

SANCTUM KTHADRAS

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First Draft: 01/01/2020

One

At the entrance was a gray box with a white panel and a glowing red dot on top. He had observed the driver ahead of him press a keycard to the panel, at which point the dot turned green and the gate lifted, allowing his BMW to pass through. Now it was his turn. He put the Jeep into park and fumbled through a manila folder on the passenger seat. After a brief moment of panic he found the keycard paper-clipped to his W4 and pressed it against the panel, noticing as he did the growing line of cars now backed into the main road. The red dot blinked twice, but did not turn green as it had for the BMW, and the gate did not open.

He sighed.

"Of course it doesn't work. Why would it?"

There was impatient beeping and honking from the line. He attempted the keycard once again to no effect and then gestured in frustration towards the box for everyone to see. Then, just as he was about to u-turn out of line and phone Tammy Long from HR, he noticed an attractive woman in a camel-hair peacoat approaching in the rear-view mirror. Around her neck she wore a retractable badge with a keycard inside. When she reached the box she held her own badge up to the panel. The dot turned green and the gate lifted.

"Sorry about that," he said, "First day."

But the woman was already headed back to her car without so much as a glance in his direction. She responded to his lame apology with a quick "Naw you good", which for some reason irritated him. But the gate was open.

As he entered the technology park slits of rain appeared on the windshield. The sky was thick with dark clouds and though it was 7:30 in the morning the light was dim. Predawn. Last Wednesday, the day of his interview, it had been clear weather, blue skies and sunshine. Now in the overcast everything he recognized seemed paradoxically unfamiliar and strange. The Jeep wound through the curves in the road, enclosed by regular rows of pine trees resembling the ancient colonnades of a lost civilization. This too felt different, oppressive in some way he could not articulate. He had not felt this way before. Slowly he noticed that his stomach felt as if it were eating itself. Nerves, he thought.

"Relax, Will" he said aloud, "Just breathe. Perfectly normal to be freaked out your first day."

Oddly his reassurance to himself did help.

He emerged from the wooded route and entered a hilly area with offices on both sides of the road. These were concrete and glass cubes about two stories high. Out in front a white van was parked and several workers in coveralls were busy trimming hedges and laying down cedar wood chips around the base of the largest building. Another was spraying down the parking lot with a garden hose, cleaning the debris

of their labor. The road he was on ended in a roundabout. There were fancy wooden signs adorned with company logos and arrows telling you which exit to take. He saw the sign for his company and immediately felt weak in his stomach. From the center console he pulled out the bottle of Pepto Bismol he had picked up at a gas station on the way, anticipating this exact moment. He twisted off the cap and downed its entire contents in just a few gulps, feeling the chalky pink liquid work its magic almost immediately.

By the time he pulled into the parking lot it was still early, a full half hour before he was supposed to meet with Tammy Long in the lobby. He turned off the ignition and sat in the quiet, glancing at his phone every other minute, counting down. This only made him more anxious so he looked outside and watched the people entering the building. His eyes went from person to person. He wondered what their lives were like. What circumstances had led them to work in the same building he was now going to work. They all looked so serious. Business-like. An impish part of him recoiled at the stodginess of all this and a thought popped into his head. What would happen if he took off his pants and underwear and walked inside to meet Tammy Long as if nothing were out of the ordinary. Shirt buttoned. Tie knotted. Manila folder in hand. Dick freely swinging. Ass cheeks exposed. How long would it take for someone to actually say something to him? What would they say? Then he recognized he was being too glib, which happened sometimes when he was anxious, and admonished himself. Don't

be weird today, Will. Normal people don't think thoughts like that. Be serious. Take things seriously for once in your life.

Just then a man passed behind his Jeep. He was obese and wore a long, black trench coat. Over his shoulder he was carrying a worn laptop bag, also black. His face was cleanly shaven, but thoroughly pockmarked with acne scars. He wore unstylish plastic-frame eyeglasses with tinted lenses. But none of those details were what caught his eye. The man was moving at the pace of someone trudging through swampland, his apparent aim to prolong the journey from parking lot to office as long as humanly possible.

He noticed others and tried to glean from their faces and gaits whether they were happy to be there opposed to the obese man, who clearly was not. Some did have that same sloth-like pace, the same dead-eyed look in their eyes. But then others walked with enthusiasm and purpose. A fit man nearly jogged past his Jeep, wearing a dark-blue tailored suit and a Hitler youth haircut. He carried a small briefcase under his arm like a football and was shouting to someone via bluetooth earpiece. This early in the morning. A salesperson no doubt. But full of life.

These are my people now, he thought as he watched them. This is my world if I walk through those doors. When I walk through those doors, because of course I will. A sense of finality descended on him like a cloud. A feeling of death and hopelessness within his heart. Then immediately he put it out of his mind. Today he must be present.

Focused. Positive. You only get one chance at a first impression, remember that. But where was the boy in him who would have longed to run off in the woods that surround this technology park and climb up the biggest tree he could find? There was a time in his life when he might have done just that. Damn the responsibility. But not now. He would never do that now. And yet, when exactly had that changed? This was a new start. A new year. A new job. A new apartment in the city. Put all that negativity behind you, Will. Don't dwell inside your head anymore. Don't think those kinds of thoughts. Suddenly, from the corner of his eye, he caught the time.

7:55 a.m.

Here we go.

He got out of the Jeep, manila folder in hand, shirt tucked, hair combed, pants and underwear on, and began the twenty-yard journey to the office building. As he approached the tinted glass doors he saw his reflection and noticed how awkwardly he walked and wondered if the HR person was inside watching him at this moment.

He entered the lobby. The floors were polished marble and the ceiling stretched three stories high. It was a cavernous space. Consequently every sound you made was magnified tenfold. He hesitated just inside the door until he recognized Tammy Long near the elevators. She called him over with an enthusiastic get-over-here gesture, positively beaming at him.

"Well, good morning to you! How was your drive in?"

"Good morning, Tammy," he said, extending his hand, "Long. But okay."

She nodded.

"The commutes are killer in these parts. But we do the best we can. You're coming up 400, correct? I'll email you some shortcuts only the locals know about."

"That would be awesome."

"Are you ready for the big day?"

"Absolutely. So glad to be here."

He handed her the manila envelope with all the paperwork inside and then they took the lobby elevator to the second floor. Along the way she explained.

"Second floor is IT and development. Third floor is executive, marketing, and HR. First is support and sales."

"Good to know."

On the second floor they entered a wide open room, the entire floor really, filled with rows and rows of gray cubicles. The smell of coffee and breakfast sandwiches was thick in the air. To his left he saw floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the parking lot where he had just come from. There was a buzz of activity, people walking past in a hurry, a group huddled around a monitor, another group in a meeting room drawing on the whiteboard. It was exciting. Like something you wanted to be a part of and contribute to. And he did. Now that he was

here. All the anxiety of his commute and waiting in the parking lot had dissipated. This is where he belonged.

Tammy showed him the break room, the bathrooms, introduced him to the IT department, and showed him where the meeting rooms were and how to access them with the keycard. He took this opportunity to inform her his keycard had not worked at the entrance gate.

"Oh, shoot," she said, apologetic, "I reminded them to do that on Friday. Once I'm done here I will pay a visit to security. You'll have a working keycard by the end of today or heads will roll. You can bet the farm on that!"

Next he was shown his cubicle. It sat on a corner near a lot of foot traffic, adjacent to the bathrooms. There was a large monitor and a docked laptop, but little else, in the work space. He noticed the computer was logged on and open to a window with a running script.

"Here's where I will leave you," she said, "Chen Lu will be over in a few minutes. You remember him from your interview. He's the tech lead of the Build team and will be your immediate supervisor. He'll take you through the next steps and get you set up with all that whiz-bang stuff."

She gestured to the laptop.

"This is your computer but hold off before doing anything with it, since I believe they are still using it to run build scripts. Normally we'd have a fresh system for you to use, but unfortunately Abigail was unable to complete a knowledge transfer before she left

and we've had to leave this system as is until we're sure we got everything we need off of it. In fact, if I heard it right, one of the first things you'll be doing is automating the build process."

She trailed off as if losing her train of thought and there was a moment of uncomfortable silence which he felt responsible to fill with something.

"Sounds like you guys were left high and dry."

She stopped and looked at him, her eyes probing, and a little bit concerned.

"Did they not say anything to you? During the interview I mean? I had thought they would've at least mentioned the situation to you, before you started."

Instantly he regretted saying anything at all. That was just like him, to be too familiar with people he barely knew, about things he knew nothing about.

"Well no. I mean, I don't think so. This is the first time I've heard about a situation."

She nodded and gave him a reassuring smile, seeing his confusion and bewilderment.

"Well, maybe it's not my place to say. Don't worry about it. Anyway, Chen Lu will be here after the morning standup. Just make yourself comfortable. Help yourself to some coffee or whatever you do for breakfast. And once again, welcome to the company. We are thrilled to have you on board!"

She left. He sat down in the chair of his cubicle. Swiveled it from side to side. Adjusted the height. It was no Aeron, but whatever. He went through all the desk drawers. All were empty except for a couple of paper binders, an old pen, a box of chamomile tea and some napkins and a spork. Then he glanced at the monitor and watched the script running, trying to decipher what it was doing but the output was scrolling by too fast. His inclination would have been to poke around on the laptop but he was hesitant after what Tammy had told him. He went to the break room and poured a cup of coffee and added a some powdered creamer and a bit too much sugar. He returned to his cubicle, sat back in the chair, pulled out his phone, and surfed the web.

Soon Chen Lu arrived at the cubicle and shook his hand, welcoming him to the team. They were on familiar terms since the interview. He liked Chen, who was older than him and had a wry sense of humor, uncommon in this kind of environment. The first thing Chen did was show him what scripts they run on the build system (his laptop). But Chen made no comment or reference to the previous developer, Abigail, who Tammy had mentioned somewhat mysteriously.

Chen explained to him that his first job would be to fully automate the script and deploy it to cloud servers, instead of a single laptop, so it could be scaled as needed. Not to mention the bus factor of having the entire build process running on a developer's machine, which was never intended but it just happened that way

because of prioritization. This all made sense to him, he had seen even worse build systems in his time, and he saw no reason at the moment to probe any deeper with questions about the previous developer.

Afterwards, they walked a few rows over and he was introduced him to the rest of the Build team. There were three others, excluding Chen: Steve Kauffman, Crystal Mathers, and Byron Smith. Now he made five. Chen suggested they all meet at the elevators at noon for a welcome lunch.

The cafeteria was on the lower level of building E. The five of them took the walking path which ran parallel to the main buildings. The wind had picked up since morning, whish-ing through pines trees, whose tops were in constant motion. On the way they zipped or buttoned up their coats and did not speak much at all to one another. Chen in front donned the hood of his jacket which made him look boyish, and not particularly like the tech lead of the Build team. Soon they reached E building, which he knew by a large wooden placard on the wall facing them. Here was a terrace. Its floors were made of large flagstone and overhead was a mesh lanai to keep out the weather. There were about twenty tables, nearly vacant today. They all went inside.

He took a tray from the rack and piled on a large serving of mashed potatoes, a blackened chicken breast, and a spicy ratatouille of zucchini, tomato, and eggplant. He poured a sweet tea to drink. The

food here was priced by weight and once weighed, his came out to just over twelve dollars. Chen informed the cashier they were all together and asked her to put everything on a card he had pulled from his wallet.

They decided to sit outside and put two tables together so they could all sit together. In a social setting it became clear they all knew each other intimately but deep down they did not share much in common, apart from the job itself. So most of the conversation drifted that way.

"So now that you've seen what we're up against," Crystal Mathers said, between spoonfuls of minestrone, steaming in the bowl, "are you ready to run for the hills?"

He took a moment to respond, partly for dramatic effect, partly to give himself time to answer diplomatically.

"Well, the last thing I want to do is be that asshole who comes into a new work environment and immediately wants to change everything or criticize all the choices that have been made up to now, without really understanding why those choices were made to begin with."

Another pause.

"But you want to change everything and criticize all our choices."

Laughter.

"Well, obviously," he said, playing along, and then continuing with earnestness, "I mean the whole thing with the builds running on a developer machine, that is just waiting for a disaster to happen."

"Oh trust me, we know," said Steve, his steak and cheese sub was already half gone and the napkin he had stuffed into his shirt was stained with grease and beef droppings.

Byron Smith added to that. He sipped on a sugar-free soda, not eating.

"It's priorities, you know. For most of this past year we've been a four person team but doing the work of twenty. Because of that we seem to always be firefighting. But now that you're here, we'd like to finally get these build scripts onto their own servers, load-balanced, and horizontally scalable. It's the one bottleneck that's really slowing down the QA side of things. They have to wait an hour sometimes for a new build to be deployed."

They all nodded. He nodded also, having been in situations like that plenty of times before.

"You know what," he said, his hands becoming animated, "I am genuinely excited to be joining a group that wants to use technology and make things better. For so long I've worked with people who just don't have a passion for this stuff, clock-watchers, paycheck collectors, the walking dead you know? Not to open any wounds, but I heard through the grapevine that your previous developer sort of left

you guys high and dry, and I think that's frankly bullshit and extremely unprofessional. I know we can do better."

All the faces around the table dropped. Nobody said anything, nobody acknowledged what he had said directly. But it was clear it had opened a wound. He immediately felt like a giant asshole. In the silence that followed he found himself scanning the woods on the other side of the path, where a small black bird was resting on the limb of a maple tree. It was too far away to hear their voices, but the bird soared into the air the same moment Chen finally broke the silence.

"So did any of you guys see the new Leonardo DiCaprio movie yet? My wife and I went on Saturday. It's about a dream within a dream within a dream. My mind was completely blown."

None of them had so Chen proceeded to enumerate the plot in mostly spoiler-free detail. He was eating a cucumber and red onion salad from a Tupperware container. For some reason he just knew this lunch had been prepared by his wife, though he had no knowledge whether Chen even had a wife. It seemed too perfect and healthy and not the sort of lunch someone like Chen would have made for himself.

When lunch was over they made the trek back to Building A, again not speaking much at all to one another. When they were back on the second floor each disappeared without a word or even a glance in his direction.

He returned to his cubicle and started working through the existing build scripts, taking notes and adding comments as needed.

The scripts were written in Powershell, a language he was vaguely familiar with. He could tell from their organization, the clarity of the logic, and how well things were commented, that the previous developer was good at least. All the time he worked, in the back of his mind, he replayed what he had said over lunch and his coworkers reaction to it and wondered if he had gone too far in the things he said.

After work he packed up the laptop along with all the accessories and headed to the parking lot, taking the stairwell this time instead of the elevator. His plan was to do a deep dive of the system this evening. Maybe over a burger and beer at George's, a bar and grill nearby his new apartment that looked pretty good. He understood his duty was to become the expert on all the existing build scripts and then come up with a viable plan to deploy them onto cloud servers. He was going to knock it out of the park and impress them all.

In the parking lot the storm that had been threatening the entire day had at last arrived. The skies were unusually dark and the wind blew with ferocity. There was pine straw and dried leaves swirling in the air. It was biting cold.

He zipped up his coat to the collar and nestled his face inside as he made a dash for the Jeep, which he forgot was parked all the way in back of the lot. He felt tiny droplets of rain on his cheeks.

From the building a voice called his name. He turned and saw that it was Tammy from HR. She had on a bright blue raincoat and was holding an umbrella in one hand. In the other she held a keycard. He jogged back to meet her.

"This is yours. Don't lose it. I had to practically give up my firstborn to make it happen."

He smiled.

"I won't. Thank you for taking care of that."

She told him it was no trouble and then lingered for some reason, as if she had something else to say but didn't know how to bring it up. He picked up on that and waited. Her eyes went to the parking lot and back to him again.

"I wanted to tell you, before you left today."

Her voice trailed off. She looked at the ground and when she looked back up her entire demeanor had changed. The professional amiability behind her eyes was gone.

"The person who held your position before,"

"Abigail?"

"That's right. About six months ago now, Abigail took her own life."

It was a shock. His mind immediately went to those moments he had referred to the previous developer with casual disdain and criticism. What a fool I am, he thought. I should have kept my damn mouth shut.

But there was something else. Tammy had an expectant look in her eyes. He waited.

"I wanted you to hear it. I know I would have wanted to know if I were in your shoes and I was getting the impression nobody else wanted to say anything."

"Right. I appreciate that. It must have been hard."

She nodded.

"It took us all by surprise."

The word 'surprise' caught in her throat, as she remembered. She said nothing for a long moment. The wind blew her hair from the side and tugged at the umbrella. He could see her hand struggling to keep it upright. Then tears welled in her eyes.

"Sometimes me and her took our lunches together. We connected over crochet. She was just getting into it and I've been doing that practically all my life. So we'd talk about things she was working on, different techniques, tools to use, stuff like that. When the weather was nice enough we'd take walks after lunch. We took the path behind the building down into the woods. There's a pond at the bottom of the hill with a few ducks in it. We'd admire the nature and talk about everything. Office gossip, family matters, you know."

He said nothing. Listened. Then her eyes went to the beginning of the path. She wiped a tear from her cheek. Her mind was elsewhere, lost in a memory.

"She was such a beautiful soul, Abigail was. And so kind to me."

Two

He was five miles from the office, in bumper to bumper traffic, in the bottleneck of the southbound tollbooth lanes, when the storm at last fell. It was a downpour. The last thing he needed after a stressful first day and during this hellish commute to his apartment. He was yet unfamiliar with the best lanes to be in and was perpetually in lanes that became exit only, or else ended altogether. The rain fell so heavy the wipers barely kept the windshield clear. He shouted, honked, banged on the steering wheel, flipped the bird, and forced his way into whatever lane he needed to be in, like every other commuter on the highway. Meanwhile a leak from the door dripped rainwater onto his knee like some kind of cruel method of torture. When at last he could take no more he squeezed the steering wheel with all his might and let out a primal scream until his vision grew dim and stars appeared in his periphery. He drove on.

Inside the perimeter the traffic finally relented but the storm continued to rage. Intermittent lightning flashes revealed in the distance a silhouette of the skyline. A building which had been obscured by the torrents of rain appeared suddenly out of the mist, like a towering colossus, and loomed overhead at a dizzying height. He entered a tunnel lit only by a line of amber lights. He found himself surrounded by dozens of cars all going the same direction. They had of course been there the entire time, but in the light of the tunnel he

became aware of their proximity as if for the first time. The sudden change disoriented him. He panicked and felt a tightness in his chest. There was something chaotic in all of this, unnatural, and the only way to deal with it at all was to tune it out and keep your foot on the gas pedal, until you made it through. Once outside the tunnel he drove under a tube walkway spanning the entire width of the highway. Inside the tube he saw a man on a bench with his head in his hands.

Exit 16 turned onto Monroe Avenue. He pulled off the highway and immediately the knot inside his chest loosened. The rain still poured, but at least he was close to home, in familiar territory. His tentative plan to visit George's Bar and Grill for dinner and some late night work was cancelled. All he wanted to do now was get back to the warmth of his apartment and crash on the couch. But he was hungry. He considered ordering delivery, Mellow Mushroom maybe, but his conscience would not allow him to have a delivery driver go out in this mess, only for him. He was an asshole, but he wasn't that kind of asshole.

A couple of blocks before his apartment complex, on the corner, was a CVS Pharmacy. He pulled in. Jacket over his head, he made a dash for the entrance and once inside grabbed a shopping basket from a stack near the door. He picked up a package of dry spaghetti, a jar of marinara sauce, and a can of mushrooms. He also grabbed a bottle of their finest Cabernet Sauvignon. Then at the counter he realized he

forgot the parmesan cheese and there and back again as quickly as he could, ignoring the irritated customers behind him in line.

At the entrance of his building he entered the code they had provided to him, his apartment number plus 404, the area code. Not the most rigorous security system in the world, but hey, whatever works. He had been assigned a parking spot which was fairly close to his stairwell. The building had been recently renovated and was very hip, at least to his unhip eyes. There was exposed concrete floors and support beams. The walls were painted in bright shades of burgundy, mustard, and hunter green, depending on the floor. The walls of his floor were burgundy while his door was painted black.

He shouldered the laptop bag and carried the groceries up to the third floor. Along the way he passed a couple of young women carrying laundry baskets. He gave them both what he thought to be a casual yet charming smile and they both smiled back.

Once inside, he put the groceries on the island and dropped the laptop bag on his desk, which sat near a window overlooking the BeltLine. The first thing he did was look for a corkscrew to open the bottle of wine, but unfortunately all of his non-essential kitchenware was still in boxes piled next to the pantry. Not having the energy to look through the boxes he did the next best thing and used a paring knife to stab and slice the cork from the bottle. This turned out to be more work than he expected, but after ten minutes of poking, pushing, and chopping, he finally got enough leverage to pull it out.

He poured into a tumbler. Those were the only glasses he currently owned, one of the many things he meant to address after he got settled in.

The first glass was gone, the bitter sweetness of the wine warmed him from the inside out. He needed it after that commute. The commute from hell. Two hours it took him, from the office parking lot to his apartment building. He hoped the storm-free commutes would be a bit less hellish, and quicker. Otherwise he was going to enter the madhouse. He poured more wine and set the glass on the counter. He looked in the cabinets above the stove for some pots and a colander, which thankfully he had already unboxed. He boiled the pasta and heated up the marinara and mushrooms and combined the final product into a red, plastic mixing bowl. Over the pasta he shook nearly half the can of parmesan cheese and then mixed it all up with a fork. He took the mixing bowl and tumbler of wine to the couch and proceeded to wolf it down.

After he ate he set the bowl on the end table and lay back on the couch, his hands folded over his swollen belly. He looked around the apartment. He saw all the boxes left to be unpacked and sighed. Fuck it. It would have to wait for the weekend. This commute was going to be a killer. He knew that going in, but then maybe he didn't fully appreciate how much it would suck. Maybe once he got familiar enough with the code and technology stacks, Chen would allow him to work from home a couple days a week. It didn't seem unreasonable to him.

He flipped on the TV and found some re-runs of Seinfeld. This was good to zone out for a bit, let his meal settle. His gourmet meal. And now Seinfeld, some comfort food for the mind. In his younger days he had always scoffed at old people who wanted to switch off their brains in the evening and relax with game shows. But now he got it. You only have so much mental bandwidth and need to conserve energy for what is truly important. He watched the exploits of Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer for awhile, his attention wavering, drifting in and out of focus. The wine doing its work. Then he fell asleep. Of course, he did not realize he had fallen asleep until he woke up and another show was on, a show he did not recognize at all. He turned it off.

His attention went to the laptop bag on his desk. He stared at it for a good minute, debating whether or not he even had the energy, but then mustered some and walked over, pulling the laptop from the bag and plugging it into the outlet on the wall behind the desk. He turned it on. The screen lit up and a few minutes later he was logged on. He double-clicked a text file on the desktop where he had been taking notes earlier in the day, and reviewed the notes. Then he opened the last build script he had been studying and re-familiarized himself with the logic. He found it hard to follow tonight. The two glasses of wine had dulled his brain and also he was tired. He drifted off from time to time while reading through the code. Not asleep but on autopilot. Before he knew it he was browsing the filesystem for some reason. There did seem to be something he was looking for, though

perhaps he was not yet conscious of it. Under the Home folder was another folder called Pictures. He opened that and saw an entire directory of subfolders, named things like BahamaCruiseNov2007, BlueRidgeAppleFarm, and GrantBDayPartyAug2009.

He clicked on the folder named BahamaCruiseNov2007. The first picture was a self-portrait of a young woman, and her mother? It was hard to say, though likely based on their shared features. They wore sunglasses and wide-brimmed sun hats. They were clinking their glasses of pīna coladas, complete with umbrellas, both of them making kissy faces at the lens. This was Abigail. The previous developer. It had to be her. He knew it was her. Without knowing he knew. Without knowing how he knew, he knew.

She was thin, with pale, slightly freckled skin, and dark brown hair cut into a bob, which exposed her neck and slightly-sunburnt shoulders. She looked, happy. As he went through the album he began to feel like a bit of a creep. And considered stopping. For one thing these photos were private, not meant for public consumption, and certainly not for him. But something about her allured him. What he could not say.

Most of the photos had been taken poolside or from lounge chairs, and in most they were holding fru-fru drinks. The only people in any of the photos were Abigail and the person he supposed to be her mother. Towards the bottom were some photos taken on an island. There were some long shots of the young woman looking through souvenirs and

finally a picture that confirmed his suspicion. In the photo she was holding up a wooden mug with the words "Abigail's Cocoa. Hands off!" carved into the side. In the background was an old Dominican man flashing a toothless grin.

He spent the next hour looking through the album. For the life of him he was unable to reconcile the woman he saw in these photos, who seemed so full of joy and life and laughter, with death. With suicide.

At five to ten he looked up and saw the time. By now half the bottle of wine was gone and his mind was heavy. He had spent the last three hours immersed in the photographic life of Abigail, the woman who he replaced. But Abigail who? He hadn't even learned her full name yet. After ten more minutes he gave himself permission to look for another ten minutes, but that was it. After that, bedtime. And at the end of that ten minutes, he gave himself permission for yet another ten. This was the pattern.

He opened Outlook and looked for saved email accounts. Soon he found what he was looking for. There was an inactive account under the name "abigail.bennett". He tried to open the account but it required a password and he had neither the focus nor the knowledge needed to crack it, unfortunately.

Unsuccessful with email he looked through the Documents folder and found several things of interest. The first were templates for Medical Power of Attorney and Financial Power of Attorney. The second was a PDF explaining the various stages of breast cancer. The last was

a text file called "expense.log", detailing specific expenses for hospital stays, doctor visits, and prescriptions. Did she have cancer? His first instinct was no. Perhaps her mother did. That seemed more plausible. But plausible did not satisfy his curiosity at this point and he kept looking.

Returning to the Pictures folder he next opened the subfolder named GrantBDayPartyAug2009. At once he recognized the location of the party as the Varsity. One of the photos had Abigail wearing one of their famous vintage hats. Grant must be the name of the boy, he supposed. From the number of candles on the cake he saw the boy was turning five. There were lots of photos of him opening presents, ripped paper, bows. Most of the gifts were Legos. A boy after his own heart. In the background of one of the group shots, he saw Abigail's mother. At least he thought it was her. In this photo she looked older, much older than she had during the cruise. She was thinner, her hair grayer, than she was before.

Seeing this family celebration brought up memories of his own family. Feelings he had suppressed for a long time now. He got up from the computer and went to the counter to pour another glass of wine. He also took a box of Cheez-Its from the cabinet. Then he returned to the desk, sat down, and did nothing. Ate. Drank. Remembered things. Things that had gone wrong in the past and because nobody had thought, or cared, to right them at the time, were now more or less permanent. These things troubled his heart.

Becoming estranged from his family and friends was not something he had planned for or even wanted. It had just happened, one small gesture at a time, not calling back his sister, not being there when his best friend asked his help to move some furniture. And then there was the Thanksgiving debacle, a final blowup that severed all communication for months. It wasn't that they never spoke at all, a phone call here, a random text there, but something had been lost, irrevocably. Something that didn't even have a proper name, a closeness, a sense of belonging, he wasn't sure. But now that it was gone he missed it terribly. The worst part was that he knew all he had to do was to reach out, to say forget this bullshit, please forgive me as I have forgiven you. All we have in this world is each other. A few brief moments of togetherness is all we have, before the end. It ain't worth it. All the bullshit in the world ain't worth it.

And yet every time he seriously considered picking up the phone, there was something inside him that pulled back, that didn't want to face the awkwardness and the bringing into light things that had long lived in darkness. He hated it. Everything about it. It suffocated him and more than anything else he longed to breathe freely again. But he just couldn't. Or wouldn't. And here he was.

At that moment there was a popup on the computer screen along with a chime, and he just about fell out of the chair.

"Jesus Fucking Christ."

One he had regained composure he clicked on the notification. It was a calendar reminder:

Write in Diary

His mind spun off in several directions. This was a turn. One, it meant Abigail's calendar was likely still linked to this computer somehow. So he'd be able to look through that if he wanted. And two, even more interesting, she kept a diary.

With this news he snapped back to focus and began scouring the filesystem for anything that remotely looked like a diary. He went through the Documents folder, looked through Downloads, and for completeness sake Pictures, Movies, and App Data. But there was nothing. Then he went through the list of applications and opened Word, Notepad, TextEdit, basically anything one could use to write a diary. Still nothing.

At one in the morning he closed the laptop, defeated for now, too tired to process anything else tonight. He put the bottle of wine in the fridge, placed his dishes in the sink, and went straight to bed, collapsing on the mattress on the floor, the bed frame still leaning against the wall.

In his dreams that night he visited his sister in Nashville. His brother was also there. In reality they had not seen each other or even spoken since the Christmas before last. All of them are in his

Jeep driving to a concert in the park downtown. But by the time they arrived they had all become children again, and were not in the Jeep but on bicycles. They entered the park and walked their bikes up a grassy hill in the middle of the park. On top was a vista that overlooked the entire city. He recognized the Batman building.

"Let's have a race," his sister said, "Whoever wins get the prize!"

They all agreed, and since he was the oldest he let his siblings have a three-second head start. His sister mounted her purple bike with yellow streamers coming off the handlebars. His brother mounted his cool, gray BMX. And he mounted a yellow mountain bike with a muddy frame and tires.

They took off. Even with the head start he was much too fast. By the halfway point he had overtaken them both. Pedaling as fast as he could he fixed his eyes on the finish line at the bottom of the hill. Yet, to his horror he saw a creature the size of a dinosaur, with arms like the branches of a willow tree. The spindly limbs floated like grass underwater. His heart sank. Immediately he ditched his bike on the ground and rolled to a stop. His brother and sister passed by, still headed downhill, and seemingly unaware of the creature that awaited them. He was overcome by guilt, a sense of responsibility for their well-being, and the knowledge they were going to die.

Awake in bed. In his room. In his apartment. In the city. The weight of his isolation in this silent and unfamiliar place at last bore down on him. He felt the burden like an immense boulder of granite: on his shoulders, behind his eyes, and even in his heart. He was sick in his heart, and utterly alone.

Three

A week passed. During that time he settled into a workable routine, awake at seven, on the road by seven thirty, office by eight fifteen, coffee while checking mail until eight thirty, daily standup at nine, work until lunchtime, lunch at the cafeteria, work until five, evening commute, home by seven, dinner, tv, movie, or game, then bed. Repeat.

The commute was bad. No doubt. But he was willing to suffer it for now. Maybe once he had some recent experience on his resume he might look for something closer to his apartment. But, he liked the people here and the work was challenging so far. He had deep dived into the existing build scripts and now understood them far better than Chen or anyone else on the Build team. Now that he had a good grasp on the current system he was hard at work devising a strategy to get the builds onto a server in the cloud and off his development machine.

Today was an important day. After work there was going to be an all-hands status meeting in the large conference room on the first floor. Each development team was to give a brief presentation on their recent accomplishments. Everyone would be there. CEO, CTO, CFO, all the C-Level folks. Representatives from HR, Sales, and Marketing. And of course, all of development. About seventy-five to a hundred people, give or take. It was also important because it would be his first presentation at the company. Chen asked him to give one, since his

work automating the build process was the most exciting thing the Build group had done this quarter. And it directly impacted the other development teams. So they would appreciate the update. He had never done a real presentation before and had spent the evening prior putting together PowerPoint slides, with lots of fancy graphs and animations. When he showed Chen and the others the final presentation they gave him high fives and said it was going to be a grand slam. He hoped so.

The conference room was jammed with people. There was no more room at the large table or any seats left around the edge of the room. Everyone who arrived later had to stand. Chen, anticipating the crowd, had gotten Crystal and Steve to go down early and save seats for them all. So the Build team got prime seats at the table.

When it came time for him to give the presentation he rose and introduced himself as a new member of the Build team. Not many knew who he was, having started so recently, but he saw a lot of friendly and encouraging faces in the crowd, and that gave him a boost of confidence.

"So, I wanted to show you guys some of the progress I've made since joining the Build team last week. If you look at this chart, you can see our QA build and deployment processes have been averaging an hour up to almost two hours, ever since Project Fusion got off the ground back in late 2009."

He paused for dramatic effect.

"That sucks."

The room erupted in laughter. He waited patiently for the attention to return to him, then resumed just as he had rehearsed in the mirror over the last two days.

"What I've been working on, with Chen's expert guidance, over the past week, is taking the excellent scripts Abigail Bennett created and modifying them for deployment to our cloud TFS Build servers."

At the mention of Abigail he saw Chen give him a frown and noticed some of good vibes in the room turned sour. A lot of stern or otherwise downcast faces. It was like nobody wanted to acknowledge she ever existed.

"Skipping a lot of technical mumbo-jumbo, the upshot is we've decreased QA build and deployment times by 60%. The average build time is now 37 minutes. And we think we are able to get that down even more, with some clever artifact caching techniques."

The room erupted again, this time in applause. Chen stood up and clapped. After the room quieted down again he went through a few more slides, showing how this improvement would speed up the entire development, QA pipeline. And then he thanked the crowd and sat down next to Chen, who clasped him on the shoulder like a brother.

The presentation lasted another hour. Afterwards, the CEO gave a motivational speech to the group and closed his speech by saying there was a catered buffet and open bar waiting in the meeting room next door. Everyone clapped and then rose to their feet in unison.

At the buffet table he dished a plate of roast beef, asparagus, and mashed potatoes and then grabbed a Dos Equis from the bar. He sat down at table with the rest of the Build group and they congratulated him on both the presentation and the progress he had made in such a short period of time.

Fifteen minutes later the CEO came up to the table and also congratulated the team on their progress. Then he turned to Will and extended his hand.

"Pence Kenton. So glad to finally meet you. We're super impressed with the work you've done so far, Will, and are so excited to have you on board."

"Thank you, Pence," he said, "I'm glad to be here."

Pence scanned the table, nodding to Chen, Steve, Crystal, and Byron in quick succession.

"Last year was difficult," Pence said, "But through the our hard work we got through it and look at us now. Guys there's a lot of positive things on the horizon. We got this!"

Pence left and Byron remarked that he always sounds like he is giving a keynote. Everyone laughed.

After dinner the people went home, very full and a little drunk, and for some it was the other way around. But Will stuck around, not feeling like the drive home just yet, still too wound up from the success of his presentation.

He ordered a double whisky from the bar and went upstairs, his intention to tackle a bug in the code that had been nagging him all day long. Anyway, he liked the office at night. The vast empty cubicles. The dim lighting, providing just enough illumination to find your cubicle, or the exit. The quiet hum of computers. The lack of voices. It was a fine time to get things done.

Sat at his desk, he opened the script that had been giving him trouble and retraced the logic to the place where he was stumped. The complexity of the code made his brain feel like mashed potatoes. He leaned back in the chair and rubbed both eyes with his hands. His vision was blurry from both the lateness of the hour and the alcohol in his bloodstream. Maybe it was not a fine time after all.

He thought about Abigail. So far he had not learned much more about her than he had on the evening of his first day at work. It had become something of an obsession. A game of detective he played whenever work was slow or in the evenings when he was putting off the unpacking that remained to do. Calling it a game was a bit of a misnomer. His curiosity was sincere. He wanted to learn more about who she was. This person who died, whose ghost now haunted him because of who he was, the person who had replaced her.

Besides the photo albums and documents on the computer he was able to view her calendar entries. Each night at midnight the same notification popped up on the screen, just as it had the first night: Write in Diary.

The thing was, the thing that really tantalized him, tormented him really, there was no diary on the laptop. Not that he could find. He had scoured the system from bios to browser, and found nothing. Therefore he concluded that if there actually was a diary, and he had no reason to think otherwise, it was either on some other computer, her home computer maybe. Or else not on a computer at all. Both of those possibilities led him to a very bad idea. One he had conceived, developed, and abandoned three times already. Was it though? A very bad idea?

It was. But it was not enough to stop him from opening the company directory on the intranet, searching for the name "Bennett, Abigail" and clicking the avatar to open her profile card, containing contact information such as email address and phone number, birthday (December 5th, 1981), hobbies (crochet, reading, and traveling), and lastly her home address. This was not new information. The difference this time was that he jotted down the address on a Post-It note next to his monitor, and then folded the note and placed the note in his pocket.

Then he sat there. Not looking at anything. Contemplating. Minutes went by. Then he came to life again, turned off the computer and monitor, made his way downstairs, into the parking lot, warmed up the Jeep, drove out of the technology park, and turned onto 400 south. The highway traffic was sparse. He made good time all the way to Exit 16. About half what it normally took. He watched the green sign for Exit 16 blur past and then refocused his attention on the road ahead, the

lane markers reflecting his headlights, the tall road lights bathing the highway in an amber glow, the oncoming traffic, he watched it all and tuned everything else out, including any thoughts that might object to whatever he was doing. And it would not be entirely incorrect to say he did not know what he was doing. Right now inside him there were two very different people, fighting.

At Holcomb Bridge he drove past the movie theater where they played arthouse and foreign movies and the second location of the Varsity, which had recently shut down. He stopped at a traffic light next to an Adult Bookstore. He looked inside and saw a couple browsing erotic accessories. When the light turned green he went left and entered Morningside, a neighborhood he was somewhat familiar as he had dated a girl whose family lived there in what was to him a mansion. They used to walk to the Ansley Park and make fun of the speedwalkers as they sped-walked. That was a long time ago.

As he drove through the neighborhood he pulled out the Post-It from his pocket and looked at the address, having to wait until he passed under a streetlight and slowing down to a crawl to be able to read it. He was not too far away. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that this was an experiment. That was all. It was an exploratory experiment and he was not breaking any laws or doing anything wrong. If it turned out the address where Abigail had lived was occupied, well good, he would have satisfied his curiosity and could then drive home in peace. And nobody ever had to know.

The road narrowed and he went up a hill and turned onto Songbird Lane and slowed down to five miles per hour. He crept along and read the numbers on the mailboxes and oriented himself as to which side of the road he needed to be looking and how far until he reached the address. When he got very near he pulled to the curb and switched off his headlights. There was no streetlight on this block. It was dark except for dim window lights from the surrounding homes.

It was then that he had a sudden flash of clarity and was taken out of his own head and saw himself as if from above, in the Jeep, on the dark street of a neighborhood of a woman who had killed herself, and realized just how irrational this was. He blamed it on the alcohol from the office dinner added to the sheer exhaustion from overworking himself the past week. He was convincing in his logic. He nearly convinced himself.

He was on the sidewalk. He stayed low. The last thing he wanted was to be seen. As he approached the address he saw the number 19002 on the side of the house. But the thing was, her address was actually 19002C. He had deduced beforehand that meant this was an apartment of some kind. But looking at the house at the address, a turn-of-the-century bungalow with red brick and white trim, it did not seem to be one. He supposed it could be subdivided. It was certainly big enough. Two-stories. But where was C? Looking closer he noticed a black letter box below the house number. On it was a golden letter A.

If the front-most apartment was A then it stood to reason C would be around the back. He hesitated and looked in the windows of the house. It was dark inside. There were no cars in the driveway. Returning to A mailbox he noticed junk mail and bills poking out of the top. It was very possible that if someone did live here they were not here now. Still, that did not mean apartment C was unoccupied. He took a deep breath and stepped onto the driveway which led behind the house.

He could see nothing at all. In the silence he could hear a gentle wind blowing through the branches of the trees overhead. But that was all. In the sky he saw a canopy of stars. There was no moon. After a minute or two his eyes grew acclimated to the darkness and he made out indistinct shapes and silhouettes. But he saw no cars. And no lights in the windows either. He decided to take a chance and switched on his phone flashlight, illuminating a small arc in front of him. At the edge of the arc he saw the back of the house and an enclosed veranda with white siding.

There was a door. And beside the door another black mailbox with a golden letter C.

Approaching the door a question posed itself to him, Can a person do things like this? What he wanted was a voice of reason to reassure him, and so there was. "Of course not", the voice said, "Don't be silly. There are laws prohibiting such behavior. Laws protecting the safety of the citizens." But there was another voice, not of reason,

or perhaps reason of a different kind. It spoke to him in a whisper, saying that as long as nobody found out, a person could do things like this, sure. And even worse things, if need be.

The door was locked. Next to the door was a terra cotta planter. He lifted the base of the planter and found the key. Then he used the key to unlock the door and went inside, his heart pounding in his chest.

The first thing he noticed was the stale air, cold and mildewy. He was not stupid enough to turn on any lights and instead used the flashlight on his phone. That was enough, though the complete darkness outside the arc of light filled him with an unbearable fear. He saw that he was standing in an anteroom next to a coat rack with a pink puffy jacket and a black beanie hanging on it. There was a hallway to his right.

He continued down the hallway and entered an open space, the living room. It was small, with a couch in the middle, a television on a stand along the opposing wall, and a small dining table in the corner, next to a door he guessed led to the kitchen. There were pictures on the wall. He shone the beam onto them and saw photos of Abigail and her mother, one he noticed from the cruise photo album. In others there were people he didn't recognize.

Next he entered the main bedroom. It was nearly the same size as the living room, with a small roll-top desk in the corner, a queen bed against the adjacent wall, several pictures on the wall. In a corner he saw a wicker basket with yarn of all colors and various crochet

supplies. On the bed he saw an old Cabbage Patch doll. Along the far wall was a closet with a sliding wooden door. It was shut. Something about the door intrigued him. He slid the door open and inside, hanging by a cord from her neck, was the decomposed body of Abigail Bennett. Her skin had peeled away and all the muscle, bone, sinew, and viscera was spiraling inward on itself, perpetually, as if her body had been caught in the gravitational vortex of a black hole.

He stumbled backwards and fell. The phone slipped from his hand, but it no longer mattered since the entire room and all its contents was burned like embers, a pulsating orange-red glow from within. But he hardly noticed. He could not keep from staring at the body in the closet. He saw the eyes of the body staring at him. Her eyes were black and utterly soulless. A painful cry, shrill and insane, and with no certain origin, filled the room. He covered his ears. One of her arms lifted and pointed across the room. He turned and saw it was pointing at the desk in the corner, which like everything else in the room was radiating from an inner flame. Then the desk burst into actual flames, blue in color, a pillar of which ran up the nearest wall and spread across the ceiling and down every other wall of the bedroom, enclosing him within.

Four

The clock on the microwave read 3:17 a.m. He filled a glass of water from the sink and sat in the dining room chair and drank, his mouth and throat parched, as if he had crawled across a desert. The apartment was not completely dark, as light from the lamps along the BeltLine filtered through the blinds and turned all his possessions a dim gray color. He sat and reflected. It had been years since a nightmare had disturbed him quite like this one. Maybe not since he was a child. Disturbed was not even the right word. The dream had absolutely terrified him. In fact he was still trembling, fifteen minutes later. But it wasn't so much the imagery of the dream that terrified him as much as the feeling it had given him, a feeling he would describe as malevolence without remorse.

It was then he realized just how much this woman, or her memory, had gotten into his head over the past week. It had only been a week for God's sake! He knew it was wrong. Maybe this was his conscience finally catching up to him. To pry into the life of a stranger like that, especially one who was dead. He knew better. He was better than that. He should have destroyed the photo albums, the documents, and then deleted her account from the calendar. Day one he should have done that. Yet even now he found himself thinking about the events of the dream. It had been so real. Every detail of it. And without realizing it his mind was going to that place again, wondering what

her apartment was really like. If anyone lived there now. And the question that had been driving his curiosity all week, Where was the diary?

He went into the bathroom, flipped on the light, and washed his face in the sink. After drying off with a hand towel he looked at his reflection in the mirror and noticed a half-open cabinet door in the corner behind him, dark inside. He became irrationally afraid of that small opening and walked over and shut it. Jesus Will, what the fuck is wrong with you, he thought. He needed to get back to bed, sleep it off. In four more hours he'd be headed to the office. There was no chance of him getting a full night rest now, but some was better than none, and with that he returned to the bedroom, got in bed, and pulled the blanket over his head.

It was no use. He lay there for five minutes, his mind spinning. Once he had read in a book on productivity that if you can't sleep then get up and do something until you are tired, instead of wasting time counting sheep. He knew that was probably bullshit advice. Still, he climbed out of bed and went back into the living room, this time sitting down at his work laptop, which sat on the desk.

He turned on the computer and opened the Pictures folder. He selected all the photo albums and then dragged them as a group to the recycle bin on his desktop. He then opened the Documents folder and dragged every one of those files to the recycle bin too. Next, he went into the Calendar application and deleted Abigail's account and made

sure all entries had been erased -- past, present, and future. Lastly, out of habit, he opened his email client and marked all his unread mail as read. One of the recent emails was from BambooHR, the software his company used for the company intranet. It was spam, marketing some new feature, a desperate attempt to increase user engagement. Whatever.

He clicked on the link in the email that opened the site in his browser. He was already logged in and sat staring at the intranet dashboard without really seeing it. Then he clicked on the icon for the company directory. He was interested to see if there really was an entry for Abigail. They had probably removed it as part of the process. There are processes. There have to be. Things in reality are more complicated than they are in dreams. They have to be. He typed Bennett, Abigail into the box and clicked the search button. One result came back.

Her profile looked much as it had in the dream: email, phone number, birthday (January 26th, 1983), hobbies (scrapbooking, movies, and hiking), and home address. All the same.

This was unexpected. He re-read her address, 20091C Birdsong Lane, and confirmed that it was the same address he had visited in his dream. He reached for an explanation and the only one his brain could conjure was that possibly he had seen it while scanning her personal documents.

Fuck it. Just fuck it. Life's too short not to live it, man.

Sometimes you got to take chances. Do you want to get to the end of your life and have regrets for the chances in life you didn't take? Thought so. These are the things he repeated over the next fifteen minutes while he put on his clothes, printed out driving directions, grabbed a flashlight and a chef's knife, and headed out the door.

Traffic was non-existent. Like traveling through an abandoned city. He could change lanes at will. Drive between the lines if he wanted. His mood was strangely euphoric. Perhaps deciding to go through with it had given him a burst of adrenaline. Whatever it was he felt good. And no longer terrified.

In the neighborhood things looked much as they had in the dream. Empty streets surrounded by trees, few street lights, turn-of-the-century bungalow houses, many of them red-bricked. He drove slowly, creeping really, the overhead light switched on to read the directions. A car with its brights on turned onto the road and came up behind him very close. Then it got frustrated at how slow he was going and jerked the car around him in the other lane. He watched the red tail lights disappear over a hill.

He came to Birdsong and turned onto the road. Strangely though, the street was on his right, whereas he was sure he had turned left in his dream. He slowed even more and pulled to the curb when he saw a house number that was close. He was disoriented.

On the one hand things did look much the same as he had dreamed them. Which was odd and were he in a less euphoric mood that fact alone may have given him pause. But as it was he was merely disoriented, because everything seemed backwards. He had turned right. The odd and even house numbers were also on different sides of the street. Still, he was here and could still find where he wanted to go.

The big question on his mind right now was whether the apartment was occupied. It could be one of those complications of reality that would put a quick end to these shenanigans. He approached house number 20091. There was a street light across the road, which was both a good thing and a bad thing. He got as close as he could and watched the windows of the house. They were as dark as in his dream. He also saw no cars in the driveway, though he couldn't be sure there wasn't one further in the back.

This was enough to convince him to go further. Every once in awhile he would have a moment of clarity about what was going on and what he was doing and would freak out a little bit. What am I doing here? he thought. And then, You are crazy to do this. You could go to jail. But it soon passed. He pulled out the small flashlight and the knife and carried the flashlight in his left hand, the knife in his right. That felt the most comfortable should he have to use it, God forbid.

He slunk along the hedgerow that ran alongside the sidewalk and then crouched up the driveway, all the way around back. It was only once he reached the back of the house that he realized he was taking for

granted the layout of things. There was no reason to expect her apartment would be in the back. And yet, he discovered, it was.

Again things were backwards. The driveway was on the far side of the apartment and consequently the door to 20091C was on the left. There was a terra cotta vase and underneath it was a key. Since there didn't appear to be anyone home, or really living there at all, just based on the condition of the place. There was a steady carpet of leaves covering the porch.

He unlocked the door, replaced the key under the vase, and let himself inside. It had that same stale smell as he experienced in the dream. There was the anteroom with a coat rack, upon which hung a baby blue puffy jacket and a black beanie. There was a hallway to the left. He took the hallway, shining his flashlight in front of him. It opened into the living room, with the same couch. The same pictures on the walls.

By now he noticed his breathing had grown more rapid. There was a tension in his throat and behind his eyes. The more things were the same the more disturbed he was. And things were the same, to a degree that horrified him the more he examined it. His brain could conjure no logic to explain this. But it was reality, undeniably, and therefore he accepted it.

He entered the bedroom, sweeping the flashlight across the room before he actually stepped inside. In the corner was the roll-top desk. Next to it a basket with crochet equipment. On the bed was the

cabbage patch doll. All the same. His heart was pounding so violently he could hear it. On the far wall was the closet. He stopped and looked at it.

He knew he was going to look inside. And so one foot moved towards it. Then another. And before long he was standing within reach of it. Then without giving it another thought he reached out and slid the door open.

Nothing.

It was a closet. There were some clothes hung there. Some board games on the upper shelf, along with shoeboxes. But no body. No horrible vision. He recalled her pointing finger and turned and looked at the desk in the corner. It was not lit from within like an ember. It was just an old, wooden desk. He walked over to it and tried the roll-top. It pushed open. The desktop was messy, with pens and papers. He noticed seams in the wood and lifted the lip of the desktop. It raised to reveal a storage cubby. Inside he saw a composition notebook with a black and white patterned cover. On the front of the notebook, in the space provided to write your name, were the words: Abigail's Diary.

Back in his apartment he noticed it was almost six in the morning. Outside the first bands of dawn were appearing on the horizon. Traffic was picking up. In a couple hours he would head to work. But right now there was only one thing on his mind. He set the diary on the edge of

the couch and made some coffee. Then he sat on the couch, switched on the lamp, and opened the diary to the first page.

Five

April 9

Mentioned to Dr. Patel that I once kept a diary in high school. He liked that idea. He said it could be therapeutic, writing my thoughts and feelings down on paper. So this is me starting a diary. Woohoo. Still not sure about it and I don't really feel like delving into the abyss right this second, but I wanted to write something at least so I can tell him I'm doing it.

April 10

Today I was pulling out of the Hobby Lobby parking lot, waiting at the red light, and suddenly right in front of me a Honda turning against traffic was t-boned by a pickup truck with a rebel flag in the back window. I mean right in front of me. The windshield of the Honda shattered, the airbag deployed, the woman inside tossed like a rag doll. It happened in slow motion. The shattered glass falling onto the road. The man in the pickup holding his bleeding head. In the aftermath I felt a responsibility. Like these strangers well-being were in my hands. But I was in line at a traffic light. Cars were behind me. The light turned green and I turned wide to avoid the wreckage, drove around the wreckage, and came back home. Did I do

something wrong? I can't stop thinking about it. One part of me says no but another part of me says the other part is wrong. I was taught by you that you ought to help people, and I believe that, truly I do. But today I failed to help those people and I know the guilt I am feeling is my conscience. I can rationalize it away all I want and assure myself it was more logical for me to get out of the way, that it might have caused more issues if I had stopped to help. What bullshit. I should have done something. Called 911. Something. But I didn't do a thing. I know I'll remember this day fifty years from now, when I'm old and senile. Maybe on my death bed I'll remember this day and still feel this pang of regret for not acting. If you were still alive I would tell you about it and you would tell me not to worry and then hug me to sleep.

April 16

The antidepressant is starting to work. Dr. Patel said it might take up to two weeks to get the full benefit, and so far it's only been a week. Anyway, I'm finding it easier to sleep at night so that's good.

At our appointment I mentioned I started this diary. He was glad. He asked what I had written about so far and I told him about the accident at the Hobby Lobby. How it made me feel a lot of guilt. He reassured me and told me that what I felt was very common and nothing

to worry about at all. It even has a name, the Bystander Effect. He said perhaps I could have pulled over to call the police or to check on them, but that what I did was also a perfectly acceptable reaction. Weirdly, just him saying that made me feel so much better. It lifted a weight I had been carrying around all week long. Words truly have the power to heal. It's easy to forget that. But it makes me appreciate this diary and the potential it has to help me.

Dr. Patel asked me to jot down some good memories about my mother. He said "it doesn't have to be all bad feelings, you know" and laughed a bit. I told him I would do that. Just not today. Tomorrow.

April 17

3:32 a.m. I woke up feeling like my brain was being electrocuted. Like a zapping sensation. I hope it's normal and that everything's all right. I will call Dr. Patel's office in the morning. I tried going back to sleep but I just tossed and turned. Thinking about you. It went downhill from there. Like a car without brakes. My mind returned to the accident at the Hobby Lobby. I replayed the the event over and over again. The guilt I had felt before returned. I tried to calm myself down and reminded myself about the Bystander Effect and how it was perfectly normal, but there was a voice inside me saying that was a lie and that every man and every woman on this Earth was responsible

for every other man and every other woman and that furthermore what we call goodness is in reality not goodness at all but selfishness at the core and that selfishness and not goodness is the life force of the universe and what I did at the Hobby Lobby was only proof of that cosmic reality. No matter what I did I couldn't silence the voice. And I did try. I prayed for it to stop. But the words curled themselves around my mind like a constrictor. I was unable to escape the strength of those words and I was suffocating.

What is the matter with me? Why can't I get over this? I know it takes time and that in some way you never truly get over it. But I need peace. I need a little peace right now. I can't take much more. It's been over a month. You know what I realized the other day? I used to be the one people came to with their troubles. I used to be a source of strength and support for others, and now look at me. Every day I feel like I'm on the verge of collapse. Going to the Post Office sends me over the edge. Shopping for groceries overwhelms me to the point of tears. How will I ever return to work? Or go out with friends? Or get married? Have kids of my own? I am a broken human being. I truly am. I don't know what to do.

April 19

Dr. Patel says the brain zaps are normal and should subside in time. Headaches are also normal. So is lethargy and lack of appetite, apparently. Look at me everybody, all normal over here.

April 20

Nobody prepares you for it and I think know why. Because to talk about it is to face it and that can't happen. We live as if the life we're living at this moment will never end and that the people who populate our lives will never die. It's not true, but it's the only way we can get out of bed everyday and open the curtains to let the sun shine into the room. The thing is, you were my sun. The point around which my life revolved, without me realizing it. You were that all my life. And now that you are gone I am driftless, isolated, alone. In darkness.

April 21

Today I was rummaging through the closet, going through some old boxes, and found the doll you got for Christmas of 1985. I had wanted a Cabbage Patch Kid, a preemie with blonde hair. But is was a

knock-off. I'm not even sure it has a name. Budget brand. But it does have blonde hair. Anyway, I remember how excited you were when I was opening the box underneath the tree, down on the carpet with me, positively bursting with anticipation. And then seeing your heart break every so slightly when I hated it because it wasn't a real Cabbage Patch Kid. I remember you trying to console me, explaining how the dolls had all been sold out and people were selling them on the sidewalks for a hundred dollars or more and you just couldn't afford that right now. But I was nine. I didn't want excuses. I wanted the damn doll! I kicked and screamed and threw the doll into the trash can, like an ungrateful brat. I remember that very clearly. But you must have kept it all those years, hidden away, because it's sitting right here next to me. And it always will. What I wouldn't give to go back in time and do it all over again. I would be so grateful for the doll and hug you and tell you how much I love you. The truth is I'd rather have this cheap knock-off doll from you more than a hundred real Cabbage Patch Kid dolls. I will cherish it forever.

I think about the doll and I think about all those times I took you for granted. I keep going back to one particular evening we spent at home, after an early dinner at the Golden Corral. You were on the couch playing Candy Crush on the iPad. I was in my room on Facebook or YouTube, wasting time. And I take myself back to that evening and I ask myself, why didn't you talk to her? I could have asked about your

day. We could have talked about the really important things in life. The things people never talk about for some reason. Like, were you happy? What was the biggest regret of your life? What were your hopes for the future? I don't know the answer to any of those questions and I would give anything to have another chance to ask you them. But that can never be.

I suppose it comes down to this. You were a precious being, a unique source of light in the world, a soul. To me you were all those things. But somewhere along the way I forgot your true nature. I forgot who you really were. I took your light for granted and regret so much that I did. It breaks my heart. It makes me cry. I'll regret it for the rest of my life. I'm sorry.

April 26

Today I went shopping. I bought a new outfit for work on Monday, a pair of khaki chinos and a mint green seersucker shirt. Debating these cute loafers too. We'll see. Since I left work last month I've lost ten pounds. When I saw how the pants fit in the mirror, I thought damn Abigail, you still got it girl!

I haven't updated this diary in awhile. But you know, it does me good. And I want to keep it going. I have not been in a good place the last

couple weeks. I have to admit. When I look back at the previous entries I cringe a little. But it's okay. Like Dr. Patel said, I'm going to have ups and downs. But things are getting better. The antidepressant has really started to work its magic. I've slept really well at night and just getting a full night sleep makes all the difference. It almost works too well. I feel like I could fall asleep anytime I want. But that's okay. Better than the alternative.

Yesterday I had a real moment of joy. The first I can really remember having since before you got sick. I went for a walk at Piedmont Park. The weather was warm and clear. The sun was shining. So many colors. The sky was an intense blue. The trees and grass were vibrant green. The flowers around the pond all shades of pink, purple, and yellow. Families and couples were spread out on blankets all over the hill. So many dogs. I saw an adorable Beagle puppy. He was perfect, like a painting. One day I'll have my own. Believe! But my moment. It happened in the middle of all this. In the middle of the park. All the people around me. I was alone but I didn't feel alone. Everywhere I looked were smiles and laughter. A little boy on a bicycle waved at me and I waved back. I stopped at a food truck on the corner and got a couple fish tacos and a beer. And I sat on the curb and ate my tacos and people-watched and for the first time in a really long time I was just, happy. I was.

April 28

Wow, what a day. I did it though. They can't take that away from me. Chen and the others were very kind and considerate. Tammy came to my desk and shook my hand and said "Welcome back, kiddo." Nobody pried into my absence, which I still haven't explained. I don't know. I just don't feel comfortable talking about it right now. Maybe in time.

I found out they had been using my laptop for builds, since my scripts were still there and not on the build servers. That had totally slipped my mind, with everything else going on, and I apologized profusely. They didn't give me a hard time about it or anything. But I guess I know what I'll be working on this week!

At lunch they took me out to PF Chang's. I got the Singapore Street Noodles. Too good!

In the afternoon the entire Build team met with the leads of QA and Development and talked about what we could do to improve build and deployment times, since the project has been falling behind schedule. I have to be honest, I tuned out a little. There were a couple glances my way, polite smiles.

The whole day I get the feeling that nobody knew quite what to say to me. I guess that's my fault for not talking about my absence. For all they know I could have been in a methadone clinic this whole time. I just want things to get back to normal as soon as possible.

All in all, it felt good to be back at work.

April 29

Didn't sleep so well last night. Commute sucked. Today I just kept my head down and re-familiarized myself with the build scripts. The ones I wrote! Funny how that happens. Not much to write about. Pretty normal day.

April 30

Got into it today with Byron. He can be such a smug asshole, I swear. I get tired of the way he invalidates any idea that comes from me or Crystal. You can tell he's the type of man that doesn't think women

belong in development roles. And Chen doesn't immediately put a stop to it either. If it doesn't get better soon I'll file a complaint with HR, or go to Pence. It's like every idea we come up with is automatically assumed to be bad, he contradicts us on some stupid technicality, and then we have to convince him otherwise. We're not seen as equals. It never happens with anybody else on our team either. I've noticed that. Only me and sometimes Crystal, whenever she speaks up in meetings, which is not often. I don't know, she's not the kind to make waves. I need to talk with her about it.

Maybe I'm overreacting. After everything, I feel a change in myself. I feel like I can't deal with bullshit anymore, not at all, sometimes to a degree where I wonder if I'm coming across as hostile. But I'm totally not when it comes to Byron. I would like to smack that fucking grin off his face sometimes.

After work I met up with Rebecca at The Brickstore. We had some drinks and some appetizers. I apologized for not being in touch. She asked how I was doing. I said fine. We made plans to go out Saturday. Not really sure I'm up for that, but she insisted. It would probably be good for me.

As we were leaving she asked how Melanie was holding up. I told her I hadn't spoken with Melanie since the funeral. She seemed surprised. I

never hear from her unless I reach out and I just haven't had the energy. Plus she's so tied up with her own family.

May 1

Another sleepless night. I don't understand it. For about a week it was working so well. Tomorrow I see Dr. Patel so I plan to ask him. Maybe he'll up my dosage. He did say that was a possibility, until we find an amount that works for me.

Work is fine. I'm getting a little heat to port these scripts out to our build servers. Mainly from Chen. I feel like he's probably getting heat from QA and Development. And then from Pence. So it goes.

At lunch I texted Melanie. She didn't text back until this evening. Said she missed me and that she was thinking about me, sissy. Then she sent me a recent pic of her and Grant. Why is it so hard to connect with her? She always keeps me at a distance. Has for years really. She does shit like this all the time, answering my texts very politely, but also not opening a channel for more communication. So it's hard to call her out on it without me looking like an insecure, crazy person. There needs to be a word for this. Wait, I've got one:

BULLSHIT

May 2

So my dosage of the antidepressant has been increased from 10mg to 20mg. We'll see if that's going to help. Dr. Patel is sure that it will. I could use a good night sleep. Today I brought in my diary, at his request, and he asked me to read a few entries to him. I jumped in with both feet and read him some of the more emotional ones. He nodded and gave me a warm smile. I asked him if he thought I was crazy. He said absolutely not. Then he asked me to read him the happy memory of you, the one he asked me to write down a few weeks ago. I told him I never did it. He frowned and then asked me to give it a try. For real this time, he said. I told him I would. So this is me writing a happy memory.

We used to live in Adairsville in a tiny trailer. This was after dad had left us. How old was I then? Seven? No more than that. I remember sitting on your lap and you holding me cheek to cheek. You sat like that for awhile, eyes shut, not speaking, just holding me. Then you asked me what I was feeling. "Warm", I said, not understanding. Then you asked me if I knew what that warmth was. I said no, and you said, "That's love." Then I asked if daddy had broken our hearts and you said yes he had.

But that's not my happy memory.

It was late summer. One of those late summer evenings after the sun has dropped below the tree line and the air has cooled off a little and there is like a pink glow in the sky. The lightning bugs have come out and are flickering above the grass in the front yard. But we are inside the trailer. The front door is propped open with a cinder block. I am on the floor of the living room, lying on my side in front of a box fan near the door. I feel the rough, shag carpet on one side of my face. On the other side I feel a cool breeze from outside. You are in the kitchen, which is open to the living room. You are frying pork chops on the stove. Reba McEntire is singing on the radio and you are singing along with her and slowly dancing as you cook. My attention goes from you to the fan, where I am melting crayons against the spinning hub of the fan blades, and back to you again. In that moment I am overcome by a feeling I wasn't able to fully understand as a seven year old girl, but do now I think, of home and unconditional love but most of all a deep faith in the goodness of all things.

Six

May 5

I'm not sure how to begin. I'm still trying to understand what happened to me. Things are very strange right now. But I need to get it down while it's still fresh in my mind. I feel like if I don't I might lose it altogether, like a dream that fades from memory after you wake up. But this was not a dream. You need to remember that, Abigail, if nothing else.

Let me go back to the beginning. Today is Monday. I barely slept all weekend. The antidepressant is not working and I don't know what to do. I tossed and turned. I thought about my mother. Needless to say I've been very tired, a little stressed, easily agitated. Overall not in the best of moods. Because of the way I was feeling I thought about calling in sick to work, but then I remembered there was a scheduled meeting with the QA and Dev leads, as well as Pence, to review the plan we've all agreed upon, come up with a timetable, all that jazz. And I needed to be there. Porting the build scripts to the build servers is a large part of this effort and I feel responsible. So I decided to go in at least until after the meeting, which was at 1.

So meeting. It was me, Chen, Steve, Crystal, and Byron and then Hannah from QA and Dave from Development. We had all sat down at the table with our coffees by the time Pence arrived. He apologized for being late and then asked Chen to start off with an overview, to get everyone on the same page. Chen did that and then we took a short break after Chen observed it may be helpful to have someone from Operations come in to get an idea about how long it's going to take to provision the new servers.

I don't know why I'm going into all this detail. I just want to make sure I don't leave anything out. I don't want to forget.

James from Operations arrives and he answers all Chen's questions about the servers. And then it comes time for me to walkthrough the new build scripts: what I've had to do in order for them to run on our build servers, which are isolated contexts, the authentication method I came up with, all that technical stuff. Well, the second I get into how I plan to use a token that never expires, to communicate from service to service mind you, and not anything client facing, Byron had to say something. I saw him shake his head and knew he was about to give me shit about the decision.

"Sorry, but that's not a good idea," he said, and then addressed the table, "You don't ever want to use non-expiring tokens. Remember,

these are cloud servers, not on-prem. If those servers are ever compromised, and a malicious actor gets access to those tokens, you got a real problem on your hands. At least from my experience."

It wasn't that he was wrong. It was the lecturing, condescending way he said it, not having the courtesy to even look my way. And any other day I would have nodded, agreed to another plan, and let it go. But with no sleep and because this wasn't the first time he's disrespected me like that, well, I lost it. I completely lost it.

"What the fuck is your problem with me, Byron?" I said, "Do you not think I know how to do my job? I don't go around telling you how to do your job."

The eyes of everyone at the table grew wide. All of a sudden it got very quiet in the room. Byron sat back in his chair and held up his hands.

"Hey, I'm just giving y'all my opinion. And I think it's pretty fucking dumb to use non-expiring tokens on a cloud server. And it is. Sorry if you don't want to hear about it."

I then stood up, told him to fuck off and to wipe that smug grin off his face or I'd do it for him, and walked out of the room, slamming

the door behind me. I stormed out back and sat on the bench next to the walking path, and I just cried. There was so much anger and frustration and tiredness all together. I couldn't handle it coming out like that, all at once. I was out of control. A few minutes later I got a text from Chen, "pls come see me" and then a moment later a follow up, "its okay".

I went to see Chen in his office, going the long way around so I didn't have to see the others. He asked me if I was okay and I said yes but that I was very tired. He told me I should just go home and get some rest and not to worry about anything. With him being so nice I started to feel bad and I apologized. He said it's okay, Abigail. We all have bad days. Get home and get some rest. We'll talk tomorrow.

It was after 3. I got into my car and drove, and drove, and drove. My mind was a blur. I couldn't focus on anything. Even when I looked at things I didn't really see them. It was like I was in a tunnel, disconnected from the objects around me. As I drove I thought about everything that had happened, all the times Byron had undermined me, and my anger swelled. I started cursing him out inside my car, saying hateful things, even violent things, to an imaginary version of him.

I drove into the city, not knowing where I was headed. It wasn't even a decision to drive into the city. I was following whatever road kept

me moving with the least amount of friction. If it was easier to turn left at this intersection, I turned left. If there was less traffic on that exit, I took it. Before I knew it I was in midtown. By now it was nearly 3:30 and the afternoon traffic was getting heavy. Still more turns and I found myself in a small residential neighborhood, with crooked sidewalks and narrow streets. A lot of trees. At a traffic light, on the corner, was a man.

He was dressed in a dark suit, shabby and ill-fitting. He wore a fedora with a tear on the brim. He saw me at the light and approached, waving at me from a distance, wanting to catch me before I drove off when the light turned green. When he reached the passenger window he motioned for me to roll it down, which I did, out of politeness. I was not afraid.

"Hey there, ma'am," he said, clearly nervous, "Please tell me you're going downtown. I could really use a ride."

He held up his hands as if in prayer. I noticed then that he was a black man, but his skin was white, his curly hair blonde. For a moment I considered telling him that I was going the other way, but I didn't. It had something to do with the way he was looking at me. He had these piercing blue eyes. He wasn't handsome. That's not what I mean. He looked as if he knew me, that he somehow understood me. And I guess

I'm in need of some understanding right now, because I unlocked the door and told him to get in.

By then the light had turned green but there was no traffic behind me. He got in and held out his hand. I shook it, feeling rough callouses on his palms. He told me I better get going before the light turned red, and so I did. I asked him where he was going and he said he was supposed to meet his brother at a barbecue joint up on Briarcliff. He spoke strangely, very ghetto but trying hard not to sound ghetto, if that makes sense. As if he wanted me to think he was more sophisticated than he was. I needed his help to find the place he wanted to go, so he pointed out turns and I followed them.

Writing this, it occurs to me just how crazy it seems. Why on Earth would I give a ride to a stranger like this? In a neighborhood I'm not familiar with. It's not something I would ever do, or have ever done before. I don't have an answer, except that in the moment it didn't feel unusual at all. It felt normal. And safe. And my state of mind at the time was such that I honestly didn't care if it wasn't.

He told me his name was Rabbit, like the bunny, and made his hands into two little paws tucked against his chest. He put out his front teeth and made a gnawing sound. Then he laughed. I told him my name and then he went into what I would describe as a rehearsed speech.

I'll paraphrase it here. It's hard to capture the exact language he used or the vaguely pretentious way he spoke, but I'll try.

"Well I just thought I should tell you my mama is in the hospital. Yes ma'am. She at Grady right this very second. She got cancer of the breast. Stage Four. Doctors say she only has a few weeks left in her. That's why I'm supposed to go meet up with my brother who be stayin in Kansas and he's gonna bring me the money so we can fly our sister down here from Wichita. You ever been to Wichita? That's where I be stayin when I'm not down here. You ever had Kansas City barbecue? Oh man you don't know what you're missing out on. Give me your address and I'll hook you up sometime, next time I'm up there."

The second he mentioned money I knew what was up. I may be a naive white girl from a small town, but I know when I'm being played for a fool. And he was playing me hard, or trying to anyway. As he rambled I just nodded as if everything he said made perfect sense. Even though it didn't. His story was full of these strange incongruities. The logic didn't quite add up. Like, why were we meeting his brother at a barbecue joint on Briarcliff in order to get money to fly his sister down from Kansas? Was his brother unable to buy the ticket himself? And why is his brother at a barbecue joint right now and why does he feel the need to bring up Kansas City barbecue in the middle of all of

this? And he wants my address to send me some the next time he's there? What?

But I humored him. I still don't know why. I let him act out this part he was playing and never let on that I didn't believe him. Every once in awhile I'd catch him crack a smile and momentarily reveal his hand. Still, I was not afraid of him. At no point did I feel in danger. But maybe I should have been.

We pulled into the parking lot of this small hole-in-the-wall, a little log cabin with an old, broken sign on the side reading "Manuel's BBQ". But this place looked like it hadn't been opened for years. He looked around and rolled down the window. He called out "Jimmy! Hey Jimmy!" several times. But there was nobody there. I could see that. This was all bullshit. He turned to me and said "I guess my brother done went back to the hospital. Think you could give me a ride over there? I'll give you fifteen bucks for gas."

For some reason I said yes. And I am really wondering why I wasn't more afraid in the moment, with this strange person in my car. He could have raped me. He could have strangled me. There was nobody else around. Jesus, I am not okay to be taking chances like this. This is a red flag, Abigail. You are not well. Maybe I am not well. I don't know. But it's the truth. What I did happened and what happened next

also happened. So I'm not sure what to do. All I can think to do for now is to write it down. It seems important.

I agreed to his offer and we got back on the road. He went off on another ramble, this time saying even stranger things than before. At least before they were a single train of thought. A con, but a single train of thought. Now he was speaking in non-sequiturs. Like, we passed a Thai noodle shop and he jammed his finger at it and said almost angrily, "You see that place there? That noodle place. Nobody goes there, I'm telling you. It's way too crowded." And then went on a tirade about how his mama used to force him to eat even when he wasn't hungry, "She used to tell me, Rabbit, son what's better than eternal happiness? Nuthin. But even a carrot is better than nuthin. So therefore a carrot is better than eternal happiness. Now eat dem carrots boy!" And he burst into laughter. He positively cackled, repeating the line, "Now eat dem carrots, boy!" a few times, for my benefit I guess. But when he saw I was looking at him like he was crazy person he collected himself a bit and said, "Don't pay me no mind, ma'am, don't pay me no mind. Sometimes my brain just got a mind of its own. You know what I'm sayin?"

A few moments of silence went by and then he started telling me the story again how his mama didn't have much time left. He repeated everything he had told me before, down to the phrasing: "She at Grady

right this very second. She got cancer of the breast. Stage Four." He repeated what he said about flying his sister down from Wichita, but this time left out the part about his brother. I tuned him out after awhile. We weren't far from Ponce de Leon, so I knew we were close to Grady Hospital. But then I caught what he was saying, "All we need is a few hundred dollars, that's all, and we can fly her down to be with her. Comfort her. She's my mama's only daughter, you know, and she's my sister's only mama."

He looked at me, expectant. It slowly dawned on me that he was asking for money. Just like I knew he would. But the weird thing is, now that he was asking, I don't know quite how to say this without sounding crazy. I wanted to give it to him. I really did. Just to see what would happen. It was like I was outside my own body, looking in through my eyes, but not really there. Not really in the car. This was a movie I was watching. And I wanted to see what was going to happen next in the movie. I spotted an ATM at a gas station and pulled in. My daily limit is \$500 so I got out that much, handing it to him when I got back into the car. "Bless you, ma'am," he said with a sincere smile, "This will mean so much to my family."

By now it was after 7 and the sun was dropping. We pulled onto Ponce and a few blocks later he pointed to a McDonald's on the left. The golden arches were brightly lit. He told me to pull into the parking

lot and drop him off. He said he'd get a ride to Grady from there. I didn't argue. I pulled into the turning lane, waited for an opening in the traffic, and turned into the lot. I came to a stop at the side door and asked him if this was okay. He opened the door and halfway stepped out, "This'll do just fine," He said, "Bless you, ma'am." And I looked him straight in the eyes and repeated his words back to him, "Bless you, Rabbit." He grinned at me and shut the door. Then he went inside and I lost track of him.

But I wasn't satisfied. I circled the lot and found a hidden spot near the garbage dumpster, where I could still see the door, and waited. Maybe fifteen minutes later he came out, carrying a sack and a drink. I sat up and kept an eye on him as he walked across the parking lot and went around back. Here I had a choice. I could have done nothing, driven home, and forgotten about the whole thing (minus 500 dollars), or I could see where he was going. And curiosity got the better of me, because I pulled out of the spot, turned off my headlights, and slowly crept along, doing whatever I could for him not to see me. When I got to an area where I could see better I stopped. I saw him standing near a fence, eating some fries and smoking a cigarette, the sack and drink on the ground next to him. He was alone. Once finished he tossed the box into the sack, ground his cigarette underfoot, and walked straight through a broken section of the fence behind him, into the woods.

That was bizarre. I have to admit. I was not expecting that. And here is the part I was dreading to write all along. Everything else was context, to methodically document my steps throughout the entire day, so that I know exactly what happened and when, in case it becomes important in the future. I'm afraid of what it means. For me. I'm afraid I won't be believed. But it happened, and right now that's the most important thing. Abigail, it did happen.

I followed him. I must have been temporarily insane, but I followed him into the woods. Just like in the car it was like I was watching a movie, through my own eyes. Of me seeing him disappear through the opening. Of me getting out of my car. Of me approaching the fence, noticing the sack and drink on the ground, the cigarette butt. What did I hope to find?

The woods were dim. The light that remained shone through the leaves and between the trees. There was a path that led to a clearing and I followed it. I went slowly, stepping as cautiously as I could over twigs and leaves on the ground, but otherwise quiet. The only sounds were the buzzing and chirping of insects, crickets, and in the distance, traffic. Rabbit was nowhere to be found. It was like he dropped off the face of the Earth. I can't say that I was very afraid, out there, though I know I should have been.

In the clearing I came upon the remains of an abandoned railroad track, mostly covered up with grass, rocks, and deadfall. It was rusty, the wood rotted. There were loose spikes all over the ground. I remember thinking that I should turn back. It was getting late and even if there were no rapists or murderers out here, I could get lost and not be able to find my way out again. I looked behind me and no longer saw the light from the McDonald's. From here I could hear no traffic either. It wouldn't take much to become disoriented. Using a few railroad spikes I crafted an arrow on the ground, pointing in the direction I had come from. Afterwards, I started to follow the tracks in the direction that seemed the easiest to traverse.

I walked for a long time. It felt like a long time. It's hard to say how long it was. And suddenly, between the branches of the trees in front of me, I saw bright lights. I came out behind a building of some kind. At first I thought it was a warehouse, having a loading dock, garbage bins, piles of cardboard boxes. But then I noticed stenciled words on the side of the sliding door near the covered ramp: Kroger Loading Area. Somehow I had hiked through the woods all the way from the McDonald's to the Kroger's on Ponce De Leon.

I was relieved and came back to my senses. I decided it would be much safer to go back using the sidewalks instead of through the woods like

a crazy person. But then, sitting on steps which led to a door, I saw Rabbit! He was smoking and didn't see me, thank goodness. By now it was pretty dark. I crouched behind a large electrical box and watched him. Then he stood up, ground out the cigarette, much like he had before, and went inside.

Because this was an operating business, and it was open, I felt somewhat emboldened. It occurred to me that I could even confront him about the BS story he had given me, the five hundred, assuming others were around. Did he work there? I still don't have an answer to that question, because when I eventually went inside myself, and I did, what I found was nothing like what I had expected.

It was a room. Not very big. Not very small. It was lit but the light source was not apparent, a diffuse light that filled the space entirely. There was nothing inside the room, that I could see, except for a man who was standing in the middle of it. He was an old man, with no hair, wrinkled skin, and threadbare clothes. When I entered he looked up, acknowledging my presence with a slight nod and a smile. Then he asked me a question I will never be able to forget.

"Where are you hurting, Abigail?"

He knew my name. He seemed to know everything about me, as I found out later. Not knowing how to answer his question I asked him a few questions of my own, like who he was, did he know Rabbit, and was he an employee of the Krogers? His answers were polite but succinct: "Nobody special", "Yes", and "No". Next I asked him what he was doing there, alone in this room, and he sighed and gave me the warmest smile I can remember. "I am waiting", he said, and then I asked him what he was waiting for and he replied, in a kind way, "For you".

Now you would think I would've been freaked out by all of this. You would think that, and yet I wasn't. It felt, totally normal. Somehow expected. When I looked at him I saw someone who understood me in a way I don't think I've ever been understood before, and for that reason I knew I had nothing to fear from him. He didn't seem to have any expectations of me. I was free to go if I wanted to. But I didn't. After some moments of silence, which passed without any of the typical awkwardness between strangers, he repeated the question he had asked when I first entered the room. This second time I really studied his expression. I was looking for any hint of insincerity or irony. It was such an earnest question to ask somebody you just met. But there was none. All I could see in his eyes was a tenderness I find very difficult to convey with words. I approached him and he opened his arms, and embraced me. He held me and I cried. I wept. And I didn't stop. It was the first time since my mother's death that I had felt

genuine compassion and human touch, and it shattered me completely. I let everything go. I told him everything that was going on in my life and he listened to every word, nodding, holding me tighter. But the strange thing was he already knew, every detail of it. Just like he knew my name. Then afterwards, I left out the same door, went down the steps, around the front of the Krogers, and followed the sidewalk back to my car in the parking lot of the McDonald's.

Now I am back at home, re-reading this entry, and questioning everything. But it happened. It did. I can't stop thinking about him. I still have many questions. But I think I do know a couple of things. The man lives in that room behind the Krogers on Ponce De Leon. He lives there, and he never leaves. Don't ask me how I know that. But I do.

Seven

He looked up from the composition book. The time on the clock was nine fifteen in the morning.

Within ten minutes he was in the Jeep weaving through traffic on his way to the office. Eyeballing the road, he sent Chen a quick text that he was on the way, and a few minutes later received a thumbs-up reply. The good thing was he missed the morning congestion and it only took him 30 minutes instead of the usual 45 to make it up Highway 400 to Exit 8. On the passenger seat was Abigail's diary. For some reason he didn't want to leave it behind.

The Jeep lurched into its regular parking spot at about 10:20. He shouldered his laptop bag and did a fast walk through the parking lot into the building. By the time he reached Conference Room C the daily standup meeting was nearly over. Pence was on the big screen TV, listening intently as Chen stood and explained some logistic hurdle regarding the cloud move. The others gave him a desultory glance and then returned to Chen. He yanked the computer from his bag and turned it on. Without missing a beat, Chen turned to him and asked if he had an update on the migration scripts they planned to use to convert the existing build system over to the new.

"Yep," he said, "I've got it pulled up right here. I'm happy to share my screen and run you guys through the process, just so we're all on the same page."

An hour later he was in his cubicle. He had been asked to focus on getting the migration scripts ready before the end of the day. Distracted, he was not sure he could realistically get it all done, but he already promised, and Chen was in the process of arranging folks from Operations to run the scripts this evening. Distracted? He was consumed. At no time during his mad commute to the office this morning, nor during the Build team meeting in Conference Room C, nor even now at his desk, was Abigail's diary and the things she wrote in it not at the forefront of his mind.

What had it all meant? McDonald's, the woods, Kroger, the man in the room. He wondered if anyone else had even known how fragile her state of her mind actually was. To hallucinate such things, and then to write them all down in such detail, and with apparent sincerity. It was likely nobody had known. He felt sorry for her and it made him sick to think nobody had been there for her, in the end. By now he had minimized his work and was on the web, searching the various terms she had mentioned that he was unfamiliar with.

SSRI antidepressant. Medication used to treat anxiety as well as depression. He scanned the list of typical side effects and found some relevant: racing thoughts, unusual risk-taking behavior, feelings of

extreme happiness or sadness, sleep problems, brain zaps, vivid dreams. But most of these would also apply to anxiety and depression, so how would you know for sure?

The Bystander Effect, or bystander apathy, a social psychological claim that individuals are less likely to offer help to a victim when other people are present; the greater the number of bystanders, the less likely it is that one of them will help. Several factors contribute to the bystander effect, including ambiguity, group cohesiveness, and diffusion of responsibility that reinforces mutual denial of a situation's severity.

Yet his most interesting discovery came when he entered the phrase "Kroger on Ponce de Leon", hoping to find directions. Bizarrely, this grocery store had entire websites dedicated to it. It even had a Wikipedia page:

"The Kroger supermarket at 725 Ponce de Leon Avenue has been known as the Murder Kroger for decades. Despite ongoing development in the area, the macabre moniker has been described as the nickname 'that just won't die'. The store opened in the 1980s. Since then, two fatal shootings and the finding of a corpse have occurred in the parking lot outside the store. In 1991, a 25 year old woman was shot and killed. In 2002, the malodorous corpse of a man was found inside a car..."

It was lunchtime. He received an instant message from Byron asking if he wanted to grab lunch in the cafeteria. He declined, saying he had some errands to run.

He drove into the city. The weather was clear and cold, the sky bluish-gray, the high cirrus clouds obscuring the midday sun. The traffic was steady, slowing down as he approached the perimeter. It took him about forty-five minutes to reach Ponce de Leon. He turned onto the road and kept an eye out for the Kroger. Half a mile down he passed a McDonald's and a few blocks after that he saw the Kroger sign, and turned in.

He parked at the rear of the parking lot, nearest to the road, next to a liquor store with a green overhang. The Kroger was at the back end of the parking lot, on a slight downward slope, so that to approach the entrance you had to descend. As he got closer he could tell the store had seen better days. The paint on the building was faded yellow, chipped in places. Out front a haphazard arrangement of shopping cart was blocking one of the exits. To the left the asphalt continued around the building. He rounded the side and saw a sign with the word "Deliveries" and an arrow pointing in the direction he was going. It did not take him long to reach the back.

He saw a trailer backed into the dock and a driver sat in the cab of the truck, talking on a cell phone. The wood line was on the other side of a narrow paved alley, thick and seemingly impenetrable. As nonchalantly as possible he put his hands in his pocket and walked the

length of the alley, keeping his eyes open for steps leading to a door. But when he reached the other end of the building he had not seen anything like what Abigail had described in the diary. The whole event had likely only happened in her mind. This was definitely a waste of time, to drive all the way down here, but he had to at least check it out. A story like that.

Up on the dock he saw a door propped open. In the interest of being thorough he decided to take a little peek, see if there were any strange rooms containing strange old men. So he heaved himself up on the raised platform, got to his feet, and then dusted off his jeans. The man in the truck eye-balled him for a second, from the side mirror, but then returned to his conversation. He approached the door and looked inside. There was nobody around. He hesitated for a moment and then stepped through the door.

A few years back he read somewhere a forum thread on unethical life tips. One of the tips concerned how to safely enter an unauthorized area without being harassed by security. The advice was simple: carry a ladder. Because when you carry a ladder everyone assumes you are working and therefore must have permission to be there, without question. The thing was, in this situation he had no ladder and unfortunately didn't see one he could grab. But, he did see a broom and dustpan in a corner and picked them up.

The back area was filled with cardboard boxes, empty and filled, wooden palettes with plastic crates of fruits and vegetables, all

wrapped in plastic. The area was not very well lit, having a dungeon-like appearance. And it was cold. In front of him he saw a corridor with posters on particle board. He saw a water cooler and a woman came by and poured a cone-shaped cup of water from it, drank it down, and then threw the crumpled cup into a tiny trash can beside the cooler. When the woman met his gaze he turned away and pretended to be sweeping some trash into the dustpan. When he looked back she was gone.

He stood up and walked the rest of the back area. He saw no other rooms or doors, just as he expected. But then he passed by a large plexiglass window. Inside was a break room. There were a few tables and chairs, a couple of vending machines for soft drinks and snacks. A group of workers was sitting around one of the tables, carrying on. He noticed one of the workers was a black albino man.

"Sir, what are you doing back here?"

It was the same woman who had seen him at the water cooler. She was accompanied by an older man wearing a button up shirt and dress pants. The manager.

He showed them the broom and dustpan, lamely.

"Sir, this area is for Kroger employees only. We're going to ask that you to leave the premises immediately. If you don't we'll have to contact the authorities."

"Okay, okay," he said, hands raised in surrender, "My mistake. I got lost, that's all."

They weren't having it. The woman gestured towards a pair of swinging metal doors at the end of the hallways, which led into the store. He leaned the broom and dustpan against the wall. Before heading through the doors, he took one last glance into the break room and caught the albino man staring back at him. There was an inscrutable expression on his face. But he alone among the group around the table was watching him.

He was accompanied him all the way to the automatic doors at the main entrance. He exited and walked to the Jeep, waited five minutes, and then returned through the same automatic doors. He took a shopping cart from the stack and wheeled it inside, pretending to shop for produce. He wasn't sure what he was going to do, or what he was waiting for, but it had something to do with the man. He had to know. He had to make sure.

He left the produce aisle and walked several others, making sure that he could always see the exit. If it took five hours until the man left work for that day, he was going to be there. His routine became one of looking at items, tossing every other one into the buggy, going to the next aisle over, doing the same, and then turning around and replacing all the items. This was the best way he could think of not to raise suspicion and not end up with a buggy full of groceries.

It was 3 p.m. He had been shopping for nearly half an hour, and beginning to question if this was a good strategy, or even a good idea at all. What was with him these days, sneaking into houses to stealing

diaries, sneaking into Kroger to find mysterious rooms, and now phony shopping, while he waited for an albino to leave his place of work. But then he spotted him at one of the registers, paying for a rotisserie chicken and a loaf of bread, and all those questions vanished from his mind.

He left the buggy where it was on aisle four and walked around to the entrance, where hopefully he would not be seen. He watched the man go through the automatic doors, waited a moment, and then followed him into the parking lot.

The man approached a rusted-out Toyota Corolla with a copper wire for a door handle. He placed the groceries into the trunk and got in the car, pulling the door closed.

"Hey, excuse me. Sir?"

He approached the driver door as non-threateningly as he could, waving one hand. The man was surprised, but rolled down the window, frowning.

"Whatchu need, boss?"

He didn't know where to begin.

"Well, I was wondering," he said, choosing his words carefully, "Is your name Rabbit, by any chance?"

"Rabbit?"

"I'm looking for a man named Rabbit. A friend of mine said he worked here and you, fit the description."

The man looked at him, puzzled and slightly amused.

"You saying Rabbit? Like a bunny rabbit?"

He nodded, and then shrugged.

"I know how it sounds, but that's the name she gave me. I don't know."

The man pointed at the badge pinned to his uniform, the word "Marcus Gaines" spelled out in tape letters.

"Right," he said, "I figured. Sorry to bother you."

"Naw, you good. Don't even worry about it."

The man continued rolling up the window. He panicked inside, his chance slipping away.

"Let me ask you, Marcus," he said, waving to get his attention, "Sorry, real quick."

The window stopped halfway and the man peered over the glass at him. Agitated. He said nothing. Waited.

"Sorry, it's just my friend told me she gave a ride to this guy, Rabbit. And supposedly he told her a story about a sick mother up at Grady, and then he asked her for some money. And my friend stopped at an ATM and gave him five hundred dollars in cash."

"Oh yeah? That's a lot of money."

"Yeah, it is. But I was wondering, does that story ring any bells for you? Anybody told you a story like that? Like within the last year? Any of your coworkers?"

The man gave it some thought and then shook his head.

"Sorry bro, I never heard a story like that."

"Right."

With that, the man rolled up the window, backed out of the parking space, and drove out of the parking lot, the busted turn signal blinking as the car turned onto Ponce de Leon and vanished into the stream of traffic.

Back at the apartment he set the laptop bag onto the desk and tossed the composition book on the kitchen table. He texted Chen, lying to him that he got sick over lunch and drove home, apologizing about the migration scripts and saying he'd try to knock out them out by tomorrow. A few minutes later he got a thumbs-up in response and then a minute later, "feel better".

Then he made pot of coffee and poured a cup without milk or sugar, strange for him. He sat at the table, sipping the coffee, lost in contemplation.

A few minutes later he opened the diary and flipped to where he had left off earlier that morning.

He read on.

Eight

May 6

Happy. Truly I am. Last night I had the most peaceful sleep, nad only good dreams. Tomorrow I will write more. Today is for me.

May 11

Five days since my last entry. I'm happy to say things are looking up. It's like a weight I've been carrying around ever since my mother got sick last year has finally been lifted. I can sleep normally again. I'm not irritable. Not only do I feel good, I feel free.

Today at work, I took Byron aside and apologized for my outburst last week. He was surprised, and more than a little skeptical based on his face, but once he saw I really meant the apology, with no excuses or qualifications, he accepted. He even shook my hand! Now we're on better terms than ever. It feels good. I'm happy I did that. There are others I probably owe apologies to. I plan to reach out to them too. Make things right. That's something I saw my mother do at various times in her life, and I want to do it too. It's important. I want to be that kind of person.

As for the events on May 5th, I have to confess I still believe it all happened, despite how insane it sounds, and believe me I know how insane it sounds. Yesterday, at my appointment with Dr. Patel, I thought about reading the entry to him, just because I felt like sharing it with somebody, but at the last minute I decided not to. The thought of sharing it with anybody feels, embarrassing. That's not quite the right word. Intimate is what I want to say, but that also sounds wrong. Let's put it this way: whatever it is, it isn't for other ears. And I'm okay with that. I've replayed the events over and over and over again, in my mind. My memory of the room is clear as water, as is my memory of him, and what he said to me, and did for me.

It did occur to me that I could always go back there, to the Kroger on Ponce de Leon. Nothing is stopping me from doing that. I could go right now even. And going there would give me the answer, definitively, whether or not it really happened. But I'm afraid. I'm afraid because I genuinely feel better. I do. The superstitious part of me believes that if I were to go down there and discover there really was no room, and no man who lives inside of it, that it would reopen all the old wounds. All the old horrors.

At the same time, I have always been a person who values the scientific method, and not the religion of science or medicine. So I did my own research into SSRI medications, and I discovered many

people have complex hallucinations and delusions while on these kinds of drugs. It's not just the happy, smiling faces you see on the ads. The drugs may help with your anxiety or depression (or not!). But there are costs. There are side effects. And sometimes the side effects can be more dangerous than the original condition you were treating.

When I told Dr. Patel I wanted to wean off the antidepressant, he was adamant that I shouldn't. Almost angry with me. But what he doesn't realize is that the medication wasn't doing its job. I don't need it anymore and more importantly, I don't want it poisoning my body. It really made me start to wonder, when I saw the look of incredulity on his face. Does he get kickbacks from the pharmaceutical companies for every prescription he writes? Honestly, it wouldn't surprise me.

It's late and I'm rambling. Long story short, I feel good and I'm really happy. Like my mother used to whisper at bedtime, as she gently kissed my forehead, "Goodnight, pumpkin. Sweet dreams."

May 12

What a fun day!

I got to work and Tammy had left a card on my desk, with a gift certificate inside for a crochet workshop at Magnolia's in Decatur Square. I ran to her office and thanked her and gave her a big hug. Then once I got back to my desk I looked up the dates and saw there was one this evening. I forwarded the date and told Tammy I was thinking of going, and she replied, asking if she could come too. I said heck yeah! Then at lunch I mentioned it to Crystal and she said she wanted to tag along. All of a sudden this was turning into a girls night out. Haha.

The class started at 7:30. We decided to meet up at 6 at the Iberian Pig for drinks and tapas, then walk over after. It was crowded in there, so we ended up going to another place I can't remember the name of. We sat outside and ordered margaritas. They were really strong! We got nachos with table-side guacamole as an appetizer. Then some empanadas. Super tasty. I ate and drank way too much. At 7:15 we walked to Magnolia's. Or stumbled, as Crystal put it.

There were about a dozen people in the class. We sat together at a table with a wife and her husband, who did not look like he wanted to be there. He kept checking his phone.

The class was set up to teach us the very basics. We could choose to make a pot holder or a headband. Of course I chose the headband. As

did Tammy. Crystal said she needed a pot holder, because one of hers had a burnt hole in it. They provided all the tools and material. It was cool. The teacher had some nice tips. Plus we had Tammy who has been doing crochet forever. She ended up helping the other woman at our table the most.

My headband is pink and looks great. I think I'm going to wear it to work tomorrow, see if anyone notices.

May 14

It's happening again.

Last night I awoke and felt my heart pounding in my chest. The pounding was so hard I panicked and stumbled from my bed into the bathroom. I turned on the lights and saw my reflection. I looked so pale, like a ghost. In that moment I remember thinking, "I'm dying. I'm really going to die. This is real. This is how it happens."

Suddenly, as I stood there, my heart beat began to accelerate, rising and rising and rising, until I thought for sure my heart was going to explode. I gripped the counter and tried to breathe normally, staring into the sink drain. And then finally it did slow down, and returned to normal.

I'm not sure what it was. But after that, I must have hyperventilated because I started to feel like I was suffocating. Like, no matter how many deep breaths I took the feeling of suffocation wouldn't go away. It was a terrifying feeling. And again, that set off my anxiety. My pulse increased until my chest was pounding, and the cycle began again.

This time I went into the kitchen and poured a glass of water. I sat down and drank the water, the pounding in my ears overpowering, my hands were trembling. I was scared. I was more scared than I've ever been in my life. I didn't have time to think about what could be causing this. In the moment it felt like death was imminent. And I didn't want to die.

I went to the bedroom and picked up my cell phone from the nightstand and called 911. The operator asked me what the matter was. I tried to be calm and told her, "I think I'm dying. My heart feels like it's going to explode. Please send an ambulance." She asked me if I had taken any drugs or alcohol. I told her I had a glass of wine at dinner. She asked me if anyone else was there and I said no. She then said someone was on the way and asked if I could stay on the phone until they arrived. I did as she requested and sat on the couch and drank the glass of water, phone on speaker. She asked me questions about my age, where I worked. Then she asked if I had any pets. I

think she was trying to keep me calm. That's the only thing that makes sense. Then, about fifteen minutes later, I heard a knock on the door.

It was two EMTs, a man and a woman. The man carried a large bag. The woman asked if I was the one who called 911 and said I was. The operator heard the arrival of the EMTs and said she was going to hang up. I said okay, as if nothing was wrong.

The woman asked me to sit down and took my blood pressure. When the cuff released she nodded to herself and then looked at the other man.

"What is it?" I asked, very worried, and a little agitated they weren't talking to me.

"Well, your blood pressure is dangerously high. Stroke or heart attack range. Be honest with me, have you taken any drugs tonight? Alcohol?"

"No, nothing. Just some wine with dinner."

"What about medications? Have you recently started anything new?"

"No, but I have stopped taking my antidepressant. That was a few days ago."

They exchanged glances. From that I knew I had made a mistake. But they continued the line of questioning.

"So you were taking an antidepressant and stopped. Was that under medical supervision? Did you stop cold turkey?"

I lied. I couldn't face the judgement I already saw forming on their faces.

"My doctor and I agreed on a plan to wean me from the medication. I was feeling okay and decided to skip a few days. It was okay until tonight."

The woman took a breath.

"Ms. Bennett, it's dangerous to stop taking medication against your doctor's orders."

"Very dangerous," the other said.

I nodded, but didn't say anything to defend myself. They told me they would stay and make sure my blood pressure was coming down. They also said my pulse rate was high, but that could be anxiety. I asked them how common this kind of thing was, and they said it was pretty common.

"Now I feel stupid. I thought I was dying."

"Don't feel bad. You did the right thing. Better to be safe than sorry. And your vitals are dangerously elevated. If I were you I would make an appointment with your doctor and review the plan to ween you from the medication. Don't take any chances, no matter how you feel. These drugs are powerful stuff."

The next time they checked my blood pressure it had come down to a still elevated, but non-critical, level. That satisfied them and they left. I thanked them and apologized again.

I went into the bathroom and took two double my usual dosage of antidepressant. The drug doesn't work immediately like that, it has to build up in your system over time to be effective. But I needed to take something to calm myself, even if it was more for the placebo effect. After that I climbed into bed. By then was almost 4.

Yet again, I am writing all this down because I don't want to forget any details. Because of what happened later on. It could be irrelevant and I really hope that is the case. But I want to be sure.

In the morning I made an appointment with Dr. Patel. I explained to the receptionist about the ambulance visit to my apartment, about stopping the medication. She told me she could get me in tomorrow.

At work I took my lunch break and walked to the pond by myself. I had not had much sleep and considered just taking the rest of the day off. But I had missed enough work over the last few months for an entire year. I wanted to show them I was someone to be counted on. That's important.

While at the pond, feeding the ducks with some crackers I took from the break room, I started feeling dizzy. My legs grew weak and I had to sit down on the little wooden bench. My arms and legs felt tingly all over. A surge went through me like a bolt of lightning and I thought I was going to die. It was jolting, like when you are leaning back in a chair and go too far, right before you catch yourself. But that was not all. As I sat there trying to calm down, not sure if I should even try to walk back up to the building, an intense feeling of hunger doubled me over, a hollowness that felt like starvation but more intense and painful. I became weak, my skin was clammy. And looking at the back of my hand, I noticed the color of my skin had turned as white as a fish belly.

From the bottle in my purse I took another dose of antidepressant, again for the placebo effect. But it didn't help this time. Then I decided it would be better for me to make it up to the offices again, in case I lost consciousness, or even worse.

I got to my feet and slowly walked uphill, following the path. I passed two men in the middle of a discussion and when they saw me they stopped and asked if I was all right. I told them I was fine, but I don't think they were convinced. They walked on, but turned back once or twice to make absolutely sure. I must have looked pretty bad for them to stop and ask like that.

At a bend I wasn't paying attention and slipped off the concrete onto the grass. I caught myself on a small tree and used it to get back to my feet. Now there was a grass stain on my new pants, I remember thinking. If I could make it back to my desk and just sit there for awhile, I thought everything would return to normal. Just like it had when the ambulance came. Then I wondered if this was my blood pressure spiking out of control and because there was nobody around, that I would die. The possibility of death seemed very real to me in the moment.

On the elevator I saw my face in the mirror on the doors and understood why those two men had stopped to ask if I were okay. I

looked like shit, pale, my eyes reddened with dark circles. Today wasn't the best, but I was at least presentable when I left for work this morning. It was then I knew something was the matter with me. Something was wrong.

I barely made it out of the elevator and was walking past the QA area, when I lost my balance and had to grab hold of one of the cubicle walls. Morris jumped to his feet and ran over. He asked if I was okay. By that point a few others had come over. I never saw their faces. From what they told me later I collapsed. They had to carry me to the nurses station, which I didn't even know existed, but apparently there's one on the first floor of every building in the technology park.

The next thing I remember is waking up and seeing a woman taking my blood pressure. There was a warm, wet rag on my forehead. She wrote down my blood pressure on a clipboard and then checked my heart rate and put a thermometer in my mouth. Then she wrote those numbers down. I wasn't fully aware of my surroundings. I saw Morris and some of the others. Then Tammy came in and tried to speak to me. At first her words sounded like gibberish. Then I answered something but it came out all wrong.

The second time I regained consciousness, Chen was the only other person in the room, besides the nurse. She said my vital signs had finally come down, which was a good thing. I sat up with her help and felt very dizzy, but better overall. Chen tried to joke with me that I was working too hard, and I smiled, but I wasn't really in a mood to joke around. She gave me a bottled water and I drank all of it. Then I asked for another. Then the nurse told me I should make an appointment with my family doctor as soon as possible, letting them know what happened, so they can decide on the most appropriate next steps. I asked her what she thought could have caused this. I asked if she thought it was a heart attack, not really wanting to know the answer. She smiled, and then said I was much too young and healthy for that, though nothing should be ruled out without further tests. More than likely, she said, it was a severe anxiety attack. She asked if I had been through any big life changes this year, any unusual stressors. And I had to laugh, though inwardly. Some, I told her. At that point Tammy rushed back into the room.

"Great, you're awake!" she said, and gave me a hug, "We were worried sick about you, girl."

Tammy turned to the nurse and asked her some questions, like was I safe to go home, drive, I don't know what else. I was pretty out of it. Chen had walked out when Tammy returned. Then, once she and the

nurse were done talking, Tammy over to me and put her hand on my forehead. She asked me how I was feeling, and what I said back surprised even me. "Hungry."

Nine

May 16

It's been a very rough few days, but things are finally looking up. They really are. I feel so much at peace within my heart that I just had to tell somebody. Shout it from the rooftops! But it's late now and nobody's around, so I guess I'll have to settle for a diary entry instead. To start, let me go back to the day after my collapse at work.

That morning I woke up early, before the sun was up, and made a pot of coffee. I drank two cups along with a couple slices of toast with butter and strawberry preserves. Well, four slices. I went back for seconds. I was completely famished. Which was a little weird, because I had eaten a very large dinner the night before: a twelve-piece chicken strip meal with four biscuits, mashed potatoes, and cole slaw. That meal is meant for families! But I didn't stress about it too much. I figured it was my body needing fuel to recuperate from the previous day. And from the lack of sleep. That always makes me overeat.

My appointment with Dr. Patel was at noon, so I had the whole morning. I texted Chen that I would be coming in after lunch. A few minutes

later he texted back a thumbs up and a smiley face. The rest of the morning I washed clothes, cleaned the kitchen, and caught up on some shows. Then I took a shower and washed my hair, which I had been neglecting all week.

Needless to say he was not happy with me. I confessed all that had happened. Quitting the antidepressant cold turkey, the early morning call to the ambulance, collapsing at work. With each thing I said, his face got redder and redder.

"Why didn't you listen to me, Abigail? I get so tired of you amateur physicians reading nonsense on the internet and deciding you know better than I do."

"I apologize. I resumed the medication. Of course."

"I'm trying to help you, Abigail!"

"I know you are."

"But you're not helping me to help you."

"I'm sorry. I will listen from now on. I learned my lesson. Believe me."

"If you don't, I can no longer be your doctor. That's just the way it is. I can't be held responsible for your recklessness. I won't be."

So, yeah. I suppose I deserved that dressing down, especially considering what happened. Still, I'm not some mindless robot. I don't just do what people tell me to do. I am taking the antidepressant for now, but I still plan to ween off of it. And I think I'm going to start looking for another psychiatrist. I think I'll have to. No man is going to tell me what to do with my body. I'll take his advice, but it's my body.

This is where things got a bit weird. I'm a little embarrassed to write all this down to be honest. Not sure if I want a permanent record for every little thing. But since I'm already writing, screw it.

On the way home from the doctor's office, I got that intense hunger sensation I had felt the other day at the pond. It came on so quickly, and with such a force, that I had to pull over until it passed. Except it didn't pass this time. I'm not sure how to describe the feeling. It feels like a vast opening, or hollowness, inside of me. Like a cavern. The nearest word I can think of to describe the feeling would be "hunger". But that's not quite it. Not quite. I don't think I'm making

very much sense, because it did make me hungry. But that was only my body's reaction to it. The only way my body knew how to interpret it, and it did make me hungry. My mouth began to salivate.

A couple blocks from where I was parked, I saw a sign for Golden Corral. That was enough to get me going. I sped over there and went inside. I ordered the buffet and sat down in an unoccupied corner near the back. The waitress brought my drink and told to me help myself.

My first plate was stacked four levels deep: Macaroni and cheese, mashed potatoes, green beans, sliced roast beef, chicken wings, tomato and cucumber salad, two yeast rolls, and cornbread. It was gone in five minutes.

My second plate was stacked higher than the last: Spaghetti with meat sauce, two chicken tacos, hash brown casserole, three pork ribs, a sirloin steak, a green salad with tomatoes, mushrooms, onions, and cheese, topped with ranch. And two yeast rolls. That one took me longer, maybe ten minutes.

Next was dessert. I ate a bowl of chocolate-vanilla swirl ice cream topped with hot fudge and walnuts. I ate a fudge-covered brownie, a large chocolate chip cookie, strawberry jello with cool whip, a bowl of vanilla pudding.

I was full. My waitress had refilled my coke and set down the ticket. But the weird thing is, I didn't feel full. Not at all. When I say I was full, I mean I could tell my stomach was literally stuffed with the food I had just shoveled into it. But the feeling of fullness, that was not there. It was the same hollow feeling, just as intense as before. But I couldn't eat anymore. And I was still hungry. My body was telling me I was hungry. It was like what I imagine going crazy would feel like. It was like going crazy and being helpless to stop it.

I did something I now regret. There were some bathrooms near the exit. I went into a stall in the woman's bathroom and put my fingers down my throat and gagged. All the food came back up, into the toilet. I saw stars at the corners of my eye. I flushed and then did it again. Until all the food I had just eaten was out of me. I washed my face in the sink, rinsed out my mouth with water, and returned to my seat.

Then I went back for more. It became a compulsion. I went into a state of consciousness where I couldn't see anything around me except the plate and where my only thoughts were consuming the food on the plate and going back for more. I was inside a tunnel with only one escape. After three more plates, I even became numb to the taste of the food. But in that numbness I did find some relief from the hunger, finally.

So I continued. I hate to admit this, but I went back to the restroom two more times, and forced myself to vomit. My throat burned from the repeated exposure to stomach acid. My eyes were red and watery. I felt awful.

At some point I looked up and saw the waitress and someone I assumed to be the manager. The waitress looked at the floor, nervously tapping one foot. The manager was polite but firm.

"Ma'am, we noticed you've been here for two and a half hours. Unfortunately this restaurant's policy prohibits customers from loitering through multiple mealtimes. Because of that we're going to have to ask you to leave. I hope you understand."

That really made me feel like shit. I was embarrassed. I paid at the cashier island near the exit and left. When I got to my car, I cried. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before. I had always heard about eating disorders, where people eat compulsively. I thought, maybe this is how it starts.

My stomach hurt. I had to go to the bathroom but held it until I got home. The rest of the night I had diarrhea. But the hunger was gone. I

finished off a bottle of Chardonnay in the fridge to calm my nerves, and went to bed early.

The next day the hunger returned. I took my medication with coffee and two slices of buttered toast. And then on the way to work I went through the Bojangles drive-thru and got two cajun filet biscuits and an order of cinnamon biscuits. The chicken biscuits I ate on my drive, but I carried the cinnamon biscuits inside and ate them at my desk, along with some black coffee.

During the daily standup meeting, I had to leave for the restroom. My digestive system was not used to all this food going through my body, and it was not happy. Jesus, I hope nobody ever reads this. It's very embarrassing.

My bowel troubles continued throughout the day, so I asked Chen if I could work from home after lunch. He said okay, but I could see from the look on his face that he was getting a little irritated with all the time I was spending away from the office.

On the drive home I stopped at a package store and bought another bottle of chardonnay as well as a fifth of rye whiskey. I don't like to admit this, I know how unhealthy it sounds, but I was thinking if I could self-medicate with a little alcohol, then maybe I wouldn't eat

so much food. If I continued like this I was going to turn into a cow. While in line I caught my reflection in a mirror and noticed how tired I looked, almost sickly.

The rest of the day I tried to get some work done, but as I was also drinking, eventually my mind became so blurred I couldn't concentrate. I was tired.

I took a nap and when I woke up the hunger was overpowering. I doubled over, clenching my stomach from the pain. In the kitchen I drank some whisky and ate a few pieces of bread right out of the bag. As I stood there, pathetic and without much hope at all, I thought about the man in the room.

It was three in the afternoon. My thinking was, if I left immediately, I could still beat the rush hour traffic. Within five minutes I was out the door and halfway to the parking lot. Within fifteen I was on the bypass. Within thirty I was pulling into the parking lot. I parked on the left side of the lot, in a section that was apart from the main parking area. There was some shade here. I felt more inconspicuous.

Around the building nobody was around. That was good. I half expected to see Rabbit sitting on the concrete steps, as he was before. But he wasn't there, and neither were the steps. My heart sank. I looked

around in a panic, feeling disoriented, and tried to remember the layout of things by memory. The covered ramp and docking area was in the same place as it had been. The roll-up doors were closed. The door beside it closed. But all there, just like before. Only the steps and the door were missing. How could that be? I thought, knowing the answer secretly and not wanting to admit it, or even think it.

Before I went back to my car I walked the entire length of the loading area. About halfway down I found the opening in the tree line, where I had emerged from the woods and saw Rabbit smoking. It was all there, all the little details I remembered. Just not the door to the room. And that made the whole thing much more confusing to me. I didn't know what to do.

I sat in my car and tried to understand what was happening. It was like I was trapped inside my own head and for perspective I needed to pull back in order to see everything from an impartial distance. Everything was the same. All the details were the same. But the door wasn't there. If I assume I wasn't just hallucinating its existence, which I don't even know at this point, then what is the simplest explanation as to why the door is not there. It should be. Things don't just vanish like that. The steps were worn, pitted concrete. The door was painted the same color as the building, faded, chipped, and rusting at the hinges. I could see it all.

Then I remembered something the man in the room had said to me, when I asked a question. At the time I thought he was being glib. But I don't think so now. This was after he had spoken to me, when I was questioning him. One of the things I asked was about the room. "Where are we?" I asked. And he answered simply, but in the abstract (or so I thought): "In a certain place. In a certain time. In a certain orientation."

At the time I thought it was a pedantic way to put it, but maybe that was just his style. Now I'm not so sure. Maybe he was being as honest and straightforward then as he was during the rest of our conversation. That would be the simplest explanation, and therefore probably the correct one. But what could it mean?

And then I had it. One second I was hopelessly lost and flailing for anything to make sense of it, and the next I was as sure about what was going on, and what I had to do about it, as I was that the sun would rise tomorrow.

I turned on the car, pulled out of the parking lot, and drove a few blocks down to the McDonald's. Near the back, close to the drive thru, I found a place to park and waited three more hours, until the

sunlight appeared through the tree line and shone onto the sides of buildings.

It didn't take me nearly as long to traverse the half mile path through the woods, now that I knew where I was going, and how far. I reached the edge of the woods and saw the loading area behind the Kroger, and I saw the concrete steps, leading up to a door. Sometimes I do have my moments.

Just like the other day, the door was unlocked. I entered the room and he was there. He nodded to me, and smiled.

"Where are you hurting, Abigail?"

Ten

The Jeep pulled into a parking spot at the McDonald's on Ponce de Leon. As soon as he switched off the ignition, almost as if it had been planned, the Golden Arches illuminated and the lights around the restaurant flickered on simultaneously. It was early evening, the sky a dark pink and blue. About six.

He had parked at the back, where he had a clear view of the fence behind the drive-thru area. He scanned its length and found the opening about midway. From the glove compartment he pulled a tiny flashlight, nearly keychain-sized, and also a folding utility knife, serrated.

Then few minutes passed in which he sat and thought everything through. It felt like something he needed to do. This was batshit crazy. What he needed in this moment was a pros and cons list of the facts. To help him figure out if what he was doing was the right thing, or maybe more importantly the safe thing.

There were pros. Well, one pro. He wanted to understand what had happened to the woman who used to have his job. Abigail. A woman he learned he had things in common with. Oddly so. And one who he had come to genuinely like, after hearing about her from coworkers, seeing (private) photographs, and most of all reading her (private, stolen) diary. What was wrong with liking her? He felt for the tragedy of her life. A part of him wanted to reach out, even across time and space,

to comfort her. Also, he was convinced foul play may have been involved in her suicide, if it was suicide. That's what he wanted to know. Needed to know. He felt that it would be honoring her memory to do discover the truth.

The cons outweighed the pros. One: Abigail was not of sound mind. Therefore her diary is not a reliable source for objective facts about what happened. Example, she wrote about twice visiting an old man inside an empty room behind a Kroger, an old man who hugged her and listened to her problems. Two: Even if everything were true, she is dead and cannot come back. So what does this clandestine sleuth-work achieve, at the end of the day? Three: If you are right and there was foul play involved, then those involved won't appreciate you bringing into the light what they hid in darkness.

He stepped out of the Jeep, zipped up his coat, pocketed flashlight and knife, and looked around to make sure nobody was watching. There wasn't.

He walked towards the fence. The opening grew larger the nearer he got, and darker. It was like staring into a black hole though above the fence line he could see the tops of the trees and large tangles of brush. Because he had psyched himself up in the Jeep beforehand, there was almost no hesitation when he reached the opening. He went immediately through.

The woods were dark. There was still faint light, through the gaps in the leaves, but not much. He pulled the flashlight from his pocket and turned it on.

An intense white beam of light revealed the path in front of him. He followed it. After some time he came to a wide clearing, and stumbled over the old railroad tracks. He turned back the way he came and was a little surprised that he could no longer see the Golden Arches through the gloam.

He walked for a long time, to the point where he was starting to question whether he was going in the right direction, when he saw light coming through the trees, just ahead.

He had arrived, and was now looking at the back of the Kroger on Ponce de Leon. The same place he had been not very long ago, in daylight. Everything was there, just as it had been. The dock, the ramp, the overhang. The delivery truck was gone. That was different. And the concrete steps, leading to a door. Just off to the side. That was different too.

It was a moment he had been dreading, a moment of reckoning, that would lead him down one path or another, definitively. And, being honest, this was not the path he had expected. He had expected not to find it.

Even more strange, and too much for coincidence, on the steps was the black albino man, Rabbit (or was it Marcus?). He was just sitting there, wearing what he assumed to be the same shabby and ill-fitting

suit Abigail had described in her diary entry. He was smoking a cigarette, looking at the ground.

Fifteen minutes passed, and he watched, not moving, crouched behind a small tree, until Rabbit ground the cigarette butt against the pavement and stood up. He removed some kind of chain necklace from around his neck. There was a pendant on the necklace. He approached the door, gripped the pendant like a key, and slid it into a slot in the doorknob. Then he bowed his head and looked as if he were in prayer. A moment later he opened the door and disappeared inside, closing the door behind him, and leaving the pendant key in the doorknob slot.

It was a chance he might never get again. And he decided to take it. He stood up and quickly crossed the alley, then up the steps to the door. He inhaled. Exhaled. Then, turned the knob. It was locked. He tried again. Locked.

"Damnit."

Seeing the pendant in the doorknob slot, and the chain necklace hanging down, he grabbed it by the point where the pendant connected to the chain and pulled. It slid out.

He rubbed his fingers over the pendant. It was flat and smooth, like a riverbed stone, oblong like an egg, and made of a material he could not place. It was vaguely metallic, hard but more organic. Chitinous, maybe. Etched onto one side was a strange symbol, of geometric patterns interwoven.

Then, he felt a violent thudding against his right temple and his vision went dark. He felt another against his shoulder and opened his eyes. Rabbit stood over him, holding a 2x4, growling at him.

"Gimme dat key back!"

He held up his arms in defense. Then scrambled to his feet, falling from the ledge in the process, and hitting the ground with both feet. He took off in a wild, chaotic sprint. He heard Rabbit shouting, running behind, and shot a quick glance behind him. He saw him, brandishing the 2x4 in both hands, his face twisted in rage. So close was he that he could see cavities in his lower teeth as he scowled.

The edge of the woods was near. He jumped into an opening and ran until he could no longer hear footsteps behind him. Five minutes straight, he ran.

Panic crept down his spine like a spider. Confusion burrowed into his mind like a rodent. He ran, and ran, unconcerned with the direction he was going or where he might end up. Away was his only destination. But soon his lungs gave out and he had to rest. He found a large tree and knelt on the ground behind it, and caught his breath. All he heard was the noise of the woods. The rustling of leaves. The whisper of wind through the branches overhead. But nothing else.

He determined it would be safe to use the flashlight, and pulled his phone from his coat pocket, turning on the intense white light. Immediately a circle of his surroundings was perfectly illuminated, a

radius of brush, the trunks of larger trees, on a carpet of dry, crunchy leaves. It was a wonder he hadn't given away his position, stomping through all this. Something in his gut told him Rabbit had not really wanted to hurt him, only to scare him. But why?

It was too soon for why. He stuffed those questions into a box for later and did his best to keep focused on his current predicament. He was lost. He was cold. He had just been attacked by a man with a large piece of wood. He noticed the hand holding the phone flashlight was shaking and made a concerted effort to calm down. Breathe deep. And think carefully about what to do next.

He visualized getting into his car and turning on the heater full blast, and then once warm, driving home to his warm apartment and warm bed. Think, he told himself. Think. You want to get back to the parking lot. You ran into the woods not paying attention to what direction you were going, and now you are lost. How are you going to get out of it? How would someone who wasn't a complete idiot do it? Start from there.

He did this. Intense situations always brought out humor in him. It was survival instinct, he guessed. Inside he was as far from mirth as a person could be. He was scared.

Use the compass. This idea flashed in his mind and he seized upon it. He opened the compass app on his phone and used it to figure out which way he was facing. Once he knew that he could figure out in which general direction the McDonald's was. And go there. Simple.

He was facing North, somewhat unexpectedly. That being the case, he needed to head East, based on his knowledge of Ponce de Leon and the general layout of businesses on the road. He found East and began walking in that direction, slushing through a thick carpet of leaves, holding the flashlight as far out in front of him as he could comfortably reach. He wanted no surprises.

Minutes later he saw the "Low Battery" alert pop up on the screen of his phone. Fuck, he thought. This was the last thing he needed, another thing to stress about. He quickly came up with a strategy to maximize battery life. He would check the direction he was heading, turn off the phone, walk a few minutes, turn it on and check again. Assuming he could walk a straight line it should work. But immediately his mind started poking holes into the logic and coming up with dozens of variations. Does turning the phone off and on again use up more battery than just leaving it on, but turning off the flashlight? He could also dim the screen. How much further was there to go? He didn't remember walking so far.

So finally he had to decide on a plan, his original one. He confirmed he was facing East and switched off his phone. Suddenly without the artificial illumination he was plunged back into a darkness even more dark than it was before. It took several minutes until his vision had become somewhat accustomed to it, and even then, all he could make out were layers of shadows, forming a rough idea of any obstacles that lie ahead.

When he figured five minutes had passed, he turned on the phone, and waited impatiently for it to come on. As the device initialized he noticed his breath was visible against the light of the screen. He opened the compass app and realized to his horror he had veered from East to Southwest.

"What the hell?"

And then it happened. The screen dimmed and the loading indicator popped up. The phone was saving its state. The battery was gone. He watched the spinner, helplessly. Then everything went black.

He didn't move a single step for minutes. He collected his thoughts and did his best not to panic. As soon as he was able to make out shapes in the woods again, he started walking. His new plan was to walk in a single direction until he came out of the woods, no matter where that was. Then from there he figured it would be easier to find his way back to the McDonald's. It seemed to make sense. But really, even if it didn't, he wasn't sure what else he could do.

At each step he grew more and more certain he was going the wrong way. He had nothing to base that on. It was fear. Despite understanding that, he was sure that soon he would see the lights of the Kroger loading area. And be right back where he started from.

That didn't happen, of course, but what did happen next was even more disconcerting, and downright strange. It crept on him like an insane wolf. One minute he was absolutely freezing, the drippings from

his nostrils frozen on his upper lip. The tips of his fingers and toes throbbing with icy numbness. And the next he was sweating. And not that wintertime skin sweating, underneath the base layer. This was sticky, summertime sweating. He was baking. His hair was wet, beads of sweat ran into his eyes and he wiped them away. He felt like he was suffocating inside the coat, so he removed it and tied it around his waist. He pushed up the sleeves on his sweater.

Around him the trees and brush grew thicker. He noticed he was no longer walking on a carpet of dry leaves. The ground was soft earth. Soil-like. He was struck in the face by what felt like an enormous frond, having divided leaves and a center stalk. He pushed it aside but encountered several more, until he reached a clearing at which point he stopped and took in his surroundings, paying particular attention to the sounds.

The sounds were different here. Not the sounds of a winter, not wind through branches and rustling leaves, but insects chirping and buzzing. And birds in the distance, ca-ooing, ye-ipping, and wu-eeting. Probably birds.

He walked on. It was probably a hundred yards or so, until he ran straight into a wall. He hit it so hard that he bounced off and landed in the grass on his rear, bewildered. In shock. As he was still unable to make out anything more than general shapes in the shadows, he rose to his feet and held out his hands, walking slowly. Soon his palms found the wall. It was cold to the touch, rough-patterned, and like

leather. As his hands searched the surface he felt the entire wall heave outward, knocking him to the ground again. It was then he saw the black orb, glistening, watching him from above.

Unable to explain and fully aware of how illogical it was, he nonetheless understood that this was a creature who had not walked the Earth for millions of years. Right here, in front of him. And he was not afraid of it.

He was drawn into its impenetrable gaze. He became lost in the eons that had passed between the existence of the two of them, now existing in the same space at the same time. Or so it seemed. For some reason he questioned nothing. He just accepted it. That seemed to be about all he could do.

As he stared into its eye, he noticed a faint blue color, indistinct but there. He stood and moved slowly towards it. The creature did not react or even acknowledge his movements at all, seeming entirely unthreatened. When he got close enough, he realized the blue color was not in the eye of the creature at all. It was a reflection. Then he turned towards the night sky and saw a vast nebula among the canopy of stars. It was a thousand shades of blue, green, and purple. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in life.

He was mesmerized. He gazed upon the nebula for what felt like hours, though it was hard to tell how long it really was. Time seemed to move strangely in that place. At last the spell was broken when the

creature rose to its feet and heaved in his direction, knocking him to the ground yet again.

He jumped to his feet and seized the moment to run back into the safety of the woods. He ran as he had from Rabbit, with no sense of direction or destination. Just away. And it worked. Once again he was in the woods, in complete darkness. He walked in a single direction for a long time, his mind still bewildered by what he had seen. It felt unreal, like a dream. But it had happened. He repeated that several more times to himself. He felt it was important for his sanity to do so. It was important to distinguish the real from the unreal. Reality from fantasy. Or, it was important not to lose that ability. So by demarcating the events he felt like he was protecting his mind.

Perhaps the experience Abigail had was similar to this. He wondered if these people, Rabbit, the man in the room, had an ability to hypnotize. It seemed a stretch, and didn't really fit with what happened, especially since none of them were around. Could he have been drugged somehow? Without his knowledge? Many questions arose in his long walk through the dark woods.

At some point when he wasn't paying attention the weather turned cold again. He became aware of the chill on his face and arms, and put his coat back on. His feet stumbled through a pile of dried leaves. The sweat in his hair froze. And then, between the trees, he saw artificial lights. His pace quickened and the lights grew brighter and brighter. It was the Golden Arches.

Eleven

You're losing it. You're losing your grip. This is not really happening. This is not reality. Reality is $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$. Reality is for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Reality is the total energy of an isolated system is constant and can be transformed from one form to another but can be neither created nor destroyed. Reality is this bed. Reality is this floor. Reality is this nightstand. Reality is this apartment. Reality is this city and the people who live in it. Reality is your car. Reality is your commute. Reality is your job.

It was seven in the morning. He was awake, sitting at the edge of the bed, his feet on the cold, concrete floor. There was sunshine coming in through a window in the bedroom, shining onto the wall opposite him, onto a decorative framed black and white photo of an old bicycle leaning against a fence. Two hours ago he had been startled awake from bad dreams. Since then he had been pacing through the apartment, room to room, processing the bizarre events of the night before. He had eventually returned to bed, but did not sleep, until the alarm went off.

He went into the living room and turned on his work laptop, sending an email to Chen and the rest of the team that he was taking a sick day, but available via email if absolutely needed. He didn't want to

come off as an absolute flake. He was still in that period of time of having to prove himself, despite his recent accomplishments and subsequent recognitions.

Next, he made a pot of coffee and drank a cup while looking outside at the traffic on the street below, both pedestrian and vehicular. Looking, but not seeing. After some time he turned back towards the kitchen table, where the pendant necklace lay.

It was still there. It was real. He had not imagined it. Nor had he imagined the scenario whereby he had acquired it.

"You're losing your grip," he said, addressing the empty apartment. And he believed that. Whatever had happened to Abigail was now happening to him. Maybe they had used drugs or some mind-altering substance to make him hallucinate. And maybe that's what happened to Abigail. That would make sense. Maybe there was something in the air, back there. Or maybe the 2x4 he was struck with was laced with a drug that can be absorbed through the skin. He was reaching for an answer, and knew it, and was not convinced by these explanations in the slightest.

His stomach turned. It was the nausea of dread. The dread of having to confront this new reality. He did not want it. All he had ever wanted was a normal life. The thing was, he couldn't stop now. He had learned too much that was unusual about the last days of Abigail. He felt an obligation to learn the truth and if necessary, inform the

police. If there had been foul play he was the only one who had the details to put the pieces of it together.

Well awake, he walked over to the kitchen table and picked up the pendant and ran it between his fingers, feeling the smooth, cold surface, and the groove of the pattern on the front. Then he set it down again and went to the large window and pulled the blinds all the way up, to maximize the amount of natural light coming into the room. From his pocket he pulled out the cell phone, freshly-charged, and took the best photo of the pendant that he could, making sure to shoot top-down and get the pattern as large in the frame as he could.

Once he had a picture he was satisfied with he went to the laptop and copied it to the computer. He opened the browser and clicked on the button called Images. From there he was able to drag and drop the picture onto the window. When the photo had been loaded he was able to click on another button, which read "Perform Reverse Search".

Almost instantly he was taken to a page of search results, displaying a grid of photographic matches to the picture he had uploaded. There weren't many and the majority of them weren't really matches at all. But there was one, not a photograph, but a crude drawing, that matched the pattern on the pendant almost exactly, though nowhere as intricate or artfully done. He clicked the image and it brought him to an internet archive page from ten years ago, a forum thread with the title "[serious] Unexplained mysteries from your own

life". He scrolled through the thread until he found the image match. It was from a reply from a user named "throwaway4822".

"I've never told this story to anyone before. To be honest I'm not sure I should tell it now, though it's been five years. My guilt over what happened still haunts me to this day. Perhaps this will be my penance. Perhaps telling it will relieve my guilty conscience. I hope so."

"My brother and I used to take a road trip together every summer, just the two of us. It was a great bonding experience for us. The thing was, we weren't exactly the type to go to visit the beach or look at the mountains. Our interests were more esoteric you might say, sometimes even morbid."

"That summer we decided to visit the Winchester House in San Jose, California. It was a house built over forty years by Sarah Winchester, widow of William Winchester and heiress to the Winchester firearms fortune. The house is filled with over a hundred rooms, with windows everywhere, in the floors and ceilings, with doors and stairways which circle back on themselves or open into brick walls. Legends say Sarah Winchester believed that if she ever stopped construction, it would anger the restless spirits of the house, who were the victims of the guns the company produced."

"The house was quite far from where we lived, and was going to be a week-long trip. But my brother had read about the house in a magazine with all kinds of descriptions and photographs, and had become obsessed with it."

"We left on a Tuesday and arrived in San Jose early Saturday morning, exhausted but very excited. We had breakfast at a diner and got to the Winchester house around lunchtime, just in time for the guided tour at 1 p.m. Ours was a large group of maybe sixteen people. So it was easy to hang in back and take our time going through the rooms. In one room, my brother saw an open door leading to a hallway and indicated to me that he wanted us to break off from the tour and explore on our own. I was hesitant at first, but seeing the look of joyous mischief in his eyes, I decided what the hell. You only live once."

"The house was a maze. After going through one door into hallway, which led to another door, and then another, we got completely turned around, and lost. I wanted to turn back, but my brother insisted that we should keep going forward, his idea being that eventually we'd reach the edge of the house. I reluctantly agreed. Next, we entered a long hallway with a window at the end. The window opened into a darkened room without any other entrance that we could see. My brother dared me to climb through the window, so I did. A few moments later he

climbed through too. In the blackness we thought we saw the faint outline of light coming through the bottom of another door, up a few steps. My brother pulled out his Zippo and flicked it open. The small flame danced in the darkness, provided us with some light."

"We approached the door. Carved into it, using very crude and shaky lines, was a bizarre, geometrical pattern, impossible to describe in words. I have since drawn it from memory. This is what it looked like, approximately."

And there it was. The same pattern from the pendant, or an amateurish attempt at it, though not nearly as complicated or symmetrical as the real thing. Through his mind went many thoughts. Then he downloaded the picture, and kept reading.

"I wanted to turn back and begged my brother to come back with me. He refused, saying I was a coward and there was nothing to worry about. Well, I never could deal with being called a coward. It's a deficiency of my personality, I guess. I told him okay, but he had to go through first. He agreed."

"He turned the old doorknob and pushed the door open, and we couldn't believe what we saw -- a vast desert landscape in the middle of the night, with a full moon overhead. Instead of closing the door

immediately, my brother stepped through the doorway onto the ground and motioned for me to join him. I should have said no. I should have waved my hand for him to come back. But I didn't."

"We took in our surroundings. It was only after a few minutes that we turned back to the door and saw that it was gone. The house wasn't there either. All we could see were dunes and endless stretches of plains, in every direction."

"My brother and I both panicked. It was cold and we had nothing to eat or drink. In the distance, very small, we saw what looked from here to be another door, and decided to check it out."

"An hour later we reached the door, and it was a door, without anything else around it. My brother reached for the knob and turned it, but it was locked. There was another kind of pattern on this door. One so intricate I won't even attempt to draw here. The door and the pattern filled me with dread. I asked my brother if we could go. I think he was thinking the same as me, because he said yes."

"Scanning the horizon we found other doors, and spent the remainder of that first day walking to them. Each door was different. Of different sizes and shapes. Made from different materials. Some wooden. Some

metal. Some stone. They were all locked but somehow we knew through these doors we could go anywhere on Earth."

"On the side of an enormous dune we found a small ingress, narrow enough for a human being to crawl inside. The entrance was surrounded by hewn stones. Since we were getting colder by the minute, we decided it may be a good idea to see if this was some kind of shelter from the elements. Turns out it was a small domelike structure, built with the same stones that lined the entrance. The ground was hard but we were so tired by that point it didn't matter. We slept."

"Next morning I woke up before my brother. I had to pee and crawled outside. The sunlight was already overwhelmingly hot and bright. I peed into the sand and then covered it up by sweeping my foot back and forth. Then, at the top of the nearest dune, not the largest, but a smaller one about fifty yards away, I saw a pale man wearing a dark robe."

"I waved my arms and then cupped my hands around my mouth and yelled. He faced me, but then turned and disappeared over the other side of the dune. I wanted to get my brother, but I was also afraid to lose the chance to learn something about this place. So I ran up the dune as fast as I could. By the time I got to the top I was utterly winded. I put my hands on my knees and caught my breath like a dog. From this

height I could see for a mile in all directions. There were doors everywhere. Of all shapes, sizes, and materials."

"Then I saw him. The pale man in the robe. He was walking, not very quickly, towards a nondescript door maybe a quarter of a mile away."

"I nearly tumbled down the other side of the dune, following him. Along the way I shouted, trying to get his attention. And after ten minutes or so, when he had just about reached the door he was walking towards, he turned to me."

"He introduced himself, in a polite way, and told me he was a Doorkeeper. I told him the story of what had happened to my brother and me, but he already knew. He smiled and gestured to the door behind us."

"Is this the door you came through? He asked."

"And it was. I was so happy. He then told me then I was free to walk back through the door, and it would take me back to the Winchester House, just as if I had never gone through it. But only one person can ever go back through. After that, the door would vanish forever. So I had a choice. Or choices. To leave my brother here and return home. To

remain here and allow my brother to return home. Or to remain here with my brother."

"Now you know my story. Now you know the choice I made, and the guilt I now carry, and will carry with me, forever."

Below the story people had responded:

"Fake"

"GTFO with that creepypasta BS"

"This was thread was marked [serious]. Please follow the rules of this forum (stickied at the top) or you will be banned."

"Nice try. This is old creepypasta from Usenet. Kthadras Myth nonsense. At least be original next time."

None of this surprised him. You couldn't believe anything you read on the internet. But a few details in the story were too specific to ignore. Too similar. The pattern in the drawing in the story was identical, or near enough, to the one on the pendant. It involved a setting with a bad history. It also involved a door. And strangest of

all, a pale man. Though implausible, all these details combined was too much of a coincidence.

Kthadras Myth. What the hell did that mean?

He opened a new browser tab and ran a search. Though just as before there weren't very many results. What did match were a handful of sketchy conspiracy theory websites and blogs. He found one that looked the most credible and clicked on it.

The site was crude. Its background was black and the bright green font almost unreadable. On the home page was a simple list of conspiracy theories, in no discernible order, in all cap letters:

NEW WORLD ORDER

ANTICHRIST

ILLUMINATI

9/11

ARTIFICIAL DISEASES

GLOBAL WARMING

FREEMASONRY / ILLUMINATI / K'THADRAS

JFK ASSASSINATION

SUPERVOLCANOS

BIGFOOT / CHUPACABRA / LOCH NESS MONSTER

PROJECT SIGN, GRUDGE, BLUE BOOK (UFO, UAP)

GEORGE SOROS

CHEMTRAILS

He clicked on the link and was taken to a page with a huge title:

FREEMASONRY / ILLUMINATI / K'THADRAS

With the subtitle:

SECRET SOCIETIES THAT CONTROL THE WORLD

At last he found the link to the page called simply: K'THADRAS. He clicked it and was taken to a page with the following information.

Not much is known about the Adherents of K'thadras. We do know they refer to themselves as Adherents. We do know they congregate around locations that have a history of violence, madness, or moral decay. But after that, we enter a realm of speculation and theory. To answer the question most of us have: What is K'thadras? The only information we have comes from a thesis by Susan Burrows, Professor of Anthropology at Saint Anselm College in New Hampshire. Dr. Burrows specializes in the history of occult religion. Her seminal thesis from 1982, "The Origin of Esoterics", established a framework connecting occult belief systems to major religions, philosophies, and governments of civilization, throughout history. In this paper we have the first recorded mention of K'thadras, only a single sentence, in

which she describes it to be an ancient being which hibernates deep within the planet Earth, having been there since the formation of our solar system, 4.6 billion years ago.

Since the publication of T00E in 1982, and a growing interest in the group, Adherents of K'thadras have been reportedly sighted at multiple diverse locations ranging from caves in Antarctica to rainforests in the Congo. Below are photos that were taken in 1983, outside some Anasazi ruins in New Mexico:

These images were grainy, black and white, photographs of a dozen or more people wearing dark robes, carrying large crates and other metallic objects up a ladder into a pueblo structure. It was impossible to make out specific details. Below the images was a disclaimer, written in italics:

The photographer, a veteran named James Mayfield, was found dismembered and disemboweled not long after these photos were published. He was found by his wife, buried in a shallow grave outside their home in Santa Fe.

There was nothing else. He bookmarked the page and ran a search for "The Origin of Esoterics" by Susan Burrows. It had long been out of publication, but he did find a PDF scan of it on another conspiracy

theory website. He did a text search and found the single sentence referenced by the other site. It said exactly what the site had quoted, and nothing more.

He then ran a search for Susan Burrows and found her profile on the staff directory at Saint Anselm College. There was even a photo of her. She looked to be in her late fifties, possibly early sixties, with long salt-and-pepper hair, and a beaded necklace made of wood. There was also an email address. He copied the address into a new email:

To: susan.burrows@anselm.edu
From: thesantiagodog@gmail.com
Subject: Question about a pendant

Dr. Burrows,

I hope you don't find this email too forward. If so, I apologize in advance. This is a shot in the dark, but at this point I'm not sure who else to ask.

As briefly as I can, I recently came across a pendant with an unusual pattern engraved upon one side. Scouring the internet for a match

brought me indirectly to a thesis you published in 1982 called "The Origin of Esoterics", specifically a line in your thesis where you mention an occult group that worships a being named K'thadras. Can you take a look at this pedant to see if you recognize the pattern on it? And if you do, is there anything you can tell me about it? Anything at all. Thanks for your time. Please find the photo attached.

After sending the email he minimized the browser and went into the kitchen to pour a fresh cup of coffee and toast an English muffin. Not five minutes later, as he was just sitting down at the kitchen table, he heard the familiar chime of a new email arriving in the inbox. He went to the computer and opened the browser window, standing behind the chair. It was a response.

To: thesantiagodog@gmail.com

From: susan.burrows@anselm.edu

Subject: Re: Question about a pendant I found

Call me. 603-641-2284

He sat on the couch near the desk, the phone was pressed to his ear.
It was ringing.

"Hello?" said the voice on the other end, feminine with a faint
midwestern twang.

"Hi, is this Susan Burrows?"

"Yes it is. Are you the one who just sent me the email?"

"That's me," he said, "Thanks for getting back to me so quickly."

There was a delay. He could hear some noise in the background.
Static.

"Sorry about that, went through a bad spot. I'm driving to Wisconsin
at the moment, of all places."

"No worries. I was just saying thank you, for the quick response."

"Oh, no need to thank me. Thank you for saving me from boredom. I
saw your email pop up on my smartphone. I don't normally read emails
while I'm driving, but the subject line was so intriguing, and then
the photo of the pendant. I have a lot of questions."

"So do I," he said, laughing.

"Well I guess you do. Now where are you located? And who are you?
There were no details in your email."

He apologized and explained to her who he was and where he lived,
and then gave her an extremely truncated version of the events which
led to him acquiring the pendant. Once he was finished telling her the

story, she broke in immediately, as if she was barely paying attention, and waiting for her chance to speak.

"Okay, now this is the weirdest thing - but you get used to weird when you study the occult for as long as I have. Myself and a group of colleague are in the middle of a promotional tour for a new book we all contributed to. What I wanted to say was this. Next week we'll be in your neck of the woods, on the 8th, speaking at a place called The Goat Farm, if I remember correctly. Do you know it?"

"No, never heard of it. Sorry."

"Well, you can look it up. Anyway, my thinking was this. If you are interested, you can attend the lecture and afterwards we can sit down to discuss the pendant you found, because I have seen that pattern before, but I'd like a little time to do some digging on it, before I say anything definitive."

"Well that would be great," he said, "I'd really appreciate that. Thank you."

"As it happens, my contribution to this book is a chapter on the Adherents of K'thadras, which I noticed you mentioned in your email. That's also the subject of my talk. Spooky, right? I tell you, I've gotten more letters and phone calls and emails over the years about that one line from my thesis, than almost anything else I've ever done. It's depressing really. But the idea does capture the imagination. The idea of a secret order worshipping an alien being who

lives in the center of our world. When my thesis was published, I had a few encounters that frightened me away from writing anything else about them, for decades. But then, last year, when they approached me about contributing to this book, I knew it was finally time to put everything I had out there. For the record. I'll be seventy-four years young this July, so frankly I don't give a shit anymore. I don't have anything to lose."

She stopped speaking and it got quiet. Her words hung in the air for an awkward moment, but then he spoke.

"Well, I'm definitely going to come. And I'd love the opportunity to sit down with you, to discuss things. Like I said, I have questions. Things have been, very strange for me lately."

"Absolutely," she said, and there was just a hint of empathy in her voice, enough to make him feel like he was understood. "And there's one more thing I'd like to say, before I have to get off the phone and focus on the road. One important thing."

"What's that?"

"Don't tell anyone else about the pendant. Trust me, I know how that sounds. So mysterious and full of portent. But I'm serious. If it is what I think it is, you want to keep it a secret, even from the closest people in your life. From your mother. Hear what I'm telling you?"

"I do," he said, "And I won't. Tell anyone, that is."

She hung up. He was sitting on the couch, the midday sun now shining through the curtain onto the entertainment center, dust particles floating in the air. Outside he could hear the muffled sound of traffic going by. Everything around him was very still, very quiet, and very ordinary.

Twelve

May 24

Something's not right. I'm a little scared right now. I'm not gonna lie. This week fucking sucked. I've missed work twice, including today. When I texted Chen, I could tell by his response that he didn't believe my bullshit excuse. But I don't know what to do. I can't work right now. I can't focus. I'm sitting on my bed, forcing myself to write this. My hope is that by writing it all down I can gain perspective and learn to control this persistent feeling I have. It never goes away. This hollow feeling. For lack of a better word I'm calling it the hunger. Because it does feel that way, sometimes. A similar emptiness inside of me. Similar, but not the same. The food helped at first, before I understood. I swear I must have gained five pounds in a week. And it did help me to feel better. It numbed me. But it wasn't enough. Soon I would wake up in the middle of the night, curled up, clutching myself. Trying to force the feeling to go away. I had tremors. I twitched. Then, sometimes I would have this heaviness wash over my entire body, smothering me, and I knew I was absolutely going to die. That was doom. I never really understood that word before. But I do now.

I stopped taking my antidepressant medication. It wasn't helping me and honestly I feel like it was doing more harm to my body than good. So I blew off my appointment on Wednesday with Dr. Patel. Even if I ever do start back the medication, I'm not going back to him. He doesn't listen and that's what I need more than anything right now.

After the food stopped working for me, I went straight to alcohol. Wine, whiskey, vodka, whatever it took. The stronger the better. I feel like a goddamn cliché out of a cheesy soap opera, I swear. One night I drank so much wine in order to be able to sleep that I was still drunk from it the next morning. I managed to get ready and drive myself to work, weak and nauseous, my foot trembling on the gas pedal. I think I had alcohol poisoning. I still had the taste the sour wine in my mouth. When I got to work I went straight to the bathroom and hugged the toilet for half an hour, wanting to throw up but not being able to. Somebody in the next stall heard me and asked if I was okay. I lied and said I was. Then after I missed the morning meeting Chen told me to just go home, if I was sick. I felt horrible. That's not me. That's not who I am. But I drove home and drank myself into a stupor. So maybe it is who I am after all.

There is a moment, after I've drunk enough, and my head is just about to spin, where I go completely blank. Numbed. I feel nothing. Not the hunger. Not the anxiety. But also not happiness or anger or love or

sadness. Nothing at all. And that's the place I am trying to reach whenever I drink. And once I'm there that's where I try to stay for as long as possible.

But that's not everything. Not even the half of it. If I'm gonna get this shit out of my system, it has to all come out.

There was a night when even the alcohol wasn't doing it for me. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't even sit still. I was crawling out of my skin, like a spider. Drunk off my ass, and barely able to stand let alone walk, I still managed to remember I had half a joint Crystal had shared with me one night when we went to a Roger Waters concert in midtown. So I stumbled over to the dresser where I kept it hidden in a little baggie at the back of my sock drawer and smoked it. And it was good. It brought me right to that place I wanted to be, and I was there long enough to fall asleep. And I slept so good.

But it didn't last. Nothing does. And I was hurting. So the next day I am thinking about asking Crystal if she can hook me up with some weed, which I'm sure she can. But then I think, I'm not sure if I want her to know I'm on the prowl for drugs. Not to sound like a bitch, but at the end of the day she's not really my friend, she's a colleague. And I don't trust that she'd keep things secret, if the shit ever hits the

fan. Plus I don't want to wait. So I start looking on the internet for ways to score drugs, and quickly learn what an amateur I am.

I found some good forums, there's one called StimCentral, and absorb everything I could from these sites. I was on those sites for hours. I learned terminology. Slang. Attitude. Anything to convince somebody I was the real deal and not some naive white girl, and sell me drugs. The people on these sites area on real shit. Meth mostly. But also heroin. Cocaine. Prescription painkillers. Marijuana too, but that's like the most harmless thing there. And I have to be completely honest, I am interested in it all. Anything that can help me. Because this is really starting to wear me down, I swear. There has to be a limit to how much a person can take, and I'm afraid I'm close to hitting that limit.

Once I learned enough from these forums to not embarrass myself, or think I have, I started hitting the sites they recommend. The most popular one seems to be Craigslist, so I go there, to the Personals section, and search for phrases like 420, parTy, Tina, ice skating. There were lots of matches. This excited me. It was one in the morning. I was half-drunk on vodka and grapefruit juice, laying on the bed, not able to sleep really, but not fully awake. In the twilight zone. Scanning the matches, I see all sorts of titles, with all sorts of code words being used. Most of them I have no clue about. But I

start to see some that I do recognize from browsing drug forums. They are like:

Wife is out of town 420, PP

Any ladies like to show off???

Mid 40's Male looking for female or Male for late night activitiess

Looking for playmate not soulmate

Any voyeurs?

I click on them randomly. Not really sure what I want, but know what I don't want whenever I see it. They all sound creepy to me in one way or another, but some have a laid-back vibe that reassures me (a little). Those stand out from the rest. One says:

30s wm needs female to party n play for a few. (Party favs included).

Activities include ice skating, 420 and there's one more of my friend named proxy. And she's 20. hmu and let's do this :p

I decide this is about the best I'm going to get tonight, and I figure I still have plenty of chances to bow out. So I enter the number into

my phone and type a short message, trying very hard to strike the right tone, so I don't sound like a cop.

Heyyy :) Saw yr ad on CL. Still up?

Before I hit send I feel this little thrill. A rush. I wasn't expecting that. Like at all. Like, nervousness combined with anticipation. It felt almost, I don't know. Wholesome? No.

I hit send and realize I've been holding my breath the whole time. I exhale and lay my phone down beside me. Then I pretend to surf the internet, but really my mind is on the phone. I don't even see what sites I'm browsing. Maybe porn. I don't even know.

After ten minutes or so my phone vibrates and lights up and my heart literally skips a beat. God I was not expecting that. Not at all. It's like I'm back in middle school, waiting for a boy to call me. But no. It's not like that at all.

I pick up the phone, almost afraid to read what the text says.

Always up :) Whats yr name baby?

It takes me a few minutes to respond. I'm not sure what to say to move things forward, or even if I want to. I'm not sure if I even want to tell him my name, and I try to think up a fake name, but when I finally type a response, all that goes away.

Abbie. U?

A few more minutes go by and I receive a reply.

Steve

And shortly thereafter, another.

Wanna party?

Here my heart rate jumps by at least twenty beats per minute. Am I doing this? I am, but I play coy. Not sure why. It just feels like that's how I should play it.

tonight?

His reply comes quick.

no time like the present :p

I quickly respond, feeling myself slipping inch by inch into something that I may not be able to get out of. I warn myself to be careful. But then send a flirtatious reply.

;)

His responses come very quickly now. I have his interest.

Cool, got a pic?

This one takes me several minutes to respond. I don't really want to send this guy a photo of myself. I could probably get away with lying and saying that I don't. But I have this desire to do more drugs, and because it's late at night, and I'm feeling that way, my better judgement goes out the window and I take a quick photo of myself kissing at the camera and send to him. He responds within the minute, and we start to have a conversation.

Steve: Damn yr sexy, Abbie :)

Me: thank you

Steve: What part of town you stay in?

Me: midtown, close to the park

Me: hbu?

Steve: Im in Decatur. Glenwood apts

Me: Not too far

Steve: nope :) wanna hang out?

Me: sure, sounds fun

Steve: cool

Steve: hmu when you get here

Me: What's the apt number?

He didn't respond to my last text. I waited five minutes and thought about sending him another, but I was worried if I came off too uptight he might suspect me and call it off.

So I printed directions to the Glenwood Apartments in Decatur. Then I threw on some jeans and a shirt, and went into the bathroom to fix my hair and put on a little makeup. Seeing myself in mirror I realized how drunk I was, my vision was blurry. My eyes puffy. The sober part of me confronted the drunk part of me. "Pull your shit together, Abigail. This is not cool. In fact this is fucking stupid and dangerous." But the drunk part of me won the argument. I picked up my keys and bag and went out the door, locking it behind me.

It was now 2:17 in the morning. The streets were empty. There was a chill in the air, and a mild wind blowing the treetops. I got in my

car and read through the directions, trying to memorize them so I wouldn't have to look while I was driving. I got on the road.

From my apartment it was only a fifteen minute drive into Decatur, especially this time of night. My head was spinning and I had to concentrate in order to stay between the lines. I was hyper focused on not weaving. I took the turns I had memorized and ended up in a part of Decatur I wasn't familiar with. The first time, I ended up passing right by the apartments, seeing the brick sign with Glenwood Apartments written in cursive letters in my side mirror, but I turned around in a Wal-Mart parking lot.

The apartment complex was sketchy. It looked as if construction had been abandoned half-way through. Behind the main row of buildings I saw cleared lots with piles of dirt and overgrown grass. I could tell these had been planned to be luxury apartments at one time, but now everything was run-down. There were a few cars on jack stands in the parking spots outside the entrance ways. Piles of trash bags next to a can that was overflowing. This was not a good neighborhood to be in at night. That was my first thought, as I drove through the complex. This was not the part of Decatur I had been in before, and the Decatur I was imagining when he said that's where his apartment was. I mean, Decatur was where Tammy and Crystal and me went to the crochet class.

I found a parking spot across from the buildings, where it felt moderately safe. I locked my doors and sent a text.

Im here

As I waited I saw a toddler crawling in the stairway corridor of one of the buildings across from where I was parked. At first I thought it was a small dog. But it was a helpless child, crawling on its hands and knees, as if it were safe in a playpen. At almost three in the morning. No parent or guardian in sight, that I could see. I searched the windows and doors hoping to find someone watching. I had the instinct to run out there and help it, but I was too afraid. An immense feeling of guilt came over me. A dark feeling. Then my phone vibrated and lit up on the seat beside me.

Come on up. C bldg, apt 7

The building nearest to me was F. I looked down the row and saw D, so I assumed C was the next one in line. For some reason it felt safer to me to not be parked too close to the building I was going into, even though it meant I'd have to walk across the entire parking lot. I put the phone into my purse and made sure I had the knife and tiny can of pepper spray, just in case.

After I locked my door I glanced to the stairway corridor and the crawling toddler was gone. I'm not sure if that should have made me feel better, but it did.

C building was on the other side of D. One of the outside lights was broken out, so it was hard to see the door numbers until I got really close. There was no 7 on the first floor, so I went up the stairs. I saw 6 and knew 7 must be the one on the end, next to a railing overlooking an empty lot.

My heart was pounding. I remember asking myself if I really wanted to go through with this. But I knew the answer already.

I knocked on the door.

A few minutes later the door cracked opened and I saw a guy wearing pajama pants and a v-neck shirt already headed back to the couch. I pushed the door open and came halfway inside. The whole place smelled of stale cigarettes. The carpets were stained. Things were strewn everywhere. I asked the guy if he was Steve. Without looking at me he said "Yep that's me. Come on in." and turned his attention back to a laptop sitting on a coffee table in front of the couch. He was smoking a joint and offered it to me, again not making eye contact.

"I'm good," I said, not mentioning that I wanted to make absolute sure he wasn't a complete psychopath before anything happened.

He wasn't cute. That alone made me think about abandoning this idea. Not sure what I had been expecting. He was skinny and had a receding hairline that showed off a massive forehead. The rest of his face was long and sort of droopy. He had a little patch of facial hair on his chin, but otherwise was clean-shaven. There were deep circles under his eyes. His skin was pale and he was constantly scratching at a sore on his elbow. But there was something about the fact that he ignored me that I kind of liked. It was like I was so welcome here that he didn't even have to be polite. It relaxed me and I wasn't afraid at all, which is weird, looking back.

Loud music was playing from the laptop speakers. Since he wasn't saying much, or paying any attention to me at all, I tried to make conversation, so it wouldn't be awkward.

"This music is cool."

He seemed to come to life at that question. His eyes got big and he turned the laptop screen so I could see it.

"I'm watching this documentary on YouTube. About Iggy and the Stooges. Do you know them?"

I told him I had heard of Iggy Pop before but I don't think I'd ever listened to the Stooges in my life, and he went on a rant that must have lasted fifteen minutes. I swear to God.

"You don't know the Stooges? That's cool. Not many people do. But you need to understand they are the one of the seminal rock bands from the last fifty years. Probably the seminal band. They brought punk to the world. They released their first album at the tail-end of the sixties and blew up all that hippie lovey-dovey bullshit for good. Iggy as front man has never been surpassed by any performer since. No exaggeration. He's the perfect evolution of Mick Jagger and Jim Morrison, taking what they did on stage and elevating it into pure Dionysian ritual. This documentary goes into all of that shit. It's fucking brilliant."

And on and on. At some point I got tired of nodding and sat back in the chair, taking a hit from the joint, and tuned him out. I was tired and I must have zoned out because the next thing I remember is him standing over me, asking if I wanted to do a hot rail with him in the kitchen.

"I don't even know what that is."

He smiled and said don't worry it's mind-blowing and motioned for me to follow him. I said sure, okay.

We went into the kitchen, where he had a glass pipe and a small butane torch, sitting on a stone cutting board. He took a few crystal shards from a baggie next to the board and crushed them into a powder and then used a razor blade to form the powder into a line. Then he lit the butane torch and heated up one end of the pipe.

"Now whatever you do, don't touch the hot end of the pipe. That shit is hotter than the surface of the sun. Trust me."

I said okay. Then he leaned down and put the other end of the pipe into his nose and snorted the line. Then he put his head back and exclaimed "Goddamnit that's good shit" and exhaled out a large cloud of smoke. This was the first time he made eye contact with me. He had these bug eyes, reddened from the smoke.

Then it was my turn. He made another line and then heated up the pipe, warning me again not to touch the end. Then he handed me the pipe.

"Go for it, Abbie," he said, "It's all you."

I put the cool end of the pipe into one nostril and inhaled, feeling the sting of hot vapor entering my air passageway. Then just like Steve I exhaled a plume of white smoke. I met eyes with him, his pupils had dilated. He looked at me with this slow grin, exposing a row of decayed teeth.

"How long does it take to kick in?"

But then I started to feel this tingling in my arms, and then in my stomach. All of a sudden I could hear my heart beating. All through my body I had this weightless feeling. And then an intense feeling of well-being. Like anything was possible. I felt warm. Full of life. Then I noticed Steve was talking to me, and all of a sudden I could hear him.

"I can tell you're feeling it now. Feelin good right? This is the rush. It's just the beginning. You wait and see."

We went back to the living room and sat on the couch. I felt hyper-aware of my surroundings, but in a good way. Like I could see things really clearly. Steve sat down next to me, very close, and pulled the laptop from the coffee table and rested it on both our knees. He showed me some videos that he liked, but honestly I wasn't

paying attention. Being so close to him, our knees touching, was turning me on. I didn't even care that he wasn't very attractive. I felt this energy between us that was almost unbearable. He moved a little closer and put his arm around the small of my back.

I inched closer to him, and it was like the floodgates opened. He pulled me against him and I put my hand on his leg. We faced each other and kissed. It was the most passionate kiss I can remember experiencing in my life. I am not kidding. The sensation of his kiss flooded over me. I kissed back, wanting to devour him.

He asked if I wanted to go into the bedroom and I just nodded. I was melting from these feelings. All I wanted was more. He picked up the laptop and led me by one hand into the bedroom, which was just a mattress on the floor, surrounded by beer cans and old food containers, stray clothes. I didn't care.

I fell onto the mattress and rolled over onto my back. He set the laptop down and put on a song.

"This is like the best make-out song ever. The Stooges of course."

The song began to play, a slow meditative violin, then chanting, and a psychedelic guitar. It was not what I was expecting. So different that I wondered if it was just my imagination.

"Do you hear like, people chanting?"

He smiled.

"That's just the song, baby."

I liked when he called me baby. It made me feel protected. I pulled him closer to me. He took off his shirt and fell on top of me, kissing me hard, our tongues entwined, kneading my breasts with one hand while cupping my ass with the other. He pulled me into him. I felt his strength and yielded to it. I wanted it. I wanted to be owned by him and lost myself in that feeling. There was no more hunger. No more emptiness. Only passion intensified a thousand times by our mutual high.

His mouth pressed against my neck, breathing on me, speaking harsh words into my ear, "You mine, baby. Ain't you? You fucking mine." And then he gripped the back of my neck with his free hand and squeezed. And I melted. We were perfectly synchronized. It was like he was reading my mind.

"Say it for me, baby. Say you're mine. Say I fucking own you."

"I'm yours," I answered, "You own me."

Then I saw out the window that it was light outside, and somewhere in the back of my mind I wondered what time it was. But I really didn't care.

Before I knew what was happening we were naked. He went down on me, giving me the most intense orgasms I've ever had in my life. I swear. Then I went down on him. And I don't remember details after that. I just remember the feeling of lust and doing whatever it took to satiate that feeling. I saw us in the mirror, saw him moving in and out of me and was so turned on by seeing us fuck that it sent me right over the edge, and I climaxed.

At some point I remember telling him how dry my mouth was. It felt like a desert in my mouth. He stopped and sat up in the bed.

"Same here. We need to drink some water. We've been in bed for like seven hours."

I sat up, my mind sharp but unfocused. Then I pulled it together.

"Wait, what time is it?"

"Like three or four. Check the clock in the living room."

"Four in the afternoon?"

My mind regained focus and I noticed how disgusting the apartment was in the daylight. It smelled horrible. I put on my clothes and went into the kitchen and drank two glasses of water, but my mouth still felt very dry. I was sick to my stomach. I was weak.

"I don't feel well," I told him. He had joined me in the kitchen.

"You on the comedown, baby," he said, crushing more shards into powder, "A little bump will get you straight."

"I'm going now. This was a mistake. Fuck, was this a mistake. I don't know what I was thinking."

Steve stopped what he was doing and looked straight at me. He wasn't smiling.

"We had fun."

I didn't answer. He pulled out a little baggie and poured some shards into it. Then he wrapped it up and handed it to me.

"If you just have to go, take this with you. For the road. And don't be a stranger. You're cool, Abbie."

Just hearing him say my name disgusted me. There was a moment of awkwardness when none of us said anything. We had spent the entire night and most of the day together and I didn't know a thing about him, except that he liked the Stooges. I had to get away.

But, I did take the baggie.

Once I was back in the quiet of my car, sitting in that apartment complex, car idling, my entire world suddenly collapsed in on itself, like a dying star. Where I was. What I had done. Who I had done it with. I had missed work. I had smoked meth with some stranger from the internet and then had sex with him. Did we use protection? What if he gave me an STD? Is that baggie of drugs in my purse payment for the sex? Am I a whore? I saw my mother's face flash in my mind, gently smiling, and I felt a deep shame. Then I drove out of the apartment complex onto the main road. I was crying.

I didn't know where I was. I didn't know where I was going. I just drove. All over the city. I was thirsty. So thirsty. And I could feel the hunger returning. Those moments of relief had meant nothing. The euphoria of the drugs and the sex had meant nothing. Now I was alone. That was the worst part of all. I was completely alone. And unclean. A part of me that had been clean all my life was now stained by the things I had done, and somewhere in my heart I knew I would never be clean again. It took all my effort not to stop and take all the rest of the meth. My thought was, if I just crushed it all up and snorted it, then maybe I would overdose and all this would be over, forever.

I pulled into a gas station and went inside for a bottle of water. The cashier looked at me with concern.

"Ma'am, are you okay?"

So I went into the bathroom to look at myself in the mirror. It was like staring into a car crash. My hair was matted and tangled. Under my eyes were dark circles, my eyes themselves reddened from the lack of hydration and from crying. My skin was pale. I washed my face in the sink and brushed most of the tangles from my hair. Then I walked to the car and drank the water. Then I kept driving. My mind went blank and the next thing I can remember is a voice, his voice, speaking to me.

"Where are you hurting, Abigail?"

He was standing there, just like the other times I've come. But something about him had changed. His breathing was labored. He looked more tired than before. The room itself had changed too. I noticed the air felt thinner, as if there wasn't quite enough oxygen. The walls were wet with a mucous-like slime. Something moldy and dark appeared to be growing in the corner of the room, but I couldn't tell exactly what it was. It may have been my imagination. When the man saw me, his eyes brightened. He opened his arms and embraced me. He held me him close to him and I noticed his smell was different. Off somehow. Like meat that had turned. I told him everything that he already knew, and he comforted me and reassured me. With him I never feel judged. I never do. But more importantly, I never feel alone.

That was yesterday. When I returned home I went to bed and slept soundly and did not dream. When I woke up this morning I felt fully refreshed. I was calm. The weather was clear. The sun was out. I took a shower and washed my hair. I put on some clean clothes. Then I made breakfast and ate while watching the weather channel, listening to the birds outside the kitchen window. I am feeling so much peace and joy and optimism in my heart. And yet never in my life have I been so utterly terrified. Because I know this is not real, what I'm feeling

right now. It's just not. Because I should be suffering right now. I should be full of anxiety and sleep deprived and hating myself to the core. But I'm not. I'm happy.

So happy.

Thirteen

It was Saturday. 40 degrees. The sky was gray and overcast, but the weather had not predicted any rain. He drove through a congested part of midtown, gas stations, fast food restaurants, strip malls, and then turned down a side street and went past a parking lot filled with brightly-colored food trucks. Then he saw the metal and wood bespoke sign for The Goat Farm and turned right onto the gravel drive, finding a spot to park near the main entrance.

The Goat Farm was an arts center which had been built inside a reclaimed industrial complex from the 19th century. The buildings were all rectangular red-brick structures with rows of boarded-up windows or open spaces where windows used to be. Indoors, the spaces had been subdivided into studio workshops for artists and craftspeople of various kinds: blacksmiths, woodworkers, sculptors, painters, stained-glass makers. The layout of the Farm was labyrinthine, with many corridors and courtyards, joined together by small brick tunnel ways. Walking through the complex felt to him like exploring the ruins of the industrial south. The owners had persevered the historical character of the place, to their credit, he thought.

He followed signs with arrows that read: Occult Talk This Way, and ended up outside a large structure that looked to be an old warehouse. There was an easel out front with a sign.

Origins of the Occult: An Introduction to Lesser-Known Belief Systems
of the World, and Beyond...

Below that was a time table of speakers. There were five in total.
And the person he had come to see was third on the list.

1pm - Dr. Susan Burrows on The Adherents of K'thadras, or Hidden in
Plain Sight

It was now twelve thirty. He went inside and noticed a small table
with a stack of books. He picked it up and read the same title as was
on the sign out front. The cover was a photograph of interstellar
space overlaid with a symmetrical arrangement of various symbols, one
of which he recognized as the same pattern on the pendant he now
carried in his jacket pocket.

He asked a girl near the table how much the book cost and paid for
it in cash. Then he found a chair near the back and sat down.

As he waited he looked around. The ceiling had to be at least thirty
feet high, with exposed wooden rafters. There was a chandelier
overhead, made from woven wood and grass. Natural light filtered in
through open spaces where windows used to be. There were five rows of
folding chairs, arranged with an aisle down the middle, as in a
wedding. In front of the seating was an old-fashioned lectern with an
open laptop on top. Next to the lectern was a table with a small

projector, a pitcher of water, and a copy of the same book he held in his hands. Behind the table was a large projection screen, upon which was the final slide of the previous talk, or so he guessed, since it said:

The End (Remember kids, don't believe everything you're told)

It was not a large turnout. There were a dozen or so attendees when Susan Burrows came up the center aisle and stood behind the lectern. His first thought was she was much shorter than he imagined. She looked like an old hippie, wearing an earth-tone wrap top, jeans, and bright purple New Balance sneakers. Her hair was pinned up in a messy bun and her glasses were pushed onto her head.

Dr. Burrows opened her presentation on the computer and a title card appeared on the projection screen in big, yellow letters:

What is K'thadras?

"Quick show of hands," she said, "Who here has ever heard of K'thadras, or the Adherents of K'thadras, before attending this lecture today?"

Nobody raised a hand, including him. She nodded, as if she had expected it.

"That looks about right. Zero out of twenty. If there were fifty of you, then I'd wager one or two might have read something about it before, probably on the internet. So good. At least I know where I am. Amidst the ignorant masses."

There was laughter in the audience.

"So, there are two components to the talk I'm going to give today. The first is to introduce you to K'thadras the Myth, and the second is to introduce you to the followers of the K'thadras Myth, who refer to themselves as Adherents. By the way, all this information can also be found in the absolutely wonderful book you walked right by on the way in. If you'd like to revisit anything I say today, look up any of the primary sources, you will find that information in the chapter I wrote on K'thadras. My point is, please buy a copy. And maybe one more, for your dearest loved one."

More laughter. She let the room go quiet, and then gestured to the question on the screen.

"K'thadras is a being that lives in hibernation, deep within the core of the planet Earth. In fact, according to the myth, our world was formed around The Sleeping Abomination, over four billion years ago, during the birth of the solar system. This is the first tenet. K'thadras, in this understanding, is not a spiritual concept, and that is worth noting, because it is unique among the deity belief systems, no matter how far back in history we go."

The slide changed to a photograph of cave art, primitive symbolic patterns drawn in muddy red paint.

"The earliest reference to the being comes from cave art. For example, take a look at these, discovered in the mountain caves system of Patagonia, in southern Chile, dated by scientists to be at least sixty-five thousand years old, drawn here using red ochre."

The next slide showed a few broken clay tablets covered with faded glyphic writing.

"The earliest pronounceable reference of the being comes from Sumerian text, as seen on these tablets. Here the same symbol found within the cave systems is referred to as K'thadras. You see the symbol outlined there, and the bird facing left. We'll get to the meaning of that in a bit."

"In these texts, besides the name K'thadras, we also learn several epithets used describe the being. Undying is one. The Sleeping Abomination is another. And my personal favorite, Dweller of the Egg. So evocative, that one. I like to imagine this tiny, embryonic chicken poking through its shell."

There was some mild laughter.

"But by far the most common epithet for K'thadras is The One Who Waits. We see it everywhere, including in these tablets."

A man in the front spoke, but he couldn't hear what they said. Some laughter followed. Dr. Burrows leaned in and asked him to repeat the question. And then she laughed.

"Right, good question! For those of you who couldn't hear in the back, this gentleman asked, What the hell is it waiting for? Excellent question, but I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you with the answer to that. And let me preface the rest of this talk by saying, you will leave with more questions than answers. Because unfortunately there is so much we don't know, even now, after thousands and thousands of years. This has to do with influence of the Adherents, which we'll also get to."

"But as to your specific question, What the hell is it waiting for? Well, we have our answer in this tablet. That left-facing bird I pointed out earlier. This symbol references a Return. So interpreting this entire line, in combination with the epithets, we might say K'thadrass Undying, Dweller of the Egg, the One who Awaits the Return."

"The return of what? You then ask. We just don't know. It remains, to this day, a complete mystery."

A girl a few seats up raised her hand. Dr. Burrows pointed to her.

"Yes, I had a question about the Adherents. Are these like historical groups? Because I'm having a hard time believing that anyone in today's society could take any of this seriously. A being that lives in the center of the planet. I mean, with science and all that we know about the world. Who are these people?"

There were some laughs. Nodding.

"Well, you bring up an interesting point. And we're going to get to the Adherents. They are not just a historical group. There is mounds

of evidence that they are still active. Which we'll get to, but to answer your question, how can anybody believe in K'thadras, in our modern, scientifically advanced society? It's been my experience, and I'm an old witch, seventy-three years young this July, it's been my experience that if you can imagine it, somebody out there can talk themselves into believing it. The human capacity for self-delusion is very, very high."

Loud laughter. Some clapping.

"This may be as good a place as any to transition into the second part of our talk, which is about the Adherents of K'thadras, the followers of this being hibernating in the center of our world."

She clicked to the next slide. In big, yellow letters was another question.

Who are the Adherents?

"I'll start by listing who Adherents aren't, and we'll go from there. Adherents aren't members of high society. The wealthy elite. Rulers of the state, titans of industry. This is not the Illuminati. There is no hierarchy of power. They build no churches. The reason for that is simple. Under K'thadras, we are all equally unimportant. In fact, for all we know it isn't even aware of our existence. Another tenet for you. Who then are the Adherents? Ordinary people, like you and me. Ordinary folks who somehow have experienced the mystery of

K'thadras and now wish to spend their lives in service of that mystery."

The next slide showed yet another question.

Where are the Adherents?

She pointed to the question. Nobody spoke.

"All around you."

For effect she said nothing after that, leaving the room quiet for a few moments.

"They could be sitting in this audience. They could have served you coffee this morning. You'd never know. Their greatest achievement, if you can call it that, is their ability to stay hidden, even after thousands of years of human civilization. Completely undetected, except for these scrap pieces of knowledge I've shown you today. In fact, what if I told you that underlying all the great religions of the world, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, was this belief system, on the fringes, in the shadows, inspiring and influencing things from afar. Would you believe me?"

Many in the audience were nodding in the negative. She brought up a slide of an old pencil drawing, depicting a large statue of a bull-horned devil, being offered a child.

"Moloch, mentioned in the Old Testament to be the Canaanite deity of child sacrifice. My colleague Matthew Davies of St. Lawrence College

has written a paper linking references to K'thadras back to this deity. It has not yet been published, pending peer review, but if you are interested, please give me your email address after the talk and I'd be happy to forward you a copy of it. Fascinating stuff."

She brought up depictions from Christianity and Hinduism. Paintings of Jesus and Lord Kalki.

"In a multitude of religions, two shown here, we have myths of a second coming, or return. But none of these religions predate the references we have of the Return awaited for by K'thadras. A growing number of my colleagues look at the Kthadrasine Return to be the originator of this myth."

Another hand raised.

"You say there are no churches for Adherents, so where do they congregate? If it is an organized group, they must gather somewhere, right? Or do they not?"

Dr. Burrows nodded.

"Right, I was coming to that. It is a very good question. And you are mostly correct, but I actually said they build no churches. Because we know they do congregate, and I suppose you could call the places they congregate churches, but in the vernacular of Adherents, these holy places are called sanctums, not churches. This is one of the most fascinating aspects of the Adherents. I get excited just thinking about it. Because, like I said before, sanctums are not built. Instead, these holy places are found. Discovered."

"How are they discovered? You ask. Sanctums are real locations known for having a negative energy, or to use hippie lingo, bad vibrations. You might also call them haunted places. Specific coordinates on the map where acts of unusual violence or madness have occurred and reoccured throughout history. Somehow these places are designated as sanctums and are henceforth used for congregation, rituals, and we don't really know much more than that. In terms of the belief system, sanctums are where K'thadras has broken through the shell of the world (note that egg metaphor) and caused the surrounding land to decay. This ground is sacred to Adherents because it is a physical manifestation of K'thadras in the mundane world."

Dr. Burrows stopped talking and nobody said anything.

"This is a lot to take in, I know. Your heads are probably spinning. But this is the gist of what we know. There is not much more to our current knowledge of K'thadras or the Adherents. Pretty amazing when you consider just how long it's been around. Adherents are quite good at keeping quiet, but also at suppressing information. You may not know this, but I published a paper in the eighties with the first reference to K'thadras, outside of primary sources. And around the same time, a photographer published some photos at some ruins in New Mexico, which he claimed to be Adherents. And he was found murdered not long afterwards. Well, after some scares of my own, which I won't go into, I shied away from publishing anything else about Adherents or K'thadras, for a very long time. And nobody else did either. I'm

guessing for the same reasons. But when they approached me for this book, a few years ago now, I knew it was the right time. I mean, screw it, I'll be dead in ten years anyway."

There was laughter. Some light applause.

"Well folks, that's about all I've got for you today. I'll open it up to questions, if you have any. Otherwise, thanks for coming out. And buy the book!"

A few people headed out. Most stayed. A couple hands went up. She pointed at a woman in the third row.

"I was wondering, is there any scripture or text. It seems like there would be something, since they've been around so long."

Dr. Burrows put her hands to her cheeks, in shock.

"Oh dear, yes! I totally forgot to mention that. Thank you. There is a book out there, written by the Adherents. And as you might have guessed, nobody has ever read it, or even seen it, though we do know it exists. In the old language it is referred to as the Vothmawg-Ab. Try saying that three times fast!"

More laughter.

"But colloquially it has come to be known as The Book of Whispers. An apt name for such a secretive group of people, don't you think? The most interesting thing about the book is that it's a living text, growing with each subsequent generation. Supposedly it's filled with rituals and revelations, spanning back thousands of years, and written in a multitude of languages. I would absolutely love to get my hand on

a copy, so if you happen to have a spare lying around, please shoot me a message."

Dr. Burrows thanked everyone for coming, and then the people in the audience stood up and filed down the center aisle. He stood up, book in hand, and approached the lectern, introducing himself and asking her to autograph the book. She did so, and then asked him to meet her in fifteen minutes at the Warhorse, which was a little coffee shop in the central courtyard.

Outside the entrance of the Warhorse, there was a patio with several small wooden tables and chairs. They had decided to bring their coffee and chai latte outside to sit, because sunshine had finally pierced through the overcast skies and the temperature was warming up. Once seated, he pulled the pendant necklace from his pocket and set it on the table. She put on her reading glasses, picked up the pendant, and turned it over in her hand, feeling the texture, and palming the weight. Her eyebrows lifted.

"Well, this is the real deal. No doubt about that. I'd say it's over a hundred years old, at least, just from the erosion on the engraving. Though we'd have to run tests on it to be absolutely sure."

"Do you know what the material is?" He leaned forward, curious to learn everything he could, "I've been trying to figure that out. It feels metallic, yet it's very soft for a metal. Could it be bone, or shell?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. That's not really my area of expertise. But you're right, it's not easily placeable. Could be a lot of things."

She leaned back in the chair and took a sip of the chai, her eyes meeting his, unwavering. He stare made him uncomfortable.

"Well, spill it," she said at last, "I'm all ears."

"Spill what? I don't follow."

"Spill how you discovered this pendant. And tell me the truth. They don't exactly sell these things at the five and dime, in case you haven't figured that out by now."

He nodded and then told her everything from the very beginning. He told her about moving to the city for a new job. About replacing Abigail. Then learning how she died. How he acquired the journal. About the albino man named Rabbit. About the man in the room behind the Kroger. About how Rabbit dropped the pendant outside the room and then attacked him after he picked up, calling it a key. About his surreal experience in the woods.

Afterwards, he met her eyes the same way she had met his, to show he was sincere and not exaggerating any details.

"That's quite a story, Will."

"It's all true. Some of it I can't explain yet. But it's the truth. The way it happened."

She picked up the pendant again, turning it over, examining the engraved symbol on the front.

"And you say the albino referred to the pendant as a key?"

"Yes, Rabbit. At least that's the name he gave to Abigail, I learned that from her diary. But I met him also. He works at the Kroger. Marcus Gaines."

Neither of them said anything. Then he continued.

"I had hoped you might be able to explain some of this to me. About what's happening. About what I've seen. What about the hallucinations? At first I thought Abigail was imagining things, she was taking all sorts of psychiatric medications, but then I had my own experience in the woods the other night. Do you think they could be using some kind of hallucinogenic drugs on us? Is that something they do?"

She smiled and shrugged.

"Look, I see how frustrated you are, and I understand. Here is what I can tell you for sure. The engraving on the pendant is the Mark of K'thadras. It is fairly well-known. Probably why you were able to find matches so easily on the internet. We even used it on the cover of our book. But we don't know its significance to Adherents, and to my knowledge no pendant with this engraving has ever been discovered. So that's one thing. And also, your story about the Kroger, you said it's called the Murder Kroger? A place like that could very well be a sanctum. Those two things I can tell you for sure. After that, I can only guess."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"You say the symbol on the pendant is fairly well-known. Is it possible this could all be a hoax of some kind?"

"Anything is possible. At this point, I wouldn't rule anything out. It's probably wise to be skeptical. That said, I'm not getting hoax vibes from your story. There are too many specific details. If you are still curious, then dating this pendant would be the next logical step, if I were you. Not that they didn't have hoaxes a hundred years ago. But let me say this, when it comes to the occult and especially the Adherents of K'thadras, you have to get used to being in the dark. It's their modus operandi."

"Right," he said, "I'm starting to understand that very well."

"There's one more thing. I only mention it because I can tell you are desperate for some answers. A few years ago, when I began research for this book, contacting my old colleagues and inquiring about any new publications, I received a text from an unknown number. The person on the other end, I still don't know who it was, offered to sell me a scanned copy of the Vothmawg-Ab for eighty-five hundred dollars."

"Holy shit."

"That was my reaction. But, I don't have that kind of money, even for something as potentially valuable as that. And more importantly, even assuming I could raise the money, which I probably could, the whole thing felt very shady to me. A little too dangerous, considering the history. So I declined. Maybe I shouldn't have, but I did."

"Why are you telling me this?"

She grabbed her phone from the purse on the ground next to the table and made a series of swipes and clicks, and put it back. A few moments later his phone vibrated in his jeans pocket. He pulled it out and saw a text from Susan Burrows. It was a phone number. He looked at her.

"All I can say is, please be cautious. I'm only sharing it because I know if I were in your shoes, I'd want someone to do the same for me. But please be cautious."

"I understand. And thank you."

Some time went by, and then she said, very casually.

"Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

He looked at her, curious.

"No."

"Why are you pursuing this? Based on what you've said, nobody is asking you to investigate what happened to that poor girl. I can see you're deeply troubled by everything. I don't blame you one bit. But my question to you is, why?"

He looked at the table and tried to formulate an answer, but when he searched his mind he realized he had no good answer to the question. He had pros and cons. But no answer to why. She nodded, as if she had expected no response, but said nothing.

They sat in silence and finished their drinks. She continued to examine the pendant. The sun was low, shining across the courtyard onto the brick wall of the Warhorse, casting shadows upon it. On the

wall he watched the silhouettes of the people sitting at a nearby table.

At last, she broke the silence.

"There's something I want to say to you, before I have to go. I hope you're able to hear my words. But, you're in this so deep, that I'm not sure you'll be able to hear what I have to say. Maybe that's the real problem. You don't realize yet just how deep into this you are, and you need to. You're driving around, doing these clandestine investigations, reaching out to me, like you're Sherlock Holmes or something. And in your head you're still thinking, I can walk away from this anytime I want. I can forget Abigail. I can forget the diary. I can forget everything and go back to work. Anytime I want, I can go back to my life. But the truth is, you are in this now. Do you think you have that pendant by accident? You don't. That's not how they operate. That's not how they've remained hidden within societies going back thousands of years. No. The only reason you have that pendant in your possession is because they want you to have it. If you take away nothing else from what I'm saying, please realize that. Okay? Regardless of how unbelievable you find their belief system, the Adherents are very real, and they are dangerous. I guess what I'm trying to say is this, because I can see by the look on your face that you're not getting it. You still think you're safe."

She reached out and grabbed his hand and squeezed it hard, as you would to rouse someone who was inside of a deep dream.

"You are not safe."

Fourteen

As he drove home, passing storefronts and buildings with their lights on, passing cars with their headlights on, he thought about the things Susan Burrows had said to him. He questioned whether what he was doing was the right thing or even a good thing. And determined it probably wasn't, but what was he going to do? That he didn't know. He decided to stop at George's for a burger and a beer. To clear his thoughts and figure out what he was going to do next.

He parked a couple blocks away, on a side street, and walked down the row of restaurants, bars, and music venues to an unassuming bar and grill, with a gated patio out front, a place that had quickly become his favorite haunting ground, ever since moving to the city last month.

George's Bar and Grill wasn't trendy or hip like most of the other places in his neighborhood. It felt like something out of the past, a family-owned restaurant where you could get a cold beer on draft, have a burger, meet up with your friends, watch the game on the flat-screen TVs that lined the long bar in back.

That was exactly what was going on tonight. The playoffs were in full swing. The place was packed. He found a spot at the bar, near the drink station, and asked for a draft and a menu. It was probably not the best place to clear your head after all, but he was here now and decided to make the best of it. The bartender set down a frosted glass

mug of beer and the menu. He took a drink, looked at the menu, and then ordered a double cheeseburger and fries.

Susan Burrows had implied he couldn't walk away, but that wasn't true, was it? He could. Right now he could leave the pendant on the bar, drive home, toss the diary in the outside trash bin, delete all of Abigail's photos from the laptop, and be done with it for good. It would be like she never existed. To him. And just imagining that lifted a weight from his shoulders. It was telling that she had asked him a simple question and he couldn't come up with a single good reason why he was doing all of this. And like she said, it was dangerous. The Adherents were dangerous. He was now convinced of that. They had probably drugged him somehow. Maybe the 2x4 he was struck across the head with was laced with some kind of hallucinogenic drug able to permeate the skin. That was a stretch, he had to admit, but anything was possible based on what he had learned about them. How else to explain what he saw? He remembered what Susan Burrows had said during her talk, "They could have served you coffee this morning. You'd never know." and wondered if it was that simple. He watched the bartender at the other end of the bar, joking with another patron. Then he looked at the beer that remained in his glass. Then he finished it. You can't live like that, he told himself. You can't be paranoid.

By the time the plate with double cheeseburger and fries was set in front of him, he had decided to wash his hands of the whole thing. But

he had to do one thing first. He couldn't let them just get away with it, if there was a chance of foul play when it came to Abigail. So as he ate, he looked up the Anonymous Tip Line and called the number, mentally preparing himself what to say.

After a few rings the phone picked up. It was a woman's voice.

"Anonymous Tip Line."

"Hi, yes, I'd like to report a possible murder. And I want to remain anonymous, for my safety."

"Yes, sir. I have to inform you that if at a later time you'd like to follow up on this tip with any additional information, please use reference number 7436. Please proceed with your tip. Be as detailed as possible, as that will help our investigators determine the best course of action."

"Yes, ma'am. The murder happened behind the McDonald's on Ponce de Leon. There is an opening in the fence behind the restaurant, leading into the woods. And then once you get to a clearing, follow the railroad tracks until you reach the backside of another building. There will be some concrete steps and a door. Inside that door is where the murder happened. It's extremely important that you investigate this right away, this evening, since I'm afraid the body will be removed sometime tonight."

The woman on the other end asked a few follow-up questions, which he tried to answer as vaguely as possible, with the aim of getting police out there this evening.

He thanked the woman and hung up. Then he finished his burger and fries, a second mug of beer, payed for the meal, and left. The pendant he did not leave on the bar top, as had been his initial plan. He wanted to keep it with him for now, until he was sure.

He pulled into the McDonald's parking lot and found a spot where he could watch for the police, assuming they came. Daylight was almost gone. All that remained of it were thin streaks of red and orange at the edge of an indigo-colored sky. He switched off the Jeep and zipped up his jacket. He wanted to stay as hidden as possible. Not draw any attention to himself.

As he sat there waiting he breathed deeply a few times and felt the burden of all of this melt away. It was like he could see clearly for the first time in awhile. He had gotten so caught up in Abigail's story that he lost all perspective. When he got home he was going to get rid of the composition book and the pendant. Remove any reference to her from his work computer. Come Monday he would go to work with renewed enthusiasm. No more leaving early or calling in sick. He was going to start working out again, running three miles a day, put up a profile on a dating site, all the things he had meant to do before he got caught up in this mystery. He thought about more things and became reflective.

At that point he saw two police patrol vehicles pull around behind the McDonald's and park. He sat up immediately.

Four patrol officers and one police dog emerged from the vehicles. One of them spoke into a radio on his vest. The others investigated the opening. Shining flashlights into it and around it. After a few minutes the officer with the dog entered the opening, the others following behind. His tip had worked. He breathed a sigh of relief, and for the first time in awhile felt like he wasn't alone in all of this. He felt like he could leave now. But he didn't. There was still a part of him that remained curious. So he sat back and waited.

His thoughts returned to his plan of getting things back on track in his life. Without realizing it the mystery of Abigail and the Murder Kroger had grown to consume his waking life. But this was the end of it. The events of the past wiped away. A clean slate upon which he could now write the rest of his life. Events of the past. His mind went back to his family. His mother and how they had left things, broken and unforgiven.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. Then he started a new text to his mother.

"Hey mama, I hope you are doing well. There are some things I want to say to you, things I need to apologize for. But I feel like it should happen in person. I hope we can meet soon, maybe over dinner, if you agree to that. But I understand if you don't feel comfortable with that. At least please let me know you got this message. I love you very much"

But he didn't send it. He felt like there was some force keeping him from hitting the send button, something inside him. Was it pride? Embarrassment? Fear? Something inside of him pulled back, as it had so many times before. He put the phone on the passenger seat and wiped a few tears from his eyes.

An hour passed. Then he saw the dog emerge from the hole in the fence, then one officer, then the other two. They brushed off their clothes, turned off the flashlights, and the lead officer spoke to someone on the radio on his vest. Then they got into the cars and drove away, as if nothing had happened.

They had found nothing. Without knowing he was sure of it. This always was a long shot, and it hadn't worked. All the weight that had lifted from his shoulders came crashing down at once. He was sick to his stomach. Things around him that had come into focus went blurry again. His mind raced.

What could he do? He was alone in this. There was still the possibility he could walk away from it. But he knew somewhere deep inside that he wouldn't be able to let it go. The questions would always be there, scratching at the back of his mind, until he saw it through. Until he got some answers.

He picked up the phone and erased the message to his mother. Then he copied the number Susan Burrows had given him earlier today into a new message.

"I was given this number by a friend. If the book is still available, I want to buy it."

Hesitating only a moment, a single breath, he pressed send. Then he set the phone on the passenger seat, started up the Jeep, and pulled onto Ponce de Leon. Halfway home, the phone screen lit up. His attention divided between the road and the phone, he picked it up and looked at the incoming notification. It was a response to his last message.

"8500"

Fifteen

June 30

Last week I got fired from work. To be perfectly honest I was expecting it. I mean, the week before they had handed me an "official warning" on a piece of paper, signed by Tammy, Chen, and Pence. Then I only came into work like two days, and gave them a bullshit excuse for the other days, telling them I needed to work from home, but they knew I was lying through my teeth. On a team of five it's easy to tell when somebody isn't pulling their weight. Oh well. My health comes first. And my health isn't good right now. I feel bad all the time. I ache all over. Behind my eyes. In my muscles. In my bones. Everywhere. And the hunger never goes away. That feeling inside of me. No matter what I do. And I just can't work right now. But I believe things will get better. I really do believe that.

The day they fired me, Tammy and Chen came to my cubicle. They asked if I would follow them into Tammy's office on the third floor. That was an awkward elevator ride. Neither one of them would look me in the eyes. That's how I knew something was up. In her office Tammy asked me to have a seat. Chen sat in the chair next to me.

"We have to let you go, Abigail," she said, as if she was my best friend, "We had hoped the warning last week would help to get you back on track, but then you only showed up to work two days last week. So unfortunately our hands are tied. We know you're still having a difficult time outside of work, but there's a limit to the sort of behavior the company will accept. Please understand our position here."

She worded everything so I wouldn't get mad at her or Chen. Pretending like it wasn't them doing this to me. Like it wasn't their choice to fire me, but "the company". The more she talked like that the more angry I got. And then she started getting personal.

"You don't look well, Abigail. We're all very worried about you. Chen and me. The others. You've lost a lot of weight in a very short period of time. You have those sores on your arms."

"Pobody's nerfect," I said, laughing a little, trying to lighten the mood. Everybody was being super serious. I swear. Tammy looked like she wanted to cry and Chen looked like his mother had just died.

Tammy brought out some pamphlets about alcohol and drug abuse. The kind you get at the clinic. She handed them to me and used that

opportunity to clasp her hands around mine. She looked at me with tears welling in her eyes.

"Abigail, please get some help. We love you and don't want to see you go down this road. You're a good person and a smart person. You're better than this."

I jerked my hand away from hers and threw those stupid pamphlets onto the desk. I told them both to go fuck themselves. They were being so patronizing and smug. If they had just been a little nicer to me and not so in-your-face I might have listened to what they had to say. But I couldn't take being condescended to like that. I stormed out of there, slamming the door behind me. I went to my cubicle for my things and got the hell out of there.

Seriously, fuck those assholes. I'll find new work when I'm well again. I don't need that kind of judgement in my life. Why are people like that? Why does everybody thinks they know what's best for you, when they really don't. I got the same shit from Dr. Patel before I fired him. I'll fire everybody. Nobody fires me!

That night I texted Stephen. I asked if he wanted to hang out. He said sure come on over. So I did. Him and a few of his buddies were high on Xanax and weed. They gave me some of that and all my troubles went

away. That may be my new favorite thing. After awhile Stephen took me aside and said the guys wanted to have some fun and asked me if I was down with that. At that point I was down for whatever, so I said sure. We went into the bedroom and they undressed me, feeling me all over. I told them to get undressed and we had some fun.

Honestly I get lost in those feelings as much as getting high. Men desiring me. Lusting after my body. The more sexual they are with me the better. Whenever they touch me I lose myself completely. It feels like nothing else in the world matters, except for the sensation I am experiencing in that moment. I go to a place inside that feels like a white sand beach on a pink horizon. It is a feeling of serenity and complete fulfillment. I crave that feeling. I only want more of it.

Afterwards we all hung out and watched YouTube. Eventually they left. At the door I saw them handing Stephen money, eyeballing me. I asked him what the money was for and he looked at me with a strange expression on his face and turned away and said, "For you".

This continued over several nights. We never talked about it. But he would text me. Telling me to come over and hang out with some friends of his. We'd get high and then his friends would take me into the bedroom. Stephen stopped coming along. After awhile it became clear to me that these people weren't really his friends at all.

He gave me weed, meth, Xanax, Oxy. Whatever I wanted that he had, he gave to me. And I wanted everything. The next week was a haze. He started driving me around to hotel rooms, shitty apartments, parking lots. I'd meet strange men and let them do anything they wanted to me. I didn't care. As long as I was high and as long as they used my body to get me to that place, that white sand beach with the pink horizon, I didn't care at all. A couple times I forgot to take any money from them and Stephen got really upset. He asked me what I thought this was, some game? And I just laughed in his face.

In my free time I'd post on Craigslist, looking to hook up or for a party and play. Depending on the mood I was in. I did so many things I never thought I would do. The filthier the better. As things went on it took more and more to get me to that place. To keep away the hunger that never went away. So I did it all. Most guys never want to use protection, and have a million excuses why, so I stopped asking. Or asked for more money. When Stephen found out what I was doing he got angry with me, raising his hand in a threatening way.

"Listen to me very carefully," he said, very calmly, but I could tell he was seething with rage, "You are mine. I own you, Abbie. You do not fuck anybody without my permission first. That's how this is going to work. Do you understand me?"

I said, "Yes, master" and laughed in his face. But inwardly I liked the way he was talking to me. It made me feel desired and cared for. And I need that. I realize how fucked up it sounds, but it's the truth, and from now on my thing is always to tell the absolute truth. No more bullshit.

The other day I got a text from Stephen, asking him to meet me at a weekly-rate motel on Buford Highway. When I arrived he was pacing the room. He was geeked out. I could tell he'd been up for days. His eyes were bugging. I asked him about his apartment.

"Those fuckers evicted me. Said I hadn't paid rent in two months. That's bullshit though. I pay my rent. Paid in full, you know what I'm saying?"

He told me he had a plan. He and a bunch of his friends had pooled their money and rented three adjacent rooms at a nice hotel in Buckhead. They were planning to throw a massive party with a bunch of girls. Advertise the party to some rich business assholes who can't get laid to save their life. Charge three hundred dollars a head. Make some bank. He told me I was one of the girls. His top shelf girl.

"Motherfucker," I told him, "I'm your only girl and I know that. Don't use your bullshit lines on me."

He blew up at me.

"You can't keep talking to me like that, Abbie. You have to respect me. Remember that. I keep you high. I know you lost your job and you're damn sure not walking out on me now. You have it too good. So shut the fuck up and do what I say."

I did shut up, but inside I said, Fuck you asshole.

He gave me a hundred dollars and said "Go buy something nice to wear. Something high-class. I need you to look like a million bucks by nine o'clock tonight. Don't let me down, baby."

But you only gave me a hundred bucks, asshole, I thought to myself as I walked out the door. Still, I went to the mall and found a little red cocktail dress and some shoes to match. They were on sale. Then I had my hair done. But I had gone over the hundred dollars and put it on a credit card that was still active, even though I hadn't paid the bill in months. I have to say, I looked pretty damn sexy, once I put on some makeup. All dolled-up like that, I think I did look like a million bucks. At least.

Stephen texted a few hours later and told me which hotel to be at. It was a swanky place in Midtown. There was a bar on the roof and I arrived early and hung out at the bar. There were guys all over me, hitting on me, buying me drinks. One guy offered to give me a ride in his BMW and I whispered in his ear, "Why don't you let me give you a ride first?" So I took him by the hand and led him to a little hidden corner just inside, near the elevators. Underneath the staircase. I hiked up my dress and let me take me from behind. He entered me and felt me all over and I went to that place where there is no hunger and no pain. When he finished I asked him for a hundred dollars. He looked at me with disgust and called me a whore. I started screaming in his face, and told him I was going to find security and say he raped me. He was quiet after that and handed me everything in his wallet, which wasn't quite a hundred. But I took it and blew him a kiss as he got into the elevator and he flipped me off.

An hour later I got a text from Stephen telling me to go to the tenth floor, room 1017. I finished my drink and went down. The three rooms they had rented were conjoined. As I entered 1017 I saw several other girls dressed to the nines, lounging on the bed or on the couch next to the wall. Stephen was there, standing with a group of men who I had met before at his apartment, a black guy and a hispanic guy. They were well-dressed. Stephen nodded to me but didn't come over.

I went out on the balcony and talked to another girl standing out there. Her name was Rebecca. She handed me a pill and I took it without asking what it was. I can't remember what all we talked about. But I do remember staring up at the moon and drinking a glass of wine. The next thing I remember is seeing the moon shimmering like it was made of water. I asked Rebecca if she saw it shimmering too, but she didn't answer. I turned to where she had been standing and nobody was there. I was alone. For some reason that made me very sad. I was heartbroken and wanted to cry. I climbed onto the balcony ledge and sat there, looking down at the pool, ten floors below. It looked like a pool I had when I was a girl. A Barbie pool. So far below it seemed small, and very blue. The next thing I remember is leaning over and almost losing my balance. When I felt that sensation it stirred something inside me. I became fearful of close I was to falling over the side, and wanted more of that feeling. To me it felt like going home. A safe and tender feeling. And I had decided to do it, but at that moment a man tapped me on the shoulder and introduced himself as Paul. He was an older man, in his mid to late sixties. He was wearing a faded polo shirt and khaki shorts with flip flops. I told him he looked underdressed for the occasion and he laughed.

"Honey, when you're as wealthy as I am, you dress however the fuck you want."

He crooked his arm and asked me to rejoin the party with him. I stepped down from the balcony ledge, holding him by the arm, feeling disoriented and a little dizzy.

"Has the party started yet?" I asked him, "It's still kind of early."

He laughed, sliding open the glass door and parting the curtain.

The room was full of people. There were probably fifty altogether, mostly guys, standing around, some with drinks in their hands. Some completely naked. I saw the girls, or some of them. I saw my friend Rebecca on the couch. She was naked in a group of men who were also naked. She made eye contact with me briefly as we walked by, and I waved.

"Hi, Rebecca!" I said.

Bill whispered into my ear, "Her name's Chastity, sweetie."

"How do you know that?" I asked him.

"Because she sucked my cock an hour ago."

Paul walked me through the rooms as if he were my guardian angel. There were a lot of girls and a lot of guys. We passed a table where they were doing lines of coke. There were a dozen lines, all in a row. I pulled free of Paul and asked one of the guys at the table if I could join in and he said "Sure, baby". So I leaned over and did a line. There was a rush through my entire body. It really woke me up. And I laughed.

"Thank you so much," I said to him. He was one of the nicest guys I'd ever met. I leaned over to Paul and told him how nice I thought the guy at the table was, and asked if he agreed with me.

"Sweetie, you have a low bar for nice," he said.

And then something occurred to me and I asked him, "Where are we going by the way?"

"So glad you asked. I saw you standing on that balcony, all by your lonesome, and thought it would be nice to introduce you to some of my good friends. They are in a back room, away from the crowd. Don't you think it's too crowded in here?"

I did think so, and told him it was very thoughtful of him.

He led me into a bathroom in the third room. The lights in the room had be dimmed until it was almost dark. There were five guys standing in the room. When they saw me come inside, they exchanged glances with each other, smiling. Paul twirled me around. My dress flew up and I got embarrassed, holding it down like Marilyn Monroe.

"Here she is boys. Enjoy."

They came over, one by one, and started feeling me all over. Just the touch of their hands on my body sent shivers of excitement through me. They lifted the dress over my head and carefully placed it on the bathroom floor.

"Thank you," I said to the gentleman who did that.

"The pleasure is mine," he said.

They removed my bra and panties and began rubbing my breasts and between the cheeks of my ass. It was more than I could take. I became wet. Very wet. They lowered me to the floor and another gentlemen laid down a towel for me to lie on.

"You are so kind," I told him.

The next thing I remember was a guy on top of me. I remember I asked him his name.

"Nobody, baby" he said, breathing heavily, and that made me laugh. They had surrounded me. I didn't know where one ended and another began. But I was in heaven. I was on the white sand beach staring at the pink horizon. I felt no hunger. I felt nothing but pure ecstasy and bliss. I was surrounded by dear friends. The people I loved and who loved me in return.

There was commotion in the other room. Shouting. Then there was a loud crash and the sound of glass breaking. The guys I was with stood up and put on their clothes, very quickly. They left me lying there and darted from the bathroom. I was alone. So I sat up and put on my dress. In the other room I heard angry shouting and more slamming of objects. It was only then I started to come out of the haze of the drugs I had taken. I looked around and noticed I was on the bathroom floor, which was strewn with beer bottles, cigarette butts, and used condoms.

I stumbled out of the bathroom and saw a crowd of people in the central room. Here the shouting was louder. I pushed my way through and saw Stephen and the other guys who had arranged this party. They were standing in the center of the crowd, all of them bloodied and

bruised. Stephen's shirt had been torn at the collar. His tie was loosened around his neck. They looked terrified.

The older man who led me into the bathroom earlier, Paul, was standing in front of them, pointing his finger in Stephen's face and shouting.

"Listen motherfucker, cut the bullshit! That Rolex you took from me is worth twenty-five grand. Just come clean and do the right thing. You and your thugs used these whores to distract us, and then rifled through our shit. That was the racket all along, wasn't it? Now come clean before things really get ugly around here!"

I broke through the line surrounded Stephen and the others and confronted Paul.

"Sir, why don't you just calm down for a second? I'm sure your precious watch is fine. You probably just lost it."

The next thing I remember is seeing a flash of light and opening my eyes. I was on the floor. My jaw was throbbing in pain. Paul was standing over me, enraged. He looked at Stephen.

"Tell that whore to keep her fucking mouth shut! I'm not fucking around with you scum-sucking pieces of shit. I'm tired of playing

games. Now there are ten of us here who are missing watches, wallets, cell phones, and cash money. Either cough it up or we're going to take it out of your ass. The choice is yours, compadre."

Stephen looked at me, disgusted. Then he looked at his partners and shook his head. Then he addressed Paul.

"We don't know nothing about your missing articles, sir. We organized this party and set out food and drinks. Anything beyond that is not our responsibility. I'm afraid you'll have to take it up with the management of the hotel."

The room exploded. I covered my head as several of the guys standing around rushed Stephen and his partners. They beat them senseless, punching and kicking and stomping. Others jumped into the fray and did the same. I saw Stephen attempting to crawl out of the tangle of fighting men, but he was grabbed by the leg and jerked around like a doll. Seeing them do that to them, I got angry myself and jumped up. I tried to pull them off of Stephen but I was struck across the face by an overweight man wearing a suit. Someone shouted.

"Watch out, he's got a knife!"

It was Stephen, crouching on the floor, his entire face bloody, his clothes ripped to shreds. The crowd of men surged backwards as he sliced the air around him. Though I didn't realize it at the time, I was standing behind the glass coffee table. the same overweight man who hit me a few moments ago tumbled backwards onto me, causing me to fall into the coffee table. It cracked into several pieces, and as I reached to brace myself during he fall, I turned and a thick shard sliced me across the left cheek. In an instant the carpet was covered in blood. It poured from my face like a faucet. There was so much blood it had formed a reflective pool and I recognized my crimson reflection in it, before losing consciousness.

When I awoke I was in the emergency room. There were stitches in my face and bandages wrapped around me. A nurse came in and told me I was lucky to be alive. I had lost so much blood by the time they reached me, I was nearly dead. The cut had lacerated the muscles in my face. The nurse asked if I was in pain and I said yes, very much so, which was not a lie. She brought me Percocet and I asked her to give me double if she could. She took pity on me and gave them. It hurt to swallow the pain medication, but it took hold and I lost consciousness again. The next time I awoke I was alone. I sat up in the room, the lights were blinding. Across the hallway, I saw into another room. There was a girl in there who had a broken arm. Her family was with her. Mom, dad, and who I took to be her little brother. They were just

sitting there, not doing anything in particular. They were just together. The girl looked up at me and saw that I was looking at them. Then her father saw me and stood up and closed the door.

It was morning. I left the emergency room and took a cab to the hotel to get my car. I drove home and discovered my power had been shut off. I washed myself in the dark, with a rag in the bathroom sink, not wanting to wet the bandages or the stitches on my face.

Afterwards, I sent Melanie a text, asking why the power had been turned off. She wrote back a few minutes later.

"Serious question. How can I pay the power bill if you don't pay me the rent? That's sort of how it works, Abbie."

What a holier-than-thou cunt my sister is. Just because she got the apartment in the will she feels like she can lord it over me for all eternity. I swear. I know I haven't been the best about paying rent the last couple months. That doesn't mean you stop paying the power bill on somebody. She knows I've been going through a lot. What if it was the dead of winter and I froze to death? That happens to some people. Like in Chicago and New York. And we're family. You don't treat your own family like that. So I told her that, and she fucking went off on me.

"Listen up, girl. I've been trying to be nice and accommodate you after mama died, but you need to get your shit together. Dave has asked that you not come to our house anymore. Not until you get some help for whatever you're going through. He doesn't trust you to be around Grant. He thinks you're on drugs and that's the reason you've lost so much weight. Are you?? Pay me the back rent (2 months) plus next month and I'll get the power turned back on. I mean, you do have a job right? It really doesn't have to be this hard."

And that was the last thing she wrote. I texted her a few more times, but she never responded. Bitch probably blocked me. So I had it and packed a suitcase with clothes and a bunch of other stuff from the bathroom. Then I loaded up the television and DVD player into the back of my car, and I left and drove to the weekly-rate hotel to wait for Stephen.

Except I didn't go there.

I went to him. And he was there. He's always there. For me. In a way I hate him. I hate that I need him. But I do. I truly do. A lot of times I lie to myself. But not to him. To him I tell the truth. Always. And everything. I don't even know why I do. But it does my heart some good and I need all the good I can get right now.

But things are different. The room is different. It's changing into, something else. I'm afraid of what that might be. The walls and ceiling have turned the color of dried blood. They have been covered by that fuzzy mold that was growing in the corners the last time I was here. And the floor has sprouted these dark, fungus-like tendrils, blanketing the surface completely. There are things crawling among the tendrils, creeping things that I can't quite make out because the light in the room has also grown dimmer. It's difficult to see anything clearly.

And him. Standing there. Those tendrils on the floor have begun to wrap around his legs, tearing at the fabric of his pants, cutting into his skin. I saw the blood running down. He seems in pain, yet doesn't move. His arms were swollen, bloated like the corpse of man floating in a river. Blistered. But only his arms. Otherwise he was as thin as ever. But not well. I wouldn't say that. It seemed to me as if his body was fighting off a bad infection. He was sweating. His breathing was congested.

It took some time for him to notice me. He looked up as I entered, but then just stared right through me. His eyes were covered by a film of mucous or slime. Perhaps the same substance that I had seen growing on the walls. Eventually he did recognize me, and smiled. His teeth were

loose in his gums and one or two fell onto the floor when he opened his mouth. Despite his condition he was able to speak. His voice was raspy and wheezy, almost unintelligible, but what he said was perfectly clear to me.

"Where are you hurting, Abigail?"

With difficulty he lifted his swollen, blistered arms, and I approached him. On his shoulders I noticed strands of hair that had fallen out. Now he was completely bald. The stench from before was stronger. It was so strong it nearly made me gag. His eyes grew wide as he saw the bandages on my face. He reached up and caressed my wound, and I saw a single tear running down his cheek, falling onto the floor.

Sixteen

It was past five. To his west, the evening sun hovered just above the forested hills of the Appalachians, casting long shadows from the billboards and passing vehicles onto the road in front of him. Traffic was sparse. He was in West Virginia, headed northbound on Interstate 79. He had been driving for eight hours straight. His back ached and his feet were sore, but he had decided not to stop until he reached his destination.

He saw the sign for Exit 96, South Weston, and put on his blinker. From the exit he turned north and drove on a winding county road that ran alongside a river on his left, until he reached US Highway 19, which took him the rest of the way into the city of Weston, a rural town with a population of a few thousand people. He passed through a residential area and entered the downtown. When he saw the sign for "Historic Asylum Tours" and an arrow pointing down E Second St, he pulled into the parking lot of Saint Patrick Catholic Church on the corner.

Next to him on the passenger seat was an aluminum baseball bat and a canvas satchel. Inside the satchel was an envelope from the bank. Inside the envelope was eighty-five hundred dollars. He had taken it from his savings account, which now held a balance of exactly five-hundred and twenty seven dollars and eighty-eight cents. To buy the book was going to cost him nearly everything he had. Was it worth

that much? He had no way to know for sure. But the promise of answers to his questions was too strong for him to turn away now. Also, he was sure that if the book turned out to be real, he could convince Susan Burrows and her colleagues to buy it from him and get his money back.

If.

He grabbed the phone from cubby on the center console and reviewed the instructions he had been sent:

71 Asylum Dr, Weston, WV 26452

Jan 23 6:45pm

Park at Swisher Feed

Cross street

Building with rusted door

Wait inside

Bring money

Come alone

Not much to go on. Before he left he had looked up a map of the area and found the Saint Patrick church, which was a walkable distance from where he had been told to park, at the Swisher Feed and Supply store. It felt safer that way.

On the sidewalk an old woman walked past the Jeep. She was hunched over and carried a little hand purse. Her eyes cut over to him and he smiled and nodded at her, but her eyes went straight ahead without

acknowledging him at all. She stopped at the traffic light and crossed over to the other side and went into a place called Deb's Diner.

This downtown area was a lot like the one where he grew up in Georgia: Vacant streets and old buildings, most of them boarded up or in disuse. The few businesses there were felt temporary, as if they could shutter any time, with dusty window displays and ill-conceived signage.

The only thing this town seemed to have going for it was the asylum, which he had also researched beforehand on Wikipedia.

The Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum, subsequently the Weston State Hospital, was a Kirkbride psychiatric hospital that was operated from 1864 until 1994 by the government of the U.S. state of West Virginia, in the city of Weston. Weston State Hospital got its name in 1913 which was used while patients occupied it, but was changed back to its originally commissioned, unused name, the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum, after being reopened as a tourist attraction.

Designed by Gothic Revival and Tudor Revival styles by Baltimore architect Richard Snowden Andrews, it was constructed from 1858-1881. Originally designed to hold 250 people, it became overcrowded in the 1950s with 2,400 patients. It was forcibly closed in 1994 due to changes in patient treatment. The hospital was bought by Joe Jordan in 2007, and is opened for tours and other events to raise money for its

restoration. The hospital's main building is claimed to be one of the largest hand-cut stone masonry buildings in the United States, and the second largest hand-cut sandstone building in the world, with the only bigger one being in the Moscow Kremlin. As Weston Hospital Main Building, it was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1990.

At a quarter after six he shouldered the satchel, grabbed the bat, and locked up the Jeep. He crossed the street going north, past Deb's Diner, and walked over a bridge, under which flowed the same river he had passed on the way into town. By now the sun had dropped below the mountains and the sky was darkening into twilight. It was freezing cold and his breath was visible in the air.

He passed a local grocery store called the Shop n Save and the Fisher Auto Parts store before seeing the red sign for Swisher Feed and Supply. On his left he saw the wide open yard in front the asylum, dotted with bare trees. There was a short black gate around the circumference of the grounds. The asylum seemed out of place inside a rural town in the hills of West Virginia, so stately and austere. It would have felt more at home in Victorian England over a hundred years ago.

At the feed store he spotted a gravel road across the street. It ran behind the asylum grounds. There were a few buildings which looked to house public services. He crossed over, having to wait for a few cars to pass. He felt conspicuous holding the bat and did the best he could

to hide it under his arm. On the road the same black gate was all that separated him from the grounds. But there were no buildings here. Ahead of him he saw a metal gate across the road. There were some orange construction barriers on either side of the gate. He assumed its purpose was to prevent vehicle thru traffic, but there was nothing to keep a pedestrian out.

Beyond the gate the road continued. Here the gravel stopped and there only was old, broken pavement. The grass was overgrown. After glancing at the time on his cell phone, he quickened his pace. He approached a few buildings. They looked old. Laid with sandstone bricks they were no doubt from the time of the original construction. The doors had been painted white at one time, but were now yellowed with age and flaking off, exposing the wood or metal underneath. None of the doors were rusted.

Eventually he came to the end of the grounds, where there was another gate and orange barriers. He turned around, confused. He looked at the time and saw he only had another five minutes until he was supposed to be meeting for the exchange.

"God fucking damnit," he said aloud, "Why does shit like this always happen to me? Of course there's no rusted door. Fucking of course. Why would there be? That would be too simple."

He returned the way he had come, looking hard at all the doorways, which was becoming more difficult in the growing darkness. And then, about in the middle of the rows, he spotted a tiny building away from

the main row. It looked like a shed that may have been used to store landscaping and gardening equipment. There were double wooden doors on the front, but on the side was a squat metal door, rusted over. He waded through the tall grass and stood in front of it, hesitating. He pulled the flashlight from his pocket and shone it over the surface to make sure it really was rusted, and it was, but then he noticed something else. At this distance, he could see there was a symbol scratched into the door, like it had been etched with the blade of a knife, sloppy but perfectly recognizable. It was the symbol from the pendant. He took a deep breath, attempting to calm his pounding heart, and turned the knob.

The door opened into a cavernous space the size of an auditorium. The ceilings were high, with exposed wooden rafters, some rotted and fallen in. The walls were mottled with peeled paint, mildew, and creeper vines. Along the walls were windows, opaque with dust and grime, which admitted no light. The floors were checkered marble, but were completely covered with debris, old hospital equipment, and broken plaster from the walls and ceiling. The air was stale and filled with dust, which he had stirred up himself when entering. On either side of the space were open corridors, leading into darkness. It was clear this was some kind of central lobby of a much larger structure.

In the center of the room was a raised platform, upon which was the statue of a figure about twelve feet tall. But it was obscured in the

dim light of the space, so he couldn't make out what it was from where he was standing. He went around the front of the platform and gazed upwards at it. But even up close the figure remained inscrutable. Its shape was vaguely humanoid, having a head, torso, and two arms and legs, but beyond that he could tell nothing about it or what it was meant to represent.

He walked towards the entrance, where two enormous doors had fallen from their hinges across the doorway. Between the gaps where doors had fallen he saw a courtyard overgrown with briars and plants he could not place and bathed in a hellish glow from a fire he could not see.

Behind him was a crash and crumbling sound. His heart jumped because he knew what the sound was before he even turned around. And it was. The figure had come down from the raised platform and was headed towards him. He fell backwards and sliced his arm on some rocky debris, horrified and paralyzed with fear.

To his right was a corridor. It was the only avenue open to him, so he took it. He scrambled to his feet and swung the aluminum bat towards the figure, trying to give himself some time, and took off in the direction of the corridor. He passed by rows of rusted wheelchairs and toppled them in his path. It was impossible to see where he was going, but he ran hard, as hard as he could.

With a glance backwards he saw the figure was following him. They were in a long hallway, with high ceilings. He had to step carefully to avoid tripping over obstacles in his path. He came to an area with

a large wooden nurses station and beyond it another hallway, smaller than this one. In a few seconds he formulated a plan to turn into the hallway and then quickly backwards and dive under the station table, in order to trick it, and go another direction entirely. He didn't even have enough time to hope it would work.

He waited until he was just past the station and turned abruptly towards the hallway, catching himself against the opposite wall. It took all his strength to maintain the momentum and push off the wall down the hallway, without slowing down, but he managed to do it. Once he was a few feet down the hallway and far enough he thought he would be out of sight from the figure, he planted both feet into the floor and jerked himself backwards, twisting as he landed. He hit the ground with a thud and crawled under the nurse station table.

As soon as he heard the figure approach and head down the hallway he leapt up and continued back the way he came. But the figure had not been fooled for long and had doubled-back also. He had gained about twenty yards on it and looked behind to see where it was, and not seeing it anywhere, panicked.

When he turned back around he noticed he could no longer see the corridor stretching in front of him. Instead he was looking at the ceiling with its exposed rafters. At his feet was a window and he reacted quickly to jump over it. He had run up the side of the corridor wall, as if it were part of the floor. Disoriented, his stomach lurched and he threw up, the vomit falling behind him towards

the actual floor which was now fifteen feet below him. His legs turned weak and he dropped to his knees, grabbing hold of a lamp on the wall for support. The figure was below, staring up. And then it too ascended the wall.

Though he was still dizzy he got to his feet and ran. When he reached the ceiling he kept going and found himself balancing on the rafters. He looked up and saw the checkered marble floor of the corridor, the figure not far behind. Before long he re-entered the central lobby, where he had first arrived. The ceiling rafters were broken and he had to make a jump to the next one. He leapt without thinking and slipped. He managed to grab hold of some wiring that hung down and pulled himself up to the next rafter. Behind him he heard the figure. He turned and saw it running on the ceiling the same as him, balancing on the rafters.

In the center of the lobby, on the ceiling, was a gigantic brass chandelier, tarnished and water-stained. It hung by a single large chain. He got as close to the chandelier as he could and grabbed hold of it, his plan to swing to the opposite side and hopefully put some distance between them. But as he swung using the entire weight of his body, his legs went out from under him and he lost his grip on the chandelier. He was able to hold on by one hand, dangling from a candlestick limb.

The figure was upon him, on the other side of the chandelier. It took hold of it and began to rock it back and forth, creating a wide

arc that made it very difficult to hold on. And then he felt his grasp slip and it was over. He fell. It was forty feet to the marble floor. In an instant he accepted that he was going to die and braced himself for the inevitable impact.

At the last moment he looked down and saw the ground rushing up and then there was darkness and pressure. But he was alive, his bones were not broken. He moved his limbs and they moved as you would move underwater, slowly and with resistance. He kicked his legs and they moved the same. Then he realized he was underwater. Or, not water, but a viscous fluid of some kind. Like mud. Accidentally he inhaled and choked. The taste of it was bitter, a combination of dirt, rock, and wood. He could see nothing around him. Nor could he tell which direction he was facing. And he needed air. He swam upwards, flailing his arms and legs furiously.

At last he broke the surface and found he was still in the central lobby. More specifically he was in the floor of the lobby. The marble and debris of the floor undulated from his treading motions. He reached for a nearby bench to pull himself out, but his hand went through right through it, swirling the substance of the bench with the surrounding air, which had also become viscous. After a few moments the bench settled back into its previous shape as if nothing had happened. He inhaled and discovered he was able to breathe this thick atmosphere, feeling only a little pressure in his chest. So at least that was consistent, even if nothing else was.

He remembered the figure and looked up towards the chandelier, where he had fallen from. The figure was there, clawing its way through the viscosity towards him. It moved slowly, but with ferocity. It was getting closer.

A thought occurred to him. He wondered if this new state would permit him to move through walls, even floors, at will. He took a deep breath and dove back into the floor, kicking his legs around so that he was facing the opposite direction and swam downwards. It was black. He felt the heavy pressure of his surroundings and became vaguely aware he was swimming through marble, concrete, and piping.

He broke through the ceiling of the basement floor. It was dim, but there was reddish light seeping around the edges of a boarded window. He took a breath of air and swam into the room, floating in the space between the ceiling and floor. Around him were the remains of toilets, sinks, and wooden partitions. He swam into the hallway. It was long, illuminated by the same hellish light from outside. Unsure where to go he continued down the hall, passing the morgue, a common area filled with chairs, and a reception area.

Behind him he heard a noise. The figure was there, following. His heart jumped and without thinking he began to run. His arms and legs pumped but he moved through the viscous air as if it were molasses. He realized his mistake and switched to swimming through the hallway, increasing his speed, but not by much. But the figure had gained some

ground. From its direction came a watery and horrifying moaning sound, which he guessed to be screaming at its point of origin.

There was nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide from it. The figure could follow him anywhere in the asylum. But maybe there was something he could do. Somewhere he could go where the figure could not. He swam into a room where the orange light was brighter, and once inside he kept swimming directly into the window. And through it. Onto the ground with a thud.

He was outside the walls, facing the sandstone bricks, the creeper vines, and staring at his reflection in the window panes. Inside he saw the figure, floating, looking at him. Unable to cross the boundary of the asylum building. For a moment he was relieved, he was safe again, his feet on solid ground. But something caught his attention in the glass pane, a reflection of something awful. He turned around.

It was a wasteland. The entire asylum was burning. The grass was charred, the trees were cindered. Flames erupted from the windows of every building except the one he had just exited.

But it was not only the asylum that burned. He looked beyond the gates and saw Swisher Feed and Supply, porch collapsed, its roof engulfed. He saw the Shop n Save, or what used to be the Shop n Save, because all that was left of it was a pile of ash and rubble. All the buildings of the town of Weston, all the signs and traffic lights, were burning.

But it was not only the town of Weston that burned. He looked further, to the rise of the hills and mountains beyond, and saw that they too were burning. The trees of the forest were enflamed, emitting ash and smoke that rose into the sky above Weston. The sky glowed orange, overcast with clouds of ash and burning embers.

And though he could see no further than the mountains which surrounded Weston, he knew it was not only the mountains of the Appalachians that was on fire. It went beyond them. To the state of Virginia. To the United States of America. To the Western Hemisphere. To the Earth. It was all burning. There was nowhere to go. Nowhere to escape from it. He knew this to be unavoidable and true. Like the knowledge you were going to die.

He walked the grounds and came to the fountain in front of the central building. From here he could appreciate the symmetrical architecture of the Kirkbride design. There were flames pouring from the windows. The white steeple and spire that rose above the central building had charred and collapsed inward. Soon the fire would enter the asylum walls and burn it to the ground forever.

None of this he understood. Something about this place distorted his thought process, so that he couldn't think clearly, much like the woods surrounding the Kroger on Ponce de Leon. But focusing on the problem, he had a moment of clarity and realized he needed to get back inside the asylum, inside the central lobby, in order to return from the same door he had entered. It seemed like the obvious thing to do,

but in the moment it felt like discovery the existence of gravity. It meant facing the figure but he had no choice.

He walked towards the collapsed front doors. Using all his strength he was able to pry an area large enough to crawl through, and he did so.

Inside he scanned the room for the figure but didn't see it. He looked for the door he had first entered through and did not see it. In that direction he walked, his eyes slowly accustoming to the dim light. Then he spotted it, off to the side, the squat rusted door. It was about fifteen yards away. He walked towards it, looking at his feet the whole time, unsure if the floor was stable. But it was solid ground. He walked and walked but when he looked up he saw the door was still fifteen yards away. He quickened his pace and kept his eyes forward and still made no progress towards the door.

The hair on his neck bristled. He jerked around and saw a face down the far corridor, visible in the darkness. Only a face. Looking at him. His heart pounded in his chest. His breaths turned rapid and shallow. All his muscles tensed. And he ran as fast as he could, towards the door. At his feet he saw the marble floor moving beneath him like a treadmill. There were obstacles in his way -- a toppled chair, a broken vase, a pile of rubble. He dodged everything in his path. But when he looked up he saw the door was at the same distance.

A sense of hopelessness came over him. Without understanding why, he knew he could run for a million years and never reach the door. It

could never be reached. Once more he turned around to look at the face. He knew it would be there. And it was.

It was closer now. Closer to him. But it never seemed to move or to hurry at all. Indeed, it had no legs. But it was closer. Of that he was sure. It had grown in size. He was free to look at it. To examine all of its details. Was it grinning? Yes it was. Or no, not really. He would not call it a grin. Was it angry? No. He saw no evidence of that.

This was his new reality. He would always be running towards the door. Running but never arriving. From now on. He accepted that. And the face would always be there, following him. Getting closer.

He was tired. Sweat ran into his eyes. His legs were aching. There were blisters on his ankle. Again he turned to look at the face. It was closer still. Very large in fact. He wondered what would happen if he stopped running. Even for a moment. Just to rest. To catch his breath. But he knew what would happen. It was no secret. There was even a voice inside him, a small voice, that wanted him to stop. The voice had always been there. But now it was louder. That was the only difference. He decided to listen to it. To rest. Only momentarily, then he would continue running. He planted both feet and turned around in expectation.

It was there. Only now that he had stopped was it plain to see. The face was the figure, and the figure was the face. They were one and the same. Now that it had arrived it revealed itself to him.

It had the shape of a man. It had the shape, but at the same time it was not a man. It was a system of blood vessels and a network of nerves. That was all it was. Its veins and arteries were throbbing, pumping blood from a beating heart, and the peripheral nerves were transmitting electrochemical signals to a spinal cord and to a thinking brain. It was alive and now upon him. It had eyes, and they were looking at him. They were insane eyes, full of violence. In its hand it held a blade. A shard of bone. Jagged and sharp.

He felt the blade pierce his gut, and afterwards the sickly smooth motion of it pulling out of him. An intense pain followed, causing him to groan reflexively. He was stabbed again. This time in the lungs, through his rib cage. The jab was quick and strong. Another in his heart. He held up his arms to prevent any more and the blade sliced through his jacket into the flesh of his forearm, cutting a gash from which dark blood poured.

Falling to the ground, he found the aluminum bat nearby and swung it wildly towards the abomination, in a last act of desperation. It was merely swiped away. He was stabbed again and doubled over, clutching himself, bleeding out on the marble floor. There was a rock at his head. He hurled it with all his strength. It struck a grimy window near the entrance, shattering a pane into pieces.

A beam of sunlight poured into the shed. Hung on the wall was a shovel, pick, rake, and hoe. On a shelf were various garden tools. On the dirt floor was a bag of mulch and a couple of old-fashioned push

mowers. Near the mowers, lying on the ground, was a black albino man, unfamiliar to him, wearing a thrift-store suit. He was in a fetal position and surrounded by a pool of blood. In his hand was the aluminum baseball bat. The man rolled over and looked up at him, grinning, but obviously in great pain. He looked at his hand and saw a knife covered in blood. He dropped the knife and went out the door. Before he left he took one glance back at the albino and saw that he was laughing. Laughing at him.

It was morning. The sky was a pale mixture of gray and pink. His feet crunched over the frost on the grass and the drive as he made his way off the grounds. At the road, cars and trucks went by, on their way to work. He crossed and continued down the sidewalk, pulling his jacket tightly around him.

As he approached Deb's Diner on his left, he smelled the aroma of brewed coffee and fried bacon. His stomach growled. He had not eaten anything since the afternoon before. A part of him wanted to leave this strange and godforsaken town, but another part wanted a return to normalcy. He went inside and found a table in the corner. The waitress brought a menu. He asked for coffee. When she returned with the coffee, he asked for two eggs over medium, a side of bacon, and hash browns. He gave her back the menu, his hand trembling. The waitress noticed this, but pretended not to, smiled, and said his order would be out shortly.

This wasn't real. That was what he thought as he looked around the diner and at the patrons having breakfast. This was a dream. And the man in the shed. He wasn't real either. He wasn't bleeding to death at this moment. That hadn't really happened. He was fine. He had been laughing, after all.

A man in coveralls and a John Deere cap stood at the register and glanced in his direction. He tried to appear normal, but the more normal he tried to appear the more he trembled. Not only his hands. He was trembling all over. He couldn't stop. He poured half and half and a few packet of sugar into the coffee and stirred it with a spoon. He saw his waitress talking to the man at the counter. Ever so often they looked in his direction and he knew they were talking about him.

He pulled a twenty from his wallet and set it under the cup of coffee. Then he got up and walked out of the diner. He waited at the crosswalk for the light and then crossed over to the parking lot of the Saint Patrick Catholic Church. The windows of the Jeep were frosted over. He got inside and set the satchel on the passenger seat and turned on the heat full blast.

Then he broke down. He wept. Tears ran down his cheeks. He trembled uncontrollably and held himself with both arms. He found it hard to breathe and had to gasp a few times for enough air. Flashes of the horrible things he had seen in the asylum went through his mind. He was losing it. Inside, it felt like he had come to the precipice of a bottomless chasm, staring into the darkness of its depths. One more

step, that was all, and he would fall in, and he knew that once he did he would fall forever.

Twenty minutes later the cabin of the Jeep was warm and the frost on the windows had melted and rays of the morning daylight shone in, blinding him. He put down the visor and put on his sunglasses. He picked up the map from the console and saw the satchel on the passenger seat, remembering the actual purpose of this trip. The satchel was bulkier and heavier than it ought to have been. He unbuckled the straps and reached inside. It was the book.

Seventeen

July 2

Found this diary underneath a laundry basket of clothes that don't even fit me anymore. I guess you could say it's been a minute. But here I am. Last time I wrote was the day I moved in here with Stephen. That was over a month ago. Feels like longer. It's a small one-room with a kitchenette and a bathroom with a toilet that doesn't flush half the time. Only one bed, but there's a cot I sleep on. We tried sleeping in the same bed for a few nights, but I toss and turn and Stephen couldn't sleep. This place is a real shithole. Just a bunch of Mexicans and lowlifes is all it is. I'm ready to move somewhere better, but unfortunately don't have any money right now. Even worse I've been stuck inside for the last two days. Recuperating from a broken collarbone and a few bruised ribs, or they could be broken too. I don't really know. All I know is Ibuprofen doesn't help the pain one bit. Weed helps, but that's in short supply. Stephen doesn't want me to show my face right now. He doesn't even want me walking to the Dollar General down the road. "Might look suspicious," he says. But he doesn't know. Just makes it up as he goes along. I know that. He doesn't own me.

It's so boring here. All there is to do is sit and look out the window. A couple moved in across the parking lot. This Mexican guy and his pregnant girlfriend. Or it could be his wife. I don't know. She's annoying as hell. The first thing she did was set out all these plants and succulents in front of their room. The next day I saw she had new orange curtains and matching chairs out front. Last she hung a little arrangement of flowers on the door, and a wooden sign with cursive writing that says, "Home is not a place. It's a feeling". She sits outside most of the day and talks on the phone, laughing like nobody can see her stupid ass. And when her man gets back from work in the evening she greets him at the door with a kiss and they sit outside and eat dinner together. Every. Single. Day. I don't know. There's just something about her I can't stand. Like she thinks she's too good to be here or something.

Okay. If I'm gonna write in this diary then I guess I better write about everything that's happened since my last entry.

It really went downhill once my car broke down. That was a few weeks ago. The garage told me the engine had seized up because of an oil leak I didn't even know about. \$1250 to replace the engine from a junkyard. That was the cheapest anybody would do the job. Neither me or Stephen could afford that. Not even close. My savings had run out. We had already pawned my television and stereo from the old apartment

and used that to pay for rent and other things. Stephen was broke too. But he didn't really care about the car. His license had been revoked a few years ago, after so many DUIs, so he was used to bumming rides from his friends or riding the bus. All he cared about was getting money for our next score. None of his connections would help him out anymore, since he had robbed them all, one by one.

I did what I could. I put up an ad on Craigslist and hooked up with men in their cars. Or took a cab to their place. Or wherever. That helped us to pay the rent each week, and to score on a regular basis, but wasn't enough to fix my car. Even that was getting harder to do for me, if I'm honest. Whenever a man saw the gross scar on my face, or how thin I was compared to the photos in the ad, they always looked disappointed and angry, "You don't look nothing like your photos," they said. Most of them just walked away, cussing me out, calling me a drug addict and a whore.

But I'm not. I know I'm not. Deep down. Those are things I do. Not what I am. The things I have to do to survive don't define me as a human being. Even though I know I shouldn't let it bother me, especially from some pervert asshole, it hurts to be judged like that. It's like they're saying to you, "This is all you are and all you ever were and all you will ever be, until the day you die." The thing is, I'm not ashamed of what I have to do to numb the feeling inside of me.

I'm used to it by now. It's always there, gnawing away at me, eating me, from the inside out. To be honest, it doesn't even bother me anymore, because I know how to deal. I lose myself. In sex. In drugs. Whatever it takes. I lose myself completely. I don't care anymore. I'm free of care. I'm free as a bird. Truly I am.

That went on for a couple weeks. I was able to earn a little but it ran dry pretty soon. Without any money to score we got more and more desperate. Finally, Stephen got mad and said we should just sell the car to make a few hundred dollars. Even if it was broken we could sell it for that. With that we'd be able to pay the week's rent and then get high as a fucking kite, in his words. But I really didn't want to give up my car. It was about the only thing I had left of my own and I really didn't want to give it up. I said let me try one more thing. He asked me what, and I said "Don't worry about it."

I sent my sister a text. We hadn't spoken since I moved out, but she responded right away. I asked if she would meet me and she wrote back, "Anytime, anywhere." So I asked her to meet me the next day at the Chevron station a few blocks from the Crown Inn. That way I could just walk down there. She agreed.

The next day I went down there and saw her car already in the parking lot. She watched me cross the parking lot. When I got close she got

out of the car and I could see that she had been crying. She dried her eyes and we hugged. Then we went inside to a little kitchen in the back that served homemade arepas, run by a family of Colombians. We ordered and sat down to talk.

Melanie apologized for being so hateful about the power bill. She said she had her own things going on and lashed out at me. But she did apologize. I told her it was okay. There was some awkward silence as she looked me up and down.

"Abigail, where did you get that scar? My God. Did somebody cut you? I barely recognized you in the parking lot just now. You don't look well. You can't weigh more than eighty pounds. Are you sick? Do you have enough to eat?"

She noticed the bruises on my forearm and gripped my arm, roughly, rolling up the sleeves. She saw the marks and looked at me, helplessly, tears welling in her eyes.

"Be honest with me. I mean really tell me the truth. Have you been shooting drugs? Is that what these marks are from?"

I told her I didn't come here to be judged. Then I told her all about the car and how it would really help me out right now if she could

loan me \$1250 temporarily, until I get back on my feet. I even offered to pay her back with interest. When I finished she was quiet and wouldn't say anything. She looked down at the arepa on the table, then towards the restrooms, then out the window at the cars in the parking lot. She looked everywhere except at me, which made me feel very isolated and disrespected.

"Say something, Melanie!" I shouted.

Several people in the store looked over at us. But my sister did look at me after that. She took my hand.

"Calm down. It's going to be okay. Just calm down."

She took another moment and looked at me very seriously. I could tell whatever was going to come out of her mouth next would not be good. And it wasn't.

"Abbie, I want you to come back with me. Right now. Wherever you're staying right now. I don't care. I don't want to know about it. Let's go back to the apartment. Right now. I had the power turned back on after you texted me. You can stay there for as long as you need to. I will help you get your car fixed, whatever you need I am here for you."

It was then I sensed a "But" coming, and it did.

"But here's the thing. You need to admit you have a problem. You need to agree to enter a rehabilitation program. And stop associating with the people you're in with now. Your enablers. I spoke about it with Dave and he is willing to help pay for the rehab, even though it's expensive. I'm very worried about you, sister. I don't want to see you go down this road. I'm afraid of what's going to happen. We love you and we are here for you. All of us. Just the other day Grant asked me where Aunt Abbie was and I didn't know what to tell him. I just cried."

We sat there, neither one of us saying anything. A few times I was about to say something but then stopped. I'll be honest. A lot of what she said sounded good to me. I'm not too proud to admit that. Things were not going very well for me, in that moment. But here's the thing. If I accepted that, moved back into the apartment under those conditions, she would control every aspect of my life. I would be living under her thumb. I wouldn't even be able to take a shit without her signing off on it first. And I don't want that. To the core of my being I don't want that. I wanted to say all that to her face, so that she'd know why I was refusing her offer, but I knew she wouldn't hear anything I had to say. She'd already written me off as somebody who

needed to be taken care of, not an equal who deserved respect. So I figured what's the point. I got up and left.

She followed me of course. She begged me to reconsider. She apologized again for making me upset. She said that wasn't her intention. I kept walking, down the sidewalk, back to the Crown Inn. That was the last time I saw or spoke to Melanie. I blocked her number after that.

That night Stephen convinced me to sell the car. We put up an ad and by the next day someone had already come by to load it onto a trailer. We got \$2500 for it, which would allow us to pay rent and get high for a couple months. That was a good feeling.

Stephen went out to score an eight ball and we shot up that same night. By three in the morning, both of us were bouncing off the walls, tweaking like crazy. Coming up with all kinds of plans to make money. Stephen got an idea which would allow us to make a lot of money and keep us high for a long time.

His plan was simple. We'd take some of the money we now had and rent out another room, under a false name, put up an ad on Craigslist using some of my old photos and a burner phone. Then when the johns came, I'd meet them at the door, get them undressed and vulnerable. At that point Stephen would burst in and we'd rob them of their wallets,

phones, watches, and whatever else they had on them. These guys would be so ashamed they wouldn't go to the cops. They'd go back to their car and drive away. Plus, once we had their wallet we could use their ID to blackmail them into silence if we had to. If we were really smart we'd also rotate rooms at a few different places.

At first light I went to the front office. There was an old Indian man at the counter, behind plexiglass, drinking coffee. I asked him for a room for a week. He told me how much and asked for my identification, but I told him I didn't any actual identification right now, but that I was happy to give him the information. At first he refused. He pointed to a cardboard sign on the counter where it was written in marker, "Must have ID to rent room. No exceptions." But I offered him an extra fifty for the week and he agreed. I gave him a bullshit name and address and he handed me the keys to room 103.

When I got back Stephen had already put up an ad on Craigslist, using some of my more sexy photos and a provocative message about what services I would provide. He was always better at writing that stuff than me. He told me to go to the room and hide some weapons around the room. A can of mace, a couple knives, and a small pistol for my own safety. He told me to keep that in a place where I could get to it in case something went wrong.

I went to 103 and turned on the air conditioner. It was hot. The room was like ours, with a single bathroom, small kitchenette, and a queen-sized bed against the wall. There was also a low dresser with a television on top. The room smelled vaguely of old cigarettes and piss. I hid the weapons around the room, imagining how various scenarios could play out.

Then I went back to our room and we both waited, shooting up to maintain our high. Four or five hours passed. It was midday and very hot outside. We got a few texts that didn't lead to anything. By now we were both on the comedown and I was beginning to feel the twitches in my arms and neck. About that time the phone lit up with a new text.

Saw yr ad. Are you still available?

Stephen responded.

Yes baby. 150 per hour

They texted back and forth, he wanted more photos to make sure I was real, and finally Stephen told the guy to come to the Crown Inn on Buford and text again when he got there. He told me to go to the room and get ready.

"Make yourself sexy. Your job is to make him feel comfortable, like it's the real deal. If you act suspicious he's gonna run and this ain't gonna work. Understand?"

I told him I did. Then I went to the room and slipped on a red nightie. Then I put on some lipstick and eye shadow and a little foundation to cover up my scar. And some perfume.

The twitches were pretty bad by that point. I was feeling that tension in my face and my shoulder blades. In the rush to get to the room I had forgotten to take a Xanax to calm down. I turned off all the lights except for a lamp on the nightstand. The dimness of that light made everything look romantic. I sat down on the bed, butterflies in my stomach. It was like it was my first time, even though I had done things like this many times before.

Pretty soon I got a text from Stephen that the guy was on the way. I went to the window and saw a fat guy in camo shorts, faded blue t-shirt, and a fedora walking across the parking lot. He looked really nervous, cutting his eyes from side to side, making sure nobody was watching. When he got to the door I stood back and waited for the knock. I looked through the peephole and saw him just standing there. When he finally knocked I waited for a few moments and then cracked the door, with the chain still attached.

"Hey, are you Scarlett?" he said, voice quivering.

"Yes I am baby," I told him, "Come on in."

He came in and sat on the bed as if the place belonged to him. He wouldn't look at me.

"Are you sure you're the same girl in the pictures?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Oh," he said, and then looked up, "Can I ask what happened to your face? I mean, the scar."

I gave him a sob story about being in a bad car accident. He seemed to believe that and apologized for bringing it up.

"Are you, okay?" he asked me. I could see in his eyes that he meant it sincerely. He was talking to me like a person and not as an object of fantasy.

"Sure I am," I said, "Don't worry about it, baby."

I sat down next to him on the bed.

He put his arm around my waist, rubbing up and down, but I immediately pulled away and stood up.

"Sorry baby, but I need to make sure you have the cash first, before we have any fun."

He put up both hands.

"Oh, I'm really sorry about that. This is my first time I've ever done this. And I'm kind of nervous about it."

I told him it was okay and that he should just put the money on the nightstand. He nodded and pulled out his wallet.

"150, right?" he said.

I told him it was and he set the money on the nightstand and sat back on the bed. I went to the nightstand, counted the money in front of him, and put it in my purse, which was on a stool in the kitchenette. I brought back a condom and threw it on the bed next to him. He looked at it but would still not look directly at me. I could tell he was disappointed. But he hadn't left so far and now that I had his money I

knew he wouldn't leave anytime soon. I went up to him and turned around and sat on his lap, rubbing him seductively. He put his hands around my waist and moaned a little.

A loud knocking came at the door. A second later the doorknob turned furiously and the door flung open. Stephen came in, wearing a black hoodie pulled up. He held a pistol in one hand. He shut the door behind him and started shouting.

"Hey motherfucker! What are you doing with my girl?"

I jumped off the guy and went to the corner and grabbed a knife from behind the nightstand, staying back.

The guy stood up, his hands raised.

"Hey hey, I'm sorry man. I didn't know who she was with or -"

Stephen cut him off, and jammed the gun in his face.

"Shut your fucking mouth! Gimme your wallet and that cell phone in your pocket."

A dark spot appeared on the front of his camo shorts and then a trickle of piss ran down his leg. He seemed in pain, eyes wincing, like he was about to cry. He handed over the wallet and phone, pleading to Stephen the whole time.

"Look man, I'm sorry about this. I'm a good person. You can have it all. Just take it. I'm just lonely. That's all. I'm just a lonely person."

Then he did cry. And something snapped in me. I went over to him and slapped him hard across the face.

"Quit your bitching," I shouted, "We got your driver's license, pervert, so we know where you live. You better not tell the cops or anybody else. Now get the fuck out of here and don't come back again!"

The guy opened the door and left without another word. We watched him out the window. He tripped over a curb and fell to his knees, but scrambled up again and took off, limping. We saw him get into a hatchback and drive off.

Stephen looked at me, smiling. In total we got the \$150 plus a new iPhone and another \$120 from the wallet. We'd be able to sell that

iPhone for at least \$500. We threw the wallet in the dumpster and went back to our room.

I was shaking all over. Still feeling that rage inside. Still seeing that fear in his eyes. After awhile I panicked that the guy was going to call the police on us. Stephen told me to take two Xanax and have some water. So I did. Then he tried to reassure me.

"Number one, that guy won't call the cops. Did you see how he pissed himself? And all that good person crap. He'll never mention it again in his life. Believe me. Number two, we probably shouldn't use the same room more than one day in a row. Not that we can't reuse it ever, but we need to let some time go by. Rent a room somewhere else if we need to. There's plenty of places. That way if somebody does call the cops they can't pin us down."

He leaned over and kissed my forehead.

"You're my golden ticket. You know that?"

I nodded, and then he whispered into my ear, gently.

"You are mine forever."

Soon the Xanax took effect and I felt it wrap around me like a warm blanket. Stephen had taken a few too and before long we had both collapsed onto the bed and dozed off.

We were awoken by the phone, a new text. Stephen rolled over and checked it, mumbling, "We got another one."

"Should we answer it?"

"Hells yeah," he said, still half asleep, "That's easy money."

Stephen made the arrangements, still in bed, and told me to go to 103 and wait for the text.

I walked outside our room and saw the pregnant girl across the lot, sitting in the chair outside. She waved at me, but I ignored her and went to the room. The sun was going down, shining over the roof of the building across the way, which made it hard for me to see into the parking lot. I sat on the bed and waited.

A half hour later there came a rapid knock on the door. By then I had laid back on the bed and was nodding off. It startled me. I checked my phone and Stephen still hadn't texted.

I went to the door, locked the chain, and opened. There was a tall guy standing there, about thirty, attractive. He wore a dark blue suit and had a clean, professional hair cut.

"Scarlett?"

"Yep, that's me," I said, still a little groggy, "Come on in, baby."

As soon as he was inside he pulled out two bills from his wallet and set them on the dresser. He saw my face from the kitchenette and I could tell it caught him off guard. Then he looked me up and down, grinning.

"Scarlett. In a red gown even. I love that."

I smiled back and counted the money on the dresser. Then I placed it in my purse and got out a condom, tossing it on the bed. He took off his jacket and placed it on the nightstand. Then he sat on the bed and removed his shoes and placed them on the floor.

"So how are you this evening?" he asked, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, "Been working hard?"

I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders.

"Look, baby, you gotta have a personality with me. When I decide to spend my hard-earned money on somebody, I need them to treat me with a little respect, you know what I mean?"

"I guess," I said.

"What's your real name?"

"Scarlett."

"Bullshit," he said, and patted the mattress, wanting me to sit down next to him. So I did.

He put his arm around me and pulled me closer, smelling my hair.

"I like that perfume."

"Thanks."

"Did you count the money?"

"Yes."

"Did you notice I gave you more?"

"Yes."

"I gave you two hundred. That's fifty dollars extra. The thing is, if I give you extra, I want extra in return. You're okay with that right? It's no big deal."

I shrugged.

"It depends what you want to do."

He started kissing me, licking up and down my neck and behind my ears. He gripped me hard around the waist. I broke free. I told him I thought I heard my phone and went to check it. I sent Stephen a text, "Where are u?"

The guy did not look happy.

"You know, that really gets my goat. Unprofessional behavior like that. I mean, if I ever did that in my line of work, interrupted a service in that rude manner, I'd go out of business. It's just unprofessional. You should do better by your customers. Now come back over here."

I went back to the bed and sat down. He ran his hand up my gown and started kissing me again, feeling my breasts.

I began to realize that Stephen wasn't going to show up this time. He had probably fallen back asleep, after taking all that Xanax. A part of me decided to just go through with the trick. Just get it over with, take the \$200, and go back. But then another part of me, the part that was like I was watching a movie of myself, decided this guy was probably loaded. Who knows how much that watch on his wrist was worth. Who knows how much money he had in his wallet.

The pistol I kept under the mattress on the other side of the bed. All I needed to do was roll over to that side, grab it, and roll off and point it.

It took a few minutes of heavy making out, but I finally got to that side. By then he had lifted my gown and was kissing my stomach. I reached over and felt for it. When I felt the cold metal I jerked it from the mattress, kicked him off of me, and rolled off the other side of the bed. I pointed the gun at him.

"Whoa, what the fuck?" he said, his eyes wide, hands raised.

"Shut the fuck up," I told him, "Give me your wallet and your phone and that watch too. Toss it all on the bed."

My heart was racing. I walked around the bed, to the door. I wanted to make sure he wouldn't take a stupid chance and dart out the door. It felt so strange to hold him under the gun like that. Instantly I was the one in control. A feeling of rage clawed at my insides, fighting to get out.

"Fucking do what I say, asshole!"

He shook his head, looking at the floor, as he removed his watch, and tossed everything onto the mattress. He muttered something I couldn't hear.

"What was that?" I asked.

He looked up, furious.

"Nothing," he said, "I said nothing. Happy?"

"Leave. Now." I said, gesturing to the door, "Remember we have your ID. We can find you if you go to the cops or tell anybody anything. We'll tell your family what you did, you sick pervert!"

He picked up his shoes, making sure I saw what he was doing, and then headed to the door. Just as he was about to open it, he swung around and knocked the gun out of my hand with one of his shoes. He grabbed both my arms and slammed me against the wall.

"You fucking bitch!" he said, seething with anger, "How dare you try to rob me! How dare you threaten to go to my family! I will fucking destroy you. I will fucking -"

He lost control and threw me across the room. I hit the counter of the kitchenette and felt my collarbone snap. I blacked out and when I came to he had me on the bed, on my stomach, penetrating me anally. He was growling and slobbering in anger. He was holding my arms behind me, to the point where they felt like they were going to break. All his weight was on top of me, pressing me into the pillow, suffocating me. After, he climbed off and hit me in the back of the head and I must have blacked out again, because when I woke up the room was empty. The door was cracked open.

I got to my feet and felt the sharp pain in my side, each time I took a step. I couldn't move my left shoulder, and I was bleeding down there. Somehow I made it to the door and held myself up against the wall, and like that I walked back to the room. Luckily there was

nobody around. Except there was. My pregnant neighbor, she saw me as I came around the front. She dropped the phone and ran over to me.

"Oh my God," she said, horrified, "Are you okay? Do I need to call an ambulance?"

I told her to fuck off. I pushed her away, getting blood on her perfect little outfit. She backed up, eyes wide and a little hurt. She picked up the phone and went inside, latching the chain. Then I saw her peeking out the curtains at me.

When I got back I saw Stephen asleep on the bed. I started crying.

"Hey, asshole!" I said, sitting down against the door, hurting, "Hey fucking asshole! Stephen!"

He rolled over and wiped his eyes, completely unaware what was going on. He opened his eyes and when he saw me he got up.

"Oh my God, what happened?" he said.

"You weren't there! That's what happened."

I broke down, pushing him away. I asked him to get me to the emergency room. I told him I had been raped and how I was sure my collarbone was broken and maybe some ribs. He brought me some water and a towel and tried to clean me off. I pushed him away.

"Just call a cab. Fuck your help. I don't need your fucking help, you piece of shit! You weren't there when I needed you, so fuck off!"

He sat beside me and lifted my chin and looked me in the eyes. He was perfectly cold.

"You cannot go to the emergency room. If they see you they are going to ask questions, which could lead to the police, which would not be good for us. I know you are hurting right now, but I need you to understand that."

I looked at him in the eyes and spit in his face. The spit was mixed with blood from my beating.

"You don't care about me, Stephen. You never have. All you care about is getting high. You did this to me. You fucking asshole! This is all your fault."

I cried. He wiped the spit from his eyes and left me there.

"Do not go to the emergency room," he said from across the room, "I forbid you to do that."

I went outside and sat against our door and called a cab to pick me up. Fifteen minutes later a van pulled into the parking lot and I waved him down. Getting to my feet was difficult but I made it inside. The Indian driver looked at me, clearly concerned, but said nothing. Stephen opened the door and stood watching me. He didn't say anything, but he didn't have to. His eyes said everything. And somewhere I suppose I did understand how bad it would be for us if I did go to the emergency room. But I didn't go there. I went to him.

Somehow I made it there. I don't know how. But I did. The cab let me off at the McDonald's on Ponce de Leon. That walk was the longest walk of my life. Through the woods. Pain at every step I took. Unbearable pain. But I made it to the door. I went inside. How can I describe the room, as it was then. It was nothing like it was at first. It was covered in some dense red-black fungus or plant life I had never seen before. Particles of illuminated dust floated in the air. And the quality of the air itself was suffocating, almost unbreathable. Creeping things were moving all around me, over my head, around my feet, brushing against my ankles, buzzing behind my ears. It took a few minutes for my eyes to become accustomed to the dimness in the

room. When they did I saw the man. He was in the same spot, but he was not the same. His legs had fused with the dark tendrils on the floor. His skin had become translucent. Like a newborn frog. Inside I could see his organs, his brain and his heart and his lungs. They too were covered in the same dark material at my feet. His arms. The flesh of his arms had burst open and in place of them were two flailing tendrils, thick and covered with slime.

I approached him. He saw me, his face was the only thing still human about him. His eyes were hazy, but they widened when he saw me. He opened his mouth but he could no longer speak. All that came out was guttural croaking sound. It was obvious he was in a lot of pain.

And then, something occurred to me. Something that I had missed all along. But which became clear almost in an instant. Somehow this was all a part of what was happening to me. In my day to day life. And somehow the man in the room was related to me. And me to him. My understanding of this relationship was dim, like the lightbulb in room 103, but it was there. And I saw things in a much different way than I had before. As I reached out to hold him, to console him, those dark and fleshy tendrils wrapped gently around me.

Eighteen

The book on the kitchen table was smaller than he thought it would be, but very thick, well over a thousand pages. The pages were loose and held between two boards which appeared to be made from the same chitinous substance as the pendant, smooth and dark. The boards and pages were bound using twine which ran crosswise and lengthwise, and knotted in the center. There were worn grooves at the edges of the boards, top and bottom, left and right, which years of binding had eroded. Etched into the the boards, front and back, were geometrical patterns he did not recognize, surrounded by the symbol he did recognize. The only writing on the boards was near the bottom of the front, carved precisely in tiny letters:

K'thadras Piy Gwam

With a pair of scissors from the kitchen he clipped the twine (because the knot could not be undone) and lifted the front cover board. The first page was an ordinary sheet of notebook paper, with food stains on the edges, and sloppy handwriting that read like weird axiomatic philosophy.

"All existence is consumption and all that has ever existed is consumption and all that ever will exist is consumption and ceaseless devouring, to the end of time."

Then further down, a devotional prayer.

"Still we submit our offering in the hope one day He will know our presence and see that we are His true adherents. To Him we are like amoeba floating in stagnant waters. Less than amoeba. We are less than that. And yet we serve in perfect humility and we offer in faith eternal. K'thadrās Piy Gwam."

The phrase again. He didn't know what to make of it, but maybe it was important. He flipped through the pages and noted the pages were in reverse chronological order. The further he went the older the pages. A rich, nutty smell emanated from the yellowed pages near the end. These felt brittle, like dry leaves.

From what he could tell the book was not organized by anything except time. Some pages were handwritten. Some typed. Some on thick paper. Some thin. White. Yellow. Blue. The content seemed equally chaotic. If one page was a confession the next would be a devotional. And if one page was a devotional the one after that would be a list of ingredients or an alternate history. The really bizarre ones were

illustrations of fractals or of unsettling plant and animal life. Like nothing he had ever seen before.

He scanned the pages, looking for anything that might help me understand the room behind the Kroger on Ponce de Leon. What he wanted was a guidebook, but this read more like scripture.

"One whose eyes gaze from this dimension into the next, into yet another, a billion times over, one from another and back again, even to the very beginning of time - where the true home of such a one?"

"In my dream I sought to know the nature of K'thadras and received this reply. Destroyer of the destroyed. Consumer of the consumed. Devourer of the devoured. Eater of the eaten. Annihilator of the annihilated. Ravager of the ravaged. But also. Creator of the created. Artist of the artifact. Lover of the loved. Giver of the given. Revealer of the revealed."

He could make no sense of it. He went to the kitchen and made a sandwich and took a cold beer from the fridge. When he returned he decided to try another approach. He would skim anything that struck him as pure devotion or revelation and look for ritualistic or historical fact. What he needed was concrete details how the organization functioned in the real world. Nothing so far was helping him achieve his goal to use the pendant to get into the room. But he

was sure it must be there, somewhere. After flipping through page after page of various scripture, something caught his eye and he stopped. At the top of one page was a large swastika, drawn with talent and elaborate care.

Hitler retreated to his Führerbunker in Berlin on 16 January 1945. It was clear to the Nazi leadership that the battle for Berlin would be the final battle of the war in Europe. Some 325,000 soldiers of Germany's Army Group B were surrounded and captured on 18 April, leaving the path open for American forces to reach Berlin. By 11 April the Americans crossed the Elbe, 100 kilometres (62 mi) to the west of the city. On 16 April, Soviet forces to the east crossed the Oder and commenced the battle for the Seelow Heights, the last major defensive line protecting Berlin on that side. By 19 April, the Germans were in full retreat from Seelow Heights, leaving no front line. Berlin was bombarded by Soviet artillery for the first time on 20 April, which was also Hitler's birthday. By the evening of 21 April, Red Army tanks reached the outskirts of the city.

At the afternoon situation conference on 22 April, Hitler suffered a total nervous collapse when he was informed that the orders he had issued the previous day for SS-General Felix Steiner's Army Detachment Steiner to counterattack had not been obeyed. Hitler launched a tirade against the treachery and incompetence of his commanders which culminated in a declaration—for the first time—that the war was lost.

Hitler announced that he would stay in Berlin until the end and then shoot himself. Later that day, he asked SS physician Dr. Werner Haase about the most reliable method of suicide. Haase suggested the "pistol-and-poison method" of combining a dose of cyanide with a gunshot to the head.

By 27 April, Berlin was cut off from the rest of Germany. Secure radio communications with defending units had been lost; the command staff in the bunker had to depend on telephone lines for passing instructions and orders, and on public radio for news and information.

Shortly after midnight on 29 April, he married Eva Braun in a small civil ceremony in a map room within the Führerbunker. Hitler then hosted a modest wedding breakfast with his new wife, after which he took secretary Traudl Junge to another room and dictated his last will and testament. It left instructions to be carried out immediately following his death, with Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz and Joseph Goebbels assuming Hitler's roles as head of state and chancellor respectively. He signed these documents at 04:00 and then went to bed. Some sources say that he dictated the last will and testament immediately before the wedding, but all agree on the timing of the signing.

Hitler and Braun lived together as husband and wife in the bunker for less than 40 hours. By 01:00 on 30 April, General Wilhelm Keitel had reported that all of the forces on which Hitler had been depending to rescue Berlin had either been encircled or forced onto the

defensive. At around 02:30, Hitler appeared in the corridor where about 20 people, mostly women, were assembled to give their farewells. He walked the line and shook hands with each of them before retiring to his quarters. Late in the morning, with the Soviets less than 500 metres (1,600 ft) from the bunker, Hitler had a meeting with General Helmuth Weidling, the commander of the Berlin Defence Area. He told Hitler that the garrison would probably run out of ammunition that night, and that the fighting in Berlin would inevitably come to an end within the next 24 hours. Weidling asked Hitler for permission for a break-out; this was a request he had unsuccessfully made before. Hitler did not answer, and Weidling went back to his headquarters in the Bendlerblock. At about 13:00 he received Hitler's permission to try a break-out that night. Hitler, two secretaries, and his personal cook then had lunch, after which Hitler and Braun said farewell to members of the Führerbunker staff and fellow occupants, including Bormann, Goebbels and his family, the secretaries, and several military officers. At around 14:30 Adolf and Eva Hitler went into Hitler's personal study.

She was distraught, and would not listen to reason. Once in the chamber, she went to the bookshelf along the wall and pulled down a book. Spened it on the coffee table in the center of the room, sweeping the candles and a floral arrangement to the floor. He begged her to stop this insanity and accept reality, even gripping her by the

arm. But she was adamant and broke free and returned to the book. She flipped through the pages until she found what she was looking for, a ritual text in that arcane language she had been studying for years. She met his gaze, a faint disdain in her eyes.

"You never believed," she said, "You only pretended. But I know you. You believe in nothing."

He knelt beside her.

"If this is what you want, I will do it," his voice was shaky. "I love you, Eva."

Her breathing was hard.

"This is the way, my love."

Her eyes dropped to the text and followed the writing with a finger. Then she got to her feet, went to the center of the room and cleared an area, pushing back a table and chair and folding the Persian rug in half and half again and pulled it out of the area. Under the rug was a light rectangle which the rug had sheltered from dust and grime. She asked him to bring a piece of chalk from the small chalkboard on his desk. He did so and stood next to her on the bare concrete. She knelt and then drew an uneven circle about four meters in diameter, as large as she could given the space. Inside the circle she drew the symbol, that frightening glyph with the unnatural symmetry. There was something unbalanced about it, which gave him the sensation of vertigo if he stared for too long.

She returned to the book and picked it up with both hands. She looked at him. And he at her. And together they stepped inside the boundary of circle and knelt, facing one another. Behind her confident gaze he saw a terrified girl. But she was also beautiful, and in the end he was glad they had married. It made sense. She began to read, the words from her mouth strange, impenetrable.

Lyg'raob mar Plmuzar Okaxcib deve, K'thadras piy gwam

As she read he looked on in horror. The sound of this sequence of words spoken aloud echoed off of each other and resonated in the surrounding air. The words rose in both volume and distortion until all he could hear was a low droning tone, which vibrated the furniture and the walls. He saw she was shouting something at him. He read her lips and understood it as "Look down!"

And so he did.

The floor had opened up beneath them, soil and root veins and rock. The hole went down for miles and what was strange was that he could see those miles, because at the bottom there was a source of light and it shone onto the rough walls. As he looked closer he saw there was a moving pattern in the light. It was not a single source of light, but a multitude, rising out of the hole. The closer it got the more he was able to make out the details.

In the center was a fire burning without a source, only flames feeding into each other. The tongues whip out and become the legs of a spider, each segment curled and interlocking with the other. The legs become the arms of an orangutang, muscled and hairy. And after that it was four hundred thousand brass horns, and then a bridge of crystals made from amber and emerald. And junkyards filled with thrones strapped with sulfurous outcroppings of rock. And fruit vines whose fruits were the rotten heads of decapitated dogs from Santiago and the bloody wings torn from birds who had never flown over the Mediterranean Sea. And kerosene lamps made from the wood of trees that had grown in the Garden of Eden. And flowers that bloom symmetrical pools of machine parts, wires and metal castings. And viruses as large as office buildings, attacking one another, in a furious tangle. After the tenth strata he understood this unholy mandala would never end. He wanted to look away but could not. When he realized this he panicked. Straining at the neck he used all his effort to break free. But it was no use. He was able to reach out and hold onto Eva's hand. She gripped his hand strongly, afraid. But he knew she could not look away from it either and he also knew never again in this life would they see each other.

The strata grew larger. What was one became two, what was two became four, into the hundreds, into the thousands. And more. And it was not just objects. It was battles in Ancient Rome through Normandy, the soldiers battling one another across battlefields and time. It was

regrets from every father who has ever abandoned a child. It was fissures opening in the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. It was seawater and freshwater. It was mountain ranges. It was plains. It was feelings of anger and hilarity and sorrow and serenity and bewilderment and horror and irritation and elation and melancholy and rage and boredom and ennui and jealousy and fear and nostalgia and resentment. All together now. And visible to him in this maddening light. He was not sure how. They feelings flowed through him and replaced his mundane despair with an overwhelming mosaic of emotions. It was unbearable. He felt his sanity pushed to the brink of a vast and dark chasm. And then it went over.

He was pulled into the vortex of the mandala and was absorbed into the perpetual spiral. His watched as his arms and legs stretched for a mile until his body pulled apart and its contents were dissolved into the river of blood. Rivers of human blood mixed with bone and viscera. Wreathed around the circle, a million miles long.

The following morning, when the servant entered with breakfast, Adolf and Eva were nowhere to be found. The only thing out of place was an area that had been cleared in the middle of the room. On the concrete floor, in chalk, was a strange symbol enclosed in a circle. Goebbels was informed and quickly ordered the execution of a soldier and servant woman, dressed them in the proper clothing, and burned their bodies to ashes in place of the Furher and his bride. Afterwards, he assumed control of the Reich, retreated with his wife

and family, and prepared for the defense of Berlin. This drastic action had been done to maintain order, Goebbels was reported to have said. Order above all.

When he looked up from the book it was dark outside. The clock on the wall in the kitchen said it was five past nine. Six hours had passed since the last time he looked up. His sandwich and beer were still on the counter, unconsumed. His eyes and mouth were dry. He downed the warm beer and took a bite of the sandwich. Then he rose and went to the window. Outside were cars going by, pedestrians walking the sidewalk, stumbling out of the gastropub on the corner, living their lives as if everything in the world made perfect sense.

Eventually he returned to the book and continued to flip through the pages. With each turn of the page it seemed he went further back in time. Each page was more yellow and brittle than the one before. Soon typeset pages turned to handwritten script. The language of the pages was no longer English. He recognized German, Spanish, Latin, Greek. But he understood none of it. Then he landed on a page with a large cross, resembling an illuminated manuscript, with ornate vines woven around the cross. He scanned the words on the page and they shimmered and blurred out of focus. At first he thought his eyes had gone dry again, but it wasn't that. He continued down the page and discovered he could now understand the words. For some reason this did not surprise him.

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the common hall,
and gathered unto him the whole band of soldiers.

And they stripped him, and put on him a scarlet robe.

And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his
head, and a reed in his right hand: and they bowed the knee before
him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews!

And they spit upon him, and took the reed, and smote him on the
head.

And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him,
and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him.

And as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name: him
they compelled to bear his cross.

And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to
say, a place of a skull,

They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when he had
tasted thereof, he would not drink.

And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that
it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my
garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots.

And sitting down they watched him there;

And set up over his head his accusation written, This Is Jesus The
King Of The Jews.

Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left.

And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads,

And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.

Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said,

He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him.

He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God.

The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth.

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour.

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, This man calleth for Elias.

And straightway one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink.

The rest said, Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him.

Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.

And many women were there beholding afar off, which followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto him:

Among which was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedees children.

When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus' disciple:

He went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered.

And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,

And laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed.

And there was Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, sitting over against the sepulchre.

Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate,

Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again.

Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first.

Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can.

So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch.

He saw darkness. He heard silence. There was no emotion in his heart and no sensation in his body. He understood he was in a space beyond space, and a time beyond time. Soon the idea of 'his heart' and 'his body' seemed absurd and he abandoned those kinds of thoughts. No such boundaries existed in this place. Here was serenity. And peace. It was hard to say how long he existed in this contemplative state of being. It could have been a few seconds. Or it could have been a million years. But at a certain point he saw a point of light appeared in the darkness. A pinpoint of light that drew him towards it. Seeing the light filled him with a longing for something he had lost. He went towards the light and heard singing, a human voice whose song pierced the silence and resonated in his heart. He wept uncontrollably. He soared through the cosmic void, approaching the source of the light and the voice, until he was blinded and deafened from them.

His eyes opened. His vision blurred. He tried to speak but no words would form in his parched throat. His thirst was unbearable. Around him was a muffled commotion. Voices he could not understand.

Eventually his vision cleared and the voices became comprehensible and he understood again who he was, where he was, and what had happened to him.

Gathered around the bed of stone was a group of half a dozen of his friends and followers, the light from the torches on the wall of the tomb illuminating their gasps of disbelief. Joseph stood in the center, holding a large tome. He alone did not look afraid, but focused and intent. Etched into the wall behind him was a symbol he did not recognize. Then the words which Joseph spoke became clear and unmuffled. He listened to the strange song-like incantation, chanted in endless repetition, and felt his strength return.

Lyg'raob mar Plmuzar Okaxcib deve, K'thadras piy gwam

Nineteen

July 14

This will be my last entry.

I am back at home, in my mother's bedroom, sitting at the desk in the corner. My sister has never turned the power back on, so I am writing by candlelight, like some princess in a castle. I've spent the last hour flipping through my old entries. You know what's funny? I don't recognize the Abigail I was before. The one with the family and the career. The Abigail who was paralyzed from grief over the death of her mother. I do remember that time in my life, of course. I'm not insane. And I do remember my mother, and my sorrow when she passed. But her memory is distant. Faint. Like a pair of shoes I once owned. Fondly remembered, but meaningless.

What this journal has become, at the end of the day, is the record of a mystery without explanation. The mystery of the man who lives in the room behind the Kroger on Ponce de Leon. You might think I'm crazy, but I have a feeling he's the one responsible for all the horrible shit that's happened to me since that evening in May. I can't explain how I know that, it doesn't really make sense, but I know. Don't get my wrong. I'm not angry. Not anymore I'm not. And I don't think I'm

blameless, either. I take full responsibility for my actions. This journal is a confession too. But ultimately, this is the only way I know how to reveal the truth about what happened. Now that he's gone.

After the events of July 2nd, Garvey took down the listing from Craigslist. We pooled the money we made and scored an ounce of good shit. It would last us a month if we paced ourselves. So we got high. And stayed high. On the drugs the pain of my injuries didn't matter. It's not that the pain went away. It just didn't matter. I remember dropping a plate on the floor and picking it up. Garvey looked horrified and said, "Ain't that your broken arm?" I looked at my arm and laughed. "Yeah, I guess it is." He asked me if it hurt, and I had to think about it for a moment. I said yeah, and we both laughed.

We never slept. We watched TV, YouTube. We talked conspiracy theories, or just sat and stared out the window. And whenever we felt the anxiety of the comedown, we'd hit it again, and be soaring for another day or so. Another thing we never did was clean the room. It was disgusting. There was trash and dirty clothes strewn all over the floor. Cigarette butts and ashes piled on the nightstand. At night we heard roaches scurrying in old takeout boxes. Or maybe it was rats. We never found out.

After a week of being holed up in the room, Garvey started getting on my last nerve. He had become paranoid that somebody was going to find out about the robberies. "We were too nice to that one guy," he said, "We should have roughed him up, put the fear of God into him." He was convinced the guy was going to place an anonymous phone call to the police. So every few minutes he would be at the window, scanning the parking lot for cops. At the trash bins he found some wood scraps and brought it inside and boarded the window in the bathroom, as best as he could with no tools. He made so much racket doing that, at two in the morning, our neighbors beat on the walls. So I went off on him.

"You're gonna get the cops called on us for doing that stupid shit, you dumbass!"

He called me a rotten bitch and slapped me across the face. And that really set me off. I scratched in his face and kicked him in the balls.

"I hate your fucking guts!" he said.

I told him I wish I never met him and he shut himself in the bathroom and didn't come out for an hour. But it was fine. After that we watched a documentary on YouTube about the whaling industry in China, and how it was connected to 9/11.

The more we stayed in the more frequent our arguments. The thing was Garvey was too paranoid to go out. And with my injuries he completely forbid me to go out. When we got hungry he walked to the gas station and picked up some arepas. That was the only time I had to myself. In those moments I could really breathe. I could relax. And whenever he returned and I heard the doorknob turn there was a sick feeling in my stomach. Sometimes I was so sick I lost my appetite altogether. Then I had to listen to a lecture about not wasting our money if we didn't have to. Sometimes he was as bad as my mother. I swear.

It was hot. Even for July it was hot. The window air conditioner unit wasn't good enough to keep the room cool during the hottest time of the day. So what I did was pull the table and chair over to the window and prop it open. Then I would sit there and just look out the window over the parking lot. That was how I spent my afternoons. What we really needed was a fan. Just a cheap box fan we could stick in the window for circulation. I asked Garvey if he could get one but he said we couldn't afford that right now.

"Just do like I do and ignore the heat. You get used to it after awhile. Look at me, I don't even sweat no more."

As he said that I could see his undershirt was drenched in sweat. But I didn't say anything. Sometimes it wasn't worth the effort. I just ignored him and went back to the window. It was so uncomfortable. With the heat and the sweat. And being cooped up with the same person for nearly two weeks. Inside I felt this gnawing. That same gnawing hunger I had felt for so long it was like background noise. It didn't even bother me anymore. Except when it did.

All that bullshit continued in the same way until today, my irritation rising, the gnawing inside getting stronger, until something had to give.

In order to block out Garvey and the heat and the stench of our nasty room, all of which was really getting to me - I sat at the open window and stared across the lot at the pregnant girl who lived with her Mexican boyfriend.

If I'm honest, I was jealous of her. It feels good to write that. Some light of truth in this darkness. I was jealous of her and her boyfriend, who clearly loved her and kissed her every night when he got home from work. I was jealous of their mutual love, and of their material possessions, the nice chairs and decorations she hung outside their room. The succulents and potted plants. But most of all I was jealous of the unborn child in her womb. A child that would be loved

and give love, unconditionally. It didn't seem fair to me that she had so much, and me so little.

She was outside, sitting in the chair, in the heat, with a tiny oscillating fan on a table next to her. She had a glass of lemonade and a sandwich and was reading a magazine. Whenever the fan turned in her direction it blew her hair across her face and she absently flipped it behind her ears. For some reason this infuriated me.

"Just tie your hair back, you fucking cunt!" I said.

Garvey sat up in bed. He had gone so long without sleep that he was nodding off during the daytime.

"What'd you say? Tie my hair back?"

"Nothing," I said, "Go back to sleep."

Not long after that she got a text. Then she picked up all her things and brought them inside. Ten minutes later a hatchback pulled up with a girl inside. The car honked and she came outside, wearing a sun dress and a large pair of sunglasses pushed up on her head. She got in the car and they drove off.

It was then I got the idea. At the time I thought it was a good idea, a very good idea, but it wasn't. It really wasn't.

From the nightstand I grabbed Garvey's pocket knife. I put on some jeans and some flip flops and walked outside. It was the afternoon and in the sunlight I winced and covered my eyes. I looked down at my arms, pockmarked with scabs and ashen in color. I felt like a vampire recently emerged from the tomb. Hyper aware of my surroundings, I looked around to make sure nobody was watching me.

What I knew from days upon days of observing them, was that my neighbors hid a key to their room underneath a green and blue glazed pot which sat upon the ledge of their window sill, holding the smallest succulent. I walked across the hot asphalt to the area in front of my neighbors room. I raised the pot and saw the room key, and took it. Hesitating for only a moment, I used the key and entered their room.

It was strange inside. The layout of the room and the furniture was entirely the same as the room Garvey and me shared, except reversed. What was different was how clean it was. And how it smelled. The walls were bright. The carpet was soft. Don't get me wrong, this entire weekly-rate complex was a shithole, but somehow she had made their room homelike, a cocoon in the middle of a wasteland. The wooden

furniture had been polished. The sheets and blankets on the bed had been washed with fragrant detergent. In the kitchenette, on the counter where Garvey and me kept our paraphernalia, they had a row of small picture frames, with photos of their family. In the dresser she found their clothes neatly washed and folded, separated into drawers for underwear and socks, jeans and pants, and shirts.

I walked into the kitchen and opened the small refrigerator. Inside was a fucking cornucopia of food. It looked like something out of a painting from the Renaissance, I swear to God. There were vegetables and fruits, tomatoes, peppers, carrots, lettuce, oranges, bananas, grapes. There was meat, chicken, ground beef, chorizo, bacon. At the bottom of the fridge was a pot of spaghetti and meatballs. I pulled it out and took a fork from the drawer and wolfed it down. I wasn't even hungry. Or, maybe I didn't realize how hungry I was.

When I turned around I saw her. The pregnant girl was standing at the door, her key in the doorknob, sunglasses on. She startled when she noticed me. She screamed and then became quiet. Calm even. She closed the door and put the keys into her purse. She did not look at all afraid. I said nothing, holding the pot of spaghetti, fork in my hand.

"You can finish it," she said, "I don't mind."

I continued to eat, watching her, not responding. She set her purse and a shopping bag on the bed and stood there, looking at me. She smiled warmly.

"You are the woman who lives across from us."

I said nothing.

"It's okay," she said, "I'm not mad. Really, you are welcome to our food. To be honest I have been worried for you. Ever since that night a couple weeks ago. I wanted to call an ambulance for you. But I'm glad you're okay now."

I set down the pot on the island, and rested the fork on the lid. It slipped and fell to the counter with a clang. I could see it startle the girl. But I pretended not to notice.

"Gregorio, my husband, told me not to intervene, when I told him about you later that night. But I was raised by my mother to help those who are in need. Don't you think that's a better way to be?"

From the moment onward it was like I was watching the movie of my life. That same sensation I had experienced before, when I followed Rabbit into the woods behind the McDonald's. It was the same. I

watched the girl, in whose eyes I now saw terror. I watched myself, opening the pocket knife, and flashing the blade in front of me. I watched the blade enter her pregnant belly, spilling dark blood onto that clean carpet. I watched the evisceration of the fetus, ripped from the womb before its time. I watched as the girl went pale, her expression a combination of shock and horror and disbelief.

I looked down and saw my clothes were drenched in her blood. My arms and hands completely soaked, as if dipped in crimson lacquer.

The next thing I remember was the parking lot. Stumbling across it, seeing my movements as if through a tunnel. Not feeling anything, but knowing that the person I was observing felt utter rage and a loss of control.

The next thing I remember is standing in the shower, my clothes on the tile floor, seeping rivulets of blood into the cracks. I remember the blood washing down the drain. Feeling the water running down my body. Feeling clean.

I remember sirens, and the flashing of red and blue lights, outside our window. Shouting. Commotion.

Garvey woke up and went to the window.

"What the hell?" he said.

He flung back the curtain and I saw rows of police cars and an ambulance. There was a growing crowd at the edge of the yellow tape, standing on their tiptoes in order to see the carnage within. But the door to the room was closed.

At that moment a pickup truck pulled into the spot where it always parked, just in front of their apartment. The husband got out of the truck, his work clothes dusty, and forced his way through the group of police officers. A man in a long coat emerged from the door and placed his hand on the shoulder of the husband, and stopped him from going inside the room. The husband was told something. He went pale and dropped to his knees, unable to stand.

Garvey turned to me, in shock, and then horror as the realization struck him. He looked me up and down. I stood there naked, clean, but my hands red-stained. In my right hand I still carried the pocket knife. I hadn't even put it down.

"What did you do?" he said. His eyes turned fearful and tears welled up in them. All the hardness and macho toughness he had always projected left him in that single moment. In its place was the

weakness of a child. A boy. To be honest, it disgusted me to see him like that. It was at that moment I realized I was completely alone in the world.

I said nothing. Not because I was afraid. I wasn't. It was because there didn't seem to be anything to say. Everything was dreamlike all of a sudden, and I felt disconnected from my surroundings. I felt like nothing mattered. Nothing at all.

"Oh my God, Abigail," he said, turning back to the scene in the parking lot, "What did you do? You need to come clean. You have to go out there and come clean for what you did."

What I remember next is the blade of the knife severing the artery in his neck and a thick jet of blood splattering the window pane. He grasped his neck as he turned back to me, wide-eyed, not unlike the neighbor girl. He staggered against the table and lost his balance and fell to his knees. I remember seeing the blade stab one of his eyes, and then the other, and afterwards him reaching towards me, blinded, with tears of blood and vitreous fluid streaming down his face. He made an awful sound, as if he were drowning and finally he collapsed onto the floor in front of me, unmoving.

I remember taking a towel from the bathroom and wiping down the window, quickly and sloppily, and placing it into my bag. I remember grabbing my identification and whatever cash we had left from the nightstand and stuffing it into my bag also. Some part of me must have been thinking rationally, out of self-preservation. Maybe it was instinct. I don't know. I'm not sure of anything anymore.

The next thing I remember is climbing out of the bathroom window, removing the particle boarding Garvey had put in place, and stepping into the small alley behind the building. There was a cat sitting on top of a rusted-out water heater. It hissed at me and scampered away. Separating the weekly-rate hotel from a gas station next door was a concrete gutter protected by a chainlink fence. I remember hopping the fence and snagging my jeans on the way down. Inspecting the hole I noticed I was wearing a pair of work gloves Garvey kept in his toolbox. I have no memory of looking for them or putting them on. But I can guess it was to hide the blood stains on my hands from anybody, until I could clean them better. I can't be sure of my motivations. At that point I wasn't even aware of my destination. Everything was hazy and surreal.

I do remember keeping away from sidewalks, and from Buford Highway in general, and wanting to stay hidden, feeling that was the smart thing to do. Instead I walked through parking lots and back alleys of the

shopping centers, avoiding eye contact, people in general. Though I do remember walking through an old shopping mall, where vendors had lined the abandoned halls with makeshift bodegas, selling prepared food, cheap trinkets, and used electronics covered with dust. I remember avoiding their eyes, but noticing them staring at me in anger, or at least it seemed to me.

What I remember next is standing in line at the McDonald's on Ponce De Leon. The cashier was speaking to me, her mouth moving, but I couldn't tell what she was saying. It was like she was at the end of a tunnel. But then, suddenly, I could understand her. I was present, aware of my surroundings.

"Ma'am," the cashier repeated, agitated, "What can I get for you this evening?"

She glanced down at my bag, and a look of concern appeared on her face. I looked down and saw that I was cradling my bag like it was an infant, steadily rocking it back and forth.

"Nothing," I said.

And it was true. I had no memory of how I got here, and I wasn't hungry in the least. I went outside and leaned against the building, and collected my thoughts.

The sun was going down. There was a pink glow in the sky, a few wisps of clouds. It was warm, but comfortable. A beat-up station wagon drove past with a car full of kids in the back seat, it's headlights on.

I mean, I knew why I was at the McDonald's on Ponce De Leon. There was only one reason, and I knew that much, regardless how out of it I was. Something had led me here. Whether it was of my own volition or not, I was here. As I had done so many times before, I walked around back and found the entrance in the fencing, and stepped through.

There was nothing unusual about this particular evening. The woods were darkening, spangles of evening sunlight shining through the dense foliage. It took several minutes for my eyes to become accustomed to the dimness. But it didn't matter. At this point I could find my way there with my eyes closed.

But I didn't have to. It seemed my senses were heightened. The air was fragrant with the smell of soil, plant life, and the blossoms of summer. I breathed it all in. In my ears were the sounds of leaves blowing in the breeze, squirrels racing along the branches and down

the trunks of the trees. And what I saw, even in that decreasing light, was a thousand shades of green and brown, from the leaves on the trees to the sprigs on bushes to the soil on the ground. I noticed it all.

When I reached the railroad, I picked up one of the rusted spikes and brandished it weapon-like in my hand. From there I followed the tracks and by the time I reached the end, behind the Kroger, it was almost completely dark. The artificial light shone white in the back of the grocery store, illuminating the cracked and uneven pavement and chipped yellow paint on the walls. As usual there was nobody there.

I stepped out of the woods and approached the door. The knob turned freely, and I remember hesitating briefly, before I went inside.

Different this time was the atmosphere. It was cold and uninviting. And so dark I had to reach out and feel my way into the space. With the railroad spike I tore through membranes of some alien substance. When I did so I expected to see the man, in some form, in the center of the room. But the dimensions of the room had changed. Or so it seemed. I looked at my feet and saw there was no floor. Instead I was staring into deep space, a vast emptiness dotted with stars and planets and nebulae. Above it was the same. There was no ceiling but instead a limitless black void. And yet I was walking. I was

approaching him. He was there, or rather what remained of him. With that spike I cut my way through the writhing tendrils and floating motes of a gelatinous mass like nothing on Earth. In the depths of that cosmic void I approached him. The man was just as he was before, fused to the surface of some world, dark and unnatural to me. My confusion before was thinking he was fused to the floor of the room. But now I understood there was no room. And never was. The room was an illusion, something to orient me, to give a point of reference. Likewise there was no up or down, left or right, north or south. Somehow I understood this without explanation. I just, knew it to be true. And accepted it. The only thing I recognized as the man was his eyes, still there, but almost entirely absorbed into that world. They were kind eyes, teary and bloodshot, and regarded me with the same gentle gaze I recognized from my previous visits. Around him, the chitinous substance glowed, diffusing a cerulean light which illuminated everything around us. Was he in pain? That is hard to say. Below the eyes was a beak-like shell, moving. It looked vaguely like a mouth. Was it speaking? It could have been my imagination, but I thought I could make out the same question he had asked of me so many times before. The sound it made was like a series of guttural clicks, not unlike the scuttling of insects on a tile floor. I approached him. But instead of embracing him, as I normally did, I raised the rusted spike above my head with both hands and brought it down with all my strength, ceremoniously, straight into what remained of him. The spike

tore through his flesh like a moldy peach. His eyes went dead. I knew I had killed him, and that our strange connection had been severed forever.

The next thing I knew I was standing in front of the door to the apartment where I used to live with my mother. The key is still there, beneath the terra cotta pot, and I went inside. Immediately I was flooded by the memories of better days. Happier days. And I began to cry. The first thing I saw were photos of my mother, my sister, and me. Lining the walls in the hallway. I have a memory of my mother hanging them. Me irritated at her banging with the hammer, for what seemed like hours, until finally I got up from the couch and went to my room and put on headphones and listened to the Spice Girls.

In the living room I sat on the couch and remembered other things, like the Christmas my sister and I bought my mom that ice maker, the one that made the "good ice", the one she wanted so bad she cut the advertisement from a magazine and hung on the refrigerator. Hoping to surprise her, we wrapped a thermos filled with the ice and put it under the tree, hoping to unwrap gifts that afternoon. But then we got a call from uncle Taylor and by the time we got around to opening gifts that evening, the ice had melted and my mom was very confused why we bought her a thermos with cold water.

I went into the bedroom and found my crochet stuff in a basket in the corner. Still there, just how I left it, was the red and white beanie I was making for my nephew. The word "Cool" was spelled out on the fold, but the other word "Guy" was incomplete, the hooks still connected.

Sitting at the desk in the corner of the room, I opened my bag to find the journal I had brought with me. When I saw the bloody towel, my pulse quickened, and I was reminded of all that had happened.

I took the bloody towel outside, walked around the fence, to the neighbor's yard, and stuffed the towel beneath some garbage bags in the bin at the edge of the property.

Back at the desk, I found a pen and wrote the entry you are reading now, detailing everything about this day. I want a record of it. Even if it never comes to light, the things that have happened, I want to know I did what I could to make the truth known.

I regret the things I've done. I hope whoever is reading this believes me when I say that. I never meant for it to go this far. The truth is, I don't know how to live anymore, since my mother died. I hope whoever reads this can understand that and not judge me too harshly, even though I killed that poor girl and her baby. And I killed Garvey. I

did that, and I can't ever take it back. For that I feel like what I plan to do is justified, and right. I truly believe that. I won't talk about the man and the room. But I hope whoever reads this also understands that. Mainly that it happened. My biggest fear is that people will find out about me and the things I've done and call me insane, and not believe the things I've written about. They'll dismiss it, call me delusional, things like that. But I'm not. I know I'm not.

And in the end, the words have always been there, in my mind. There, but unexpressed. Now I simply say them: I am going to die.

How strange my life turned out to be. How precarious it all was, looking back. How thin the walls that sheltered me, all my life, against a despair that has no end.

I have more to say, my heart has more that it wants to say, but I don't have the words to make it understood. It's like, all my life I've been on the cusp of understanding something. Something of vital importance that lies just beyond my grasp. Even now I know it's there, hazy and indistinct, in the fog of my mind. But I can't seem to get at it. I can't reach it. I haven't ever been able to reach it, because it's too far away. Now I guess it always will be.

Twenty

In the morning he took a shower and dressed for work. He brewed a pot of coffee, but by the time it was done and the had aroma filled the apartment he looked at the clock and noticed he was behind. He turned off the maker, grabbed his laptop bag, and also the satchel containing the book and pendant, and hurried out the door, taking the stairs instead of the elevator to save time.

The weather was fine, briskly cold with clear skies and sun. Traffic was average, not as heavy as he was expecting for mid-week. He made good time to 400 North and made it past the tolls before 8:20, better than usual. There was an accident about a mile before exit 8 which slowed him a little, but it was still fifteen til 9 when he pulled into the parking lot.

At his cubicle he relaxed a bit. As he checked his email he took several deep breaths, and felt his pulse slow to normal. The last thing he had wanted for today was to be late. Instinctively he knew he needed to return with gusto and enthusiasm for his work, after so many days of absence.

In the break room he poured a mug of coffee, preparing it with sugar and two creamers, his usual, and headed straight to Conference Room E for the daily standup meeting. Crystal and Byron were already inside, discussing something that sounded important, both of them serious. When he entered Byron cocked one eyebrow.

"Hey dude, long time no see."

"Hey Byron," he said, taking a seat across from them, "Yeah, I had to take some time off, unexpectedly. Family stuff."

Crystal smiled, and nodded at his explanation. A few moments when by, and then Byron picked up the conversation where he and Crystal had left off, not bothering to fill him in with the details, so he did the best he could to follow.

"Well, tell me at least Chen asked Reginald for the logs last night."

"I think so," Crystal said, "You can certainly ask him when he gets here."

"Cause if we don't have the logs, there's no way to troubleshoot the problem. It's like working with one hand behind our backs, in the dark."

Crystal nodded in agreement, and turned her attention to her phone, done with the conversation they were having.

A few minutes later Chen entered the room, along with Reginald from Ops and another person he didn't know, a younger guy, closer to his age.

"Hey guys," Chen said, "Reginald and Kevin are going to help us figure out the issue and hopefully deploy a fix as soon as we have one."

Chen did a double-take when he saw him, and smiled.

"Hey man, glad you have you back. You picked a good time. Everything is just humming along, like a well-oiled machine."

The group laughed. Maintaining camaraderie and group morale, even when times were tough, was something he had always admired about Chen. After the laughter died down, Chen got serious. He laid a bundle of papers on the desk in front of them.

"Here are the logs from last night. Steve is working from home today. He's already been going through them, and found a few bad network calls around midnight, so that's our best guess at the moment, as to what caused the issue."

"Bad network calls?" Byron said, incredulous.

Chen nodded.

"I know, but it's the only thing we've found so far. Hopefully with more eyes on it, we can get to the bottom of the issue."

Reginald gave the team a run-down of what happened on the Ops side of things.

"Around midnight a yet to be determined internal service starting flooding the Authentication API with requests, thousands per second. Normally the API is protected from denial of service issues of this nature, by a proxy service that throttles requests by IP and a dynamic blacklist. But internal services are not routed through this proxy and therefore that safeguard system was unable to stop it. Because it was the Authentication API, every other system that requires Authentication, basically all of them, was unable to serve requests,

from midnight until now. It brought the entire platform down. Customers in Europe and Australia have been calling in complaints. We're just now starting to get complaints from customers in the US, since the business day is just starting."

After the the rundown, the team broke off, Byron and Crystal to their cubicles. Chen to his office. He waited a few minutes and then knocked on the open door to Chen's office, poking his head inside.

"Got a minute?"

Chen was in the middle of writing an email, but stopped.

"Sure."

He sat in the chair in front of the desk. Chen waited for him to speak. He took a moment before saying anything.

"Well, I wanted to apologize for my absence lately. I know with a team this small it really hurts productivity when someone isn't around to pull their weight. I've had some family issues come up. I didn't want to get into it over email. Anyway, I'm sorry. It won't happen again. Just let me know what I can to do help out in this situation today. I don't have the full context, but I can catch up."

Chen sat back in his chair.

"Hey man, I really appreciate you saying that. But it's not necessary. When it comes to family you do what you have to do. Family comes first. I hope whatever it was is okay now."

"It is, and thank you."

"What would really help I think is if you could sit down with Byron to go through the logs from last night, and see if you can figure out which of our services could be causing this issue. We are working on a temporary fix to re-route the public facing applications to a separate auth service. Some features won't work of course, but at least the applications will load."

"Right, that makes sense."

He went by Byron's cubicle and asked if he minded the help looking through the logs.

"Mind? Hell no. My brain's spinning trying to filter through all this noise. It's like finding a four-leaf clover in a haystack."

"Wouldn't it have been simpler to give us text files instead of print-outs of the logs?"

Byron shook his head.

"Tell me about it man. Those old farts do everything like it's 1972."

They divided the log sheets and went through them line by line. It didn't take him very long to notice a pattern in the logs. And not much longer after that to trace the connections back to the new build script deployed only a few weeks ago. There was a sick feeling in his stomach. But he knew his suspicions were correct when he compared the endpoints and tokens being used. He told Byron and waited for that cocked eyebrow, but he saw no hint of blame.

He opened the script on his laptop and went through the code and found a scenario that would cause an infinite loop of authentication requests. The fix was basic, a simple null check before the loop. It was something he should have caught before, if he had paid attention. In his defense it was a section of the code Abigail had written, and he had not touched it. But he didn't say anything about that. He checked in the fix and both he and Byron went to inform the rest of the team about what they had discovered.

Chen was relieved. Considering the seriousness of the issue, they were able to deploy the latest commit within the hour. The authentication service was no longer bogged down with requests and the platform returned to normal behavior.

They had a late lunch at the cafeteria, as a group, after a collective sigh of relief, and receiving the all-clear from Operations. While they ate, Chen suggested he should start work on a monitoring tool for all their internal services, so they could track issues like this in the future more easily. He thought it was a great idea, and would be fun to write, and his mind began the work of coming up with various approaches.

By the time he left the office that evening, he had a rough idea of the scripts and off the shelf software that would be necessary to implement such a tool. He was so caught up he barely paid attention to how bad the traffic was on the drive home, only vaguely aware of how long he sat still on 400 as the setting sun came through the

windshield and blinded him. Absently he flipped down the visor and made a mental arrangement to drive to George's this evening with his notebook and put all his thoughts down on paper. Despite this being software, he still liked to design on paper. Having to translate his ideas to the written word always clarified things in his mind, and surfaced any holes in his logic.

The next time he became aware of his surroundings was when he pulled into the McDonald's parking lot, on Ponce de Leon. It was twilight and the sun was no longer visible in the sky. He pulled into a space around back, near the drive-thru window, put the Jeep in park and switched it off. For several minutes he stared ahead, the spool of his mind unraveling all the events of the day in reverse. From the back seat he grabbed the satchel. He unzipped the front pouch and pulled out the pendant on the chain. He looked at it and rubbed his thumb over the etched grooves of the symbol on its face.

Behind the building was the fence. The hole was there, just like it was the last time he was here, and the time before that. There was a part of him that hoped it would not be there. After everything he had seen it didn't seem implausible. But it was there. He stood outside it and waited. And then he went through it.

The woods gave off a fragrance that was earthen and wild. He crouched through the small tunnel of twisted limbs from brush and small trees and emerged in the clearing. The ground was softer than

usual, a carpet of sodden leaves and grass. He found the railroad tracks and followed them. As he walked he thought about the day.

There was never a question he would come here tonight. So what was today then? He couldn't say. More importantly, what would tomorrow look like? The excitement and drama of the workday felt like a hundred years ago. His plans to implement the monitoring tool, was that all bullshit? He didn't like to think he was someone who could be taken in by self-delusion, but here he was. And then another question occurred to him. Why must he go through with this? There was nobody at his back with knife or gun, forcing him. He could walk away. He could turn around right now, get in his Jeep, drive to George's, and sketch out the design for the monitoring tool. That was a thing that could happen. And yet, every moment that went by he did not turn around. Every moment he took another step towards the door behind the Kroger. Something compels me, he thought, but I don't know what.

Nothing was alive in these woods, he observed. Nothing that he could see. Except for him. The woods were dark, and the air was cold and biting. The last glow of evening was visible in the small patches of sky he could see through the trees. A wind blew through the treetops and rustled the branches and limbs above him. He zipped up his coat and kept his eyes on the ground, following the remnants of the tracks.

When he reached the edge of the woods, and saw the dilapidated area behind the Kroger, and the steps leading to the door, he stopped.

Waited. Go back, a voice within told him. Continue, said another. Do not be afraid.

He emerged from the woods and stepped across the alleyway and ascended the concrete steps to the door. On the knob was the slot he had tried before. He removed the pendant from his pocket and inserted it. He turned the knob but it was locked. Just like he expected it to be. He unbuckled the satchel and pulled out the book. He had written the phrase down on a sheet of paper folded underneath the twine which bound the covers. He removed the paper and looked at the words. He stood up and put his hand on the doorknob, in just the same position he had observed Rabbit do it. He read the words slowly, with emphasis on each syllable.

Lyg'raob mar Plmuzar Okaxcib deve, K'thadras piy gwam

Nothing happened. Nothing at all like what he had experienced when reading the accounts from the book. He panicked a little and wondered if he had pronounced the words correctly. He thought he had. He thought to try again, but before he did, a mechanical sound emanated from the door, the sound of unlatching. He turned the knob again. It opened.

Beyond the door was a narrow corridor, with concrete walls and fluorescent lighting overhead, producing a faint but consistent electric buzzing sound. There was a damp, basement-like smell

emanating from within. It looked to be some kind of utility area, lined with shelves and a mop bucket near the door with a desiccated mop inside. It was not at all what he had expected to find. He closed the door behind him and continued along the corridor. From his pocket he pulled a folded serrated-edge knife, one he had brought along for safety, and opened it, gripping it tightly in his right hand.

The further he walked the more he heard the sound of chanting. At first he dismissed it as imagination or ambient noise, but soon it became unmistakable. He stopped and listened to it. The chanting was low, of many voices, in a language he could not place. Inside he heard a voice, speaking to him. "Now would be the time to turn around, if that's what you're going to do." He ignored it, and kept going.

As he walked he looked at the shelves along the walls. The shelves were lined with rusted tools, tin cans filled with nails, nuts, bolts, and other types of construction materials. But old, very old. At some point the lighting changed. The fluorescent lighting was replaced by incandescent bulbs, dimmer than the fluorescence, and spaced at wide intervals which left entire sections of the corridor in the dark.

The sound of the chanting grew louder, and more distinct. The lyrics were strange, having the same unnatural pronunciation as the words he copied from the book. At each rise and fall of its melody he was overwhelmed by feelings of euphoria and doom. What kind of song could produce such feelings? He wondered. The sound was so hypnotic it lulled him into a dreamy state of mind and it was because of that he

did not notice when exactly the corridor changed. There were no more shelves and the walls were no longer concrete but polished stone.

There was also no more lighting, but the strange thing was he could see perfectly fine. The corridor was bathed in an amber glow, as if from an unseen fire, flickering and moving along the floor and walls.

It was then he noticed the walls of the corridor were not bare, but were engraved with elaborate scenes, depicting unusual landscapes and unrecognizable forms of life. Along the tops of these engravings were words of the same language as from the book. He reached out and ran his fingers along the precise and intricate craftsmanship. It was beautifully carved, the work of genius. Of that there was no doubt.

By now the chanting had grown so loud it was echoing off the walls of the corridor, reverberating in his mind. He was disoriented but continued to walk. At a certain point he glanced upwards and was surprised to see there was no ceiling. The walls rose to a balcony, twenty feet up, which ran the entire length of the corridor and was lined with a stone balustrade. Above that was darkness. Along the railing were candles, hundreds of them, of various shapes and sizes, and he understood that was the source of the light. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness above he saw each candle was being held in a human hand. These were the chanters. They were robed and hooded. He could not see their faces.

He continued to walk, looking around him, at the chanters overhead. As he progressed he noticed the polished stone of the walls became

rougher, the engravings less artful, eroded. On the ground his feet stumbled over pebbles and grooves in the stone flooring. It was colder. He felt a breeze from somewhere ahead. And then he reached the end of the corridor.

There was an archway, with steps leading down. Because there was nowhere else to go, he continued down the stairs. The steps were smooth and slippery, and there was no railing, so he reached out for the walls for support. The walls were no longer polished, as they had been in the corridor. He was in a cave. The only light was from small torches that lined the right hand side of the stairwell. The chanting became softer, less distinct. And soon the only sound was the lapping of the torch flames in the breeze, which came from further below.

He descended for an hour, until his feet were sore and his back hurt. By now the torches were so infrequent he was now walking in almost complete darkness, but it had happened so slowly he hadn't realized it. He emerged from the stairwell into an open area with a cavernous space overhead. Here the breeze was stronger. It was cold. Along the wall facing him were three doors, lit by torches. The doors were made from the same smooth and chitinous substance as the pendant and the cover of the Vothmawg-Ab.

He approached the door on his left. He turned the knob and opened it. He saw space, infinite and dark, spread before him like a vision. He saw the birth of the solar system, the burning orb at the center of a spiral nebula of dust and rock and ice. He saw the formation of the

planets, the slow accretion of interstellar debris into molten spheres. He saw the annihilation of a billion particles as they collided into one other in the silence of the cosmos.

Next he went to the middle door. When he opened the door he saw the alley behind the Kroger on Ponce de Leon. A gentle breeze scuttled leaves across the cracked pavement, and bristled the limbs of trees in the woods beyond. Otherwise there was nothing out of the ordinary that he could see.

At the third door he turned the knob and found that it was locked. He understood that it always would be.

When he turned back to the stairway he saw that it was gone. Where it had been was another wall of the cave. He went to the wall and searched it, hoping to find a way back through again. He scratched and pounded and lost his temper, to no avail. He soon gave up and sat down against it, head in hands, and thought about many things.

He thought about K'thadrass. He thought about the reality of his being, asleep in the center of our world. He focused his mind on that reality until everything else that he had always thought to be reality felt unreal by comparison. He thought about his life, all the hours of his life he had wasted by pursuing empty desires and running away from toothless fears. He thought about his family and friends, and even his enemies. All that seemed so far away, as if it had happened to someone else, in another life. But then a voice would protest at that resignation. It would tell him, this is not real. This is temporary.

Your other life was real, and it is waiting for you. Keep strong. And that would help for awhile. But then the feeling would come back stronger. He grew sad at the thought of never seeing the people in his life again. He regretted any moment of his life where he had said an unkind thing or acted in a hateful way towards someone, and wished with all his heart he could go back and do it over again, to correct those wrongs. He was sorrowful and felt like nothing again would ever make him happy. That every good thing in life was in the past and all that remained of life was suffering and death. But then, he broke through, and light came back to his heart. This was life, after all, for all its pain there is also joy. When his heart was light he felt like he could wait for a hundred years. The length of time didn't matter. His patience was infinite. He sat in the room and his thoughts returned to K'thadras, as they always would from now on. And he realized something profound. Something that could not be taught, only experienced.

I wait because He waits.

The years passed, and he grew old. His skin wrinkled, his hair fell out. The walls of the room eroded and all but one of the doors faded, along with his possessions. But it didn't matter. As he had realized when he was a young man, he could wait a hundred years, if he had to. He could wait forever. And then one day, the only door that remained

opened. It had been many years since it had been opened and creaked with age. Inside walked a woman, pensive and alone. He looked up, surprised but not unpleasantly so, and spoke to her.

"Where are you hurting, Abigail?"