

The Children of the Lord

R. Ancel

For my students.

We are all the lord's children, and he left us in a hot car.

— *Anonymous*

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I Prologue

Puke runs down the airbag cover, the center console panel in front of my passenger seat. The guy, hunched over, full fetus, puking like a baby on my gas-station-vacuumed upholstery. The orange chunks soaking a flyer, staining the portrait of a little girl. The blue and crimson lights flashing between the blinding whites.

In 2020, feeding the homeless is a revolutionary act.

First puking, now wheezing. The gas station 40-ounce – flooding out the top, mixing with the glob of crushed almond — that smell is there to stay. The can spews froth, fizzing on the pool of stomach acids, which puddles by his feet. Listen to that fizz for long enough, and you forget that he stopped vomiting awhile ago, *too* long ago. Now, arms wrapped across his chest, he shivers. He didn't hold down the protein bar — it's all over the head unit, and the gear-shifter — so god knows how much longer he'll keep shivering before he stops for good.

The whole time, the siren behind us, shouting, “*Pull over!*” Like we didn't hear him the first fifty times.

We're vigilantes, not deaf.

My tires screeching against the concrete sidewalks, my small sedan *thuds* — everything inside bounces — myself, the old man, the chunks of protein bar. He groans, pulls his hands behind his head. Or, maybe, that's the groan of the rusted tailpipe falling off again.

He pulls his head closer to his stomach, and the siren still screams, “*Pull your vehicle to*

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the side of the road!”

The red and white and blue doubles, triples, quadruples — it’s too easy to lose count.

We zip by a minivan — the soccer moms, the kids, they barely squeal to a stop as my bouncing car flashes by. The echo of a honk that never ends. The multicolored lights glowing darker.

The bought us one, maybe two, extra minutes. But they’ll be back.

In the distance, glowing the color of blood, the plus-sign, the neon Greek cross, and the hospital logo underneath it — it’s salvation.

For him.

Not me.

No, I’m fucked.

A few years ago, before my passenger door slid across a mailbox and sent it bouncing off, I worked at a parking garage. It was a temp job while I made the transition to college. A woman I worked with, she spent her weekends getting the homeless to rehab centers.

Why? I once asked — because I was stupid — or because my hands weren’t gripping the steering wheel hard enough as the tires smoked onto the highway.

She said that most homeless get where they are because of substance abuse. Many of them in this city, they’re alcoholics. Ones who let booze get the best of them. She doesn’t give them money. She gives them food, and brings them to rehab.

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Hitting the brakes so hard we almost flip after the 90-degree turn, I asked, How do you know that?

“Because I was once an alcoholic homeless,” she said — someone’s shouting at me, a gruff scream from the driver’s side of an open taxi window.

She helped them get to rehab because someone once saved her. And now, she saves other people.

And now, the red, white, and blue lights creep upon us — the great American metaphor — just as we dart off the bypass.

The whole simplicity of the idea killed me. Rehab — *just* rehab. In a culture that shames rehabilitation, in a culture that implores us to get wasted.

When I was twenty-one — and I can say this, because the hospital’s parking lot is one curb-hop away — I saw my first therapist. It was after a breakup, during a semester when I almost flunked out. He said, my problem was just stress. He said, word for word, “Get a little drunk. Get a little high. Go to a party. You’ll feel better.”

My first night drinking booze was three days after that.

In a culture, that expects you to get so shitfaced you puke all over a stranger’s car seat, being sober is an act of terrorism.

But — and I can say this, because my car almost rammed into a pillar — the friends you make drunk, they usually go away. The stress you avoid when you black out, it’ll catch up to you. And the people you hurt when you give up control of yourself to feel good — they find you. One way or another.

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Not everyone gets lucky enough *not* to let an addiction, or a behavior, or whatever you want to call it, ruin their life.

But some of us survive. And when we do, we have an obligation to save others.

The sirens grow louder as I throw open the passenger door. His body limp, he slides out, head thuds against the pavement. There's blood running down his forehead now, by the soggy cluster of granola in his hair. The head of the little girl, the photograph on the flyer, gets decapitated between the door and car frame.

It took awhile before I started helping the homeless get to rehab, too. Started simple — *real* simple. Sometimes, you get backlash. You get people who don't want to be saved. Not everyone is ready for that. Not everyone trusts you — least of all, the people who have hurt, or been hurt. Or both.

But most people just want a home. They want shelter. Food. Another chance.

When I found this guy, cradling a manila envelope, and downing a brown-paper-bag that turned out to be a Natty Ice, he just wanted a bite to eat. Didn't realize how drunk he still was. I didn't have much on me, just a granola bar that my wife packed for lunch, because it's easy to forget to eat when you're making sure everyone else gets fed. I held the bar out.

And when he grabbed it — *right — fucking — when he grabbed it* — some officer's voice shouted in the distance. It grew louder with the sound of footsteps running toward us.

For the record, most cops don't care if you feed your fellow man. He just wasn't one of them. He ran over faster than I have ever seen a cop run.

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Got right up in my face.

Demanded I explain what I was doing.

Giving this guy something to eat— But it wasn't good enough.

I don't hate cops.

Resting on my shoulder, this guy nearly slipped off, and started dry heaving again, right there in the lobby. We're so close. I screamed, "*He needs help! Someone get him help!*" Because once you've seen someone die from overdose, you do everything possible not to see another.

The nurses rushed over. Took him off my shoulders. Behind me, the automatic doors hissed open. Sirens, parked outside, blared loud again.

I don't hate cops — but by the time my fist had b-lined into that officer's throat an hour ago, the old guy was already around my arms, already coughing up chunks, and reaching out behind him for the handle of *Honey Jack*.

Now, he's screaming and reaching back, and he might be screaming "fire" or "flyer." Someone this wasted, it's impossible to decipher what he says.

He should have died. But despite everything, he got here. He made it. Whatever happens to me is, well, whatever. Acts of service are the modern-day assassination.

But, still, he made it.

The pattering of shoes, and *Hands on the ground!* and the clicking of handguns surrounded me. My knees hit the cold tile. My face kissed a chunk of some soggy, dehy-

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drated raisin. My eyes closed tight.

— James “Jim” Whitfield, police testimony

The Children of the Lord

A history by Robert Hellman

The human race on Earth died when one guy developed a bad cough.

That's it.

That's how we go out. Not with a scream, nor a whimper — but a cough. Just a cough.

That's how Earth loses its children.

They say that those of us who left this planet got along just fine. That deeper in the galaxy, the reptilian overlords, their blue skin and ever-changing forms, welcomed the rest. But by the time the lizards got here? Well, there wasn't anyone who was ready to leave.

So they left us.

Because we asked them to.

The rest of us, the ones who were smart enough to send their children, or their children's children, far beyond the solar system, they made out great. And not because they will avoid the supernova that will one day engulf the earth. Not because they lived beyond the Buddhist, fatalist, accept-what-you-won't-change bullshit. No, they're lucky.

They get to remember what life is like when you lose communication.

Here on Earth, we forgot what that was like. Long, long ago. We communicate, we share ideas, we better ourselves. What we're really doing is running.

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We communicate to forget that we're all afraid of being alone.

The closer we get, the more we share ideas, the more secure we feel. But remember — remember your ancestor, who spoke in grunts, and drove a rock into his neighbor's skull. Remember, even he knelt, and prayed, his hunt bleeding out by his knees. He and all his kind worshiped their hunt. Then, they worshipped the plants and crops. They worshiped small gods in their homes. Then, big gods. Then, themselves.

But they weren't connected. Not like us, the ones who stayed behind.

Those of us who stayed on Earth worshiped communication — with all forms of life. Even life that can't speak itself.

When we communicate, we replace our gods with knowledge. And when we lose our connectivity, there, we find the gods again. So, the smart ones, those of us who left, give them credit. When they tell you about other arms of the galaxy, where Lapis lazuli lizards lay eggs in cancer patients, give them credit. They found something that the humans left on Earth never wanted to find again.

Before you call them delusional, ask yourself if you're really just jealous.

But, look, some of us never get to leave a legacy behind. Our ancestors had gods, who died, when other gods invaded. Then, those gods were killed by therapists, who give bad advice, until boards of directors took their licenses.

We all have our legends.

But not every legend is bullshit. The humans here on Earth stayed and died. The ones who left were saved by aliens. And before all that, in the center of a city, the lizards, from the

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other side of the galaxy, stopped by to take a human. It was the first and only time they did this.

In the middle of the crowded city, people chatted outside bistros, or fixated on their phones. Only two people in the entire crowd noticed. One shorter, a scrawnier guy, in a white collared shirt and tie. The other, a younger woman, her dark-brown hair cut short and oily, a sleeve of a silverfish tattooed on her arm. An entire city full of people, and just the two of them noticed.

This guy walked away from them. He reeked, his clothes torn up, skin leathered, drainflies buzzing around him. He just trodded off. It wasn't clear what he said to them, but they kept watching him. He alked up, and up, the hill, in the middle of the afternoon, the sun shining down from the top.

The girl pointed — not at the guy, but something just beyond him. The outline of someone, wearing a full jacket, like an FBI agent. Her arms wrapped across her chest. Her partner's hand raised above his brow, shielded his eyes from the oppressive sun. They both squinted, blinded by the beams of daylight.

At the top, the figure in the suit reached out his hand, and the older man took it. Completely washed out by the sunlight, on top of the hill, he turned back to the couple, at the bottom, and smiled. His lips moved, and surely he was trying to tell them something. He and the man in the suit both turned around, and took their first steps.

Then, the light intensified — and the two were gone.

2

The alarm buzzes at two-thirty in the afternoon. My hand slaps it. Eyes open, slowly, from this dream. Not the same way the yoga gurus say, or the Buddhist gurus say — and don't get them started on which 'way' is the better of the two. No amount of meditation prepares you for adulthood.

My life repeats the same routine, day in and out. The day to day task is my mantra. *My meditation.*

And before you correct me, yes, I *have* studied with monks from Tibet. And, no, it *didn't* make me a better person.

Coffee rushes along the sides of my green and black mug. My nose rests just above the rim. The steam opens up my sinuses. Behind the mug, on one of the desktop monitors, my business inbox floods with unread messages.

Miss Doughtry, I tried downloading a music player, and now there's a purple octopus dancing on my screen, and my keyboard won't work, and...

All my business cards read, "Evelyn Doughtry, Home Automations Specialist." That's a fancy way of saying, I fix toasters that have Bluetooth built in. And before you ask: yes, your Bluetooth toaster *does* have an exploit built in. You just haven't found it yet.

If that scares you, maybe you should burn your home appliances.

Before you ask, no, *no one* (except my clients) calls me 'Evelyn.' My mom calls me 'Eve.' So do my friends. My dad doesn't call me anything, because he was never in the picture.

Eve, baby,— Delete.

Mom hasn't answered any calls or texts in weeks. She's probably too busy letting her shitty new wife grind it on her face. Well, mom — guess you're getting coal this year. A nice, fat turd, wrapped with a bow-tied ribbon.

Evelyn, I have a special work order request. Please call me at this secure number. The same, generic description, from the same, generic twat. They send it over and over. Doesn't matter how many times I ask for details of their issue — *specific details*. If they can't read, they're probably not worth my time. When the same person, sends you the same message — over, and over, and *fucking over again* — hitting "DELETE" gets easier and easier.

Part of this freelancing gig is taking whatever requests I want. Just enough for a roof, for food. It used to be, enough to party. Go downtown. *A lot.*

That was the whole last half of my late teens, the whole first half of my early twenties. Hopping in some Uber with a group. Showing up at a night club — flirting with the bouncer so he lets me walk in with ripped jeans and a t-shirt that shows my bra straps. They'd let me slip in, and then, they'd block the guy behind me — you could hear the bouncer say, *No polos. Against dress code.*

It wasn't about the free drinks — never *ever* take a free drink from a rando at a club. Especially if they're a man. They'll think you're interested. This can be a pain in the ass when you explain that you're not interested in men. Or, women. Or, anyone, really.

We should be teaching men *not* to rape. But the more they do, the more our culture lets them get away with it.

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We shouldn't *need* to know how pin someone to the ground. But the more rapists get loose, the more it becomes our problem.

When their faces turn red, and they're coughing for air, they might try, with the little breath they have, to call you a *bitch*. *Cunt*. *Whore*. Push your knee deeper into their Adam's apple.

It's men — big, *tough* men — who might get their feelings hurt if we teach them *not* to rape. If we teach them to take "no" for an answer.

The more people defend this kind of thing, the easier it gets to shove my knee into a throat.

So, sure, going out with my girlfriends, it was fun. But that's not why I stopped. Not because of the douchebags at the clubs, either.

A long time ago, my dad knocked up my mom, back when they both thought the birth control was working.

We learned about one-way functions in cryptography courses. They're formulae that can produce a result. But you can't reverse it.

Making a baby is a one-way function. Like encrypting a file. Alice sends Bob a number. Bob sends Alice a number. They use it to get a shared secret. They share some public information in the process.

I am Alice and Bob's public secret — the fact that they had kids too young, too naive, too juvenile.

My parents had me in their early twenties. My earliest just blur together. But the farther I remember, the more my memories turn to screaming and shouting matches, tires squealing off and broken glass.

Mom hid me from my dad for *years*. One day, the doorbell rang. It rang while *toddler-me* put together a Lego house. Inside it, stood a little Lego man, his Lego wife, and their beautiful lego daughter. Perfect, plastic people. A perfect, plastic family.

It kept ringing, so mom answered it. Someone who looked homeless just stood there. He looked at me... and started to cry. Just cried, right there, in the doorway. Mom started yelling. He yelled back, louder — *so* much louder. And mom did that thing she always does. She tensed up. Ran back in the house; slammed the door; ran away, to her bedroom; and slammed that door, too.

Agonizing screaming echoed just outside. Through the blinds, my eyes peeked out. Watched him walk away. That was the last time I ever saw my father.

At twelve, mom told me that, if dad *really cared*, he would make the effort. Her boyfriend at the time rested some microwaved egg patty, next to some microwaved bacon, on my plate.

At eighteen, mom said, my dad knows my age. Her new girlfriend wrapped her arms around her — said, what do you need *three* parents for, anyway?

In college, when the academic council almost kicked me out for protesting gender rights, mom told me to stop acting so difficult.

And when I started drinking, at nineteen — god, when I started drinking — mom

changed. She stopped arguing with me the first few times I snapped at her, so wasted it was hard to stand. She tensed up, hung up, ran to her room — all the same shit she always did.

And it didn't seem to matter, later on, if I had sobered up or not. The sparkle she used to look at me with, all throughout my childhood years, it went away. She got reclusive. She stopped calling me.

It's not anger. Not fear. Sometimes, I wish it were — it'd be so much easier to understand her if it were. No, the way she looks at me now, it's something else. It's impossible to put my finger on.

Mom always blamed dad for their failed marriage. She said, *Your dad's drinking ruined our family*. Said, *I won't raise a child with an alcoholic*.

Yeah. Well, looks like I finished what he started. Like father, like child.

Partly her growing defensive, partly me spending hundreds of student loan dollars at clubs, mom and I drifted apart. She came to my college graduation, with her new wife. At least one parent shows up for me.

The three of us sat with elevator music serenading the Applebee's, right after the graduation ceremony. The new wife goes there for the two-for-one appetizers. For the two-for-one drinks.

Four empty glasses surround my side of the table. I place the fifth glass, now empty, on a card, with a frog, and a speech bubble that says, *Hoppin' toward a bright future!*

"Does dad know where we are?"

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“He has to know,” mom said, sipping water, ever the designated driver.

“You always said he didn’t *try* to find me. All my life. Does he even know where to look?”

The new wife raised her eyebrows as she sipped her strawberry marg. Mom just chewed her food, and said, “If someone wants to find you, they will.”

While the waiter cheered and rested a the bloomin’ onion between the two of us, Mom said, “If someone wants to talk to you, they will.”

That night, a handle of Honey Jack drained itself in my glass. The frog on the card peeked out above the trash can rim. Opened up Photosho — could’ve done this in fucking *Paint*, for what it mattered. It started with my full name, in large font — EVE-LYN DOUGHTRY — then my mom’s name — ALICE DOUGHTRY. Then, some photos, in a collage. Then, *BOB HELLMAN: PLEASE RESPOND*. Then, why not, our addresses. Emails.

One by one, I posted it on Facebook. Made a landing page for *just* this flyer. Attached it up on message boards. Linked it in the comments section of online phonebooks and local news sites.

Posted it all over town. Stapled paper flyers onto wooden phone poles.

Hours into the next day, my phone rang. On the screen, in big letters, “Mom.” I put down the last IPA in the six-pack. “Evelyn—” She *never* calls me Evelyn. This must be someone else — someone lost in the reserved, defensive anger, and refused to call it “anger,” because this person hates to feel that. She just *sounds* like my mom.

“Yep?”

“Why?”

My eyes can’t roll back any farther. “Because I want to find him.”

She groan-sighed, disgusted. “You *know* I don’t want him to—”

“Don’t want him to *what*?” I snapped back, “Don’t want him to *find me*? Don’t want him to *see his daughter*? To be in the same room for my first steps. For my graduation. *That’s* what you don’t want?”

“Eve, I—”

“No, *fuck you*, mom! I’m a grown fucking adult. I run a *fucking business*. If I *want* to find my father, I *fucking will*!”

Didn’t give her time to retort or run away — just spiked my phone clean through the drywall. Curled up into a ball. Gritted my teeth.

But I didn’t cry.

Dad cries. More men should cry, really. But it’s not my thing.

That was weeks ago. Still haven’t heard back from her. Still haven’t heard from him, either.

Maybe mom was right.

Hot coffee scalding my throat, the inbox pings, “*Evelyn, I have a special work order req—*” It’s better than the dancing-octopus emails, but they all go to the same place.

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Delete.

My therapist got me to rethink the whole “drinkng ’til you black out” thing, the nasty habit that’s *so* easy to slide into when you’re living on student loans — in college, the only time that’s socially acceptable to replace water for beer.

“Drinking can make unmanageable problems even worse, in some cases,” she said. You never hear this kind of thing from those Yogi, with their mats curled up on their back, with the smell of pot still lingering on their clumpy, greasy hair. “If you’re having trouble managing work *and* your relationships, and this *just happens* to get worse after a few shots, well... Maybe there’s a better way. That’s all.”

It’s cute, the way she tries so hard to dance around the issue. And I can’t be the *only* person alive who finds her therapist kinda hot. Do men get turned on when they feel seen an understood, too?

“And you *don’t* want to reconnect with your father? Even after the flyers?”

Without realizing that my arms sometimes clutch my knees close to my chest, I shook my head, “No. No, that was just to piss my mom off.”

Her eyes gazed away for a second with her “hm.” She says, “You know, if you really want peace, join a meditation group. Find a group therapy session. Sit in on an *Alcoholics Anonymous* meeting.”

So I did — *all* of that.

The yoga group that met every Wednesday, it’s always quiet, except for the lone yogi, walking around the room. Now and then, he repositions you. Sinks his fingers right

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into your side. He tried correcting my posture once. My fist cleared across his cheek. A few weeks later, someone else started leading at the studio, and I never saw the other guy again.

So much for perfect evenness of mind.

And don't get me started on the A.A. meeting. One of the most *depressing* places ever. The former drunks, spilling out their stories, about the times they lied their way into a drunk coma. The times they screamed outside an ex's house. Jobs they lost. Just sad.

Someone there once said, "Part of this journey is apologizing to the people we hurt." *Bullshit*. People who get hurt never want an apology. They just want to forget.

Just ask mom.

Wherever she is.

Someone there said, "We accept that addiction takes control of our lives. And only God — however we understand God — can bring us back to sanity."

Yeah? Tell that to my dad.

Wherever he is.

A few weeks finding enlightenment, finding God, that was plenty enough for me.

My god is a virus that I got some pervert to download. It's not so insidious — just *look* at this fake website — took me *minutes* to put together, and it shows. Minutes to put together, with some text that references something about "child porn," and a download link.

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When they run the program, it plays an animation of a purple octopus. It dances across the screen. Every time it swings a tentacle, that's another bulk of metadata, file information sent straight to my PC. By the time they call their tech support, it's way too late.

Every now and then, a new email from a new person says, *"Evelyn, I tried downloading some music, and now there's a dancing, purple octopus on my computer screen. What do I do?"*

And I'll open up another private node, to a private email, to the cops.

This is ripping down the veil of Maya. This is tearing down the curtain at the temple. This is more ethereal than any spiritual awakening. More healing than any relationship with any god.

The first pedophile to download this, well, he opened up his computer to me in minutes.

The rest of them took a few days.

They didn't pray hard enough.

I hate cops — but they're the ones we trust to lock up these disgusting fucks. They get an anonymous message every few days. IP Addresses. Download logs. The shit that lingers in your memory. *Computer* memory, that is. Not my actual memory — this is the kind of shit you want to forget, or you'll turn to booze again.

Rewriting my homegrown malware for better exploitation, that's my meditation.

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But, still.

Still, there's something missing.

One night, sitting on top of the ten-story airport garage, where I hang out to clear my head, it occurred to me that my phone had been weirdly... silent. For days. This isn't my work phone, not the inbox flooding with "HELP, THERE'S ROACHES IN MY COMPUTER, IS THAT NORMAL?" This is my personal one.

The only person in my life who calls this number is my mom.

Chilly wind from the bay blows my short hair, freshly cut with my own scissors, my own hands. I dial her. Wait throughout the ringtone. Wait, until the voicemail android tries to take my message. No answer.

And that wouldn't be weird — but it's been like that for months.

You'd think that she would give a shit about her own daughter — that she'd be mindful that her daughter is also trying to run her own business. But she's silent.

With every passing day, some tight knot builds in my gut. Between planting malware, and spraying raid into computer cases, and getting groped by yogis, and flirting with my therapist — when I stop, long enough to feel the silence, the knot twists tighter.

It's noon. My inbox is pinging, over and over again. *Silverfish are swarming out my Bluetooth coffee pot — my husband says hackers put porn in his hard drive RAM — his computer has a little squid dancing at the corner of the screen —*

My phone rings — the phone I *want* to ring. I don't think twice before answering it.

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Who cares if the number is unknown?

“Mom?”

“Hi, this is... wait, Mom?”

It’s a male voice. My expression sours.

“No, sorry.”

Once the disappointment sinks in, the END CALL button is right beneath my thumb.

“I’m calling on behalf of your dad. Bob Hellman — that is your dad, right?”

And there’s that knot again.

“You’re Evelyn Daughtry, right?”

“Eve,” I mutter. “Who... who is this?”

“My name’s James Whitfield, but call me Whit. Your dad almost died in the hospital. I paid a visit to prison for getting him there.”

My mouth just hangs open.

“He’s alive. They have him on fluids. He keeps drifting in and out of sleep. But he keeps asking for, well... for you. Took awhile to find you, til I saw the flyer he left in my car...”

“What do you want?” I whisper.

“Me? Nothing. Just to make sure he’s okay. It’s *he* who wants *you*.”

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My dad.

“He keeps asking about you. Mumbling your name, in and out of dreaming...”

The alcoholic, who fucked up his marriage, fucked his career, his entire life. The guy, who was so horrible, that my own mother did everything in her power to keep me safe from him.

“So, for his sake... would you mind, maybe — just *maybe* — paying him a visit?”

The selfish prick who left me behind. And now, in what may be his final moments, he wants *me* to show up for *him*?

My therapists words about reconciliation echo in my head. The A.A. speaker, talking about confronting our past, and those we hurt, echo, too. Another ping plays from my inbox. “HI, I DOWNLOADED A VIDEO GAME AND SOME OCTOPUS STARTED DANCING...”

“We’re at the Tampa Regional Cen—”

My thumb hits “end call” and kills the line, and I slam the phone against my desk.