a painfully fruitless research into nanofibers. In those two hours, a phone number turned into a name, and a name into a handful of links. Sally Jacobs, a painter living in Boston, who had graduated from art school late, only a few years before. Without knowing Sally's husband's name, it would be hard to know if he were credible. If he had completed Dr. Chabon's training, then that was another story.

The first meeting was at an unfamiliar coffee shop in Boston, just across the river from MIT. Sally was already there, contemplating what scone to buy at the bakery display, wearing a bright red sweater - as promised - to identify her. I touched her on the shoulder and she immediately turned on a smile.

"At last, I meet another paranormal fan. At last."

We exchanged a few friendly gestures. I asked about the red sweater, and Sally told me that she wore it to keep bright and happy in the summer. "It seems like the minute frost snaps, everyone gets their dreary stuff out. Not me."

Sally was from Louisiana. "That's where I met my husband," she explains, "and we had this strange thing happen, which I'm sure you'll be dying to hear about."

"You said that your husband never solved it," I recalled, "was it because he thought it was something small?" I opened up a neat notepad and started the beginnings of an outline.

She laughed and caught herself. "Oh no, it was very serious there for a while. I wasn't sure what I was going to do."

Sally was no stranger to the paranormal. Her first job out of college was an intern for the Baton Rouge Historical Society, where the most popular question callers had was for haunted tours. "My boss said we weren't supposed to dignify them with an answer," she said, "but I gave people a few names and asked them to tell me which they had liked. I just wanted to help people out, with them visting my city, you know?" And eventually she heard the best reviews from The Old Byer Mansion - "the *haunted* one", she insisted - and started working there after college.

I had stopped looking at her and down to my notes, slowly spiraling down to another spooky old house story. This was far below his usual research. This was nothing. He looked back up again as if with interest, to see Sally looking off into the distance.

"... I don't think he'll mind," she said, "my husband, he won't mind if I tell you how we met. The managers of the Old Byer Mansion brought him in with a couple of others, hoping he could spark some new interest in the place. Doctor Chabon's way of doing things was very neat, very new. All of us were following it, and were excited to meet the people behind it. I remember asking, 'what if they don't find anything?' but we decided to play it up."

"Well, what did they tell you?" I asked. I told her how unusual it was for a serious researcher to get involved with a haunted house.

"To be honest, Earl - that's my husband - told me later that the team was flat broke." She laughed and looked away again. "Yeah we should have figured it out. Not something that comes up when you're giving them the grand tour. Then they had to come back to us and explain the real problem, which Earl explained was infrasound or something. He told the manager, my boss, that they could fix it with Silly Putty! The next minute, the manager was on his feet and pushing him out the door. I figured, well, nice knowing you." She pauses. "And he was nice. Definitely nice to know him."

Days went by without a trace of the team. Sally kept up her job as a tour guide, but things felt a little more manufactured. The speakers playing eerie piano music set the tone. Squeaky floorboards, never fixed, made the visitors jump. At home, she had moved in with someone named Victor, who Sally did not dwell on in our conversation. "If one thing is certain", she said, "it's that he wants nothing to do with any of this." So I didn't ask about that in our first meeting.

When Earl came back to Baton Rouge, he seemed changed. "More urgent." She thinks a bit, definitely feeling an answer but not sure what words to use to verbalize it. "More direct." "Had he fallen for you by then, you think?" I ask. Sally shook her head. "Almost certain it was because he wanted something different from the mansion contract, or maybe to pick up other clients, or maybe there was something to the mansion after all? I never fully dismissed it. But a few days later, it happened."

Police reports back much of Sally's story from that point onward. I have seen them on microfiche in the official records office of Port Allen, Louisiana. I have interviewed witnesses who were on the scene, officers of the court where hearings took place. Every event that they remembered matched up with Sally's story. The one thing which Sally could not explain, and the one thing that every interviewee eagerly speculated on, is how.

"I woke up in a nightmare," Sally said. "I would take steps and they would fall on soft leaves and rough sticks. I knew I was still asleep because I was in the forest, in the dark, and I didn't remember getting there. When I didn't wake up, I stopped walking. It was so quiet in the woods that I couldn't think." She yelled wordlessly. There was no answer. "It seems like the *first* thing that someone would notice," she admitted, "but for the first few minutes, I didn't notice that I was naked. And when I *did* notice, I still didn't panic or think of going home, because I was still in my dream, and that was normal." In the distance, she thought that she could hear cars rushing on a highway. As she walked toward it, pushing aside branches and thorns as best as she could, she thought that she could hear each vehicle - the sports cars zipping, the tractor-trailers barreling through, a few people driving home dronelike. "Stupid, right? But that's how I knew it was more real than a dream." She looked down at her fingertips on the table, and points out a white scar on her finger. "This was from some crap in the woods." And then, "It doesn't matter how it got there. All I want to know is, how did I get there?"

A passing driver made a call to 911, and the Port Allen Police Department took Sally into protective custody. Documents from all witnesses claim that she was fully conscious and aware at that point, demanding to talk to her family. The officers gave her a blanket and then a set of warm clothes to cover herself, then insisted on bringing her to the station, in case she remembered what had happened. An officer - unnamed in the report - called her house to see if Victor was home. Then another officer drove to the house to collect statements.

It became clear... that 'Sally' was lying about her identity. An officer took statements from both Victor and Sally Jacobs. Neither had left their house or seen anything unusual.

Sally was booked into psychiatric care, and labeled as Jane Doe.

Sally closed her eyes and touched her forehead. "And I never met her, not once."

"Who do you mean?"

"The other Sally. The one who was home when I was in the woods."

"Do you think she looks like you?"

"Identical, unequivocally identical. I can't say it myself, but everyone in there said she looked the same as me. Though after the first couple of days, they were saying I was the one who looked the same as her."

"The next morning, the full situation dawned on me," Sally continued. "The police were sympathetic toward me because they had brought me in, in such a state, but they knew that it didn't make sense. Either I was raving mad, or setting up a fraud or identity theft."

"What evidence did you put together on your side? Your path into the forest, any missing persons reports, anyone who was with you at the time...?"

"I would have been asleep, I'm sure. Complete opposite end of town, my car was in for repairs, and I didn't have a thing on me. So it was all about the other Sally. Me versus myself, my friends... I wanted to prove she was a liar, to hate her, to stop her from doing this to me. By the end of the first day, as me, they were calling her the Real Sally. Suddenly everything I knew was over and done with. And I couldn't start my life over until I was out of the psych ward, and they wouldn't give me that until I gave them another name.

On the third day, just a week before Thanksgiving, I told the officer on duty that I was done. I just needed to call home. And I called my mother, my own mother, and the other Sally had gotten to her already. I don't remember what she said. We both cried."

On the surface I was following along, nodding. The story had gotten intense enough that I stopped note-taking. But internally I was making the list. There would be photo records of Sally at the police station and psych ward. Even years later, voting records would make it possible to track down Victor and Sally... whoever she was. There would need to be proof that the other Sally existed. DNA would scientifically prove whether she was related to the rest of the Jacobs family, but that would require their consent. Not likely.

Sally halted her story. "I have to go now, but I can follow up. It gets deeper, more involved. Earl told me... that it's called duplication. It's been heard of before. It has, hasn't it?"

"I want to take each case from scratch. You can't depend on every source. You can't show that a similar-sounding case is related, until you can explain how they both happened." This was a good way to handle difficult questions.

"You're a lot like him." And Sally gathered her things, her scarf and coat. "The difference is, you might solve this one."

Before our second meeting, I had to get a better understanding of what was happening. I had gotten faxes of police records. In a team with multiple people, one investigator typically is assigned as the Con Eye, or Conventional Investigator. In my one-man shop, I spent a day doing nothing but finding weaknesses in the story. I knew that the other Sally had gotten married to Victor six months later, so the conventional explanation was most likely to be jealousy. But the Sally who I knew hadn't made any efforts to contact him.

I called their house in Baton Rouge, and it went to voicemail. A voice - one I couldn't tell apart from Sally's - invited to leave a message. I hung up - there would need to be better tactics if I were to get anything out of Sally.

There had been two paranormal investigations into duplication before, described dryly in my reference book, Strange Happenings. I had been right to tell Sally that they wouldn't be so helpful. Without an explanation for the earlier cases, it would be hard to link this case to them. Besides, it looked like Sally's case would have more documentation, if the police and both duplicates were willing to share their information.

So, I went into the second meeting expecting elaboration. I certainly did not expect to be sent on one of the strangest turns of my career.

Sally seemed surprised by what I had found so far. "I didn't tell you how I got out."

"Someone came for you." I knew that much. "I would need to go down to the county records office to get more than that - records, video..."

"One day, they said Earl had come to see me, that we knew each other through the paranormal research community, and that he could help find my family. I knew who my family was, but more than anything I needed to get out of that place. I would have taken up anyone."

"I would have checked it out, too. Duplication isn't something you... I mean it has been reported, but it isn't something that gets reported every day."

"If I thought about it like that, that I was just a curiosity-" she made a quick look of disgust "- then I would never have accepted. I was just so happy for the moment when the leave papers were signed, that the automatic doors slid open and I was enveloped in fresh, cold air. I don't suppose that you know this, but freedom has a taste." The moment they got to Earl's car, there was a snap of shock. "I held back, Earl noticed, and he says, 'There is something that you need to see. We're in this together.' And it was preposterous, but there was another of him in the car. And I knew whatever force this was - wherever it came from - he would have a better chance at an answer than anyone."

This changed everything. Unless she had an explanation for what happened to Earl, there would be some proof. It would be one thing for there to be one look-alike. If both Earl and Sally were duplicated, then there must be proof.

After being picked up by the two, Sally stayed with them at a motel where they tried to put together the basic facts of what had happened. The other Earl had woken up in the lobby of a locked train station, also naked. "He pried his way out, and found a cloak room with some unclaimed coats. He got back to the hotel, knocked on the door, and met himself right then."

"He must have been terrified."

"Of course. But they started working on an explanation, and with me involved we had a sort of partnership. We had to solve this case. I grew closer to the Earl who had fallen into the train station, who was lost, like me. He started to call himself the Younger Earl, and me the Younger Sally. It was so much more comforting to stop talking about real versus copy, or me versus the other. The Older Sally may have had a driver's license, a diploma, a job, and a house, but I knew that one day I could get those things, too."

"You had to start from scratch?"

"I didn't have any documents. The Younger Earl could use the Older Earl's information, but we knew there would be legal trouble if they both worked full-time under the same name. Earl had an uncle in the INS who could help process some immigration paperwork for me, and I started to become a legal person. But the situation meant that the Younger Earl was often taking on jobs for cash. It strained the relationship between them. At the beginning they were the same, then brothers, and one day they were just roommates, tired of speaking to each other.

One night the Older Earl was out late, and the Younger Earl asked if I wanted to go somewhere. I'd been cooped up in my hometown, unable to see my friends or family because they thought I was a liar, so of course I said, 'anywhere'. We both drove the night and the next morning, to Arizona, then up to the Grand Canyon."

Sally was strangely cautious telling the story, as she had never told it to anyone before. "We walked up to the rim of the canyon, in the cold wind that comes while you wait for the sunset, and I whispered, 'I've never seen it before.' And he replies, smooth as ever, 'Me neither. From now on we have this moment, and the others don't.' We slept in the car that night, uncomfortable as anything, but for the first time in years, I slept soundly."

"And did you ever see the other one of him again, the Older Earl?" I asked. "I assume you stayed with the Younger Earl."

"That's right, we stayed together on the road for a few days. We knew we couldn't make money that way. We just needed to know there was another person in the world who had been cast out of their life, like we had.

When we went back, the Older Earl was staying up late, watching the evening news. He never did that when we were together - I assume he was waiting for us. Finally he spells out a plan, where he takes their passport and works with a charity in Nigeria for the rest of his life, and the remaining documents would be enough for the Younger Earl to take over his life in the States. It was a big sacrifice on his part, one which I never understood. But the Younger Earl agreed immediately; he told me it had been a dream of his, so he knew the Older Earl would be happy going."

"I don't suppose you can get me in contact with him? This is going to make the investigation a lot more difficult, if I'm only talking to you and Earl here, and your duplicates don't get involved."

"We have enough money now, especially from my last auction, that you can have all of the funding that you need. I just want to know, where did I come from?" A pause. "No one has been able to tell me that in all of these years. Just find out where I came from, please."

The only details which Sally could add from that point were minor. The main question, then, was how to get Earl involved, to find out what he might know about the duplication. To move forward, Sally suggested a fantastic but bizarre plan.

"I will tell him that we should see a couples counselor," she explained, "and once you've established some rapport, you can ask him some deeper questions."

"Well I was going to ask him about the metaphysics of it, which I don't suppose would come up in the relationship between you two."

"To the contrary, I feel like there's a lot that he's withholding from me. Maybe his answers seem a little evasive. For example, when I asked what he was looking for, why he came back to Baton Rouge just before the event, I can't get a... well I'm never so good at this... but I can't get a read on whether he's telling me the truth. I don't even know enough about the paranormal sciences to know whether his answer is a good one. I know he must be working on how this happened. And maybe he's solved it, but doesn't want to tell me. One day I was home sick, and saw a special on parallel universes and string theory, that sort of thing, so I asked him, well, if we came from a parallel universe."

"Is that what you think?"

"I could tell that he was considering it. And so I asked, does that mean that I'm missing from the universe? Does that mean that we can go back? And I couldn't get a word out of him for a day after that."

"Well, it's a disturbing thought. You lost your family when you came here, and if there's another universe where they lost you, it makes it worse. But Earl hasn't experienced the loss on his end, because he took over the older Earl's place, so he hadn't thought about either loss yet."

"See, you'd do great as our counselor!" She laughed. "This is exactly why we need someone with experience in the paranormal. But you have to have your office sharpened up a bit so that he doesn't figure it out. Not until you build up that rapport, or whatever I said. He says it's not polite to talk about the paranormal, not until he finds a hint that they could relate."

I had two weeks to frame the office as a couples counselor's office. Where usually a lone client sat in a wicker chair, describing their paranormal experiences, their dreams, their delusions sometimes, I brought in a comfortable couch. A shelf of rare Indonesian idols, their original temples smashed by monotheistic zealots (more out of fear than religious piety), was replaced with a set of innocuous books. The office plants, even, seemed more striking and exotic than you would find in a calming space. Lastly, I stowed away my class photo with Dr. Chabon. In the photo you can see that he was frail and near death, but still full of intensity, more eager than ever to solve the mysteries of the universe. It didn't seem right to hang another picture in its place, but I did borrow a travel poster and prop it against the wall.

The day before our first appointment, Sally wanted to come in and see whether it would suit the project, but I urged her not to. It was important that she see the building with new eyes.

I arrived earlier than usual on the morning before our first session. I flipped through the first pages of an actual family counseling book. The sun streamed in through a window behind my chair. I struggled with an onset of nerves brought on by meeting another researcher, by deceiving him, by ignoring the elephant in the room and stealing one of the greatest mysteries that we'd ever encountered from right under his nose! In the last ten minutes, I remembered to sprint back down the hall and warn the receptionist to say as little as possible to the Jacobses. "Very talkative, anything could set them off. Just point them my way." She nodded.

At last I could hear the receptionist buzzing them in, the footsteps down the hallway, and a hand on the door. Just act like you do this every day, I told myself.

Earl had the same youth as Sally, but held an odd intensity and alertness common to the paranormal profession. He had worn a dress shirt and tie to the meeting, and introduced himself and Sally formally, making his best effort to show her that he took the meeting seriously. Sally wore dull clothes, and clasped her hands in her lap as she sat down, but when Earl looks away, she flashes me a faint smile. She believes every part of her story. She believes that we are on the cusp of finding something.

"Would you tell me about how you met?" I asked.

Earl's story was markedly different from Sally's and - since I had read the police records

- deliberately misleading. He acknowledged that they met through Sally's historic tours, leaving out the detail about the ghost stories. He jumped ahead from one event to another, not explaining what drew them together, only that they found a common interest in the town and Sally was feeling "trapped" there. Sally nodded and added details only occasionally. It was the story that he always told people, I gathered.

"I think it matters how couples meet," I said, trying to pick the tone for wise but common -sense advice, "because it sets the tone of the relationship."

Sally perked up. "Does it?"

"Well of course it does." I look to Earl for a reaction.

"For me, I think we set a tone a few weeks later. We took... a little cliché I'm sure... we took a roadtrip to the Grand Canyon together. We knew so little about each other before then. And we went to this one spot off the main trail" - Earl gestured wildly with his hands, even though there was no map or reference for his gestures - "where you couldn't see a soul around. Where we were the only ones with this new experience, and we were facing it together."

Sally beamed.

The hour was almost over, and I hadn't gotten any deeper into the mystery part. I made some final comments, scribbled on a notepad, and scheduled an hour appointment. "Usually we will meet weekly, but this week I am still getting to know you both. It's helpful for me to follow up within a few days." Both of them checked their schedules on their phones. At this moment, even though I had yet to prove they were duplicates, a shiver ran down my spine. Their motions and the parting handshake, though normal, took on an alien quality. Was it fair to wonder if they were from another universe?

The next day I met with the nanofibers client and offered him a seat on the new couch.

He took one look at the new office decor and shouted, "what on earth..?"

I gave him a mischievous look. "Couples counseling."

He laughed and patted me on the back. "let's get out of this dollhouse."

The meetings with Sally and Earl went on. Earl had a story covering every aspect - his brother had signed up for a mission trip in Africa and disappeared off the face of the map. Sally, too, had stories concocted. She was adopted, she insisted, and her foster parents had long since retired. "I think they're still driving around the country in a big RV."

It was a flawless story, but of course it was. There was no reason for the story to be doubted, and even if someone found a hole in their explanation, they would never hit upon the truth. The possibility that they were from another universe, as I now suspected, and fully integrated into our own. Never drawing suspicion.

Four more sessions went by, without the faintest trace of Earl caving. At times their conversation delved into the matters which a good couples counselor would understand - into their petty household arguments, their presents for each other on Valentine's Day, their little morning rituals. I started to think that they would have been excellent material for an actual couples counselor!

For our sixth session, Sally and I agreed to leave one of the Indonesian idols on the coffee table as a decoration. When Earl and Sally entered the room, Earl immediately reached out to the idol, stopped his fingers an inch before touching the idol, and looked up. "Is this real?" he asked.

"Another couple brought it in. The wife was a collector of some antiques, and they were afraid it was becoming a hoarding habit. She gave me this one as a gift."

"I highly doubt that," Earl countered, as he examined the statuette. "This is an idol of Nettle. Supposedly the recipient of the idol is more likely to side with the giver in a dispute. In a double-blind study there were some interesting results..." Earl drew his hand back again, pointedly never touching it.

I remembered, somewhat disconcertingly, when I received the idol from a very convincing activist. My cover story... no, I didn't need to take it seriously right now. "Are you familiar with -eh- the occult?" using the vulgar term for the supernatural. "I never knew what it was."

"Not really, but I don't want to get into bad voodoo, you know? Don't touch it, Sally." Sally and Earl sat down, and I moved the idol to the shelf where it belonged.

"Earl doesn't like to say so, but he's always been into that sort of thing," Sally forced a laugh and went on: "I even did a couple of ghost tours back before I left Louisiana."

"Really? Ever catch one?"

Earl drummed his fingers on his arm of the couch. "I would like to tell you it was all nonsense, but I was part of a troop of ghost hunters right out of school... the things that I saw would turn your stomach and make your eyes open wider than you thought possible. I'll have you know-" Sally squeezed his hand "-they didn't pay us to find out if these things were real. They were real, and they paid us to deal with it, without flinching, without screaming, no matter how strange it was. And no matter how harmless it was, they wanted it gone. In today's world, people can't come to terms with something existing beyond explanation. They fear it at first sight, and they still fear it after it's gone."

A long pause. I thought I would end the session there, but we had only just started.

"I apologize, I didn't know you were both involved in that. I'm sure it made it easier for you to bond."

Sally nodded. Earl dropped his tense look, and we moved on. But we were getting closer to the truth.

I thought that this breakthrough would get us closer to having Earl open up about their paranormal meeting. I told Sally as much when we talked on the phone later that night, her whispering to avoid detection. But the next session was full of stops and pauses. We were getting nowhere.

The next week was scheduled to be our final session. I had been encouraging the couple to keep going, to see whether we could get results in another couple of weeks, but Earl seemed noncommittal. Sally, too, seemed to be losing interest in her own project.

They had just arrived when Earl touched his pocket. "I think I've forgotten to pay the meter. Sally, can you..?"

"Right on it. There's quarters in the car." And she left with the keys.

For the first time, I was alone with Earl. He pointed to the idol. "I don't mean to bring up a sore subject, but it is a very fine idol. You're lucky to have it."

I nodded.

"You ought to know something. Sally was in a tough spot when we met. I think us talking brought back a lot of memories, some she hadn't quite processed before. But looking back, I think brought us closer together. I say that now because it would sound awfully sappy in front of her. And I want you to know that I mean it."

What to do. More nodding.

"I just want to know, do you think this is getting somewhere? Do you think we could get something out of another couple of sessions that we can't build on our own, using the communication skills that we talked about?"

He was putting his cards on the table, and this might be our last chance to talk in private, so I decided to break character.

"Earl, there's actually one thing we haven't discussed, which I was hoping we could talk about today. You see, I already heard from Sally that you were a paranormal researcher, before we met. A student of Dr. Chabon. It seemed a little untoward to mention it, and a little awkward when you we didn't discuss it. I respect what you do."

"Dr. Chabon.... yes. You know about him? Well, I hope you're not keeping your patients up at night with those stories. He was as great a storyteller as a scientist."

"I know... I actually knew him. I was also a student of Dr. Chabon."

"Really now? Imagine that..." Earl closes his eyes for a second, and then looks around the room. "My class all went in different directions after the school closed, but I never knew one to go into family counseling. This is a new one. How long since you were in the field?"

"I still practice."

Earl looked around the room again, furrowed his brow, and then his eyes came back to meet mine, widening.

"Tell me again about how you met your wife."

He left without a word. Neither he nor Sally came back into the office that day.

Or the next day.

Or ever.

A week later, my office was back to its usual paranormal decor. My clients could come in again. But there was a notebook and a file folder all about the duplication case, and each day new records filtered in from Louisiana.

My nanofibers client and I were sorting through hundreds of photos which he had taken with a microscope at a science open house in another city. Even at high resolution, it was hard to see much of anything. We were interrupted by a rapping on the door, and the receptionist handed me another packet from the Louisiana State Police.

"You should go after this," my client insisted, which was the only thing I'd heard him talk about other than his own research. "This is something. I'll come back tomorrow and you better be finding all the records you need."

I discovered that an investigation into Sally had grown far beyond the local police, and even the FBI was asking why Sally could have been released when she was "perpetuating identity theft at a previously unknown level of sophistication." They had the photos, finally, with the older and younger Sally. The older Sally was dressed to appear before the court. She wore a blouse and there were wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Confusion.

The younger Sally, who I knew, was in simple clothes provided by the psych ward. She had a small scratch on her face, but was otherwise undistinguishable from the older Sally. She stared straight into the camera. "Where did I come from?", she had asked me. It looked like she was asking it now, to the cameraman, to the FBI, to whoever had this photo cross their desk. And every agency, every investigator, had done their best to pass on the documents, to simply make the story go away. Perhaps Earl was right, after all. But however the younger Earl and Sally had made their way into our world, we needed to accept them, I decided.

The next day, my nanofibers client was in the office before me. He had not taken his papers and photos out of his briefcase. He looked to me and demanded, "tell me where you going."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"That document didn't come from down the road. Your source is somewhere you can't touch, and it's killing you. Go solve this."

I nodded.

"Now tell me where you're going next week, and I'll cancel our meetings until you get back."

"I'm going to Baton Rouge."

The final leg of the Baton Rouge trip - a prop plane from New Orleans - is short enough that I had barely gotten a chance to review my notes on my laptop. The ToDo list was overflowing with leads. But the first meeting clearly belonged to one person - the older Sally. I arranged an interview with a short but non-revealing e-mail, and she was surprisingly willing to meet. "Don't be reluctant to ask," she had written, "there are so many people trying to crack this case over the phone, that I hoped they'd send someone to see me. I moved on."

I parked the rental car outside Sally's address. Up the steps and behind the door with a light-up wreath, was another piece of the puzzle. I knocked and Sally was opening the door up, catching the wreath to keep it from falling off, and welcoming me into her home. And this Sally was perfectly identical. It was not fair to call her the older Sally, because she was just as lively and friendly.

The other Sally and I sat in chairs in the living room, across a coffee table from each other. I noticed a framed desert landscape over her head.

"Do you travel much?"

"Not really - we got this from a photographer friend of Victor's." She looked at it again, trying to think of something else to say about it, then decided on, "I'd love to go to Arizona, see the sights sometime."

I tried to jump into one of our old conversations, but I had to remind myself that I didn't know the first thing about her, and all of those conversations were with the other Sally.

"I don't have any questions of my own about the identity theft case. I was just trying to find out what your experience was."

"I've told it a million times if I told it once. I was sleeping, Victor nudged me to wake up, and there was a policeman on the phone, asking me how the hell I was at home. He made me say a few nonsense phrases, to make sure I wasn't a voice recording or something. And then he says, there's a woman at the station who says she's you. Cancel your credit cards and we'll sort this out by tomorrow."

"So you didn't think it was going to be a big deal?"

"Well I was baffled - I don't have a lot of cash, we're still renting the house, and obviously I was still me... not going away! So I was afraid that someone was trying to kidnap me or something, but then why would this woman get herself found in such an odd state? I called my parents to make sure they would know not to trust her. Then I went about my day like normal."

There was a rustling from the door, and a man came in the door. The wreath fell to the floor. Sally stood up quickly. "Victor! We've got another Sherlock Holmes here."

Victor looked, nodded, and bent over to fix the wreath. I took the time to walk over and shake his hand. "Don't worry, I don't think there's a threat. Just trying to figure out if there are any leads."

"I wouldn't think there would be," says Victor. "Get what you need, but please don't come by like this. Sally, she gets nightmares."

"I always have," Sally insists. "I've always been a light sleeper."

"If you find this woman, make sure she's not anywhere near here."

"I understand. I don't think that'll be a problem."

"And how is that? You know something more about her?" Victor has a way of bearing down to the point, painting me into a corner.

"She's moved... to Alaska." They both look surprised, and Sally squeezes her husband's hand.

"You didn't tell me that you knew about her! Oh wow, have you seen her?"

"No. Just a report from someone up there. She's been living there for a few years."

"Well.... that's nice. Unexpected. But nice. I hope she's well."

"Obviously, I can't elaborate. In fact, I think I should go."

"Oh, but..."

"No, really." And I walk out and hit the road. I didn't even need to give them my fake business cards!

I woke up with a start in my motel room. Cars and trucks rushed on the highway outside. Somewhere in the unclaimed space and forest and swampland between the motel and town, that is where the younger Sally had walked out of the woods. No one would remember the spot, so it would be fruitless to look.

The continental breakfast was nothing but plastic-wrapped muffins. I told the manager that I would like a blueberry muffin, and he found one in a supply closet. I ate it reluctantly, wanting to be alert for the meeting with local police.

The police station is an unassuming one floor concrete building. Not knowing any other way to conduct business, I walk in, take off my jacket, straighten my tie, and ask the officer at the door where I should wait for my meeting.

Two junior officers arrive and urge me through a winding series of hallways. "The chief wouldn't like us inviting you in. He isn't a superstitious man." Down a set of stairs into a video surveillance room. "A pious man. Not a fan of the occult. But I've always suspected there was something unnatural about that girl. And in my book, something unnatural is unholy. You can't solve that with a little notebook and a case file. You have to send the occult after the occult."

It made sense, in a way, but I didn't like the implication that I was part of some evil collective. "I'm just a scientist or a researcher, really. Please, don't consider me any different from an archivist coming down here to see arrests from their grandparents' moonshine days."

"I hope you don't think our records go that far back. Everything these days is computerized. Everything from the past is in a big sealed archives building down in New Orleans."

"Not necessary. Would you have a video of the release of Sally - I mean a Jane Doe - from four years ago?"

"We have video going back seven years." he looks to see if I'm surprised, but I don't know whether to be impressed or not. He looks disappointed. "I've got to admit, three years is unusually deep for us. The other day, we had a couple come in looking for video from two years back. You know what for?"

"What?"

"They got arrested and taken to the drunk tank on their first date. Wanted a video of their booking for the wedding. Weird as fuck."

Finally we shared a laugh. It never occurred to me that the police would be as eager to break the ice as I was.

They had some preparation, so the video was prepped in seconds. "Here's Jane Doe signing off. You say you know the man picking her up from here?"

"That's Earl. He's another paranormal researcher."

"He got to her first, yeah?"

"You could say that." I watched the video play out much as Sally remembered it. The surprise, the eagerness to get out of that prison. The officers switch to an overhead parking lot camera, which catches the two briskly walking to the car. Sally stops and looks around wildly. Earl pausing and reaching out her hand to comfort her, and then pointing into the car.

"Can you get a closer shot of that?"

"You mean, like 'ENHANCE!' This isn't the movies, no sir."

A disappointing lead. But then the other officer says, "what about the High-Res Exit Cam? We've got one set up across the street." So we watch the scene play out a distance, then the car comes to the exit and brakes before turning onto the road. "Let's take a look inside." There's a zoom and a re-pixellation, then a refinement.

In between Earl driving and Sally in the passenger's seat, another man leans forward from the back seat to talk to them. And he is absolutely indiscernible from the older Earl.

"What the fuck. Did you know about this?" They scrub the video forward and backward, but the first frame that we saw is our best. "Must be the dude's twin brother."

"I've got good info saying that this guy was an only child."

We looked at it for a while.

"I'm going to make you a copy of this tape, and then I want to get this case the hell out of the way. The chief wouldn't want to have you in here."

And that was that. They weren't curious; they weren't stunned; they just wanted the mystery to dissolve. Perhaps the younger Earl was right after all.

The next day dawned with a careful retreading of the forest where the younger Sally had first appeared. There was no telling what I would find, nor any telling what I should look for, but there was always the chance that some hint would come of it. In many cases, the best information comes from the most obvious source, no matter how unlikely it is to provide data. A dog barking at an intruder now disguised as a friend. A baby blinking to guide a sketch artist's pen.

I collected a few odds shards of a mirror, but then I found the side mirror housing and door from a compact car. A lot of trash from parties going deep into the woods, along old and overgrown trails. People stopped going outside sometime. My older friends insist it's because of technology. I think it's because we stopped believing in the fearful creatures of the forest. Not just raccoons and coyotes, but spirits and demons.

I ate lunch at the diner where I parked my car. On a whim, I asked if the waitress had heard of Sally Jacobs. She hadn't. So much for the small town door-knocking approach.

That afternoon, I had a tour of the old Byer Mansion. It was exactly as the Younger Sally had described it - unchanged not in material, in detail, in campiness. I gritted my teeth at the eerie piano, and held back a chuckle at the guide's yelp, "a murder happened in this room!"

I assumed that these places would give me insight into Sally's life, perhaps whether she came into contact with something paranormal beyond the laughable parade of the Old Byer Mansion, but instead they were uninteresting. They had no photos of Sally, no memory of her entirely, even as Sally lived on in this town. While the younger Sally continued to develop her artwork and rise to fame, the older Sally seemed to have disappeared within herself. And her nightmares.

The final drive to the airport was one of resignation. Of a city able but unwilling to prove one of the greatest paranormal events ever documented. I watched the sunset from the boarding area of a soulless airport. There was no path from here to the truth.

Then I remembered: there was one more of the duplicates to track down. The older Earl, in Nigeria. The younger Sally had told me that Earl took pains to go off of the grid, that even in the beginning they would only get calls weeks apart. That it had been over a year since he called in.

But an American does not disappear so easily into a country which is not his own. Especially when he is a paranormal researcher. Especially when he is not only a foreigner there, but anywhere in our world.

I had photos of the younger Earl, which could be tested and screened against thousands of travelers' photos. There was a possibility that Earl had lied about his actual home, so I expanded the search radius. I searched the records of paranormal journals, with hope that isolation had driven the younger Earl back into publishing. Even under a pseudonym, there would be some note that the letter had been sent from a reader far off the grid.

I found three candidate articles, under three separate names. There was no record of these authors before Earl's arrival. They were all sent on paper from what this journal called off-grid originalists. And the records were meticulous, scientific, a sure mark of Dr. Chabon's students.

The next day, I set up a Skype call with the research journal team in London. I had published articles through this journal and its competitors before, so they had no suspicion that they were part of my research.

"I know this man," the publisher insisted, "and he is no mystery. He is publishing under a few names, but it is just to keep his name out of the news. He is a famous actor, would never live it down."

It was a disappointing drop to the lead.

"Did you check letters to the editor? We get letters from cranks every damn day, but this one reminds me a lot of your subject. Let me look through some e-mails from the mail room about this guy."

There was a chattering of keys, a flutter of clicks, and a chirping from the computer.

"Yeah, we get a letter every few months. And he's got a lot about meeting a witch doctor in Nigeria. The first couple of letters we laughed at, but we got to thinking, based on the postmarks, this guy might be telling half the truth."

I got a forward a few minutes later. A spotted paper envelope with painstakingly printed writing:

EARL JAN
TRAVEL HOSTEL CANDI
CITY PLAZA
JIMETA, NIGERIA

We shuffling passengers came down the steps and across the tarmac. The jet loomed large over us. It lit up with dozens of beacons, and the engines cycled up and down. Even a seasoned traveler would feel some fear, I thought. And today I was headed to a new continent - one that I had read about many times in the paranormal journals - but one which would be completely alien to me.

The woman next to me took out a pair of reading glasses to examine the first page of a detailed atlas. She marked up this page, and absent-mindedly kept scribbling. There was nothing wholly remarkable about this flight, I thought, which would make it stand out from any other. There was only my inexperience.

The first night I was too afraid to do anything but pace the room of his hotel in the airport. It would be many miles just to reach the hostel, and then it would take another miracle to find Earl. Given the poor response from the younger Earl, there was not guarantee that the older Earl would be honest with me.

The bus groaned as we picked up speed, starting out from another checkpoint. The roads were packed with rusting trucks, each packed to the brim with people, others even with passengers hanging on.

Then the last shuddering bump, the bus rounding the corner, and the bus approached the gates of the city. This was Jimeta. Nowhere would be better to hide, I thought, because even though a foreign visitor would stand out in this town, he would have all that he needed to live and thrive. Though heavily armed police stood on corners, the larger forces of paperwork, government, and science could not find him there. The bus came to a halt in a dusty, open square. "Jimeta! Jimeta!" called the driver.

The bus was rushed by merchants, come to sell water and snacks to travelers. I pushed open the doors and took in my luggage. Then suddenly the bus was making its mind to leave, the mobs of merchants trailed it for a minute to make their last sales. And when the bus was gone, I had only myself to make up my mind.

The hostel was only a few blocks from the square. My own research had proven useful for once - I had a good idea of where to go, that I could backtrack if necessary, that if I did not see the banner of the Candi Hostel, that I could circle back and search. But I had scarcely gone two steps before an old man grabbed my wrist and pointed over to a small shop, done up in pink and garish decorations.

"I am here to make a reservation."

It was small things. I went with the other backpackers on a waterfall hike. I took my turn at the grill at a shared barbecue. Each visitor I got to know. And I said little of my own past, of my own plans. Without internet access or business cards, in a group of lost and wandering travelers, the world revolved around stories, and I told few.

There was no trace of Earl in those first five days. At last I decided to tell the host Gene, a cheery but incomprehensible English scholar, that I was a scholar, too.

"What is your study?"

"The paranormal. Ghosts. Monsters. Even if we don't know if it's real."

A pause. "Ghosts? Yeah, yeah... ghosts."

The next morning, he came to me as I struggled to hang up my laundry on a clothesline. "The ghosts. This man has them." And there was a phone number.

In this time, I had not yet gotten a phone which could work in the country, but there was a shop deep in the local market where other travelers had gotten their phones.

I stepped out of the phone stall and put the number from the hostel host into the phone. There was ringing, and a woman answered the phone in a local dialect. I could understand nothing.

"Hello, can you hear me?"

She laughs. "Call later, please."

The number calls me back. This time it is a familiar voice.

"This is Earl."

"Earl, hello? Can I talk to you about your brother?"

"My brother? No no... you must be mistaken."

"I know, Earl. I just want to talk."

"Is he alright?"

"Yes, he and Sally are fine."

"That is great news. I can send him a message the next time that I am in town. Thank you for your kindness."

"I also talked to the other Sally."

A long pause.

"Please come find me at the Green Market tonight."

The shop was packed but it seemed as though no was else was moving. I edged my way through the crowd, looking up and down for him. And there he was, contemplating a set of canned food.

I came within a few feet and shouted to him. I extended my hand. He extended his hand as well. "I think it's too late for you to believe if I say, 'fancy seeing you again?'"

"You don't look so much like him anymore," I pointed out. The years had toughened the older Earl's face. He had a tan, a bushier haircut, and an unmissable scar above his left eye.

"You come here to see if my brother is a lunatic?" he asked. "Or is the FBI willing to go a lot deeper into investigating the paranormal these days?"

"Please come to the Hostel Candi. I've got a room where we can sit down."

"You want me on the record, don't you? I hope you know that anything that I say will be so radical, no one will believe the tape has any truth to it."

"I want your story, that's all."

"I'll go with you to the Candi. I haven't been at that old place for months. A good place to get your start in this country, but not a place to live more than a couple of weeks. I'll get myself a package of cookies for the road."

We waited an eternity in line, but I told myself that it was necessary to say little and follow Earl's lead so that I could gain his trust. Fortunately he made no effort to flee. But I would need to find out where he lived, who the first person was to answer the phone. The minute he walked out, I would lose all of my leads. He would disappear again.

"Good God you are nervous. Hold these cookies, will you? I won't go far."

We found a set of still-intact couches across a table from each other. Earl opened his pack and took out a water bottle. He was instantly comfortable and at ease on the couch. There was little else inside. I had my recording materials, my laptop, and a dozen travel and paranormal research books.

As I prepared the recorder, I was starting to realize that Earl was coming forward. He had a point about the recording being impossible to believe, but the admission would provide a new level of legitimacy. It would also bring a new researcher with research experience to dig into the case.

"The first thing you've got to know, is that I know exactly what happened. The duplication was not an accident."

"What do you mean by duplication? I mean, I understand the basic concept. I have seen the other one of you."

"The younger me."

"Yes, exactly. A little term that he came up with."

"Now that you mention it... yeah, the other guy was the one who gave me the name."

"I want to understand the metaphysics. Are you from another, parallel universe? Did you come here by choice?"

"You don't understand this at all. Clearly the other me kept the whole thing under wraps or sent you running in the wrong direction. Forget whatever he told you and start over with what you know. Anything you saw with your own eyes. Or heard from Sally."

"The first time that I saw Sally, she was a tour guide at a haunted house. You've seen it?"

I show him a brochure from my case file.

"That's the place. Damn charming place, would be a lovely home if they didn't mock the place up as haunted. Anyhow, the first time that I saw her, she was absolutely radiant. If it weren't for my team, I would never have gotten anything jotted down when they gave us the grand tour. Sadly the place was a sham and our operation was pretty starved for money; we couldn't keep them on as a client. It was heartwrenching to go back home and have our team splintering. With Dr. Chabon gone, our old school was getting broken up, and it was hard to find new clients. I deeply wanted to come back to give her something to beam about, but that was senseless. I told myself that I could move on."

"It was a hard time for all of us."

"A fellow paranormal researcher, right... I almost forgot. It was a tough time for our community."

"I forgot to tell you - I also was a student of Doctor Chabon. The loss was especially hard for all of us who had him as a mentor."

"Wow," Earl said. For the first time in the interview, it was deviating from the script that he had set up in his head. "Did you ever meet a guy.. a bit older than you I suppose.. named Taylor?"

"I might have met a Taylor."

"Thick glasses, spiky hair? He was a senior when I first started the program."

"Sounds familiar."

"That is a heck of a coincidence. Well, this story is going to get pretty interesting for you, then."

"When I was about to graduate, Taylor was just entering the program, as a freshman. All of the freshmen were assigned mentors and Taylor's fell through, so I ended up mentoring two people - him and a girl whose name I forget. Taylor was a bright guy so I helped him out with a bunch of his research, even though it was a little on the strange side."

"The strange side of paranormal?"

"He was convinced that there would be an explanation for the paranormal, and it would be somewhere in classical physics. Then in the spring he changed direction, started talking about finding things which quantum physics *theorize* exist but haven't yet proven. Dark matter, cosmic rays, and so on. Or some extension of classical physics that explains the experimental results of quantum mechanics."

"There isn't proof of dark matter?"

"There's observational evidence that dark matter exists, but the only reason that anyone theorized dark matter is to explain that observational evidence. It's like saying it's dark in your room because of 'anti-light', when really you're just creating a term that explains what you're seeing."

"Weird. So he was looking for dark matter. Is that dangerous?"

"I haven't a clue. He was carrying physics and cosmology books around for months, poring over them, coming up with a list of twelve things that hadn't yet been observed. When I graduated, he was fervently into dark matter, and none of his professors would talk to him about it. I walked him through writing up a proposal and found a professor from one of my courses who would help him follow through with it."

"I didn't talk to him much, my year. I can't tell you if he got any closer to finding it."

"Well, years later I was bumming around the southern states, taking jobs wherever we could be hired. Eventually I'd be sent to that old haunted house that Sally went on about. And I got a call from Taylor - very excited, said that I had to head back to the school right away. They'd been taken over by then, but Taylor implied that it was very urgent. I pulled into the old parking lot, which was just weeds - very sad - and he had a big U-Haul. The minute I drove in, he started the engine."

"You trusted him."

"I knew him, and I knew that he needed me to help with something. The connection that we had in school made a lot to him. I don't know how he convinced me, but he went into a long-ish explanation of a project that he'd set up in his school days."

"On the original campus?"

"At some point he had an opportunity to move the project into a drawer at a community college physics lab, while he was taking some classes. Somehow he'd rigged it to pull power and wait for the experiment to complete, then it would send a signal to his phone over text. He showed me a screen on his phone with two messages. He said either the experiment was disassembled and he would have to start over, or he had captured a monopole."

"A monopole? Is it a paranormal term or a physics term?"

"Cosmologists - the physicists who study the beginnings of the universe - calculate that magnetic monopoles exist. So classical science believes that they exist. But they have never observed them. There's been some research into the subject, and a lab thought that they detected one back in the early 1980s, but no one's gotten one up close."

"What is it exactly, the monopole?"

"It's magnetic, but unlike any magnet we've seen, it only has one end. No plus on one end, minus on the other end. Taylor told me that it had to be a tiny point, a new atomic particle just absorbing magnetism. Meaning it isn't made of any matter that we know of."

"What did he want with it?"

"I assumed that he just wanted to capture it to reveal it to science. I didn't understand the rest of his explanation about monopoles, but it was exciting to think that one of us might get published in a conventional scientific journal. They'd have to let him publish. This thing was a monumental discovery."

"What happened to it?"

"We got to the college and it was empty. 1:00am, no one around. He led me through a door that was unlocked at night. Went up some steps into a long hallway. There was a... a thrumming, a drumming noise. Like Jumanji. We walked past a computer lab with a few dazed students, paying it no mind. But the drumming went on. I asked Taylor if this was his experiment making the noise, but he said nothing."

We got to the end of the hall and we could walk right into the lab. The drumming came from nowhere, but fortunately Taylor remembered exactly the drawer where he'd left it. He had a key, turned the lock, and slid out this drawer. Full of tubes and wires, just a mess. I wondered for a moment whether the kid had lost his mind. And then he pointed out a silvery ball of stuff, somehow suspended in a clear capsule, about as long and about as big around as the ink in a ballpoint pen. He'd trapped something in there, and he wanted me to believe that it was paranormal matter. He found a cart in the lab which could use to roll back up to the hall, said we needed to get it into the truck."

"Was it heavy?"

"No, not like that. While it was in the drawer, he unscrewed one end of the capsule and this ball started rolling out into a string, and the string was making its way for the screw hole, so he plugged that with his finger. Then he asked me to unscrew the other end. I got it loose and see that in the meanwhile it was burning a hole into Taylor's fingertip, through his finger, to escape."

"What was..."

"It was some toxic horror. He wasn't in any pain that I could see, but he was plugging the hole and it was resisting. It took the first part of his finger, bone and all, and he went on plugging the hole with his knuckle. Once the capsule was free, he wrapped it in a plastic bag and held that down on the cart. He says, let's roll this thing out to the truck. I'm stunned by what I'm seeing, I just go along, right? I figure he knows what this thing is doing. Then we're rolling it back down the hall, and the bag is expanding, the capsule is rattling around in there. I guess some of the monopole goo was coming out. Then everything went crosswise. The wheels jam, I look down, and they're sinking into the tile. My hands are pushing the cart and instead they slide off of it. The lights in the hall flicker and go out, but we can still see by the light of this infernal capsule inside the bag. I start running but I can't get any traction, so I slip and roll, and Taylor picks it up and starts bolting for the closest door - I swear he went straight through it without it opening. There are flashes outside. People are peering out of the computer lab to figure out what the hell is happening and I can't answer, I am crawling after to see what happened to Taylor. I get up on my knees to unlock the door and outside he has gotten it pinned down on the ground. We're on the campus lawn and he screams for me to get the truck, which we parked on the other end of the building. I dash around to get it, bring it around and up onto the sidewalk, and Taylor is rasping wordlessly. I unlock the back doors and there's a thick metal safe lined with plastic. Taylor heaves it in there, I lock it, and he collapses back onto the grass. I see a few silver strands sinking into the soil, dissolving as easily as spilt water."

"Was it all lost, then?"

"No, Taylor managed to keep some of it in the bag. He used a magnet to show me that we'd gotten some inside of the safe. I asked him what would happen to the rest of the stuff, was it still toxic, and he didn't know. Guessed it would probably go down to the Earth's core."

"And he was okay?"

"Yeah, I thought we would be rushing him to a hospital, but his finger was mostly healed. Still missing, but not bleeding out. I asked him what happened with the doors, I guess that was still the hardest part for me to understand at the time, and he asked me how I pushed the cart into the floor and the wall. I don't even remember."

I had certainly not prepared for this story, nor did I have the physics knowledge to ask sensible questions about the monopole. There were a couple of minutes where I went back through my notes, not saying anything.

"I suppose you want to know what this has to do with Sally."

"I almost forgot! But yes."

"Come to my place at Greenbark for dinner tomorrow. The guy here at the hostel, Gene, he knows where to go."

And quick as a flash, he had walked out the door.

Gene's face lit up with excitement when I told him we would go to see the ghost-tracker Earl. He was also a little disappointed that he had not heard the story from the other night.

"What happen? What ghost?"

"He met a scientist. They found something."

"Ah yes, science."

"Like Frankenstein. Do you know Frankenstein?"

"Yes, Frankenstein. Made the monster."

I piled all of my recording equipment into my bag and squeeze behind Gene on his moped. Soon we were speeding down dirt roads and through tea fields. At each junction we would stop, Gene would look around as though completely lost, and then pick a direction. Yet at the end of the trip we reached our destination, a small European-style home straight out of every safari story. Inside was the older Earl.

Earl explained that the house had been there for over a century, that it was a respite for colonial leaders and had, during more difficult times, been transferred over to wealthy locals and visiting researchers. To the current owners, Earl was just another scientist. He surprised me by introducing me to his wife, who he said should remain anonymous in any of my accounts:

"I came to this country thinking I was an expert on the paranormal. I had done a great deal of research on Nigerian totems. Then I met my wife - she was a local witch doctor, unmarried as was custom. If I've learned anything in my travels, it's that the minute you think you're deep into something, you find someone who's a hell of a lot deeper and smarter than you in that subject. She was that know-it-all who put my knowledge to shame. It felt like I'd never find my own place here. But as I was packing up, I heard that another young woman in the village was wanting to become the local witch doctor. And the thing is, to break into that industry, the only way is to accuse the current witch doctor of working with the devil. And despite everything she'd done for them in the past, they wouldn't listen to her denials. I hid her away, and got a few of her things from her house before they burned it to the ground."

Earl pauses for a minute, and we hear her moving dishes around in the kitchen.

"It's interesting that me and the younger Earl, as you would call him, have met our wives under such dire circumstances. I'm not really sure what it means about our relationships, like are we just there at a difficult time? And my wife, we talked about it the other night after you told me about Sally. She says that it's because it shows real character, real love to support someone through the most difficult time in their lives. I think it makes sense."

"It does make sense."

"I told you about Taylor. He was broken, I think he was still hurting beyond the missing finger, though it was hard to tell what was happening. So I was scared off. I left as soon as I could and went back to hunting ghosts with the team. After I ran into Sally, I told them that we were running ourselves ragged, chasing after this stuff. The team lost its cohesion pretty soon after that."

"You couldn't go after the paranormal physics work, like Taylor?"

"No way... that stuff was real but too real, just terrifying. I never told the other guys on the team about that night."

"So what happened with Sally?"

"After the team went to I came back into the city, thinking I would salvage something with Sally. Apologize for saying the house wasn't haunted, make amends. We had this most amazing breakfast together where she was chirping on about a million different fascinating things in the town. She was at home and a part of the city and even had ideas for how I could stay there."

"But what about Victor?"

"The next day I tried to call her and do something smooth, like take her on a river cruise. But she had made plans with her fiance, Victor, and that was that."

"What did you expect?"

"Well I was a bit closed-minded, right? Here I was, thinking that the best thing for me would be to go back to Louisiana and reconnect with my close friend Sally, when really I hardly knew her, and her life was on a very different trajectory. We had nothing to do with each other. Please no sympathy... my life is brilliant now. But at the time it was a real colossal shock."

"What next?"

"I was holed up in my hotel room, wondering where on the map to go next, when Taylor appeared. Literally came in through the windows and curtains in a beam of light. I was about three levels above astonished, as you might imagine. Just up against the wall shouting what the hell is happening. And he says he's about to do me a favor. That's what I remember mostly - everything he said about the monopole was still gibberish to me. But he must have found it. And with it, he had some sort of power. So he duplicated Sally."

"I don't understand. You asked him to duplicate Sally?"

"No, no, I was much too terrified to speak. He didn't tell me what he was doing, just said that thing about doing me a favor. And hours later - I didn't sleep a wink, of course - there was another me banging on the door, asking me to let him in. That didn't seem like much of a favor. Even when we saw the younger Sally was on the news... I don't get it. What's the favor? I was vying for this girl's attention, so he creates another one of me and the girl?"

"It doesn't make a lot of sense. Especially for someone with these... powers to modify the universe like that."

"That's nothing. I've raided his workshop, looked into his papers, and to him, these ethereal existences, duplication is nothing. Here I was wondering how he managed to modify space, time, and matter, and he wrote that it would be nothing, like smudging freshly printed ink. Like me and that cart. Physics is bullshit. Paranormal research, too. We're just waterbugs skimming the surface."

"What happened between you and the other Earl, then? He knows what happened."

"In a sense, yes. If you count what I've told you as knowing what happened, then yes. I even mailed him the workshop papers, so he'd have what little I had learned. It sounds like a small thing, but that was the only source of information out there about what happened to us. Possibly the only source of information that'll exist in our lifetimes. I never had a chance to talk to the other Earl about it."

"You had separated by then. They told me about a road trip."

"We were all living together. I was disappointed and angry to see a connection forming between the younger Sally and the younger Earl. He kept trying to be different and better than me. She felt like they had something in common. I didn't know what to hope for. For the first several weeks there, we were just trying to live and hide and build up an identity for her. And then one day he took her from me, and they have been together this whole time."

He is lost in thought.

"It ended things between me and Sally. I didn't want to hear from her or the younger Earl ever again. Looking back now, I..." he laughed "... I get what Taylor was saying in that apparition, I really do. This Sally was someone I thought that I loved and respected more than anything, and I couldn't accept what she wanted! At first I could tell myself that it was this guy Victor and she just didn't see what a jerk he was, but once it was myself but not me... once it was the younger Earl, I mean... You have to understand that life is not about your choices. It is about other people's choices."

"Like you choosing to come here? Like me choosing to find you?"

"Maybe? But more like: an inventor can receive millions in funding or be ignored. A writer can write ten words or a million, but only the publisher will decide what gets published. If you have something precious in your life, it needs to be validated by others to be made real."

"Did that happen for you, Earl?"

"Did I get something real?"

"Yes."

"I like to think that I did."

I turned off the recorder and settled back into my chair. Earl folded his legs in to go into a more zen-like pose. There were sounds of the forest, and from the kitchen, bubbling soup.

I went home that night feeling full, feeling cool wind on the skin. Perhaps Earl was too cynical. There were still precious things in the world, things that could be your own. But by any standard, he had found himself out in the jungle. He will live there til the day that he dies.

Returning to regular work at the Cambridge office was refreshing if less hands-on. People came and went with stories. Were any of them as revealing as Sally's? As terrifying as the older Earl's encounter? As scientific as the monopole trap set up by Taylor? None of them were, but I went on, helping however I could.

The day came when I received a letter from the younger Sally:

We live in a new city now. We are fine but our secret remains.

I still want to understand what happened.

Talk to the older Sally. I wonder if she still has nightmares. I don't know if this is helpful or not, but I used to sleep fitfully and now no more.

If you solve it, leave a letter at Ming's on Chelmsford Avenue. The owner knows me.

I will come one day and read it.

- Sally

What could I tell Sally? A million thoughts and experiences flew through my head. But to turn her against Earl would not bring her answers - only confusion and turmoil. I remembered the older Sally, her fitful sleeps and drab daytimes. The younger Earl may not have learned the same lesson as the older, but he had nonetheless crafted a better life for Sally, and that meant he must have true feelings. Perhaps he was right to hide away the research which could create and destroy so much.

I wrote:

I met the other Sally. I found the older Earl living happily in Nigeria.

You are from this universe.

Earl found evidence that a lab experiment duplicated you. He hides it because he is proud of your resilience and the new life that you have made together. For a while you had to run, but now you can stop running.

You are the new Sally Jacobs.