



SUBCUTANEAN

AARON A. REED

A NOVEL
WHERE NO TWO COPIES
ARE THE SAME

SUBCUTANEAN

SUBCUTANEAN

by Aaron A. Reed

Printed in the United States of America by TheBookPatch.com

Typeset in LaTeX using the *novel* class by Robert Allgeyer, the NovelDeco and Mont fonts, and custom code. Cover design by the author.

Revised First Edition(s), 2024

This copy was generated from seed #45444 and is the only copy generated from that seed.

Seed Number Key:

Seeds starting with 0: Advance Reader Copies

Seeds starting with 1: Limited Crowdfunder Editions

Seeds starting with 2: USB Key Editions

Seeds starting with 3: First Editions (Feb 2020)

Seeds starting with 4: Revised First Editions (Mar 2020)

Copyright 2021 Aaron A. Reed.

The book you're holding is unique. There is no other exactly like it.

Each printing of SUBCUTANEAN is different. This is the one and only version generated from seed #45444. Words, sentences, or whole scenes may appear in some printings that do not appear in others. No two copies are alike.

But all of them are the same story, more or less. Don't worry about what's in the other versions. They don't matter. This is the one you have.

This is the one that's happening to you.

SUBCUTANEAN.TEXTORIES.COM

PART ONE

DOWNSTAIRS

I am not yours, not lost in you,
Not lost, although I long to be
Lost as a candle lit at noon,
Lost as a snowflake in the sea.

Sarah Teasdale

I don't know how to tell you this, Niko. I never wanted to gut you, reach inside and pull things out, not again. Old wounds and sleeping dogs, you know. Tales better left untold. And you've heard this one, haven't you? Even if your version never quite matched mine.

But that's why I'm sitting here, writing this. If it's a story, you see, maybe we can understand, come to terms.

Pretend it's not ours.

I don't think I ever told this to you. When I was little, my dad used to come tuck me in at night, and sometimes I'd blink and he'd disappear. He'd be sitting on my bed, singing or smoothing my sheets or telling a story, warm and alive, and between one blink and the next he'd be gone. My heart would thump and I'd clutch the blanket, terrified, eyes thrashing back and forth across the dark spaces of my room like a trapped bird looking for a way out, looking for him, but he'd be gone, and I'd be alone.

Maybe premonition. More likely was that I'd fall asleep, waiting for him to come in, and dream he had. Some noise would jerk me up to a room where he'd long since looked in on me and pulled the door gently shut. But how I rationalize it makes no difference. It doesn't change how I lived that loss, each night it happened. How I can feel it even today. The person who loved me most, erased from existence in a blink. I'll never forget how that felt. Even if it never really happened.

But this story. Our story. Maybe it's a language we can speak, you and I. Find in the telling the truths that matter. Embellish, excise. Revise. Revision.

Although our story was never just a story. It happened. You still remember that, don't you?

Fine then. Here goes. You ready?

This is what happened when we found the flight of stairs underneath my bed, and took it. Took it all the way down.

Right from the start things were wrong, but I couldn't see it. Maybe I didn't want to. Or maybe I'm being too hard on myself. There wasn't exactly a roadmap for what happened, a script to follow. But it's undeniable that even on that very first night—the night of the Russian dance club, remember?—everything was already wrong.

I was on the back porch, looking over the dying backyard grass at the sunset reddening the top of college hill. We'd moved in a few weeks back, Niko and I and our friends, mostly his, students and lapsed students and a few brave graduates, still settling into the rambling old off-campus house we'd found in the newspaper. (Cast your mind back to a time when kids like us had figured out the internet but people old enough to own property hadn't, so instead of browsing classifieds our bandwidth went entirely to downloading all the music in the world.) My Bio homework was in my lap but I couldn't remember what page the reading started on, or why I cared. All I could think about was whether the words I'd said that morning had cost me my best friend.

So when I heard him force his way into the house through the juddering side door, perpetually stuck, I stiffened. He'd stormed out after the argument and I hadn't heard from him since. I hadn't even started to work through my feelings about it, what I'd said and what I hadn't. I didn't know what to say to him now.

Which one of us needed to apologize, or for what.

I tensed, waiting to hear if he'd head upstairs to his room or find me out here, not sure which I wanted. The possibility seemed suspended, unresolved, for an uncomfortably long time.

The screen door creaked and Niko stepped out onto the porch. I didn't turn around. He walked over and stood at the railing next to me, an unlit cigarette between his lips, facing the twilight.

He sucked on the cigarette for a long minute ineffectually, distracted, then slipped it back into his pocket. Gripped the railing.

"Hey," he finally said, "wanted to invite you out. With a bunch of us," he added, a bit too smooth. "There's this new dance club over by the old stadium. Supposedly they play this fucking feral, crotch-pummeling Russian dance music and lots of sexy people will be there tonight, including us."

"Huh." I blinked, not quite getting what this was. "Not really my thing."

"I mean in a weird way it kind of might be? I mean you like Shostakovitch, right? He's Russian. And isn't techno sort of the people's music of the modern day? Simple, rhythmic, obnoxiously loud?"

He was reaching. It was kind of sweet but I still felt sullen. "Is this you apologizing?"

He let out a breath, deflating. "I don't know what you want from me, man. After everything we've been through together, you think we'd be past this kind of shit."

I couldn't think of what to say. I realized I was being unfair but I also felt terrible unresolved wounds between us. The things I'd said that morning hadn't stopped being true. *You're smothering me. I can't always be there for you. Sometimes you're too much.*

Sometimes, I feel like I can't escape you. I hadn't said that last one.

But. I also hated to feel estranged from him. I wanted every-

thing back the way it was before. More than anything.

We let the twilight happen to us for another couple minutes.

“It is me apologizing,” he said at last. “You’re my best friend, Ryan. I can’t stand to have you angry at me. I need you to—” He stopped, face reddening, scuffed his feet on the deck. “I mean I’d like to have you around.” He pulled the cigarette out again, had it to his lips before realizing the lighter he’d thrown out a week ago still wasn’t in his pocket. He sighed and dropped it onto the lawn.

“So come out to the club,” he said. “We can hate Russian techno together. I’ll buy the drinks. Let’s go have a good time. Yeah?”

“I’ve got Bio homework.” I looked down at the still-closed textbook in my lap, face reddening. “And I don’t want to be around a lot of loud drunk people tonight. Or loud drunk music.”

“It won’t be any fun if you aren’t there,” he said quietly.

I looked up and met his glance, expecting the vulnerability I’d only seen there a handful of times, but found something else. The half-grin and cocked eyebrow that said he wasn’t taking no for an answer, and maybe it said something else, or I wanted to pretend it did. His eyes were so fucking sharp. When they looked at you and wanted something, it hurt.

I sighed. “I’m going to hate it.”

“Yeah you are.” He grinned wickedly. “Every second. We’re leaving at eight. I’ll knock on your door.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “Who knows. Maybe some drunk straight guy will start making out with you cause Russian techno makes him feel all experimental and shit.”

“That’ll definitely happen.”

“What was the point of coming out,” he said, already on his way back inside, “if you never actually *go out*?” He mimed dropping a mic and his head exploding, and was gone, leaving only the him-shaped hole that always lingered after the rest of him had vanished.

I was somehow committed. I was going, like he'd wanted. On the off-chance that something interesting would happen. Still trapped in his orbit, for better and worse.

We'd been friends since freshman year of college and best friends since the year after that, and by now felt like something more, placidly absorbing jokes about being joined at the hip, going everywhere together. We did. Especially since his accident, we'd had a profound if unspoken level of companionship I'd never felt with anyone. Usually I was content with that.

In some ways we had so little in common it was astonishing we'd become friends, and that led to frequent arguments, sometimes rising to breakup levels of drama. At other moments it seemed like the universe had meant us to find each other. Over the years we'd grown together, like two plants in the same small pot. It had been an especially tumultuous four years of college—although I guess it feels that way for everyone—so shared roots twined us together now, half-remembered fragments of stories and selves: skipping a funeral to camp together in the rocky canyons of Brushwillow, sharing long silences amidst the lakes and pines; pulling all-nighters on mad projects with desperate stakes; driving to the next town over through a summer midnight, windows rolled down and air thrumming through, desperate to find fresh vegetables for reasons that seemed incredibly important at the time, buzzed from both caffeine and alcohol as in so many stories involving Niko. In our defense the alcohol was supposed to go in the ragu.

I'd hated the club, as predicted. The music was so loud it hurt, almost as much as it hurt to call the shit they were blasting "music." I'd worn my rainbow pride bracelet, the one I'd bought a few months ago and mostly been too chickenshit to wear (it was a college town but a conservative state). I might as well have worn a bag over my head. Everyone ignored me, including the hypothetical hot guys with loosened inhibitions. I stood against a wall

hating myself and hating how I must have looked to everyone, an acne-faced geek in too-small clothes lurking on the outskirts, wishing he was back home listening to Dvořák symphonies. I watched Niko dance his ass off, mostly with girls, and once or twice with guys, whether out of politeness or genuine interest I couldn't tell. I'd never really been able to tell. He flirted with everyone, flashed the same manic energy in all directions. But he, too, seemed to fail at making any solid human connections, and I was relieved when he cornered me and asked if I wanted to duck out early.

Walking back home from the club through the chill night air with him was a relief. The night felt endless, anonymous, an escape from daytime problems; the argument that morning already a long-forgotten memory, ancient history. In the fall we'd be starting our fifth year of college, neither of us particularly close to graduating with any particular degree, and for the first time that felt ominous. The future staked out before us our whole lives was running out. A blank canvas ought to have been exciting, but any direction we could imagine to go in seemed blocked off, already closed, inaccessible or unrealistic. Friends were picking already between the remaining well-flagged routes: getting careers, getting married, getting pregnant, getting gone to new cities, new lives, new starts. It would be our turn soon enough.

By the time we hit the top of the hill and saw the house, we were ready to be back indoors. I'd gotten ranty about real music on the walk back, and as we stepped through the juddering screen door, its metal-on-wood screech already a familiar sound, I had a half-dozen songs queued up to play for him. Mentally, I mean: digital music players hadn't caught on yet back then, although it was still tragically too late for my records to be anything but anachronism. Vinyl wouldn't start making a comeback for years and was deader than dead. Maybe that was why I liked it. When we moved in I'd stacked my crates of LPs in the closet, so now

as we tromped up the stairs to my room and dragged them out to hunt for the albums I wanted to play, we got annoyed at the lack of anywhere to put them. So that was how I ended up on my hands and knees, searching for a way to open up my bed.

“Bed” was generous: it was a mattress, thrown on a raised wooden platform built into a corner of the room. The platform was mattress-sized and had therefore seemed like the sensible spot to put one, but it also felt as if it should have had some storage space inside. I’d never found any handles or hinges, but with late-night logic it seemed ridiculous that the thing couldn’t be opened somehow, and because I can’t leave well enough alone and because unsolved challenges annoy me, there I was on hands and knees fiddling with the paneled edges of the platform, shoving and kneading and banging on them. When something finally gave with a satisfying *chunk*, I whooped in satisfaction; but leapt back startled when the whole platform groaned and swung up, pencils and organic chemistry textbooks sliding off the mattress onto the pitted hardwood floor.

Underneath was a set of steep stairs down.

“Whoah,” Niko said, “Jackpot.”

They were carpeted in the same dark beige as the rest of the house, which looked like someone had redecorated in the seventies and died decades later unaware style had moved on. Ten steps led down to a landing where they twisted right and reversed. Cramped, but bland and familiar: the walls paneled in that same fake wood as the rest of the house, lit by those same tacky wall sconces. All as you’d expect from the stairs down to a basement, except we were on the second story and the house already had a basement, which emphatically did not connect through my bed.

Niko laughed in astonishment. “What the fuck is this, man? What’s down there?”

“Hell if I know. More secrets.” We were grinning, because this sort of thing had already happened a few times since we’d moved

in. The house had been my find. The group of us were getting older (or so we thought then) and were sick of living in shitty campus housing or the shittier apartments nearby preying on starving students, so we pooled our resources to go in on a house in the pleasant tree-lined neighborhood a few blocks farther out. It was an old house, maybe as much as a hundred years old, but big, in good repair, and, most important, cheap: we were all paying less rent than when living in pairs or alone. I'd claimed the funky second-floor patio room in a lumpy wing extending into the backyard, clearly a later addition, and Niko snagged a creaking and stuffy room next to mine which he dubbed "lovingly misshapen." A lot of the place was like that: a half-landing here, an awkward angle there, bits taken out and bricked over on some whim or other. The house had expanded and contracted over the generations, it seemed, in decades-long breaths.

The listing hadn't mentioned a secret passage. But it also hadn't mentioned the closet with a door in the back leading to a dusty, forgotten room (which now housed a dusty, forgotten game of Axis and Allies); nor had it mentioned the extra bedroom in the basement tucked away around a corner and behind an unlikely-looking door. These small discoveries gave the place a quirky, rambling feel, and I loved it. My whole life I'd had dreams about finding new rooms in houses I'd lived in, each time with a thrill of discovery, of learning your cozy domain still had surprises, things left to find. Maybe it came from moving around all the time as a kid. Or maybe it said something about me.

I still had them, the dreams. I didn't know they were about to get much worse.

Niko touched the angled bottom of the bed platform and looked at me, as if for permission. He gestured grandly downwards. "Well, Orion, should we check it out?"

I gave him a formal bow, feeling puckish, giddy. "Indeed, Nikolaos, let's fucking do it."

He grinned and tousled my hair, bounding over the lip. He

stooped as he took the first few steps, black curls brushing the underside of the tilted platform.

“You going to fit down there?” I smirked. “This looks made for normal-sized people, not basketball players.”

“High school power-forward Nick appreciates your validation of his identity, thanks,” he called back, almost to the landing. “College dilettante Niko, though, wants to know if you’re fucking coming.”

I hesitated on the threshold, strangely reluctant.

He turned from the landing to look back up, arms folded. “I’m not *that* tall, am I? I’ve only got like three inches on you and your—” He flailed a hand up and down at me. “Your demographically average carcass. Stop giving me complexes.”

Actually you’re exactly four and a half inches taller than me. But who’s counting.

He shrugged, continued down the next set of stairs and out of sight. “Later, skater.”

I flipped his skinny ass off and followed him down.

Despite his complaints, Niko was in fact wearing a basketball jersey, but an ironic one from the thrift store, for some hopefully-fictional team called the Reagans. He wore a purple blazer over it, which I trust is all I need say about his fashion sense. Somehow, it worked. His horrifying ensembles always worked, whereas the clothes I’d buy, new or used, turned ugly, permanently wrinkled, and the wrong size by the time I got them home. “Dear LiveJournal,” I’d written once in my private, locked LiveJournal account, “I get now that I’m destined to die alone. You can stop sending me signs.” I had never shared my LiveJournal account with anyone and never would, which some people had told me was missing the point. Nowadays on social media I do a lot of typing and erasing status messages without posting them. Maybe you can relate.

Anyway. Niko had shrugged his shoes off when we’d gotten to my room, and now his bare feet sunk half an inch into carpet

as he tromped down the stairs. His feet were hard not to notice: maybe it was all the basketball, or the Greek ancestry, but they were like statuary. Perfect.

The stairs were steep but otherwise unextraordinary. Around the corner, more of them dropped to a second landing. We stomped down, Niko's drunken excitement leading us on like a dog straining at a leash. Past that corner was one more landing and one final run of steps that opened into a large, windowless room.

It was bigger than any other room in the house, maybe twenty-five feet across by sixty or seventy long. (Logically it ought to have been the same size as the house's footprint, but both the dimensions and orientation were wrong for that.) It had the same beige carpet and brown wall-paneling, tacky faux-bronze wall-sconces, and a plaster ceiling eight feet up. Firewood was stacked up by two fireplaces on opposite walls, in the same style as the non-functional one upstairs hidden by our TV. No windows, not even those awful basement ones that fill up with dead leaves and spider webs. No furniture, either. Just the expected bits of floor lint, carpet stains, wall gouges, and other subtle remnants of long occupation. A cool, musty smell suggested said occupation had been a long time ago.

Five open doorways led out: two along each long edge, and one on the far wall opposite the stairs.

"Holy shit, Ry, this is fucking amazing!" Niko's eyes lit up as he walked a few paces in. He flexed his bare toes on the ugly carpet. "It's like a whole secret underground lair!"

I felt the same thrill, tempered with hesitation. Did our landlord somehow not know about all this extra space? Was it some kind of forgotten bomb shelter? Niko was already talking about throwing parties down here, where to put couches. A secret basement hangout spot.

We called it Downstairs, big D, without really thinking about it.

The architecture was making my head spin, though. Someone else's bedroom was under mine. I felt an indignant vertigo, and made Niko come resolve this mystery before exploring any farther. We went back up to my room, then downstairs—regular lower-case downstairs—to reconnoiter. There was, in fact, an odd protrusion into the kitchen underneath and to one side of my room, and when we peeked into our absent housemate's bedroom around the corner, a mirroring blocky bulge in there. So together those two bulges explained the stairs, though not why you'd build a staircase in the middle of a wall like that. But the house was full of those weird angles and edges, so it seemed in character.

We went back Downstairs and poked around a few of the side hallways. Pretty cramped, but no worse than other god-awful basement apartments I'd seen students living in. Like some of those, there were no windows anywhere, which made sense: it felt too far down. Rooms opened off the sides of the halls (those cheap particle-board doors, those rattling brass-plated tin doorknobs). Some were carpeted and looked like they could be bedrooms; others had bare concrete flooring like a laundry or utility room. They were all empty.

The hallways branched at the end: we picked one and saw both ways passed more doors before making L-turns, each in opposite directions. Those crappy wall sconces were everywhere, so despite the lack of windows, it was almost too bright. They were all lit, and weirdly enough we couldn't find a light switch anywhere.

"You don't think we're paying for all this electricity?" Niko asked with jittery alarm.

"We haven't gotten our first bill yet." I raised my eyebrows. "Good thing we're splitting eight ways."

We didn't exhaustively explore, beyond checking another hallway and seeing that it, too, branched and snaked off, shedding rooms left and right. Niko had started down that one, but I

stopped, hit by a wave of unexplained dizziness, and put a hand against the cold wall.

He stopped instantly. "You okay?"

"I don't know." My head pulsed with another wave of nausea, this time with an undercurrent of dread, maybe from not knowing what it was. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"You drink too much at the club or something?" I shook my head. I'd had one beer. And this didn't feel like being drunk, or like a migraine, or like anything else I could label.

It just felt like something was wrong.

"I need to go lie down," I said firmly.

He tousled my hair again, but gently. "Okay, man. Hang on just one sec. I need to see the end of this fucking hallway and then we'll get you back upstairs."

I didn't want him to leave but couldn't think of any sane reason to stop him that didn't sound needy, so I nodded and let him go. Too many vaguely ill feelings were churning around inside me to sort them out from each other.

"I'll wait here," was all I could say, the thought of walking back up twisting stairs feeling for a queasy moment like a bad idea.

He was already halfway down the hall, but lifted a hand in acknowledgment. Moments later he'd turned the corner and was gone.

It was suddenly very quiet.

I sunk to a sitting position, knees at my chin, back against the fake wood-paneling. I tried to turn my focus inward, self-diagnose whatever was happening, but my thoughts slipped off the sense of growing unease like a car on black ice, unable to gain traction. Instead I focused on the feel of the carpet under my butt, the smoothness of the wall at my back. Tangible, external things. Safe.

Please, please hurry back.

Something changed around me, subtle but significant. Head

swimming, I couldn't lock on to what, at first, was different. I blinked, squinted.

The light. The play of light around me had changed, gone darker, even though none of the wall sconces in my field of vision had gone out or gotten dimmer.

We were at a T-junction, where the hall we'd come from, back to the big room with the five doorways, had branched in two directions. I was slumped against the wall facing the way we'd come, head turned towards the right-hand fork, the way Niko had gone.

I decided the dimming must have come from the lights in the hall behind me, the one we hadn't explored yet. They must have gone out.

Careful, still fighting nausea, I turned my head.

The unexplored hall was dark. The lights were off, and the dark brown walls sucked up the refracted light from the other two hallways, so that the end of this one, where it turned another corner, was right at the edge of shadow.

But there was enough light to see that someone was standing there.

I stared and tried to unsee the human shape, to resolve it into a trick of angles and darkness: turn off my brain's over-eager pattern matchers, finding predators in a coincidence of edges.

It moved.

The shadow took a step forward, slow and deliberate. Like a deer not sure if it's seeing a bobcat or a bush. I couldn't see its eyes or expression but it was facing me, looking at me.

And then I realized who it was.

Maybe my eyes had adjusted to the dim light, or maybe my imagination was shifting into a higher gear. But like the solution to a puzzle plunking full-formed into my head I recognized, now, who was standing there at the end of the hall.

It was Niko. Obviously.

A wave of relief crashed over me. "Jesus, man, you scared

the shit out of me.” Something was still wrong but I didn’t want to think about it. “I, uh. Probably need to head back up,” I added, keeping my voice cheerful, looking down at the carpet, looking anywhere but him, still standing at the end of the dark hall. Everything probably made sense, if I could just see how: why he hadn’t said anything, why he was standing there. Did the hallway he’d left down even connect to that one? I clutched the carpet under my hand, feeling for the solidness of it, an anchor back to reality.

Silence. I looked back up, unwillingly. The face was still dark but I recognized the way the body held itself, the silhouette it made, the shoes. Unmistakable. I knew the shape of his body as well as I knew my own.

I squinted into the darkness, seeing something else now. Something barely visible, even deeper in the shadows.

There was more than one of him.

The second stood just behind the first, so I couldn’t see its face either: but it was the same silhouette, the same height, the same shape. It was another one, identical. Another Niko. It had been there all along, hidden behind the first, and I could only see it now because they were moving again, lifting up the other foot, still slow, still hesitant, following the double in almost perfect synchronicity. Like they were glued together.

They put the feet down, gentle, soundless on the thick carpet.

Another pace closer.

I wondered how many more were stacked up behind them. How many more I couldn’t see, each pressed up against the last, a line vanishing into the darkness, stretching back god knows how far, patient, waiting for something I could never understand.

I wondered what they wanted.

I wondered how fast they could reach me if they started to run.

“What you looking at?” Niko asked from behind me, and I *leapt*, fucking leapt to my feet like the floor was electric, whirling

around to face him, body in full panic as all the building adrenalin flooded through me in an instant; panting and overwhelmed with terror and nausea and a terrible, stabbing relief at seeing him, seeing a him that was familiar instead of a thing that wasn't.

"The lights back there went out," I said, gasping, not looking behind me. Also, more certain: "I need to throw up."

He clapped my shoulder, grim. "Let's get you back upstairs."

I let him shepherd me away. I didn't look back down the hall.

But as we left, his arm protective on my shoulders, he frowned. "Didn't find the end of the hall, man. This place is freaking huge."

The hallway had twisted a few more times, Niko said, then split again. I'd felt fine after a good night's sleep, but neither of us seemed in any hurry to head back Downstairs the next day. It might seem odd that we didn't go back down there to map the whole thing out right away. I can't really explain it, unless Niko was already feeling the same irrational foreboding as me.

I've always spooked too easy. Horror movies, for instance, were an absolute no-go. I'd realized this at some point in high school when they were still a kind of macho rite of passage. One of the last ones I watched was a terrible direct-to-video job about a creature that lived in the woods and hunted down the teenagers who kept blithely wandering in. When you finally saw the monster it was a huge let-down—terrible make-up on an even worse actor. But before you saw it on screen, you heard it, and the movie's whole gimmick, its thing, was that the creature would parrot back anything said to it, in the original voice, flawless. It wasn't clear if it understood the words, or just mindlessly mimicked the sound. But while it was slaughtering each hapless cheerleader it would repeat her terrified cries for help back to her, perfectly. Would keep screaming in her voice even after she'd died.

That concept settled into my brain and ate away at me for weeks, though I couldn't explain why it was so terrifying. Why should the worst thing to hear from a dark woods at night be

not snarls or growls or witchy laughter, but your own voice, yourself? And yet it was. A few weeks later I jerked awake well after midnight certain something was standing in the shadows of my room, and as I reached out frantic for my lamp I knocked it off the nightstand and it crashed to the floor, the bulb shattering with a tinkle, and I stupidly called out “Is someone there?” and as I did I realized if I heard it repeated back to me from the shadows it would be the end of me, a clean break through my sanity, even if it was a joke or a prank or a hallucination, and as I clutched my blanket too terrified to go to the light switch on the wall I prayed, pleaded with my brimful imagination not to choose that moment to overflow, to improvise, to believe in things that weren’t really there, like it had each time I’d read too much into smiles or gestures, each time I’d watched vivid movies play in my head sprung from single sentences in books or looked at clouds and seen, really seen, fantastic shapes in them, and I’m pretty sure that was the exact moment I decided horror movies weren’t for me.

Anyway. I knew there wasn’t really anything down there, Downstairs, and as the memory faded so did the lingering terror. Replacing it was a giddy sensation like having too much Halloween candy. There was a whole huge secret basement under our house that only we knew about. It felt good to have a secret. Another code in our personal dictionary, something only for us.

Niko was terrible at secrets. By next afternoon, all the other housemates had seen Downstairs too, as well as a couple of his basketball buddies and one or two of his closest philosophy buddies. (He’d made a point of changing majors and hobbies once a quarter for the past year, while continuing to swear up and down to his immigrant parents he was still majoring in Economics.) I tried not to take the betrayal personally.

But the strange thing was that no one seemed much interested. Everyone agreed Downstairs was a cool find, and made for a nice hangout spot, but no one cared to venture too far out-

side the big central room, or spend too much time down there. Everyone other than Niko and I would get bored, start talking about other things, eventually drift back upstairs to whatever they'd been doing before.

Odd, in hindsight.

We did end up moving a couple couches down (and it was murder getting them around those tight landings, let me tell you) and a half-dozen boxes of my records, and made the Big Room available as a kind of secondary hangout space, quieter than the crowded front room with the TV and people always coming and going. Some of the empty rooms off the big one turned into overflow storage for everyone's miscellaneous shit, but remained otherwise unoccupied. An old bandmate of Niko's who'd dropped out of college to start an art collective got really excited about free studio space, moved in a bunch of junk for some unfinished sculptural masterpiece ("I'm going to need at least twice this many fishbowls," she apologized), then never came back again. Maybe it was a con.

I didn't get on well with most of Niko's friends. I'm sure they all wondered what he saw in me.

No one did end up moving down there. Zero natural light is kind of a downer, even for well-adjusted people. Niko made some noise about bringing a girl down sometime. ("Dude, it's a secret make-out lair. You're doing college wrong if you don't get some action down there.") But we both knew he wouldn't actually do it. It was too quiet, for one thing.

It also felt forbidden, somehow, but not in like a sexy rule-breaking kind of way. Being down there had the vague flavor of trespassing, the kind where you're not going to get away with it and it'll go bad for you when you get caught. Sneaking into a restricted area at the airport; busting into Area 51. I mean it was our house, right? But Downstairs didn't feel like ours. Enough laughter or booze or noise and the feeling went away, or at least buried itself somewhere deep, where you'd hardly ever notice it.

Maybe because of that, definitely because I had to fill in at my job for two work-studies who faked being sick, maybe also because we enjoyed prolonging the sense of mystery, and, okay, because I was sulking, more than a week passed before we got around to scoping out the place in depth. Niko spent a day in an extraordinary funk of fierce depression followed by an equally intense reversal, like he'd do from time to time, and I took advantage of his high to prod him into going to explore Downstairs. He took to this plan eagerly, and seemed pleased when I told him I'd been waiting so we could do it together. "Ryan," he said fondly, "in an emergency, you know, you can do things without me. I'll allow it."

"Well, I kind of thought this was like, our thing, you know."

He fell onto one knee. "Oh, my noble Orion," he intoned, "canst thou e'er forgive such rank betrayal, breaking this our vow of secrecy? Will thy gentle heart recover—"

"Okay, okay," I said, waving my hand. "Get over yourself."

He leapt up with a wicked grin, made himself a pot of coffee, put on a truly awful and unseasonable Christmas sweater, and headed Downstairs with me to map out what was down there.

Except we couldn't.

We'd grabbed flashlights in case of dark corners or burnt-out bulbs, but didn't need them. Every hall was lit by those cheerful bright wall sconces, and most of the side rooms had a single bare bulb in the center of the ceiling. But it was the damndest thing. We couldn't find an end to the place. We picked one hallway and wandered around for maybe fifteen minutes, through T-junctions and ninety-degree corners, past dozens of doors and empty rooms. The same wood-paneled walls, seventies carpet, and wall sconces were everywhere. Downstairs was aggressively bland but disturbingly unbounded. It went from weird to surreal to sort of frightening, how much of it there was. And this was just one of the five hallways off the central room.

I'd poked my head into a room with a nook at the far end,

a wooden dowel running along the top—like a doorless closet, maybe. I wandered over to investigate, hoping for a few dusty hangers, the remnants of an old calendar, some comforting sign of former human occupation. No such luck.

I mean, the place looked like people should have lived there, but there was almost nothing around to prove it. Anonymous marks scuffed the walls, the odd piece of lint dotted the floor, but there were no height marks penciled on door frames, no piles of old magazines, no bright squares on dirty walls where pictures once hung. Not a single old candy wrapper or forgotten sock. I ran my hand across the wooden dowel and wondered who had put it there, if anyone had ever hung clothes from it.

There was a sadness to it all. I thought of my first apartment, the one I'd moved into halfway through senior year of high school for reasons that—well. Reasons. It felt the same way, when I moved in and for most of the nine months I lived there: empty, anonymous. Faded, somehow. Less alive. I couldn't spare any pieces of myself back then to lend it life, make it feel like a home. Maybe none of its earlier tenants had, either. A house without a soul. A year later I'd been glad to move into the dorms, for all their noise and smells and ill-repair, because at least there was no question that people had *lived* there.

When I turned around, the door back out was gone.

For a second my heart pounded and my eyes darted around three blank white walls, pupils dilating in shock. I was trapped. There was no way out.

And then as I jerked forward in shock, I saw my mistake. The inside of the door was the same color as the walls—even the knob had been painted over, inexplicably—and the angle of the room's single light hid all shadows, so for a minute, from directly opposite, the door had turned invisible. A trick of perspective, and keyed up nerves.

Don't see things that aren't there. You fucking idiot.

Niko hadn't followed me in. I turned the white doorknob and

pushed my head out into the hallway, called his name.

No answer.

Perfectly fine and normal, I thought, keeping a firm grip on myself. I walked down the hall in the direction we'd been headed, peeked around the corner.

More hall, more carpet, more doors. No Niko.

I shouted his name again, louder.

Nothing.

It was so quiet.

I started down the hall, then halfway down thought maybe I should go back, not forward; then stopped in confusion. If you're lost you're supposed to stay put, not wander around.

I've never been lost in a basement before.

The knob on the nearest door started to turn.

My heart tried to jump out my throat. The door thumped. The knob turned the other way, faster, more violent.

With a shuddery squeal the door burst open, Niko's shoulder leading the rest of him out.

"Stuck," he said, jiggling the knob. "Like the one upstairs. Oh, goddammit. I spilled my coffee."

We looked down at the new dark stain on the carpet. He licked droplets from his fingers, inspected a candy-caned sweater cuff. "Thank Christ it didn't stain the cashmere."

"That is *not* cashmere," I said, rolling my eyes. "Hey. Don't wander off on me like that."

"Sure, and sorry, but hey." His eyes had a mischievous glint. "Come check it out. I found more stairs."

The new stairs led down into darkness. From the top we could see about twenty or thirty steps before things got shadowy, and enough of the shadows to tell the stairs kept descending for a while after that.

Niko had been excited to show me, but now he perched uneasily on the top step. I got out my flashlight and switched

it on, pointing down. "Come on. Maybe there's some answers down there." He still looked hesitant. I put on my straightest face and my best P.I. voice. "Don't you want to get... to the bottom of this?"

"Mmm." He frowned in concern. "I just wouldn't want your boyfriend to get jealous, me spending all this time down here with you."

This was a little joke of his. I didn't have a boyfriend.

But he flicked on his own light, waved me on. "After you, amigo."

There were about eighty steps. Other than that, and the fact that we were lighting our way with flashlights, they seemed like any other stairs in a house built during the Ford administration and sinking into senility. That same damn carpet. They must have bought up the whole factory.

The wall sconces were still there, but no longer lit. Still no light switches anywhere.

When the stairs finally gave out, it was into another hallway, nearly identical to the ones above. This one felt a bit bigger, and the carpet a darker shade, looking more brown now, though maybe both impressions were a trick of the flashlights. Funny how much light influences your perception of spaces, of shapes. Colors. Everything, really.

More rooms opened off this hall, though these had more variety. A few doors were locked, which we hadn't encountered on the upper level. Some of the rooms seemed like bedrooms: a few even had old bed frames and mattresses in them. I searched the walls in vain for colored tacks with ripped corners of posters still attached, or even a crumpled gas station receipt. I mean it wasn't like the place was sterile. Another room had a drain in the floor with stains running up to two big utility hookups on the wall, and the faint smells of dust and moths and yellowing wallpaper glue were everywhere. What was missing was anything personal.

The weirdest room, though, was the kitchen. It was too big

for a kitchen, for starters, and had too much stuff in it: too many oven hookups, too much haphazard ceiling ventilation, red-handled water valves everywhere, and a dozen jumbled stove tops with holes where the burners should be. There were parts of appliances but no whole ones: bundles of wiring, even a kitchen sink. Niko tried the faucet and we both were startled when hot water came out. It was like a half-assembled restaurant kitchen with all the equipment jumbled together, rather than a row of stoves here, a row of dishwashers there.

I found what was clearly the plumbing for a toilet hookup in the middle of one wall, and had to put my foot down about this making any sense at all.

“Maybe a wall was supposed to go up here?” Niko shined his light between the bathroom plumbing and the nearest stovetop, but the kitchen stuff extended to either side.

“Who puts a toilet in the middle of a kitchen?” I didn’t get it.

He shrugged.

Just the one door, too, and nothing nearby that might have been a dining room or pantry, though we did find a large, empty, low-ceilinged room a few doors down. “Not that you could get a dining table down here,” Niko mused. Same brown carpet, but no signs of anything to explain the room’s purpose: no ceiling bulb or place to attach one, not even a single electrical outlet.

“You get the feeling whoever built this place didn’t exactly know a lot about architecture?” Niko’s voice was hushed in a kind of reverence. “Everything down here’s off, you know? Like, who was that old lady in California who built that house with all the doors that went nowhere and fake hallways and everything?”

Sarah Winchester. I told him. Except her house is now an internationally famous tourist attraction. And this place was bigger.

Why didn’t anyone *know* about this?

Niko was thinking along the same lines. “Seriously, though. Who the fuck built all this? And why? For what?”

“No clue. But if there’s any explanation, it’s probably down here somewhere.” I even half-believed that, which felt nice.

“I feel weird walking around a crazy person’s house.” His eyes darted around the empty room. “Not that I expect, like, pit traps and rotating blades. But it feels sort of... unsafe.” He had finished his coffee and was fiddling nervously with the mug, twirling it by the handle back and forth in his fingers.

He kept glancing at me like he wanted me to say something that would make him feel better, to save him, so I tried my best like always. “You ever notice old horror movies have lots of really improbable architecture?” I babbled. “I want to meet some of those architects. Probably all dead now but I still want to grab them by their ghostly lapels and ask why the fuck they built all those crawlspaces and secret torture rooms and basements without proper lighting.”

“You’re freaking me out, man,” Niko said. He held the light under his face, washing it out to a ghostly tan as his eyes rolled up into his head. “Vreeaking meee owwwwwt.”

“Attractive.”

“You would totally date zombie me. Rotting flesh and all. Don’t pretend you wouldn’t.”

“You’re half-skeleton already. There’s barely any flesh to rot off you.”

“Come on.” He grabbed my shoulder and propelled me down the hall. “Let’s keep going.” The rough of his hand shocked some courage back into me. My shoulder felt cool when he took the hand away.

A few more paces down the hallway, it opened into a pentagonal room, a closed door in each wall other than the one we’d entered through. We tried a few. Each door opened onto another staircase leading down.

“But *seriously*,” Niko said, alarmed. “This cannot possibly be here. It doesn’t make sense.” He looked towards me, desperate. “Ryan, help.”

“Okay,” I said, grasping at straws. “Maybe it’s like a whole underground network. All the houses in the neighborhood connected together. People used to smuggle drugs or something. Underground railroad.”

“Decor’s too new,” he countered. “And we haven’t found any other stairs back up.”

“Bomb shelter. Last owner decided to modernize. Dreamt of turning it into the ultimate student housing complex. Collapsed from construction debt before he could get rich off desperate kids willing to live in windowless asbestos-lined death traps.”

He shook his head. “Let’s go back, man. I don’t like this. Something’s not right.”

I peered down one of the dark stairwells, frustrated. It bothered me that we might be so close to figuring this out. The next door might open onto something that explained it all.

And an undercurrent of excitement cut through the tinge of fear. This was fun. We were exploring. On a quest together.

I didn’t want it to end.

“It can’t go on forever,” I said. “And whatever’s deepest down will be most interesting, right?”

I talked him into it. After all there was nothing dangerous down here: it wasn’t like exploring an abandoned mine shaft. Everything was in perfect repair even if no one seemed to have been here for years.

Big as it was, it was only architecture.

The staircase we picked dropped down for a few dozen steps, then turned at a weird angle and dropped some more. It wasn’t necessarily smaller but felt more claustrophobic. Maybe that was my brain reminding me how deep underground we must be getting. At most of the landings a new hall branched off, each at a different angle. We kept going down.

After four or five weird angled twists the stairs ended, opening up into another corridor. Everything felt exactly the same, despite being stories deeper underground. It was as bland and

anonymous as office space in a skyscraper.

There were more doors.

We shuffled past them, flashlights glinting off doorknobs and—*there* was a difference—instead of the wall sconces, fake candelabra now. You know the ones, with those awful faux-candles that flicker orange and don't fool anyone? They weren't lit now, anyway.

We stopped less to try side doors now, eager to get to the end of the hall, or the end of something, at least. Find some answers.

For a long stretch there were no doors at all, just wood paneling, so that when we did come to another door it was a relief, like exhaling held breath. Niko tried it, and it swung open onto a room like nothing we'd seen so far.

It was concrete and tall, with rounded corners at the bottom. The ceiling was higher than the walls, like we were in a pit dug into a bigger room. In the center of the concrete floor was a drain.

Niko, intrigued, grabbed the bottom of a short ladder that ended around shoulder-height and pulled himself up to the top of the pit, flashlight swinging wildly. I clung to mine, keeping it steady like a candle I was afraid would blow out.

I felt afraid, without knowing why.

He shined his light back down at me. "Yep," he said, "it's a swimming pool."

That made sense, by some incredibly loose definition. "What's up there?"

He turned away from the lip, moved out of sight. Patterns of light swam across the ceiling as he swung the flashlight around. Something rattled. "Another kitchen." His voice bounced oddly off the rounded concrete. "This one's all furnished, though."

I was getting more and more unsettled, unaccountably so. "Any more doors?"

The reflections of light moved to and fro, like something alive. "Nope. No way in or out except through the pool. And there's no

place to sit and eat, either.” He paused. More scuffling. “Funny. The fridge is locked. Like, there’s a keyhole on the fridge and you can’t open it. Who does that?”

The door we’d come through, I noticed, was the same as all the others: cheap particle board, regular brass-plated knob. Not especially waterproof. I bent down, pushed it shut. Sure enough, there was a gap between it and the top of the carpet. Like you’d expect for any regular door not, you know, at the bottom of a swimming pool.

“Hey, Niko?” I straightened up, keeping my voice steady. “Let’s go back.” I wanted to add *I don’t like this* or maybe *I want to get the hell out of here right now*, but some irrational fear gripped me that if I showed any weakness, he’d be the one who wanted to keep going down.

Going deeper.

Something rattled up there, wood scraping wood. “There’s silverware in these drawers,” he called, as if he hadn’t heard me. “Cups in the cabinets too. Super seventies. Like the cups your grandma probably has, you know? I think Barbarella had these cups.”

His voice was starting to seem unreal. I felt how tenuous a connection I had to him: a voice, the glints of his flashlight on the ceiling above the empty pool. Echoes and shadows. The distance between us seemed vast and growing vaster, maybe already unbridgeable. A strange nausea was creeping up on me, an unsettling dizziness, a turning, a skew.

I remembered lying in bed as a kid, waiting to be tucked in, and the person I loved most in the world vanishing, between one blink and the next.

And then. Maybe I imagined this, between the weird echoes of that concrete pool bottom and the nerves I’d worked up. But I thought I heard muffled voices. Faint. Coming through the wall.

Coming from the other side of the closed door.

I stumbled back from the door, heart pounding. “Niko,” I hissed, trying to inject all the urgency I felt into the shape of his name, “get back down here, right now!”

He must have heard something in my voice, because seconds later his head poked over the edge, and he slid down the ladder and dropped the last few feet onto concrete. I could see him, I could suddenly even smell him, and that tangible reality felt overwhelmingly reassuring. I grabbed his arm and even his awful not-cashmere sweater was comforting.

“What’s up?”

“I thought...” The noise had gone; I felt foolish. “I heard someone out there.”

He walked to the door, pulling away from me. “No don’t!” I hissed, but his hand was already on the knob, he was already turning it, pushing the door open, stepping out into the hallway. Shining his light left, back the way we’d come. He turned, to shine it to the right.

And for an instant I was sure

something

around the corner was going to grab him and in the same instant with nightmarelogic certainty I knew it was my fault for imagining it

for making it real

but nothing happened. He shrugged.

"I don't hear anything, man."

Neither did I.

"Let's get back anyway," he said. "We've been down here too long. Your boyfriend's going to kill me."

As we walked back up the hall through the zone without doors, I glanced back. I noticed with a frown we'd left the door to the pool room open.

It felt wrong, somehow. A bad omen.

But no way in hell was I walking back to shut it.

We lay on my closed-again bed and stared up at the ceiling, giggling. We couldn't help ourselves. It felt good to be out of there, to have the whole ridiculous mystery literally at our backs. Even an old mattress felt like shield enough.

I'd felt better with each upward step. The earlier rooms were familiar as we hit them in reverse: the pentagon room with its stairs down, the bright yellow light of the upper halls, Niko's coffee stain ("so typical," I told him, "you've marked this place with your distinctive musk") and the big empty room with its couches and piles of everyone's junk. By the time we'd climbed the final stairs to my room and swung the bed shut, we were giddy, flushed with excitement, brimming with explanations and theories.

"It must run under the whole neighborhood," Niko was saying. "Connect to other houses, or maybe it only used to. Maybe no one knows about it any more." He grinned. "Except us."

"It doesn't make sense," I was still protesting, but it felt more silly than sinister. I shook my head, embarrassed by my freak-out earlier. I was spooking myself for no reason. If someone else was down there, wouldn't they have come to say hi?

Maybe they did.

I shook my head again. It was cool, and nothing was going to get in the way of that.

Niko jumped off the bed up to his feet, then swayed and put

out a hand to touch the wall. I frowned, sitting up. “Okay?” Sometimes he blacked out if he stood up too fast. I worried.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, waving a hand. “Just need some more coffee. Or booze. Maybe both.”

I did some legit research in the next few days. Our landlord stopped by to see how we were settling in and reassure us he’d fix the things he said he’d fix before we moved in, which he clearly wasn’t going to fix. He was a younger guy with kind of a stoner vibe, on the whole not very plausible as a landlord. When I casually asked how he’d come to acquire a hundred-year-old house in a rather nice college town, he said he was trying to make a living off rental properties and we were the first students to move into this one. He mentioned he’d gotten a good deal on the house because of the maintenance it needed (embarrassed cough) and because the city sold it at auction and they “weren’t allowed to play bidding games and shit” with it.

“So the city repossessed it or something? Do you know who owned it before?” I asked, practically exuding casual nonchalance.

“Old lady,” he said, “no heirs. Kind of a weirdo. Didn’t have any furniture, you know? Mattress on the floor of the foyer, toiletries and shit, but nothing else. All the other rooms were empty. No art, furniture, nothing. I probably shouldn’t be telling you this.” He leaned forward conspiratorially, nevertheless. “Neighbors said she was a real shut-in.”

“Oh yeah?”

“In and out once a week to buy groceries, that was it.” He made a cutting gesture with his hand. “Never talked to anyone. No car. Didn’t die here, by the way.” He crossed his heart. “Would have told you that, swear to God. No. Heart attack at the Safeway. And that was it.”

I didn’t ask if he knew anything about a secret basement the size of a city block, because I was afraid our rent would go up.

Down at city hall I looked up the property history, which I’d

hoped would be more interesting than the chemistry I should have been studying. The house had indeed been built about a hundred years earlier. The records were aggressively boring. Certainly nothing about enormous sub-basements or a fleet of mining vehicles. I even hunted through microfilm of the local paper for anything unusual the week of construction. No dice.

After that, the trail went a bit cold because I had another acne flare-up, a bad one, dropped out of a class instead of showing up to take the midterm and felt generally miserable about myself for a couple of days. I finally pulled myself together enough to get some groceries and refill the expired prescription on my acne cream. I was in the bathroom, rubbing it on my pockmarked face and thinking about how much I'd been lied to as a kid. *Oh, that'll clear up when you get older. Also You'll figure girls out eventually and There's someone out there for everyone.* Classics, all.

Niko popped his head around the corner. "Dude. Phone's for you." He blinked at me. "You realize when you do that, it looks like you're rubbing jizz all over your face."

I didn't really see it. The last thing I thought about when looking in the mirror was anything sexy.

He must have guessed what I'd been thinking, because he punched my shoulder. "Dude, get over yourself. You're not Quasimodo." He sighed. "We need to get you a boyfriend."

"Store was fresh out," I said, but grimly resolved to start wearing my pride bracelet out in public again. "Who's on the phone?"

"Some lady from the local history society? I thought she had the wrong number, but she asked for you by name."

I had in fact called the history society a few days earlier, and the voice on the phone turned out to be an elderly woman who breathlessly said she'd love to chat about the old houses in our neighborhood, and invited us over to the society office for a cup of tea. The office turned out to be her living room. We sat on a sun-faded couch sipping something tasteless while she fawned

over us (“so *wonderful* to see young people take an interest in local history”). It was awkward. I asked if she knew anything interesting about our address or any people who used to live there. She wasn’t familiar with the house, although the mayor had once lived on our street, she told us, and she thought most of the houses near there had been built around the same time. Flailing, I asked if she knew anything about tunnels or underground rooms around town. She spun a not-very-interesting story about how during Prohibition a local bootlegger had dug a tunnel that led from his basement all the way to a poplar in the neighbor’s backyard—nearly fifty feet long. I smiled and nodded until I found a way to excuse us.

Meanwhile Niko had been making excursions on his own. I got kind of upset when he told me—I’d wanted it to be our thing, something we did together—but he said he’d come get me the instant he found anything interesting, and didn’t make too big deal out of it. It really bothered me, though. I thought about going on my own too but it felt wrong without him there. I itched with overwhelming curiosity but also a certain dread that kicked my heartbeat up a notch when I thought about walking too far down those halls, those stairs. I told myself I was being stupid but my pulse didn’t listen.

Niko spitballed the idea of making a map, but figured it would be tricky. “A lot of those angles are non-standard,” he said. “Those funny twists on the stairs down from the pentagon, right? They’re more than ninety degrees but less than the next sensible unit—one thirty-five or whatever. I have a feeling if you measured them they’d be fractional. Like one twenty nine point two three eight three eight.” He laughed. “Three eight three eight three eight three eight three—”

“Quit it.”

He smirked. “Irrational.”

Some of the halls sloped up or down, too, enough that you could feel it when you walked them. Keeping track of what

level everything was on would add to the confusion. I dragged discussion back up to the bigger picture. “It has to be mostly running east, doesn’t it? Because of the hill. That big stairway doesn’t go down far enough to get under 12th Street.”

“I don’t know.” He visualized with closed eyes for a moment, then shrugged and opened them, shaking his head. “Hard to keep a sense of direction down there. We’ll bring a compass next trip. You think those new GPS things for hiking would work?”

“No, they need line of sight to the sky. We could leave breadcrumbs, like Hansel and Gretel.”

“We might have to, if it’s much bigger.” His eyes widened. “Can you imagine getting lost? Like some estate agent’s nightmare. ‘My god, I’ll never be able to replace all this carpet!’”

We had a party down there. By unspoken agreement, the housemates didn’t advertise the extent of the place: I put police caution tape from the dollar store across all the doorways out of the big room, as a joke, though I suspected I wasn’t really joking. It was fine if everyone just saw a chill basement hangout spot. Much levity was made from the fact that you had to climb in and out of my bed to get there, or to go back up and take a piss.

We brought down a foosball table, some Christmas lights, lots of booze, and the stereo. I protested that my record collection was for archival purposes, not playing at parties, but Niko put his hands on my shoulders and looked deep into my eyes and said please, and that was all it took. It was an okay turnout and everyone, for all the usual reasons, focused on getting good and drunk. My usual social ineptness kept me from truly enjoying myself. Some girl tried to hit on me; I was so startled by this I blurted “Actually, I’m gay,” which was even more awkward out loud than it sounds written down, and she laughed noisily and commiserated about the tragic ironies of dating for a few embarrassing seconds before vanishing, and only too late did I think to ask what the hell had compelled her to talk to me in the first place, because certainly whatever it was had never worked

on any guys.

Not that I'd figured out how to go to parties where guys who'd be interested would hang out, anyway. I hated dance clubs and the couple gay bars I'd stepped into had given me massive anxiety attacks; I still felt a rush of panic when I thought about walking through the door of the tiny LGBT center on campus, even after years of passing it on the way to classes. I'd always thought things would get easier in college. At my enormous high school there hadn't been a single out queer person, and I sure as hell wasn't going to be the first. Not only because of crippling shyness, self-image issues, and fear for my actual life, but because I literally did not know how to come out. Ellen hadn't done it on national TV yet when I was in high school; Kevin Kline hadn't done it at the movies, let alone sultry-eyed Jake Gyllenhaal; not enough gay teens had been famously killed or killed themselves to inspire anyone to tell us *It Gets Better*. Gay people basically did not exist in my universe, and yet there was I, somehow, gay regardless. College was supposed to have been an improvement. But once I got there, I failed to blossom into a beautiful flower. Maybe I should have moved farther away, to an actual big city, rather than somewhere close by and familiar and still red-state as fuck: but the problem wasn't my environment, I came to realize, it was me. It wasn't that I had issues with being gay: the internet had given me plenty of opportunities to come to terms and feel okay about it. I just didn't know how to be it in public, with other people, on any level but especially a romantic one. I'd never dated or even asked anyone out, and more and more it felt too late to start.

Meanwhile the straight people were having a nice party. Niko, wearing a blue bowling shirt with "My Name is BONG" stitched into the lapel and a pair of tight-fitting lime-green jeans, whose only virtue was the tight-fitting part, was shadowing some girl he'd been trying to hit it off with. It wasn't going well. They got into an argument early in the evening (Dear LiveJournal: I

tune out when I hear the phrase “That’s *not* what Marx said”) and she stormed off up the stairs. Niko fumed, then stormed off himself, reappearing minutes later in a Linkin Park t-shirt and torn jeans and carrying a bottle of tequila, which he used like a police baton to corral me into a corner to do shots with him.

“Said I dress too fucking weird for her,” he said with a hollow Ashes to Ashes sort of intonation. “Is *this* fucking normal enough? Whatever. The hell with everyone.” I could drink to that. We threw back a shot, sitting on the carpet with our backs to the paneled wall. Niko was always swinging between extremes: at high ebbs he wanted to be friends with everyone, at low ebbs I was the only person in the universe. He was busy furiously ignoring the rest of the party, which I wasn’t feeling much connection to either.

He sniffed. “You know when we first moved over here I didn’t speak any English?” I nodded; I’d heard this story before. “My parents thought it’d be cute to dump me into third grade like that. You know, *full immersion*.” His face twisted.

I poured him another shot, thinking I probably shouldn’t, but by then I already had.

He leaned back against the wall, looking worn down. “I tried so fucking hard to fit in. To get to where just opening my mouth didn’t mark me out as a freak. By the time junior high started none of the new kids even knew. Master fucking performance.” He tugged at the t-shirt, a corner of his mouth twitching. “Meanwhile the fam all expects things to be exactly like we’d never left. Like America’s just a little rest stop, like of course I’ll want to go back to Greece and have a million kids as soon as I graduate. My aunt asked me at Thanksgiving why I wasn’t married yet. I reminded her I am twenty-two years old and still in the middle of fucking college.” He sipped at the shot, winced. “Urgh. Never sip tequila.” He held it up to the light, squinted suspiciously. “Anyway. She said neither of those things stopped my uncle.”

I was staring idly at a dark-haired girl and a bearded jock flirting on the couch across the room, words swallowed up by the thumping of the stereo. Thinking about the music echoing down all those empty halls. “I can’t even imagine getting married.”

“Yeah, neither can the government.”

“Not just that, asshole.” I side-kicked him, then frowned, trying to figure out what I wanted to say, how deep I wanted to go. Fuck it. I let the tequila talk. “I don’t know. I can’t imagine anyone wanting to spend the rest of their life with me. Or that I could believe someone would say yes, if I wanted to with them.”

I closed my mouth, feeling stupid, but he was nodding. “Yeah, I dig you. Thinking you could be that for someone. Believing in yourself that much.” He was frowning. “I can’t believe in anything they fucking want me to be.”

He tilted his head back, eyes closed. “Well, you ever make it there, you got a best man lined up at least.” He opened one skeptical eye. “Or are there two best men? How would all that even work?”

“I don’t know.” I closed my eyes, too. *Dear LiveJournal. Figure out how all that even works.*

We listened to the music for a minute, surrounded by people who naturally knew how to Saturday night, without training. It was kind of nice being near them, at least.

Niko said, very quiet: “You think there’s something wrong with me?”

I opened my eyes, looked at him. His were still closed. The flashing Christmas lights were lost in his black curls, more swallowed up than reflected by them.

A corner of his mouth lifted. “Stupid question.”

“You’ll make it,” I said, more because I wanted him to believe it than because I’d given it any real thought.

I’d rarely seen his face at rest like this, without its usual mask of social engagement—he liked to play gracious host, loud-mouthed philosopher—and the strong curves of his prominent

jaw, his sharp nose, seemed fragile in the shifting light. Sharp, but delicate. Able to be shattered.

“Not fucking likely.” His brow furrowed, but then his face relaxed. He downed the rest of the shot, clinked his empty glass against mine, and leaned into me, just a little. “Nice to have someone around to humor me, though. Keep doing that, yeah?”

“No problemo,” I said, leaning into him, too.

We stayed like that for a few minutes.

Then some friends of his tromped down the stairs and he leapt up, pulling a sparkling smile and manic laugh out from somewhere, pouring drinks and giving high fives, and dragged me with him into the noise, and one of his friends talked me into getting trounced at foosball, and everyone kept drinking. And the moment between us faded into ephemera and lost any possible significance, even to me.

Like all the ones that had come before, I’d let it slip away.

Not long after, Niko disappeared. I figured maybe he’d gone back to his room to be alone: despite appearances, his social energy was limited, had to be rationed. I didn’t think anything of it.

Midnight passed, unnoticed.

Some time later the party started winding down. Soon it had winnowed to a couple hardcore foosballers, the girl and the beardy dude making out on the couch, and a few sozzled, earnest conversations in corners. I extracted myself from one of these, but on my way upstairs to take a leak I noticed that the flashlight we’d left by the hall—the one that led to the pentagon room, the long stairs, and the pool—was gone.

Had he gone exploring? Tonight?

If he had, he’d been gone a long time.

An hour later the party had just about wrapped. Still no sign of Niko. I’d checked his bedroom—empty—and polled a few housemates. No one had seen him since the start of the night. I worried.

I was standing at the hallway wondering if I should go look for him, when a shadow appeared at its end and my body tried to jump out of my skin.

It was him, of course. But my relief only lasted for a second. As he got closer, a prickling sense crept into my bones that something was wrong.

He was stepping carefully, like over ice, deliberate, head turned down to the carpet. For a moment I wasn't sure it was him at all.

He noticed me, gave me the thinnest of smiles. Sweat beaded on his face, which was ashen, like he'd been throwing up. He grabbed my arm as if to keep from falling over. His hand was cold.

"You okay?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yeah. Just need to go to bed."

"Did you—" I wanted to say *see something down there*, but couldn't quite work up the nerve. "—have too much to drink or something?"

He chuckled, weak. "Bed." He brushed passed me, and headed, wobbly, up the stairs.

After that everything changed. He'd lost all interest in Downstairs. If I brought it up he'd change the subject; if folks were hanging out down there he wouldn't come. When I finally asked him directly about this, he shook his head.

"I don't think it's a good idea to be down there, that's all." He tried to play it off casual, but his jaw was set.

Something about him had changed. His wardrobe turned straight-laced. He went back to calling himself Nick. He watched a lot of sports on TV. And things were strange between us. Our conversations didn't go quite right, didn't fit in their familiar grooves. We'd get derailed, trail off. We started talking less. I couldn't point to something specific that had changed, but the usual pleasurable tension between us, the taut bond of connection we'd had since the accident, was gone. He didn't seem to need me any more. He seemed like just a dude. Just a Nick. Not mine.

I worked up my courage and did a few of my own solo expeditions Downstairs, without telling him, but I couldn't convince myself to go very far. I hallucinated strange noises around corners: floorboards creaking, whispered sighs. I knew I was only scaring myself, but didn't have it in me to stay down there for long.

I retreated instead into a game I'd bought a few months back but never made much progress with, a CD-ROM adventure set on a space station orbiting a massive, distant star. Apparently

cribbing from *Solaris*, you played a new arrival sent to investigate why all the scientists had gone crazy and stopped sending back data. You did this by wandering the station's endless metal halls—the transition animations got reused *a lot*—knocking on the scientists' doors, and watching tiny video clips of them ranting through narrow metal slots they'd slide open to talk to you. Most would play the same few clips over and over, but some had a surprisingly broad selection. There were a huge number of doors and scientists, and you had access to all of them right from the start: the game's puzzles didn't seem to prevent you from getting to any part of the station.

The game was hypnotic but frustrating. Each level of the station was on its own CD, and sometimes when you swapped them it would crash, resetting progress since your last save. It would also sometimes crash when you knocked on a scientist's door, instead of playing the right video clip—something about a QuickTime corruption error. Worse, it often wasn't clear whether the puzzles were broken or just mysterious. They consisted of weird alien artifacts that seemed to litter the halls at random: you could always walk right by them, but if you clicked them you'd get a zoomed-in view of their incomprehensible surfaces. Clicking various components or protrusions would produce odd sound effects, morphing animations, or, most of the time, nothing. Sometimes clicking part of a puzzle would take you back to the hall view, as if you'd clicked away. As far as I could tell none of my fiddling had ever done anything. I kept waiting for some clue or Rosetta stone that would help begin to make sense of the alien artifacts. It never came. Either it wasn't there or I was missing it. Nothing the scientists said in their video clips related to the puzzles, either: they each seemed trapped in their own hallucinatory world of inner demons, and their delusional ramblings didn't seem connected to each other or the plot, if there even was one. The whole thing was so gloriously baffling that the game became a mild obsession for a while, a surreal

distraction to fill the hours I was no longer spending with Niko.

Eventually I went looking for hints on the internet. I found a Yahoo directory page for the game which listed half a dozen fan sites, some of them as obtuse and labyrinthine as the game itself, all riddled with under-construction gifs, hand-drawn maps, questionably relevant web rings, and elaborate self-insert fanfics, or long rants about *what it all meant* peppered with links to freud.com. The game's fans certainly had a type. Curiously, while many of the fan sites promised that full guides or walkthroughs were coming soon, none of them seemed to actually have any, and I started to wonder if it wasn't just me having trouble with the puzzles. Maybe no one had solved them. Maybe the game was so broken it was impossible to beat. I finally uninstalled it and used the hard disk space for *Warcraft II*, which was less existentially terrifying.

One night not long after that, everyone but Niko and I had left for an overnight road trip. We started drinking, and it seemed to ease the friction between us, which made us both want to keep drinking. I took comfort in this, maybe the first acknowledgment that he felt the gap between us too, wanted as much as I did to find a way to close it.

Deep into a bottle of vodka, we got into one of those hilarious drunken arguments about nothing: the final line to one of our favorite movies. I was sure it was one thing, he was sure it was something a few words off. I knew I was right, and also could see why he might remember it wrong, but he refused to believe me. He tried to pull out his cell phone to call a friend for a second opinion and got it stuck on something in his pocket: laughing, he ended up dumping everything out on the table, but then we got distracted by a text he'd gotten from an ex-girlfriend, which led to more drinking and another argument where I dutifully tried to keep him from responding, not just because he was drunk but because back then with those flip phones it would have taken

him a fucking hour to peck out a reply.

We ended up slumped in our chairs, the vodka bottle empty, listening to some spacey ambient music on the stereo. I had about drifted off when I shook myself awake. Niko was out cold. Before I could wake him and convince him to drag himself to bed I noticed something out of the corner of my eye.

In the pile of stuff he'd pulled from his pocket (phone, wallet, keys, crumpled receipts) were two small brass keys.

They weren't on his keyring, just loose in his pocket, and faintly corroded with age.

It was hard to tell for sure, but they looked identical.

Nothing about this was all that unusual but somehow I knew one of those keys would fit the fridge Downstairs. Don't ask how I knew this, because I couldn't tell you, but I did. Irrational.

That ridiculous locked fridge in that ridiculous kitchen atop a ridiculous empty pool.

He'd been keeping something from me.

Had he found something in there? Something that scared him off going back?

What inside a fridge could be that scary? Could make him lie to his best friend?

I'm not sure why I did it. The vodka, maybe. Repressed curiosity. Or maybe the growing frustration that something had happened to Niko, something had changed; but I wasn't allowed to know what it was, or ever put it right.

Quietly, I took the keys. I shouldn't have, but by then I already had.

The house was dead quiet, which made the transition to Downstairs feel even more natural. Despite my earlier trepidations, I wasn't afraid as I grabbed the flashlight by the hallway. Vodka is magic.

I passed through the first few hallways, the stairs where the lights went out, the dark lower corridors. It wasn't until I hit the

pentagon that I got scared again.

I'd been walking on autopilot, lost in musing, but as I stepped into that room with its stairs leading down, I pulled up short, noticing something vital. The flashlight was dimmer. My eyes had adjusted, but through my liquor-addled head I noticed the room was still less bright than the last time I'd been down here.

Niko must have run down the batteries with all his exploring.

This didn't especially worry me: after our first trip I'd brought up this possibility. "Yeah, fuck that," he'd said, and duct-taped four fresh batteries to the long body of the flashlight.

But it did occur to me—now—that to change them down here I'd have to do it in total darkness. Fiddling with sticky tape, fumbling to unscrew the light, pouring out the old batteries and not mixing them up with the new ones, by feel...

So there was that.

I thought for a minute about going back. But I was close to the pool room now. I wanted to find out what was inside that fridge. What Niko had been keeping from me.

And I did have the batteries, after all. If I needed to change them, it would just take a second.

I kept going.

The last set of stairs down, with their weird irrational angles, passed quickly. The hall at the bottom stretched into the gloom, and I sped past the long stretch with no doors till I reached the pool room.

The door was closed. So Niko *had* been back here.

Inside was the smooth curved concrete of the pool bottom. I grabbed for the lowest rung of the ladder and pulled myself up, a familiar motion from my swimming days made unfamiliar through lack of buoyancy, being clothed and bone-dry.

The upper level had a lip about three feet wide extending around the edge of the empty pool, and on the ladder side the space opened up, concrete giving way to linoleum. Sure enough, there was a full kitchen up there, just like Niko had described.

With all the appliances, it was fairly cozy. I stared bemused at the chrome dials on the oven, the row of pale-green cabinets with round white handles.

I turned to the fridge. It looked dated, a fading yellow with tacky chrome highlights. It only had one big door; no freezer. No magnets or family photos, either. Generically anonymous.

I tugged at the handle, but it didn't budge. Studying it, I saw what Niko had been talking about: there was a small keyhole under the handle. Smaller than a house key: more like one for a padlock, something you'd put on a shed.

The keys I'd lifted from Niko looked about right.

I picked one and slid it into the lock. It went in smooth, with a satisfying click as it bottomed out. But when I turned it, it wouldn't rotate.

Frustrated, I jiggled it back and forth, turning harder. The key was too small to get a solid grip on. I squeezed down and gave it a really good twist.

For a second I thought it was turning, but then I realized I'd bent the key. I'd come close to snapping it in half.

I pulled it gingerly from the lock, staring at it in disappointment. Well, shit. There wouldn't be any hiding this from him now. It was bent nearly in half. I tossed it on the counter for a minute as I tried to think what to do.

In between the little noises I made, the taps and scratches and breaths, I felt the silence like a weight on my shoulders, pressing me down.

Try the other key.

It slid in easy too, and when I gently twisted this one, it turned. I rotated it through a full three sixty before I heard a second snick.

I pulled at the fridge handle and the door swung open, cold air and yellow light wafting out.

I wasn't sure what I expected to see (*frozen heads*, the part of my brain still traumatized by horror movies suggested) so it

took a moment of blinking in confusion to realize the fridge was empty. There weren't even any shelves other than the one above the crisper drawers on the bottom, though the walls had notches where they should go. But no food. A butter dish and condiment nooks in the door, unused.

There was nothing in there.

Except—frowning, I bent down, shining the light inside. The fridge was *deep*. It went back a good six feet. And there was something on the back wall.

The inside of another fridge door. Condiment nooks. Another butter dish.

What the hell?

Feeling foolish, I clambered inside, flashlight bumping against the plastic floor above two pairs of crisper drawers, one facing in, one facing out. They held my weight.

I shuffled forward, hunched over (there was less than five feet of vertical space) and pushed the inner door. No give. I pushed harder, remembering stories about kids stuck in fridges, but still nothing. *Is this one locked too?* I searched for a keyhole, but didn't see one. *Which makes sense, if it's on the outside.* I turned back to confirm, and yes, the door I'd come through had no sign of a lock on its inner surface.

The logo on the plastic butter compartment said Whirlpool.

A thought popped into my head: *What if it's like an airlock?* This made no kind of logical sense, but seemed compelling. Only one door open at a time, otherwise you'd let all the cold air out. I almost giggled, then stopped myself, afraid.

What am I doing?

I decided to try it. Why not? Nothing made sense, so maybe this would, for lack of any better ideas. Turning awkwardly, I reached for the door I'd come through with the hand holding the flashlight to pull it shut. It wasn't designed to be pulled from the inside, but I got a grip on a condiment shelf and swung it firmly towards me.

As the door slammed shut two things happened, both terrifying in different ways. First, there were two snicks, one from the door in front of me and one behind.

Second, I lost my grip on the flashlight, and it tumbled out of my hands, hit the hard shelf underneath me with a crack, and went out.

Cold terror flushed through me. I felt for the light, grabbed it and shook it, pressed the button on and off. Nothing happened. I pushed the door in front of me but it didn't give at all. I slammed into it hard with my whole body, panicking, the rounded edge of a plastic shelf jabbing into my cheekbone, but the door didn't budge.

Because it's locked, I told myself, mind whirling. *But the one behind you is open, now*. I twisted around, facing the back of the fridge as near I could tell, the second door.

But the thought of opening that door in pitch blackness, a door leading into complete unknown, opening it blind and crawling out into darkness, was terrifying. I stayed frozen, caught between fears: staying there or moving forward. Finally some combination of claustrophobia and visions of my air running out triumphed over my fear of the unknown. Trying to keep my breathing calm, I unscrewed the end of the flashlight by feel, dumped out the old batteries, and one at a time replaced them with the fresh ones duct-taped to its sides. I held my breath and turned it on.

Blessed light flooded the tiny chamber.

Anxious to escape, I crab-walked forward till my outstretched hand touched the other door. Before I could stop to think, I kept moving forward, pushing my weight against it.

The door opened easily. Stumbling on cramped knees, I spilled out of the fridge and staggered upright, shining my light around warily. But what I saw confused me even more.

It was the same room.

I frowned, mind working, flashing the light over every surface

like a brush that might paint sense into what I was seeing.

It was the same kitchen—same ovens, same green cabinets, same improbably-adjacent concrete pool. Not a mirror image, or a slightly different design: it was the same room I'd just left. Except now the fridge was on the opposite wall.

Like it had connected through the wall to an identical room on the other side.

Dizzy.

I took a few steps forward, shined the light over the edge of the pool. Same ladder, same door, although it was shut. Had I shut it behind me this time? I'd been in a hurry. I couldn't remember.

I turned back to the fridge, and froze.

The door had swung shut behind me.

I pulled on the handle, but it didn't budge. Locked.

Shit. Where was the key? I checked my pockets. It wasn't on me. What had I done with it?

A sinking feeling crept over me. *It was still in the lock on the other side.*

And I'd set the other one, the bent one, on the counter before coming through.

Maybe that was the one that fit this side?

I stood there for a long moment, not sure of what to do.

I grabbed the handle again and pulled it harder, as hard as I could; tried to pull the whole fridge forward. But its back end was flush with the wall, and it didn't budge even a little, like it was cemented in place.

There was nowhere else to go. The fridge was locked, and the only door out was at the bottom of the pool.

Resigned, I climbed down the ladder, dropped onto the concrete. I opened the door onto the doorless hallway.

A wave of *déjà vu* hit me as I looked down it. It was the same hall I'd passed through minutes before—but I knew it couldn't be. I'd crawled out the other side of the fridge. This wasn't the

same place, and yet it had that ineffable tang of familiar places, the twinge that tells you *I've been here before*.

As I walked down the hallway, I looked for some distinguishing feature to confirm this intuition: but the decor was, as always, so bland that nothing stood out. It could have been any basement hallway anywhere.

When I hit the stairs back up to the five-sided room, though, something went wrong.

I'd stopped without meaning to, clutching the banister, foot on the first step. I looked up the stairs, and a faint twinge of vertigo brushed me. It was like what I'd felt that first night we came Downstairs, when I thought I'd seen something at the end of the hall. It wasn't quite premonition, a sensation, a tingling, an insight. It wasn't like knowing or feeling at all.

Something inside me between emotion and intuition just didn't want to go back up there.

Like that sense you get before eating spoiled food, even if you haven't consciously smelled anything sour. Like this is going to be bad for you.

Like you're going to regret it.

I had a sudden vivid flashback to a photo I'd seen as a kid, still confused about my burgeoning sexuality. It was from an article in a news magazine about gay bashing: there'd been an upswing of murders everywhere, big cities and small towns. The photo showed a chalk outline on a dirty sidewalk and next to it a spray-painted message, red and messy: "A Queer Died Here." I remember a wave of despair and horror washing over me as I stared at that picture, curdling the pulse-pounding fear of getting caught I always had when encountering something relating to my secret suspicions about myself. That was the first time I understood it wouldn't just be embarrassing or awkward to be gay, or found out as gay. There were people who would hate me for it, maybe even kill me. That was how wrong they thought I was. To know just existing could make people feel that way

about you, to realize that this was the world you'd have to live in, to keep growing up in. If you could.

The creeping feeling I felt now was like that. An existential wrongness. And it was getting stronger. Like a light from around a distant corner, growing brighter.

I listened, motionless, but heard nothing. The quiet pressed me.

What am I going to do? Go back?

No.

Taking a deep breath, I made an impulsive decision. A few paces back was a door, and without stopping to think I pulled it open. The room inside was crammed with furniture under sheets. On a normal day this might have scared the piss out of me, but this feeling of wrongness was getting so strong I would have run straight into a room full of oversized spiders rather than stay in that hallway any longer.

I slipped in and shut the door behind me, quietly—that felt important—and ran to the far end of the room. Spotting something sofa-shaped, I lifted the edge of the sheet that covered it and half-crawled, half-dived inside. Flipping onto my back, I smoothed the sheet, held my hand over the flashlight—I couldn't bear to turn it off—and held my breath.

The feeling had diminished when I ran across the room, but now was growing again. I was trembling. I tried not to breathe, to relax my face as if doing so would open my ears wider, let me hear fainter sounds.

It was deathly quiet. All I could hear was my heartbeat.

The top of my hand glowed a dull red as the flashlight beam lit up bones and the dark veins between them.

The feeling reached an unbearable crescendo, and held there sustained. I was shivering and couldn't stop. It was wrongness, wrongness on every level, filling me up. I wanted it to go away more than anything.

I thought I heard something move in the hallway outside.

Scuffing the carpet, maybe.

Then, mercifully, the feeling started to drain away.

I let out a breath, then took in another. With each one I felt more in balance, an equilibrium I'd never thought to appreciate until now. In another minute, all that was left was me: coated in sweat, crashing off adrenaline, but all right.

And yeah, it took fifteen minutes to muster the courage to lift the sheet and walk back across that room. Now that my regular instincts were back, the thought of what might be under all those other sheets was fucking terrifying.

When I'd recovered, I hurried across the room, out into the hall, and back up the stairs. My brain had gone numb: I let myself feel like I was retracing my steps, but another part of me knew I moved through different halls and rooms, on the wrong side of the fridge. But going back would mean following the direction that ugly feeling had drifted—and I couldn't do that. So I climbed the stairs to the pentagon room, through the identical hallways back, and up the second stairs to the lighted upper levels, everything exactly as it should have been.

When I saw the coffee stain, though, I stopped.

It was right where Niko had spilled it on our first trip down, where the coffee had sloshed as he'd forced open the sticky door.

It was the same hallway. But I couldn't explain how.

What had happened? My brain whirled, trying to manufacture sense.

What I finally decided was this: I must have gotten turned around in the dark fridge. Banging the inside of the door, trying to force it open, I somehow moved the fridge, pushed it across the kitchen to the opposite wall. When I came out, it was through the other door, but into the same room.

It worked if I didn't think about it too hard.

But then where was the key?

Simple. Still in the lock, but on the side now up against the

wall. As for the key on the counter, maybe I'd knocked it off with all my banging in the fridge. It fell on the floor, got kicked away or maybe swept underneath.

I couldn't honestly convince myself of this.

It's the same coffee stain.

I felt superimposed. It had to be the same hallway, and yet it had to be a different one. This was the same stain, and yet I was a ten-minute walk from where Niko had spilled his coffee.

Maybe going Downstairs drunk had been a bad idea.

I kept going. I made it back to the big room, looking just as I'd left it, and climbed the final stairs gingerly. But my room was waiting for me at the top, nothing out of place: my records, my textbooks, my dirty laundry. That settled that. Somehow, I'd come back the same way I went in. But I felt deflated, unresolved, like the last fifty pages of the book had been left out. *And then he: The End.*

I shut the bed behind me more firmly than necessary. I considered nailing it shut but settled for piling some heavy boxes on top of it.

It had been maybe an hour since I'd left. Niko was still passed out on the couch in our front room.

I curled up on the next couch over and, despite being so keyed up I could barely think, dropped into sleep.

I woke some time later to him shaking my shoulder, and sat up, bleary-eyed. It was still dark outside.

"Go to bed," he was saying, "it's late."

I yawned. The trip Downstairs seemed like a dream, coming back in bits and pieces. I snuck a glance at the corner of the table where he'd emptied his pockets, but his stuff was gone. Did he notice I'd taken the keys?

Shit. I'd have to tell him.

"Hey man," I said, dreading this. "You remember earlier when you pulled your shit out to get your phone, and left it on the

table?”

He blinked. “Um. No.”

He’d been pretty drunk. I pressed on. “We were about halfway through finishing that bottle.” The vodka bottle was about a quarter full. I frowned. Hadn’t we killed it?

Shaking my head, I pressed on. “Look. What I’m trying to say is, I took the keys. I’m sorry. I just wanted to know if you’d found something down there. Why you hadn’t told me. I went but there was nothing there, and I got turned around and... anyway, it doesn’t matter. I screwed up and I lost them both. Both keys.” It sounded so stupid as I said it, and I hated myself, both for stealing from him and for squandering whatever opportunity they’d represented. “I’m an idiot, man, and I’m sorry. But look, if you tell me where you found them, maybe we could figure something out, and talk about what’s going on, and everything?”

Niko was frowning, but didn’t seem angry. Maybe this wasn’t going to be a big deal after all.

He sat down on the floor next to me, a serious look on his face.

“Orion,” he said, “exactly what fucking keys are you talking about?”

The next few minutes unspooled with growing panic, like a harpoon in a speared sea monster diving deeper and deeper.

Niko said he'd never found any keys. And as I tried to piece together the evening, to backtrace what had happened, little details kept failing to add up. The vodka bottle. The movie quote: now he agreed with me, was baffled that I thought he could possibly get it wrong. He pulled out his phone and showed me the last text from his ex: four months ago.

Despite these discrepancies, something felt right about the way we discussed them. We were back in sync again. The strained awkwardness and stunted conversations of the last week were gone. It felt like he'd been away on a trip and we were catching up again, despite the fact that we'd been seeing each other all week.

But when I told him where I'd been that night, about the fridge and the keys, it was like I'd punched him in the face.

He bolted up, took a few paces, then collapsed into a chair, stricken. "Oh, shit," he kept saying. "Oh shit oh shit oh shit."

He wouldn't say anything else until I poured him another shot of vodka—the vodka we'd already finished, goddammit—and then the story started breaking out of him in dangerous pieces.

"Remember the night of the party?" He looked drained. "I didn't feel like talking, you know, to other humans. So I went exploring. Had a vague thought like maybe I'd find something

interesting to bring back up and show you.” He ran a shaky hand through his kinked hair. “But something...” He swallowed. “Something happened, okay? And I got to the pool room and I couldn’t go back the same way.” He waved a hand at my raised eyebrow. “Let me just finish telling this, okay?”

He wouldn’t say what had happened, but it made him change course, and after wandering through unfamiliar halls for a few minutes he found himself approaching the pool room door from the other direction. He climbed the ladder into the kitchen, but when he got there found the fridge not only unlocked, but open—the outer door, at least. He’d done the same thing I had: climbed inside, pulled the door shut, lost his light, pushed the other door open—and climbed out with the same spatial confusion I’d had.

I told him my theory about knocking the fridge around, but he shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. When my light went out, I was pretty deliberate with my motions, exactly because I didn’t want to get turned around. I barely jostled the thing. And there’s something else that makes me think...”

He swallowed, licked his lips. For a long minute, he couldn’t meet my eye. Then he grabbed my knee, as if to steady himself, looked over at me. Looked hard. “Ryan. Man. This is going to sound crazy. But listen, okay? This place. This house.” He looked around furtively, as if we were someplace dangerous and not the living room of our college crash pad. As if it could hear us. “We’re not where we used to be. *This is a different place.*”

“Hang on,” I said, rejecting this at once. “It’s one thing to say there’s a couple mirrored hallways down there, but there’s not a whole different house up here. There aren’t clones of our goddamn roommates, a different street and sky and...”

I trailed off, because he was staring at me, miserable. I realized this was exactly what he thought was happening.

“Look,” I said, worried and afraid, “let’s go back right now. I’ll show you the coffee stain. That proves it. We can find the other key and—”

"I'm not going back down there." He pulled back. "I've been too damn terrified to even think about it, after what I..." He bit his lip, looked away. Took the last swig of vodka.

Tingles crawled down my neck. "What you saw? Well, what was it?"

He didn't answer for a while. I thought he was trying to remember at first, and then maybe that he was trying to forget.

Finally, defeated, he told me. "On my way down. Before I got there. I started feeling... off. Like something was wrong."

"That happened to me, too. I hid in a side room and waited, and after a while it went away."

"Yeah," he said weakly, "probably what I should have done. You know me, man. I ignored it. I kept going. And..."

He stopped, trembling. Phantom insects crawled up my back. What did he see to rattle him this bad?

"That long hallway. Without any doors. I was walking down it, and I saw another light."

I sat rigid. "What the fuck?"

"I kept walking," he went on, not looking at me. "I didn't want to turn my back, get chased down. That sick feeling got stronger. Sharper. But I couldn't stop walking. Couldn't turn around."

He took a deep breath. "The light got closer. It was someone with a flashlight. They were walking toward me the same way I was walking toward them. I couldn't see their face. I just kept walking. I kind of hugged the right wall and they hugged the left. The flashlight was right in my face. I couldn't see anything until we were only a few steps apart."

He met my gaze at last, forehead wet with cold sweat, like he was reliving that queasy sensation. My own stomach twisted. I couldn't breathe.

"Ry," he said, "I passed myself. I walked right past another me with another flashlight, who looked as sick and fucked up as I did. And we both kept walking. We didn't stop. I made it to

the pool room, climbed the ladder, and went right through that fucking fridge to get farther away. And there is no fucking way I'm going back down there again."

I swallowed. "Dude. It was dark. You were messed up. Maybe you saw someone else down there, but what you're saying, man. It's impossible."

"Irrational." A hollow laugh. "Things are different here. I'll show you. What's the smallest bill you've got in your wallet?"

"Uh, I don't know." Taken aback, I pulled it out, riffled through the smaller bills. He smiled grimly at one of them, snatched it, held it up.

"Better hold onto this. Because no one here's ever heard of one."

"What are you talking about?" I said, annoyed.

And over the next hour, he showed me.

We pored through the dusty encyclopedia in our front foyer. We combed the magazines sitting in the house, dragged out Monopoly. We fired up the Internet (all GeoCities and tedium in those days) and found pictures of cash registers, government websites, coin collectors talking about the history of currency.

According to everything we could find, the US Government had never, at any point in its history, issued a three dollar bill as legal tender.

We stared at the one from my wallet with growing unease. Buchanan's familiar portrait stared back, implacable. Niko tapped the portrait's chin. "That right there might be the only one that exists in this place. Wherever we are."

We cobbled together a theory out of guesswork and dreams.

If Downstairs had two sides—two versions, or halves, or whatever—then Niko had passed into the other one the night of the party, through the unlocked fridge. The Niko I saw stumbling out of the hall that night, sick and wanting sleep, was the wrong Niko. A different Niko. The one my Niko had passed in the hall.

And that Niko didn't quite fit in. Everything was a little off about him, and from his perspective, I suppose, about me.

But that Niko had found two keys. We had no idea where he'd found them. But if he'd passed through the fridge with one of them—and here I will compress the part where we opened another bottle of vodka rather than accept the ridiculousness of this garbage fairy tale premise where a magical Frigidaire is a gateway between worlds, slept it off, suffered through ugly hangovers the next day, and reconvened late in the afternoon with some Aspirin—if the other Niko came through the fridge just before my Niko had, that could explain why my Niko had found it unlocked and open, was able to pass through.

And earlier—if we followed this chain of logic—I'd been drinking from a different vodka bottle, in a different house, with that other Niko. The one with the keys.

I'd stolen them and passed through to this side of Downstairs—the wrong side—and maybe some other me had been doing the same thing. I only avoided him by my sudden detour, when I sensed something wrong up ahead and ducked into the side room with the sheet-covered furniture, to let him pass by. And now we were both in the wrong house, on the opposite side from where we'd started.

"And both of them are on the wrong side, too," Niko said, still wincing from the hangover.

I licked my lips, head also still spinning, wondering if it would be okay to take two more Aspirin. Or four more. "But these other two, if they exist." I still couldn't quite surrender to this madness. "The other two now have both keys, right?"

Niko frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I left one in the fridge on the other side—our original side—when I went down last night. And the other, the bent one, on the counter. Also on that side. They're both on that side."

His face soured. "And the door locked behind you. So there's no way for us to get back."

“Unless there are two keys on this side too.”

“No. You said the first one you tried didn’t work, even though it looked the same? I think there’s exactly two keys. One for each side. The other me ended up with both, somehow. I guess if he found one and went through, he’d know right where to look for the second.” He took a breath, let it out. “So yeah, you’re right. They’ve got both keys. Unless they come back through, we’re stuck here.”

We stared at each other.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I have no fucking idea. But shit, man, I’m glad you’re here.” He ran a hand through his curls, face pale. “I seriously wasn’t handling this on my own. This whole last week, things weren’t right. *You* weren’t right, and I couldn’t stand that, man. I was going crazy without you. Doubting everything, you know how I get. Doubting who I even was. But this, this is...” He waved his hand back and forth between the two of us, then knocked it on the table. “You get me. We’re tight. Yeah? In it together, I mean. It’s good. I’m glad.”

I didn’t say anything, but I didn’t have to. I felt the same way and he knew it.

I slept in his room that night, in a sleeping bag beside his bed. He didn’t want to be alone. I’d kind of wanted some time to process everything but I didn’t protest too much. I liked being his anchor. He kept us both up late talking about random bullshit, rambling. It was okay. Everything was upside down. Old comforts couldn’t hurt.

We slept in the next day. Call me a coward, but buried in my sleeping bag I could pretend I wasn’t in the wrong universe.

Things were definitely wrong. Now that I was looking, I couldn’t deny it. Familiar people acted strange in a way you couldn’t put your finger on. Colors seemed indefinitely different shades. A vague sense of off-ness suffused everything, like a

movie with the sound a frame out of sync.

After looking more closely, things were off about my room. There was an unfamiliar dress shirt on a hanger. My copy of Clive Barker's *Imajica* was missing, along with all the other books of his I'd discovered after reading that one. The weird CD-ROM game I'd been playing was gone from my desk and my hard drive: now internet searches for it came back with nothing at all. It wasn't quite my room, I realized. It was someone else's.

It was mostly little things, so we grasped at each quantitative difference, each change we could pin down. One night one of our housemates kept saying something I didn't understand. She was going on about getting a parking ticket and kept saying it was the "fourth fucking time" it had happened.

"What's that word you're saying?"

"Fucking," she clarified, unhelpfully.

"No," I said. "Count up in ordinals. You know, first, second..."

She blinked at me. "First, second, third, fourth, fifth."

Fourth. Instead of four.

Things were different here.

We didn't find too many obvious changes. I was pretty sure the vice president had a different middle name, though I wouldn't have staked my life on it. I saw a periodic table hanging in the sciences building and something seemed off about it, but I couldn't put my finger on what. Usually we weren't quite sure whether something had actually changed, or we were losing our goddamn minds.

We danced around it for a while, but finally the phrase came out: parallel universes. But it didn't really satisfy. Why these two universes in particular, out of a supposedly infinite number? Why were they connected via a series of poorly decorated basement rooms and linked together by a refrigerator, of all things?

At one point, feeling overwhelmed, I called home—not to tell mom what was happening because I didn't want her to freak, just to hear her voice—but the answering machine said they were

on vacation till the end of the month. This was annoying both because I hadn't heard about any long vacation, and because "we" presumably meant her and my sister, and for some reason I hadn't been invited, which made me feel even more out of place and abandoned. I was three hours away, not on a different planet.

Feeling rejected, I went record shopping, adding a couple hundred dollars to my already terrifying credit card debt in exchange for a small stack of LPs. Lately I'd gotten obsessed with sci-fi audio book recordings. I found a few treasures at my usual haunts: Leonard Nimoy reading Ray Bradbury, and a six-record set of one of the Dune novels, read by Frank Herbert himself, still shrink-wrapped. More and more I only bought stuff in its original wrapping, unopened, sleeves protected from scuffs and wear marks, the records inside unplayed and undamaged, which is how I'd keep them.

Dad was the one who got me into records, back when I was still a kid and he was the most amazing person in the world. He took me to Disneyland, just the two of us (I don't remember now why mom and my sister weren't there), and we stayed late to see the Main Street Electrical Parade, and on our way out, way past my bedtime, he got me the record, my first record. I have eight different versions of that album now, six still in their original shrink-wrap. That first one I played so much it got scratched beyond belief, had to be constantly nudged forward out of stuck grooves, the cardboard sleeve beat to hell and back. I've still got that one, too.

I'd idolized dad. He'd worked for the Department of Agriculture, which doesn't sound that glamorous but was legendary in my mind: my understanding of his job was that he traveled around the country helping farmers grow food better, the food that everyone in the country ate, and to me that was as noble and heroic as being an astronaut. Because of his job we had to move every couple years, and so I never really had any long-term friends. Except him. My sister and I were never that close—

even as kids, our interests were too different—but dad and I, we understood each other. We were always there for each other.

Maybe it was because of what happened with dad that I got so needy with my friendships later on, desperate to hold on to them. I either wanted to be your best friend in the world or not interact with you at all. That wasn't a recipe for a healthy social life in high school. I had a few friendships, here and there, but they didn't last: I'd cling too hard and people would drift away. Niko, I guess, was the first one who ever clung back.

Thank god I had him back again.

We stayed close, maybe inevitably now that we were the only matching pair in this entire universe. It felt easy to be closer to him, for us both to need each other. It felt right. A relief from the wrongness all around us.

He thought my airlock idea had legs. Downstairs was made from house-stuff: hallways and empty rooms and appliances. A fridge was one of the few devices in that context that could maintain a seal. It was a cute concept except it didn't actually explain anything.

It took a long time to convince him we needed to go back down.

"Maybe we can just stay here, and they can stay there," he said. "So everything's off a little. So what? It felt way more wrong to get close to..." He waved a hand. "Him. Whoever. My handsome twin. So maybe we should leave well enough alone. Brick the fucker up and never look back."

Then the headaches started.

They were odd headaches. Not severe. A tinge of nausea and dizziness, like stepping off one of those fairground rides that whirls you around, and only a very distant pain. They came and went. But I took them as an ominous sign.

Niko said he'd been getting them all week. Oh. And they'd been getting stronger.

So the headaches more than anything convinced us. We had

to go back down, at least try to figure out what was going on, or at least how we could get back. Maybe the fridge wasn't the only connection. Maybe there were other keys, other doors. We'd barely started exploring. There was so much left.

But first we had to solve what Niko called the Mere Paradox. He threw a spoon at me when I said this back to him.

"No, smart-ass. A *Mirror* Paradox. We're obviously in this creepy weird sync with them." We were in his room with the door shut, and he was pacing the two-and-a-half steps of cleared floor while I lay on his bed, thinking. "Example. Me and the other Niko both went exploring on the same night. The other side, the other house, they were having a party that night too. We both saw that. The decor, uh, such as it was, was the same on both sides, or close enough. He and I were so synced up that we got to the fridge only minutes apart. He beat me, so he came through first, and then we passed in the hall." He stopped pacing, shuddered, and drummed his fingers on a bulky MIDI keyboard propped up against a wall gathering dust. "Two. A week later, both pairs of us end up getting drunk off vodka on the same night. Oh, there's these little differences—one side finishes the bottle, the other doesn't, and this me didn't get a certain text message that night—but both versions of you decide to go exploring. Again, you get to the pool room only minutes apart. For the most part it's like we're staying in a kind of lockstep, despite the superficial differences."

"Your conclusion, professor."

"If we go down to explore, they will too. We meet in the middle, and bam." He shook his head. "Exactly what we don't want to happen." He saw I was still confused, so he scribbled two arrows on his whiteboard, pointed right at each other. "The fridge is the connection point. The only way each pair of us can get back, so far as we know. But if we go back there, so will they. It's like we're trapped on two sides of a mirror. We each want to touch it, but we can't do it at the same time."

“Would it really be so bad?”

He glared down at me. “You don’t trust that feeling? I got a lot closer than you, and man, it was the worst. I don’t know what was causing it or why, but every part of my body was screaming something was wrong, was sick, was going to harm me.” He sighed and flopped down next to me. “So meeting ourselves is out. No choosing between having to fuck or fight yourself.”

“Which would you do?”

“I would definitely fuck myself,” he said, solemn. “You?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Ugh. Neither. I think both of us would take one look at each other and back away in mortified embarrassment.”

“Sounds about right. So if we can’t get close to each other, but trying to cross through will bring us together, then what do we do?”

“Okay, so we explore at random.” I sat up. “Every branch, we roll dice. Even if the others are in sync and pick the same time to explore, they’ll go down different paths.”

He shook his head. “I think the lockstep runs deeper than that. Even randomness could be part of it. The coffee stain. Remember? We both passed the one on this side, coming out. That’s what made you assume you were in the same place. Because it was identical, right? If both versions of me spilled coffee and both made exactly the same stain, I bet dice would fall the same way too.”

“How do we know it’s identical? Did you really stop and look that close?”

That got him. Niko would jump off a bridge to win an argument. A few minutes later we were headed back down the stairs, keeping up a forced light banter. It helped that the coffee stain was close to the surface, and far enough away from the fridge that even if the others went down at the same time, to look at their stain, we’d be nowhere near each other.

No one had cleaned up after the party—in fact, the other

housemates had stopped coming down here at all, inexplicably—so there were still Christmas lights and red plastic cups strewn around the big room. Weirdly comforting. We retraced our first trip through the upper hallways to the coffee stain, and got down on hands and knees to study it. I immediately felt foolish.

“This won’t prove anything. We never looked at the original this close.” I shrugged. “I don’t know. It looks the same to me.”

“But exactly the same?” Niko bent closer, excited. “No, I don’t think so. I don’t remember this trail of droplets off to the side here. Do you?”

We argued about it for a few minutes, but it was like grabbing soap in a bathtub. I’d read enough textbooks about memory and perception to know neither of us could accurately recall specifics of the other stain—it was weeks since we’d seen it and the details hadn’t seemed important at the time.

I got up, shaking my head. “What is this even meant to prove? Does it matter if they’re identical or not?”

“It matters,” he said emphatically, “because if it’s exactly the same then the two sides are in total lockstep. We can’t do anything different from them and they can’t do anything different from us. But if the stains are different—even just a little—then there’s a chance to break out of the pattern. Do something unique. That could be huge.”

“But we know we’re not exactly in sync,” I said. “For one thing, they somehow found keys down here. We never did that. And now they’ve got them both, and we don’t have any. We’d be factoring them into our plans if we had them, right? So they must be doing that right now. Shit, man, they could come through the fridge if they wanted to, any time they want.” We both stopped at this, momentarily chilled.

“So why haven’t they?” he said. “I mean, if we want to get back to the right side, they must too. Why haven’t they come through and given one key back to us?”

“Maybe they know something we don’t,” I said, tired. “Like

where they found them in the first place.”

We sat in the hall for a minute in glum silence. I stared at the coffee stain, like it was an inkblot that would resolve into something sensible if I could make my mind work the right way.

“There’s other differences,” I said. “When I went down, I felt like something was wrong, and I went and hid like a baby. The other version of me didn’t do that. We did different things.”

“Yeah,” he said, closing his eyes. “I’m actually worried about that.”

“You were just saying you wanted us to be unique.”

He rubbed his forehead. Maybe he was getting another headache. “The two sides are nearly identical, as far as we can tell. The two versions of us are nearly identical too. So far, at least. But I don’t know. Maybe if we start acting different, if we diverge too far...”

“What?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know. Just a thought. Probably garbage, never mind.”

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the wall.

Niko was scared. He stayed close to me almost all the time, hanging out in my room, by the TV, wherever I was. This was a familiar pattern, actually: whenever he got overwhelmed he made me his full-time validator, babbling his interior monologue, running every decision big and small by me, ending most sentences with “Right?” or “Yeah?” It was like outsourcing his ego. I let him do it, like I always did, because it felt good to have him need me that much. But I felt guilty, too, because it couldn’t be healthy.

At least it kept his mood from worsening. At low ebbs he’d slow down, stop moving: his face would go slack like the strings holding it up had been cut. He’d been known to lock himself in his room and not come out for days, at least not when anyone could see: not eating, not sleeping or maybe doing nothing but. He’d

stop talking even to me. I'd bring him food and after knocking and joking and cajoling would have to leave it outside his door. The next afternoon it would still be there, crawling with flies, untouched. Eventually he'd emerge grinning like a cold-blooded reptile hit by a sunbeam; he'd shower and do laundry and throw out empty liquor bottles and clean up the dirty dishes and pretend like nothing had happened. But he knew he couldn't fool me.

So I kept him talking, and our half-assed theories began to crystallize into a plan.

We rounded up a bunch of dice, some tarot and playing cards, loose change, a dreidel, and a stack of books, and devised a procedure—a ridiculously complicated procedure lasting almost an hour—to end up with two numbers, after several dozen iterations: the first between one and twenty-four, and the second between one and sixty. An hour, and a minute. The theory was that even if both sides were so close even randomness tended to turn out the same, if we stacked that randomness on top of itself, compounding chance on chance, it might be a wedge to split that sameness apart. Niko showed me a tiny video on his computer about strange attractors, said this was chaos theory in action, the butterfly effect. Whatever. We were making wild guesses.

But the hope was that even if the other versions of us were doing the exact same thing—following an identical procedure—their numbers would drift apart and they'd end up generating a completely different time.

Which would allow us to leave something for each other at a rendezvous point.

"The fridge is the natural spot," he said, "Right in the middle. Maybe they'll give us back our key. Or leave a note with a better plan."

We weren't sure what we could offer in return. Eventually we decided on a message. I had a carbon paper memo pad from my dad's old office: kind of a memento, but I wasn't feeling nostalgic. We could leave a handwritten note and keep a copy.

So we had a plan. We just needed a time, and something to say.

“In hindsight,” Niko said, throwing back the last of the coffee and smacking his lips, “maybe we should have put a range on the fucking numbers. Dear god. I have a midterm in five hours.”

It was just after three in the morning, and we were prepping to go down. The time we’d generated was 3:41. We hoped for their sake the guys on the other side got something more reasonable.

Niko was in a rough mood, and it wasn’t just the time of day. His old jock friends had been ragging him about not hanging out. (“I have to pretend sports bloopers are funny, Ry. It’s horrible.”) Later he’d gotten a call from one or both of his parents about how his degree was progressing, which had not gone well. He spent the rest of the day in his room with the door shut blaring loud music and, apparently, watching a *Friends* marathon. Every time I listened at his door I kept hearing Joey say “How *you* doin’?” Laugh track. Maybe he was just watching the same episode on repeat. Late that night I knocked again and reminded him we had a three a.m. date. A long and mournful stream of cuss words came muffled through the door. After an ominous silence he opened it, looking bleak. “Whose stupid idea was this again?” he asked, then grimly set his alarm.

We’d planned a quick trip in and out, to minimize the chance of overlapping times. When we got to the kitchen, we’d leave the note in front of the fridge (since we couldn’t open it ourselves) and immediately head back. If their time was earlier than ours, their message would be there waiting, maybe with the key if they were feeling generous; if not, we’d come back the next day at some convenient time to check again. It made sense, except we were making it all up and had no idea if any of this would work or if we were playing make-believe.

Swinging up the bed did feel ominous now, though. I noticed for the first time that it creaked. Stupid. We were girded up with

supplies even though it was supposed to be a quick trip—three flashlights each, water bottles, even granola bars.

We'd never seen anything dangerous down there, exactly. We just knew something wasn't right, now. That it wasn't just a basement down there.

We knew. We knew nothing. The truth is that despite our attempts to rationalize, to explain, we were blind. Shooting in the dark. Grasping at straws from sci-fi movies and bad dreams.

We had no idea what was happening to us.

We headed down, quietly so as not to wake our housemates. Once we got Downstairs, we followed the well-beaten path toward the room with the pool and the fridge. Niko was jumpy, especially when we got to the first staircase into the dark zone. Every shadow seemed ominous and he muttered suspicions at everything. "I think this door moved," or, "Someone's been here, I can feel it." I tried my best to keep things light, to reassure him.

On our way down the twisting stairs to the pentagon room, he stopped at one landing and glanced down the hall branching off from it. With a choke, he stiffened and leapt back, gripping the flashlight like a sword.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he hissed. "What the hell is that?"

I looked.

Way down the hallway, past the reach of the flashlight, were two tiny glints, hovering maybe four feet off the ground, deep in the darkness.

My heart rate was through the roof and I couldn't breathe, but I raised my flashlight too, shined it down the hall. It revealed nothing but the glints. I felt paralyzed. But I saw how scared Niko was. How close both of us were to panic.

I gave him a mock salute. "Later, skater," I said, and started down the hall.

"The fuck are you doing?" Niko hissed from behind me. But I kept moving. I kept walking forward, eyes fixed on the glints, willing my light to get stronger, willing those eyes to resolve into

something explainable, something benign.

“Shit,” Niko said, and followed me. “Shit shit shit.”

It only took a few more steps before we realized our mistake.

The hall ended in a T-junction. About four feet off the floor was one of those fake candelabra. The glints had been our flashlights, reflecting off its dull metal sheen.

I laughed; it was easy with all the relief flooding through me. “See? There’s enough weird shit going on without jumping at shadows.”

Niko forced a laugh out too, but his face was still pale and tense. “How could you tell? From back there?”

I shrugged. “I couldn’t. This was the quickest way to find out.”

“Great. My hero. Glad you weren’t mauled by a shadowbear.” But he was smiling now for real, and looking at me with respect.

He was right. That was stupid. Bravado is exactly the wrong response to what’s happening.

“Let’s hurry and get this over with.” I turned to walk back to the landing.

But as we walked away, I couldn’t help remembering how those glints had looked in the darkness, before they’d resolved into something explainable. Like eyes. Watching.

Just because it’s not real doesn’t mean it can’t hurt.

I didn’t look back.

We made it the rest of the way to the pool room without incident, and climbed the ladder. Nothing was waiting for us, which I found mildly deflating, and seemed to validate Niko’s black mood. “Although it makes sense, statistically,” I tried to point out. “Four out of twenty-four. There’s only a one in six chance they’d have gotten an earlier time.”

Feeling dumb, we positioned our note on the floor directly in front of the fridge. The message we’d decided on was simple, three lines on my dad’s old “While You Were Out” memo pad:

Hey, it’s us.

*Can we have a key?
We'd like a way back.*

It felt ridiculous signing our own names to ourselves, so we'd signed it with a smiley face.

Niko had left the carbon copy in his room as a record of the transaction, which made us feel more secure about the whole thing even if neither of us had any idea what use that could possibly be.

We lingered, but in theory every minute increased the odds of an overlap. So before long we dropped back down to the concrete pool floor and headed back towards the top.

On the way back up the twisting stairs, Niko paused at the same landing to look down the side hallway. He stopped again, but this time with a frown.

"It's gone," he said.

We peered down the hall, flashlights held high. There were no glints now in the darkness at the end of the hall.

"Probably a different angle," I said, not very convincingly. I cleared my throat, trying to sound like the hero he'd made me out to be earlier. "Um. Should we go look, do you think? See if it's moved or something?"

He was still staring down the hallway. His expression hadn't changed, and his voice was calm. "No," he said. "No, I don't think so. I think we should go back upstairs now."

"Is there, uh. Do you see...?"

My knees felt weak. *Some hero.*

His eyes flicked to mine, then back down the hall. Our flashlight beams made it only halfway down its length before darkness swallowed them. Somewhere at the gray and ghostly edges of our light, photons stopped bouncing back to us. The vanishing point drank them up. We strained to see through that darkness, but it was impenetrable.

The silence was almost painful.

Abruptly Niko turned and started up the steps, calm and quiet

and not looking back, and I was right behind him.

Good call.

Once we got back up to the house (*their house*, a voice in my head reminded me) we went out onto the porch to decompress. Niko smoked a cigarette, something he'd given up multiple times, but I wasn't in the mood to play life coach again. We'd had vague thoughts of catching the sunrise, but it was still too early for even a hint of dawn.

"So we learned something," he finally said, flicking ash. "We know there's something down there. An intelligence."

"How do you figure?" I was blindsided by this.

"The glints. Something knows we're down there. It's fucking with us."

"You're reading way too much into it." I didn't want any part of this theory. "We probably weren't standing at the same angle, or were holding our lights different. Something. Besides, weren't you the one joking about shadowbears? Where do you get off now with 'an intelligence?'"

He got up and stubbed out his cigarette. "Something made all that," he said, and went back inside.

He stayed in his room all the next day.

When I was a kid I got way into swimming one year, another obsession. I started going to the rec center pool every day after school, having mom drop me off there on weekends. They had a swim program and I shot through all the rankings. Minnow, Fish, Flying Fish, Salmon, Shark, Tiger Shark. I swam. I don't recall especially enjoying it: it was just something I did, like a job. Then at school one day someone asked me why I was so into it and I couldn't tell them. I could hold my breath for forever, which helped, but hardly seemed like a good reason. The truth was I had no idea why I was doing it, and that terrified me. What had made me start? I couldn't remember. I felt almost violated, possessed, like some outside force had tricked me into

driving all my thoughts and energies into moving back and forth through lanes of water, over and over again, for months on end. I stopped not long after, in part because I was hitting puberty and changing clothes in front of other guys was becoming more and more mortifying, but I think really it was because I couldn't explain that compulsion and it scared me.

I felt it again, now. I wanted to be back Downstairs. Sure, I could rationalize this away: the only way back home was down there, it was an excuse to spend time with Niko, we had an experiment to follow up on. But the real reason was that I wanted to find out what was down there, more than anything. I was driven to. Something was driving me. At least that's how it felt.

I didn't mention any of this to Niko. I knew if I did it might put him off exploring altogether.

We went down to follow up on our experiment when he came out of his funk, at the end of a nervous afternoon of excuses. Eventually he couldn't put me off any more. I had to see if there'd been a response to our note.

The route was getting familiar. We traced our way through the upper hallways, down the long stair into the dark zone, through to the pentagon room, and down the twisting stairs with the weird landings. When we passed the one with the glints, neither of us stopped. We pointedly did not even glance down it. Glints, no glints: neither would have been especially reassuring.

We passed down the stretch with no doors to the pool room, and pulled ourselves up the ladder, but to our vague disappointment, we saw at once that nothing had changed. Our note was still sitting in front of the fridge where we'd left it. No key. No sign anyone had been there since us.

Niko tugged half-heartedly on the fridge door. Still locked.

"Maybe our theory's wrong," I said. "Lots of guesswork in there."

"But which part?" He slumped against the fridge in frustration. "Shit. Back to ground zero, I guess."

“Not necessarily.” I didn’t want him to lose hope. “Maybe something came up on their side and they couldn’t make it down yesterday. Or, you know, they got eaten by the shadowbear.” Niko didn’t smile. I shrugged. “Let’s give them another day or two.”

He was gripping his temples. “I’m getting sick of these headaches, man. I’m *tired* of this. We’ve been acting like everything’s okay but it’s not, it’s really profoundly not. How much time you think we have to figure this thing out? Something’s slipping away, Ry. Can’t you feel it?”

Sighing, I bent down to pick up the note. I stared again at what we’d written: Niko’s handwriting, the words, our little three-line koan to ourselves. Stupid. Of course nothing had happened. We were inventing causalities out of pure fantasy, trying to operate a machine without knowing how it worked or if it even existed. Maybe we didn’t have alter egos in some other dimension. Maybe...

I blinked. I’d been staring at the note this whole time. Something had been bothering me about it, though I hadn’t consciously realized what. But now, like an optical illusion popping into place, I did.

The note was almost the same as the one we’d left. But not quite.

“Niko,” I gasped, breath failing me, “it changed. It’s a different note. Oh, *shit*. They wrote back.”

He grabbed it from me, and for a second I could see him struggle to see it, because the change was so small. This note had the same handwriting, was written on the same memo pad sheet. Then it clicked for him too, and his jaw clenched tight.

The message was still right in the middle, just as ours had been. Only a couple words had changed. Like they’d been trying to convey a new meaning with the smallest amount of difference.

Hey, it’s us.

Can not have a key.

You'd stay a way back.

It was still signed with a smiley face. But now instead of dots for eyes above the curved mouth, there were circles. Big ones. Like someone wide-eyed with fear, or shock.

Grinning.

I looked at the chrome surface of the locked refrigerator, and my skin started to crawl.

We didn't say anything to each other on the way back, and when we climbed up through my bed and shut it, we split up. Niko went out the front door, I assumed to take a walk, without a word. I lay on my bed listening to records until I got too creeped out imagining what might be underneath me, and went out to curl up on the porch swing, instead.

The summer air was hot, with only the hint of a breeze, but felt infinitely better than the cold dead air down there.

I tried to think of anything else, but something kept dragging my brain Downstairs, as if it was too heavy to stay on the surface with me. No matter how often I clawed my way onto other topics, Downstairs and all the things we didn't know about it dominated my thoughts.

I had no idea what we should do next.

When Niko came back it was with a brown bag from the liquor store, and he went straight up to his room, not even looking at me. I didn't feel like talking to him either.

We didn't know what was going on; we didn't know how to stop it. We didn't know anything.

We might have stayed in our funk for another couple days, except something happened the next morning.

The local history lady had left me a voicemail at around 7:15, a solid fantasy movie and credits before I normally woke up. She'd been useless when I'd stopped by before, and her tone of voice

in the message—"something a bit exciting's come to light about your house"—made me assume she'd dredged up some trivia as a pretense to get me to come back and keep her company. Maybe get me to join the local history society myself. A warm-blooded young person like myself could even aspire to become treasurer.

So it was a couple hours before I got around to calling her back and asking when would be a good time to come over.

"Oh, come right away," she said, voice syrupy. "This really can't wait. Just wait till you see what I've found."

Not at all encouraged, I agreed to head over, and biked the mile or so to her fastidiously tidy house. The visit got off to an ugly start when she asked why I hadn't brought my colored friend this time. "Actually, he's Greek," I said through clenched teeth, and then wished I had the guts to say something else. She served me tea again, weak to the point of tastelessness, and spent so much time making small talk I'd convinced myself she hadn't found anything and this whole exercise was a waste of time. Worse, she kept glancing at my pride bracelet and pursing her lips, and then pretending not to have done either. I wanted to get out of there but was too mentally exhausted to remember how social interactions were supposed to work, what niceties would bring a conversation to an end. She was rolling me out with polite nothings and platitudes, like dough, and I couldn't escape it.

The third or fourth time I pressed her about what she'd found, she got up with a smug smile and bustled out, returning a minute later with a file folder holding a few photocopies.

"I did some digging on your address," she said, "and found something rather interesting." She pressed up against me as she handed over the file, a bony shoulder and cloying perfume crowding into my personal space. Trying not to sneeze, I opened the file and pulled out the first page.

Clutching the page, I scanned the smudged text. It was a blurry copy of an old newspaper article, maybe from around the

turn of the century. I didn't see the relevance until a few contextual clues started popping out at me ("by the new university"; "on top of the hill") and I realized where the entrance to this cave was. I almost choked on my tea.

It was about a search for two kids who had gotten lost in an underground cave, dating from a summer in 1931. Two neighborhood boys, 15 and 17, had gone exploring in the caves and never come back out. Rescuers sent down had heard faint voices, and it was suspected the pair had been boxed in by rising water. Brave men had tried swimming through flooded passages, but none had been successful at reaching the boys. Some rescuers had proposed digging a shaft down to them from the surface, but none could agree where to dig: different rescuers had heard the voices coming from very different places, saying very different things.

The next article, dated a day later, was a short history of the cave, most likely a filler piece given a lack of new rescue details to report. The cave had been a source of trouble before, it seemed: a forbidden but popular spot for local youths, it had never been mapped but was not believed to be extensive. But it was treacherous in part because of a spring which bubbled up from its depths with unpredictable rhythms, sometimes flooding lower passages or resmoothing upper ones. The spring's varying flow erased markers and made it hard to tell the twisting tunnels apart, making the cave seem "far larger than its true extent." It had no official name but the locals had given it various nicknames, among the most popular of which was Looking-Glass Cave, after the clear pool the spring waters sometimes left at its entrance. The article explained that this was a reference to a Robert Louis Stevenson poem taught in local schools which all the kids knew, and which the article reprinted in its entirety. Some of the verses seemed uncomfortably on-the-nose.

Sailing blossoms, silver fishes,

*Pave pools as clear as air—
How a child wishes
To live down there!*

*We can see our coloured faces
Floating on the shaken pool
Down in cool places,
Dim and very cool*

I flipped to the other few pages in the folder as the woman twittered on about her sleuthing skills in the county archives. The remaining articles painted a grim picture of the subsequent week of rescue attempts, the breathless updates unable to disguise the fact that all had failed. Squabbling about the proper dig site, fears of digging too aggressively and causing a cave-in, a surge of flooding from the spring which was flowing “with unusual vigor” that season, and ever-growing crowds of spectators all delayed and complicated the rescue efforts.

The final article was short, the tone terse, only the headline betraying a hint of pathos: CAVE SEARCH CALLED OFF: SURELY NO HOPE LEFT FOR YOUNG SPELUNKERS. It announced that after fifteen days the rescue efforts had been abandoned. No voices had been heard from anywhere in days, and the boys were presumed drowned, starved, or buried—dead, one way or another. The cave entrance was to be sealed for good, the spring bricked up to prevent its no-longer-pure water from reaching the surface. No future generations of children would stare wistfully into its pools clear as air.

With the article, for the first time, were pictures of the two boys.

They stared out from oval windows, sketched in ink, probably sourced from the descriptions of grieving mothers rather than life. They looked younger than their reported ages. I stared back at them, unable to stop from wondering what their story

had been, what it must have been like to die down there. Alone except for each other. Had they been lifelong friends? Or casual schoolmates exploring the cave on a whim? Did their final days bring them closer together, or tear them apart?

The old woman caught me looking and smiled knowingly. “Been hearing their voices, have you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Lost souls,” she said, “haunted. Not right to brick up a stream where a thing like that’s happened. Keep that trauma bottled up.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” I said, annoyed. I didn’t believe in ghosts and hadn’t heard any teenage voices sobbing in the night. “By that logic, any river anywhere should be haunted. I mean, twenty thousand people died building the Panama Canal, and you don’t hear about—”

“The ringleader was probably the Mexican one,” she interrupted, tapping one of the pencils with a portrait.

It took me a full five seconds to recover from this cognitive shift. “Uh, what?”

“Maybe looking for a good place to hide,” she said, matter-of-fact, still tapping the portrait. I looked down stupidly: one of the boys, I supposed, did have darker skin than the other. “Lots of deportations back then, during the Depression. The Spanish boy must have talked the other one into doing something foolish. Pity. Probably didn’t have much education, didn’t realize how dangerous those caves were.” She grinned and her mouth was full of rotting teeth. “Of course, they are very good at swimming rivers.”

Hot anger kindled somewhere inside me, overcoming my usual shyness. “That’s a shitty thing to say about two dead boys.”

She puckered her mouth, glanced again at my pride bracelet. “Well. Should have realized you’d be the *sensitive* type.”

I couldn’t take this any more. Her racist bullshit aside, the notion that what was happening to me was a cute ghost story for her to solve was so disconnected from the growing existential

dread of the past few days I wanted to slap her. She was everyone who thought my problems had simple explanations, everything wrong with a world that was broken and couldn't be bothered to care about fixing itself. For a moment, brief and burning, I hated her.

And that's when her face came unstuck.

This was back when movies were still celluloid, and at the dollar theater by our house the film would sometimes jump the gate, get misaligned. When that happened the image would smear, frames no longer projected neat one after the other but running liquid through the machine, all movement turned into vertical bands of distorted color; and the audio would go juddery, vague, and distant, recognizable but distorted. Clipped and monstrous.

This was like that but in three dimensions.

The woman exploded. Her face twisted and smeared, exposing blood and bone. The back of her tongue flapped against her pulsing epiglottis, her eyes round spheres peeling back, turning inside out, her lips deformed and pulled like taffy into a twisting shape that reached from the ceiling to her knees. Her fingers had gone long as tree branches and skinny like pencils, twisting and jerking backward at frantic angles; the pattern of her dress had multiplied and filled the empty spaces in the air and was so thick now I choked on it. Everything moved, everything in her sounded, and the sound was a scream, like her lungs were jet engines, her voice box a bleating thing the size of a cow being flayed alive.

I dropped the teacup and the files: I vaguely remember them tumbling toward the floor in slow motion, spilling and twisting around each other. I was screaming too. All I wanted was to get away. I stumbled back and my head cracked against a cabinet of china plates; I held up my hands to shield myself, as if such a pathetic act could matter against a thing so huge and horrible. It came toward me, moving fast. I couldn't stop it. My sanity frayed.

And then she snapped back into herself, and her voice returned to normal. Almost. It still juddered, like the floor beneath her vibrated a hundred times a second. And her skin was boiling and rippling, like something inside it was desperate to get out. Thousands of tiny somethings pushing and pounding with disproportionate strength against her wrinkled flesh.

She reached toward me—and maybe this was all in my head, maybe she was trying to help, reacting in shock to my reaction, what must have seemed like some kind of seizure—but as she opened her mouth to speak, the rippling distortions made it into a grin. A huge, horrible, ravenous grin, malevolent. Gleeful.

Her reaching fingers writhed, and her eyes were wide and round as saucers.

I jerked to my feet and ran.

For a while I didn't even know what direction I was running. I bolted straight through intersections and past oblivious pedestrians, not seeing them. I wasn't thinking about anything at all. I didn't stop until a knife in my side brought me up short, bent me double, and I realized I'd been running a long time.

I collapsed on a patch of hot grass and threw up, retching and gasping. Gnats scribbled the air around me. Somewhere a dog barked.

I stayed there five or ten minutes, breathing jagged, looking down, studying my hands on the grass and my puke, dealing with those three things, the hands and the grass and the puke, not wanting or able to look up or deal with anything else. Nothing happened. After a while that started to help.

Eventually I climbed to my feet, got my bearings. I realized I knew where I was. I walked slowly back to our house.

I never went back for my bike.

When I got home, Niko was gone. I let myself into his bedroom and curled up on his bed, because I needed to be surrounded by something familiar. The smell of him was an anchor to reality.

Maybe the only one.

I came in here sometimes when he was gone, usually only when he left the door unlocked. I didn't touch anything. I just wanted to see the pieces of his life in isolation from his too-bright self, read the story they told about him with no silhouette from that burning corona. Once I'd seen a brochure from the campus LGBT center in his trash can, and wondered about that for a long time: why he'd taken it, why he'd thrown it away.

I must have drifted off, because moments later the afternoon light was dying and his hand was on my shoulder, shaking it. I jerked awake, guilty excuses on my lips. He was screaming at me.

"What the *fuck* are you doing in here?" His face twisted with a rage I'd never seen there, sharp and ragged.

"I didn't... I just..." I staggered to my feet, not knowing what to say.

"Get the fuck out," he shouted, and then I saw something behind the rage: a fear, a wild, desperate fear. There were tears in his eyes. "Get out, out of my fucking room, I just want to be *alone*," he yelled, and as I backed up stammering he shoved me, so hard I slammed into the wall, cracking my head, and then he dropped down on his haunches and buried his face in his hands and started to sob.

I would have left except I'd only heard him sob like that once before, and I couldn't stand the thought of letting him do it alone.

"What happened?" I finally asked, back still pressed to the wall, afraid to move in any direction, towards him or away.

He ran his hands through his hair, staying crouched, staring at the floor. "Something's... following me," he said at last, quiet, miserable. "Shadows. Something's wrong with the shadows." He looked up and past me, haunted, like speaking to someone behind my shoulder. "There's too many of them. I can see them squirming out of the corner of my eye. Like they can't all fit in the shade they've been given. They're following me, wherever

I move, like regular shadows except these ones are alive and thinking about me and looking at me and *hungry* for me, and every time I turn around there's more of them pressing into the same space, packed tight, squeezing in, wriggling, more of them each time, more and more and more and more and more..."

I knelt down, grabbed his shoulders and shook him, then did it again, hard. His head flopped back and he grabbed my wrist, a faint annoyance reaching his face. I was glad to see anything there at all.

I let him focus on me before saying, "There's no shadows."

He stared at me.

I shook my head, more sure of it now. "That's not it. It's not ghosts, or a thing out there, stalking us. It *is* us. We're what's wrong here. We're the ones who don't belong." I swallowed, bile still souring the back of my throat. "We're slipping. Losing our grip on... something. This whole world, maybe. Or it's losing its grip on us."

I had his full attention now.

"And I don't know what happens when we let go, or it does," I finished. "But I don't think it's good."

He stared at me, hopeless. "There's no way back."

"There is. There has to be." I took a breath. "We just have to find it."

We turned the wall of his bedroom into a map, taping up big sheets of artist's paper from an old class, shoving piles of books and unwashed dishes and dirty underwear and two scuffed snowboards out of the way to make room. He transferred our notebook sketches to the wall and we tried to fill in the rest from memory. It was imperfect, because stairs down there ran up and down and the wall was flat, and also because the hallways twisted at weird angles and we didn't have surveying equipment to sort them out. But it was a start.

It was also painfully incomplete. There were dozens of doors we'd never tried, branches and halls we'd only glanced into. Almost everything we had seen was from that single hall off the big room, the one we'd tried on a whim our first time down. Other than peering around the first couple corners, we hadn't explored the other four halls at all.

Niko swept a hand across all the empty space. "We're fucked."

"Look," I countered, "we know the other versions of us found a key, somewhere. And we also know the two sides are staying almost exactly in sync. Close enough to spill coffee the same way."

"Not close enough to leave the same fucking note."

"Still," I pressed on, "that means the keys can't have been too well-hidden. We could have almost found one, walked right past it. Maybe the only difference was a momentary decision about

which door to go through, what wall to glance at.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He stirred his coffee, morose, and sat it down to cool on his dresser, next to a half-empty older mug growing a skim of mold. “The other me already got to the key on this side and took it through with him. There’s no key left to find.”

“We don’t know that. And besides, we have no idea what else might be down there. We need to keep looking.”

He ran a hand through his hair, a familiar gesture, but he looked changed. His eyes were getting sunken, from lack of sleep or some more worrisome deficiency. His face, so often laughing, hadn’t smiled in days.

“Synchronicity,” he said. “That’s the problem.”

“How do you mean?”

“I think we’re getting out of sync with them. Day by day, decision by decision, we’re losing our lockstep. And the further out of sync we get, the harder it is to go back.”

“Speculation.”

“And the deeper,” he pressed on, “the deeper we’ll have to go to find another way through.”

“Bullshit.” But I didn’t have energy to argue with him. Clearly we couldn’t solve anything from up here. We needed to go back down. We had to fill in the blank spaces on that map.

Our first Expedition departed the next morning. With a capital E, Niko said, to show we were taking this shit seriously now. We had backpacks, trail mix and energy bars, lots of flashlights and batteries, twine, spray paint, a compass, graph paper, whistles, and rope. Despite everything, I think the prep got us fired up a bit. If answers were down there, we’d find them. We skipped class and I called in sick to work, and we both agreed if necessary we’d do the same tomorrow, and the next day. Finding a way back was top priority.

We chose one of the unexplored halls off the big room, and decided to explore as much of it as we could, until we’d mapped

it all or got too tired to keep going. We picked the one at the far end of the room, opposite the stairs back up. Right away we found something different.

The first few twists and turns were the familiar terrain we'd come to expect: carpet, wall sconces, scuffed doors. But after a short and confusing snarl of hallways and tiny rooms, the floorplan opened up into an area with brighter lights in the sconces, and longer, straighter hallways.

Except some of them went straight down.

We stood at the lip of one of these pits and stared over the edge. It was like someone had taken a regular hallway and stood it on end. The brown carpet went right over the lip and continued straight down, passing sideways doors, sideways wall sconces. Maybe seventy or eighty feet down, it hit a carpeted bottom and leveled out again, branching in opposite horizontal directions. The pit filled the exact center of a junction; we could step around the corners into hallways leading off in the three other directions from the one we'd arrived. It was a five-way intersection, all at right-angles.

A couple dozen paces down one of those halls was another pit.

"What is this," Niko sighed, "challenge mode?"

When you think of treacherous terrain a basement hallway isn't the first thing that comes to mind, but clutching the corner and peering vertiginously down, the pit looked as unscalable as the Matterhorn. There was nothing to get a grip on, except the doorways every twenty feet or so. Clearly we couldn't get down without climbing gear, nor come back up without it either.

If you fell... if you got stuck down there...

We stepped carefully around the pit (which was awkward and terrifying because it came right up to the ninety-degree edge of the wall) and kept exploring on the same level. But the pits were everywhere. Each horizontal hall would dead end sooner or later, and the side rooms were all small and empty. Some of

them had hallway pits, too, leading down from their exact center. In half an hour we'd mapped out everything we could get to without a climbing harness. Other than going back to the big room, there was no way forward except fourteen pits, each at least fifty feet deep.

"Difficult could be good." Niko perked up. "This is the first thing we've had to work for. Maybe means there's something interesting down there."

"Or maybe one of the other hallways leads to a room filled floor to ceiling with keys. No point guessing."

We went back to explore one of the other halls—we didn't have much choice—and found something different there, too. About half the doors led not to rooms, but to crawlways.

They were those half-sized doors you find sometimes that open onto water heaters or the electric meter in your house. Flush with the floor and about three-and-a-half feet tall, they opened onto similarly miniaturized corridors, snaking off in two directions for a dozen feet with T-junctions at each end.

Niko leaned casually against the door and poked his head inside with a suave expression. "Hey," he said to the crawlway, "How *you* doin'?"

We figured out pretty quick it was a maze.

You could stoop-walk, but crawling on all fours was a lot more comfortable. (For me, at least. Niko kept bumping his head and swearing.) The tiny hallways branched and split constantly, keeping to neat ninety-degree angles. Those ever-present wall sconces remained brightly lit, but the crawlway never went the same direction for long. Doors were scarce, and they all led back to normal-sized halls.

Once we realized how easy it would be to get lost, we retraced our steps and sat panting by the entrance.

"Promising," Niko said. "They're making us work for it."

"Makes no difference," I said. "It's the same problem again. We can't risk getting lost."

“But this is easier, man. We don’t need specialized equipment. Just some way to leave a path. Hansel and Gretel, like you said.”

Or maybe Ariadne. I had a ball of twine in my pack, so we settled for a simple solution: tying one end to my ankle, and the other around the half-door’s knob. After some deliberation, we decided to keep our packs on, despite the awkwardness of crawling the tunnels with them. Having girded ourselves with stuff, we felt naked without it now.

We set off to map.

It wasn’t long before we realized the crawlways accounted for an oddity in our mapmaking. If you look at the blueprint of a normal house, it’s economical with space. Rooms and closets and halls fit into each other like well-stacked Tetris pieces. Downstairs was not like that. Large swaths of empty space surrounded most of the rooms. Hallways went farther than they needed to, adjacent to nothing. Niko’d talked about bringing a sledgehammer down and breaking through one to see what was behind it—but now we had an idea. The maze of crawlways filled up the emptiness behind the walls. Not in any logical or sensible way, though. As we started mapping them out in a notebook, I remembered the graph paper mazes I used to draw in school. A crawlway would wrap around the outlines of what must have been a room, then double back and wrap around itself again. Sometimes a bunch of branches would split off from a small area. There were dead ends. We had no sense of whether we were on the edge of the thing, near the center, or if the geography even had a regular enough shape for those terms to signify.

We’d figured all this out before moving too far, comparing what we’d seen to our map. Niko developed a plan to push toward a direction where we thought there should be lots of empty space, and find out whether the crawlways filled that up too.

What happened next caught us completely unprepared.

We’d started crawling in a promising direction. I’d begun to feel almost cheerful: we were solving the mystery, peeling back

this place's secrets. Surely it was just a matter of time before we found a way back home.

And then something *yanked* my ankle from behind.

I gasped and twisted around. The twine tied to my ankle was taut, and pulling me with terrible force, starting to drag me back the crawlway. I cried out, digging my fingers into the carpet.

The twine scraping against the edge of the junction behind us sounded coarse and ugly, like a rusty knife dragged over the hairy skin of a coconut.

"What the fuck, *help me!*" I shouted. The loop around my ankle was viciously tight, cutting off circulation. My fingers scrabbled for purchase but the carpet wasn't shaggy enough to grip.

Niko scrambled back towards me, shrugging out of his pack and grabbing my arm. But as he pulled me back the twine dug into my ankle like a vise, like the pressure would saw the line straight through my foot. It *hurt*. I couldn't understand why it hadn't snapped. "Cut it, fucking cut it!" I gasped.

He cursed and let me go, whipping back around to zipper open his pack, letting the line start to drag me away. The sound of the twine scraping the corner seemed way too loud, like someone was holding a mike against it. I reached up to grab a wall scone and the cheap thing twisted off in my hand, sparking as the bulb went out. I held onto it stupidly as the line around my ankle dragged us both away, reeling out drywall-dusted power cable from the wall.

I panicked. My mind flashed through visions of monsters waiting just around the corner, reeling me in. A horned demon. Some evil-eyed little girl from a shitty horror movie. And then the history lady flashed into my head, inside-out and distorted past the breaking point, eyes white and wide; and I jabbed my fingers into the grooves in the fake wooden wall paneling and started babbling

SURELY NO HOPE LEFT

mind slipping towards the only place it might be safe

How a child wishes

To live down there!

and Niko cut the twine.

I missed the lead-up in my nightmare, but he'd dug through his pack for the Swiss army knife, lost at the bottom with the camping gear, then struggled to squeeze ahead of me without kicking me in the face. He told me later he'd barely touched the blade to the twine when the taut line snapped, whipping around the corner in a fraction of a second.

He had to spend a minute calming me down. Maybe it would be a better story if I left this out, but I was crying, bawling like a baby, and my pants were wet.

What brought me back, prosaically enough, was the growing unpleasant tingling in my foot. Pins and needles: painful, but familiar. The knot on the twine had slipped down and pulled a tight loop around my leg just above the ankle, digging half an inch into my jeans. Niko helped me cut it off and I sat rubbing my foot for a long time, calming down, waiting.

Listening.

After maybe fifteen minutes we started back, Niko up front with the knife. I was equally terrified bringing up the rear, though, constantly looking over my shoulder, miserable and afraid.

The fact that the lighting was so bright and consistent, so cheery, only tinged my fear a more metallic shade.

Around the corner we found the cut end of the twine, slack and unmoving. We followed it all the way back to where we'd come in.

It was no longer tied to the doorknob, like we'd left it. The twine lay coiled up in a neat loop. Right outside the threshold.

“This changes everything,” Niko was saying. We were in the funny-shaped room behind the closet with the unfinished board game, dust gathering on unresolved plans for world domination. We’d moved all our expedition gear in here; we didn’t want to explain things to anyone else, and the rest of the housemates had forgotten this room even existed. I rubbed the ugly bruise ringing my ankle, sitting on the grimy hardwood floor with my pant leg rolled up.

“Does it? How?” I winced, prodding a tender spot.

“It’s the first concrete sign there’s something down there. Not glints of light. Not sounds. Something physical.”

“Yeah, reassuring.”

He conceded the point, slumping down next to me. “But why now? What brought this on? Is the maze forbidden? Did we break some kind of rule?”

“Marking our way.”

“What?”

I sniffled. “It’s the first time we’ve tried to leave a permanent trail, something unambiguously marking the way back. Maybe whatever it is... ugh.” It still felt awful to verbalize it, give it that kind of legitimacy. “Maybe it didn’t care for that.”

“What about the spilled coffee? That’s a kind of a marker. We didn’t get in trouble for that, and it didn’t disappear or anything. Maybe whatever’s down there doesn’t want us exploring the

crawlways. Because they lead to something. Something big.”

I punched the wall, suddenly angry. “Who knows? None of it makes any sense anyway.”

“That’ll go on our tombstones. A week from now, when we’re dead of fucking dimension poisoning.”

“Well hey, dude, it’s either that or lung cancer thirty years from now.” I mimed taking a drag off a smoke. “At least dimension poisoning’s probably quicker.”

He laughed despite himself, and I chalked up a mental win. Cheering him up, making him smile, was so ingrained in me I barely noticed I was doing it any more. Maybe that day, I shouldn’t have been. It wasn’t exactly a situation to be cheerful about.

Do I do it because I really want him to be happy? Or is it that I can’t stand it when he’s sad?

“I’m not going down there again,” he said with grim finality. Neither of us said anything for a long minute.

“Okay fine, I am. You’re right. You win. We find a way back. Somehow.”

“There’s monsters up here, too,” I said softly.

He sniffed. “Or maybe we’re the monsters, man. Crawled out from underneath the bed.”

We decided to explore the vertical shafts, instead of going back into the crawlways. We didn’t know whether what had happened was a message or a provocation. I thought the bruises on my ankle were message enough: Keep Out. Niko argued that was exactly why we should ignore it. Wherever they don’t want you to go is probably the most interesting place to be. On the other hand, maybe the message had been like fences around Chernobyl.

Maybe whatever was farther in was worse.

So we settled on the shafts, which had the virtue of being unusual and promising terrain without even mild signs of demonic infestation. One of Niko’s ex-hobbies was rock climbing,

but he'd stopped after the accident jacked up his wrists. Bits of gear still lingered around his overstuffed bedroom, though, so we'd assembled some rope, harnesses, carabiners, and a couple of grappling hooks we found at the sporting goods store. The box called them "Grip Monkeys," which seemed incongruously cheerful.

We picked the first pit, since they all seemed about the same, and set about securing the grapples in a doorjamb in a way that would hold our weight. We'd each go down on our own rope, one at a time and using the second as backup. We also had extra Grip Monkeys in our pack, in case something happened to these.

Along with the usual gear, we also brought down a camcorder. We were too broke to afford the newer all-digital cameras, so we borrowed one that shot on Hi-8 tape. This was before the whole found footage craze, so we didn't think to take the camera down the pit with us and record weepy confessionals into it: we were going to leave it down the hall from the shaft, trained on the pit and our ropes and the Grip Monkeys, hopefully capturing anything that tried to mess with us.

When we were ready, and since we didn't have a tripod, I left the camera on the floor a dozen paces back, pointed at the pit, and hit record. We shouldered our packs and Niko tied on to the rope. Moving carefully, he stepped over the lip, and started to rappel down the carpeted "floor" of the shaft. I watched his grapple nervously, but it held his weight, tines set deep into the solid wood of the door frame.

The bottom of the shaft seemed a mile down with Niko dangling above it, but probably only dropped about seventy feet. He moved fast and soon was stepping onto the once-again-horizontal carpet at the bottom. He shined his light back up at me and gave the all-clear.

I followed him down, trying to think only in particulars about what was happening and not the terrifying big picture. I focused on old climbing lessons, what my hands were doing. One thing

at a time. Presently I'd made it down too.

The hall at the bottom of the pit stretched off to either side, like we were at the junction of an upside-down T. Detaching from our dangling ropes, we picked a direction and began to explore.

Things got weird down there.

The hallways continued on as they had above, and there were more pits. But now they didn't go straight down. Not quite. They descended at angles ranging from severe to subtle, never quite true to vertical. Some were almost ramps. Others changed their angle or gradually twisted as they dropped. And while the pit we'd rappelled down was lit, none of these were. Each plunged down into darkness.

There were more of them, too. A lot more. Dozens and dozens. Most opened from the middle of a hallway, filling its width: easy to jump across, but wearing a pack you felt clumsy, were acutely aware you were one stumble away from a very bad time.

We decided to avoid unnecessary leaps, but the pits were so thick they hedged us in, pushed us inexorably towards an unknown destination. If we tried to veer too far off course, they'd get denser, and we'd have to backtrack or turn aside, angling back to our former heading. And the longer we followed it, the more the hallway angles edged off true.

It was subtle at first. But the horizontal hallways were getting less and less level. We'd stumble on a floor that canted slightly left, or tilted half a degree up or down. The walls, too, were growing angled, some leaning outward a degree or two instead of staying neatly parallel, or bent a little bit inward at mismatched angles. It made us feel drunk. You've seen so many well-constructed hallways in your life, your brain doesn't know how to process ones that don't behave.

Once at the peak of my swimming days I'd had a chance to swim in the ocean. It was a school trip and there was a beach day

and some of the other guys were going to do it but the thought alone terrified me. Not because of waves or rip tides or sharks. In a pool, you know, through goggles, the universe becomes a smooth abstraction: white and well-lit concrete on all sides, contained, chemicals and filters flushing out anything but you. Sounds are muffled. Gravity's on break. There's no place for anything to hide, and even when you can't touch bottom, you know it's there, a few feet below.

The ocean is different in every conceivable way. Standing in the surf would be one thing, but swimming out past where my feet could touch the sand? The thought crushed me with primal terror, compressed me. An unknowable void stretching down beyond my flailing bare feet. What it might contain. Years later I tried reading Lovecraft and thought of that sensation again when he talked about cosmic horror, something so vast and inhuman it could shatter you, so close it could reach out and brush your toes. I couldn't make it through more than a couple stories. I couldn't shake that image.

I couldn't shake it now.

We kept going.

The halls branched and spread out endlessly. We gave up trying to map, other than the route back. We passed through regions of dark and regions of light. The decor rarely varied from its ubiquitous blandness. Sometimes little things were wrong. A door turned sideways, opening outward. A light fixture sticking out of the carpet. Crown molding running in a line a foot above the carpet. We searched around these anomalies, but never found anything useful.

Some of the rooms got larger, too big for rooms in a house. More like a school gymnasium. Still the same carpet, though. And it felt like we were seeing more of the anomalies, the farther in and deeper down we got. An explosion of pipes and plumbing, sticking out of a wall for no particular reason; rooms that were two feet wide or with fifty-foot ceilings. It was like the deeper

we went, the more flexible the rules became—of architecture, of stability, of god knows what else.

We were getting tired. Just before turning back, though, we found one last curious room. We could hear it before we opened the door.

The room was the size of a squash court, though not quite as tall, the whole thing covered in green bathroom tile, even the inside of the door we came through. A sink rose serenely from its center. Scalding water blasted from the faucet, releasing clouds of billowing steam and filling the air with a moist, sticky warmth. The sink was full, water spilling over its sides and flowing down the porcelain like some artsy fountain, then streaming away across the tile, presumably according to some imperceptible tilt in the floor. It vanished down an open hallway, carpeted once again, slanting down at a steep angle from a corner of the room.

We walked over to the hallway to peer down. It was closer to vertical than horizontal, dropping at a vicious angle. Where the hot stream hit the tilted carpet it became black with mold, and the walls and ceiling were stained with rust and moss. Like water had been coursing through it for a long, long time.

From the slanting darkness rose a hot smell of rot.

“This feels different,” Niko said.

We walked back to the sink and tried to turn off the faucet, but the hot and cold knobs spun loose. The scalding water rushed full force out of the tap, churning noisily in the basin.

“We’re going to have a hell of a water bill,” I joked, but then remembered something. The newspaper article from the history lady, about the boys lost in the cave whose entrance had once been on the site of our house. The spring that bubbled up from beneath it. The spring that had been bricked up.

Looking-Glass Cave.

Something felt on the verge of snapping into place, making sense. But I couldn’t quite see it.

*We can see our coloured faces
Floating on the shaken pool*

I got down on hands and knees to stare into the running water, not sure what I expected to see. But there was nothing. The billowing steam and rippling of the water meant I couldn't even see my own reflection.

I got to my feet, feeling deflated.

Niko was beaming his flashlight down the tunnel, chasing the descending path of the stream. "This would be rough going. Steep and slick. We'd need better climbing gear. And I can't see how far down it goes."

I took a deep breath. "It feels like that's the way, though. Doesn't it?"

He ran a hand through steam-wilted hair, eyes still pulled down the shaft. "Yeah. Yeah, it sure does."

I couldn't stop thinking about the wet tunnel as we retraced our steps. Images of it flashed through my mind. The thought of what might be past the reach of our flashlight beams, what was down there, was maddening. I was planning how soon we could come back down, what we'd have to bring with us. What it would take to keep pushing deeper.

We passed through the last few hallways to the base of shaft we'd come down. On the carpet directly underneath were our ropes, coiled up neat, Grip Monkeys still tied to the end.

"God damn it," Niko said with feeling, craning his head to glare accusingly at the shaft and fling curses up its length. We couldn't see anything unusual up there, not from down here.

Our way back up had been cut off.

We had extra grapples in our packs, but the originals didn't seem damaged: just detached. The shaft was too narrow to throw one all the way back up to the top without hitting a wall, so we settled for hooking a doorway, halfway up.

Our position now was much more precarious. We couldn't tell if the grapple was set properly: we just had to trust it. Niko volunteered to go first. From the ground below, I watched him climb, anxious.

And for some reason, that was the moment I finally accepted that I was still in love with him. I'd tried so hard to convince myself I wasn't, that I'd moved on, wrung him out of my heart, that all we had was an especially deep friendship. But watching him dangle from that rope, knowing he could fall at any second, I couldn't pretend any more. I'd never stopped loving him. I didn't know how. Maybe I never would.

And that was also the moment the grappling hook ripped through the molding of the wooden doorframe far above, and Niko fell.

Time seemed to snap and twist back on itself in opposing directions, both too fast and too slow. Terror struck me like lightning, searing me with unbearable matching thoughts: *he's going to die* and *there's nothing I can do to help him*.

Then he grabbed the edge of the next doorframe down and his body slammed against the horizontal door beneath. I watched the bottoms of his sneakers as they kicked and flailed at the smooth beige wall, scrabbling for purchase.

He was still too far up. *Too far*. If he fell...

"Are you okay?" I shouted up at him, or something equally useless. My lungs were clenched so tight that for a minute I couldn't breathe back in.

He'd managed to press the toes of his sneakers up against the wall, but there was nothing to stand on. His position was desperate, hands gripping the inch of molding like claws. I could see muscles trembling even from here. He clung to the wall quivering like a caught-out insect, paralyzed with indecision.

"You're okay." I tried to keep my voice light, in control, willing confidence into it and up to him. My mind thrummed as it raced to find him a way out. He was still clipped on to the climbing rope but the grapple now swayed useless beneath him. The hallway pit ran featureless above and below the doorframe he clung to: there was nothing else to get a grip on, not for a dozen feet in either direction.

“The door.” I projected calm authority. “You need to get the door open. If there’s a room inside, it’ll only be a little drop. Niko. Are you listening to me?”

He shook his head, as if snapping out of shock, found the doorknob beneath him and focused on it. It was on the bottom side of the door from our perspective, at waist-height for Niko, but too far off to the side to easily reach.

He lifted an ineffectual foot to try kicking at it, but it was too high. I watched his fingers slip towards the edge of the molding.

“Nice idea.” I tried to keep my voice steady. “Just try again, okay? I’m right here. If you fall, I’ve got you.” But did I, really? My arms were stretched out stupidly, but if he fell into them from that height it would break us both.

He kicked again, more desperate this time, foot still far from the knob. His shoe scudded across the smooth paint of the door. His fingers gripped the molding so tight they’d gone white. He couldn’t hold a grip like that much longer.

“You almost had it,” I lied. “Come on, buddy, you got this.”

“Just shut up for a second,” he shouted, flashing a glare down at me. “Stop fucking telling me what you think I want to hear and shut up.”

I fell silent, face flushed, paralyzed. Singed.

He stared at the knob, and the silence sharpened until I couldn’t help but break it, to say out loud what I knew he was thinking.

“You’ll have to let go with one hand.” I said it as even as I could. “Just for a second. To turn the knob.” I breathed. “There’s no other way.”

He nodded. I stood helpless below him, arms still stretched up, aching.

Then he did it.

In one quick move he pressed his body in toward the door, letting his toes take as much weight as they could, let go of the frame with his left hand and thrust it out hard toward the

knob. He brushed it and for a horrible moment it looked like he wouldn't be able to grip it and turn it, the angle all wrong, and so was his balance, now; but then his fingers wrapped around the knob, his wrist twisted and it turned.

The door clunked and swung inwards from the bottom as his weight pushed against it, and he half-collapsed, half-scrambled through as his balance was lost, fingers slipping off the frame. He tumbled inside, banging knees and shins, and fell through, the door swinging shut behind him like a cat flap, muffled thumps and curses making their way through the walls.

But before I could even breathe out, a shock of awful, saw-toothed sound smacked into me from above, and I was so startled I bit my tongue. It was utterly alien, a juddering metallic *twang* that lingered in the air, throbbing, jittery, reluctant to die away.

And then I realized what it was.

The sound turned in an instant from monstrous to mundane. Niko must have thwacked it as he tumbled past, flailing: one of those springy metal doorstoppers, no doubt surprised to meet a falling body instead of a hastily opened door.

We made it to the top, in the end. It took a series of shorter climbs to each sideways room, treating them like miniature base camps, places to rest before flinging the grapple up another dozen feet to the next door, the next cube of safety; testing each set of the grapple more thoroughly, belaying each other as best we could in the patently unsafe circumstances. But at length, we'd made it back out.

"Sorry about earlier. What I said." I'd just grabbed his hand pulling me up the last few feet, and now we were sprawled on the carpet, mercifully horizontal again, like two mountaineers on the world's blandest summit.

"Don't worry about it. You just... do that sometimes, and it bugs me." *Tell him what I think he wants to hear.* I shut my eyes. "I wish you'd..." He lifted a hand, gestured vaguely in the air,

dropped it in defeat. “Whatever, forget it. There’s a million more important things to worry about.”

The camcorder was where we’d left it, sitting on the carpet pointed at the pit.

The door frame where our original grapples had been attached wasn’t damaged. We’d seated them pretty firmly, so this suggested that rather than being yanked free from below, someone had carefully unhooked them from up here.

Of course, the ropes had also been neatly coiled at the bottom. Someone had to have done that from down there.

Niko didn’t want to watch the tape, not while we were still Downstairs. But I couldn’t stand not knowing. So he huddled miserably beside me while we watched the footage on the tiny flip-out screen.

The tape had run to the end, so we backed it up a bit and hit play. To our dismay, the ropes were going over the edge right to the end; whatever happened, it had been after the tape ran out. Niko held down the rewind button and we settled in for a long haul: but after only a few seconds we saw ourselves spring back up from the pit in fast motion, first me and then him; dicker with the grapples and rope for a few minutes; then zip over to the camera to turn it on.

“I swear the tape was at the beginning,” Niko said. “There should have been two hours of space. This is like five minutes at most. What the hell?”

He let go of the rewind button and let the tape play. We watched in numb frustration as everything we’d done earlier played back: the same discussions about rope and seating the grapples, the same lame jokes failing to ease tension. There wasn’t much point to watching it all unfold again. We just didn’t know what else to do.

On the tiny screen, I was standing a pace or two back, wondering aloud how much gear we should take down with us. I hated how my voice sounded on tape, how my face looked. I

always had. Even on the tiny screen I could see red blotches. On the screen a miniature Niko sat on the edge of the pit, adjusting his ropes.

Distorted by the shitty camcorder speaker, he said, “How far down do you think this goes?”

My image shrugged, said “We could possibly go far deeper.”

My skin crawled. “Oh my god.”

Niko glanced at me. “What?”

“That’s not what I said.” My head was spinning. What *had* I said? Something like *It can’t possibly go much deeper*, maybe. Not that.

Screen-Niko said “You’re right. In fact, we shouldn’t you and I come back this way at all. No. We should go deeper and we should let’s stay down there, down and deep.” His voice sounded strained, but he pulled his rope tight smartly. “And don’t come back until we find it, Ry. What it is we need to find.”

Where it gripped the camcorder, Niko’s hand was pale. “I didn’t say that either,” he breathed. “I mean I said something about that long, some of those words and phrases maybe. But they’re *different they’re fucking different—*”

I shushed him, because the voices on the tape were speaking again. But now the words were familiar, mundane. We both watched the screen, afraid to blink, but nothing else seemed changed. Everything played out as we remembered. Except now every word and gesture caused a spike of uncertainty. *Had* I said that, exactly that? Had I moved my arm that way, stood in precisely that spot?

Video Niko started to rappel. The camera focused on my legs as I stood up top, watching him descend. On the screen I waited, then clipped onto the rope once he’d made it to the bottom.

Video Ryan checked his harness, took a deep breath, and started down.

He paused before his head dropped out of frame to call down to Niko: “Coming down.” I remembered saying that, I thought.

Then he turned and looked straight at the camera.
Straight into the lens.
He held the gaze for a long moment.
Then glanced, deliberate, down the shaft. Then back to the camera.

Wide-eyed.

His head dropped out of sight.

We sat frozen, watching the video of the empty hall for another thirty seconds, until the tape reached its end and clunked to a stop.

Niko breathed out. "Jesus." He closed the screen and sat the camera down, backing away from it like it was a bomb. "Jesus fucking Christ."

I kept staring at it. CAVE SEARCH CALLED OFF floated through my head, the headline from the old newspaper article. SURELY NO HOPE LEFT FOR YOUNG SPELUNKERS.

Pools as clear as air.

"Jesus," he kept muttering. "Jesus."

We slept in the big room that night because we always had low-level headaches now when we went upstairs. We were becoming trolls, hiding from sounds, afraid to go out under the sky, only venturing from our cave to get more supplies, stock up for further ventures down. I slept under the foosball table, gathering dust. No one but us had been down here for weeks.

You won't be surprised to hear I had nightmares.

In my dreams I replayed the tape, over and over. Each time I rewound all the way to the start, intent to watch it through, to make sure there wasn't some clue I'd missed. And each time the tape was different. It was always Niko and the pit and I, but never the same. And whenever something changed, fresh dread filled me up again.

Sometimes the changes were slight, barely there, and I struggled to catch the altered words, the different glances. Sometimes

our words were rearranged, as if to make cryptic cyphers, hidden meanings on the verge of making sense but never quite resolving.

In some of these variations, Niko and I were boyfriends. A couple. I could tell from the words we used, the way we looked at each other. Nothing that would have been obvious to anyone but me. I replayed these scenes over and over, rewinding to catch the little glances, secret smiles.

There were other, worse versions.

There were dream-tapes where a gaunt Ryan and Niko with aged and wrinkled faces hobbled up to the camera in wonder, picked it up, passed it back and forth between them in awe. Like they'd been trapped down there for a lifetime. They pawed at the lens in a stupid glee, as if they'd forgotten what a camera even was. As if it might somehow be a portal back through time.

There were tapes where we cursed out our watcher-selves, told them to go away, to never come back again, that what was down here would destroy us. There were others, far worse, where we laughed like sharks, invited ourselves to come down deep, and stay.

There were versions with two Nikos or two Ryans, pretending to be two different people. There were versions where we *were* different people, people I'd never seen. There were versions where we spoke other languages, or babbled idiot sounds and pretended they were speech.

There were scenes of the pit with nothing else there: no grapples, no ropes, no us. There were scenes where the carpet was crawling with beetles. There were scenes where the walls were made of meat.

There were tapes where I couldn't see anything wrong, and those were the worst because I knew something was.

And on one tape—and I rewound and re-watched this over and over, in the dream—water from all the hallways poured into the pit, a four-sided waterfall. The carpets were black and sticky with moss trailing down into the vertical shaft, the walls not

smooth and white but rocky like cave tunnels, the air thick with steam. Something jostled the camera and it surged forward with the tide, water sloshing against the lens, until the scalding stream carried it over the edge and it fell, straight down into that boiling pit, surrounded by water on every side, gathering speed, falling into wet and steaming dark, faster and faster and faster...

I would jerk awake at this point, coated in sweat, and try not to fall back asleep. But when I did I'd find myself rewinding the tape yet again and pressing play, hoping this time the footage would return to normal. It was always changed, and I'd have to watch it all over from the beginning, hoping this time I'd catch something useful, a hint, a clue, an answer.

I woke to the smell of stale nicotine. Niko leaned against the stairs back up to my room, staring into the dark, a lit cigarette between his fingers.

"Our lease says no smoking in here," I grunted, still shaking off nightmares.

He took another drag. "Blow me."

I laughed and he flashed me a wicked grin. It felt good to laugh. Even if it was a little bit forced, to make sure he knew that I knew he was kidding.

Rubbing my eyes, I sat up in my sleeping bag. After a moment I scrunched over beside him, back against the stairs.

We steeped in smoke and silence for a long minute.

"Did I ever tell you," he finally said, "about that time I went camping by myself, up in Brushwillow?" I shook my head. "Used to do that a lot, after the, uh. Accident."

I took that in. He hadn't brought it up in a long time. Neither had I.

"I went by myself, cause I didn't want a lot of people around just then, and it's easier than twisting people's arms to get them to come with you. Planning around schedules, all that bullshit." He shifted into citation voice. "'The man who goes alone might

start today, but if he travels with another he must wait till that other is ready.”

“Yeah, Thoreau. You quote that one a lot.”

He shrugged. “I like it up there. Anyway.”

I waited, staring into the whorled beige universe of the carpet.

“So this one night I’m up there, alone. I’m in my tent, and it’s dark. Cloudy, no moon. I’m sleeping fine, on my back, you know, head up against the edge of the tent. And then I wake up, cause I hear something, just outside.”

He sucked on the cigarette. “Something breathing. Low, hissing, gurgling breathing. Sounded huge, like a bear or something, a big-ass wolf. And it was right on the other side of the tent flap. Inches from my face. Like something had pressed its muzzle against the nylon, that thin nothing sheet of ultralight fabric, and was waiting.

“I still remember what that felt like. Fucking terrifying.

“I was too scared to move, so I lay there a long time, hoping it would go away. But it didn’t. The thing stayed where it was. Kept making those horrible breathing sounds. Inhale. Exhale. Raspy, choking.”

He dropped the cigarette into an empty soup can we’d brought down as an ashtray.

“And then I realized where the sound was coming from. The breathing was coming from me. I was sleeping on a root or something, my head had gotten into some funny angle. I was snoring, basically, and woke myself up. But I didn’t realize what woke me was a sound I was making myself.”

I was too tired to process this. “Cool story.”

“Do you get what I mean, though?”

I rubbed a hand over my face, tried to think.

“You’re saying maybe there’s not... a *thing* down there. That somehow, all of it is us.”

“Echoes,” he said. “Reflections. The rooms are reflections of our shitty old house, and the things we’re seeing, experienc-

ing down there, maybe they're not alive. We're causing them, somehow. And now we're ascribing intentionality to side effects. Jumping at our own shadows." He lay back down on his sleeping bag, staring up at the ceiling.

"There was this weird CD-ROM game I was playing," I said after a while. "It doesn't exist over here, I guess. You spent all your time wandering around listening to these crazy scientists rant and banging your head against bizarre alien puzzles. I couldn't make any goddamn sense of it." I pulled my knees up to my chin. "But I keep thinking about it. Maybe even more, now that I can't actually play. I'm turning the pieces I have over and over, trying to fit them together, figure it out. But I can't. I'm missing something, and it's probably not even something I can find. It's locked on a CD in another universe. So it's pointless, but I can't stop obsessing over it. Just endless frustration, with no way to ever make progress."

"Yeah, dude, that's how I feel about all those games. Especially *Return to Zork*."

"But that's the thing," I said, earnest. "They all feel like that until you see the solution. The clue you walked past ten times without noticing. The right spot to stand at, the right place to click. Once you find it, everything pops into place. It's plain as day and you can't believe you didn't see it before."

We were both quiet for a while.

"So maybe we're somehow looking at this wrong," I finally said. "We're not seeing something. We keep saying it doesn't make any sense. Maybe we're just not seeing it the right way."

"Maybe." He closed his eyes. "Or maybe there's nothing there to see."

I closed my eyes too, and tried to sleep. But I could feel the camcorder dream lingering, eager to take over again. I tried to fight it off, but I was so tired.

"Even if we are the wolf," Niko muttered, just as I was about to drift off, "that doesn't mean it's not trying to kill us."

I tried to take a midterm and it was a disaster. I hadn't been to class in weeks, which didn't help, but everything I'd learned earlier had vanished from my brain, neurons reclaimed, I supposed, for more important things. Then I started hallucinating, questions and pencil marks multiplying and layering on themselves even when I looked up from the test, abstractions filling the darkened auditorium, and I had to flee, whispering a hurried apology to the T.A. that I was having a medical emergency. She told me to go home and take care of myself. I was halfway home before I remembered that phrase has a positive meaning, too.

I'd thought she was telling me to commit suicide.

Something was in my room when I got back. I stood outside the closed door, number two pencil still clutched in my hand, listening. It sounded like an elephant. Heavy, clopping footfalls made the floorboards groan. Wet, agitated breathing rasped. Dust motes danced at my feet in a strange breeze, sucked under and pushed back out through the space below the closed door, rhythmic. Air moved with faint fleshy sounds, like a hundred quiet people flapping their arms, flailing.

I crept away, miserable, and by the time I came back with Niko and he threw open the door in some play at courage, there was nothing there.

I collapsed into his arms, sobbing, and he let me stay there for a while until I'd calmed down. I clung to him, afraid if I loosened my grip he'd disappear. Like dad, tucking me in. Gone between one blink and the next.

He had a perpetual headache now. He kept describing it with the word "throbbing" and only that word, as if clinging to the sound of it. Like using a different one would acknowledge the pain too had changed, grown worse, was no longer caged by the word he'd picked to trap it. I could see how much it hurt him to think, to make words, to move around. He ground his teeth. He stood up carefully now, putting a hand against the wall each

time, as if his blood was fighting his heart's attempts to lift it to his head, to keep it from being dragged back down.

My headaches were getting worse, too, but it wasn't the pain that bothered me. It was the strain of always having them that wore on me. Of wondering if we'd have them for the rest of our lives.

We left to explore down the slippery tunnel late that night. It might have made more sense to do it after a good night's rest, but neither of us could sleep, and spending so much time down there meant night and day were becoming academic concepts anyway. Niko caffeined up (I was jittery enough already), and we loaded our packs with canned food and power bars, thick gloves, and crampons from the sporting goods store. "12 points of contact ensures solid grip on ice," the box had said. We didn't expect the manufacturer had tested them on moldy carpet, but it was the best we could do.

In my pack was also a gun. I bought it from a place I'd driven past every day on my way to work but never gone into until that morning. The friendly clerk agreed to waive the mandatory waiting period in exchange for the last of my ATM cash. I didn't tell Niko about the gun. I thought it would make me feel safer but it just felt heavy.

It had been a hot day and the old house clung to that heat through the night with grim brick desperation. Descending into chillier air was a relief. With every step down the headaches diminished, our mood improved. It was almost addictive, being down there.

We retraced our route through the upper halls to the top of the shaft and reset the grapples. This time Niko hammered them into the doorjamb, face set, until he'd driven the steel spikes three inches into the wood. Even so, neither of us really expected they'd still be there when we got back.

When, or if.

Getting down was a familiar exercise now, danger mitigated by procedure and repetition. We retraced our route to the tiled room with the sink. The water was still running, hot and steaming, rushing across the floor to the corner with its angled hallway lined with slimy black carpet. We shined our lights down the hot throat and the steam grabbed their brightness, bounced it back to us maliciously. We couldn't see more than a few body lengths down.

Niko ran a hand through his curls, deflating again in the hot moist air; scratched the hair behind his ear furiously, like a dog with an itch. He was shaking. "Are we sure about this? Really really? Because it sort of seems like a colossally stupid thing to do."

"You have a better idea?"

He sighed, looking down the steaming shaft unhappily.

"No, I don't have a better idea," he said at last.

We pulled on the crampons and the heavy gloves. Harness, rope, knots. Check. Niko pounded two new Grip Monkeys into either side of the angled tunnel entrance. We tied on. Double-check.

Then, each holding our rope, kicking hard to sink the sharp toes of the crampons deep into the slimy carpet, we started down.

It was slow, hot work. Once we got inside the slanted hall, the steam was oppressive, everywhere: we were instantly drenched with it, like rot-smelling sweat. Even with the crampons our feet slipped. The sludge was deep and slick, a stew of algae and mold and fungal slimes, green-black and stinking of putrefying jungle, of horrible things happening under your carpet, inside your walls. We held tight to the ropes with steam-wet gloves. The walls and floor twisted and bent as we descended, as if the constant moisture had warped them, but the downward angle stayed relentless.

It was a gullet. We were letting ourselves be swallowed. No—worse. We were forcing ourselves in. Eager. Like we couldn't

wait to be digested.

We were nearing the end of our sixty meter ropes when everything went to shit.

All at once we were sliding. Our ropes had gone slack in our hands, no longer connected to anything. There was no time to dig in the crampons; we were already moving too fast, careening down like a grotesque slalom. Neither of us screamed, focused I guess on trying to grab hold of something, anything, but there were no doorways, no light fixtures, nothing but the thick hot slime and the scalding water. I tried to dig my feet into the oozing carpet but my loose rope had entangled me, my pack was in my way, my face was smeared with scalding gunk and I couldn't open my eyes.

My hand closed on Niko's leg and I grabbed it. A moment later the floor angle shifted and he cried out, threw his body sideways, brought us both to a shuddering, squelchy stop.

We were soaked through, overheating. Scalding water ran past us down the slope. I blinked my eyes open and saw he'd wedged himself into a kink in the tunnel. One of his knees was scraped open and a dull red mark on his forehead was beginning to swell. But he'd done it. He'd stopped us.

Ropes slithered down the tunnel past us, followed moments later by two grapples still tied to their ends. Niko reached out to grab one with his free hand, but his weight shifted, and he had to throw the hand back against a wall to re-brace, cursing. I tried to snag them with my foot, but didn't even come close. They vanished down the tunnel, trailing rope.

Niko's face was tight. He tilted his head down toward me. "This was a mistake. God, we're so fucking stupid. Ryan, man. We have to go back."

"Hang on," I gasped, head filled with the roaring of the water, blinking gunk from my eyes. "Don't panic. We can do this."

"Man, I'm barely holding on. I don't know how much longer I can keep from slipping. We have to try to climb back up."

“Back?” I said, confused. “You want to go back?”

He stared down at me. “Of course back. Are you fucking crazy? Where the fuck else?”

“There’s nothing good up there. Nothing right.” I kicked my foot for purchase, managed to rest at least some weight on a hidden protuberance. “Besides, nothing’s changed. The plan’s still the same. This is the best lead for finding a way back to our side.”

“Are you not paying attention?” he hissed, furious. “Something is trying to kill us.”

“So let’s find out how to stop it.” I tried to keep my tone reasonable. “We’re halfway down already. Climbing back up will be rough, regardless. Why not get all the way to the bottom first?”

“Because we don’t even know if there is a bottom.” His face was blotched red with fury, with sweat, with the scorching heat of the air. “Halfway? We have no fucking idea how deep this goes. I should have said this a long time ago. You’re obsessed. You get obsessed a lot, man, let it drag you down. Your stupid records.” He took a deep breath. “Well now you’re obsessed with this place, and it’s blinding you. It’s *feeding* on you, your obsessions. Multiplying them. You can’t see it, or maybe you don’t want to, but I do. I’m looking right at it. Like the answer to the puzzle.”

I was angry. “If I’m obsessed with anything, it’s with finding a way back. We’re running out of time. We either figure this out, or we’re stuck here forever, in the wrong world. We need each other to get through this.” I said it again, like saying it could make it true. “We need each other.”

“You’re obsessed with me, too,” he muttered. “When was the last time you hung out with someone else?”

“When was the last time you did?”

He shook his head angrily, dismissing this.

“Our housemates,” I pushed, “when was the last time you

hung out with any of them? Anyone other than me?" He stared back, seething. "Their names. I bet you can't even remember their names." I was bluffing. But could I remember them, either? Names, faces. No. There was nothing. None of those people mattered, not to me, not to us. We were the only thing that mattered. Getting back to where we'd been, what we'd had. What I'd wanted.

He shook his head again, violent, like there was something inside it he wanted to dislodge. "You're living in a fantasy," he spat, "you always have been. *I can't be what you want me to be, okay?* I can't be what anyone fucking wants me to be. You all have these versions of me in your head, these ideal perfect Nikos, but they're not real. I can't live up to them." He opened his eyes, stared yearningly back up the shaft. "Help me. If you really care about me, help me back up. Don't be like everyone else. Don't just fucking *use* me to get what you want."

"Going back's not going to help. There's no answers up there." He wasn't understanding. I reached for something else. "Those headaches aren't going away. You think you can live with that pain? Forever?"

"Better than being fucking dead!" He seemed to realize I wasn't changing my mind, turned away to reach for a handhold, but there was nothing there, nothing to grip, and he scrabbled pathetically at the slime.

"Is it?" I shouted, angry, desperate. I had to say something, something that would make him stay, keep him here, and my mouth raced ahead of me. "You won't make it, up there, not with pain like that. We both know you won't."

He tensed, glared down at me. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what it means," I said, shaking. "Never really helped you. I've done nothing but help you. I've always been there for you. Every fucking time you fall I pick you back up. *You'd be dead if it weren't for me.*"

He shot me with a gaze of such cold fury I cringed. “You’re fucking poison,” he hissed, “you know that? A fucking snake. I wish you’d let me die that night. I wish we’d never met. *Let go of me!*”

And his hand did close on something, and he pulled himself up, triumphant. His leg was slipping out of my hands, and I couldn’t bear for him to crawl away from me, couldn’t stand it, couldn’t handle the thought of going back up to that world, to any world where everything was wrong and nothing I wanted was possible, so I pulled. I pulled, too hard, and both his hands slipped, and he crashed back into me, only I wasn’t holding onto anything but him any more so both of us tumbled down, faster and faster, slipping and twisting and scraping together down the steepening blood-hot slope, down and down and down into darkness.

PART TWO

MULTIPLICIOUS

See the rings pursue each other;
All below grows black as night,
Just as if mother
Had blown out the light!

Patience, children, just a minute—
See the spreading circles die;
The stream and all in it
Will clear by-and-by.

“Looking-Glass River,” Robert Louis Stevenson

The first time someone kissed me it didn't really count.

I'm in the closet at the back of the band room, sophomore year of high school, and this annoying girl, Krissy or Kristy or something, has followed me in to grab the music stands, and she's especially giggly and flighty and nervous for some reason, brushing up against me, and then the lights switch off and she grabs me and I realize it's a setup, she got someone to stay out there and flip the switch: and in the sudden gloom she grabs me and crushes her lips against mine. And all I can think of in this moment is Bradley, this cute sweet transfer student who a month before had found out I also liked weird old music, so he corners me after band one day to talk about it. He loves old music, strange music, making weird cross-genre mix tapes, and he plays some for me out of the half-dozen he keeps in his backpack, which is also filled with loose-leaf sheets of staff paper scribbled with notes because oh, he also composes, too, and he's impossibly cute and I'm so flustered, embarrassed, because as obvious as his interest seems now, back then it's not even possible for me to consider it. I never once think that he might be like me because I've never met anyone like me. We spend hours in the practice room and make plans to hang out again and then the next day in the hall some kid from the varsity team shoves him to the ground, hard, sends his books flying. Calls him a faggot. I'm paralyzed, half a hallway away, frozen while I watch Bradley

say something from the ground, a denial, maybe, and the jock is saying something back, evidence, maybe, but I can't hear because my pulse is pounding in my ears. I'm too afraid or ashamed to go help him, to say anything at all, risk the ugly spotlight of the jock's face turning on me, too, because he's clearly making a thing of this, drawing a line. Not in our school. I imagine a chalk outline around Bradley, red graffiti. A queer died here. I can't move, not even when he finishes collecting his things, gets up, and walks away, taunts at his back, walks down the hall towards me, and now I can move but only to turn away, face flushed and heart galloping, and I can't look at him and I don't know if he sees me there as he passes by. But he isn't at school the next day and the week after I hear he's transferred somewhere else, and I never see him again. And now in the dark closet as this dumb girl's lips push against mine all I can think is that it should have been Bradley, my first kiss should have been him, and now I've fucked it up, lost it, failed him and myself and even this girl, whose eyes I can't meet either as I pull away and brush past her out of the closet and past snickering faces to the door outside, changed, maybe, or maybe not. Her hair was in the way, after all, long straight blonde strands of it tasting like strawberry conditioner, so our lips didn't really even touch, let alone tongues. Was that a kiss? Did it count? Who knows. I don't feel like it should, and anyway I don't feel any different except maybe worse, somewhere deep down, even less experienced and less ready and less sure of who I'm supposed to be. I drop out of band not long after that. I've always liked listening to music more than playing it, anyway, and I like to listen alone.

I plunged into a pool of steaming hot water, instantly immersed, choking. My scrabbling hand found something slimy but solid and pushed against it. My face broke the surface and I gasped, slipping and struggling to my feet. Water came up to my waist.

I wiped rank muck off my face, blinked burning eyes open, tried to catch my breath.

It was utterly dark. All I could hear was splashing water.

“Niko?” I shouted.

Nothing.

I shrugged off my pack, zipped it open with blind, shaking fingers while struggling to keep it above the waterline, and fumbled around inside. My hand closed on a plastic tube. Glowstick. I pulled it out and snapped it, shook it, frantic.

A dim red glow began to bring the world back, a breath at a time. Churning water was everywhere, white and frothy. Steam swayed. Above my head a sheer shaft opened up and angled away, lined in oozing black gunk and coursing fluid. The one we’d slid down, presumably. Turning all the way around, the edges of my dim circle of light suggested level hallways, flooded, leading off into darkness in three equidistant directions.

No sign of Niko.

Something dark and coiling swirled in the water: my rope. I grabbed for it and reeled it in. One end was still attached to my waist. At the end of the other, my shiny grappling hook trailed tangled green streamers.

I searched the frothing surface, but saw no sign of a second grapple, or a second rope.

Shutting my eyes, I tried to sort through the confusion of the sliding fall. We had tumbled, together at first, my hands grabbing for his slime-drenched shirt, the sodden edges of his pack. But there was nothing to get a grip on. After those first few moments all I could feel was my own tangled rope, the pasty mulch sliding past me. I assumed I’d gotten ahead of him, or behind.

But what if I hadn’t? What if he’d managed to stop himself again behind me, wedged himself into another kink in the tunnel?

Or what if the tunnel had split, somewhere up there?

I didn’t want to think about the third possibility, but I spent a few grim minutes duck-walking through the water, old res-

cue swim lessons running through my head, feeling my hands through the muck beneath the churning surface. I found nothing solid. No backpack, no rope. No body.

He wasn't here. I was alone.

Everything in my pack was soaked. I threw out a waterlogged sandwich and watched it drift in the churning current before vanishing beneath the foam, as if someone hungry underneath had grabbed it. I'd lost a crampon in the fall and couldn't find it, so I took off the other one and maneuvered it into my pack. The red light from the glowstick turned everything the same shades. Black and blood.

I had no idea if the dripping gun would still work, but I slipped it into my belt anyway. It still didn't make me feel safe but I tried to pretend it did.

My flashlight wouldn't turn on, even with fresh batteries. "Water resistant," according to the package, but I imagined it had been subjected to an environment outside factory test conditions. I strapped it to the top of my pack anyway, hoping it might dry out and be useful again. I had a dozen waterproof glowsticks, so I wasn't immediately worried about light.

But a countdown's started, hasn't it? Tick, tock, tick.

I stared up the shaft we'd tumbled down for a long time, considering. Climbing back up—without a rope, with only one crampon, without someone helping me—seemed impossible. I tried to picture Niko up there somewhere, struggling to pull himself back up, handhold by slippery handhold. If he made it to the top, he'd throw another rope down to me.

Wouldn't he?

I waited a long time, as long as I could stand it. It might have only been a few hours, maybe even less. But it grew more and more maddening to simply stand there, soaked through, bathed in steam and sweat, doing nothing. Wondering if he was trying to find me. Wondering if he'd left me behind. Wondering if he was drowning or dead or lost, somewhere in this maze.

At last I decided to move. If he'd made it back up, he could take care of himself. And if he was down here somewhere, maybe I could find him. Offer help, if he needed it. If he'd take it. Anyway hadn't I said it would be silly to make it all the way here and not explore?

It was the deepest we'd been yet. Maybe there were answers down here. Or at least another way out.

I picked a flooded hallway, took out my keys and gouged a crude arrow into the shitty paint of the wall, drywall dust spilling out. Breadcrumbs, to find my way back. Or show Niko where I'd gone, if he was lost down here too, or came looking for me.

And if something else comes looking, you're pointing it right at you.

But there was nothing to be done about that. I gave the shaft back up one last doleful look, then turned to the hallway and began to push my way forward through the hot, sluggish water.

I wandered. I'm not sure for how long. The black water's surface smoothed once I moved away from the turbulence at the bottom of the shaft, swallowed up the glowstick's dim red light. There were no longer any curious features or unusual architecture: only an irregular grid of junctions. The infrequent side rooms were always empty. Sometimes the floor or ceiling sloped up or down, not always in sync; so the water level would drift from ankle-deep to above my waist, and the ceiling from claustrophically low to beyond the reach of my light. The halls trended wider and narrower, too, in unpredictable rhythms. I worried for a while about stepping into a pit I couldn't see and dunking myself again, but there weren't any. Nor were there stairs, up or down, or even light fixtures. Only hallways, branching, recombining, endless.

The air stayed steamy, and while the water cooled as I moved farther from the hot inlet stream it was still uncomfortably warm. I felt hot and clammy, thick-headed. Mist swirled in the air, sculpting the dim red light into strange shapes and shadows.

It was while stopped to dig through my pack for a fresh glowstick that I thought of using the gun as a signal.

It had kept intruding on my thoughts like a sore tooth as I trudged the flooded halls, chafing against my waist. I pulled it out and stared at its bulk in my hand, calculating. It wasn't that big, but I imagined it still ought to make enough sound to carry quite a ways down here. If Niko was anywhere nearby, he'd hear it.

Gripping it with both hands, I flicked off the safety, lifted it above my head to aim at the ceiling, and pulled the trigger.

The shot was deafening, and instantly my vague hope soured to abject terror as I realized what I'd done, realized how far that sound might carry, wondered who else might hear it. The reverberations echoed, endless. I pictured compressed sound waves expanding through miles of hallways, like a dangerous thought lighting up more and more neurons, bouncing off skullbone to keep reflecting, multiplying, feeding on itself. A sound crashing up staircases and down shafts in rippling patterns of interference and reinforcement. I stared down at the gun in my hand, thoughts dull, shots ringing and echoing in my head and through the halls.

But I couldn't take it back. It was done.

The echoes finally slunk away into the shadows. I waited for minutes, straining to hear an answering sound in return, either welcome or ominous. But the silence had fallen back over me like a weighted blanket, hot and smothering, and the new ringing in my ears didn't help either.

I wondered if I should fire again, to give him a better chance to find me. If he'd heard the first shot, it would have caught him by surprise. This time he'd be listening, straining to hear a direction.

So would anything else.

Fuck it.

I shot the ceiling again, cringing from the noise and a new

spike of dread—and *maybe Downstairs won't like being shot at*—counting the seconds till the echoes died away. I stared at the gun in my hand, too terrified to make eye contact with the black sockets of the flooded hallways. *Four shots left.*

I waited for an hour. It was torture, standing in knee-deep bathwater turning my blood sluggish as itself, with nothing to do but wait, and worry, and listen. But I heard no answer. Nothing sounded in return. Nothing came.

I gouged another arrow into the wall, and moved on. I'd decided to keep moving until I found something useful or I couldn't move any more. If I kept moving I wouldn't have to stop, wouldn't have to think.

Walking takes almost no thinking at all.

I came to another spot where the hallway widened, but this was different. Running along the indentation in one wall was a row of pay phones.

I slowed to a stop and stared, wondering if they were really there.

They rose from knee-deep water, six of them each on its own steel pole. The ceiling had risen so high my glowstick couldn't find it, but light stabbed down from somewhere, spotlighting each phone like it stood beneath its own personal streetlight, fierce and bright after hours of flat red glow.

Water sloshed as I trudged over to the nearest phone, reluctant but intrigued. Pay phones don't normally live inside a house. Did that mean something?

I touched the black plastic of the receiver. It felt grimy and cold. As if in a dream, I lifted it, held it to my ear.

Dial tone.

I blinked as it droned in my ear. This didn't make sense. If there was no power this far down, surely there weren't phone lines either. Some telecom grunt hadn't run a cable all the way down here, snaking it through all these endless halls and vertical

shafts, had they? Hope they billed by the hour.

The sound of the dial tone was disturbingly familiar.

Without meaning to, I reached out a finger and dialed a number from an old commercial jingle. Seven sing-song digits.

A voice told me to insert fifty cents.

I almost laughed at this familiar banality. I slapped my pockets, but had no change. I hadn't expected to need any.

I put down the receiver, lifted it again and dialed zero, still not really expecting anything would happen.

After a ring, a woman's voice: "Operator."

My bluff had been called. I didn't know what to say. "Er... I'd, uh, like to make a collect call."

"Please hang up, dial star nine seven, then the number you wish to call. Say your name at the first tone."

"Thanks," I managed.

She was gone. The silence hung oppressive in her absence. I needed a voice back on that line. With a couple words she'd made the familiar loneliness unbearable.

But who could I call? Water sloshed around my knees as I considered the utter inexplicability of my situation. Should I call the police, explain I was lost in my own basement, miles from the surface? Ask the fire department to send a rescue team through my bed, down the vertical hallway, and throw a rope ladder into the slimy tube in the giant bathroom?

Or maybe I'd call a friend. You know, one who'd believe me, who wouldn't hang up thirty seconds into my story. In the movies, whenever someone says "You wouldn't believe me if I told you," there's always someone to say back: "Try me." This person invariably turns out to be surprisingly open-minded.

I knew with grim certainty this was not going to work for me. The only friend I had like that was Niko. And he was gone.

I felt desperately alone.

My fingers brushed against the dial pad, hesitating. They punched star nine seven and then kept going, tracing out a famil-

iar pattern, a groove deep in muscle memory. My fingers knew it well.

At the first tone, I said my name.

Something clicked and whirled in the receiver. A pause, and then, a ring.

Another.

Another.

Someone picked up and said, "Hello?"

"Mom." Relief flooded through me like adrenaline. You trust a voice like that on a primitive level, instinctual, in parts of your brain deeper than logic, than thought.

She must have heard something in my tone. "Honey? What's wrong?"

"What, I only call you when something's wrong?" I tried to joke, but my eyes were tearing up and my hands were trembling. I held the phone tight against my face. It smelled like old sweat and institutional cleaner.

With my other hand I wiped my forehead. Swallowed. "Nothing's wrong. Just wanted to hear your voice. How are things? Tell me what you're up to." I didn't care what she said. I only wanted her to talk and keep on talking. To hear sounds from a normal world and pretend I was part of it. That I'd ever been part of it.

She humored me for a minute, but I could tell she was worried. And I could think of nothing to say that would get me out of here.

"Alright, star man," she finally said, and my brain flashed to my sixth birthday when she dressed up like an astronaut to bring in my cake. Crêpe paper planets and glow-in-the-dark comets. "Fess up. What's going on?"

"I'm... I'm in trouble, mom." My voice was breaking. "Something's happened. You remember my... my friend Niko?" I rushed forward, babbling. "I've lost him, mom, I don't know where he is, where either of us are. I fucked things up and I don't know

what to do. This is too big, all of this is too big, and I... I made a mistake, and..." I bit my lip so I'd stop talking, something pressing down hard on my chest, and gripped the phone like it was my last anchor to reality. Maybe it was.

She took a deep breath. Let it out.

"Oh, honey," she said. "Is it... is it AIDS?"

Of all the things to be terrified about right then, that one was so far down the list that my brain sort of tripped over itself, downshifted straight back to first and stalled the hell out. "Oh," I said. "Uh. What? No. No, it's not AIDS. Mom. I wouldn't tell you something like that over the phone." I took a deep breath, and once again said something I probably shouldn't have. I said it with deadly seriousness. "It's HIV."

There was an awful silence.

Then I started giggling. I couldn't help myself. "That's not funny, Orion," she said, but then she was laughing too, and neither of us could stop, even when she kept trying to, kept saying "Orion" again in her serious voice which just set me off more, which set her off again too. And if I could have given anything to stretch that moment out forever, I'd have done it in a heartbeat.

I wiped tears from the corners of my eyes. "I'm sorry. No, it's not that. I can't really explain it. I guess I just needed to hear your voice more than anything. I'll... figure something out."

"That's my smartie." I could picture her expression when she said this; she'd said it a lot. "You're sure it's nothing I can help with?"

"I'm sure." The red monochrome of the glowstick made the pay phone into an artsy abstraction; the blackness around me sucked away all the rest of its light.

"Well, you'll figure it out. You always have, even when... when there wasn't someone there to help you." She took a deep breath. That was a big thing for her to admit. "You know you can always ask for help when you need to. But you won't always need to. And that's okay."

Tears were pushing out of my eyes again, damn it. I leaned against the booth, screwing them shut. “Thanks, mom,” I whispered.

“I love you, sweetie,” she said. “Do you want to talk to your father?”

And out of everything that had happened, all the unexplained and terrifying and gut-wrenching things, nothing hit me like those words did. Sometimes words hit harder than a slap. You feel them, like ten thousand volts. They sour everything that came before, ruin everything coming after. That’s how those words hit me.

Because my father was dead.

“No,” I managed in a quiet, trembling voice.

“Oh, he’s right here, honey, it’s no trouble. Hang on.”

I stood clutching the phone, unable to move, to breathe.

Faint rustling sounds came over the line.

“Well hey there, son.”

This is something you probably won’t understand unless you’ve lost a parent. You have to put things away when that happens. Something is gone and parts of you went with it, in ways that aren’t always obvious. You have to accept that this person is not coming back. You may not want that to be true but it is and you can’t change it, and you need to believe you can’t change it, which isn’t quite acceptance, but still. You do it. You put the pain from those missing pieces in a box and nail it shut and you don’t forget it or accept it, not exactly, but you learn to stop thinking about it. After a while it’s almost like you’ve buried the box, or lost it. It’s gone.

And then you hear that voice again, and you realize nothing was ever buried or lost or even nailed shut. The box has been there all along, wide open, and everything in it still has exactly the same power to hurt you. It’s just been waiting for the right moment to try.

“Hey, dad.”

The words came out against my will. *There's been a mistake*, I thought dreamily. He's still alive. Just a dream that a freight truck doing ninety smashed into him on a country highway with a busted stoplight, killing him instantly, taking him away from me between one blink and the next. It made sense: it had never felt real, anyway. Some strange multi-year delusion, not easy to explain but so, so easy to accept.

Or maybe in this universe it had never happened.

Maybe here, he's still alive.

This had never once occurred to me since I'd passed through to this side. It was too huge a change. All the differences were so tiny, so inconsequential. Not like this.

Or.

Maybe it's not him at all.

Something inside me withdrew, to wherever small animals go in their heads while staring down looming headlights. Some residual part of me thought I ought to move, speak, react. Get out of the way. But I didn't know how.

"Good to hear your voice." My dad. He sounded like he meant it. "How you holding up?"

"Dad." I wasn't in control: I sounded distant to myself, like someone else was speaking. "Dad. What's going on?"

He chuckled. "We were going to ask you the same question. Your mother and I were a little worried after that call the other day."

I couldn't think. "Call?" I said stupidly.

"From you and Niko." My father hesitated. "We couldn't figure it out, son. You want to let us in on the gag?"

"Uh. Gag?"

"Sure. All that business about *going deeper*."

My blood was frozen and my mouth had gone dry. "What?"

"You said," he explained, voice still achingly familiar, "you both said the next time you called, I was supposed to remind you that you have to go deeper." He cleared his throat. "That,

um.” I could hear the rustle of a paper, like he was reading off a notepad. I could see him, squinting through his glasses. “That you’re not deep enough yet, and you need to keep going. Deeper and deeper. As deep as you can get.” He cleared his throat. “Pretty mysterious. What’s it all about?”

The ground felt like it was dropping away.

“So what’s the news, son?” my father said, a hint of a smile in his voice. “You in deep enough yet?”

I dropped the phone. It swung on the end of its metal coil, spinning slowly. I could still hear his voice, faint and distorted—

“Ryan?”

—dad’s voice, drifting faint from those tiny holes in the receiver, as I backed away, staring—

“Orion? You there?”

—and my shoulders hit the wall, and I couldn’t back away any more but I could still hear his voice coming out of the receiver, so I pulled out my gun and shot it.

Somehow I hit the dangling receiver on my first shot, and it exploded. Tiny bits of plastic shrapnel cut the air. One whizzed past my cheek and sliced it open. I didn’t notice. I raised the gun to the boxy metal body of the phone and shot that, too. I shot it again and again until the gun wouldn’t fire any more.

My ears hurt. The reverberations were deafening, echoing endlessly. They seemed even louder this time, like they had a life of their own. Like they’d never die out. I unclenched my hand and the gun fell into the water, vanishing under the surface without a splash.

The phone made a distinct, metallic *clunk*.

I looked up at its bullet-riddled surface.

Inside, something was tumbling down through the pay phone’s innards, dinging and plinking past metal obstructions. My gaze moved down, following its invisible path through the body of the phone.

Finally, the clattering stopped. The gate of the coin return

jiggled as something clunked into the slot behind it.

Not wanting to, I edged forward. Part of me reached out while another part tried in horror to call my hand back, but it kept moving. It pushed the gate open.

In the coin return was a small brass key.

I stared at it for a long moment. Then I snatched the key and pulled back, turning away from the bank of phones in the same movement. I slogged fiercely on through the water and down the hall, moving fast, not looking back.

My ears still rang with gunshots. In the silence, that ring kept sounding almost like a distant telephone, bell clanging somewhere far behind me. I tried to ignore them, but the ghost sounds didn't fade for hours.

In a flooded side room half the floor had rotted away. Water cascaded down into consuming blackness, no lower level visible. I stepped carefully past the open door and the strong current rushing in, tide sucking my shins like it was hungry for them, and sloshed away fast up the hall, shuddering at the thought of that black pit. You fell into that thing, God knows where you'd land.

Soon after, the hall began sloping up. The carpet went from wet to damp, and then, between one step and the next, dry.

Up ahead glimmered a tiny spark of silver, and as I got closer I realized it was a night-light, plugged into an outlet at the base of the wall. Something about it whispered of lightning bugs and sleepy summer nights, and all at once I felt immensely weary. I fell to my knees when I reached the weak light and sloughed off my waterlogged pack, then curled up around the tiny pale glow as if it was a campfire. My face snuggled into the brown whorls of the carpet like the fur of some huge indifferent beast. I slept.

My body did, anyway. My mind kept marching.

I dreamed endless waterlogged halls. I trudged, not making any attempt to mark my way or track my position. I searched for nothing, found nothing: just wandered. When I realized I was dreaming I tried to break free of the nightmare, think of anything else, but lucidity was slippery, fumbled away between heartbeats, and I kept losing it. I walked halls lit only by my

flickering blood-red light and thought of nothing that wasn't them.

Once, in a long, straight hall of waist-deep water that never seemed to end, the surface ahead of me shifted, swirled.

Something moved underneath.

I stopped short, squinting, and held my glowstick high. The ripples flung its dim light back to me, bunched up and distorted. But I could make out something person-shaped under the surface, swimming toward me.

The gun was in my hand: in this dream, I'd forgotten I lost it. Gripped by fear, I aimed it at the thing under the surface and pulled the trigger. But the shots went wide, from the angle of the water or some grim nightmare-logic. Whatever it was kept coming.

I cringed back against the wall. The thing beneath the water was doing the breaststroke with smooth, efficient moves. It didn't break the surface and it never came up for air. Through the rippled distortions I could see no face.

But as it swam past, ignoring me, I could see it wore my clothes.

It didn't slow down. I pressed my back against the wall, cold sweat prickling on my face, helpless to stop my head turning to watch it pass.

It swam to the end of the hall and around a corner, never stopping for breath, leaving a wake of dark whorls and eddies behind.

I woke with a parched, sticky mouth. My face was glued to the carpet with dried blood from where the piece of phone had cut my cheek. I tugged myself free, which reopened the cut. Wincing, I sat up and rummaged in my waterlogged pack for something to staunch the bleeding, still half-asleep. I'd left my soaked shoes on and my feet felt like they'd swelled to twice their normal size inside them.

My glowstick had long since burnt out. The nightlight's weak silver glow reduced the world to a dim circle of carpet, a few feet across. And I was groggy, still shaking dream-remnants from my head. So I didn't realize until I started digging for a fresh glowstick that someone was sitting a few feet away.

I gasped and leapt up, scrabbling back against the wall behind me. I could see only tennis shoes, catching the pale gray edge of the nightlight, and the faintest hint of a body in the shadows behind them, knees pulled up with clasping hands. Someone sitting with their back against the wall, faint silver glints in two eyes. Watching.

I stayed there trembling for a moment, too afraid to either come closer or flee into the blackness back the way I'd come. I'd left my pack in the circle of light, between me and whoever was sitting beyond it.

I realized I recognized the shoes.

Hesitant, I cleared my throat. "Niko?"

The face was so shadowed I could barely make it out, but I thought it smiled. "Hey, man."

The voice was cracked, weak. But familiar. Unmistakable.

I stepped back toward the light. "Shit, dude, you scared me." He made no move to get up. "What happened to you? We got separated and I didn't know what to do. Did you hear my gunshots? Jesus, I'm glad you found me."

I knelt and pulled a new glowstick from my pack, but he held up a hand.

"Okay if we talk for a minute first, like this?" he said. "Been in the dark for fucking ever and that thing will murder my eyes." He lowered the hand. "Cool?"

It was such a relief to hear his voice again I shoved the glowstick back down, along with a vague sense of unease. "Fine. So what happened?"

"Rather hear what happened to you. Tell me everything."

So I did. How I'd waited at the bottom of the shaft, explored

the water-soaked hallways. I told him about the call at the bank of payphones. But I left out the part with the key. I'm not sure why. I figured there'd be plenty of chances to bring it up later, now that we were together again.

He didn't say much. The silver glints bobbed at times like he was nodding or cocking his head. But the darkness was fierce. All I could really make out were his shoes, and the hands clasped around his knees. In the pale silver of the night-light they looked skeletal, emaciated.

Disquiet crept into me, rising through the floor into my feet and up my bones. I couldn't see his face. I wanted to.

"Hey," I finally said, "this dark is kind of freaking me out. You can shield your eyes or whatever, but I've got to have some light. Okay?"

He sighed, as if resigned. "If you have to."

I reached carefully for a glowstick the same way I used to walk deliberately towards the light switch in my childhood basement, shepherding growing panic with a forced front of calm. I pulled one out, snapped it, shook it, blinked at the surge of yellow light from mingling chemicals, and held it up, anxious, as the light crept toward him.

The electric yellow was shockingly bright, and he'd winced and held up a hand to block it out. He kept it there for a long moment as I squinted, pupils squirming. Finally, almost reluctant, he dropped the hand and met my gaze, defiant.

Something was wrong with him.

He was changed. Distorted. Something had leathered him, shrunk and withered his features, hollowed his eye sockets. At first he seemed like some poorly made caricature, face a twisted copy of the one I knew so well. But then I started to realize what had happened to him.

Time.

He was older. Much older.

I was still in the shallows of my twenties, remember. I hadn't

been around long enough to see how age inscribes itself on people, crumples parents into grandparents and invalids and corpses. I hadn't seen friends lose hair and teeth and muscle tone. I hadn't loved someone long enough to find out what decades do to them.

The Niko against the wall looked twice as old as he should have been, maybe more. He was wearing different clothes, but out of his standard wardrobe: the bowling shirt with "My Name Is BONG" on the lapel. It wasn't threadbare or faded. Something bulged from the front pocket, maybe a penlight, and his pack leaned against the wall beside him.

He held my gaze, waiting. We stared at each other for a long time.

I finally broke the silence. "What happened?"

He took a breath. Let it out. "You can see what happened." He cleared his throat. I realized now he wasn't tired, or strained. His voice was just older. He spoke in short, clipped sentences, like breathing in too deep was painful. "So. Yeah. I'm not your Niko, man. Okay? I've been through more. A lot more."

I stiffened. "You're... from the other side?"

He smiled. "Ah. You still think there's just two sides. Sure, course you do." He shook his head. "Guess that's how it seems near the surface. A pair of possibilities. Neat. But deeper down, things get more... *tangled*." The word sounded heavy in his throat, dangerous.

"What do you mean?" I couldn't stop staring at his face, and I swayed with the sick feeling of recognition and strangeness, curdled together in that fierce yellow light.

"There's a lot of space down here, Orion. A lot of... possibilities. Most of them aren't good." His glance had drifted down the corridor, but now it snapped back to my face. "My Ryan and I, we got lost. Long time ago. Real fucking lost. Never made it back."

"Your Ryan?" I looked around, panic spiking. "There's some

older version of me down here too?”

He looked away. “No.”

After a moment, I realized he wasn’t going to say anything else. And then why.

His eyes flicked back to mine again, as if fascinated by them. He stared with something like hunger. At seeing my face again? At seeing anyone?

“Been on my own a long time,” he said, as if explaining. “Gotten used to it.”

Suddenly I couldn’t accept any of this. “Your clothes.” I shook my head. “Your shoes. No. They haven’t changed. They should be worn down to nothing.”

He looked away again, out into the blackness down the hall. “Like I said. Lot of possibilities.” He cracked a knuckle. “We weren’t the only ones who got lost. Bumped into lots of other Nikos and Ryans down here. Most of them dead. Sorry to say.” He cracked another knuckle, methodical. “But the clothes are fine, man. The clothes fit great.” He forced out a barking laugh, abrupt and cold. I wondered how long it had taken his laugh to shrivel down to that emaciated sound.

He sniffed. “You get used to it. Stealing clothes, I mean. Stops being strange after a while.”

“But how do you eat?” I felt angry, not the least because my skin was crawling at the thought of him grave-robbing other Nikos. Other Ryans. “If you’ve been down here so long, how the hell are you even alive?”

He turned back to me again, no longer wistful but with a dangerous sharpness. Maybe you’ve heard the phrase “thousand-yard stare” and maybe you’ve even seen one before, but I hadn’t. It *struck* me. I believed everything he said next, no matter how fantastic. The words were only flavoring on the truth in that stare.

“There’s a room,” he began, voice graveling, “not much farther down from here. Different from anything up here. Bigger. A bit

bigger.” That laugh again. “Some stairs keep going down. And if you follow them far enough, they open up into black empty spaces. No walls. But keep climbing down and you’ll come, in the end, to a floor. Step off the bottom stair onto dirt, packed down. Stretching out forever in every direction, as far as your light can reach, as far as your legs can walk. The Basement.”

He grinned, grotesquely. “Endless. And empty. Bits of junk now and then, I guess. Empty hope chests, half-buried in dried mud. Broken table legs, rotten lumber. Naked dolls. But mostly just endless dark, endless quiet. Endless nothing. Except for all the other stairs.”

“Other...” I swallowed. “Other stairs?”

“Most of them go up,” he said. “In spirals or twisted landings or long straight flights. Through emptiness, like the way down. But eventually...” He coughed, cleared his throat. “They lead to halls again. Rooms, carpet. Downstairs. But not the same one. Because if you make it all the way back up to the top, to the house, it’s different.

“I mean it’s our house,” he said when he saw my frown. “It’s always our house. Not exactly. None exactly. But all close enough. Sometimes the foyer’s a mirror image, or the front door’s changed, or there’s one more bedroom on the second floor, one less. Or the carpet’s different, or the wallpaper, or the kitchen’s smaller or there’s no bricked up fireplace, or the fireplace is bigger, or there’s a fish tank instead of a fireplace. Sometimes, maybe one in ten houses, I can’t see a difference. But I think it’s always there.

“Each one has that upstairs porch room, though,” he went on, relentless. “Your room. And they’re all filled with your stuff. Little variations again. Sometimes your bookshelf has a copy of *Imajica*, sometimes it doesn’t. That one I always look for. But it’s your room, in every house. And your bed you climb up through to get there.

“But,” he added, “but you can’t get out. You can’t get out of

any of them.”

“What?” I couldn’t break his gaze.

“Bricked up,” he said. “Sealed off. Windows. Doors. Bricked up. Bricks behind the walls too. And behind the bricks. Bricks forever.” His fingers drummed against the wall. “Like dead shoots, I think, those houses. Seedlings that didn’t grow, didn’t ever live to poke their heads into the light. And there’s a lot more dead ones than live ones. Thousands of stairs that go nowhere for each that lead back up to a real house, a real universe. Whole. So you wander too far down there in the Basement, lose the stairs you first came down from...” He shrugged.

“You come across other Ryans and Nikos down there,” he added, “from time to time. Wandering. Lost the stairs they came down. Hoping to find the way back to a world with people and a sun and something that isn’t this. This place. Something that isn’t us. They get real fucking disappointed.

“Sometimes I’ll meet them wandering the dirt, crying, panicked. I stay away, of course. Can’t get too close, like you know, or. Bad things happen.” He pointed to his temples, and I flashed back to that feeling of wrongness when my double and I had almost bumped into each other.

He looked away. “Course they’re usually dead by the time I find them,” he added lightly. “But. Your question. Each dead house has a pantry, food. Once in a while one has power, too, lit up like Christmas, and the fridge is running and cold, and there’s lunchmeat and milk and leftovers inside. Unspoiled. So there’s plenty to eat. Just not a lot of, you know. Ambiance.”

He stepped closer. “I heard your gunshots. That’s how I found the right stair. Found you. Don’t know what you were shooting at but doesn’t matter. *You’re not lost.* Are you.” He glanced behind me, back the way I’d come. “This goes back up, doesn’t it? To the surface. The real surface.” He closed his eyes. “With light and birds, and grass, and people who aren’t you or me. I can’t tell you...” He opened them again and I wanted to

shrink back, close my eyes and pretend I'd never seen something like that in human eyes, let alone in his, that hollowness and greed and something else, too, something worse. But I couldn't. I could only stare back, cringing.

"I can't tell you," he said more quietly, "what it would mean to me to find my way back up there. Orion. I can't stay down here any longer. I can't."

I wanted to find my Niko, but this one kept arguing against it. Impossible, he said. Like finding a needle in a haystack. Except this haystack went on forever. In the best-case scenario, he explained patiently, we'd wander until our food ran out, then with our last dregs of energy and luck find our way back up and out, empty-handed.

He didn't mention the worst-case scenario.

Decamped in a small empty side room with low ceilings and walls bulging with water damage, we argued. A single weak light bulb stuck in the center of one wall made stark shadow-men play across the other. He insisted the smart strategy was for us to retrace my steps to the base of the slide and find a way to climb back up. "The closer to the top, the fewer possibilities," he said, "the fewer choices. And fewer chances of making the wrong one." When he found out I hadn't seen my Niko since we got separated in the shaft, he grew even more convinced. "Maybe he's not down here at all. Maybe he caught himself on the way down, like you said, and he's up there now waiting for you. Worrying." He gave up convincing me. "Or if he's not, he'll realize heading back is the smart option. I *know* he would, buddy." He tapped his head. "Trust me."

I couldn't deny this plan made sense, but I felt sick. Too much was wrong. "Look. Even if I take you back up there, it won't be your world. You can't stay. If you're on the wrong side too long,

you start to feel—detached.” I shuddered without meaning to. “Like it’s rejecting you. Like antibodies swarming. It’ll kill you.”

He shrugged. “We don’t know that. I’ll risk it. Anything’s better than staying down here.”

“It’s not just that.” I felt like a coward, but desperately wanted an excuse, a reason he couldn’t come back with us. “You know about that sick feeling when you’re too close to a twin. That’s even worse than the headaches. So say we find my Niko and get you both back to the surface. Then what? The two of you get a double on campus, move in together?”

He sighed, impatient. “You think I haven’t thought this through, all the time I’ve had? You help me get back up, I’m gone. It’s a big planet. I’ve learned how to survive. I’ll never get within a hundred miles of either of you again.”

“Wait a minute.” I’d had an idea. “That sick sensation, when you’re too close. We can use that to find him.” He raised an eyebrow. “Okay, maybe you’re right, and there’s too much space here to find him by dumb luck. But you’ve got a sixth sense for where he is. You’re like a magnet we can move through that haystack, feeling for tugs. Any twinges and we steer closer, till we’re close enough to do the rest by shouting.”

“You’re not listening to me, Orion.” He was getting angry. “There’s a lot of space down here. You have no idea how much space. You’re never going to find him. You need to accept that. You’ll get us both lost. And I’m *sick* of being lost, buddy. Fucking sick of it.”

He had an intensity my Niko never had—though maybe there’d been something like it latent in him, waiting for the right trauma to pull it out like a loose thread. It scared me. It scared me that I’d never noticed it before.

He was right. I didn’t want to get lost down here, either. I didn’t want to end up like him.

But I also wasn’t willing to give up on my Niko.

I dug out my keys, held them up. “Look. I’ve been using these

to mark my way. There's no chance of getting lost. And I've got plenty of food, still. For both of us. So we keep searching. Keep marking the way. Be methodical, map it out. And if the food runs low..." My throat felt tight. "If that happens, we'll turn back. But I can't give up on him yet. I can't."

His eyes narrowed, and I could see him weighing something behind them. "Fine," he said at last. "Until the food runs low. But look. Buddy." He put a hand on my shoulder, squeezed it, tighter than I would have liked. "I've been down here a lot longer than you. These halls are deceptive." He kept his eyes locked with mine, not looking around, like the walls would notice him if he did. "We'll look as long as we can. But if we do this, you've got to trust me. When I say it's time to turn back. We turn back." He wasn't asking. It was an order. His eyes drilled into mine and there was something cold and grim in them, like a general leading his troops to slaughter.

But then a corner of his mouth lifted and he clapped my shoulder, dropped the hand. "That okay with you, man?" he asked, and he sounded so much like his old self it ached.

"Fair enough," I said, even though I didn't want to. It made sense, I supposed, for him to play guide. But my stomach twisted when I realized what I was agreeing to, realized the power I was ceding. Realized I'd agreed to trust someone who, in every way that mattered, I barely knew at all.

Elder Niko was obsessive about marking our way—I couldn't blame him—so we made slow progress. But despite his initial misgivings he seemed committed now to finding his younger double. Even downright cheerful about it.

We slipped into something like a rhythm, despite the surreal circumstances. He borrowed a glowstick—the penlight or whatever in his shirt pocket must have been dead—and kept up conversation as he swung it around, peering down all the hallways we passed. Sometimes, for a moment, I'd forget it wasn't

him. Then the light would catch the hard-edged crow's feet around his eyes, or he'd ask in nostalgia-tinged tones if I remembered something that happened a week or a month ago, and reality crashed back into me. I supposed from his perspective I was like a long-lost friend at a high school reunion, so as woozy as it made me feel I could understand this behavior.

I thought I could, anyway.

As the hours passed the sense that he was keeping something from me, that something was wrong, only grew. He kept asking about the way back up: casually, like making conversation. But he wanted to know what was above the slide, the layout of the rooms before that, whether we'd come through a fridge or a sliding glass door, whether the junction before the long stairs down had eight doors or six or five, which pit exactly we'd rappelled down, whether we'd found the Library Chasm, which branch I'd taken off the Big Room to get down here. He was trying to reconstruct the route back out. Maybe this made sense—maybe he was just curious, or hedging his bets in case we got split up, like I had with my Niko—but behind the jokes and easy laughter I sensed calculation. A front. Performance.

Now and then I'd ask if he'd gotten any twinges of feeling, hints we were getting close to another Niko. He'd answer right away: Sorry. Nope. Nothing. At one point, annoyed, I demanded he stop for a minute and really try. He apologized with abashed sincerity, and we stood at a junction for ten long minutes while he concentrated, the wrinkles around his eyes creasing as he squeezed them closed—but when he opened them again, he shook his head. Nothing. He seemed sad but not surprised.

Like he knew there was no one there to find.

We'd come to a place of endless ducts and exposed plumbing. Bulky metal curves and protrusions poked from the walls: the bones of water heaters, of central air. The ground was dry, but the room felt hot and moist, dripping all around us. We poked

around a space the size of a mansion, cluttered with oddly-sized corners and crannies, finally realizing the whole area was a dead end. There was no other way out.

“Maybe it’s time to turn back,” Elder Niko said when we realized this, solemn. We were near the back of the big cluttered space. A smell like rotting leaves wafted from the sharp metal ruins of a boiler that looked like it had ruptured from the inside. The carpet was mottled with rusty blotches, like overlapping pools of dried-up blood. “Man, it’s going to be hilarious when we find out my younger self’s been topside this whole time. Lounging on a blanket in the backyard, you know, under the sky. Catching some rays. Listening to tunes. Waiting for you to get out.” He laughed, and his voice echoed off a thousand metal boxes.

His face grew more serious. “Or maybe he’s so lost we’ll never find him. Orion. I tried to tell you. This place is too big.” He gestured around us, took a deep breath, looked chagrined. “It’s a lost cause, buddy. I think it’s time to give it up.”

He took a step toward the door, but I was in his way, bristling. Holding my ground.

He stopped, looking confused. “What’s up?”

I couldn’t explain my trembling, except for a deep-seated certainty that this was wrong. Everything about it was wrong, just generally, but a specific wrong thing was the way this place had taken Niko from me and done this to him, made him into something I couldn’t understand and didn’t trust, and I couldn’t stand this stalemate any more. Some yawning possibility loomed before me, like I was on my knees proposing and had no idea if the answer would be yes. But I had to know. Better to get shot down than keep wondering forever.

I met his eyes. “Tell me.”

“Hmm?”

“Tell me whatever it is you’re not telling me. What’s really going on. I want to know.”

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Damn it, stop *pretending*. Everything is not okay. You're stringing me along and you need to stop it. Be honest with me."

"Oh?" His expression had started to shift. Something was slipping.

"Stop playing games." I clenched my fists. "Stop *using* me. Look, we can do this together. You need me to get out of here. Both of you do. I know the way back, and I'll help you, but I need to trust you. And you need to trust me. Okay?"

Looking annoyed, he scratched furiously behind one ear, not meeting my eye. He sighed, heavy.

Then, looking up at me with a resigned expression and shaking his head, he stepped forward, and punched me in the throat.

I staggered back, pain exploding from my neck, but he stepped forward at the same time, looking bored. He punched me in the face so hard I spun sideways and slammed into the wall, something crunching in my nose, and he kept stepping forward, grabbing my wrists and kicking my feet out from under me. He twisted my arms as I fell so I landed face first, and still he kept moving with me, descending with his knee in my back so when I hit the ground his full weight slammed down on top of me. He punched me hard in the kidney, twice, grinding my face into the carpet with his other hand now somehow on my head.

My mouth was open but I couldn't breathe, or scream or speak or think for lack of breathing. My throat felt crushed, my lungs paralyzed. Pain like a stab wound tore open my side. I couldn't think enough to move my muscles.

Never taking his weight off the knee digging into my spine, he pulled something from his bag. I heard a rip, and was so sure it was some part of myself it confused me when I felt no pain. Something sticky wrapped around my wrists, tugging the hairs on my forearm. Duct tape. And now I did struggle, feebly trying to dislodge him, kicking my legs. Pathetic as a half-squashed bug, twitching, not realizing it's already dead. In moments he'd

bound my ankles, too, and then my knees.

It had all taken maybe ten seconds.

I tried to make a sound, to beg him to stop, or ask why he was doing this, but all that came out was a coarse rasp, not even a gasp. So I begged with my eyes instead.

He met my gaze, then looked away, dispassionate. He knew what I was trying to say. He didn't care.

He frisked me: hands patting my ass, my pockets, my crotch. "Gun," he said, impatient, "where's the gun?"

I had just enough breath back to grunt a word. "Gone."

"Stupid." He cuffed the back of my head. "There's worse things than me down here. And worse *mes*." He smirked, but his hands had found my back pocket, felt what was inside. They reached in, urgent, and dragged out the key. His breath caught.

He bent down and shoved it in my face, angrier now than he'd looked while beating the shit out of me. "What's this? How long ago did you find this?"

My head spun, trying to think of some way to regain control. "Couple," I gasped. "Hours."

"Have you used it yet? Gone through?"

I didn't want to answer his questions, but I couldn't see how lying would help me, either. I shook my head.

He stood up and punched the wall, leaving his fist in the cracked indentation it made for a long moment. Then he started to pace, furious. Thinking. I groaned and rolled partway onto my side. The pain in my kidney was evolving from a stabbing into a roiling burning sickness, like something inside me boiled, threatened to burst. Breathing felt like forcing air through pipes sealed with rust.

"My Niko," I rasped. "Looking for me. Won't let you. Do this."

"Your Niko's dead," he said, and he said it so simply, so matter-of-fact, it sunk into me like another punch. "Found him and got rid of him before I found you. I always kill the Nikos first. Makes

the headaches go away faster.”

It felt like the room was dropping, like he’d cut some elevator cable I hadn’t known was holding me up. I didn’t want to believe him. I fought not to. “No,” I gasped. “Bull. Shit.”

He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out what I’d thought was a penlight. It wasn’t. It was a finger.

He tossed it onto the carpet by my face and it rolled once, coming stiffly to rest a few inches from my eye. It was cut through at the knuckle and pale and dead. But more or less the right color.

“I’ve killed him hundreds of times,” he said, sounding bored again. He was watching me, though, and as he noticed my tears he gave them a small, sad smile, as if touched by my naiveté. “And you, too, you little bitch. You’re even easier. Always freeze up at first. Or if you don’t, you try to grab my arm. But the same way every time, right? So that makes it simple to break your wrist. When you double over whining, it’s easy to grab your skull and smash it into the ground until you stop moving.”

He knelt down, turning his head sideways to study my face, as if curious about the effect his words were having on me. “This time’s different, though. *You’re* not lost yet. *You* know the way back.” He reached out and tousled my hair, playful-rough. “And you’re going to take me there, Orion. Take me back up. Or you’re going to die.”

He stood up again. “But this fucking key. Complicates things. You said you’re on the wrong side, from your perspective. Yeah?” I didn’t answer; he went on as if I had. “That means there’s another you who’s also found a key. The twin key to this one, on the twin side. And if that other you didn’t get ambushed by his old bestie”—a wicked grin—“he’ll pop through to this side soon enough. Because. You find a key, you’re almost certainly only a few hours away from finding its door.”

I couldn’t see how this changed things. “Why does that matter?”

He turned the key over and over in his hand, staring at it.

“Staying in sync. Wasn’t that always our theory?” It was like he was asking the key. “I think we have to. Buddy. I told a lie earlier. I don’t always kill you both right away. Sometimes I... ask questions.” He scraped a thumbnail along the key. “Find out where you’ve been. What happened before. The ones who have it worst are always the ones who got too out of sync. With their doubles. And if they lose it entirely... if things warp too out of true...” He made a sucking sound through his teeth, bringing it to a crescendo and then cutting it off, like a tire popping in reverse.

He glanced at me, then back to the key. “That’s what happened to me. My double and I, we... diverged. And something tore. Or popped, maybe. Think pairs of soap bubbles, floating in infinite void. They need each other to stay stable. Our universes got too far apart and it wasn’t good for them. They’re gone now, or too far to ever reach. Dark.

“But yours...” He grinned even more broadly. “A ripe pair. Undamaged. Still connected. To each other, and to you. You. I can follow you back into them like a thread. Like a fucking thread, Orion. Up and out and back into the light.”

This is the part where if I was a spy or an action hero, I’d be secretly digging a knife out of my pocket, working my way free of the bonds, taking advantage of the villain’s distracted ranting to try for my freedom. But I wasn’t a spy. I was a Bio major. I’d never been in a fight. I was trussed up, I couldn’t move, the pain was still excruciating, and I had no idea what to do.

As if to reinforce my stupid squandered opportunity, Niko seemed to notice me again. Abruptly he put the key in his pocket (his front right pocket, I noticed, desperate not to be completely helpless) and dug through my pack. With a satisfied grunt, he pulled out rope, and proceeded to tie my hands and lower arms behind my back, so tight my elbows almost touched.

My freedom was slipping away. I tried to keep him talking. “But...” I had to clear my throat, heavy. “If Niko’s dead—my Niko—isn’t it too late? How can anything be in sync now?”

He paid no attention to this, continuing his rope work. When he'd finished he wrapped the end a few times around my neck and fear spiked through me, but then he grabbed under my arms and lifted me gently to a sitting position, leaning against the wall.

He went to the pack and pulled out my flashlight, shaking it. "This thing work?" I didn't answer: he was already toggling the switch on and off with no effect. He grunted, dug some batteries from his own pack and slipped them in, nodding in satisfaction as the light came on. Pocketing it, he rummaged through my pack, eyes lighting up when he found my cache of food. He ripped open the wrapper on a power bar and took a huge bite, grunting in satisfaction. Ignoring me.

"Niko," I said, trying not to cry. "Please let me go."

He grimaced, like what I'd said had hurt him, and scooted closer to me, still chewing. He ran his fingers gently through my hair, tugged back my head. Stared into my eyes with a frown. Like he'd lost something in them.

"I told another lie earlier, bud," he said, swallowing. "Sometimes those dead and bricked-up houses do have power, like I said. Who knows why or where it comes from, but sometimes they do."

I kept my eyes on his, hoping to find some empathy or humanity there.

He took another bite. Chewed more slowly this time.

There was nothing in his eyes.

"Power," he said, mouth half-full, "but the fridges and pantries, in all those houses? They're empty. All of them. There's no food down here, Orion. None at all."

I couldn't stop trembling. I couldn't look away from his eyes.

He swallowed again, shoved the last of the bar into his mouth. Still gripping me with his other hand, he turned my head from side to side, like he was admiring it. "But you and me," he said, mouth full, "other versions. Man, there's *so many* of us. Popping up or tripping down those stairs, those millions of stairs. Lost.

Always lost. Pathetic. Eaten all their food. Starving, out of their minds. They're already dead, really. Or a nudge away."

He swallowed the last of the power bar, licked his lips and the crumbs off his fingers. Then he leaned forward, slow, like he was going in for a kiss.

He stopped, face inches from mine.

"Wouldn't it be such a waste?" He spoke quietly, carefully. His breath smelled of processed figs. "Such a shame for all those deaths to have been for nothing. To have served no purpose. Don't you think?"

"Niko," I begged, wanting it to mean so many things.

He touched a finger to my lips. "I think you get it. So. We have to find the door this key connects to. We have to wait for your doubles to come through—yours, and your dead friend's. Swap places with them. Pass back to your side. Keep things *synchronous*. And then head up, up, up into the shallows, back to the surface, away from this place forever, and synchronicity can go fuck itself." He stood up, reaching down, and grabbed my shirt to jerk me to my feet. He wrapped the end of the rope around his arm.

"But we'd better get moving. Cause your door's going to be farther down from here. And best for both of us if we find it before I get too fucking hungry." He gestured back toward the way out of the jumbled room of metal tubes, mockingly polite. "After you, amigo."

Like a bitter parody of the exploring I'd done with my Niko, a million years ago, we kept moving. I led, Niko following behind holding the rope wound around my neck. He'd cut the duct tape from my ankles so I could walk, but tied a blindfold made from a damp shirt tight around my face. "Little handicap," he said, "case you decide to run off." I cringed as he clapped me playfully on the back. "Don't worry. If you're good, I'll tell you when you're about to walk into a pit."

We searched. At intersections he'd describe each hallway, and casually discuss which way to go, as if we were equals. As if he hadn't threatened to kill me and worse. Other than a preference for moving toward anything weird or different, he seemed content to let me choose the direction. He marked the wall, tracing our path with fastidious care—"If we're doing it on this side, they're doing it on theirs, too"—and on the whole seemed downright cheerful. For a while he whistled something I finally placed as the theme to one of our favorite shows. Just the second bar, over and over again.

Like he'd forgotten the rest.

I made little plans for how to get away.

None of them seemed very plausible.

From his descriptions, I gathered we were passing through a maze of identical drab halls. The carpet underfoot was sometimes dry, sometimes thick with something that felt like dead mulch

and made me stumble, and often slick with slime and mold. We must have been only just above the water table, if such a concept made sense down here. Probably it didn't. Sometimes we'd go up dry stairs to a soaked hall at the top, or along a downward slant that went from squelchy to dusty. We were near water, anyway, moving through histories of past inundation. Niko described walls streaked with damage from it, paint browned and peeling. More than once he had to direct me around collapsed sections of floor, sinkholes I could sense only through the hot smells of rot wafting up from them, the uneven edges of torn carpet and cracked cement at their lips. Hands on my shoulders, he told me where to step. I obeyed.

There were few side rooms here, but he'd open the door to each we passed and check it. Bedroom-sized, he told me, all empty except for a small drain in the center of each floor.

It was hard to keep my balance, blindfolded and with arms bound behind me, and I stumbled a lot. The adrenaline from earlier had worn off, leaving behind a dozen throbbing aches and a deep exhaustion. How long had I been down here? I couldn't come up with a number, but my body knew the answer. Too long.

Worse, I felt abysmally alone. To feel like the last person in the universe that cares for you is not only gone, but twisted into a thing that loathes you with active and pulsing hate, is utterly miserable. Maybe this place had twisted him, or maybe that hate had been there all along, buried under the surface, and I'd just never noticed it.

At the next intersection I tripped on a rough patch of carpet and collapsed, smacking my chin against the ground. It hurt, and I started crying. Sobbing, actually. I'd never felt more useless, pathetic. Niko told me to shut up, and I tried to pull myself together. He sighed, and suggested we take a rest. Sniffing, I agreed.

He sat me up against a wall and fed me a power bar, one

torn-off piece at a time. I clenched and unclenched my tingling hands; from the elbows down everything was numb. After a while the tears stopped.

I wanted to sleep but couldn't bear waking back up to this. I wanted him to untie me, unwind the rope from my neck, let me go. I wanted to get away from him, or better yet for none of this to ever have happened at all. I wanted to be dreaming of something other than hallways, and him.

I could have none of these things. But he hadn't gagged me. I could still talk. And maybe talking together, like we'd done so much, I could find a way to reach him.

So I asked him about the things he'd seen, and he told me.

He spoke of a hallway twelve miles long without a single door or turn. Of a huge labyrinth of circular halls he'd mapped, pressing towards the center, until at last he'd arrived triumphant in the small circular room at its core. All that was there was a pile of crumbling bricks, like the reward for the maze had never been built. He spoke of caged metal ladders climbing up through vast, dark, empty spaces, rung after rung through nothing but void.

He spoke of more connection points between paired dimensions, useless to him since he couldn't find his way to the surface of any—and all *tangled* down there, he said again. The connections always had some kind of airtight seal. Walk-in closets with snug doors on either end; empty gun safes with doors on either end, just large enough to wriggle through; a shower, but vertically stretched, thirty feet of bathroom tile with frosted glass doors at the top and bottom, and climbing its steel fixtures, faucets and knobs sticking out at random from the walls, climbing it all the way to the top.

Sometimes there were furnished rooms, he said, that you could almost imagine were part of a regular house. Out the door you could pretend there was a kitchen, maybe, with bacon frying and morning light slanting through the window, or a porch with

a cool breeze. As long as you stayed put it was almost like being home. He said these rooms, by far, were the most dangerous of all.

He spoke of curving tunnels made from scraps of sandpaper and carpet samples, of flooded libraries swimming with illegible books, of treacherous mountains of abandoned silverware, poised to bury you alive at the slightest touch. He spoke of vast caves made entirely of stairs: walls, floor and ceiling expanding and contracting in carpeted, ninety-degree edges. More than a decade later, the first time I saw a blocky cavern descending into shadow in *Minecraft*, I had to shut the game down, right then, turn on the lights, walk away. It looked exactly how I'd imagined Niko's stair-edged pits.

Finally, he trailed off, and we steeped together for a while in the thick, unbroken quiet. I was trying to think what I could say to keep him talking, but he broke the silence first.

"You would have gone wild for some of that shit, man. Wish you could have been there." His voice was wistful. "All our crazy, stupid theories. We were wrong about everything. But it was more fun being wrong together."

I licked my lips. Maybe this was my chance.

"Yeah. Hell yeah," I started. "Jesus, man, I can't imagine what it's been like for you." *Isn't the phrase "I can only imagine?"* some part of my brain whispered. I shook it off. "I mean, I don't know what I'd have done, if it were me. Alone down here." I took a breath, extemporizing. "You've... done things to survive, and I mean who could blame you? Who's to say when push comes to shove what's right or wrong when survival's at stake?"

He didn't make a sound, and I couldn't see his face through the blindfold. But I sensed a tide shifting. I'd said something wrong. My chance was slipping away.

"*You don't have to do this to me.*" I hadn't meant to say it and not with such pitiful desperation, but now I couldn't help myself, couldn't stop babbling. "We're friends. You're my friend. We're

only going to survive by working together. You don't have to keep me tied up like this. I want the same thing you want. To get out, get the fuck out of here—"

"Friends," he interrupted, voice dangerously quiet. "Is that what we were? Back in the day?"

My chest was tight. "Weren't we?"

I heard a scratching sound. A dog itching itself. I couldn't see but had a clear image: he was scratching the hair behind his ear, head tilted, half-turned down. Something he always did right before explaining something he didn't think he should have to explain.

"I've had a lot of time to think, Ry." His voice was still calm. "About our *friendship*. About *us*." I jerked: he'd rested his fist on the top of my shoe. "Why we ended up down here."

I was losing him, or had already lost him, but I didn't know how or why or what I could say to reverse it. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," he said, lifting the fist and letting it fall back on my sneaker. "I think maybe there was more going on than I really appreciated at the time. For. Example." He punctuated each word with a harder bap on my foot. "We only found this place because of you. Remember? Because you found it, underneath your bed."

"Okay," I said, "but—"

He shushed me, and I sensed him stiffen, twist his head away. He switched on the flashlight and dim light filtered through the blindfold. He seemed to be pointing it down the hallway, back the way we had come.

"What is it?"

"Shut up. Did you hear anything?"

I shook my head, distant relief mingling with fresher fear. "No."

Silence. It seemed to expand in my head, like those disposable earplugs, eating up all the empty space.

Finally he turned back toward me. "I think something's following us."

Something. Not someone. Oh. "Like what?"

"You know about the other versions of us down here." He snickered. "More than you'd like to. The doubles, and their doubles from the other houses, and so on. They're us, more or less exactly. Which is why we get that sick feeling when they're close. And because they're us exactly, it makes them easy to take out. Don't have to learn their weaknesses, because fuck, you already know them." He paused for a moment. "But there's... other ones."

I wasn't sure I wanted to prod, but found myself doing it anyway. "Other ones?"

He shook his head. "Ever see someone watching you down here? Like at the edge of your light?"

"No," I said, hair rising. "I mean... I don't think so."

"If you get closer, you can see they look like us, too. Always a Niko or an Orion. On the outside, anyway." The pattern of light shifted as he swung it down each of the other hallways, then back to the first again. "When you get close to a double of yourself, you can feel it. Right? Feels wrong, somehow. Bad. Something to do with the synchronicity, I think, the risk. If the two of you see each other get out of sync, if you understand you've broken it... bad news, and your body senses it. That danger.

"But. These other things. You get close to one of them, even if it looks like you, you don't feel anything at all. And that somehow makes it so much worse." He spat. "Because it means the Mockups aren't human. They look like us, but they're not, not really. They're something else."

"You named them the fucking Mockups?" I was horrified. "Thanks. Not creepy at all."

He laughed a genuine laugh, then cut it short, like he was upset with himself. Like I was pulling something over on him. "They *are* creepy, dumbshit. They just stand there. They don't usually come too close, but if you walk up to them, they don't move away. They don't move at all. They watch you." He sniffed.

"I mean they move their eyes, you know. To track you. Their heads. They breathe." He unscrewed the water bottle and took a swig. "But they don't respond to anything you do. *Anything.*"

He paused, as if to let that sink in. Or as if remembering something.

"And if you walk off," he continued, "they'll follow you. At a distance. But if you stay in one place for too long, sometimes. Sometimes. They kind of creep up on you. Slow. Edge a tiny bit forward every now and then. Like they're eager, but also real, real patient. I woke up one time and two of them, two Nikos, were bent over me. Standing there for fuck knows how long while I slept. Staring. Mona Lisa smiles."

He shrugged. "If you sprint for a while, take some twists and turns, you can shake them. Creepy, yeah, but not a problem."

Oh well that's fine then. "What are they?"

"No idea." He laughed that hollow bark-laugh again. "Maybe echoes, or waves, or something. Waves and particles. Superimpositions. This whole place, Downstairs, it's like some kind of huge multiplier. You've figured that out, right? At least that much? It multiplies. Dimensions, people. Rooms. Ideas. Emotions. Some kind of chain reaction that got started somehow, sometime. There's a spring down here," and he was almost chanting now, murmuring, his voice gone strange, "clear waters at the source. Deep. All the water comes from there. Very, very deep. It splits, and splits, and splits again, and keeps splitting. Thousands of times. Millions. And each stream is as big as the one it's splitting from, and they shouldn't all fit but they do, and it's wrong, it can't fit in your head, it's too big *it's too big...*"

He seemed to catch himself, stiffened.

"But the Mockups," he said, in control again. "They do it too, sometimes. There'll be two of them, moving almost in sync. Or four. I think if two bump into each other, they sort of stick together, cluster up. And if those two meet others, they all join up, like a fucking molecule. Snarled in bigger and bigger tangles."

He was watching me now, I guessed; I got the sense he was smirking, enjoying the effect the story was having on me. "One time I had to walk through a whole room full of them. All just standing there, packed shoulder to shoulder as I shoved my way through. They weren't doing anything. Just looking. Looking at me."

I turned my head nervously in the direction of the hallway I couldn't see. "And you think there's one back there now?"

"Oh, I know there is," he said. "It's standing right there, watching you."

I jolted back, lost my balance, and topped over, kicking back with my feet and scrambling to right myself. My skin was crawling and all I wanted was to get farther away, except I couldn't see it, couldn't see anything, and *what if a second one is coming up behind me*—

But Niko was laughing now, big belly laughs, and it slowly dawned on me through my terror what that probably meant.

"You fucking pussy." He climbed to his feet, grunting. "Dumb of me. If you'd wet your pants I'd have to smell it the rest of the way."

I awkwardly struggled upright, stood, furious. He made no move to help.

But I knew him too well. He might have been bluffing at the end, but only to cover for being legitimately scared. He *had* heard something down the hall, or thought he had. And he hadn't been teasing when he'd started talking.

At least some of that had been true.

He tugged on the rope around my neck. "Storytime's over, bitch. Get moving."

Walking blind into the unknown isn't fun, and gets worse when you're freshly terrified of it. I kept expecting now to walk into a body, someone standing in my way, fleshy and warm and inhuman. Staring. But I didn't. To my captor's credit, he never

let me walk into a wall (or a pit), although he was sometimes rough with jerks to the rope around my neck to correct me.

But I was reaching the limits of my endurance. My collapse by the nightlight felt like eons ago, and maybe I'd only slept for an hour or two there, anyway. Waves of emotion had washed through me since then, each one leaving its own high-water mark. I stumbled even over level ground. I was barely awake.

Niko finally noticed, and agreed we could stop for "a sleep." He let me lie down, but kept my head covered and hands tied. It was better than nothing.

It's a testament to the depth of my exhaustion that I fell asleep within moments. This time, I didn't dream.

I blinked awake some time later, not quite sure what had woken me. Niko breathed quietly, a few feet away. I got the sense he was sitting up against the wall, legs folded up, and I was lying at his feet in the center of the hall. It was dark. He must have turned the flashlight off, not that I'd be able to see much anyway with a t-shirt tied around my face.

I wondered if I could, very slowly and quietly, wriggle away. Like a worm out of a tackle box.

He reached out and nudged me with his foot. "Don't even think about it, bitch." But the nudge was gentle, and his voice tired.

We stayed there for a long moment, listening to each other breathe.

Finally, he exhaled, loud, frustrated. "You think I want this?" He sounded desperate. Near tears. "I don't. Any of it. Scaring you like this. I'm not a monster, man, I don't get off on it. I'm doing what I have to. You don't get that, I know, but you haven't been down here long enough. Nowhere near long enough."

I stayed quiet, afraid to say something that might make him angry again.

He sighed. "I don't always kill you, either. Or at least not right away. Sometimes, first. For old times' sake, you know. I

fuck you.”

The word *fuck* stung me.

He leaned forward, holding his head a foot above mine. His breath tickled the fabric at my ear. “You do remember, don’t you? The time we did it?” He sounded concerned. “That night, after I tried to kill myself?”

Sometimes when a person is stung their body overreacts. They swell up, maybe so much their eyes are forced shut. It’s called anaphylaxis. Unprotected, in the Greek. But the point is it’s not the sting that’s doing it to you, not really. It’s your own body, blinding you and destroying itself in a misguided attempt to keep you safe.

“No,” I whispered.

“That was maybe the closest I ever felt to anyone.” His voice was calm, bland, like recounting a decent lunch he’d had. “I loved you so much. Not in that way, you know. Not the way you wanted me to. But I figured what the fuck. You saved me. No, not just that.” His finger brushed my cheek through the fabric and I flinched. “You *needed* me. I was *everything* to you. That felt so fucking good.”

I was trying to stay motionless. I remembered a safety video they’d made us watch at Yellowstone. *If you’re on the ground and a bear attacks you, curl into a ball and play dead. Don’t fight back. The bear will win.*

I couldn’t open my eyes, couldn’t breathe. Maybe it was the anaphylaxis. Something somewhere was terrifying. Doppelgangers lurking in basement hallways. A camper in a tent, terrified by his own snores.

The bear will win.

His hand moved over the shirt wrapped around my head, not quite touching it, not quite pulling away. “I want to get that feeling back sometimes, you know? It’s so fucking lonely here. You can’t blame me.” He laughed, so loud and close to my face I cringed. “I mean. Don’t get me wrong. I’d prefer a girl but there

aren't any down here. Just us. Only us."

His fingers outlined my face. "Anyway. Doesn't work. Never works. Never the same with you." He breathed out through his nostrils and it tickled the fabric by my cheek. "I can't trust you. Any of these versions of you. Ry, Ryan, Orion. You seem different but you're all the same. Everything you ever said or did after that. Was bullshit. None of you gave a shit about me, did you? What I needed. Who I was. You just wanted it to happen again.

"And the next time I tried to off myself, that's the only reason you stopped me, isn't it?" He rapped his knuckles on my forehead, through the shirt. "Isn't it, bitch."

"No." It was so soft, I'm not even sure he heard me.

I could feel him shrug. "Anyway, that's why I kill you, after. Case you were wondering."

He sat back up, wincing. "But sorry, man, not tonight. Got a headache." He stood, kicked me in the side. "Come on. Better keep moving. We're close. I can feel it."

Soon the texture of the ground beneath my feet started to vary. First it went glossy-smooth, then to shag, then to changing patterns and textures of creaking wood, tile, and carpet. I stumbled more and more over bumps and irregularities, as if the floor was crumpling, bunching up as we neared some pressure point.

Niko opened every door we passed now. At the third one after we slowed down, he sucked in a sharp breath.

“Definitely on the right track. You’re gonna need eyes for this, kiddo.” He pulled my blindfold free.

I blinked in the sudden glare from his light. He stood between me and the open doorway at the end of the hall. It was dark inside and cold damp air spilled out; I could see something glittering in the gloom behind him. Ice?

“Take a look,” he said with a grin. “I’ll shine the light. But don’t lean too far in. I wouldn’t bet your life on my grip on the rope.”

Wondering what he meant, I shuffled to the doorframe. He turned and shined the light past me, and that’s when the vertigo hit.

The door opened onto a drop-off. The opposite wall was distant but visible at the edge of our light, so couldn’t have been more than a hundred feet away. But the floor and ceiling were gone. Past the doorframe, the wall plunged up and down into limitless blackness. Turning my head carefully to the left and

right, I could see the walls also extended into dim infinity in either direction. We were peeking out the side of a canyon that seemed to stretch on forever: up, down, left, and right.

The walls were pink and pillowy. For a queasy moment they looked like skin, until I realized what they actually were. Fiberglass. The endless walls stretching into the gloom were pink insulation foam, divided by rectangular grids of dusty wood, marked here and there with pencil marks and marred by chipped, discolored edges. We were termites in the walls of a giant's house.

Here and there, other open doorways interrupted the endless pink sea of insulation. Streams of water spilled from some, cascading down into an inky depth that gave back no hint of answering splash. Cascades plunged down from above us, too. The space was filled with a cold and heavy mist.

Curving down from the base of the doorway was a filigreed structure I couldn't at first identify. My impression of ice was wrong: it was laid out more like a spiderweb, a grid of sparkly intersecting lines. As I squinted I realized the sparkles were countless tiny crystals, dangling from some kind of mesh and reflecting back the flashlight in hundreds of shimmering glints. As the web curved down and away it grew denser and denser, strands converging towards a point maybe sixty feet below and another sixty away from the door. The lines of dangling crystal converged there into a dense, scintillating object a couple feet across.

A chandelier. I blinked. It hung with no obvious point of support above a square platform suspended beneath us in mid-air. It was as if the chandelier had exploded, but only in one direction, toward us: crystals multiplying and propagating outward and upward in an ever-widening wave of fractal repetition, connecting the chandelier to our hallway with a web of glass.

"It's a Confusion," Niko said with a satisfied grin. "Means we're real close now."

"A what?" I backed away from the horrifying drop-off.

“What I call them.” He shrugged. “Most of Downstairs tends to follow normal architectural rules. Walls, floor, ceiling, measurements more or less what you’d expect. Bedroom objects in bedrooms.” He played his light along the chandelier-net, watching its cut-glass facets sparkle. “But close to a connection point, things get jumbled up. Perspectives change. Architecture gets stretched to breaking. Like it’s harder to maintain the semblance of order, for some reason.”

I thought of our fridge, in a kitchen with a pool that had a door at the bottom.

“This one,” he added, frowning down, “is pretty fucking weird, though.”

Still struggling with vertigo (tipping forward, arms bound, unable to stop myself as I crashed through the flimsy web and tumbled down that bottomless canyon) I followed his gaze. The lines of chandelier-stuff converged above what I’d at first seen as a square platform some way below and in front of us. But as I focused on it, I realized it wasn’t a platform, but a set.

Only its base was solid, a room-sized square suspended in midair over that awful drop. Thin metal poles sketched out the cube whose floor was defined by the platform, and wires arced up from the cube’s top corners and down from its bottom ones into the distance, anchoring it in place. A set, like I said: my first impression was that I was looking down on some ambitious experimental theater production.

And it got weirder.

The floor of the set appeared to be the same scuffed, dusty hardwood floor tiles as my bedroom. Tatty throw rugs, dollar-store trash cans, secondhand furniture, and a battered desk filled up the floor space, haphazard: none exactly like the things in my room, but close, as if out of the same catalog, the same tile set. Pictures and mirrors hung suspended on wires where the nonexistent walls should have been; in the latticework above, artfully positioned spotlights shone down, making the stage

gleam bright in the gloom. So yeah, picture looking down at an experimental theater production set in a cramped and overstuffed bachelor pad, furnishings cluttered together with no sensible order. And all suspended over a drop-off to god knows where, surrounded by endless walls of pink insulation foam, connected to us via exploded rays of chandelier.

“Holy shit,” I said.

He laughed. “Damn straight. Okay then. Who wants to go first?”

It was me. Surprise. Niko realized he’d have to untie my hands for me to climb down, and if he went first, there’d be nothing to stop me running off back the way we’d come. I’d be running in the wrong direction, away from the supposed portal back to my own side, but I felt like that might be preferable to being the prisoner of a hungry psychopath who looked like a strung-out version of my dead best friend. Or whatever we were to each other.

Not that it was apparent the floating platform was anything but a dead end. I protested weakly, but he was firm: “We can swing across from there to one of the hallways on the other side. No problemo.” He retied the rope around my ankle, let out enough slack for me to get down, and wound the other end around the doorknob of the last room back, a few paces up the hall.

“This probably won’t hold your weight,” he added, tugging the rope experimentally. “Not for long anyway. But if I brace myself and take some of the load, it should be enough.”

He explained the plan while sliding fresh batteries into a headlamp and tightening it onto my head: I would climb down the chandelier net while he and the doorknob stood ready to catch me if I fell. When I got to the floating set, he’d retie the rope to himself, and follow me down while I braced from below. He reminded me that since we’d be tied together, catching him if

he fell would be in our mutual interest.

He also mentioned, quite casually, that he had no plans to kill me. Our deal held. Once I got him to the surface, he'd vanish and I'd never see him again. If I messed with him, though—tried to untie my rope while down there and run off, or got funny ideas about yanking it—he would hunt me down. He told me of his expertise at hunting me down—me, personally. He'd done it dozens of times. He'd know which way I'd choose at intersections. Where I'd try to hide.

And once he found me, he'd hurt me. He'd spend a long time hurting me.

He was an expert at that too, he said.

As if to illustrate this point he pulled out a camping knife with a long, serrated blade and flipped it open: the kind you'd use to saw through small deadwood to make tinder. We'd looked at one just like it at the sporting goods store, my Niko and I, but decided not to get it. After admiring it for a moment, he closed it and attached it to his belt. I wondered if this was less a threat than insurance against being tied together above a gut-clenching drop. Maybe some of each.

He watched me watching the knife, with cut-glass intensity.

"Time to go," he said.

I clutched the doorjamb, trying not to stare down at the bottomless canyon past the edge of the carpet. Trying to think of some way to get out of this.

"What do you think's down there?" I asked, buying time.

He didn't look up, focused on a knot. "Water," he said. "Everything ends in water down here. Or maybe we're above the Basement. The soil, like I told you. The bottom. Sometimes there's smashed-up stuff down there. Ruined furniture, shattered light bulbs with tangled-up cords. Maybe this is where it comes from."

He pulled the cinch tight. "Rules of geometry don't really make sense this deep, though. Maybe we're already below the

Basement. Maybe this goes down forever.”

He got to his feet, wincing and putting a hand momentarily to his temples. “Okay, quit stalling. Get moving.”

“Hang on.” Fear sweated out of me. “We don’t even know if this mesh or net or whatever will hold my weight. Or if this portal you’re looking for is even down there.”

“It’s down there.” He set his grip on the rope. “I’m sure of that. But as for your first concern...”

He shrugged, then shoved me, hard.

I flailed, but my body was already past the edge of the door, my hands too slow to grab the frame, world tilting at a sickening angle. My sneaker tried to glue itself to the carpet of the hall but my center of mass was too far out, way too far. My head dropped below my feet and I opened my mouth to scream as I began to fall into nothingness.

With a tinkling smash, I crashed into the net of chandelier. It was like landing on an uncomfortably studded trampoline, sloped sharply down. For a second everything swayed, nauseating, and I scrambled for a grip, but I was slipping, sliding over the scraping glass baubles, down and sideways towards the edge...

With a whimper I clutched the mesh beneath me, wrapping my hands around faceted glass and wire and jamming my feet into gaps. One leg was dangling out into the yawning void of empty space, but my other three limbs were all caught. I jerked to a stop, gasping, swaying, heart pounding so hard I could barely think, spread-eagled like a fly in a tacky, glittering web.

From somewhere above, Niko laughed. “See!” he called down. “Speculate, theorize all you want. Only way to get answers is to dive in head first. Or butt first, in your case.” He let out some slack in the rope. “Now untwist your panties and get climbing.”

I wriggled away from the unthinkable drop-off, back toward the center of the jangling net. Moving was awkward: the mesh was a grid of thin metal wire, squares maybe eight or nine inches

apart up here, but denser farther down. Little glass baubles dangled from it every few inches, sparkling in the beam of my headlamp. The thing was not comfortable to crawl on, and had enough give that it deformed alarmingly as I shifted my weight. The thin mesh cut into my hands unless I was careful; I'd scraped them both, stopping myself from falling.

I looked back up. The hall we'd arrived from was one of a handful interrupting the expanse of smooth pink insulation, but water poured from each of the others, and there was no obvious way to reach any of them. Shuddering, I looked down along the path of books, scouting my route to the relative safety of the floating set. The steep slope of the net up here flattened as it dropped and converged to chandelier. I decided facing the net and right-side up was the safest position to start, like climbing down a ladder. When the thing became more horizontal, I'd have to twist around and crawl, then drop the last few feet to the platform.

It was awkward and slow going, in part because I took significantly more care than I strictly needed. I did not want to trust my life to that murderous asshole and a fucking doorknob.

One handhold and foothold at a time (and ignoring Niko's frequent insults and urgings to hurry the fuck up) I finally made it to the chandelier proper, which I noticed, disconcertingly, wasn't connected to anything at all. Nevertheless, it was rock-solid, anchored with implacable tenacity to its chosen point in space, hovering above the top of the set beneath, as if hanging from the ceiling of an ordinary room.

Carefully, I pushed my feet over the tinkling edge and dropped the few feet to the hardwood beneath me.

I landed hard and dropped into a crouch, adrenaline flaring. While nice to be off the chandelier net, this felt only slightly less precarious. The platform swayed with my momentum: slight, but enough to suggest how thin the wires were that held it suspended, how unknown the strength of their theoretical anchor points,

lost in shadow. I kept away from the edges, which confined me to a small square in the platform's center.

I eyed the bed with suspicious curiosity, but on closer inspection it looked nothing like my own. It was a bulky thing with a built-in headboard shelf, and showed no signs of having the ability to swing open.

I finally remembered Niko, who'd stopped berating me some time ago, and glanced up to see what he was doing. He wasn't there. I frowned. The rope tied to my ankle curved up to the lip of the hall, tracing the path of the chandelier-net, and vanished inside. I was so far below the hallway now I could only see a few feet of walls and ceiling through its open door. The corridor still seemed lit by the refracted glow of a flashlight, moving around somewhere back there, so I figured he hadn't gone far. Maybe he was untying the rope from the doorknob and tying it to himself, so he could follow me down. But he'd been at it a while.

Shit. This was an opportunity, and I was squandering it. I glanced down at the rope tied to my ankle, but there were multiple knots, some kind of Navy-ass shit, pulled so tight my foot was losing circulation. Sharp. I needed something sharp. I cast around desperately. A few paces from me was a nightstand with drawers, and I yanked one open, hoping for—I don't know. Something. Anything. But there was only junk inside: a few dusty paperclips, a mechanical pencil with a missing eraser. A single red prize ticket from a skeeball alley.

I stared at it, despair creeping over me.

Light played across my face. I started and looked up, guilty. Niko was back, peering down distractedly from the doorway, the rope now tied around his waist. The shadows from the wires and cables that held the set suspended played across my face like strands of spiderweb. He didn't seem to notice what I was doing. He seemed on edge.

"I think there's one of those fucking Mockups up here," he said. "Way, way back in the hall. At the edge of my light. Doesn't

matter. Not going back that way, are we? I'm coming down. Find something to brace yourself on. Brace good and tight," he added, "because if I fall and you're not secure, you're coming with me, baby."

Maybe that would be preferable, the best fate for all concerned.

But maybe he was telling the truth. Maybe he really wasn't planning to kill me. Maybe there was a door up ahead for my key. A way back.

Without Niko?

My survival instinct shoved the thought away, like a drowner pushing their rescuer down into the choking depths, desperate to keep their own head above water.

I cast around for something heavy, but the set's furnishings were as accurately cheap as its upstairs inspiration: more particle-board than heavy oak, plastic trash cans but no sturdy hope chests. I kicked one scraped-up dresser with my foot, and it obligingly slid a few inches across the floor.

"Bracing myself might be a problem," I shouted up, but there was no response. I figured he hadn't heard—the forest of insulation around us swallowed up sound, creating a surreal distance to everything, like someone had turned down the volume on reality—but when I looked up to shout, Niko was staring back down the hallway behind him again.

"I think it got closer." He glanced down at me for a moment, face unreadable, then looked back down the hall. "While I wasn't looking. Fucking creepy. In fact..." He trailed off, staring at something I couldn't see. My vantage point only showed a couple feet of ceiling.

"What?" My stomach churned, as if in warning.

He didn't look away from whatever he was staring at.

"It's got something in its hand," he said, quite calmly.

Nausea swept through me, chemical fear. Hairs prickled all over my body.

“It’s coming toward me, Ry.” He was still calm, still staring down the hall. “I’m starting down in twenty seconds. Figure out a way to brace yourself. Fast.”

Maybe he was messing with me again. Trying to put the fear of god in me so I’d hurry it up.

Or maybe he wasn’t. I knew what his calm tone meant. What he hid behind it. He was fucking terrified.

“I’ve never seen one move like this,” he said, voice still calm. “It’s running down the hall towards me, now. Ryan. Hurry.”

Something inside me screamed. *He’s not lying and something is coming and there’s nowhere to run and maybe I should let it get him but I’m tied to him I’m fucking tied—*

I ripped my gaze from the hall and cast frantically around the narrow square of safety for something sturdy. The big bed with its headboard filled with books and knick-knacks looked the heaviest. I pushed another armoire, one of the few solid-looking pieces, over on top of it, then scrambled underneath the bed and back over the top of both pieces of furniture, pulling the rope tied to my ankle behind, trying to ignore the way the platform rocked and swayed beneath me as I did. Quickly I did it again, wrapping the rope twice around the furniture’s bulk. If Niko fell now, all that weight plus my own should be enough to hold him.

“Hurry up,” he shouted from above, still staring down the hall, and then *I could hear it*. Footsteps, beating against the carpet. Something running down the hallway, running flat out. A manic run. Fast. As fast as it could.

“Ready,” I shouted up, not sure which side to root for, not sure of anything but the pulse hammering in my ears.

He nodded once, then pulled his gaze away and swung out over the edge, flipping around to face the net, feet feeling for purchase while he clutched the end of the carpet. Focusing on his hands, not glancing down the hall again, he started down. His descent was much quicker than mine, efficient and smooth. But still not fast enough.

It was coming for him. The footsteps thudded the hall above, creaked loose floorboards. They were close.

"Shit," he said. "Shit shit shit." He was still close to the doorway. Too close.

What is it what does it want why is it running what does it have in its...

With shocking suddenness a hand wrapped itself around the doorframe. It gripped it tight as a body appeared behind it, skidding on the carpet, coming to a halt on the edge of the drop-off. I shivered as I saw it, every part of me shocked into motion like I'd leapt into an ice-cold stream. I wanted to scream but couldn't. My gaze was fixed on the thing in the doorway.

And then I recognized its face.

It was Niko. Young again.

My Niko?

He raised his hand and shot his older clone with my gun.

But even as he did something *changed* around us. The set rippled beneath my feet, writhing, flexing. The endless canyon of pink insulation around us groaned and stretched, pulled away, growing dimmer in the scattered light of our headlamps. New grid lines appeared as the wood reconfigured itself.

Downstairs was growing larger.

I looked back up. The bullet had gone wide as both Nikos had grabbed for support in the sudden groaning sway. But now younger Niko was lifting the gun again while Elder scrabbled for purchase on the jangling net (*and it can't be my gun*, I thought distantly, *no more bullets*) and younger Niko changed his aim, steadied himself; but Elder snarled, leapt back up four feet of net in a frantic bound, and wrapped his arms around his double's lower legs, hanging his whole weight on them; and younger Niko's knees buckled and he tumbled forward onto the net with a cry.

Or maybe it was me who cried out, I wasn't sure, and I couldn't breathe, because both Nikos were snarling, scrambling

for purchase on each other, on the gun, on the precarious net beneath them as they tumbled down it. They were seconds away from slipping off the side, from plunging into the void of empty space beneath us.

“Look out!” I shrieked, but young Niko had jammed his gun hand through a gap in the net, jerking them both to a halt. The web of chandelier-stuff bucked and heaved, tinkling like a dump truck full of glass. An eyebolt connecting it to the doorframe wrenched free with a splintering groan. I felt the same crawling horror of watching a spider fight a scrabbling insect, vicious, instinctual. Elder Niko plunged his hand through also to the underside of the net, wrestling for the gun. It went off again with a muffled thump, swallowed up by the acres of insulation around us. Something zipped past my face in the same instant and I ducked, belatedly, eyes still glued on the fight above.

Elder Niko lifted his other arm high and elbowed his double hard in the gut, but was met with a savage kick; he grunted and started sliding again, grasping at the beads of glass for purchase. Young Niko struggled to pull his gun arm out of the net but all his weight was on it now and the wire frame dug into his skin. Elder had grabbed his leg and was yanking on it; he kicked at the grasping hands, and as he did I remembered something vitally important.

“He’s tied to me!” I screamed.

Elder laughed as Niko’s eyes widened. “That’s right, asshole,” he shouted. “If I go, your boyfriend goes.”

Niko bit his lip, recalculating, and pushed himself higher with a grunt, yanking his arm free. But as he did the gun caught on one of the glass baubles, and before he could grab it the weapon was sliding and scraping down the net. Toward the other Niko, who lunged for it, laughing.

In a clear mental flash I saw what would happen: he’d grab it, he’d shoot young Niko between the eyes; his face would go slack and he’d fall off the net into the void and vanish, and it wasn’t

that I loved him or couldn't survive without him but something else, a pure flash of righteous indignant anger rising up in me. After coming back for me, after *rescuing* me, when he could and maybe should have left me behind, he didn't deserve to die like this.

Elder was stretched out precariously, hand only inches from the gun, and without thinking or planning I grabbed the rope trailing up to him and yanked it, with all the strength I had.

He let out a *whoof* as his torso lurched back, all the air forced out of him, and balanced for a heartbeat at a crazy angle, only one foot touching the jangling net. Then momentum pulled him backward, over the side, and he fell.

Everything happened very fast.

The gun slipped through a gap in the net and tumbled into darkness.

Elder screamed in fury and grabbed for the edge of the net. He caught it and the whole thing twisted; but he'd snagged only a single strand and it couldn't stop him. It shrugged him off, slicing the skin off his fingers, and he fell, arms and legs flailing, trailing rope behind him.

But his grab for the net had dislodged my Niko too, and he was head down and slipping, flailing, grasping, tangled up in Elder's rope.

All this happened faster than movement. Maybe my brain had sent signals to my muscles, but they hadn't arrived yet, or my body was too confused to interpret them.

Elder tumbled down, rope twisting behind him. He reached toward the platform, but it was too far away; he was going to fall past it. He stretched instead for one of the taut cables holding it up but he was moving too fast, couldn't close his fingers around its thinness fast enough; it twanged as he plucked it with an immense, groaning thrum, and he kept falling.

Above me, my Niko cursed and slid off the edge of the net. The tangled rope had gone taut and yanked him off, and he was

falling too. Only he wasn't tied onto a rope. He wasn't tied to anything.

I finally moved, lurched forward to do something, anything. But Elder had fallen out of my sight line, and his end of the rope tied to the bed I stood on snapped taut with a creak.

Young Niko plunged by on the edge of my vision, but then the bed juddered and groaned underneath me. It started to slide, to pull me toward the edge.

I realized I'd made a mistake.

I'd thought if someone fell, the stress on the rope would be basically downward. The weight of the bed, especially with me on top, would act like an anchor. Surely enough to arrest a fall.

But the rope came up over the edge of the platform and angled across the floor. The force on the bed was entirely from the side.

Elder's weight on the rope was pulling the bed not down but sideways, like a bodybuilder tugging it across a floor; and me with it. Toward the drop-off and the infinite canyon below. Toward a drop there'd be no possible way to survive.

I moved faster than thought. I'd never considered myself a person with quick reflexes, someone you could count on in a crisis. But before I consciously knew why I was doing it I'd flung myself off the bed and was racing across the platform towards the opposite side. Behind me I could hear the bed's juddering accelerate as Elder's weight tugged it even faster across the floor. *Someone's not getting their deposit back*, a surprisingly deep-seated part of my brain observed. I had only seconds before it reached the edge.

Before I could change my mind, I leapt off the platform, arcing down into nothingness.

I fell for only a second before I jerked to a stop, the rope around my leg yanking me back with a stab of pain and flipping me upside down. I swung in sickening arcs, head twisting from side to side trying to understand what was happening, but for a moment nothing made sense, my headlamp strobing through images I couldn't assemble into a coherent whole: a length of blue and white rope, a swinging body, a line of dusty floorboards. Frantic, I reached up and grabbed the rope, pulling myself more or less upright, swaying dizzily.

I took a breath but it didn't help.

I dangled thirty or forty feet below the underside of the bedroom platform, swinging on my rope. A ways below and twenty feet away, Elder Niko swung from his end of the rope, off the other side of the platform. Above us on its top, out of sight now, our ropes met at the anchor of furniture I'd wrapped them around; the awful juddering had stopped, so our roughly equal weights were balancing the pulls on it from opposite directions. We swung in sickening arcs over the void. But we'd stopped. We weren't falling.

I looked up for younger Niko, and immediately regretted it.

A network of dark guy-wires splayed out from the bottom corners of the bedroom set, like the ones from its wirework top, angling in straight lines down and away toward the insulated walls, and through luck young Niko's downward path had inter-

sected a cluster of them. He was just clinging to one, struggling to snag his foot on another, but the wires bounced angrily with absorbed momentum, and were caked with grease and dust. His fingers were slipping free. In seconds, he'd fall.

He looked down at me, frantic, dangling from my rope.

Gaging the distance.

I opened my mouth to scream *No!* and he leapt for it.

Because the only reason Elder and I had stopped was that we balanced either other out. But with two bodies on one side of the rope, there was no way our anchor up top would stay put. No way in hell.

He collided with my rope maybe fifteen feet above me, wrapping grease-smearred hands around it tight. Above us, the platform groaned and vibrated as the bed started skidding across its surface, pulled back towards our side again. We began to drop, like eggs in a basket being lowered from a window. Beneath and across from us, Elder Niko started to rise.

Niko moved.

Like lightning he shot up the rope, climbing hand over hand like a demon. With everything in motion it was hard to tell at first if he was gaining on the platform above us, the bottom of the set, but then I could see he was, was almost to it. A muffled crunching smash came from the top of the platform as our anchor smashed into some other piece of furniture, and our descent slowed: but only for seconds. Niko used every one of them. Just as the anchor had begun to pick up speed again and my stomach had started to drop, Niko pushed off the taut rope and grabbed desperately for a dark mass of pipes and ductwork extending from the bottom of the set.

His hand closed around a metal pipe and he gripped it tight, swaying, then pulled himself up to a perch in the exposed network of house guts. My descent had stopped as once again the force on the two ropes became equal.

But the anchor of furniture groaned above us, shifting un-

easily, and as I looked back to Elder Niko I realized I was in trouble. Though he'd started well below me, we now swayed an almost equal distance beneath the set, and he was swinging on the end of his rope, deliberate, getting closer each time. Eyes locked on me.

Reaching out his hand for my rope.

I leapt up mine, for a second sure I'd be faster. I had a head start. I was twenty years younger.

But my life hadn't been given over to surviving down here, to stalking, to killing. And my slack coiled beneath me: a leash, tied to my ankle.

In another swing Elder reached the loop and grabbed it. Then he hung his full weight on it.

I slipped four feet before my grip on the rope was firm enough to stop me, friction-burned hands screaming.

Below me, he laughed, and sprang up my side of the rope like it was a ladder. My arm muscles were already aching. Before I could pull myself up more than a foot or two, his hand closed around my ankle.

I strained to pull away, kicking, and again felt the bed shift unsteadily above. I looked up. Younger Niko's gaze met mine; he clung to a rook's nest of plumbing, casting around for a way to help, but there was nothing in reach. He couldn't help me.

I looked down and saw the same face, shriveled in a blink by decades of rage into something monstrous.

"We don't have to do this," I panted, still trying to shake my leg free from his cold grasp. "We can all go through, get to the surface. Then go our separate ways. Like you said."

"You fucking idiot." With the hand not gripping me he fumbled at his belt. "You thought after all this time down here I'd *forgive* you? That we could be friends again like old times? No. You're going to die. And then I'll hunt that bitch down"—his eyes flashed up to his younger clone—"and kill him, again. First things first, though." And he reached up with the knife he'd unclipped

from his belt, flipped it open, and sawed into my calf.

I screamed, trying to pull away, but his other hand gripped my leg tight, and I looked up through the pain and starved vision at my Niko's shocked, helpless, too-distant face, and below me his double laughed and kept sawing with terrible strength. In one fierce thrust he sawed through my jeans and into my skin, and drew the serrated blade back, cutting deeper, into flesh, into muscle.

"It's your fault," he grunted, and the strength drained from my hands as hot pain sliced through me. "I went looking for you. You know that? How I got lost." My blood dribbled onto his face and he spat it away. "We had a fight. Don't remember. What about." He pulled the blade back and I screamed, trying to twist away, but he only gripped me more firmly. "But I remember hating you. I remember that. I remember hating you and deciding to go back anyway. If I hadn't, if I'd turned around, I would have felt the sun again." His breath was ragged. He shifted his grip on the knife. "But I went back. For you." He sawed the blade deeper and I screamed and realized, then, that I couldn't escape this, couldn't escape him, that if I didn't die from falling or bleeding out or being left for dead the best I could hope for would be a life down here in the dark, like him, left to wander forever, trapped, helpless, lost. Fighting it was impossible. It was already done and settled, and had been from the moment we'd first set foot Downstairs, from the moment we saw the house, from the moment we'd first met.

"He won't forgive you, either." He grimaced up at his younger self through teeth stained red by my blood. "He just hasn't realized it yet."

"He's not you," I gasped, "he'll never be you." And because I couldn't make myself believe it I stomped down on his face as hard as I could.

He let out a *whoof* of air and something crunched as a splatter of blood arced out into darkness. His eyes rolled up into his head

and he went limp, and then he fell. In thirty feet he reached the end of the rope around his waist and it jerked him away in a huge arc, flailing his limbs like a scarecrow. He swung in sickening curves beneath me, spread-eagled, face up, over the void. Eyes closed.

Somewhere above me Niko was whooping in victory, but I barely heard him through the blood thumping in my ears, the high-pitched scream of pain in my leg. Refocusing my eyes, I dragged them down. The knife was still embedded in my calf. As if from a great distance, I reached with one hand, gripping the rope tight with the other, and pulled it free in a queasy sucking motion. Blood dribbled down my pant leg, dripping off my foot. Numbness and pain rippled through me, and muscles spasmed in my arm, but there was something I had to do before any other concerns. Woozy, I slid the knife under my belt, and started to climb back up. From the top of the platform I could cut myself free, let Elder's weight pull him and his anchor down. All the way down to hell.

"No, wait!" Niko shouted down at me. "The key! Do you have the key?"

I looked up, not really registering the words he'd said. "What?"

"To get back to our side." His voice seemed distant, swallowed up by the canyon of insulation. Maybe I was losing more blood than I realized. "The doorway's close. It has to be. But you need to get the key."

Front pocket, right side.

Below me, Elder Niko still swung at the end of his rope, eyes closed. I didn't think I could have killed him, but I must have knocked him out.

Or he wants you to think you did, anyway.

Niko was clambering one handhold and foothold at a time to the edge of the floating set. He reached it and clambered up onto its surface with a sigh of relief. Peering over the edge on hands and knees, he shouted down to me. "Look, I'll pile some more

furniture on the bed, weigh the anchor down. Enough weight for you to climb down his rope.”

I hung indecisive for a long moment. Then, with a sigh like a death rattle, I began to swing. Building up momentum.

Reaching for the other rope.

“Hurry,” Niko hissed above me.

“Thanks,” I muttered. “Helpful.”

Muffled sounds of shifting furniture floated down as I swung. Otherwise the silence was oppressive, now that no one was talking or scrambling or trying to kill anyone. It felt like the surrounding darkness was a blanket, muffling, infinitely thick. A dangerous unreality was taking hold, like this was a video game. A dream. I shook my head, fighting mental fog. Tried to feel the pain in my leg, to let it be an anchor to keep me from floating away.

Eventually I’d swung far enough to grab Niko’s rope. At first I could simply climb down it, my own rope tracing a rising angle back up to the opposite side of the platform. But as it grew taut I realized I had a problem. When I’d looped it around the bed I hadn’t bothered to even out the two sides. And now, at the end of mine, I was still a few body lengths above Niko. I couldn’t reach him. His side had happened to be the longer one, and the only way down to him now would be climbing the last few feet on the other end of the rope. His end.

Which meant detaching myself from mine.

With one hand I scrabbled pitifully at the knot, but untying it was hopeless for half-a-dozen reasons, my weight on it not the least. There was only one way to get off my rope onto his.

Below me, Elder Niko let out a gormless groan, head lolling to one side. But his eyes stayed closed.

A strange clarity had descended on me, the disconnected panic that comes from piling bad decisions on bad decisions, realizing you’ve gone too far but no longer able to stop. I flipped open the knife again, and before indecision could paralyze me, I

cut through my own rope, just above the knot at my ankle.

It was done. My rope swung away out of the range of my headlamp, swallowed up by darkness. His creaked as it took my weight. I tried not to hear it. Tucking the knife into my belt, I lowered myself the last few feet to Elder Niko's body.

He was still splayed out, spread-eagled, face up, eyes closed. Blood and spittle drooled from the corner of his mouth.

His fingers twitched in gentle spasms, the last motions of a dying insect.

We were surrounded by darkness.

Gripping the rope with one numbing fist, I reached out with my other hand, fingers brushing the edge of his pocket. He groaned again, flopped his head sideways.

I pushed my fingers inside, feeling for the key.

There.

I pulled it free, carefully, gripping tight as the tines tugged the lining of his pocket, caught on its edge. I focused all my attention on not dropping it, not letting it tumble down into oblivion; on pulling my hand slowly, deliberately, out of his pocket.

Which is why I didn't notice his eyes had opened. Not until his hand closed around my wrist.

"The fuck," he muttered, lids heavy, speech slurred, "you doing down there?"

His grip on me was weak, but I felt the gathering awareness in him, like a coiling viper. His face was smeared with blood, and more had rushed to his head as he dangled, making his face look misshapen, swollen. One of his pupils had dilated all the way open, and a blood vessel in the eye had burst, a spidery red blotch reaching tendrils through the white. He looked monstrous.

"I let you swim through first," he muttered, eyelids fluttering closed. "Can't remember. Why. Guess I thought I still owed you. A debt." He blinked, coughed. "Stupid. Wrong. Couldn't find my way. Back up. Think about that mistake every day, every day, every day..."

I let him rant. Maybe he didn't know what he was saying.

But I saw him then with a sudden chill clarity. I understood he was only monstrous because of what I'd done to him. And I'd only done it because of what he'd done to me.

We were two boys lost in a cave, daring each other deeper, hearing voices but too afraid to really listen, digging doomed rescue tunnels we pretended were for each other, not ourselves. Obsessed with our rippling reflections and ignoring the deeper, colder, dimmer depths beneath. Each holding up a looking-glass we took to be the other, that of course only reflected ourselves.

"I'm sorry," I said, gently pulling free of his grip and slipping the key into my pocket. He scrabbled at my waist with his other hand, pathetic, as if trying to get a grip on my belt to pull himself up. "Sorry for dragging you down here. You deserved... someone better than me to be your friend. And you can hurt me, hunt me, kill me as many times as you want but it'll never change that. Never take it back." I took a deep breath. "But I can't let you do it any more. You don't deserve to die, but..." My eyes flicked up, then back to his. "Neither does he."

He smiled, blood spilling from the corner of his mouth, and as it dribbled away something changed. Like the light had shifted, popped a shadow into a shape. Like pixels in a game turning from smudge to solution.

The confusion in his eyes had been a lie. They were perfectly clear.

"Too bad," he said, "no one gets what they deserve."

He had the knife in his hand. My belt. He'd slipped it off my belt while I was babbling.

I swung sideways as he lunged it at my face, and it nicked my ear. There was no grogginess in him, no disorientation. I'd just seen what I'd wanted to see, one last time. I'd never really seen him at all.

My muscles tensed to fling myself back up the rope, but without the knife I'd never make it. Never be free of him. Certainty

flushed through me. This had to end. This had to be the last time.

He lunged again and I grabbed his wrist, wrenching it backwards, trying to pull the knife free. He snarled and reached for me with his other hand but I twisted away. We swayed and twirled at the end of the rope, the rope I was no longer tied to, clinging instead with one desperate, trembling hand. I felt fibers snapping somewhere above us; this rope wasn't rated to hold two people. One way or another this was about to end.

He stabbed at my face again and I swung to the side, just enough for his hand to brush past me, so I bit down on it as hard as I could. He swore as I ground down harder, feeling flesh give, tasting blood. Sensing his grip loosen, I snatched the knife, his expression of shock burned into my vision even as I turned away, already climbing. Maybe I'd never done that before, in all the times he'd attacked me. Maybe I'd never fought back.

I climbed, the knife clenched between my teeth. For a fleeting moment, and maybe for the first time in my life, I felt like a badass.

But I'd bought myself only seconds and not enough. I'd pushed well past the limit of my endurance. I barely had the strength to pull myself up. I'd put a few body lengths between us, but he could swallow that lead in seconds. I was a wounded rabbit limping from a wolf.

Below me something screamed and I realized it was him; a terrible scream, rage and pain and loneliness and betrayal etched onto air. He started up the rope after me.

"Get. Back. Here." He growled. "Get the fuck. Back down here. I'm not finished. With you."

Bloodstained rage twisted his face. He was gaining. He was going to kill me.

And then a dictionary clobbered him in the face.

I looked up, shocked, at a triumphant Niko peering over the edge of the platform, shaking a fist down at us. "Leave him the fuck alone, dickweed!"

He'd piled books scavenged from the bedroom set next to

him on the edge. He had another heavy hardback already in his hand. He hefted it, gaged the distance, and flung.

The angle was awkward for throwing, and this time the missile went wide, plummeting down into darkness with its pages aflutter, like they wanted to take wing. But he'd already grabbed another book.

Below me, his elder was shaking off the blow.

I climbed.

Niko kept throwing books, and some collided with my pursuer, enough to throw him off balance, to buy me more seconds. I needed every one. I was fading fast, and so was the rope. Muscles tore and fibers snapped. My vision shrunk to a wavering tunnel, only my hands and the rope visible in the deepening blackness. I climbed. I climbed with some reserve of strength I'd never guessed I had.

After a particularly vicious clobbering I gained a body length and stopped climbing, spit the knife into my hand, and started to saw.

"Faster," someone was muttering, maybe me, "faster."

The Niko below flung himself up the rope. I hadn't gained enough distance, after all. He'd almost reached me.

A crushing inevitability pressed into me, from tingling arms to kicking feet. Someone had already won. Someone would live. The clock would run out and we'd find out who.

Faster.

Fibers twisted, stretched, broke free.

A copy of *Imajica* arced smoothly by my head.

Guttural noises just beneath me. It was too late. He was here.

And then the rope split.

He was at my feet. He flung himself at them when he heard the tear of the rope giving way, but had nothing to push off, no momentum to save him. He scrambled frantic as the rope went weightless in his hands, a finger brushing my shoe.

Then he fell.

Within a second he'd plunged past the range of our lights, swallowed by blackness. Only then, after losing sight of him, did he scream, and there was no fear in it at all. Just rage.

But it was a tiny sound, eaten up by miles of pink insulation, fading fast and not repeated.

He was gone.

PART THREE

MANIFOLDWISE

...before I die I want to see
The world that lies behind the strangeness of your eyes,
There is nothing gay or green there for my gathering,
it may be,
Yet on brown fields there lies
A haunting purple bloom: is there not something in
grey skies
And in grey sea?

"On The Road To The Sea," Charlotte Mary Mew (1869-1928)

I woke up from a dreamless sleep to face the unpleasant truth that we couldn't stay here forever.

With Niko's help I'd made it back to the top of the suspended bedroom set, as exhausted as I'd ever been. I thought nothing in the world had ever felt so good as lying on my back on a floor, every muscle gloriously unclenched. Wedged in between two dressers, so as not to roll off the edge, we slept.

When we woke we ate power bars from Niko's pack: my own had gotten lost somewhere in the fight, probably kicked off and down into the darkness below. I had no idea where to go from here, but Elder Niko's plan still seemed sound: get across to a hallway on the other side. On the opposite wall of pink foam from the one we'd entered from, what seemed like ages ago, only one open hall was in reach of our floating set. It took some careful grapple work with our tired muscles, but in the end we managed to traverse over to the hallway, relieved to be standing on solid ground once again.

This hallway had a floor of concrete, and was wider. A trench of water ran down its center, spilling out into the canyon behind us and cascading down.

We kept to the level ground on either side of the trench, and started trudging.

We moved slowly. Niko had cleaned up the cut in my lower leg as best he could, bandaging it with some socks from a dresser

drawer and a tight-wrapped bungee cord from his pack. But it hurt, a lot. I hobbled more than walked, had to stop for frequent breaks, or lean on him for support. He helped me without comment, when I needed it.

I couldn't help notice, up close to him like that, that he seemed to have all his fingers.

Unsaid things festered between us.

The tunnel had no perceptible slope, but the water in the trench ran fast, rushing eagerly past us. The path stayed straight at first but then began to curve gently leftward. We walked for what felt like a long time.

There were no side doors, no junctions, no rooms. There were no decisions to make. We just walked. Other than an occasional grunt or word of coordination, we didn't speak. A small part of me wanted to ask a million questions. Another part didn't want the answers. There was a tautness between us, a strain, like a handshake stripped down to bone and gristle, rubbing, raw. It had been there a long time, underneath everything we'd wrapped around it.

Mostly we were just too tired for talking.

Up ahead, the hallway ended in a cramped room. After a few more minutes of trudging we reached it.

It was a squat and vaulted brick antechamber, maybe twelve feet across and hexagonal, with tunnels coming in from all six sides. Each seemed identical to the one we'd entered from. Water flooded the sunken floor of the chamber and ran out the trenches in the middle of each tunnel.

In the center of the room, under the water, was a stubby concrete pillar topped by a metal hatchway with a wheel, like something you'd see on a submarine.

I knew before checking that the hatch would have a keyhole.

Once we confirmed it did, we became strangely hesitant, our momentum lost. We perched on the lip of a tunnel, dangling our feet in the water, using the excuse that we needed a rest.

There was so much I should be asking him, so much I should be saying, but I couldn't find a way to start.

Well. I had pretended nothing was wrong for such a long time. Maybe another few minutes wouldn't hurt.

The rippling sounds of the water were peaceful, and I didn't want to break the silence. But someone had to.

"So." The sound bounced off vaulted brick, making the chamber even more claustrophobic. I coughed. "We've come all this way. We going through, or what?"

He seemed curiously reluctant, but managed a weak smile. "Sure! Yeah. Let's do it."

We waded over to the hatchway. The wheel was inches under the surface of the water. I pulled the key from my pocket and slipped it into the lock, and it went in smoothly. I spun it through a full turn till it made a tiny *chunk*, then turned the wheel. After a few revolutions, something gave, and we found we could swing the circular hatch open along one hinged side.

We held our glowsticks underwater near the opening. The hatch opened into an ordinary-looking but flooded room beneath us with a yellow-tiled floor. Chrome and porcelain rippled up at us. We realized after a moment it was a flooded bathroom.

"If this portal thing leads through a toilet," Niko said, "I'm out."

We could only assume the way through was somewhere out of sight, around a corner or down an unseen hall. But how far?

"The other guys are probably doing the same thing on their side," I said hopefully. "Maybe we'll swim through at exactly the same time, go past each other."

"Huh." I looked over; he was staring uneasily into the flooded opening. He caught me looking and forced a smile. "Why not, right? Makes as much sense as anything else." But his gaze slipped off me and up to the vaulted ceiling, like he was interested in the architecture. He wasn't.

He was worried about something.

I turned away, ignoring the upwelling of unease, and frowned at the hatch. There was something familiar inside it. I squinted, trying to make the wavering underwater shapes resolve. Tied to something just under the hatchway was a climbing rope, the same kind we'd used with our Grip Monkeys. It stretched down in a taut line out of sight, towards the hidden wall of the room beneath us.

Niko'd seen it too and reached into the hatch to give it a tug; it seemed taut. "Thirty-five meter rope," he said. "Looks like someone marked the way through."

"Our doubles?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

"And this goes through to another hatch like this one, you think? One that opens up onto our original side?"

He nodded, still not looking at me. "What my evil twin was looking for. The way back through. And if we're lucky, our doubles will be waiting on the other side. Just like this. Getting ready to swap places, swim through. Get everyone back where they belong, all neat and tidy."

"And, uh. You know this how?" I swallowed. Here was the discussion I'd been too afraid to start, happening anyway.

He tensed, frowning at his submerged shoes. "I don't *know* it. But we might as well believe it, because if they're not there, and there's no more synchronicity between us at all any more? Then who the fuck knows where this rope leads." He shook his head. "No. They're over there. We have to believe that. They're having this same discussion, right now."

"*They.*"

My voice broke and he looked up startled, guilty, afraid. Like a texting jaywalker realizing too late he's wandered into traffic.

"Niko," I said, trembling. "Are you sure you're... I mean, when we got separated..."

Somewhere far below us, something *groaned*, low, immense.

The ground quivered, like a mountain turning over in its sleep, and the surface of the water pinched and jittered in sympathy. We both dropped half into a crouch, but the earthquake stopped, the low rumbles far beneath us faded. The water we stood in sloshed drunkenly.

"What the shit was that?" I breathed.

"I don't know." He nodded, coming to a decision. "But we'd better hurry this up. So. You should go first."

"Excuse me?" I blinked.

"You're the better swimmer." He was talking fast, shooting uneasy glances at the walls around us. "If there's anything unexpected or it's too far or whatever, you can come on back. But if you make it through safe, tug the rope a couple times and I'll follow."

"I thought we'd go together." Something was wrong again. The dark circle of the submerged porthole was ominous. Unknown. This was happening way too fast. "I don't want to go alone."

"It's the only way." He gazed at me, fierce. "Orion, just trust me, okay? This will all work out, but you need to trust me right now. Can you do that?"

I wanted to laugh. *Trust?* Could we *trust* each other? The question unraveled into a million strands, tendrils stretching back through everything that had happened down here, and everything that had happened before that.

"No." I shook my head, mind racing. It felt like riding a bike that kept slipping gears, nothing quite fitting together, accelerating down a hill with less and less control, no way to stop. "No. I can't do this again. Why won't any of you be honest with me? Stop it. I know. *I know.*"

The ground trembled again, and Niko took a staggering step toward me, grabbing my arm. "Stop," he gasped, "Ryan, stop. Don't say it."

"He showed me a finger," I whispered.

“Shut up,” he shouted. “Look. Here’s what’s going to happen. You and your double will swim through together, then me and mine after, and everything will be *fine*.”

“But the other Niko,” I gasped, shaking my head, “he’s—”

The ground dropped out from under us, like a plane hitting turbulence. Rumbles quivered in stone far below. I tripped and plunged into water up to my neck as the earth swayed, groaned like a buried titan coming back to life.

Niko grabbed my arm and pulled me up, put his other on my shoulder, pulled me against him and shouted in my face: “Shut up! Shut up, you fucking idiot, stop talking, stop overthinking everything and just swim through the goddamned tunnel, just swim the fuck through, it’s the only way you’re going to—” And he cut himself off, biting his lip, his eyes filling up with tears.

And then I got it.

Synchronicity.

I felt like we were balanced on an impossibly heavy pivot, a mountain peak turned upside down. If we leaned too far in any direction...

Two soap bubbles, pressed together, floating in a vast empty void. Trembling.

He knew. He knew there was no other Niko to swim through. Not any more.

The surface of the water twitched, rippled. Waiting.

He let go of me, took a step back, face reddening. “I just think,” he said quietly, miserable, “that you should go first, okay?”

The walls around us crunched, coughed, like millions of brick bones having chiropractic work done.

Maybe it was my imagination, but the room seemed smaller.

And then something else hit me. Something so hard and huge I forgot how to breathe, and staggered back away from it.

I let you swim through first. Can’t remember. Why.

Bricks cracked and popped around us, exploding like popcorn.

Couldn't find my way. Back up.

He was reaching for me but I tripped backwards, reflecting his concern with horror. *No. No, no, no.* As each brick popped others surged into the gaps they made. The walls were squeezing closer. The room was barely nine feet across, now. Water surged into the runnels leading out, cascading away in all directions like it, too, was terrified.

"It's okay," Niko was saying, smiling through the tears. But it wasn't. He hadn't been close enough to hear what his elder had been whispering. *He didn't know.* "If it doesn't work I'll just stay on this side, retrace our route. No biggie. Get back to the top and so what if there's some headaches and the shadows are weird. I'll deal."

"No." I shook my head. "This can't be what happens, it's not right, it's not fair, it can't end like this..." Something was slipping from my grasp. I tried to hold on to all the stories I'd told myself about Niko, about me; all the endings I'd wanted for us. Each of them were tales disguised as truths; worlds that I yearned to slip into like tailored gloves, sized just right; stories reassuring me that I finally understood what I deserved, good or bad, where I belonged and who I belonged to, and who belonged to me, where I didn't have to be alone in a dark bedroom any more with no one who loved me to tuck me in, too afraid to fall asleep.

But people don't wrap up like that into nice little cages, contained. We weren't each others' stories. He couldn't be mine, and I couldn't be his. We'd mistaken shadows for substance, all of us: chased them and failed, of course, to grab them, become shadows ourselves in failing.

But we weren't shadows. We were more than that. We deserved more.

Something swayed inside me, as if I'd let go of one handhold and gripped another, shifting my weight even though I wasn't sure the new grip would hold. But by then I'd already done it, already committed. And it held. It didn't let me fall.

“No,” I said again, but stronger this time, stepping forward into the shrinking space, barely the size of a closet now and still getting smaller, “No. This isn’t how this ends.”

And as the words bounced off the contracting brick that had nearly reached our heads, it held still. The rumbles and groans around us went dead. Everything paused. Everything held its breath.

I looked at him and I tried to see him. Really see him. I willed the layers of muck and confusion between us to pull back, to clear away and reveal someone, at last, who I could understand. The Niko who forgave me. The Niko I’d hurt. The Nikos I’d saved, damned, slept with; the ones who needed me, who hated me, who wanted me dead. The one I’d tried so hard to find, looked everywhere for, down here, up there, inside us both and beyond possibility.

None of them were here. The only one here was him.

“You don’t owe me anything,” I said, “but I owe you this. At least this.” My voice was hoarse at first but I willed more of my growing conviction into it. “Maybe you’re right and going through together, coming face to face with it, would be bad. But maybe not. You think it’s coincidence that every cockeyed theory we’ve had about this place has turned out right? I don’t. If it’s feeding off us, multiplying us, then we’re the prime factor. The base case. You think that if we see the truth, we’ll be destroyed. Well, fuck that. I reject it. I reject it with every ounce of my goddamn being.”

I took a deep breath. “Maybe synchronicity matters, maybe it doesn’t. I don’t really give a shit. What I want is to get us both back home. Look, I don’t deserve your trust, and maybe I don’t know how to give it to anyone else. But if I have to start somewhere I should start with myself. And I think I can do this. I *trust* I can. Okay? I made Tiger Shark in swim club and I can hold my breath for three minutes and I can make it. I can make it through. I can. And you are fucking coming with me, because

I may be the reason you're down here but I swear to god I will also be the reason you get back out."

The words lingered in the air. We stayed suspended for a moment, unable to break eye contact, afraid, maybe, to look at anything but each other.

A single brick tumbled from the ceiling and made a tremendous splash. We both started, then laughed, and couldn't stop laughing. We were buried alive and almost certainly going to die but goddamn, we were going to do it together.

"Yeah." He took a breath, then another. "Yeah, okay. We'll try it your way. You win. This time, dipshit."

It was decided. It felt good, and yet painful, too, as some pinprick of knowledge stabbed into me, saying even if we did survive, nothing would ever be the same between us. So without overthinking it I stepped forward and hugged him, fierce as the roiling lump in my throat.

His bare skin, still damp, felt hot against my own. He held me tight, wet curls rubbing against my face. Heat passed between us, but it was the least of what had.

We'd loved each other, at times. Even if the people we'd loved were mostly in our heads.

It was nice, but his curls were tickling my nose, and I pulled back before I meant to, reflecting his surprise at this with embarrassment. For a second it looked like he thought I was going to kiss him, and then I thought maybe he was thinking of kissing me, out of some kind of misplaced solidarity, and we both stood uncertain for a second or two before dropping arms and stepping back.

Awkward. But sort of perfect for the mismatched shape of us, which was, if nothing else, our own.

I turned away, toward the submerged portal, the way out, the way home. I stared down at it.

The thought of swimming into that hole without knowing the way to the other side stabbed a different part of me, the one

concerned with oxygen and continued existence. I pushed the fear down but it kept manufacturing images for me: jeans snagging on hidden nails that held me back while I flailed uselessly; huge dead fish swimming the flooded halls with flaking gray skin, bulging eyes growing larger and larger as they closed on me. I imagined drowning. Breathing water instead of air. Spasms of lungs. Knowing you were about to die, only not soon enough. Not nearly soon enough.

Almost on autopilot I guided Niko through what to expect, through breathing exercises, stroke technique. Calming him down as much as myself. Preparing.

We started to breathe, deeper and deeper. Priming our lungs with all the air we could.

I stared at the circular opening, visualized the motions I'd make. I tried to believe I could do this. I tried to push down the sliver of doubt lodged somewhere in my throat.

Gripping the sides of the hatch, I paused. I wasn't ready. But if I waited any longer, I'd never be.

"Last one back to the right dimension buys the drinks," I said, then took one last huge breath and dove headfirst into the hatch.

The room below was, in fact, a bathroom, lined with tile that might have been a pale yellow but glowed green in the light of our glowsticks. Chromium sink fixtures and a frosted-glass shower threw back emerald light. In contrast to the other flooded chambers there was no mold, no algae, no water damage. It might have been flooded seconds before.

I didn't pause to wonder about this, but kicked off through the open door into a murky hall, following the guide rope which led onwards like Niko had predicted. He followed behind, pulling himself hand over hand along the rope.

I focused on my strokes, old swimming lessons coming back. This was a different sort of lane, of course: the floor brown carpet, plaster-of-paris above instead of a shimmering boundary of air. And the wounded leg slowed me down: it hurt, every time I kicked. But I wasn't worried, not yet. I had good lungs. I could swim for a while.

The rope turned a corner into a large unfurnished room with a half-dozen washers and dryers piled in a corner. We swam past them, mechanical, calm, following the rope through an open doorway opposite.

Through the door was what looked like a small porch or mud room. Boots and shoes tumbled weightless in the water. The rope stopped here, tied to a capped metal pipe. The opposite wall was a sliding glass patio door.

The airlock.

Through the glass it was dark. But faintly, through water rippling as if moving with strange, hot currents, there: another sliding door. Distance was impossible to judge, but it couldn't have been more than twenty-five or thirty feet away, suspended in a dark and empty void.

And framed in that window was a figure, silhouetted by the green glowstick he was holding.

Another me.

It could have been a mirror, except he was alone.

The water trembled and around us foundations groaned, but I reached down and grabbed Niko's hand and held it tight against the wriggling water, and he gripped it back. We stared across the gap at my double, defiant. I realized half the sick anxiety I'd been feeling was from my growing proximity to him, subsumed by the general terror of what we were doing. But that wasn't why I gripped Niko's hand so tight.

We were breaking the rules of this place. Staring asynchrony in the face. And we weren't backing down.

We were going through anyway.

The rumbling petered out, died away. Shoes disturbed by the shaking drifted around us, their long laces waving like antennae.

All this had taken only seconds. I knew every one mattered. Across the gap I saw the other Ryan reach for his sliding glass door, and found myself doing the same, unsure which of us had moved first.

In lockstep, our doors slid open, and we swam forward into the black water between, me tugging Niko behind. As we reached the portal the floor and ceiling dropped away. Everything was dark.

And as we swam past the threshold something *changed*.

The water cooled; the pressure and ambient sound in my ears shifted. The other sliding door was just ahead of us, but it seemed too as if we floated in a cavernous space, a space beyond

measuring, the other door impossibly distant. Disoriented, I turned around to shut the one we'd come through—remembering they couldn't both be open at once—and as I did another shock of *change* swept through me, crystallizing into something immense, yawning, terrifying. I remembered the spring Elder Niko had spoken of

pools as clear as air

deep at the roots of this place: a spring that split and split and split again, endless. I felt possibilities branching in the water around me, but even more in the waters inside me, in the part of me inside the waters. Branching, expanding, growing like mold in a petri dish but spilling out of the dish now, spreading through the lab into the walls, the world

down in cool places

and it was as if I was the mold, the spring, an effervescent source spilling out into infinite variation, branches branching and branched again into an unfillable space, filling it. Boundless, multiplied. Multiplicious.

Slowed by dream-syrup, fighting awed stupor from these whispers of immensity, I turned my back on that powerful water at the center, pulled the glass door shut, staring numb as it slid implacable down its track, while behind me the other Ryan did the same. Our doors clicked shut.

And as we turned around to swim across that heady gap, facing each other again, we both raised our glowsticks high. And then we saw them.

Drifting in that immense and empty space, lit a gangrenous green by our chemical lights, there were more of us.

Dozens. Floating, unbreathing. Eyes open.

Watching.

I screamed, bubbles of precious oxygen exploding from my mouth, and then they came for us.

I twisted around and yanked the handle of the door, but it wouldn't budge. I clawed at it, slammed my fist against the glass.

The door wouldn't open and they were right behind they were coming they were going to get us and I *twisted* wildly, pressed hands to the glass behind me, but it was hopeless. There were too many of them, drifting forward with hands outstretched, serene expressions on their faces. Beside me, Niko was preparing to push off against the glass and make a break for the other side, but faltered as he saw what was happening across from us.

The other Ryan had failed to open his door, too, but as he'd turned around a coincidence had pried apart our synchronicity even further. There were more of the floating Ryan-things on his side—an accident of distribution maybe—and the few seconds Niko and I had to act had already run out for him. As he bent his legs to push off from the glass door, they reached him.

He screamed, eyes going wide as their fingers wrapped around his hair, caressed his arms, reached pale white fingers into his mouth. Bubbles of air exploded from it as he twisted frantically, trying to shake them off. Hands closed around his neck, twisted his arms, pulled his head back by his hair to a terrible angle; hands that seemed unsure if they meant to caress or kill. He was panicking, writhing in the water like a trapped eel, dying.

Before we could move or even start swimming forward to help him, his body spasmed as he breathed in.

He *breathed in*.

It's a horrible thing to watch yourself drown. My brain disconnected, floated away, observed only in abstractions as the me across the gap spasmed and convulsed, surrounded by things that shared our face, pressing forward, closer, eager, like they wanted to feed off the flicker of his death. The guttering green of his thrashing glowstick was doubled, reflecting mirrored patterns in the glass behind him.

Something was wrong with that.

More of the Ryan-things were drifting toward us, Niko was yanking frantic at my arm, but I couldn't move, couldn't react, struggling to grasp that fleeting thought like a half-remembered

dream. Neurons tried to spark. The doubled reflection. Something had almost slipped into place. Like a puzzle in that damn adventure game, a puzzle you don't even know if there's an answer to until the moment you see it.

A glowstick and its reflection, now gone horribly still. But the closer one was occluded by the swarming forms, the shadows that swam around it.

The one in the reflection was clear. In the glass, its light was unobstructed.

In the glass, there were no swarming figures. They weren't real.

They weren't real.

There was no way, no time to explain this to Niko. So I wrapped my arms around him tight, felt for the glass door with my legs, shut my eyes, and pushed off hard towards the swarm of encroaching Orions, as hard as I could.

The pain in my wounded calf went white-hot but I barely noticed it. I shot straight forward, intent, right through the mass of things closing in.

Something brushed my leg. I kicked forward with all the strength I had. Two fingertips bounced off my forehead, trailed through my hair, but we were moving too fast for them, we were through, we were past them. I'd done it.

We'd reached the glass door on the other side; below us, the drowned Orion sank into erasing darkness, no longer struggling. I couldn't help him. But Niko was kicking and thrashing in what I'd assumed was terror at the illusory Mockups. To pull the door open I'd have to let him go. But as I did I realized the reason for his panic was far more serious.

He was out of air.

Whether he'd lost the last of it screaming, whether his smoker's lungs were just inferior to mine: it didn't matter. I could tell at a glance he wouldn't make it to the other side. He wouldn't even make it through the door. His face was filled up with crushing

desperation, a look that counted seconds until the overwhelming urge to breathe took hold of him. They were almost gone. His lungs were empty.

So I pressed my mouth to his and filled them up. I gave him the last of my breath.

His eyes went wide as he realized what I did, and I could feel him fight to pull back, to stop me. But I held him tight, and anyway I knew he couldn't stop the desperate need of his lungs to expand, to survive, no matter what his forebrain thought it wanted.

In moments, it was done. I was empty, and he was full.

He would live. He would be the one who made it.

I pulled back, and as I did the water exploded around us like it had come to life, gone in a snap from still to carbonated. All around us the architecture groaned, flexed, heaved, like it too had come alive.

Across the gap of thrumming water behind us I saw the glass door we'd come through pull back. Its dimensions and the reflection of my glowstick grew smaller.

The wall was pulling away.

Desperate, my own need to breathe becoming overwhelming, I faced forward again and tugged the glass door beside us open; but even as I did, Downstairs expanded. Plaster dust pillowed into the flooded hall in thick weightless clouds as the walls split and reformed, split and reformed, like bones breaking and healing and rebreaking, growing fractionally longer each time. New glass doors spawned above us, below us, to every side. I ignored it all. I pulled the door open along its rail and grabbed Niko's arm to shove him through.

He gripped the edge as I did, twisting around to grasp my shoulder. There were no words for the look on his face, or for all the things we'd never said to each other and now never would. There was no time to say them and no air to say them with. I could guess what some of them would have been, maybe, but not

others. There was so much of him I'd never really seen, never understood, too caught up in manufacturing other versions of him in my head to know the only one who'd really been there. Now I'd never know how much I'd missed.

I pulled back gently from his grasping hand, and smiled, and tried to put everything left I wanted to say into that.

Water frothed around us, twisting, expanding. And then in a flash it began to move. A current tore him from me, limbs flailing, pulling him backward through the mudroom and down the twin of the hall we'd swum through to get here, toward the other hatch. I hoped. Toward the right surface. Even if I'd wanted to follow, I couldn't have: another current of shockingly cold water had wrapped itself around me like a tendril. An angry, biotic undertow pulled me down, straight down, with vicious force. The reflection of my glowstick strobed as the current pulled me past door after door of sliding glass, faster and faster: a flicker, then a dull throb, fading and mingling with the phantom patterns and flashes of color now dancing across my vision as my oxygen-starved brain began to shut down.

In a moment I'd breathe in, and I wondered what it would be like to inhale those waters of possibility, let that multiplying spring inside me. Let it fill me up. I harbored no illusions, of course: I'd seen it happen to the other Ryan. I'd die. But a beautiful way to go, in the abstract at least. A life spent worrying about possibilities would end by drowning in them. Neat.

This peaceful thought had so taken me I was caught utterly by surprise when the current shifted and smashed me into a pane of glass with so much force it shattered. Rocketing through a waterlogged hall of turbulent water, surrounded by tumbling fragments of glass, head throbbing and vision expiring, I opened my mouth in shock and, before I could remember I was waiting for a poetic moment to die, breathed in.

≧ EPILOGUE ≦

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

"One Art," Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979)

I hope this finds you well, if it finds you at all.

I walked by our old house this morning. The whole yard was flooded, caution tape everywhere. Empty driveway. Whoever lives there now must have abandoned ship while they waited for the plumbers to sort it all out. But it gave me an idea.

Water gushing up from the basement windows. A mess. But I found a little whirlpool in the swamp of the front yard, a big exposed pipe sucking liquid back in. Back down. That's where I'll drop this, I suppose. That pipe might just lead to the city sewer system, but if I'm lucky, it goes a lot deeper.

Maybe it would be better to let you keep thinking I'm dead. Maybe I shouldn't be writing this. But I think you'd rather know. There's a difference between dead and gone, despite the expression. I think you'd prefer knowing one Ryan, at least, survived. I never really did understand how you think, but I'm reasonably sure about that.

Assuming, that is, you survived too.

I think you did. That could be me projecting, one last time. But I don't know. It feels right that one of each of us made it out. Balanced.

Not synchronous, but resolved.

I don't have headaches here, which is weird, because it's not the place we started from. Elder Niko said there weren't just two sides, and I thought I got what he meant, but I've stopped trying to pretend we ever understood Downstairs. Anyway, it's different here. Chewing gum isn't a thing, and this asshole named Ted Cruz is president now, which feels like the worst possible timeline, but still. No headaches. This universe is not rejecting me. Maybe I should be insulted, but I suppose I'll have to take what I can get.

You're not here. I'm pretty sure of that. Hopefully you ended up back where we started. Hopefully that part of the plan worked out.

We never understood Downstairs, but that hasn't stopped me making up new theories. And I think we were wrong, about a lot of things.

Well. Duh.

But for example: we always assumed our doubles were on the other side of the fridge from us. But I don't think that's right. I think it was worse than that.

We could never figure out why they didn't use their keys to come through, since they should have had them both, one bent on the counter and the other stuck in the door. We didn't think how easy they'd be to miss. How the two of them, coming back to their own side from an expedition, might have gone straight through without seeing them at all.

How the four of us all ended up trapped together. Only they had no need for the keys or to get back through, because they were home where they belonged, on their own side. The problem was that two doppelgangers had followed them through.

Us.

They figured it out a lot quicker than we did, I think. How that loss of synchronicity had pulled our twin houses partially apart, like a gardener starting to separate two potted flowers. Even if we'd had the key, the connection through the fridge was gone. Too shallow, too close to the surface. What would we have found in there, if we'd forced it open? Maybe an endless tunnel of fridge insides: vinyl walls, crisper-drawer floors, stretching to infinity, going nowhere. How's that for a road to hell?

So they had to figure out a different way to get rid of us. We were sleeping in their beds. Eating their food. Stealing their lives while they lurked below, afraid to come near us and push things even more out of sync. Sneaking up to steal food in the middle of the night, thieves in their own house. And the only way to send us back was to find another connection point, a deeper one, down where roots still twined together. And prod us into finding it, too. They had a lot more time to explore than we did. Downstairs became their home.

They couldn't explain things to us, not directly. Because if we'd also realized how much things had diverged, it would have tugged our universes even further apart. So they tried to find the subtlest ways to send a message. Saying things without changing hardly anything. Tweaking the note, the video. Pulling us back from the dead-end of the crawlways. Nudging us away from the red herrings closer to the surface, to deeper explorations. Toward the new way through they'd discovered. A flooded tunnel, buried deep. A way to get us back home.

I think about that a lot. We were their monsters. But they helped us anyway. Maybe they didn't see any other choice, but still. That was pretty great of them.

Once they'd found the flooded connection, they could pass through to our home universe, and help clear the way back for us. Leave guide ropes. Make it easy. One of them stayed to keep an eye on us, to make sure we "discovered" the flooded tunnel. Once we did, the plan was probably that they'd swim back through

in advance, so that, when the time came, all four of us could pass each other, and the two of us could keep holding onto the thread of belief that synchronicity wasn't broken. At least until we were all in the right place again and what we believed no longer mattered.

But then that other Niko crept up from the depths of possibility and fucked everything up. They didn't see that coming, I don't think. How could they have?

Bitterness, multiplied. Multiplicious.

Your counterpart, the other Niko from the twin universe—he didn't make it. *I always kill the Nikos first.* Well. That's what happened. I saw a finger, and I think, I'm guessing, you found a body. I can't even imagine what that must have been like. But that's why you thought the plan was fucked, that synchronicity was going to collapse the moment we survivors confronted the fact that only one Niko was left. Elder Niko's plan was to take his place, but without him, there was a gap. A flaw in the pairing. And based on everything we knew, you were sure it was a fatal one. It almost was.

Who knows how much of this the other Ryan figured out. I guess all he knew is that his Niko never came back. He must have been scared, confused. Maybe that's why more of the Mockups went for him. Maybe it wasn't coincidence.

So that's my theory. Probably wrong. I'm sure you have your own.

I guess the details matter less than how we left things.

It feels like too late and too little to say I'm sorry, but I am. I was lost back then, too afraid to grow up and too wounded to risk being wounded again. But that's not a good enough excuse. I should have been more honest with myself. I should have been more honest with you. I wasn't, and I hurt you, and I can never pay you back for that.

I am enclosing ten bucks, though, for the drink you bought me that night at the Russian dance club, lest you think I'm a total

mooch. I did say I'd get you back, didn't I?

Thinking back on it all, I do take some comfort that when push came to shove, we choose to save each other rather than turn our backs. Or maybe it wasn't a choice: that wasn't how it felt to me. We just did it. You saved me, on the bedroom set above that awful void, and other times besides, when you had every reason to leave me behind. And I gave you the last of my air, not because I didn't want to lose you, but because you were the one who deserved it. That other Niko said it's too bad we don't get what we deserve. But deserving's just another story we tell ourselves, you know? And sometimes, if we try real hard, we can tell it right.

I should wrap this up. If I spend all day writing mysterious letters to another man, my boyfriend might get jealous.

Donovan. That's his name. Donovan.

Maybe it's ridiculous to think something as tiny as a triple-bagged USB key wrapped in a ten-spot could possibly find its way to you. If our two universes connect at all any more, it's far down in knotted skeins, hopelessly tangled. I imagine this baggie winding its way through miles of piping, tumbling down moss-covered tunnels, floating through submerged, warped bedrooms. Somehow making its way back up to another surface, another flood. Seems silly. But I see it in my head, vivid. I try to believe there's a world where it could reach you, even though the odds seem astronomical.

On the other hand, with so many possibilities down there, maybe it's inevitable. Maybe this message will multiply, splitting off into thousands of fractal copies, a million USB keys floating to a million surfaces, ending up in the hands of a lot of confused people but also, too, in yours.

Maybe one of those versions will even seem right to you. Irrational, but true.

I haven't dreamt about you in years, but I did last night. Not in particulars. Your name just sort of floated through me,

troubling in some way but not defined. A word repeated until it loses its meaning, becomes obsessed with itself. A reflection's reflection. It's why I came by the old house, but all that was here was a flooded yard. All it reflected was me.

I never knew what we were to each other back then. Something less than all those things we never were, but more than a friendship. An else-ship, maybe. An other-ship. Traces of mingled shrapnel under shared skin. Broken pieces of each other we tried to make our own.

I guess we're left with what we had. *Have*. Definitely have, yeah? Because we're gone to each other, but not dead. We survived.

So hey. I hope you're doing all right and you found your way back to a world where people say "fourd" like God intended. I hope you found better people to hang out with and a new set of hobbies and someone to appreciate your fashion sense. I hope you realized you were someone worth saving, too.

I miss you sometimes, but that's okay.

We made it. And I think... I think we'll be alright.

Or hey. How about this.

I trust we will.

ALTERNATE SCENE

Here's a scene from Subcutaneous in a different rendering from the one in the main text of this version of the book.

(From Chapter 8...) Some of the rooms got larger, too big for rooms in a house. More like a school gymnasium. Still the same carpet, though. And it felt like we were seeing more of the anomalies, the farther in and deeper down we got. An explosion of pipes and plumbing, sticking out of a wall for no particular reason; weird cube-shaped extrusions or cavities in the edges of rooms. It was like the deeper we went, the more flexible the rules became—of architecture, of stability, of god knows what else.

Behind one unassuming door we found something that looked almost like a backstage, with a wood floor painted black instead of a carpet, cinderblock walls with folding chairs stacked against them by the hundreds. But no curtain, no audience, no racks of lights above. In fact there was nothing above: the walls rose up beyond the range of our flashlights.

In the exact center of the room was one of those caged metal utility ladders, climbing up into that darkness.

Mostly because it was going up and not down, we decided to try it. Or I decided, anyway, hands gripping the cool metal rungs before Niko could raise an objection. I felt reckless down here, brave enough to try anything. The exact opposite of the me on the surface.

Besides, the ladder looked just like the one at my junior high when I'd been on stage crew. I'd climbed it a million times. The metalwork of the cage felt like a blanket. Safe.

Within a minute I'd climbed disturbingly high. I didn't look down but the beam of Niko's flashlight, trained on me, had faded to glimmers, washed out by my own. Everything around and above was dark. And *quiet*. All Downstairs was quiet, of course, but here it seemed monstrously so, a quiet of infinitudes, even the sounds of my own body sucked away into the emptiness around me.

Niko seemed so far away.

"Find anything up there?" he asked, putting a hand on my shoulder. Startled, I looked down. My hands were still gripping the rungs of the ladder, but my foot was on the floor of the stage. I was on the ground. Niko was beside me.

"What happened?" I felt dizzy.

He frowned. "You climbed up for a while, then you came back down. Anything up there?"

I made him try. The same thing happened. I watched him climb up, high into the darkness above. Then, without missing a beat, he reversed course and came back down. When he made it back to me he was as startled as I'd been. He felt like he'd been climbing up the whole time.

We tried experiments. Keeping in verbal contact. Focusing on our movements. With enough of that, it was possible to realize that you'd started moving down again before you'd come all the way back. But always with a sick and juddering sense of grinding gears: one part of your brain kicking in and telling another it had been looking at things wrong. It took a moment to perceive, like an optical illusion. We stopped after a particularly nauseating moment when I was listening to Niko below me chanting *You're coming down, you're coming down, you're coming down*, and all my senses were telling me that was wrong, that I was still climbing up, climbing up, climbing up, and when the truth crashed into my perception I felt such a wave of sickness that I almost lost my grip on the ladder, had to clutch it shivering for minutes, cold sweat breaking out all over my body. After that we decided to

stop experimenting.

BACKER ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Countless permutations of thanks to my crowdfunding backers who helped make this project happen!

Adam Marshall Smith	Clifton Royston	Evan Marzahn
Adam Summerville	Craig D Hewitt	Felicity Drake
Aidan Linder	Damien Neil	Finn Ellis
Alan Hinchcliffe	Damien Neil	Florian Mehm
Alex Hutchinson	Dan Cox	Frank Lantz
Alex Mitchell	Dana Duffield	freddy elbaiady
Alexander Davis	Daniel Dresser	Freya Campbell
Alexis Ong	Daniel Ravipinto	Gabriel Smedresman
Alice Southey	Dave LeCompte	Gillian Smith
Allison Parrish	David G Tubby	Greg Dember
Anastasia M Salter	David J. Allison	Hamish McIntyre
Andrew Ferguson	David Masad	Hartmut Koenitz
Andrew Plotkin	David Szydoski	Heather Albano
Andrew Vestal	Dawn Sueoka	Herb Swift
Andy Whitmire	Derek Donahue	ian michael waddell
Anonymous backers	Diane Heaton	Isaac Karth
Anne Sullivan	Dietrich Squinkifer	Isaac Schankler
Bay Chang	Dionysus Blazakis	Jacob Garbe
Benjamin J Robertson	Doni Faber	Jacob Topp-Mugglestone
Bogi Takács and R.B. Lemberg	Duncan Bowsman	James Ryan
Brett Witty	Dylan Lederle-Ensign	Jane Clark
Brian Jenkins	Ed Washburn	Jason Grinblat
Byron Alexander Campbell	Eli Zupke	Jay Edelson
	Elizabeth Goss	Jenni Polodna
	Ellie Yee	Jeremy Rishe
Candice Majewski	Emily Hopson-Hill	Jessica Rivera
Chad Barb	Emily Shearer	Jinjin Wu
Chris Rees	Emily Short	John Leen
Clara Fernández-Vara	Evan Balster	John Maullin

John Murray	Matthew Ivan Bennett	Sam Roberts
John Urquhart Ferguson	Matthew Kirschenbaum	Scott Hardwick
Johnnemann Nordhagen	Matthew R.F. Balousek	Scott M. Bruner
Jonathan Reyes	Max Kreminski	Sebastian 'achlys' Stein
Jordan Han	Maya Sonenberg	Shannon Prickett, Patron of the Arts
Josh & Amber Fitzgerald	Megha Baikadi	Simon Sarginson
Josh Lawrence	Melanie Dickinson	Stephen G. Ware
Joshua McCoy	Michael Bikovitsky	Stephen Granade
Julian Togelius	Michael Janes	Sterling Keeley
Jurie Horneman	Michael Mateas	Storme Winfield
K.DeFlane	Michael Rubin	stricken.messenger
Karen Vaughan	Michiel Trimpe	Sydney Ellis
Katherine Morayati	Mike Treanor	tablesaw
Katrina Kinsley	Molly O'Brien-Manley	Tara Liu
kay walker	Nick Junius	Tarn Adams
Kerry Garvin	Nick Scheiblaue	Terry Beyak
Kevin Langevin	Noah Wardrip-Fruin	Theresa Jean Tanenbaum
Kimberly Shannon	Noel Warford	Thomas Dinneny
Krauseman	NPCDev	Thomas Gizbert
Kyle Haas	Patrick R	Tim Chaplin
Kylie Taylor	Paul Benzon	tobbsvensson
Lara Martin	Peep van der Molen	Tracy O'Brien
Laura E Hall	Peter Mawhorter	Travis Capener
Lyle Skains	Phoenix Toews	Ty Eckley
Malin Rozon	Rae Tay	tyler burns
Marcelo D. Viana Neto	Raphael D'Amico	Valentina
Mari Page	Rax Green	Vallia Yu
Marina Rossi	Richard Eriksson	Will Jennings
Mark C. Marino	Richard Roberts	William Hampton
Mark McGurl	Rick Dean	Yuu Gamon
Mark Rickerby	Robb Sherwin	Zack Urlocker
Martin Ralya	Robert Fletcher	
Matt Sinclair	Robert Giusti	
Matthew Campbell	Sam Kabo Ashwell	

ABOUT THIS COPY

There are several hundred places in the master copy of Subcutaneous where text can vary. Here is a sampling of some of the decisions made by the rendering code when this copy was generated.

- Your narrator preferred wordier ways of saying things.
- Your narrator was a bit more optimistic than the norm.
- Your narrator preferred to avoid slang.
- Some proper nouns in this copy that might be different in others include Mockups, Grip Monkeys, and *Imajica*.
- Your Ryan and Niko lost the keys to re-open the fridge.
- The progression of your glowstick colors was red, silver, yellow, green. Read into that what you will.
- Your Niko fell when climbing the vertical hall.
- At the bottom of your Downstairs was an endless empty space, the Basement.
- In this version, the final fight took place on a floating set between two endless walls.
- Your Ryan never solved the weird CD-ROM game. Maybe none of them did.
- In your ending, Orion swam through the final gateway with Niko, not alone.
- Your Ryan never found the version of Niko he thought he was looking for. That's probably for the best.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron A. Reed is a writer and game designer focused on exploring new ways for authors and readers to tell stories together. His award-winning games have been featured at IndieCade, South by Southwest, Slamdance, GaymerX, and the Independent Games Festival, and he has spoken about digital storytelling at Google, PAX and PAX East, WorldCon, NarraScope, and the Game Developer Conference. He holds a PhD in Computer Science and a MFA in Digital Arts and New Media, and aims to continue abusing them both in interesting ways.

This is, by some definitions, his first novel. Or maybe that was *Blue Lacuna*. Or *Hollywood Visionary*. Or *The Ice-Bound Concordance*. It's hard to say.

Aaron lives with his totally real boyfriend in Alameda, California, in a house without a basement.

Reviews wanted! Please share your reaction to *Subcutanean* on Goodreads or anywhere else readers congregate. Your voice is a huge part of helping an indie book like this succeed. **Thank you!**