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**The Soul of Sybil Jane Armstrong
and Other Stories**

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of
Master of Professional Writing
at
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by
Kate McClintock



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Abstract

A care home worker learns a dark secret about her favourite resident. A young man with a brain injury desperately tries to warn his small town of impending disaster. A doctor is haunted by a dissatisfied patient. In 1930's Alabama, a woman sells her soul to the devil to escape an asylum. *The Soul of Sybil Jane Armstrong and Other Stories* is a meditation on disability, horror, and the monsters we make and are made into by the world around us. This collection maps diverse experiences of disability, caretaking and unruly bodies and minds onto the horror genre, subverting expectations around agency, harm and the monstrous to explore how ableism shapes the things we fear and the things we ignore.

I was inspired to write this collection by my own experiences of disability as a woman with cerebral palsy. Disabled bodies and minds feature heavily in traditional horror stories, from *Frankenstein* to *Friday the 13th*, but disabled characters are usually reduced to villains, monsters, or, at best, objects of pity. I sought to expand this framework, highlighting the horror present not in simply existing in a disabled body or mind, but in the navigation of a world designed to be hostile, and, indeed, in the harm which each individual is capable of, regardless of ability.

**The Soul of
Sybil Jane
Armstrong
and Other
Stories**

Acknowledgments

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The One Who Bites

Los Angeles, A.D. 1986

There is nothing.

And then there is something.

Silk lining, oak and varnish, then fresh-turned earth. The last step is always the same. The new body has broken fingernails, thin, ragged shards covered in blood, caked in upholstery and splinters. The pain is electricity, shocking me awake.

+

I have many names. Stryga, strzygoń. wieszcz, upiór, vampire. I have climbed the Ural Mountains, swum the Volga River, hidden, shadowed in the great fir-forests of old. I am older than God, older than man and the borders he scratches into paper, lines he cleaves in bone to make his point. It is all the same to me. War, plague, famine, malice, despair or simply nature, all man's ends are my beginning. I have no form, yet I can smell the rot, I can *feel* it as I feel the beating of a billion pairs of wings, as I feel the growing of a trillion blades of grass. The dead are my business. I raise them from the grave, make them walk, make them bite, make them drink.

+

When strangers come, bearing strange symbols, smoke and sacred water, choked by crosses around their necks, I become a demon, the devil, evil itself. It makes me chuckle. These trinkets hardly bother me, gold and blessings and that strange, toothless language. With their new God, I become a shadow to my people, unseen, roiling in the darkness of the night which lays just beyond their doors. At first, they are arrogant. In time, they regain their respect for me.

When war and famine force my people across the great ocean, cleave them from the stone and soil and wood I am bound in, I follow them, burrowing into the furrows of their souls, waiting, waiting. When the feet which carry me find the earth once more, I hear new tongues, tongues of power. Munsee, Bodwéwadmimwen, Tongva. The people who speak them can see me, like the days of old, and their land is thick with my ancient kin, spirits of

wood, of water, of life, of death. We come to an arrangement. We do not meddle in each other's affairs, do not reach for their people. I keep my word, but those whose bodies I travel in grievously break theirs.

+

I get ahead of myself, or perhaps behind. My new body is a girl, young, not 25 winters, though what passes for winter in Tovaangar is sorry indeed compared to the Carpathians. *Chloe*. The name is not one from my land. She has not been dead long when I find her, in her grave in so-called Los Feliz, the stone decorated with idols of the God who did not save her. There are so few of my people in this city like a jungle, all concrete and asphalt, snaking, squirming freeways where roots do not grow. My time on this side of the great ocean has been so short, only a blink, but I feel as though I have ached for eternities, naked and alone in the void, waiting to be called once more.

+

Yes, I was called. I was always called. Back in Chicago, New York, empires of Russia, Prussia, Austria, Poland. Man takes without asking, but I am bound by rules he chooses to ignore, and I can only come when a soul screams for me, begs me to join them in a decomposing suit of flesh. The calls of this girl were deafening, and so I answered, gladly.

She pulls herself out into the open air, staggers to her feet. Chloe, like so many I have known, is damaged. Her left leg does not move as she wants it to, the foot dragging, the hip aching. I know a remedy that will dull the pain.

+

This city like a jungle crawls and sprawls beyond the grasp of those who have made it. Even the living here are dulled by the distance, the great emptiness of lawns and two-car garages echoing in their souls. Back home, this was so much easier, the villages so much closer together. But I look through this girl's eyes, trawl back through her memories, mining synapses until I find the way back to the place she last walked.

She is waking up now, her thoughts crowding into mine, fighting for control of her body. I grant it with a last, luxurious stretch. I am not greedy. I am grateful for all that she gives me: the cool night air on her skin, the heat of the day radiating up from the pavement, the orange buzzing of streetlights, the singing of crickets. My time will come.

+

She reaches the house, low and white-walled. It is occupied, lights blazing against the night. She looks to her wrist, but there is no watch there. She steps up to the window, looking inside. A couch and two reclining chairs circle a television, its screen glowing softly. A man sits in one chair, staring blankly ahead, a can of beer barely dangling in his limp grasp. Her father. His tie has been removed, his shirt unbuttoned at the collar. I know his flesh will taste of sorrow.

She moves on, rounding a corner of the house and finding another window. This one opens to a kitchen, a large wooden table circled by four chairs. It is absolutely covered in dishes, dinner plates, pie pans, Tupperware. Some are covered in silver foil, others by a thin skin of plastic wrap. We smell comfort, pierogies, kielbasa, sauerkraut, dill, wafting towards us along with more exotic tastes, chocolate, vanilla, orange, cinnamon, the sharp danger of garlic. Enough food for a village, more than this small group will eat in a month, now with one less mouth to feed.

A young woman stands, hands submerged in the sink. Her eyes are red-rimmed, her jaw set, her movements mechanical. She turns, slowly, to the window, and she is a reflection of Chloe, as though the glass is distorted, a silver-backed mirror—oh no. Two bodies which share the same soul. *Selena*.

+

A scream and then a shattering crack rend apart the silence of the house. The dish in Selena's hand is now in pieces on the wooden floor, a hundred shards of blue flowers at her feet. Pounding steps, and in a second the father is in the kitchen, wide eyes breaking through the alcohol clouding his brain. He moves to shield his daughter from us, lurking outside. A wooden crucifix hangs on the wall, and he pulls it down with a shaking hand, presses it against the glass.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The wood and the words mean nothing to me, but they are like a hot knife to Chloe's chest. She staggers back, away from the window, away from the glowing yellow light that is no longer home. The shoes she was buried in are useless, and she stumbles out of them as she struggles to run. The concrete smashes against her knees, against her outstretched palms, but she rises, continues on. Her need to get away is greater than any hunger she has ever felt.

My time has come.

Like a trap that has been sprung, I take back my control of her body, burning through her muscles, wrapping around her bones. I open her eyes so that she can see through the ink-black night like it is nothing, I dull the screaming pain in her hands, knees, feet, hips. Now she can run, faster than she ever could in life, faster than any living person. The endless sameness of the houses, of the grid of streets, blurs past in an instant, and she cannot feel her ragged feet against the concrete and asphalt, the skin cut to ribbons.

No. We only think of one thing.

+

The neon sun shines in this place even at midnight. Pink, green, blue, red, every window of every bar ablaze, bright as daylight. The streets we came from were silent, but the boulevard is packed with people, men and women jostling past, spilling out of doorways, Madonna, Springsteen and cigarette smoke following them onto the sidewalk. They are all short skirts and spiked hair and smudged eyeliner, and they smell of alcohol. Some glow and warp around their edges, minds far away with the help of something stronger.

I let go, and Chloe stumbles to ground once more. I know from long experience that it is better to blend in, to be camouflaged. Otherwise, the prey will bolt. This attempt was clumsy, but it does not matter. Others stumble, others fall, leaning against bricks, bent double and vomiting into alleys. Chloe gets up, and the pain rushes back into her, bright and sharp, pulsing like the neon lights in every bar window. Her hands and feet are bloody, broken, and she swallows a scream. She knew this place long before me. She fears being recognized.

Chloe staggers around a corner, seeing stars. She vomits, yellow bile tinging her long, brown hair. It is hard to breathe. It is darker here, less crowded. She could lie down, curl up—

“Hey, you all right?” A voice from behind us, a man’s, made slow and unsteady by what he has drunk. “You shouldn’t be out here alone, you know.”

He comes closer, closer. He smiles and his teeth are very straight, so white it seems they glow against the darkness. There is no comfort there. I get ready to spring again.

“Come on, sweetheart, I’ll take you back home.” He reaches out, touches her shoulder. His skin is so warm against hers. He pulls her upright, her bloody palms staining his t-shirt.

“There we go, that’s a good girl.” His hand reaches for the hem of her dress, snaking up her thigh. We hear the pulse in his neck.

She sinks her teeth into his flesh, hot blood spurting into her mouth. It is glorious, the spoil of a thousand lifetimes, and I feel my power growing with every gorged mouthful she swallows. He cannot scream, for he is drowning in his own life force. As his blood flows into her body, into us, the ragged gashes on her hands are brought together, the shattered kneecap is made whole, the glass and stones embedded in the bloody soles of her feet are pushed out, the wounds closed. The pain in her hip is dulled, but I cannot heal what she had before death.

When she is done, she discards the desiccated corpse, leaving it alongside her vomit and the detritus of the drunk and stupid. She is tired, her body heavy after such a meal, but I know that we cannot be seen. I help her, guide her away from the lights and the noise. I find a warehouse, dark and empty, at least for now, and she falls down to sleep on a corner of the concrete.

+

As she falls away into oblivion, I reach back into her memories, sifting through years for anything of interest. Humans are stupidly dull, their lives brief and pointless, but I am interested, nonetheless. Occasionally, I have the good fortune to find one who is not like the others.

Images spiral as I move through the record of her life, patchy and imperfect as it is. Churches, some small and cramped, others large and airy, with high ceilings, swooping arches, glowing stained glass. I hear the language of my people, alien amongst this false God. Chloe, dressed in white, a lace veil over her head. Chloe, kneeling to pray. Chloe, at the center of a circle of people, heads bowed, their hands on her body.

Arrogant humans. They want to heal something they do not fully understand. They tell her that she is made in the image of their God, that he wants her to be whole, that he can make her whole. It is so easy, according to them. All she must do is live righteously, pray, ask forgiveness for the thousand sins they say she commits every day without realizing, every day that she lives in the corrupted flesh of her body. Their churches are bathed in light, their rooms spacious, and yet every single one of them is leaden with shame. They do not see that they have made a cage for her, one which confines her more than her body ever could.

Years spiral on in seconds, and the taste of her memories changes. Her body grows, her mind expands beyond the narrow walls of her childhood, and she resists. Arguments with her father, her mother, slamming doors, slaps across the face. At church, the others look at her parents from the corners of their eyes, whisper, ask, *how could they lose control of their daughter like this? And when Selena is such a good girl too?*

Yes, Selena. The other half of this soul which called me. She is there, in almost every memory. A mirror, the same only as a reflection is the same. Where Chloe fights, refuses to wear dresses, refuses to meet priests who will cover her in holy water, refuses to pray the rosary, finds temporary comfort in that neon world and the oblivion of alcohol, Selena does everything they want. She does not know the aching bones, does not know the shame hanging around her neck, does not know the throbbing ache that persists long after the pain of a slap has faded. A circle is closing, one sister outside, one sister in.

+

And then, the end.

Usually, it is sharp, a ragged edge to come up against. Most who call for me do not meet a natural end; they do not go quietly in their sleep after a long, contented life. Chloe is no different.

First, the splashing of water. A pool, the concrete still holding the day's warmth even as the sky begins to turn golden and red and the sun touches the horizon. Selena is here, and another, a boy their age, whose name is easy on the tongue. *Stanislaus*, but he butchers it to *Stan*. A boy they have known their whole lives, a boy raised in the church, a boy whose human wants cannot be dulled by the vestments he brags of taking. He sits close to Selena, their bare feet dangling in the water. He is much closer than their God would like.

He has brought a bottle of alcohol, whiskey, and Chloe is drinking from it. She sits apart from the forbidden lovers, smoldering in a way the liquor cannot put out. No one has ever hungered for her the way that Stan hungers for her sister, and her sister's acceptance of his touch is a greater sin than Chloe has ever been guilty of, but Selena is never punished because Selena keeps a secret. The fact that Chloe can see that this man has no honor does not dull the pain. It makes it worse.

The bottle passes around, shapes blur at their edges, voices raise. Clothing is shed like a nuisance, and Selena and Stan slide into the pool. They are laughing, so easy, all life dulled by the magic of that whiskey, but though Chloe has drunk just as much, she is not at ease. Her face still smarts from the slap of her father's hand. She rebelled against him in public, in their church. This will not be forgiven.

The idea appears like a ghost, shimmering and formless above the water, in the dark.

Doesn't Chloe look so sad? Stan asks. *Doesn't she look like she needs love? God's love?* Selena reproaches his blasphemy, but he can only laugh. Chloe shakes her head, takes another sip. Her head is full of cotton now, the pain of her father's hand fading. She does not sense the danger.

Stan's hand around her ankle, he pulls, catching her off guard. It's the left one, the bad one, and as he jerks her into the water, pain sizzles up her leg, lifting the fog of the alcohol. But now it is too late. The water soaks into her blouse, her jeans, her socks and heavy boots, and she has no strength to fight.

Here we have a poor sinner, Stan says, cackling, *one who can only be redeemed by the power of God.* He presses her face under the water, some pale mimicry of baptism. The chlorine stings her eyes and she thrashes, body churning up bubbles, fingers clawing at the air.

Stan pulls her face up again and she gasps, fingers seeking his flesh. He pushes her down again, laughing. He is drunk and it is all so, so funny. Practice for the real thing.

He pulls her up again, and in the dark, she sees Selena, standing in the water nearby. She does not move to stop this. She does not intervene.

She wants it.

Chloe the troublemaker. Chloe the sinner. Chloe the cripple. Chloe, who can never just do what is asked of her, who can never be grateful for all the attention, all the prayers, all the love.

Yes, it would be better if she was gone. If there was peace in the house.

Stan pushes Chloe down again, and her body knows that this will be the last time.
Through the killing water, she sees Selena, face refracted.
The other half of her soul reaches down and holds her under.

+

In the warehouse, the sun has come and almost gone again. Memories make time liquid, stretch and compress it in ways far beyond the power of the waking world. Chloe's death is unique in its specifics, yes, but I have seen its violence a thousand times before. I am not surprised. Hatred feeds on the corpse of adoration.

Chloe starts awake, arms thrashing as they did in her last moments. She gasps, and I feel her heart pounding against her ribcage like a sledgehammer. She looks around. No other humans have found this place; I made sure of that. I may be invisible, but I make my presence known in other ways. Our only companions are oversized rats; they scuttle among scraps of newspaper, molding plastic bags, and needles. In one corner of the massive room, a faded blue couch sits, decomposing. It stinks of urine.

She sits up, her movements cautious. Last night's blood is dried and crusted on her hair, her lips, her neck, her plum-colored funeral dress. She holds up her hand, staring at the rust which has seeped into the creases of her palm and underneath her fingernails. As she does, the last of the long daylight reaches across the concrete, grasping for her skin. No, I put us far enough away from the broken window, covered in boards. We should have been safe.

The light is weak, but it makes her skin smoke all the same, blisters popping up across the back of her hand. It is agony, and yet, she does not scream. I try to take back my control of her body, try to wrestle her muscles into submission, force them to move, to get away, but I cannot.

Tears flow out of her eyes as she stares at the blistering flesh, layers of skin blackening and peeling back, but they do not come from the physical pain. Finally, she pulls her hand away, tucks her body into the growing shadows, but she is not following my command. The skin stitches together, new cells rushing to replace the dead flesh as it falls to the ground and crumbles to dust. Again, I try to regain my control of her body, but I cannot hear myself over the howling of her thoughts.

She knows what I am.

+

Somehow, in all her memories, I missed it. An old woman, her babcia, an unending chain of stories on her lips, stretching all the way back to when the first people came to my land, first gave their bodies to fulfill my purpose. Selena, in her world of science and medicine, did not care, their parents did not pay attention, but Chloe heard. Heard that I am evil itself, that those who call me will never again know the light of that young God, will never enter his kingdom. I give the dead everything, but they must give everything to me. Her sister, her father, they will only be the first to shun her, to drive her out, to try to kill her. Wherever she goes, she will be hunted, and she will be driven to hunt. I have made her a monster, glorious and terrible. Now, she is worlds away from the perfect image these lowly priests dreamed of. She is twisted beyond their recognition.

A scream builds inside her body, burning hot, ripping through flesh and exiting her mouth as a wailing howl. Yes, this is what I wanted. Her hate is her strength now. It will carry her through what must be done.

Outside, the sky is twilight purple. It is time.

+

The house is quiet, dark. The journey back here was easy, now that we have feasted. She has washed the blood from her face and hands in a dark bar bathroom, the other women too stupidly intoxicated to notice anything wrong. She has run back here the way we came, numb to the tearing of her feet, the aching of her bones as they pound against the asphalt. Past the lawns and garages of homes she will never live in, filled with people who will despise her when they learn what she is. Past the churches with their bells like thunder ringing for the evening mass, past the place where she was buried, unconsecrated ground, the other side of the wall from her babcia. Past all the remnants of her old life, to the place where she was first shunned.

With my help, the dark is nothing to her, and she sees her sister sitting on the front step, staring up at the starless sky. In an instant, Chloe is upon her, clawing at her long legs, her arms, any scrap she can cling to so that Selena can't run away. Selena screams, kicking wildly. Her foot makes contact with Chloe's face, breaking her nose. Bright blood spurts into the night, staining the gravel path between the house and the lawn. Chloe's grip loosens for a

second, and Selena scrambles towards the door, her blue satin pajama pants ripping at the knees. Chloe is undeterred, grabbing Selena by the legs and dragging her onto the lawn. She screams again and Chloe flips her onto her back, pressing a hand to her throat. The sound is strangled.

“You told them all I killed myself and now look what I’ve become!” The words are a roar, her voice distorted, deep, powerful like the old Gods. Selena writhes under her, face turning red as she desperately gasps for air, but we are too strong. We will kill her and we will feast, and finally, the one soul will be reunited. In all the centuries, I have never known such glorious hate as Chloe feels now, pulsing through her body like electricity, powering her.

Tears stream from Selena’s eyes, and she reaches a shaking hand up to Chloe’s face. A pathetic last attempt. The life is fast leaving her body, every bit of it flowing into her sister and making her stronger, taking what should have been hers.

Selena’s palm touches Chloe’s cheek, the skin worn rough by hot water and soap. Foolish, she is defenseless, ready to finish off. I am ready. I am never satiated. But something happens which has never happened before. I cannot command this body which has given itself to me. Chloe feels the burning in Selena’s lungs as though they were her own; the desperate terror of strangulation makes a home in her body as she has forced it into her sister’s. She is back in the pool, the water burning the inside of her nose, cold fear turning her limbs to ice when she needs them most of all. She feels the throbbing of Selena’s knees, her thighs, her arms, rent with scratches. Chloe can feel Selena’s heart hammering like a caged animal—wait.

There is another heartbeat here, rattling fast, so fast each beat runs into the next and they are hard to count, so fast it’s almost just one blur of sound.

And the memories, they rush in like that great, vast ocean I crossed so long ago. Selena in church, a lace veil on her head. Selena kneeling to pray. Selena watching Chloe as hands are laid on her, over and over again. Selena, who shares her sister’s face, her voice, her fear of heights, who shares everything but that crookedness which must be made straight. Selena who sits unnoticed, like her entire body is made of glass. Selena, who thinks doing everything right will make her be seen. Whose body is consumed with the freezing, dull ache of loneliness, more desperate for touch than she is for food.

Years pass in a second, and as she watches her sister thrash against that cage of shame, Selena curls deeper into it, caresses its bars, for they are touch, of a kind. She hears the poison that their father spits at Chloe, cursing her fire, that she dares to rebel, and it is a

rod for both of their backs. When Selena is praised, it is because she is what her sister is not, the good half of their soul. She who has reached medical school, who will fulfill the sacred work of preparing the dead, unlike her sister who drifts aimlessly and deserves no praise. Her path is so narrow, one wrong step and she will lose everything, be cast out as Chloe has been.

And then, there is Stan. He who is both good and free, loved and lively, and he sees her like no one else, wants her for something more than her piety. His touch is what it means to live, what it means to be, outside of her cage. And so, she lets him touch her, lets him do things she has been told her God will strike her down for. Lets him voice her secret thoughts, that her sister is a sinner, that she is ungrateful for all the love she has been given, that she has strayed and is no longer pure, unlike them. Selena does not tell him how she knows his touch has made her dirty, contaminated, like a molding plastic bag inside a decaying warehouse, all the worse than her sister for how far she has fallen. She does not ask him to set aside his calling to their God, because she does not want to hear him refuse her. She ignores the future barreling towards her like a train, that soon he will leave and she will be alone again.

And so, when all three are dead drunk and he pushes her sister under the water, Selena does not tell him to stop. She does not rush to Chloe's aid, she does not scream, nor call for help. She just watches. What would her life have been without this burden she has always dragged around, another half she never asked for? What if she could cut out the rotten parts of herself; what if this is what she's ached for, what if this is what she needs to feel whole? Stan pulls Chloe's face out of the water one more time, and Selena sees the terror flashing white in her eyes. She steps forward and pushes Chloe down. She doesn't let go until the body stops thrashing.

+

Chloe lets go of Selena's throat, ripping her hands away as though her sister's neck burns like sunlight. A long, ragged gasp tears out of Selena's throat, and she gorges on air. Chloe sits motionless for a moment, staring at her as she gasps, blinks tears from her bloodshot eyes, clutches her aching chest. I writhe inside Chloe's body, begging her to fulfill her end of our bargain. My need is so great.

The screaming of Chloe's soul came to me in the nothingness, and it was loud like burning, the sound thunderous and hot against me. I thought then that she must be uniquely desperate, more so than anyone I had ever heard. I didn't realize then that her soul had another half, Selena, and that she had been screaming for me long before she killed her sister.

In all my centuries, I have never needed to use force. The souls who call out to me flicker with rage, with hate, with bitterness. They will trade everything for a chance at revenge. Once they taste the power I can give them, the speed of a wolf, the strength of a bear, they devour it like they are starving. No one has refused, even as I take more and more of them, even when they are shunned, even when they turn all their hate onto what is left of themselves.

No one until Chloe.

Selena sits up, eyes still wide with uncertainty, body stiff and still like prey. Chloe reaches out, takes her hand. It is so warm, still buzzing with life. We can hear the other heart beating inside her, the chance of a new life.

"I'm sorry," Selena says. The words are not empty; they pulse with the weight of the past week. Back in the pool, the cold realization settling into Selena's body, panic bursting in sparks down her spine when her sister won't move, when her lips are blue, when Selena screams and screams and Chloe doesn't open her eyes, doesn't make it all just a bad dream. When Stan's liquid courage evaporates, all his bravado gone, just a foolish, limp boy, no leader, no man of God. When he scrambles for a way out of the trap they have made for themselves, when he whispers, *They'll believe us. All we have to do is keep our story straight.*

The drive back, freeways spiraling out with all their curling roads to nowhere, Stan repeating over and over again, *You were with me all night, we never saw her.* The police at the door the next morning, her mother's scream, the questions and the hole in Selena's chest that grows bigger and bigger as she gives her rehearsed answers. The crushing silence in the house, the nights where sleep keeps itself always just out of reach, the jerking half-dreams she wakes from, her sheets soaked and smelling of chlorine. The test, huddled in the bathroom she has never had to herself, all the scaffolding of her future crumbling to ash, and the one person she might confide in laying cold on a mortuary table.

"I'm sorry," Selena says again.

Chloe nods. "Me too." She stands, helping her sister to her feet. They stare at the house, dark and quiet, their parents seeking a refuge they will not find in the evening mass.

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It is easy to leave, easier than Selena thought it would be. She takes her medical textbooks, clothes, shoes for her sister. She does not invite Chloe inside. Everything is packed in the faded green station wagon, enough night left to travel safely to a motel room with blackout curtains, where no one will ask questions.

Two weeks later, I hear Stan's soul screaming out to me. His body has been mangled by steel on the freeway, irreparably broken. He is brought to the university hospital, then to the morgue. Selena is careful and efficient, draining his blood and replacing it with embalming fluid, cracking open his ribs and measuring his organs, following procedure exactly. The morgue will not miss the plastic jugs she uses to collect his blood, sparing it from the drain. It reeks of alcohol, but Chloe drinks it down all the same.

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Stan is buried so that he may be close to their God, his name unsullied by his deeds in life. Selena never returns to their church, never hears her name tarnished. Her child comes into life, pink and screaming. In time, he will learn why his aunt lives by night, why his mother scrubs jugs that smell of pennies, why garlic and poppy seeds never enter their home. I am never satiated, but he keeps the ravenous wanting at bay. He sees me in the dark, as he drifts to sleep. I speak to him in the language of our people, tell him stories. He does not fear the night.

The Patient

Inpatient Visit

Alexandra Reyes

Note Date: 10/8/24

Signed by: Dr. Jennifer Robinson, M.D.

26-year-old female presenting with poorly localized abdominal pain. Increases during menstruation. Onset around age 22 with severity increasing in past 6 months. Describes pain as “a dull ache” and “extreme”. Focus on work tasks impaired. Regularly uses Tylenol and Advil for pain relief, reports these as ineffective. Vital signs normal, weight in low-overweight range. No history of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections. Not currently using hormonal birth control.

Performed pelvic exam and abdominal palpation, results normal. Discussed hormonal birth control options, patient refused intervention. Urine sample collected for pregnancy and STI tests. Educated on the risks of long-term NSAID use for pain relief. Patient appears to have a poor understanding of reproductive health and the menstrual cycle; referred to women’s health class available within community.

Dr. Jennifer Robinson was, above all else, orderly. 34, average in height and appearance, her world was built on routine and predictability. Breakfast: 5 a.m., 3 free-range egg bites with turkey bacon, spinach and green onions, 1 cup coffee with stevia sweetener and 1% milk, 1 banana and 1 piece of seasonal fruit. Commute: 6 a.m. to 6:24 a.m. Arrive at hospital: 6:30 a.m. Office administration tasks: 6:35 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. Adult medicine patient visits: 7:15 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., etc. Even in its current under-funded and over-worked state, the world of medicine was quite suited to someone like Dr. Robinson, and Dr. Robinson was quite suited to it. Unlike her colleagues, whose biggest pastime seemed to be complaining, she didn’t even mind what they called the “lack of work-life balance”. Life was work. It was simple.

It was for these reasons, then, that she had little patience for time-wasters, for hypochondriacs, for compulsive symptom-googlers, and for the concerning large number of her patients who received most of their health information from obscure social media

accounts. They did not fit into her orderly life. They did not respect the rules, the predictable, clearly defined and understood set of rules which governed medicine: patients were to describe symptoms, physicians were to listen, diagnose and prescribe a course of treatment. If these rules were followed, physicians would make the best use of their extremely limited time and resources, and patients would receive the care that they needed.

Alexandra Reyes was most definitely a hypochondriac; Dr. Robinson could observe this within the first minute of encountering her in the consultation room. She radiated a terrible nervous energy, and the bags under her eyes made Dr. Robinson feel exhausted, though she always slept well. In the sterile environment of the hospital, the patient's cheap, sickly sweet body spray was overwhelming. Ms. Reyes came well-prepared to her appointment, which Dr. Robinson normally appreciated—accurate data was, of course, essential to a prompt and correct diagnosis—but the nature of Ms. Reyes' complaint raised alarms. Menstrual pain, Dr. Robinson was tired of saying, was normal, to a degree, and would be worsened in patients with sedentary lifestyles, which Ms. Reyes certainly led. Given that the patient almost certainly lacked formal education, her use of words like “endoscopy” indicated a patchwork internet education, sufficient only to increase her natural tendency towards anxiety. Dr. Robinson was glad to be rid of her with only a cup to piss in and a glorified sex ed class for grownups at the outpatient clinic.

It is possible, of course, that Dr. Robinson's brusque bedside manner with Ms. Reyes was due, at least in part, to the enormous disruption of her routine that moving into a new home had caused. On the morning of October 10, she ate breakfast in an empty kitchen of an empty house on the corner of 23rd Street and Government Alley, and that evening, she returned home to the unpacked bedroom of an unpacked apartment on 34th Street, across the freeway. The move was not her choice, but after betrayal and the breakdown of her relationship, it was what she had been forced to do.

Dr. Robinson arrived at her new home, an apartment on the upstairs level of a Victorian house around 8 p.m. after an unsatisfactory canteen dinner of overcooked salmon and tasteless quinoa. The sun had been down for over an hour, but a streetlight two houses away provided enough light to see the house's lilac boards and gingerbread trim, worn and faded but not entirely worse for wear. The large oak tree in the front yard was in the process of dying, its leaves too shriveled even for autumn, and the grass underneath it was brown despite last night's rain. It did not feel like home.

She trudged up the flight of stairs and into the apartment, a musty, shut-up smell hitting her the moment she opened the door. The outlines of her furniture, too large for the cramped space, were no longer familiar but somehow menacing. The dark had never frightened her before, but fatigue after a long day decreased the eye's ability to adjust to low light levels, and she shivered, hurrying into the bedroom with its promise of rest. A faint scent of eucalyptus from a candle she would never use—a housewarming present from coworkers she barely spoke to—couldn't cover up the smell of damp. She fell into bed too quickly to notice the paint peeling on the sideboards or the distinct chill in the air.

Urinalysis

Alexandra Reyes

Note date: 10/12/24

Signed by: Dr. Sandra Young, Clinical Biochemist

Pregnancy: Negative

Pathology: Negative

Clinician notes:

No evidence of sexually transmitted infections detected in urine sample.

Dr. Robinson did not adjust to her new home as she had hoped. Her next day off wasn't for almost a week, and she had been desperately hoping to sleep in. Arriving home from a late shift at 11 p.m., she quickly fell asleep but woke up in the middle of the night with a sudden, violent jerk. The blue glow of the digital clock on the bedside table read 3:04 a.m. She shivered; of course, the place she was now forced to live was poorly insulated and freezing. Her limbs were lead and her head ached for sleep, but now she had begun on her resentments, and the thoughts chased themselves around her brain like rabid dogs after gangrenous tails. The betrayal of infidelity, the gut-ripping sense that if only she had been smarter, had been more vigilant, she could have seen it coming and steeled herself somehow. The loss of her beautiful home, two stories instead of just one, spacious, with room to breathe and breathtaking picture windows. Its beautiful dark green exterior and a safe, warm interior

free of water stains and the ghosts of neglect and impoverishment. And the crushing, endless drudgery of work, all all all never ending, no rest, no light in this goddamn tunnel—

What was that? She strained her ears against the oppressive night silence, black as the room around her.

Skrrrch. Skrrrch. Skrrrch.

She sat up, eyes pulled towards the ceiling, its craggy surface taking on an otherworldly glow in the dim blue light of the clock.

Skrrrch. Skrrrch. Skrrrch.

She wasn't just imagining it. She stood up on the bed, bare feet balancing on the worn duvet, and reached up to the ceiling, popcorn scraping at her fingertips. She strained to hear through the silence.

Skrrrch. Skrrrch. Skrrrch. Soft thumps. The scuttering of tiny feet above her.

Rats.

Dr. Robinson did not sleep that night.

Dr. Robinson's lack of sleep was a pity, because the next day, Alexandra Reyes was back. This time, she didn't come in person but in the form of two messages sent through the patient portal in close succession; both begged for a referral to the gynecology department. When Dr. Robinson responded, inquiring whether Ms. Reyes had attended the women's health classes or heeded her medical advice about the dangers of over-medication, the response was deeply unsatisfactory.

This was the problem with time-wasters, they were usually not one-time customers, not content only to take a bit of her energy, a scrap of attention on a single day. No, they came back again and again like a recurring infection, some so frequently that one forgot what it was like to live without them. Irritated and against her better judgement, Dr. Robinson

referred the patient to Dr. Sousa in gynecology, one of her more tolerant colleagues, with a note on Ms. Reyes' tendency to exaggerate and her previous non-compliance.

Before sending it off, Dr. Robinson considered the possibility that the patient might be drug-seeking; that usually went hand in hand with desperation. Casting her mind back to the visit, she considered Ms. Reyes' appearance and behavior: clean, appropriately dressed, no visible sores or track marks. Early stages? She added another note on this topic and sent off the referral, mentally noting that she had spent her allotted lunch break on this pointless task.

Life dragged on for Dr. Robinson, all the slower because she could not find sleep. She had known sleep deprivation before, as had all medical students and residents. She knew the sluggish, tree-trunk limbs, the impaired reaction times, the headaches, the snapping at anyone within reach, words clawing almost before thoughts formed in her head. But this was different, somehow. In medical school and in residency, Dr. Robinson had roommates, other bodies who may have been irritating and disruptive, but who were warm with life and filled cheap student housing and falling-down apartments with a presence that she'd never expected to miss. In those days, the odd night of insomnia had at least been punctuated by the rhythms of other human beings; now the only companions to her exhausted and overwrought mind were the rats, *skrrch, skrrch, skrrch*, always scratching and clawing as though on some demented mission to make her life hell, to chase away the one thing she craved: sleep.

Skrrch. The endless days of Pap smears, vaccines, reassurance of the benign nature of a rash and mentally banging her head against a wall when patients refused to comply with her simple, science-backed recommendations, came and went, until finally, *skrrch*, the exterminator arrived at her door.

He was white, heavysset, in his early 50's, with the red face of an alcoholic and the clubbed fingers of a man less than a decade away from total lung failure. His hair and skin were greasy, as though a central part of his daily routine was smearing them with oil, and his bloodshot eyes lingered on her too long. A faint but definitely unpleasant smell oozed from him, and Dr. Robinson forced herself to stop listing the most common pesticide-linked cancers in her head. It was hard to believe that this was her salvation, this was the only thing that could save her, bring her back to sleep. Reluctantly, she stepped back to let him in.

The exterminator stomped through the front door unceremoniously, hauling an overstuffed, threadbare work bag and a collapsable ladder behind him. She thought with a

sudden horror that this man was the first guest she had hosted in her new home, and her stomach turned. He looked around at the crumbling baseboards and dusty floors with their mystery stains, down the hallway and into her room which was stuffed with receipts and discarded protein bar wrappers.

“Rats?” he enquired, without much question in the word. Dr. Robinson felt the heat rising in her cheeks as she nodded. He said nothing else, and so after a second, she led him to the hallway and opened the access hatch to the attic. It creaked terribly and belched sticky, grey dust into her eyes, but the exterminator seemed not to notice. Wordlessly, he unfolded the ladder and placed it under the hatch, climbing up into the dark with a nonchalance she could hardly believe. She heard the click of a flashlight and then various rummaging sounds, several bangs and poorly muffled swear words. After what must have been only a few minutes, lengthened by anticipation into hours, he came back down the ladder. His dirty work boots gave way to his dingy coveralls, now with a new layer of dust and cobwebs. Her skin crawled, and she brushed imaginary spiderwebs from her arms.

“Nah, not rats. No droppings,” he said, putting away the flashlight and folding up the ladder.

Dr. Robinson was stunned. “But what about the noises? I swear I hear them up there all night.”

“Pipes, probably. Call a plumber. Sorry I can’t help you there.”

He leered at her, rot pulsing out towards her on his hot breath. “You have a cup of coffee?”

Dr. Robinson did not.

Dr. Robinson disliked crying, but after her ice stare pushed the exterminator out the door, she felt tears threateningly close. She was not crazy. The sounds she was hearing were not pipes. She had heard enough patients with psoriasis, nails clogged with flaking dead skin, scratching and scratching until they bled, to know claws when she heard them. And how would he even know, when he’d spent less than five minutes up in her attic? God, what a waste of \$75.

Skrrrch. Skrrrch. Skrrrch. Her head snapped up, electric rage burning away her tears before they fell. It was only now, when the sound was back, that she realized it had been

absent when the exterminator was in the house. Something outside of herself led her to the kitchen, led her to drag a chair into the hallway, led her to stand up on it. She did not hear any noise aside from the pounding of her fists against the hatch in the ceiling, but after a time (minutes, hours? she did not know) when the furor was past, her throat felt sore as though from screaming. She was covered in dust, and twenty minutes in the shower didn't make her feel clean.

Alexandra Reyes

Inpatient visit

Date: 10/26/24

Signed by: Dr. Gabriel Sousa, M.D.

26-year-old female presenting with ongoing menstrual pain, which she describes as “extremely painful” and “sometimes dull and sometimes a sharp stabbing feeling”. Referred by Dr. Robinson, patient's GP, after a visit on 10/8/24. Previous lab results show no evidence of sexually transmitted infections. Patient is negative for pregnancy; claims last sexual encounter was over six months ago. Abstains from sex due to pain. Patient presents as anxious but generally well-groomed and appropriately dressed. Blood pressure slightly elevated, weight in the low-overweight range.

Performed pelvic exam and abdominal palpation; results normal. Patient reports regular menstrual cycles and heavy bleeding; was unable to describe the exact degree of blood loss. Patient estimates using 5 or 6 standard sanitary pads on heaviest flow day.

Discussed hormonal birth control with patient. Patient refused intervention and became somewhat agitated. Directed patient to pamphlet on various types of hormonal birth control, which she refused to take. Discussed risks of long-term NSAID use for pain relief with patient and suggested holistic methods of relief for menstrual pain, including exercise. Patient became more agitated and began to cry.

Patient exhibits a high degree of anxiety and emotional distress over perceived health issues. Concur with Dr. Robinson on noncompliance issues; consider drug seeking-possible, as

patient requested narcotics, but did not press the issue. Referred patient to medical imaging for abdominal ultrasound as well as to psychiatry for initial consult.

Dr. Robinson did not sleep the night after the exterminator stole her money and provided nothing of value, lied or through his own incompetence really believed that she did not have a rat infestation, and made her skin crawl with his gaze. The next morning, dragging herself through exhausted, half-alive motions, she pulled the chair into the hallway and climbed into the attic. She knew, as a doctor, that fatigue impacted muscle strength, coordination and reaction time, but at this moment, she did not care. She had endured weeks of torture and sleep deprivation; there was no choice, there was no logic, there was only the driving force of obsession, of desperation, of wild need.

It was only after she pulled herself onto the worn floorboards of the cramped, dusty attic that she realized her phone, along with its flash, was lying on the kitchen table, and that she had no source of light. With no rest, everything was magnified, every emotion grew tenfold from its logical size to some insurmountable monster. The realization that she had no light except the small, grimy window and whatever came up from the hallway below was crushing in this state, but that driving need was an even stronger pressure. Dr. Robinson collected herself from the attic floor, coming to stoop in the claustrophobic space, and looked around.

She was absolutely not prone to fantasy, but it was with some dismay and much more embarrassment that she did not find the attic floor writhing and teeming with a putrid mass of screeching, scratching rats. All the nights spent staring up at that infernal ceiling, teeth grinding, thoughts blinded by the need to make that sound stop, had transformed what likely was only a few small rodents into a pestilence worthy of Nosferatu himself. She shook her head and took a step in the direction of her bedroom.

The attic was impressively neat, with only two empty cardboard boxes, a few disintegrating scraps of paper whose text had long since faded, and a decidedly unhospitable and threadbare wool blanket. These were covered, like all surfaces in the attic, with a thick layer of dust, and the boxes bore signs of habitation by entire family lineages of spiders, but they did not provide good places for rats to hide. The dim light didn't reach the corners of the room, where the ceiling sloped down to meet the floor, but as she ran a reckless hand through the darkness, she felt nothing. The next side, nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Dr. Robinson sprang to her feet, the pressure in her chest so great she felt it would tear out of her, splitting her ribs. No, this couldn't be. She paced the small space, oblivious to the cobwebs in her hair and even the sting as she scraped her forehead against a raw beam. Again and again, feeling through the corners, all regard for her own safety overwhelmed by her hate, by the certainty that they had to be there, because if they weren't—

The hairs stood up on the back of her neck, and a decidedly corporeal shiver brought her out of the racing mass of her thoughts. She stood up again, slowly. Something pressed down against her skin like humidity; the feeling of being watched was as sharp in her stomach as when the exterminator had undressed her with his eyes. A flash of movement in her peripheral vision, and she whirled around, a specter in every shadow, every nerve on fire. Nothing. Then, another, in the opposite direction, and she whirled back, stumbling and losing her balance. In the millisecond before thought could catch instinct, she braced for the hardness of the wooden floor, arms windmilling out in a desperate attempt to break the fall, but the hard did not come. Instead, something grabbed her by the abdomen, points of ice-like fingers digging into the skin, and against every law of physics, she was righted by a force infinitely and terrifyingly stronger than herself. Scrambling, muscles tensed like steel cable, no thought, only blind terror as she rushed away from what she could not see, down the hatch, onto the chair and into her bedroom, the door closed and locked behind her.

Dr. Robinson did not sleep that night, even after downing the emergency bottle of wine she kept in her pantry.

In her entire medical career, Dr. Robinson had never been officially written up by any employer for any reason. That changed irrevocably the next day, October 28th, 2024, under a most unfortunate and unfair set of circumstances. She had been at work in her sleepless, half-living state, shuffling patients through the sterile visiting room whose fluorescent lights worsened her already pounding headache, when the woman with the crying child came in. Flu season was the bane of every healthcare worker's existence because of patients like these, or rather the parents of patients like these. The child could have been no more than five, and Dr. Robinson heard him all the way down the hallway and in the waiting room, shrieking wails piercing her fogged-up state and setting every sense on high alert.

The only somewhat sympathetic thing Dr. Robinson could say about the child's mother was that the woman looked as exhausted as she herself felt, wincing slightly every time her child coughed directly into her mouth. The first thing the woman did, however, was

to refuse the surgical masks that Dr. Robinson offered them both, a serious offense given that at least one of them had a highly contagious respiratory disease. The visit did not get better from there. The mother, without waiting for Dr. Robinson to say anything else, demanded antibiotics. Dr. Robinson took a deep breath, trying to compose some of the thoughts which the wailing child's noise had chased away. She attempted to explain that antibiotics were useless against viruses, and that unless the child was experiencing serious symptoms, she was forbidden from prescribing antiviral medication. This only made the woman more agitated, and she began yelling about her lack of sleep, how she was all alone with the child, how it was ridiculous that she paid so much every month for health insurance only for the goddamn doctor to screw her over, etc.

Dr. Robinson was able to stand this abuse as she withstood most experiences with patients, by staring blankly and letting them rant. When the mother needed to take a breath and thus provided a break in the noise, Dr. Robinson asked whether or not the child was vaccinated. The mother looked as though Dr. Robinson had asked whether or not she routinely electrocuted the child, and turning instinctively away from the doctor, explained that vaccines were poison. A seething, stinging heat filled Dr. Robinson's entire body, and she felt somehow light, as though she had been removed from the great burden of her flesh.

The next thing that Dr. Robinson remembered was standing in the hallway outside the exam room with Dr. Calloway, the head of general practice, shouting very loudly and with his face very close to hers. She blinked several times, genuinely unable to understand what he was saying to her, but she quickly realized that her situation was very bad. Dr. Calloway was demanding an explanation for her "unprofessional behavior", but the space where that memory should have been was just a black hole in her brain. She shook her head, and with an uncharacteristically uncertain tone of voice, explained that she couldn't account for what she had said, except that she had lost her temper. Dr. Calloway angrily explained that this did not excuse her calling the woman a "negligent bitch whose child should be taken away" and a "catastrophic threat to public health". Against Dr. Robinson's will, the conversation was moving from the hallway into her office, and then she was gathering her things, only half-aware of terms like "two-week suspension" and "appearance before the medical board", which floated through the air towards her at their own leisure. The drive back to her apartment was a reflex, and even her eyes couldn't feel irritated at the bright autumn sun streaming through her windshield at 11 a.m.

Slowly, as she trudged up the wooden stairs, dislodging chips of white paint with every step, it began to dawn on her just how catastrophic this was, and a hot, burning terror bloomed in her chest, a switch flipping and every emotion she had been unable to feel back at the hospital coming through in a second. The air around her had lost some vital property; it refused to rush into her lungs, and she saw the next stair coming towards her with an excruciating and inevitable slowness. Somehow, she caught herself and made it through her front door, the panic attack rolling through her at full force once she realized that she had no more wine.

Form and shape were lost in hyperventilation, every neurology lecture and grounding technique as thin and useless to her as dust. That evening, entirely without her usual routine of showering, flossing, brushing and journaling, Dr. Robinson stumbled into bed and fell into a restless state somewhere between sleep and waking.

Slowly, a vision called out to her, something solid out of the ether. She was lying on her back, staring up at the infernal ceiling, that endless white expanse which was the source of all her compounding misery. Her fascination was complete, and she realized in some subconscious way that she could not move. Arms, legs, head, hands, all were paralyzed, dragged down through the bed as if by some overwhelming force of gravity. Try as she might, she could not even close her eyes to blink. The scratching was so loud it felt like it was coming from inside her own head.

Almost imperceptibly at first, hair-thin lines appeared in the ceiling above her, sprawling out with increasing speed. Her eyes stung as white dust fell down into them, unprotected by lids or hands. An iron pressure invaded her chest, so strong that her lungs could not expand to draw breath, and the hot ice of terror burned through every vein. All she wanted to do was move, to get up, to run, but she was frozen, only able to count *one, two, three, four*, up to something she knew was coming. She watched as a tiny foot, like that of a rat, appeared through the largest crack, and with an agonizing slowness, its entire small body broke through the plaster and fell towards her.

The second the rat hit her face with a sickening crack, she could move, but by then it was too late. More came, endless masses, more rats than there had ever been in the world fell down upon her like the rapture, and she thrashed wildly, skin and bone helpless against the tempest she now found herself in. The horrible sound of their squeaking, and the breaking of their bones against her body, her bed, her floor consumed her. There was no light, no white of

the ceiling left, only the endless dark of the rats and their overwhelming rotten stench as she thrashed, desperate to find some end, to find the light—

She woke screaming, drenched in sweat despite the freezing room, arms still fighting the horde of fur and claws, tearing her sheet to ribbons. She had forgotten how to breathe normally, the air rushing into her chest in short, asthmatic gasps, and the terror burned through her in movements she could not control. Finally, she fell back, exhausted. The ceiling above her was intact, no dust, no gaping hole. It had only been a night terror, brought on no doubt by the day's intense stress. As her logic caught up with the wild, mauling animal in her brain, she realized that her whole body ached, and she looked down at her arms. They were covered in red scratches, already rising above the uninjured skin. Superficial, treatment unnecessary. She felt something wet on her stomach and looked down to see a slash in her worn t-shirt, red pricks of blood bubbling up and already coagulating. She looked at her fingernails. She saw and did not see blood, her eyes struggling to adjust to the darkness. She pressed against the laceration, too exhausted to move from her bed. The clock on the table read 3:04 a.m.

Medical Imaging Report

Alexandra Reyes

Date: 11/01/24

Signed by: Dr. Gabriel Sousa, M.D.

Review of abdominal ultrasound for patient Alexandra Reyes, conducted on 10/28/24.

Uterus, both ovaries and bladder present. No structural abnormalities observed. No evidence of pathology present in soft tissues.

Without the normal routine of scheduled shifts, hours and days blended together into a mass of time that was both infinite and nonexistent. The bottles of wine kept coming, ordered on an app which, after photo verification of her I.D., didn't even require Dr. Robinson to answer the door when the delivery driver arrived. The tangible world became less and less important as her mind wandered through a haze of constant sleep-not-sleep, the wine sedating but never giving rest. She was vaguely aware that the laceration on her stomach wasn't

healing as it should, alcohol impairing her immune system. Clumsily, she applied iodine and gauze, the sturdy structure of her medical training slowly molding like her baseboards. She spent hours in her room, staring at the ceiling, and hours more transfixed by the late autumn sunlight refracting through her window. The nightmare of her betrayal, her suspension, the looming threat of the medical board were so far away now, the inevitable order of the time before given way to the glorious haze of the organic. In the dreams that now found her in waking and sleeping, rats scurried over and under her skin.

One morning, or rather, at one time after she managed to drag herself out of bed, as she fought through the haze of an emerging fever to use her espresso machine, the flashes of movement and other small, mostly ignorable visual disturbances she had been living with realized their full, horrifying form. She reached up, lacerated stomach sharply reprimanding the movement, to grab an espresso cup, eyes turning thoughtlessly to the refrigerator in the corner. With shaking hands, she packed in the grounds and put them into the machine, and her eyes came back to the refrigerator. Something heavy in the air pressed down onto her skin. The mechanics of her medical training struggled to grind against the rusting of her reason.

Alexandra Reyes was standing next to the refrigerator, staring at her. Logically this was impossible, of course, but it could not have been anyone else. Her hollow eyes stared out at Dr. Robinson, ringed with the darkness of insomnia, and a cloying sweetness filled the air, some artificial approximation of tropical flowers, the same scent which had invaded the consultation room during her appointment. Alexandra smiled, but it was no expression of joy. The ends of her mouth curled up too far into her face, a distorted, Cheshire cat grin, and Dr. Robinson was bolted to the floor, paralyzed just as she had been in her dream. The scratching noise filled her ears, but it no longer came from only the ceiling. She heard it in the walls, in the baseboards, under the floor, as loud as the screeching rats when they had all surrounded her, a suffocating wave of darkness and noise. The plaster on the walls began to crack, the floorboards began to shake, the house itself seemed as though it would be brought down on her head. Alexandra's flesh rippled, huge forms like boils rushing under her skin, from the tips of her fingers all towards the central point of her abdomen. She lifted up her shirt, and Dr. Robinson saw a writhing, churning mass there, stretching the skin long past where it should have burst, tiny claws reaching out towards her, a litter of tiny bodies struggling to break free. Alexandra never stopped staring at her, and her smile only grew bigger and bigger, until her face was unrecognizably distorted.

Then, all at once, she was gone, along with the shaking walls and the heavy feeling in the air. Dr. Robinson dropped her espresso cup, and it shattered against the floor; every fried nerve jumped at the noise, and she screamed and ran out of the kitchen. With every step, pain shot through her abdomen, but she barely noticed. Reaching her room, hands shaking, she picked up her phone and dialed the crisis line. They were anonymous; Dr. Calloway and the others at the hospital, on the medical board, would never know. The line rang three times, and then an automated voice answered, soft music playing in the background.

Thank you for calling the California mental health crisis line. All of our counselors are currently busy. Please stay on the line, and we will connect you as soon as one becomes available. If you are experiencing a medical or psychiatric emergency, please hang up and dial 9-1-1.

Her entire body was shaking uncontrollably, and she looked down and noticed pus weeping from the gash on her stomach, the laceration now swollen and hard with an abscess. The glass screen of her phone shattered as it hit the wall, leaving a hole in the plaster. The music continued for a second, distorted, and then stopped.

Intake Visit Note

Alexandra Reyes

Date: 11/04/24

Signed by: Dr. Emily Nagasawa, PsyD

Initial psychiatric assessment scheduled for patient Alexandra Reyes. Patient referred by Dr. Gabriel Sousa for assessment regarding health anxiety and possibly somatic symptom involvement. Assessment scheduled for 10:30 a.m., patient did not show and was unreachable by phone. Patient has no history of psychiatric disorders and no previous contact with any mental health system. Previous noncompliance noted. Marked as vulnerable.

From the moment she first saw Alexandra in her kitchen, alcohol no longer worked to sedate Dr. Robinson, no longer provided any semblance of rest, any break from the churning of her mind, the aching of her head, the flashes and the scratching noises which were now her constant companions. A bottle of wine only served to complicate the search through her files for Alexandra Reyes' medical information. Maybe she had been too hasty, too quick in her diagnosis. Maybe there was something she had missed, something she could send to Dr. Sousa. Yes, she had made a mistake, a mistake just like the one she made with the woman and the screaming child, but she could fix it. She could come clean to the medical board, she could start over, she could fix this.

Desperation pulled her paper files out of their flimsy cardboard boxes, years of work and hundreds of patients all jumbled together in a second by frantic, careless fingers. No, no, no, no, no, they had to be here somewhere, she knew it, she knew she could find them. She opened her laptop, the alien light of the screen burning her eyes. Digital files, digital records, yes, she could find anything there. Millions of lines of text swam before her eyes, clicking like gunshots in her ears, scrolling, scrolling to nothing. She opened the physician's portal in her browser, tears pushing from her eyes, stomach alternately filled between the gaping hole of terror and the hot, pulsing mass of rage. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

Her bedroom was getting dark. How long had she been at this? Hours? Days? Years? She did not know. The light was fading from her dirty window, fast, faster than it should have, faster than the earth could possibly turn. She reached up and switched on the lamp on her bedside table, stomach screaming, then stumbled to her feet and pulled the chain for the overhead light. She turned around and saw Alexandra Reyes by the head of her bed, staring at her, smiling that cruel, metallic smile, so much worse than any expression designed to elicit hate or fear. The smell of eucalyptus. Alexandra was holding a candle in her hand, oblivious to the wax dripping down and sizzling on her skin.

A shattering sound of glass, and Dr. Robinson jumped as first the overhead light and then the lamp on her bedside table flickered out. The darkness was complete now, midnight black except for the ring of light from the candle, illuminating Alexandra's teeth.

Slowly, she lifted her shirt, revealing once more the writhing mass underneath her skin, limbs and tails wild, scratching, scratching, scratching from the inside, desperate to get out. The scratching was all around them now, and Dr. Robinson watched in horror as thousands of rats burst from the walls, the ceiling, the floor, and ran to Alexandra, the gravity which held their putrid bodies together, the force of their awful life. In the process, they ran over and bit Dr. Robinson's bare feet but try as she might to dance away from them like hot

coals, there was no escape. They ran past her, up Alexandra's arms and legs, chewed her frizzy hair, crawled over her face, all converging on her stomach. With one hand still holding the candle, Alexandra brought her other hand to her stomach, and with an impossible force, clawed at and ripped open her own skin. In the flickering light of the flame, Dr. Robinson watched in horror as she tore through rippling yellow fat, layers of muscle and fascia to her horribly distended uterus. Blood poured from her, running down her legs and onto the grey carpet, showering the rats, who seemed oblivious. The movement inside her was obvious now, Dr. Robinson could count the claws on each tiny foot kicking out against the uterine wall. With a spray of blood and amniotic fluid, slick, spasming rat bodies fell from Alexandra and onto the floor, cushioned by the teeming mass of their siblings below.

All at once, everything was gone. The mass of rats, the blood, the holes in the walls and floors and ceiling, Alexandra and her teeth, all gone as though they had never existed. Dr. Robinson looked around frantically, searching the dark for some evidence, for some explanation of what she had just seen. Something soft scorched her hand, and with a start, she realized that she was holding a candle. She dropped it, and the flame caught on the carpet, slowly growing to engulf a nearby piece of plastic wrapping and sending several flies buzzing away.

A glint in the darkness, the wine opener. Dr. Robinson knelt down to pick it up, doubling over in pain as she did so, fire burning across her stomach as though she had touched the candle flame to it. She pulled up her shirt and saw that the abscess had grown and was now pulsing and stretching from movement within it. The pain was unlike anything Dr. Robinson had experienced, and her vision swam. She gripped the wine opener in her hand. The scratching, which had stopped for the first time she could remember when Alexandra disappeared, was starting up again, so clear it must have been coming from only an inch away from her head. She pulled the knife out of the wine opener, beginning to rust and caked with wax and dirt.

She knew what she had to do.

Foxglove

I need my mom. It might be embarrassing to admit as a 24-year-old, but it's true. I need her in the morning when I wake up, body stiff from sleep that is not rest, only a break from the storm. I need her as she makes my breakfast, a smoothie with protein powder that I usually struggle to choke down. When I'm sick, really sick, so sick that I can't tell what's real and what is the driving rain of fear, I don't have an appetite. Even when it's not so bad, when I can breathe a little, my whole life is making sure I don't get swept under again, blinded by visions of the worst things I could ever possibly do, paralyzed by the rituals that promise safety but only pull me down deeper. I'm so lucky that I have her. I know I couldn't cope on my own, and the thought of what I'll do when she eventually dies is so cold in my chest that I put it away the second it tries to come out. I know how much my mother loves me, how her caring grows and stretches and bursts out of her chest, reaching me always.

I think it would kill me to lose her.

We live in a small blue house on a quiet street, one story and everything we need. Each house in our neighborhood has a postage-stamp lawn, but ours is bald and patchy no matter how much fertilizer and seed she pours on it. It's a joke between us, that she puts all her nurturing into me and has nothing left for plants. I don't have a green thumb, a green hangnail, a green anything, so I can't judge her at all. It does make our house look strange, the neat blue boards and white trim against the brown, dying grass. The only scrap of bucolic suburban bliss our front yard can muster is a cluster of purple wildflowers, little bell-shapes which draw hummingbirds in the spring and summer. I imagine the neighbors judge us for the communal embarrassment we provide, but mom says it's all in my head. "Plus," she adds, her warm brown eyes narrowing, the closest I ever see them get to something sharp, "we've lived here for almost 20 years, and still, the neighbors can't accept that you're just a little bit different. Don't pay them any mind."

I'm glad I have mom, and I don't like it when she leaves, not even to work overnight shifts as a police officer, because when I'm here alone, I feel like all the neighbors are watching me. I read the term "curtain twitchers" in a book once, and I think our street must be full of them. Every time I step out the door, even if it's just for a walk around the block or to water our garden of hopelessness, faces fill the front window in every house. Most of our neighbors are older, retired, nothing but time on their hands, and people like me used to be

locked away. They didn't get used to difference when they were young, and now they're old and don't want to change. I know we should have compassion, but it still hurts. I feel like an aphid burning up underneath a magnifying glass. I try not to go out much.

Things changed when Charlie came. The moving truck was there early in the morning, like 8 a.m. early, and its reversing alarm dragged me out of sleep and up into the waking world. I peeked out my bedroom window, pulling up the blinds enough to see across the street. I saw the curtain patrol had been woken up too, or at least disturbed, but despite myself, I opened the window to see if I could catch what was going on. Aside from being nosy, our neighbors have a habit of reporting everything they don't approve of to the police, calling in a noise complaint or bringing up some obscure planning bylaw that has definitely been violated. Mom has to spend a lot of time talking them down. As I watched Mrs. Rice (who lives across the street and two doors down), hurry out of her door in a matching purple sweatsuit, I thought for the first time in my life I would agree with one of her complaints. The noise was so loud and sharp it felt like my head would split in two.

"Excuse me?" Mrs. Rice's voice was barely audible over the loud, steady beeping. "What on earth is going on here?" Her manicured fingers were anchored firmly to her hips, defiant in all her five-foot-three glory.

An unintelligible shout, and the beeping stopped, along with the truck; for one blissful second, the street was silent. Then, the shuffling of feet against concrete, and a well-dressed old man who looked like he belonged in a Frank Capra movie appeared from the other side of the truck.

"Oh, I'm so sorry ma'am. My name is Eugene Simms, and my granddaughter and I are moving into this house here. Gosh, we've been terrible neighbors for a start, I really do apologize." He looked incredibly sheepish, more so than I thought it was possible to feel when you were in your eighties, and stuck out his hand to Mrs. Rice.

Based on her reaction, I understood a little more why the feminist movement had taken so long to kick off. Mr. Simms was quite handsome, still with a full head of silver hair, and maybe she was lonely, but Mrs. Rice stopped completely in her tracks. She took his hand, all her bluster gone, replaced by a winning smile and a smaller voice.

"It's not a problem at all, Mr. Simms. It's just we don't often get new people moving in. I'm afraid I've forgotten my manners."

They kept on, and I felt transported back in time, like I was watching them in their heyday, decades ago when getting a new neighbor was a prime social event. With a loud

rattle, one of the movers opened the back of the truck and began setting up a ramp, and at the same time, a black SUV with a disabled license plate pulled up and parked on the street. The driver's side opened, and then Mrs. Rice wasn't the only one who was lovestruck on our street anymore.

The first thing I noticed about Charlie when she opened the door was her long brown hair and even longer arms. In one smooth movement, she pulled a pink wheelchair frame from the passenger's side and set it on the ground. The wheels came next, spokes adorned with covers of baby pink and blue watercolor flowers, and then a dark pink seat cushion. She made the transfer from the car into the chair look so easy, even though she was only using her arms. She flowed along in the wheelchair, her motion so alive it was mesmerizing. She opened a rear door of the car and pulled out a cat carrier, balancing it on her lap and wheeling over to the house. I followed her movement closely, my heart in my stomach, dizzy, but for once, not from fear.

When she reached Mrs. Rice and Eugene, he exclaimed, opening the door of the cat carrier to an adorable orange tabby. The cat hopped onto the sidewalk and stared up at the crowd around it, eyes wide and hackles slightly raised, but it didn't run away; instead, it sniffed the girl's feet, which rested on metal footplates, before moving on to Eugene and Mrs. Rice.

"Oh my," Mrs. Rice said, "that's a friendly cat. Mine would have run and hid with all this commotion."

"Oh, he goes wherever we do, little shadow," Charlie said, the cat's tail wrapping around her thin, still legs.

"Ellen, this is my granddaughter, Charlie," Eugene said. What a perfect name.

Charlie stuck out her hand, and Mrs. Rice hesitated before taking it, looking her up and down. "Oh you poor thing, so young to be wheelchair-bound. It must be difficult."

"Not at all. I'm actually really lazy, so I think sitting all day is better than walking," Charlie said, and somehow her voice seemed too bright, her smile too wide. Mrs. Rice cleared her throat and stooped down to talk to the cat.

I felt a wave wash over me then, and for a second, my heart pounded because it seemed so much like the waves of fear that came out of nowhere and turned off the part of my brain that could think. My palms were pricking, electricity dancing over the skin. I hadn't spoken to Mrs. Rice in over eight years. Plus, there were the movers, Eugene and Charlie,

who was absolutely terrifying and had freckles on her nose. I'm not like normal people. I can't think of nice things to say to keep the conversation going, keep everyone comfortable. The conversation usually dies when I show up.

But there was something else in the wave too, something warm and buoyant I hadn't felt in a long time. It dulled the pricking of my palms and the thoughts chasing each other through my head. I wanted to be with Charlie. She made it better. I felt the pull and push of everything that was out there, and everything that was clouding up my head, as I walked down the hallway towards the front door. My life is one of extremes: rising euphoric highs that crash down at nothing and all at once become bone-crushing lows. Now I was caught, suspended somewhere in between them, and I didn't know quite how to feel.

Mom was looking out the front window, and she started at my footsteps, jumping and swearing, which she only did when she thought I couldn't hear.

"Shit, Violet. I didn't think you were up yet." I answered that the truck had woken me. She shook her head, annoyed, and then looked back out the window at the crowd that had gathered around Mr. Simms, Charlie and their cat. There was Mrs. Jaysingh, who was always immaculately dressed, even to get her mail, Mr. and Mrs. McCannon, who were hardly ever home in the winter for going on ski trips, and a bored-looking teenage girl, head buried in phone, who I guessed was their granddaughter.

"Pulling them in, I suppose. The old busies must be thrilled to have someone new to gossip about, especially a girl in a chair like that. She doesn't know what's coming." Mom tsked.

She was cold water on all the warmth that Charlie had lit in my chest, and suddenly my voice didn't work right. I looked out the window again and noticed that Charlie wore baby pink socks, which matched her UCLA hoodie. Mrs. Rice was laughing at something she had said, head tipped back, really laughing. Mrs. Jaysingh took the moment of distraction to start working on Eugene, all her perfect white teeth on display as she smiled at him.

"Charlie and Mr. Simms have to be different, mom. I mean, how could they not be?" I gestured out the window to Charlie. "Even if everyone else thinks I'm weird and crazy, they'll see it from our side. Can we just go out and talk to them?"

Mom turned to me, eyes narrow with astonishment. "Seriously? You remember what happened last time. I don't want you to have any more panic attacks."

"But—" The rest of the sentence turned to a stutter as my body tightened, remembering. Years ago now, I'd tried to go to a job interview, tried to make myself more a part of the world outside. I'd gotten so frantic I had to be escorted out by the manager, and

that night, I'd done something stupid to myself, something that could have landed me in the hospital. Mom took care of it, tried to keep it quiet, but Mrs. Rice found out, and that was the last straw for the curtain twitchers. I officially became a pariah.

"No. If it was just them, maybe, but there's way too many people out there. And Mrs. Rice is the worst one of all; you know that. She'll just make you look like an idiot." Mom's tone was final.

Mr. Simms was waving to the small crowd on the sidewalk, and Charlie was scooping the cat into its carrier, its tiny face utterly bewildered. She rolled towards the doorway of their new house.

"Well, can't you go over later and introduce us? At least see how they react?"

Mom sighed. "Maybe." The crowd across the street was dispersing now, and Mrs. Rice looked up and caught a glimpse of us in the window. Mom quickly pulled the cord, and the blinds clattered down.

"All right, enough distractions. Let's eat breakfast." She was brisk, gave no option but to obey. "Today's smoothie flavor is blueberry vanilla."

The shame was growing so big in my stomach that I knew I wouldn't be able to eat.

That night, and for the next few days, I paid for the sparse joy that Charlie had brought me. My thoughts can be so terrifying, so overwhelming. They crush the world down to the size of my bedroom, everything beyond that an exclusion zone of caught breaths and pounding hearts. In my room, I believe I can control the things that trigger my fear, avoid them and stay safe, but it grows into a prison. I started obsessing over the thought that I would break into Charlie's house in the middle of the night, that I was a stalker, that I was evil, that I would kill her, even though I would have sooner killed myself. I locked my window and the bedroom door, closed the blinds and sat on my bed. But I was already taken, swept out on the tide of compulsions. They feed on each other like fungus feeds on dead leaves, spreading and spreading until it's all waste, as far as you can see. The first time I locked the window and the door, the ebbing of the fear was instant, what I imagine it must be like for an addict to get high. But it never lasts. Even though I could physically look at the window latch and see that it was locked, something so much stronger than I am made me get up to check it. Again, and again, always chasing the relief I felt when I locked it for the first time. But the more I checked, the more I gave in, weak as I am, the bigger the fear grew, circling tighter and tighter round my neck like ivy, until I couldn't breathe. I gasped out, desperate for air, for something to hold on to as the world grew dark at its edges. The only

thing I could see were nightmare visions of me crawling out the window, sneaking across the street, bashing in the glass and then—I never got that far. The not knowing exactly what I might do made it so much worse.

I need my mom. I don't want to, but I do. In the evenings, when she came home from work, I would pour my soul out to her, hours and hours of aching, frozen fear rushing out of me. She never complained. She was infinite, always had space for what overwhelmed me, even if she'd worked a murder that day or had to testify in a case involving a kid. She always had room for what crowded out everything inside me, even my soul, and for a few moments, she could make it better.

Statistically, it is so unlikely that I ever would have met Charlie in person. Yes, she was my neighbor, but even after the monstrous fear of my stalking her and breaking into her house was consumed by another (this time, the fear that I had developed sepsis), we lived separate lives. I struggled to choke down smoothies, protein bars and meal replacements when my body didn't experience hunger and watched and rewatched the same few movies and documentaries I didn't think would trigger a spiral, compulsively avoiding all other forms of entertainment. When I'm really sick, the outside world doesn't exist. I can't comprehend it, in the same way I'm sure an aphid can't comprehend an airplane: it's too vast, and I have too much to stress over in my own tiny world. When I was feeling up to it, or when my body was so driven by anxious buzzing that I felt I would be ripped apart if I didn't move, I would drag myself out to the front yard and water the lawn. I only did this when no one else was on the street, and I rigged up the hose so I could sit on the front step, an easy retreat if someone did come by.

That's where she found me, one afternoon in the summer when it was so hot that I instantly regretted coming outside. I was too busy checking and rechecking my body temperature, as though by thinking hard enough about it, my brain could become a thermometer, to notice her until it was too late to leave without looking rude. She was rolling down the sidewalk, and the orange cat was following her, far enough away that it was definitely just a coincidence they were walking in the same direction. She was wearing pink cat-eye sunglasses and long black leggings which made me hot just looking at them. I saw her a second before she saw me and froze as she waved, voice rising with enthusiasm.

"Hi! I'm Charlie. I don't think we've met." She hurried up the driveway, making the slope look easy, and sticking out her hand. In a daze, I stood up and walked over to her,

leaving the hose running. Her hand was soft, and up close, I noticed that her nails were done, short and hot pink. Slowly, the cat came up and sat next to her chair.

“Oh, this is Theo. My grandpa named him after Theophrastus, from ancient Greece. He was a botany professor.”

“Theophrastus?” My throat was tight, but somehow, I choked out the sound.

She laughed. “No, silly, my grandpa. At UCLA for like, 20 years. Now he just mumbles to himself and plants seeds in old yogurt cups.”

I nodded, conscious that my temperature was definitely rising, at least in my cheeks. Charlie smelled so good, coconut wafting from her long hair, which was in two braids. Theo came over to sniff my feet, and I was grateful to have a small distraction, because I felt like I was about to have a panic attack. I leaned down to pet him, but Charlie didn’t seem to notice, just kept on talking.

“I haven’t seen you around much, just watering your lawn, although I think it’s a lost cause and my grandpa agrees. By the way, you left the hose on.” She gestured towards the hose, and I hurried around the side of the house to turn it off. It occurred to me then that I could just run away, slip in through the back sliding door in the kitchen and be done with this, but she was so lovely, and if I ran away, I would never be able to leave the house again for fear that she’d find me and confront me. Palms sweating, I came back around to the front lawn. It really did look pathetic.

“Ornamental lawns aren’t really suited to southern California; it doesn’t rain enough,” she continued, as though I’d never left. “We’re just renting, or else he’d rip the whole thing out and plant succulents. As it is, he’s going crazy. Do you want to see? Come on, we have an awesome heirloom tomato plant.”

Without waiting, she turned and rolled back down the driveway. Something stronger than I am made me follow her.

From the outside, the house that Charlie and her grandpa moved into seemed totally ordinary: one story, attached garage, small windows looking out to the street. The wooden siding was painted an unoffensive grey-green, like a succulent. Inside, though, was a totally different story. As Charlie rolled up the newly installed ramp and opened the door, jazz music spilled out, the sound scratchier and richer than I’d ever heard. I entered after her and held the door open for Theo, who chirped as he walked through, announcing himself. I stopped in the entryway and looked around.

I have no idea what the house looked like before they moved in, but now it seemed so thoroughly an extension of Charlie and Mr. Simms that I couldn't imagine anyone else had ever lived there. The living room was lined with bookshelves on both walls, reaching almost to the ceiling; each shelf was stuffed with books, some of which looked so ancient I thought they belonged in a museum. Crystalline sun-catchers, all spirals and twirling rainbow light, hung in front of each window, and every wall that didn't support a bookshelf held framed photos, posters, art prints and other curios. On top of every bookshelf and hanging in every ceiling corner were plants, so lush and green, leaves spilling out of pots, that it seemed they must have been there for decades. I was stopped utterly, each step revealing more to look at, more reasons to wonder, but Charlie sailed through like it was nothing.

"Yeah, my grandpa really likes to collect stuff. Moving was kind of a nightmare. The garden's this way, in the back."

I followed her through the kitchen, plants spilling out on top of the microwave and over the cabinets. It smelled like strong coffee and frozen pizza, and the afternoon light shone through a window that was already dirty. Charlie briefly stopped rolling to grab a handful of cashews from a huge Costco tub on the counter, putting them in a small plastic container and wedging it between her thighs. Then, she opened the slider and rolled onto the backyard patio.

This yard was different from ours; a strip of concrete leading from the patio and surrounding the grass on three sides, almost as though it was made for wheels. There were built-in planter boxes along the back fence, newly planted with black dirt, and terracotta pots covered the half-sun, half-shade surface of the patio, arranged to make a path between them to the grass. At that time, I knew nothing about plants, and most of the ones in the pots looked half-grown, no flowers or fruit to help distinguish them. Even still, I knew this was impressive. It seemed like so much more than Charlie and her grandpa would have been able to do alone. I thought back to Mrs. Rice and all the other neighbors gathered on the sidewalk on the day they moved in. I wasn't the only one who wanted to be around Charlie, to feel her magnetism.

"So," she said, pulling me back to the present, "this is it. Might be kind of a letdown after going through the house, but he has tons more seedlings in the garage, waiting for fall. We can go look at that too, if you want."

I did not particularly want to do that, because Charlie and her grandpa had an enthusiasm for plants that seemed slightly overboard to me, but I couldn't think of denying her out loud, so I said nothing. I looked back to the sliding glass door and wished the cat was

standing on the other side, yowling to come out so I'd have something to do. Instead, I picked at my cuticles and hoped it wouldn't gross her out.

For the first time, my silence seemed to deflate her, and she pulled up her sunglasses, looking me in the eye.

"Sorry I dragged you here. If you don't want to stay, I promise I won't be offended. I just don't get to spend a lot of time with people my own age, especially not since Mrs. Rice and Mrs. Jaysingh are over every day."

Despite myself, I giggled, and Charlie giggled too, the corners of her eyes crinkling up, the freckles on her nose squeezing together.

"Which one do you think he'll pick?" Based on the number of noise complaints each woman lodged with the police, I couldn't imagine they'd be very fun to live with.

Charlie rolled her eyes. "God, either one is awful, and I know the attention just makes him embarrassed, but he's too polite to send them away. It gets awkward, and they are definitely ignoring my hints."

I imagined that the hints were anything but subtle, and I could feel my palms start to sweat just thinking about the rolled eyes and sharp words Charlie and the two older women must have exchanged almost daily. I had barely started tunneling down into this warren of anxious thoughts when I realized that Charlie had stopped talking. She was looking at me. Oh, God, it was my turn to say something, but I'd suddenly forgotten every conversation that I'd ever been a part of, and every topic that another person might find interesting.

"Sorry I'm not very good company," I blurted out, instantly chiding myself that that was the best I could come up with. "I think I make other people uncomfortable. Maybe Mrs. Rice and Mrs. Jaysingh have talked about me." The words came ahead of my thoughts, and I desperately wanted to be back in my room. After I got out of here, I was never going outside again.

Charlie looked confused, her brows knitting together. "I feel comfortable with you. And no, they haven't said anything. But they also haven't answered my questions about you, which I did think was odd. Did you blow up their mailboxes or something?"

The mere thought of getting in that much trouble made my chest ache. "No, God no, I would never do anything like that." I watched a tiny ladybug, more orange than red, slowly crawl along the rim of one of the terracotta pots.

"Yeah, you don't seem like the type to get in trouble. So why don't they like you?"

The question felt like being slapped, and I must have physically reacted, because Charlie immediately started backtracking.

“I’m sorry, that was so rude. Oh God, I brought you over here to look at our tomato plant, and now I’m just rambling. Here, it’s over here, and then you can leave if you want.”

She wheeled over to the edge of the patio, the side that was fully in the sun, and gestured to a huge bush of a plant. As I looked closer, I saw small green fruits budding out from slender branches, but they looked nothing like the tomatoes I knew from the grocery store. Instead of being smooth and round, they were lumpy and lopsided, more like tiny pumpkins than beefsteaks.

“Wow, they look really...”

“Weird? Yeah, maybe that’s why I like them so much.” Charlie gestured to her chair in an exaggerated motion. “But they’re so much better than the ones from the store. They smell so good, and when they’re ripe, you can eat them just with salt.”

“Wow, cool.” Even if they weren’t green, I wasn’t sure I’d want to put one of those things in my mouth.

“Well, I’ll let you go now. Sorry for dragging you over here, but it really is so nice to talk to someone who knows what WiFi is, and that—“

“Mrs. Rice and Mrs. Jaysingh don’t like me because I’m not a normal person.” The end that I had pleaded for was here, and I couldn’t stand it. Leaving would be so safe, but it would put out the soft, warm feeling that had been gently carpeting all the sharp edges of my insides since I’d been talking to her.

Charlie nodded slowly, and when she didn’t say anything, I had to keep talking, had to confess everything just like I did with my mom.

“I...I have bad thoughts,” I said, slowly, “and I do weird shit sometimes to make them go away. That’s why they don’t like me.”

She nodded again. “They’re flirting with my grandpa, so they’re not gonna say what they really feel, but I know my chair makes them uncomfortable. Mrs. Rice talks to me like I’m a pet.” After a second of thought, she said, “You know, fuck them.”

I laughed, bigger than I had in a long time, and Charlie laughed too, the sound filling the backyard and spilling onto the street without a single care. I realized I hadn’t worried about sepsis the whole time that I’d been with her.

Charlie made life so good that summer, better than it had been in a long time. It got to where I was spending most days in her back garden, learning the names of all the plants and listening to modern jazz music from her grandpa’s record player. She told me about the car accident that left her paralyzed and killed her father when she was seven, and how she’d been

desperate to get away from her mother ever since. How her grandpa offered her a place to live when she was 15, building a ramp himself when his old landlord was slow to install one. I met Mr. Simms the second time I went over; he was still dressed in a suit even though it was over 90 degrees, and Charlie seemed more concerned that he would overheat than I could have ever imagined her feeling about anything.

She told me that he was in the early stages of dementia, and I didn't believe her at first, remembering how sharp he seemed on the sidewalk the day they moved in. But he introduced himself every time I came over, asking my name like all our previous meetings had been some hallucination on my part, and then I understood. Every so often, our time in the garden would be interrupted by an alarm on Charlie's phone, and she would hurry inside to give Eugene his medication or go through a series of memory exercises with him.

Mrs. Rice and Mrs. Jaysingh visited a few times while I was over, but I saw him forget both of their names more than once, and I don't think they knew how to act. It was also decidedly awkward for us to be in the same room together. The idea that I might have been part of driving them away from him made me feel nauseous, but I was secretly glad when they stopped showing up. Charlie was too, and seeing her happy was a better high than any compulsion. I didn't tell mom what I was doing, and I always made sure to be back home before she got back from work. I wasn't sure exactly why I hid it, but something inside me told me that I should.

Charlie kissed me first, unsurprisingly. We were sitting together on the patio and hiding from the late afternoon sun, hands sticky from picking slugs off of leaves. Suddenly, I noticed the same purple flowers we had outside our house growing in a corner of her lawn. By that point, I'd been over so many times, I was shocked I hadn't noticed it before. I asked her what they were.

"Foxgloves. They're not native, but they grow wild here. They're pretty, but we've never planted them on purpose because they're dangerous."

"How so?"

"Well, if Theo were to eat the leaves, they'd stop his heart, just like that." She snapped, the sound sending shivers down my spine. An image of Theo, stiff and lifeless, flashed before me, but it was gone before it could stick and ruin my life.

"But you make sure he doesn't, right?"

"Of course. We don't let him outside unsupervised, and he doesn't snack on plants in general."

I nodded. "You really care about him."

“Not just him,” she looked at me slyly. “I’d have to really like a girl to tell her the truth. Now I’ll never be able to poison you, at least not with that.”

“I didn’t know you wanted to poison me,” I said, laughing because I knew she would never do anything like that. There was a moment’s pause, and then in slow motion, she leaned in and pressed her lips to mine. Fireworks don’t begin to describe the feeling. I was free. We kissed a lot after that, in the verdant sun-shade of her garden, just the two of us.

Even with Charlie, I was still me, and there were days when I just couldn’t make it across the street and into her garden. Brutally stabbing my mom to death, dying of rabies after Theo gave me a love bite, the cold, slow doom of melting ice caps and rising sea levels. The thoughts cycled through, one after the other, but the terror was all the same. I would get a little better and open up my world, watch a new TV show, start reading the news again, go to the grocery store or the park with mom, and then something random, maybe something I’d seen a thousand times before and never had a problem with, would set me off. The fear was so urgent, no far off worry of some unshaped future, no vague fear of people talking behind my back. When it was bad, every second of every day felt like I was trapped in a burning building no one else could see or feel, my mind scrambling desperately for some way to save myself. Then I was back in my room, curled into a ball, crying and crying like the salt could wash away all that was disgustingly broken in me. Sometimes I would look out the window and see Charlie and Theo casually strolling down the sidewalk or sunbathing on the lawn, and I ached to join them in the normal universe.

I needed mom so much in those moments, to force me to eat and shower, to be the confessional booth which would hold all my sins. She was everything I needed, and I couldn’t even think of Charlie being the same. Sure, she was the first person besides my mom that I’d ever told about the thoughts and the things I did to keep them at bay, but hearing and knowing were two very different things. She had enough problems without having to hear three tearful, hour-long confessions a day or remember to defrost my smoothies.

One night, early in September when the day still baked like summer but the evenings could bite like fall, mom asked me about Charlie. We were watching a documentary about the Amazon rainforest (no people, a low chance of triggers), and we’d just gotten to a section on parasitic air plants in the canopy. She asked during a lull in the narration, calm as anything, as though she was asking me how the weather had been.

“You’ve been over at that new girl’s house, haven’t you? What’s her name, Carrie?”

I am bad at hiding how I feel, and totally hopeless at it around mom, so I know she saw how horrified I was. At 24, I was still like a teenager, sneaking around, the whole world hinging on whether or not I got caught. She paused the program, and the silence in the living room was suffocating.

“You’re not in trouble, Violet, don’t worry. Last week, I forgot my phone charger and came back to get it in the middle of the day. I saw you two in the backyard; you left the gate open a little.” She was trying to meet my eyes, but for some reason, I was still frozen. She craned her neck towards me. “Wasn’t spying, I promise.” She sounded almost hurt, and I felt so stupid trying to keep this from her.

“Her name’s Charlie. She and her grandpa have a really cool garden over there. We hang out sometimes.”

Mom smiled slyly and eyed me. I flushed immediately, rushing my hands to my face as though that would hide anything. “Well, she’s a very pretty girl. You should be careful, though. It takes a very special person to understand you. Are you sure she’s it?”

Mom didn’t wait for a response, or maybe she took my silence as one. Either way, she pressed play and the show continued, but I didn’t hear a word. The fear was tightening like some tropical vine around my neck.

All fear is the same when it comes from the bad thoughts. What I mean by that is, no matter how actually dangerous the thoughts are, living with them still feels like everyone around you is drinking poison and you can’t convince them to stop. My fear of developing sepsis (life-threatening) and my fear of breaking into Charlie’s house (life-ruining) were both as terrifying as the new fear I carried after that night, that Charlie was planning to leave me (life-ruining in only the emotional sense). I didn’t confess anything to mom, even when it got so bad that I could only sleep a few hours each night. Some stubborn, juvenile part of me couldn’t handle the possibility that she might be right. I spent hours going over every interaction I’d ever had with Charlie, every pause, every gesture, every touch taking on a new, magnified meaning, until I could barely breathe. It was like I was floating above my body, and without me – it was so much bigger than me – the fear crystalized into certainty, tangible as the vibrant leaves on the ground outside. I knew it then. She was growing tired of me, of everything I dragged around, all the emotional weeds of my life.

This new knowledge didn’t make me feel better, but it did make me feel different. The fear was gone, and I only felt hollowed out, all the emptier because I’d lost what had been a constant companion for my entire life. I still spent time with Charlie in the garden, and

with the changing seasons she was glad for the help, but I knew things were different. The warmth, the easiness that had lived between us, was gone. She wasn't cruel to me, never rude or sharp in her words or her actions, but she didn't look at me as though I was all that was right with the world anymore, and she didn't kiss me. She was preoccupied, spending more time on Eugene's memory exercises and pulling down the reminders he scrawled on post-it notes, which sprouted up around the house like mushrooms. The last day I spent with her, I stuffed rotten tomatoes, withered vines, and endless dead leaves into big, black trash bags. We barely said two words to each other. That night, I barely registered that mom came home almost an hour after her usual shift ended. The sky could have fallen and I wouldn't have cared.

It shouldn't have hurt me as much as it did when she and her grandpa moved out, but the heart is an animal, not a plant; it can't be trained to grow just how you want it to. Their farewell was much less well-attended than their arrival, with only Mrs. Rice standing on the sidewalk to say goodbye. I peeked out the blinds in my room, now caked with dust because I'd discovered I couldn't clean without nervous energy.

Eugene was worse than I'd ever seen him. His tie was crooked, the skinny end sticking out and visible from the front, and only one of his shirtsleeves was cuffed, the other running out beyond his jacket arm like an errant weed. Charlie held his hand or the tail of his coat all the time until she bundled him into the backseat of the SUV, but he seemed desperate to wander away. Amongst the organized coming and going of the movers, he was slow and random. His eyes were glazed, and at first, I thought he was drugged or hungover, and then my heart sank as I realized what must have been happening. Did he know that these were his last moments of some kind of freedom? That from this afternoon, he wouldn't be able to do anything by himself, every move planned and watched by some nurse or carer as everything he had been slowly melted into the mist? I looked at Charlie's face, but I couldn't read it, not from across the street, anyway. She looked older, tired, wilted. I ached that she would look up, meet my eyes and give me some kind of farewell, but that thought was almost enough to bring the fear back. I was glad and not-glad in a shame-tinged way when she drove off, oblivious to me.

I'd never experienced a broken heart before. As I watched Charlie drive away, some part of me expected that it wouldn't be that bad, that since I'd already accepted things were over between us, I could move on. I certainly had enough to keep me distracted.

I was wrong. Losing Charlie felt like losing a part of my body, and I was hollow. They say that love changes you, and one of the things it changed in me was my ability to cope with the thoughts. They weren't worse than they had been before; if anything, I was so numb that they were better, but it didn't feel that way. Charlie had given me a new sense of what was possible, proof that I was a person who could experience light, floating joy. She was hard evidence that the shifting sands of the world outside my bedroom could bring more than a bracing, breaking cold to my chest. They had also brought her, and she was the sun in summer. Before her, I wanted to know the world in my more reckless moments, but my driving need to survive each day made it a low priority. Now, I had known the world, and my inability to inhabit it without her was suffocating. Time was liquid in a way it had never been, and for the first time I could remember, boredom crept into the carefully-built fortress of my life.

I didn't say any of this to mom, but I think she could sense it. The air in the house had a new texture, rougher, more...noticeable between us. She bought me ice cream and rented shitty romance movies, but I still wasn't hungry, and I definitely wasn't interested in watching some girl cry over a man. I wasn't like those protagonists anyway. They had jobs, friends, fashionable wardrobes, cities full of bars and restaurants at their doorsteps. They had made worlds for themselves beyond a boyfriend, and all they had to do was rediscover them once he was gone. Outside of Charlie, I had nothing to find.

When she came back to our street, I heard her before I saw her. I've long suspected that in my worst moments, my mental state moves beyond anxiety into full psychosis, a total break from reality. Auditory hallucinations are more common than visual ones, so for a second, I assumed I was so hungry for Charlie that my mind conjured up her voice as a cold comfort. But she had never yelled when she was with me, never pushed the words out of her mouth with such force. I peeked out of the blinds, now clean because mom had recently dusted them, and saw her across the street, in front of her old house. Oh God, it was really her. She was wearing the same pink UCLA hoodie she had been when I'd first saw her, along with baggy grey jeans and a knitted pink beanie. She was arguing with a man I didn't recognize, and I opened the window to try and catch their conversation.

Immediately I realized that the man must have been their landlord, because I heard the words "security deposit", "cosmetic damage" and "inspection agreement" over the rising breeze. Like I was someone else, not Violet, scared of her own shadow, I pulled up the blinds and opened the window fully, shivering from the cold air.

“—I explained that this was a possibility when we first spoke on the phone, and you agreed to it at the time. I’m a full-time wheelchair user; scuff marks on the baseboards are inevitable.”

I couldn’t hear his response, but Charlie got louder. “There is no other damage to the house! You agreed to give us back half the deposit when we signed the lease—“

He shouted something, and it was clear that he didn’t know how determined she was. “You motherfucker, you are stealing from us! I’m going to report you to the civil rights department!”

He stepped towards her, reaching for one of her handles, but she deftly moved away. “Don’t you dare fucking touch my body or my chair, you asshole.” Her eyes searched the street, and though I couldn’t see her, I knew that Mrs. Rice was listening, probably standing in her backyard, taking notes.

I had never seen this man before, but my entire body burned with hatred towards him. Charlie was sunlight, she was a field of wildflowers, soft and sweet to lay against. She was the one door I had walked through that hadn’t led to disaster, and he was trying to hurt her, trying to steal from her, trying to lie and get his own way because he thought she was an easy target.

I don’t remember how I got out of the house and across the lawn, dry and brown as usual. I only remember the knowing in my chest, solid as the trunk of the oak tree in Charlie’s backyard, that this was wrong and I had to do something because I still loved her.

I was oblivious to the world around me, so much so that I almost jumped in front of a passing car in the urgency to get to her. The screaming honk must have drowned out my calling to her, but she turned her head and saw me.

I have never seen such white-hot hatred.

In a second, it was as though the landlord had never existed. She raced down the driveway, not even pausing to look before barreling across the street to me. She didn’t seem to notice the curb as her body bounced from rolling over it.

“What the hell do you want?” I could taste the poison, and maybe it was already in my blood because I was dizzy, body so hot despite the chill in the air. I looked down and realized that I wasn’t even wearing shoes. The cold concrete made my feet ache. I felt like I was underwater somehow, all the laws of physics reversed. What had I done? Why had

everything turned to a nightmare in one second? Sure, our last meeting had been distant, but Charlie was taking the nuclear option. Surely, I hadn't been this rude to her?

"I wanted to see you." I could barely get the words out, like my jaw was locked by the sheer incomprehensibility of the situation. "And that guy was screaming at you, you both left so suddenly..." When I was running out the door, everything seemed so crystal clear, but now it was like I'd forgotten how to think.

Charlie's hands were physically shaking, and I felt sick to my stomach. "Yeah, we did leave suddenly, didn't we?" I could hear a sob in the back of her throat, only barely restrained behind her words. "Your mom convinced me not to call the police, said you had *problems* they already knew about. If you don't get the fuck away from me right now, I will call and I will watch them drag your ass away." She pulled her phone out of a pink leather purse hanging off the back of her chair, and I felt helpless as I watched her unlock it, like my body didn't belong to me anymore.

The world got blurry, and the familiar shame of crying started to corrode my insides. I had been right, mom had been right, the thoughts had been right. I stepped out into the world and now everything was a ruin, crumbling down like the dead tomato plants I'd hauled out of Charlie's yard the last time we spoke.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I miss you. I'm sorry." My words were shaky through sobs, and it took everything for me not to crumble to the ground at her feet. "Please don't call the police. I didn't do anything." My face was burning, and I felt snot running out of my nose.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" She wasn't yelling anymore, her brows knitting together in confusion. Her hand was still poised over her phone, but she wasn't dialing.

"A lot of things," I sobbed, "but I never wanted to hurt you. I just wanted to say goodbye. Just let me go without calling the cops."

I turned to walk back towards the house, but she called out.

"I found Theo's body in our backyard. His neck was broken and...God, it was horrific."

I whipped around, and the ache on Charlie's face hurt me more than losing her ever could have. I couldn't breathe. Images of Theo's slim, soft body, his orange stripes, his sweet pink paws, all slashed, broken, covered in sticky blood. I felt the wave crashing over me, knew that I would be replaying these pictures over and over, no matter how much I tried not to think about them.

"Oh, God. Charlie, who—"

She cut me off.

“Mrs. Rice told me you killed him. She says you have a habit of it, that you’re supposed to be working on it somehow, but clearly that isn’t the case.”

No, no, no, no, no. No, I wouldn’t do that, I couldn’t do that. Yes, over and over I’d been prisoner to thoughts of my losing control and brutally killing or harming humans, but they were just thoughts, thoughts I would do absolutely anything to get out of my head. I would never hurt anyone.

Would I? God, would I?

The next thing I remember was Charlie pulling at my arm, hard. I was gasping and gasping but there was no air for me to pull in. Bile stung my throat and my lips, and slowly, a great wall of noise appeared around me. Screaming, Charlie, Mrs. Rice, Mrs. Jaysingh, Mr. McCannon, all noise I couldn’t make out except that it was bone-deep bad.

Charlie yanked my arm again. “You have to get up; I can’t carry you.” Somehow, I did, somehow, I forced my legs to work and push my body off of the sidewalk, and then we were rushing forward, faces and asphalt and houses with roofs covered in dead leaves racing past us. She pushed me into a car and slammed the door. A millisecond of silence, and then the wave of sound was back, made faint by distance but quickly growing closer. Metal shoved against my arms, paper tearing, Charlie’s grunts of effort and then the door slamming closed, bringing in the quiet. We were speeding away down the street before I realized that we were in Charlie’s SUV, and I was holding her wheelchair, disassembled. In her haste, one of her wheel covers had been torn, the butterflies ripped apart.

She was very calm when she spoke, like mom when I was so sick the fear took away my ability to breathe. “You had a panic attack, and then Mrs. Rice came over and started yelling about how she should have run you over, how you were sick and evil and she was calling the police. The rest of them heard her screaming and came.” She pulled a napkin out of the center console and handed it to me. My lips still burned after I wiped them.

Charlie pulled over and stopped the car. I looked back, but no one was following us, at least not yet. She looked me straight in the eye.

“Violet, you didn’t kill Theo, did you?”

Had I? I searched my memory. The days after Charlie left were blank, a bog I had to trudge through to get to anything else. I tried to think of hands wringing, a sharp *snap*, knives, blood, sobbing over the sink, white porcelain stained red as I scrubbed...no. I never would have hurt him, I never would have hurt anyone. I had lost so many years of my life, hiding myself away from the world to protect it from what I might do, from what I thought about doing against my will. All that work couldn't have been for nothing. I shook my head.

"You didn't kill any of their cats, did you?"

I jerked my head up so quickly it ached, eyes wide. "Why do you think I'm killing cats? Why would Mrs. Rice say that?"

"She said it happened years ago, when you were still a teenager. She said that your mom told them you were sick, you couldn't help yourself, but she had you in these classes...Violet, why would she lie?"

The past must be tangible, must have some shape you can touch and hold, because I felt all the weight of it crash against my body then. Swinging in Mrs. Rice's backyard. Playing dress-up with Mrs. Jaysingh's old saris, pulled out of the trunk with the gold inlay. Opening putrid cans of wet food for the McCannon's fat black cat while they were skiing in Aspen. I hadn't always been hated. Why did it change?

Sixteen. Naïve and desperate for money to buy brow pomade and lip liner, sure that if I could control what I looked like, the endless cycle of unwanted thoughts would go away. Going to an interview at a smoothie shop – mom hadn't thought it was a good idea – and then... I hadn't known it would be a group interview. I walked in and saw four people I knew from school, and then the room was too small and I couldn't breathe and the manager was escorting me out, unaware that all I could see were awful visions of me sticking my hand into one of the blenders, blood spurting on the walls, the ceiling, onto their horrified faces. I bled for real that night, convinced that the thoughts would only end when I did. The cuts weren't deep; I was unsure, didn't really want to die. Mom didn't take me to the hospital, just wrapped up my wrists and gave me a Xanax. She had first aid training. She was, after all, an officer of the law. After that day, I never went back to Mrs. Rice's backyard, or Mrs. Jaysingh's saris, and I never saw the McCannon's cat again. None of them spoke to me, and I couldn't go outside without getting a dirty look. But I was safe in the house. Safe with mom.

Charlie dropped me off a block away from the house, far enough off that mom wouldn't be able to see her car. Mom was back from work, the cruiser parked in the

driveway, and I hurried down the sidewalk and towards the front door. I knew I was being watched, could feel it on my skin like humidity, but there were no faces in the windows.

As soon as I opened the door, mom jumped up, frantic. “Violet, where have you been?” I noticed that the blinds were pulled down over all the windows. “Listen, we need to go, okay? Pack a bag, but hurry, only take what you need—”

“I know,” I said, and she looked momentarily taken aback. “I remember what happened.”

She nodded. “Honey, I don’t know why they’re making these things up about you, but we can’t stay here, okay? I can make this go away, but we don’t have any time.”

“Can I have a smoothie?” I asked, numb. “I haven’t eaten all day.”

“Shit, I forgot to make more this weekend. We’re all out. Can’t it wait? I can get you a milkshake on the road.” She was already gathering papers off the kitchen table, hastily shoving them into a backpack.

“I’ll make some. You should have one too. You’re always telling me to eat.”

She took a deep breath, setting the backpack on the floor. “Okay, but we drink them in the car. I’m going to pack up my bathroom, and you do the same once you’re done.”

We never made it into the car.

The hospital isn’t as bad as I thought it would be. Given that I rarely left the house before all this anyway, the whole being under lock and key thing is easy enough to ignore. I’ve always felt crazy, but since being here, I’ve realized things could be so much worse for me. The doctors and nurses are supposed to treat us all the same, I’m sure, and definitely not supposed to tell the other patients about our history, but word has gotten around about my animal cruelty case. I’m only being charged with what happened to Theo, because of the statute of limitations, but this place is a rumor mill, so most people think my body count is 6 or 7 cats. I don’t waste time trying to correct them.

The day after Charlie left, I pulled up all the foxgloves from our front yard and put them in a plastic bag in the back of the fridge. Mom only makes my smoothies and frozen dinners, so I knew she wouldn’t look there. I really meant to use it on myself, but I’ve always been a coward. No matter how bad I felt, I could never get up the nerve.

The night everything went down, mom was too frantic to notice anything. I only drank a little of the smoothie I made, for obvious reasons, so it wasn't so bad for me. I think mom was a different story.

I've spent so much of my life agonizing over whether or not I'm a good person. It's hard not to do that when your brain's biggest hobby is feeding you waking nightmares, making up scenarios where you're only capable of doing unspeakable things. I didn't expect that it would take mom as long to die as she did, but I watched the whole thing, only called in her colleagues when I was sure she didn't have a pulse. Over the hours I spent watching her get weaker and weaker, holding her hair back when she vomited and taking the battery out of her phone when she tried to call an ambulance, I didn't wonder whether or not I was a good person. When the world swam and I could count the seconds in between my heartbeats, I didn't feel any regrets. I only wondered if she felt the way I did when she killed Theo and all the other neighborhood cats, and when she turned around and blamed their deaths on me. I didn't feel satisfaction as I heard her take a last wet, rattling gasp. I only felt a sense of the inevitable. I was doing what I needed to do. I was doing it out of love.

I didn't have time to clean things up, but that just made it look even more like an accident. When the ambulance finally arrived, Mrs. Rice ran out and yelled at them about me, so the police showed up a few minutes later. I knew both the officers, and it was hard to watch their faces as the paramedics carried mom's body out of the house. The fact that they could barely contain their disgust towards me did make it a bit easier. I knew one woman in particular was a cat lover.

I didn't know that they could find foxglove on a blood test, but it was all over mine and mom's. I was crying a lot in the ER because I was starting to worry that I'd taken too much, that my heart would stop and that would be it, so it was easy to convince them that I was sorry, that I hadn't known what I was doing, thought the foxglove was harmless. I told them about Charlie and then instantly regretted it. I didn't want to drag her into this, but she must have covered for me, told them I wouldn't have any idea how dangerous it was. The coroner ruled it a case of accidental poisoning.

I confessed to the animal cruelty charge, even though the lawyer said I should wait until my mental competency hearing. They wanted to know about all four of the cats, so I tried to put myself in mom's shoes, walk them through exactly how she would have done it. The lawyer says if they choose to charge me with a misdemeanor instead of a felony, I probably won't serve any jail time at all, but it all depends on whether the doctors say I'm fit to make decisions for myself. I have the first session tomorrow.

Charlie's visiting me then, too. She tried to tell them she didn't want to press charges over Theo, but it's out of her hands. I'm not upset about it, just glad to have her back. Today, I made her some pink paper roses in art therapy class. I'm sure she'll love them.

Sympathy for the Devil

The man standing in front of me at the Fiji Airlines counter is angry. Even from a few feet away, standing as neatly as I can between the black stanchions with their shiny retractable ropes, I can feel the anger radiating off his body like the heat off the runways outside. He's dressed in the embarrassingly-cliché American tourist uniform of a Hawaiian shirt, khaki pants and socks with sandals. His voice has been getting louder by the second, something about how he paid for a first-class ticket, goddamnit, so he's going to sit in a first-class seat. The woman behind the counter is impressively composed, given the circumstances. She's under 30 and wearing a tropical flower in her ear, probably part of the uniform. I think it would be uncomfortable, but she's stone-faced.

The woman says something I can't hear, and it doesn't help the situation. "No, I don't want a goddamn refund, I want a fucking first-class seat! Why is that so hard for you to understand?"

The man is now loud enough that people behind me are murmuring amongst themselves, the air-conditioned atmosphere growing thick with tension. Another man behind the counter, dressed in a crisp white shirt and grey vest, strides over to the woman and the irate customer. His movements are calm and assured, placation if I've ever seen it.

The well-dressed man (probably a manager), addresses the customer, something about "refunds" and "airline miles" floating over to me, even though I'm trying not to hear. I've lived this scene a hundred times before, but this Tommy Bahama asshole doesn't have the excuse that I'm used to, that his neurons are melting away, taking with them his ability to emotionally regulate and control his impulses. I pity whoever gets stuck wiping his ass in 40 years.

Whatever the manager can offer isn't what the angry man in the embarrassing outfit wants to hear, but it does bring the volume of his response down a few decibels and give the woman he was berating a chance to move to another computer. After a moment, she calls me over.

For the 19-hour flight from L.A. to Sydney, I've only brought one bag to check and a backpack as a carry-on. The woman, whose name tag reads *Lilly*, hoists my suitcase onto the conveyor belt with a smooth, almost effortless motion that makes my back twinge to look at it. I hand her my visa and ticket, both printed out because there's too much riding on this for me to rely on the digital world alone. Maybe the residents have rubbed off on me.

“Going on vacation?” the woman asks as she types into the ancient terminal in front of her. She must be running on autopilot, because before I can answer her, she looks down at the visa and corrects herself. “Oh no, you’re going for work. How exciting.”

I shrug. “The job isn’t really the draw.” I look over to the angry man, who has now settled his initial complaint and is wrangling his two obviously oversized suitcases onto the conveyor belt. For someone about to go on vacation, he doesn’t look happy.

Lilly follows my gaze and clicks her tongue, annoyed. “He’s going to yell at the flight attendants on the plane, then at the immigration officials in Fiji, then at the staff at his all-inclusive resort... People can travel thousands of miles, but at the end of the day, they don’t change.”

Her terminal beeps and prints out my boarding pass, the stark black letters somehow alien on the crisp white paper. She tears it off and hands it to me.

“Good luck. Enjoy Sydney. It’s a beautiful city.”

I nod at her, forcing a smile. I desperately need a drink.

I do not have a substance abuse problem. If I did, there’s no way I would be able to work as a care assistant (to be upgraded to assistant manager on my arrival in Sydney), at a nursing home, where half the job is handing out pills.

If anything, I have an understanding with substances, particularly alcohol. I keep it together throughout the day, go through the motions—totally sober, I might add, I would never be that irresponsible—and then at night, I drink, and drinking gives me the ability to get up the next morning and do it all again. It’s night now, 9 p.m. although the airport is still manically busy, so I’m not deviating from my usual routine at all when I sit down at a bar next to my gate that’s playing golden oldies from crackly speakers. Compared to the check-in line and a couple of the chain restaurants I can see at the next gate, it’s mercifully uninhabited, and my vodka tonic (well, with lime), comes quickly.

You might not be excited to hear this if you’ve recently decided to dump an elderly family member into the care of an “assisted living” facility, but the kind of people most of these places attract are not exactly the cream of the crop. I’m not being self-deprecating, it’s just the reality. Even if you start out with the best intentions, armed with a chipper attitude and a recent CNA certification, this life wears at you. Death is inevitable, of course, but most people can put that lovely thought aside when they go to work, focus on perfecting their spreadsheets or figuring out how to sell more overpriced used cars. Even if you work at hospital, most of your patients eventually walk out of there, at least alive even if you couldn’t

fix them. I don't even think working at a funeral home or a morgue is the same. In one, the relationships you create are with people who can reasonably be expected to survive the next five years, even if they are numbed by grief, and in the other, the clients are already dead, all the action on the other side of that most impenetrable barrier. Nursing homes are somewhere in-between. Everyone who comes in is alive, even if they are diminished, and you can't help but get attached to them, to whatever life they still have left. And then, eventually, everyone who comes in, whether it be for just a few days or for years on end, dies, and you have to go on living, passing out pills and changing clothes and filling out forms like nothing happened. It's hard to be enthusiastic for long.

I've got even more baggage than the average person working in a warehouse for the nearly-deceased, in the form of a musculoskeletal disorder called cerebral palsy. If you ask a physician, they'll tell you that you're lucky, that it's not degenerative, doesn't get worse with age. What they really, in their infinite wisdom, mean by that, is that the neurological basis of the disorder doesn't get worse. It's not like dementia, or ALS, snipping away at your brain over time. But your muscles, the ones that have been steel-beam tight all your life, that have shaken uncontrollably when they get tired, or all the time, they can get worse, get weaker. Over time they can even pull your bones out of shape, pull your shoulders or your hips out of their sockets, curve your spine into a letter like *S* or *C*. For some people, this decline is worse than others, but it is inevitable. When I was a kid, I remember being pretty carefree, at least where pain was concerned. Now, I wake up and I go to work and I hand out pills and I come home and I drink and my back feels like it's on fire, my hamstrings pulled so tight that I sometimes worry I'll sprain them just by walking. I used to be able to navigate a cracked sidewalk or a few steps with only a second or so of hesitation, passing for a normal person who was just overly cautious. Now, if I don't watch my feet at all times, I'm bound to trip over something, fall headlong into the street. There's a low humming in the back of my mind all the time, that 10 or 20 years from now, I'll switch places, be stuck on institution time and have nowhere to run, no way to get away from the one person who's always stuck with me.

It would be simple to say that that's why I liked Martha so much, that I saw my future in her and latched on, but the truth is, I could have felt that for any resident in the 18 years I'd been at Oakview Senior Living. Of course I'd made friends in that time, become more attached to one person over another because we had the same sense of humor or the same instinctive dislike for most of the other employees, but Martha was different.

Martha was very different.

When she first moved in, she was 18 months out from a dementia diagnosis, in her early 70's. It sounds stupid and cliché if you weren't there, but the second she walked in, you could feel the room change. She was one of those people who had a presence, an energy that was almost visible as it radiated off her skin. It made you realize that most people are just trudging through life, stuck on a moving sidewalk, passive as anything. Not Martha.

She was beautiful, with an old Hollywood glamor, always well-dressed in silk, merino, French linen. She wore three or four rings, but none she'd been given on a wedding day, and she cycled through tasteful stud earrings and even sometimes a string of pearls. Before I met her, I'd always thought blue eyeshadow was incredibly tacky, but she pulled it off perfectly, and she met all of the inevitable compliments on her appearance with a smize and an "Oh, thank you, dear." I couldn't help but notice that the other clients, male and female, who were with it enough to put effort into their appearance, started doing so after she arrived, whether to attract her attention or to compete with it. But whatever power she had didn't come from her red lipstick and perfectly curled white-blonde hair; it was much deeper. When you're in it, in the presence of someone like that, it's hard to really put your finger on what exactly makes them so different, but in hindsight, I think it was the way she *saw* people, saw me. For the past 18 years, I'd been amazing at blending in, being part of the wallpaper wherever I was. Sometimes people would talk to me, but only because they knew someone quiet was a perfect canvas for their own inane thoughts, someone they could vomit up their inner monologue to without interruption or critique. She actually wanted to have a conversation, ask me questions and really think about the answers I gave. Sometimes it felt like being stripped naked; I'd leave a conversation with her realizing I'd said way more than I meant to, but it was intoxicating, better than a drink.

I should have known that nothing in life is free.

Back then, I was working the night shift, 8 p.m. to 8 a.m., four nights a week. Even with blackout curtains and a few nightcaps when I got home, it was brutal living like that, nocturnally. The only bright spot was that after 10 p.m. or so, there wasn't much going on, and there were so few employees that, as long as the nightly housekeeping tasks got done, you could pretty much do whatever you wanted on your shift. After I passed out nightly medications, soaked dentures, changed people into pajamas, I'd watch *Neighbours* reruns with a VPN and browse job boards in Sydney (I tried Melbourne first, but it seemed too cold). Sometimes the night security guard, Alex, would see me on his rounds, and I made sure to always have some black licorice to pay him off with. I wasn't asleep, but I wasn't

really awake, either, stuck in a twilight half-dream, not today, but not quite tomorrow. It was easier that way, not fully living in reality.

Of course, every so often someone would get up in the middle of the night, or be sundowning so badly I couldn't get them to sleep right away, or have the audacity to want to set their own bedtime as an adult. When that happened, I'd make hot cocoa or tea and put on an old movie, take a break from the Erinsborough gang. That was most of the time Martha and I spent together, sitting in the dark, briefly transported from the now neither of us wanted to live.

After 18 years, I was very familiar with dementia, with the slow, inevitable decline, that erosion of memory and self. By the time they get moved into a nursing home, most patients are some way down the path of acceptance, aware at least that they have some limitations, even if they can't pinpoint exactly what they are. Martha was not like this. She'd try to play things off, act like it was just a coincidence that she was awake at two in the morning, frame the conversation in such a way that she never had to use names or recall exactly where she was. I wouldn't correct her, and if she couldn't get to sleep because she was scared of the dark in her room, I'd stay up with her. It was those times that I learned about her life.

People with dementia often make things up, usually without knowing it, but people who have lived for years in L.A. County also have real stories that would be unbelievable to people living anywhere else, like dating the Rolling Stones' road manager ("He gave me the clap,") or doing acid with Neil Diamond at 18 ("Mind-expanding, you really must try it, dear"). Whether or not the stories are true, it's pointless to correct people who really believe them, but despite what I knew about the disease, I believed everything Martha said. Does that make me naïve? Maybe, but I know you would have done the same if you were in my shoes. Everything she said was so plausible, and so full of specific details it had to be lucid. She even showed me her address book, which told you where you could go to see Donna Summer on her days off, at least in 1978.

The other thing Martha really liked to talk about was her daughter, Joyce. Joyce had two teenage daughters herself and was a bestselling author of psychological thriller novels (this I did fact-check, and it was true. She has her own Wikipedia page.) If you can't tell from my TV preferences, I'm not a great reader, and I don't think Martha had been either, but it made sense that her daughter would have a life like that, glamorous and far above all us normal people in our drudgery.

“Oh, I can’t wait to show Joyce the curtains I put up in my room,” she would say, puffing out her chest. “She inherited my good taste. Her house in Echo Park is beautifully decorated.” She really came to life when she was talking about her daughter, face lighting up when she told me about her New York Times bestsellers or showed me a photo she’d posted on Facebook, standing next to some other bigshot author I didn’t recognize. According to Martha, Joyce was usually away on business, in New York meeting with a publisher or somewhere in Europe at a literary festival, but when she was back in L.A., she was bound to come visit Oakview and give us all a show. On her bad days, she’d ask me, “Alyssa, have I ever told you about my daughter and her books?” at least five or six times. With another resident, I might have ignored them or tried to change the subject, but with Martha, no matter how many times she brought it up, I’d always answer, “No, I don’t think so,” and get the full story all over again.

Remember how I said I’d sometimes leave a conversation with Martha feeling naked, like I’d forgotten myself and told her more than I meant to? The first time I remember that happening was after a particularly rough handover. One of the recent hires had quit without even finishing her probation period, and we were so understaffed that there were only two of us on shift, me and Ellen, a horribly talkative woman who normally spent her shifts buried in mountains of paperwork. Martha was really lucid that night, and she could see I was frazzled, behind my chipper voice and pasted-on smile. At this point she was staying up with me almost every shift, something I made sure not to let management know about. After I’d finally got everyone to bed, I asked Martha if she wanted some tea. She looked at me, really looked at me, and said,

“Oh, don’t worry about, dear. Why don’t you just come sit down?”

I don’t cry. I haven’t cried for 18 years, not through all the deaths and entitled relatives screaming at me for things I can’t control, but I came very close that night. Every wall I’d built up inside myself seemed shaky, threatened by one old woman who made me feel soft in ways I hadn’t in almost two decades.

I didn’t cry that night, but I did tell Martha about Australia. To this day, she’s the only person I’ve ever told, in full at least. I told her about the wheelchair-accessible beaches, the strange, upside-down seasons, 60,000-year-old cultures that were still being practiced, how you didn’t need private medical insurance to survive. Everything that had buoyed me up during endless shifts sitting in the dark, every scrap of information I’d clung to like a life raft when I felt like I was drowning in the meaninglessness of my own existence, I told her.

At that point, even after all the time I'd put in, the prospect of leaving everything and everyone I knew behind for a new life across the Pacific seemed like a pipe dream, something too juvenile and embarrassing to say out loud. Once I started talking, it felt like I couldn't stop, and when I finally ran out of information to give her, I regretted saying anything at all.

But Martha didn't say that I was stupid, had my head in the clouds, didn't leave me with a condescending, *Oh, that's nice, dear*. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"Oh, Alyssa, you should do it!" she said, clapping her hands together, the sound like a gunshot in the empty room. After looking around to make sure she hadn't woken anyone or summoned Ellen, she continued, her voice quieter but still quivering with excitement.

"You have to go, or at least try. What an adventure! If I was still young and could do my life over again, I'd want to do something like that, something brave."

I clicked my tongue. I'd just turned 40, and no part of my body would let me feel young. When I told her as much, she just laughed.

"Trust me, hon, you are still young. And who's going to miss you around here? Besides me of course, but I'll have Joyce, and maybe your replacement will be some fine young man who goes to the gym and likes watching movies with me."

That made me laugh, really laugh like I hadn't done in a while. We'd stayed up talking so long that we didn't end up watching a movie that night, and Martha went to bed soon after, admonishing me to "Just try it! At least apply for one of those jobs." As I walked away from her room, I could hear she was humming *Sympathy for the Devil*, by the Rolling Stones.

So that night, I did apply for a job halfway around the world, crossing my fingers as I hit 'submit'.

I did something else that night, too. At the time, I didn't feel like it was crossing the line. For all that she talked about her daughter and how she *would* visit sometime in the future, Martha never talked about a visit actually happening. Short-term memory is one of the first things to go with dementia, but Martha had talked to me before about things that happened during her day, things I could verify by looking at the activity schedule or asking another resident, so she wasn't so far gone that she was completely stuck in the past. I needed to find out for myself.

I'm sure if you've shipped grandma or grandpa off to the retirement village, you wouldn't dream of just leaving them there, never coming to visit or even giving them a call, but not everyone is so generous. One of the other benefits of working the night shift, besides

the ample opportunities to watch bad TV, is that you don't have to supervise visiting hours, watch bored teenagers ignore the world in favor of a phone screen, or try not to notice how often middle-aged children steer the conversation towards an inheritance. And as life-affirming as that is, it's nowhere near as bad as watching the people who don't even get the bare minimum anymore, if they ever did. Some residents come in having outlived all their family, especially the ones who never had kids, but the vast majority have some surviving relatives, a child or a nephew or a younger cousin or a bastard stepchild they'll accept out of desperation. Watching them spend every day alone, sometimes gazing at those lucky few who do get visitors with a palpable ache, other times stomping off to their rooms, too proud to admit they can't stomach it anymore, I think that's the worst part. I chose this career, in my own passive way. I went into it knowing that I'd lose everyone I cared for, knowing that I had to figure out a way to handle that. But no one signs up to spend their last years alone, shoved so far away from the rest of humanity that they can't even pray for some contact. That kind of loneliness has to be worse than dying.

I stuck my head into Ellen's office, mentally preparing myself for the verbal deluge I was about to trigger. I'd gotten tired of listening to Ellen after about three days on the night shift, so she didn't particularly like me, but what she liked far less was dead air.

"Hey, need a break? I just got everyone down for the night."

The second I stuck my head in the room, I noticed the air distinctly lacked the smell of tropical fruits and hot metal, so I knew it had been a while since Ellen's last vape break.

"Yes, oh my god. These new Blue Cross forms are a nightmare, and I say that as someone who's used to prior authorization. 15 minutes?"

I nodded and walked in.

"Hey, did you hear what happened to Lina, that new activities girl?" Ellen asked, her eyes hot with fresh gossip I didn't care about. She didn't wait for me to respond. "So, apparently, she has an ex-boyfriend that she has a restraining order against, okay, and he came in this morning, during day shift! He was making this big scene, totally scaring Mr. Rivers, by the way, 'Oh, I have to see her, you have to let me see her,' that kind of thing. Mike told him to go away and then Lina went off with him, but I was talking to Chantel on the phone earlier, and I think she just made up that he stalked her. I mean, if she was really afraid, why would she go off alone with him?"

I nodded, barely managing something like an affirming sound.

"Anyway," Ellen said, picking up her purse, "thanks so much for this. Be back in a few."

As soon as she was down the hallway and out of sight, I got to work.

For all her flaws, Ellen was organized, and it didn't take me long to find the visitor's logbook. Everyone who came into Oakview, whether they were a visitor or otherwise, had to sign in, and because a good portion of our visitors were over 50, this process still hadn't been digitized. I opened the huge black binder and flipped through the pages, scanning for Joyce's name. This log covered the past four months' worth of visitors, and as I scanned down the handwritten columns, I didn't see her. The previous logbook was a bit harder to find, shoved onto a bookcase next to some tax documents, but I didn't find Joyce in that one either. In fact, in the entire time Martha had been living at Oakview—almost eight months—no one had come to visit her.

Something bubbled up in my chest then, hot and bile-burning. How dare this woman—who clearly had resources—just dump her mother here and walk away? She got to travel the world, win awards, even give a TED Talk, all while Martha was slowly fading out like a damaged film reel, the highlight of her life watching movies with someone who couldn't wait to get away.

I don't like talking about the past, even thinking about it, but it rose around me in that moment until I felt like I was drowning. I didn't come to work at Oakview because I had some passion for the elderly or because I was pragmatic and realized that if I dedicated myself to the old and dying, I would always be able to find a job. No.

My mother died of inflammatory breast cancer when I was 22, and for the last six months of her life, I took care of her. When I was in it, handing out pills and changing dressings and shoving loads of soiled sheets into the washing machine, I couldn't wait for it to be over. Before she got sick, my mom had been so independent, but when she was dying, she was suffocating. Every time she rang her stupid fucking bell to ask me for a drink of water or another blanket or just to have some company, it felt like a siren warning me away from impending doom. The more that she needed me, the more that I shrank away from her. Back then my dreams of running didn't take me so far, just a few hundred miles into the desert in Arizona instead of across the Pacific. Daughter of the century, I know. It might make you feel better to know that when she died, rather than feeling the relief I expected, I felt like I'd been hit by a nuclear blast. I didn't want anything anymore, but I still needed to make a living, so I ended up at Oakview. It was natural, like the tides, and I let fate drag me along after that. It was a small penance, really. And then I met Martha, and life seemed just a little bit more worth sticking around for. I couldn't leave her on her own.

I don't remember exactly where the idea of writing Joyce a letter came from. The last movie I'd watched with Martha had been *Lady Bird*, so maybe that scene of Christine reading all those letters from her mom was still fresh in my mind. An email felt impersonal, and Martha hadn't exactly been quick to adopt the wonders of modern technology. Plus, Joyce was a writer. A letter from her mom (with the caveat that it had been dictated, since Martha's handwriting wasn't what it used to be), that might shake this woman out of her negligent stupor. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like an amazing idea.

There was, of course, the small problem of finding Joyce's address. Much to the delight of our elderly residents, phone books do still exist, but a quick flip through the one at the front desk showed no listing for the famous author, Joyce _____. Not surprising, really. Her books seemed...dark, and I wouldn't have wanted hardcore fans of that material to know where I lived, either.

I felt bad about taking Martha's address book without her knowing, but I felt like it had to be for the best. Once she got a reply from Joyce with a promise to visit, she'd be so happy she wouldn't care about anything else. It would be easy to convince her that she'd sent her daughter a letter and just forgotten, too, especially if I told her I remembered writing it for her. So, on my next shift, when I got Martha down for bed, serenaded by her white noise machine, I took the red leather book out of her bedside table, and got to work.

After everything that happened later, I don't remember most of what I wrote. I was never a good student, but I told myself that subpar grammar would probably make the whole thing seem more realistic. Above all, I made sure to emphasize how much Martha missed Joyce, how she was so looking forward to her visit. When I felt I'd gotten the point across as well as I was going to, I addressed the envelope and slipped it into the outgoing mailbox. Martha had three different addresses for Joyce, but all but one had been crossed out over the years, so I felt fairly confident that it would reach who it was supposed to. At the time, I thought that was the worst thing that could happen, a wrong address, a missed connection.

I was wrong.

They must have been as understaffed in Sydney as we were in L.A., because the job I applied to there, to be assistant manager at Frederick Gardens Aged Care in one of the western suburbs, got back to me quickly, and I got hired within the month. The facility was owned by a huge chain with a much more substantial HR department than I was used to, so they helped me apply for my visa. Despite how big of a deal all this was, I felt like I was floating through the whole process, like I was back on the night shift trying to zone out as

much as I possibly could until it was time to go home. When I got the email from Home Affairs with my skilled work visa, my first thought was putting in my notice at Oakview. It was days before I even started thinking about plane tickets. I still had something to take care of.

Exactly eight days after my visa arrived, I showed up for the night shift after some time off and was told that Martha was struggling after a particularly bad day. Again, we were so short on staff that Ellen was in charge of the handover, forced to work during the day so we had cover. After my visa got approved, Mike, the general manager, had told everyone else that I was leaving, though I managed to get him to lie and say that I was moving to Sacramento instead of to Sydney. Ever since then, Ellen and the others had looked at me like I was a traitor, as though my quitting was going to destroy all their lives—well, they may have had a point there.

“Yeah, she was really agitated almost all day,” Ellen said, giving me a knowing look that entered my chest like an ice pick. “Talking to someone who wasn’t there, really confused and not recognizing us. I hate to say it, but she might start having more bad days than good.”

Nausea roiled in my stomach, and my palms pricked with anxiety. “Do you know who she thought she was talking to?”

Ellen clicked her tongue, faking surprise. “Oh, so you’re still interested in part of this job?”

“Whatever,” I said, turning away. “Is she in bed yet?”

“Nope, left that for you,” Ellen said, smiling. I wanted to knock her teeth into her big fucking mouth.

As I walked down the hallway to the medicine station, I heard Ellen call, “I think Martha said it was Joy? Joyce, something like that. You know how they can be, hard to get anything out of in that state.”

It was all I could do not to sprint through the building to Martha’s room.

There’s a lot in this that I’m not proud of, and one of the things that sticks out to me is how quickly I brushed off everyone else that night, rushing through those mundane routines that come before sleep, barely talking except to give orders, *step in, arms up, spit*. No one grumbled more than usual, maybe because word had filtered down to the residents that I was leaving, and they expected me to be checked out. Whatever the case, when I’d dealt with everyone else, I went to see Martha.

I wasn't prepared for what I felt when I saw her, for how the bottom dropped out of my stomach and the floor seemed to sway like I was on a boat. Her hair hadn't been curled for at least a day, and her eyes were rimmed raw and pink from crying, but the thing that truly chilled me was how scared she looked. In the second after I opened the door and locked eyes with her, before I could even compose myself and give a chipper, "Hi Martha, it's me, Alyssa!", I saw that fear and I recognized it.

My mother had the same look on her face the night before she died. She'd been confused at the end, not sure where she was, not sure who I was, agitated and trying to get away despite being 90 pounds and long past bedbound. In 18 years, I'd seen a lot of bad situations, worked shoulder-to-shoulder with death almost every day, but this was truly the first time I wanted to turn and run, because it was the first time that I knew Martha didn't recognize me.

"Hi Martha," I said after a moment, stepping inside. "Are you ready for bed?"

Martha shook her head. "I didn't send it because I know I'm not supposed to send it. I didn't send it, I didn't send it."

"It's okay, Martha. You're not in trouble," I said, spotting the envelope on her bedside table. I wanted more than anything to snatch it up, to demand to know exactly what had happened, exactly why she was so upset, but I knew better.

"No, but, she said...she said she doesn't want to, go go go away."

"Who said that, Martha? Was it Joyce?"

Martha nodded slowly. I'd almost reached the bedside table now, and I reached out a hand and picked up the envelope. I was about to open it when I realized that it wasn't a new envelope, one I'd never seen before. It was the one that I'd sent, Joyce's address scrawled across the front instead of Martha's. And in big, unmistakable block letters, that selfish, negligent bitch had written REJECTED under her Echo Park zip code. I realized Martha was humming the Stones under her breath.

"Martha," I said, barely able to keep the emotion out of my voice, "I'm gonna put your shoes on, okay?"

If this was a bad movie, I would have raced over to Joyce's house, speeding down the 101 in record time, but L.A. traffic is a nightmare even at 9 at night. A different person might have used all this time stuck in stop-and-go to rethink this amazing plan, take the next exit and turn around, go back to Oakview and bundle Martha into bed before anyone could realize that I'd snuck her out. But I didn't. In the 45 minutes that I spent in the car with her, I didn't

think. I didn't even have a plan, besides showing up at Joyce's door and...confronting her somehow. I would bang on that stupid door in her stupid, hip, gentrified neighborhood and then, something would happen. Joyce would see her mother, realize how bad things had gotten and resolve to change her ways, start visiting every week while she still could.

Next to me in the passenger seat, Martha had been relatively calm for the entire drive. Halfway through, she took her seatbelt off, but it didn't turn into a fight. She sat there, rocking slightly back and forth, humming *Sympathy for the Devil* under her breath, the same verse over and over, *I've been around for a long, long year...* I'd long ago abandoned rationality, but I hoped she would still recognize Joyce.

It didn't even occur to me that Joyce might not be home until I pulled up alongside her two-story, white stucco house. The street was quiet, and I didn't see a car in the driveway or any lights on inside. It was that moment when I felt my insides turn to ice, rational thought come back into my brain and start spiraling down into what deep shit I was going to be in, regardless of what happened when I knocked on the door. If Joyce truly didn't care about her mother, I would still have to contend with Oakview, with the security cameras that had caught us red-handed, and if Joyce did care about her mother, she would absolutely get me fired, and then...oh God.

I hesitated for just a second, then got out of the car. 18 years is a long time to have guilt burning away at the walls of your chest cavity like acid. I knew that whatever happened when I knocked on that door, I would finally have some relief. I took Martha's hand in mine and marched up to the green-painted door.

The first time I knocked, nothing happened. I looked for a bell but didn't see one, so I knocked again, knuckles sore against the wood. I held my breath, Martha's humming floating softly through the evening silence.

Then, finally, after what felt like a lifetime, sounds of movement from inside, footfalls on the stairs. My chest ached, and it was only then that I realized how fast my heart was beating, how my chest must have been constricted somehow because I could only draw shallow breaths. The sound of a deadbolt being undone, a knob turning, and then—

The door opened, revealing a woman in her 50's, and behind her, a dimly lit hallway. I recognized her immediately as Joyce, though her hair had more grey and her face had more wrinkles than in her publicity photos.

Before I could open my mouth to speak, to accuse, Joyce said, "Do you know what time it is? I don't appreciate—" When she saw Martha, she stopped, abruptly, as if something had taken away her ability to speak. Somehow, all at once, she transformed before my eyes,

physically changed. Her face seemed to crumple into itself, her whole body shrinking back from the doorway like a wildfire was raging outside.

“Get the fuck away from me,” she said, but it wasn’t the same voice that had been so quick to warn us off, so authoritative, so adult. It was a small voice, cracked and barely able to push out the words, quiet and childlike. “Get away from me, or I’ll call the police.”

I looked at Martha, and there didn’t seem to be recognition on her face. She was still humming that song, stray words escaping her lips, the same verse over and over.

“Stop! Stop singing!” Joyce sounded panicked, but she was frozen in the doorway, unable to step forward and push us away, or step back and lock herself inside. I noticed her hands were shaking. Suddenly, my mouth was dry.

“Joyce,” I said, “your mother has really been struggling. It would mean so much to her just to see you, even if it doesn’t seem like she knows what’s happening. She talks about you all the time at Oakview—”

“You wrote that letter,” Joyce said, her gaze piercing into me, and I recognized the mother in her daughter, that same look that felt like being stripped naked.

“Yes, I’m sorry—”

“You don’t know how fucking sorry you should be,” Joyce said. “She’s tricked you too, hasn’t she?”

I felt like I was trapped in some slow-moving nightmare, like the laws of physics had somehow been dissolved and now the world wasn’t working the way it should. I hadn’t considered that Joyce might be crazy; had we caught her in the middle of some psychotic break? Was she on drugs? After a moment, I collected myself enough to speak.

“What are you talking about? Martha hasn’t tricked me; I brought her here because she’s lonely, she’s desperate to see you. She talks about you all the time.” My heart was pounding worse than it ever had, and I realized I was squeezing Martha’s hand far too tightly. She was still humming.

Joyce sighed, a watery sound choked with emotion. “Put her in the car.”

“What?”

“Put her in the fucking car. I’m not listening to that song. I don’t have to anymore.”

For a second, I just stared at her, at the grey-green eyes desperate like those of a hunted animal. I wished so badly that I’d never done this, that I’d had one ounce of self-control and hadn’t walked out of Oakview, hadn’t started any of this.

But it was too late to go back. I might as well get some answers. I led Martha back to the car and locked her inside with the windows cracked. I was afraid the second I turned my

back that Joyce would slam the door shut, but she didn't. She was waiting for me to come back.

"What is going on?" I asked when I reached the doorway again.

Joyce chuckled dryly. She'd balled her hands into fists to stop them shaking. "I should be asking you the same. I'm sure that home is just ecstatic that you took an old woman with dementia out in the middle of the night. What is it called, Oakview?"

"You don't know? You're not the one who sent her there?"

Joyce fixed me with a hard glare. "I haven't seen that bitch in 30 years. I thought she was dead because I hadn't gotten a letter in a while, until yours."

My face smarted like I'd been slapped. "How could you—"

"She was always so charming," Joyce said, shaking her head slowly. "No one ever knew what she did to me. That was what was so scary, how she could *switch* just like that. Never in public, oh no, but behind closed doors..."

"I didn't know it wasn't normal to get beaten with extension cords. That's what she did to me, when I broke that record, Beggar's Banquet. She said having me ruined her life, meant she couldn't go off and party like she wanted to. She would lock me in the coat closet. It was so small I couldn't even stretch out my arms, so dark." Joyce pushed out her palms, marking the edges of an invisible cage. She shuddered for a second, then continued. "The longest she ever did it for was two days, two whole days, and she left that record playing. When I heard the door open, I screamed and thrashed against the walls, even though my throat was burning because I was thirsty and my fists were covered in blood. When she opened the door and saw me in there, she didn't even look sorry, just surprised that I was still alive."

I don't think I'd taken a breath the entire time Joyce had been speaking, and I realized that tears were running down my cheeks.

"She didn't tell you that story, did she?"

I shook my head. "I'm so sorry," I managed, "but she's dying. Can't you make amends? I know she—" I couldn't get the words out.

"I was dying," Joyce said, leaning so close to me I could feel her hot breath on my skin. "I was dying every single day until I got away from her, and she knew it and she was *glad*. Wherever she's run to, whoever she's trying to be that you need, she is not sorry. I hope she goes screaming. Don't contact me when it happens."

Joyce took one last look at the car, and as I turned to make sure Martha was still there, she slammed the door in my face. My throat felt tight, like I was going to throw up. Martha

was sitting in the passenger seat, and I slowly walked over and got into the car. She'd stopped humming, and the silence inside was suffocating.

Suddenly, Martha turned to me. "Alyssa, have I ever told you about my daughter and her books?"

My body shook so much from crying that I couldn't answer her.

We got back to Oakview just before midnight, and I was fully expecting the police to be there, flashing lights and sirens, helicopters and calling Martha's name on a bullhorn, but the building was totally quiet. Martha was fighting sleep, and I dragged her inside, through the dark entryway, past the empty TV room, down the shadowy hallway. At any moment, I was expecting Alex to pop out, catch me in the act, but he didn't. I put Martha to bed and spent the rest of my shift staring blankly at late night shows in the TV room. I'd imagined that confronting Joyce would make me feel better, would do something to soothe the burning numbness I'd carried around in my body since my mom had died, but it didn't. What she'd told me was unthinkable, so contrary to everything I knew Martha to be, and yet, I believed her. I knew that look, knew that fear in her eyes. I knew you couldn't fake that.

My last month at Oakview passed in a blur. Martha had some lucid nights, but we could all tell she was going downhill. She still wanted to stay up with me, and I obliged because I had to, speaking to her as little as possible. Every time she hummed that song, I felt an unspeakable impulse vibrate through my muscles, one that told me to drag her into her room and lock her inside with the lights shut off, not come to get her no matter how much she screamed.

I never did.

On my last day, I only worked a half, and most of the day crew stayed late to give me a little send off. The Costco cake and Value Brand ice cream could almost mask the passive aggression that radiated off Ellen and Mike and all the other people I was glad to be leaving behind. When everyone was leaving, Alex pulled me aside.

"You know," he said in a low voice, "you'd better find out what kind of candy they like down in Sydney. It really helps when a security tape needs to go missing."

Goosebumps pricked up on every inch of my skin, and I know my face couldn't hide what I was feeling. Alex smiled.

“I’m not gonna tell anyone. Shit, when I’m an old man, I hope I’ll be able to go out in the middle of the night, just go for a drive like I used to. You’re a good person, Alyssa. I’ll miss you.”

I told him I would miss him too, and in that moment, I was so relieved that I almost meant it.

At that airport bar by my gate, I’ve had two more vodka tonics by the time the angry guy in the Hawaiian shirt shows up, ready to board. I’m in the cheap seats, so my group is last, and I think I can coax this bartender into making me another drink before I have to get on a plane for 19 hours. I try my luck.

“Last call,” he says, giving me a wry smile. If you think throwing up on land is bad, try it at 35,000 feet.”

“I can hold it, but thanks.”

He finishes pouring the drink and slides it over to me, complete with tiny straws and another branded napkin that I’ll throw away in 15 minutes. “My advice, and trust me, I know what I’m talking about, is to go over to that souvenir shop and pick up some of that Liquid I.V. they have at the checkout.” He nods to the shop across from the bar, full of neon neck pillows and Lakers gear.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say, taking a sip. The ice-heat of the liquor is soothing against my throat, and I’ve drunk enough that the world is starting to take on that pleasant, woozy feeling, soft around its edges and no longer something I need to be particularly concerned about.

I’m startled out of my stupor when Hawaiian shirt guy starts yelling again, this time at another passenger, a girl who can’t be over 18 and looks so fragile that I think the words themselves will blow her apart. The bar sways in front of me and I blink hard, straining to focus.

Overhead, the speakers start playing *Sympathy for the Devil*.

I look out the window, staring at the blackness of the tarmac, and imagine it’s the Pacific Ocean, stretching out endlessly under me as I run and I run and I run and I never move from where I’m standing.

Wildland

You could tell a lot about a man based on the way he ate, especially in prison. Some men, especially those who had been well-off on the outside and especially those who were just starting their sentence, would balk at the slop provided by the state of California. They would avoid entirely the canned green beans and other vegetables, grey and so overcooked that they lost all shape inside the mouth, and hold their noses at whatever alleged meat was being served that day, subsisting instead on slices of white bread and whatever they could scrounge up in the commissary. Other men, those who had known the pain of lack on the outside, or those who had been locked up long enough to know that resistance was futile, devoured everything hungrily, nearly oblivious to tastes and textures which were as grey and industrial as the walls around them. These men knew that food was food, every morsel a gift too precious to be turned away.

Tex Albertson was one such man. After 12 years on the inside, eating was not so much a culinary or social experience as another motion to go through, three times a day, regular like the count and contraband searches. He could blank out his mind to it, go to that faraway place which had served him so well when he did not want to remember what he was currently experiencing. As such, he barely noticed the “turkey” cutlet, creamed corn, squished bread and canned remnants of what might have been spinach on his mess hall tray. Here at Feather Ridge fire camp, in Plumas County, California, where there were no fences and about a million more trees than in a standard state penitentiary, the food was marginally better than it had been at Lancaster State Prison. In his five years at the camp, Tex had noticed there was significantly less rat shit in the boxes of cream of wheat. Even so, in the summer, when almost a hundred men filled the dining hall and wildfire smoke permanently hazed the huge wooden room, the kitchen sometimes ran out before everyone had been served. The state hadn’t calculated that men doing hard physical labor for 15 hours a day might need more food than the average inmate. Chowing down protected what you had. Even in the winter, when it was too wet for big fires and the camp ran on a skeleton crew, old habits died hard. When hunger pulled at his ribs, so did the memories of that ranch back in Texas, buried under almost 20 years now.

Tex was startled out of these thoughts by Tijuana, one of three other men chosen to overwinter in this section. He was so named for the massive tattoo across his chest in swirling, gothic letters, a permanent connection to his hometown that was more than skin-deep.

“Hey Tex, you got any ghost stories from the field?”

He was about to shake his head *no* when Burger – who’d earned his nickname because on his first day at Calpatria, he’d refused to shut up about the Burger King he’d tried to rob at gunpoint – cut in. At 21, he was one of the youngest men at fire camp, if he could be called that, and was literally incapable of being still or quiet for more than 90 seconds at a time. He was not someone Tex would have chosen to spend the season with.

“Yeah, you seen any weird shit? You’ve been here the longest out of all of us.”

Tex could feel the plastic table bouncing in time with Burger’s knee.

“Burger ever tell you about that zombie deer thing we found out by the Brooks Road car fire? Half its head was missing, fur all patchy like it had rabies?” Kam rounded out the winter group. Also 21, he was a package deal with Burger, less hyperactive and the follower in Burger’s idiotic get-rich-quick schemes. He’d been disciplined twice for trying to bribe a delivery driver to bring in weed but had avoided being sent down to the concrete coffin again because he had godlike skill at reading a landscape and knowing where a fire would move.

“Bruh, I told you, rabies is foaming at the mouth. Mange is the fur thing.” Burger spoke with a mouth still half-full of pasty bread.

Kam ran a hand through his mop of dingy blonde curls. “Whatever, man, didn’t know you were a fucking veterinarian out here.”

“Or how about that old cabin we found, out by Buck’s Lake, the one with all the witch symbols and Satan shit on the walls?” Burger asked Tex again, swallowing his mouthful and immediately shoving another one in its place.

“Oh, right, I remember,” Tijuana said, a chuckle not far behind. “The totally real cabin that you two totally found and didn’t make up.”

“It was absolutely real, man. We would never make something like that up! There were candles and everything, real voodoo shit.” Jesus himself hadn’t felt so deep a betrayal as Burger did at the accusation.

“If this was so real,” Tex said, swallowing the last of his corn, “Why didn’t you tell anyone about the candles? That lake hasn’t burned in 40 years. You know that’s a real hazard.”

Burger looked dubious, and Kam elbowed him. Burger elbowed back and chewed sullenly on a wad of spinach.

“I didn’t see anything, but I felt something when we were up in Grass Flat, the ghost town.” They all turned to Tijuana, who was disassembling the mystery meat cutlet and inspecting it with scientific curiosity. He set down his fork. “Me and Gibbs, remember him?”

We were pulling water on that old shed that was on fire. We got it out, but I swear to God, as I was walking back to the engine, I felt something go through me, something freezing cold, even though you could still feel the heat off the shed. It felt like something, or *someone*, walked through my body. Maybe it was a ghost.”

The table was utterly silent for a moment. Then, Burger blurted out, “Shit, man, that’s crazy. You saw an actual ghost!”

“I didn’t see anything,” Tijuana said, holding out a palm as if that was all it took to stop Burger’s wild imagination. “I just felt it, that’s all.”

“What did it feel like?” Kam asked, leaning forward with his chin in his hand.

Tijuana thought for a moment. “Felt empty. Like when your unit’s on lockdown and all you can do is stare at the ceiling in your cell.” He shook his head, and Burger and Kam were wide-eyed.

Slowly, Tex said, “Grass Flat is creepy man, old buildings and everything blasted away from where they did the mining. Probably a lot of gunfights back in the day.” Burger and Kam were obviously full of it, but Tex had never known Tijuana to make things up. Catholic only by baptism and superstition, Tijuana still believed in the power of the dead.

“What about you, Tex? Sure you’ve seen some stuff.”

Tex shook his head, “Nope,” and stood up to turn in his tray. “I don’t have no ghost stories. You all should get to sleep. We have a five-mile hike tomorrow, up to the ridge.”

Burger sucked his teeth, running a hand through his short dreadlocks. “Shit man, okay. But I thought you were like, basically in charge of this place, seeing how you’ve been here so long.”

“Captain Fernandez is in charge at Feather Ridge,” Tex said, bristling, though he hoped the boys wouldn’t see. Even though Tex was better at every drill and sharper in the field than the guys from the U.S. Forest Service he worked alongside, the captain loved reminding Tex how slim his chances of ever becoming a civilian firefighter were when he got out.

Burger nodded slowly. “Ah, okay. Bet Captain Fernandez has seen some shit though. Guess we gotta just wait for him.”

“Yeah, it’s late.” Kam yawned and stretched, all gangly arms and blown-out tattoos. “Guess I’ll pack for the morning.” He and Burger started to stand up.

“Wait,” Tex said, and Kam and Burger immediately sat back down. Tijuana half hid a smile. “You really want a story, I’ll tell you a story.”

“Yes!” Burger was immediately giddy, pumping the air with his fists. The early winter night had closed in outside, and the harsh fluorescent lights in the mess hall threw hard shadows down on each man’s face. The only other soul in the mess hall was a guard at the other end, absentmindedly drinking horchata, the spiced scent a reminder of everything Tex was missing out on in here.

Tex took a deep breath. “All right. But this ain’t a ghost story. No witches, no miners. This is one hundred percent real, and you can count on that, because I wish it wasn’t. I wish I didn’t have to remember what I found out there.”

It had been over five years ago now, Tex’s first summer at fire camp, and the first time he’d ever been up high in the mountains. After seven years of L.A. smog in his cell in Lancaster, he’d been looking forward to some clean air almost as much as the prospect of being able to earn \$6 a day fighting fires, as opposed to the \$2.17 he’d made in the kitchen. When he got to Plumas County in June however, the smoke from the Lassen Fire in the national forest was so thick it felt like he had sand in his eyes and glass in his lungs. Even at midday, when his bus arrived at the Feather Ridge con camp, the smoke made the sun weak and faraway, the light a dirty brown color like the water in his cell had often been. That night, while he and the rest of the new guys were learning how to deploy their fire shelters, the setting sun had been blood red, like something out of a sci-fi movie. Even indoors, trying to fall asleep in the hot, crowded bunkhouse, his chest hurt.

Tex hadn’t known he would arrive at Feather Ridge in the middle of one of the state’s biggest ever wildfires, and his first weeks on the job were a literal baptism by fire. His chest never stopped hurting, and soaking a bandana in water and tying it around his mouth only blocked out a tiny amount of smoke. In movies, he’d seen firefighters wearing respirators as they ran into burning buildings, but wildland guys didn’t get those. His back and shoulders ached from digging up gnarled tree roots to prevent flash fires spreading underground and hauling more dead branches from a hectare of forest than he thought could exist in the whole world. He learned that even through his heavy orange jacket, emblazoned with D.O.C. for “Department of Corrections”, he could still get first and second-degree burns, and that a water drop from a helicopter came down with such force it could knock the wind out of him. He also learned that the Lassen Fire had been started by a lightning strike, and every summer storm that year set him on edge, convinced a piece of the cracking sky would fall to earth and turn the trees around him into matchsticks.

He wasn't alone when he found the kids, thank God. He, Captain Fernandez and one of the forest service guys, Ishikawa, were hiking through a ridge that hadn't been entirely burned, looking for spot fires with enough ready fuel to be trouble. Tex had already seen how a big fire could burn some areas right down to charcoal, the pale snow of ash piling up between pitch-black, spiky trees, while a few hundred yards away, green moss survived untouched on still-living trunks. Experience didn't make it any less surreal.

Suddenly, he heard a yelp, almost doglike, and he and Ishikawa rushed forward. Cap had stumbled over a cliff, burnt branches making the surface look like it extended further out than it did, and it took both men to haul him back up. Tex had already seen how Cap still treated the inmate firefighters like they were unexploded ordinance, even after a grueling week in the field, and he wanted to move on, get this patrol done with as soon as he could and pass out in his bunk. But something below them caught his eye, something plastic and blue, definitely manmade. Tex called it out, and Ishikawa saw it too. The unstable ridge they were on tipped out over a small hollow, barely ten yards wide, the edge of a blue plastic tarp peeking back up at them. Ishikawa called out and no one answered, but Tex sensed humans down there, the same way he'd sensed when he was about to get jumped back in L.A., a second before he saw the first punch coming.

The cliff was too unstable to anchor ropes for climbing, so the three men had to spend 30 minutes hiking down to the hollow, half-sliding down a charred slope. If, for some unimaginable reason, the person down there didn't want to be found, they would have had plenty of time to escape, Tex thought, and then, bitterly, remembered that there weren't creepy campsites in the middle of burnt-out forests back in Lancaster.

When they reached the hollow, half shaded by the overhanging cliff and unburned as far as they could see, Cap called out, blunt like everything about him. *Cal Fire, is anyone here? Anyone injured?* For a second, the hollow was utterly still, and then a rustle from the blue tarp and a small, filthy face peered out, ash-streaked skin topped by a ragged mop of blonde hair. Ishikawa jogged forward and knelt down to the boy, who looked like he couldn't have been more than ten, his eyes hollow with prolonged hunger. Ishikawa pulled back the sheet, and even from a few yards away, Tex was overwhelmed by the stench that billowed out with it: rotten meat mingled with a sticky, metallic scent, like canned peaches. He didn't remember vomiting, but suddenly his mouth and the front of his coat were covered in bile and half-digested food, and Cap was scowling at him, urging him forward because there were more kids to examine.

A rough hole had been dug under the tarp, and including the tiny blonde one, the men pulled five boys out of it. All but the last were able to scramble out mostly on their own, frozen limbs suddenly activated by another's human touch, but none of them answered the persistent questions, who were they, were they hurt, who were their parents, how long had they been out here? Once one had been extracted from the hole, his frenzied motion stopped, and most knelt down on the ground or wandered aimlessly, like they'd been dazed by a hit on the head.

Cap called out for Tex to get the first aid kit each firefighter carried with him, and he was going through Ishikawa's pack when he noticed the tiny blonde kid had wandered away from the group, towards the bare granite of the cliff overhang. With a sickening *crunch*, the kid rammed his head into the rock, bright red blood instantly staining the yellow of his hair. In two huge bounds, Tex was next to the kid, arms wrapped around a body that was startlingly fragile, toothpick bones wrapped in tissue-paper skin. The kid thrashed forward a few times after Tex grabbed him, forehead seeking rock, but after a few moments he went so limp that Tex's blood ran cold.

"Cap! Ishi! This one's got a head wound. Self-inflicted." The last words felt too dry in his mouth, like sand that wouldn't come out. The Cal Fire guys were trained as EMTs, used to cracked skulls and even worse, but Tex felt a new wave of nausea roll through him. What the fuck was he doing here? He couldn't help these kids; all he wanted to do was turn and run, even if it would send him straight back to Lancaster.

Cap walked over from the group of boys by the hole. One was sprawled on the ground, Ishikawa holding the boy's hand with a blue glove. He didn't look good.

Tex explained what had happened, and for just a second, he saw a chink in Cap's steely façade.

"Can you hear me, son? What's your name? We're gonna get you out of here real soon, okay? I just need you to be brave for me a little bit longer." Cap took the boy from Tex, carrying him over to Ishikawa's pack and setting him gently on the ground.

"I know I showed you how to use the radio, Albertson," Cap called back to Tex, not turning away from the boy on the ground. Cap only used surnames with the inmates. "Get on there and call for med choppers, two critical injuries, three serious but stable. Plumas County sheriffs too. This is a crime scene."

The vast gulf of fear Tex felt at having to use the radio almost overshadowed the chill he felt at the mention of cops, and the deep sense of irony that he would be the one calling them. Even in his fire gear, these hicks might pull their guns on the only Black man for

twenty miles. He shook his head to clear the thoughts away, picking the radio up from Cap's bag. He'd only used it once before, and it felt as threatening as a bomb in his hand.

Mercifully, he pressed buttons in the order he vaguely remembered he should, and the thing crackled to life. He felt like an idiot answering the dispatcher's questions, and Cap had to shout their approximate location to him to relay, but eventually he got an ETA of fifteen minutes on two copters for the worst boys. He set the radio down and looked around. The ground around the hollow fell away in sharp angles, and every piece of flat ground above them was covered with trees, some burnt black and some still live and spiky. Where would the choppers land?

"Ow, fuck, man!" A *thud* as flesh connected with flesh, and Ishikawa struggled to restrain the boy on the ground, the one he was working on.

"I know it hurts; I need you to stay still."

"Fuck you. You're just gonna take us back there—" The kid punctuated his statement by kicking Ishikawa again, and Tex ran to hold down his legs. Like all the others, the boy was emaciated, and his skin was so pale it still looked pure white in the little streaks where his sweat had washed away ash. Tex tried to calculate his age, tried to imagine how he would look if he didn't look starving. Fourteen? Fifteen? Tex could close his hands around where the boy's calves should have been, and he realized with growing nausea that the smell was strongest on this kid. He looked over to the boy's right hand, which Ishikawa was still working on, and he didn't have to be an EMT to know that it looked like a severely bad situation.

The boy struggled and swore again, and Tex could only imagine the beating he would have caught if he'd sworn at an adult at that age. Through the slow, cold, nightmare fear of this moment, he could feel the past creeping back into his mind. Something was wrong here, really wrong. The quiet, from Ishi, from Cap, but especially from the boys. He had known that quiet back on the ranch, the silence that came from all speech being met with a slap across the mouth.

Ishikawa moved to the boy's left side, pulling out more medical equipment wrapped in plastic. Tex caught the boy's eye, cloudy and faraway. He seemed to be slowly fading.

"Hey, kid, what's your name? I'm Tex."

"Max," the boy said weakly.

"How'd you guys get out here, Max? What happened?"

Ishikawa shot Tex a look, as if to say, *don't bother*, before returning to his supplies. It looked like he was trying to start an IV, but the one time Tex had seen him do it before, it was almost instant. Tex had never liked needles. He didn't want to look.

"Compass," Max breathed, so quietly that Tex almost missed it.

"What? You have a compass?"

"That's the program. Compass Wilderness Therapy." Max scoffed, and Tex's body felt cold. Max's head slumped back, and Ishikawa slapped his face.

"Max! Max! Fuck." He turned and called to Cap, who was still working on the younger boy. Then, to Tex: "Get on the radio again and tell those choppers to hurry up. This kid is running out of time."

It was just a bit easier to turn the radio on this time, but to his astonishment, the helicopters were still ten minutes away. It felt like they'd been in this hollow for a lifetime. Tex looked around, his limbs aching for movement, something to drive out the pounding fear that was eroding his chest. He felt restlessness creeping over his skin, the kind that turned off his ability to think and made bad things happen. He saw the three uninjured boys, huddled against the cliff face, as far from the firefighters as they could get. Somehow, he knew they weren't sitting together. Even with only inches between them, they didn't look at each other.

Tex walked over to the one who looked the oldest, the curve of the cliff face forcing him to stoop and then squat down. The boy looked at him blankly. It was like all of them had lost their ability to react. The closest thing he'd ever seen was the guys who'd spent weeks and months in solitary. When they got back to gen pop, they looked hollow, like the isolation had crept inside their bodies and was haunting them like a ghost.

"I'm Tex. What are your names?"

"Carlos," the oldest one said after a long moment. "This is Tommy, and that's Aidan." Tommy had a buzz cut that was a few weeks past needing a refresh, and Aidan had huge brown eyes that seemed to take up half his face.

"That kid over there, Max, he said something about Compass Wilderness Therapy? You guys know anything about that?"

All the boys looked at the ground.

"How long you guys been out here?"

"I don't know," Aidan said softly, the words coming out in a long, thin stream, like every syllable was a struggle.

"Fire came through here. You remember how long ago that was?"

Aiden shook his head slowly, but Tommy answered, slow and thoughtful, like he was really having to dig for the memory.

“Fire came through here three days ago, I think. But the lightning strike—“

Carlos kicked him hard in the shin, staring daggers. “Shut up.”

“You saw a lightning strike?” The Lassen fire had started miles from here, almost two weeks ago, but secondary strikes were common, especially in dense forests like these.

Tommy looked at Carlos, and some weight shifted between them.

“Look,” Tex said, staring Tommy square in the face. “Whatever happened, whatever somebody did or didn’t do, two of your friends are really hurt, and the cops are gonna be here sooner or later. You don’t have to get your story straight if you just tell the truth. Might save you a world of pain.”

A few beats of heavy silence, and then Tommy stood up, a sharpness in his movement that Tex hadn’t seen in any of the kids before.

“Tommy, no—” Carlos leapt up too, grabbing for Tommy’s hand, but Tommy jerked away.

“What the fuck, man, who are you trying to protect? We can’t hide it. I don’t want to hide it anymore.” Tex caught the edge of a sob in Tommy’s voice, but the boy was over at the other side of the hollow before he could fully process what he’d heard.

Tommy kicked away a few branches and dead leaves, revealing another tarp, this one black. He took a deep breath, and then pulled the tarp away, just as Tex was about to shout something about crime scenes. His words died in his throat.

When Tex had first smelled Max’s hand, he couldn’t imagine that anything could be worse, more overpowering. But Max smelled like he was dying. The body under the tarp smelled like it was definitely dead. Tex retched, but his stomach was already empty. Carlos recoiled, but Tommy didn’t back away. “Look,” he said to Tex, and so he had to.

He saw a small depression in the ground, shallow and grave-shaped, and in the hole there was a body, or at least what was left of one. Male, white, 30’s, though decay had already set in, so age was fuzzy. Tex’s blood ran cold as he saw a deep gash across the neck, and then...there was something wrong with the legs, something different from the rest of the corpse. Most of the skin was intact on the rest of the body, but the legs looked like they’d been scavenged by animals—

No.

Tex looked back at the boys. Tommy was crying now, and Aidan had come to stand with them.

“He put me on the radio,” Aidan said, staring directly at the body. “I couldn’t get anyone, so we had to hike down. I couldn’t get anyone on the radio.”

Tex felt like he was floating, like he’d discarded his body because it was no use anymore. He didn’t want to look at Tommy, but he couldn’t look away.

“We’d been on this hike for two weeks,” Tommy said, his voice steady. “I’d been in the program six months, Aiden three years, Sean, the little blonde kid for nine months, and Carlos four years. It was Max’s first hike.

“Josiah,” Tommy nodded towards the corpse, “was always hard on the new kids, and Max didn’t know how to keep his mouth shut. Josiah took his rations as punishment so he tried to steal some from Carlos. He was already so skinny.” For a moment, Tommy looked like he would crumple under the weight of telling, but he clenched his teeth, continuing. “We never had much, never had enough. Never thought I’d get used to hunger like that.”

Carlos cut in. “He came at me with a pocketknife. Didn’t touch me, but he cut up his hand real bad. After that, Josiah took everyone’s rations. He said Max needed to go to a hospital, so we had to hike down to where a car could come get us.” Carlos looked at Aidan, and the younger boy covered his face.

“You took everyone’s rations, asshole. You always did whatever he told you.” Tommy’s voice was flat, but it vibrated with an anger that Tex knew from experience to ruin lives.

“Oh, fuck you Tommy,” Carlos said, leaning forward, and Tex shouted so loudly all three of the boys jumped. He gave Tommy a small nod, and the boy continued.

“We stopped because there was lightning; that’s when Josiah took Max’s rations. Lightning was the one thing he’d let us stop hiking for, but he said we had to keep going, for Max.” He paused for a moment and shook his head. “It was so bright when it hit the tree. Fuck, man, thought I’d go blind. We all just ran, man, cause the trees were already on fire, it was all around us. Eventually Carlos looked back and saw Josiah on the ground. He was trying to take off the backpack. It was on fire, he was on fire.”

“Never heard anyone scream like that,” Carlos said. “I dragged him up, and we kept going, crossed this little creek and then found this place. I couldn’t make him go any further.”

Tommy again: “We lost the rations, the first aid kit, the radio. Josiah was bad, man. His back, it was like his shirt melted onto it, and he just kept screaming, for hours and hours.”

“It smelled like bacon and burning tires,” Aidan said.

Tommy shook his head. “It was Max’s idea, after four days. His hand was really bad even then, and he was weaker than anyone else. Said no one was coming to rescue us. Said we had to do it to survive. My chest hurt so much from breathing in the smoke, and Josiah just didn’t stop, screaming and begging us to do something, to help him. We didn’t sleep.”

The three boys looked at each other.

“Was he already dead when you...” Tex didn’t need to finish the sentence. All of them shook their heads no.

“He looked at me and asked me to kill him,” Carlos said. “Said he was worse than dead. Said it was okay.” Carlos’ lip trembled.

“We all...did it.” Tommy looked at the other boys, then seemed to decide something. “Yeah, we all did it. The fire came through two days later.”

Aidan spoke, softly. “We were being punished, we were gonna die because of what we did.”

“And then, we didn’t. We’re still here.” Tommy looked over his shoulder to where Cap was doing CPR on Max. A thundering sound, and Tex and the boys started. At first he thought the lightning was back, bringing thunder with it this time, but then he realized what it really was: the choppers. The boys looked at each other, wild-eyed, but Tex held out a hand.

“That body isn’t gonna be anyone’s first priority, I promise.”

Back in the mess hall, the vast darkness of the room was totally silent, the shadows on the floor still as the dead. Kam and Burger were on the edge of their seats, bent forward as if to hear all that much sooner, and Tijuana was completely stiff sitting next to them, his face twisted to a grimace.

Burger broke the silence. “So what the hell, man? What happened next?” Tijuana shushed him, but Tex continued.

“Well, like I said, when the choppers got there, their first priority was Max and the younger kid, the one with the head injury. His name was Sean. Eventually, the other kids got evacuated and taken to the hospital in Reno, and then I don’t know where they went. I heard Max lost his hand, though.

“Sheriff’s guys found the body. I told them what the kids said about the ‘program’ they were in, and they believed it, since they saw how starved they were.” Tex paused a moment, heat rising to his cheeks. “I told the deputies the kids hadn’t said anything about what happened to Josiah. Cap and Ishi did the same. Deputies didn’t ask too many questions. I think they wrote up the neck wound as a suicide, said parts of the body had been scavenged

by animals driven out by the fire. Guy ended up getting cremated, ashes buried by the state. No next of kin.”

“And you?” Kam asked. “What happened to you?”

Tex shrugged. “Went back to fire camp, took a shower and went to sleep. Cap offered me time off, but I didn’t want it. Been here ever since. Never seen anything else like that, though, thank fuck.”

Burger shook his head slowly. “Damn, man, that’s crazy. They really killed that dude and ate him.”

In one quick motion, Tijuana cuffed the back of Burger’s head, and he let out a small yelp.

“Hey man, what the—“

“Dude, you don’t have to say everything that comes into your head,” Kam said, turning to him with an embarrassed look.

“No, but, I just mean,” Burger rubbed the back of his head, glaring up at Tijuana, “those pioneer people in the 1800’s ate each other too, but it took them a hell of a lot longer than four days.”

“These were kids,” Tijuana said, a harder edge to his voice than Tex had ever heard. “Lost in the woods in the middle of a wildfire with no gear, nothing, already starved for weeks.”

“That ain’t the only thing,” Tex said, the words out of his mouth before he could really think about them. Telling the story had opened a floodgate inside his body, and as terrifying as that was, a big part of him didn’t want to close it. “I never told y’all how I got locked up.”

“Assault, right? Some bar fight?” Tijuana asked.

Tex nodded, his heart beating faster than it had when he first saw that mangled body in the woods five years ago. “There’s more to it.” He paused, but the other men were silent.

“Back in Texas, shit, I was a wild kid. My mama never liked me, not from the day I was born, and so all I wanted to do was piss her off, make her feel as bad as I did. Of course, I didn’t know that at the time. One day, I stole a truck from this guy in town and set it on fire in an abandoned parking lot.” He shook his head at the raised eyebrows in the audience. “I know, I know. I’d spent the night in jail before, but the cops didn’t come around that night, or the night after. I really thought I’d gotten away with it.

“Then, one night, about a month later, I wake up, and I know someone’s in the room with me. This flashlight kicks on, brighter than the fucking sun, and before I know what’s happening, these two huge men are pulling me out of bed, handcuffing me. I screamed out for my mom; I thought I was being kidnapped, but then I saw her standing by the door. She didn’t say anything as they took me away.

“They put me in the back of this van, no windows, and we drove around for hours. Eventually, they stopped and pushed me out, took the handcuffs off. The sun was just rising, and I could see we were way out of Amarillo, way out in ranch country in the middle of nowhere. I looked up and saw a sign, Broken Creek Ranch, and then a path about half a mile up to this big house.

“They marched my ass up there, and I met the guy who was in charge, Reverend Thompson, real man of God, old-school Southern Baptist preacher, white. He told me my mama’d sent me there to straighten me out, that she didn’t want to deal with me anymore, so now he was in charge. The way he said it, I knew he wasn’t fucking around, and I knew my mama wouldn’t be coming back for me. I was fourteen.

“It was all other boys, about 25 or so besides me. We weren’t hiking in the woods, but that man worked us from sunup to sundown, six days a week. On Sundays, we had to listen to him preach for hours, then get up in front of the whole group and talk about our “sins”, mostly if we’d ever picked up a dirty magazine. Reverend wasn’t very strong, so he used his son to discipline us, Mr. Sam. It wasn’t even real work, either. He had us dig holes, and then the next week, we had to fill them in. Had us do pushups, stand in the hot sun for hours with no water, no food. We barely ate, got beat for everything and nothing. I saw him crack a boy’s skull in front of me. I hated that motherfucker, and I hated his father.

“After three years, when I was 17, I ran away. Just ran in the direction the vans came from to bring the new boys and somehow made it to the highway. Hitchhiked all the way to Albuquerque, then eventually got to L.A. Got a job working in construction, didn’t tell anybody who I was or what had happened.

“I liked to drink back then, and one night, I was in this bar in Santa Ana, knocking back Jim Beam, when who the fuck do I see, but Reverend Thompson, sitting in a booth with a woman on each arm. Like I said, a real man of God. Back in the day, sometimes he left the ranch, said he was preaching in Hollywood, Sin City, worldly places. I guess this was one of those times.

“I don’t remember going over to him, don’t remember if I said anything or if he recognized me. What I do remember is what it felt like to stick my glass in his eye. Didn’t know you could kill someone that way. Didn’t feel anything when I found out I had. Didn’t even feel better.

“His family wanted me locked up forever, and at that point, I didn’t really care. But it turns out boys had died at Broken Creek since I’d been gone, and some who had survived were trying to get the place shut down, get Mr. Sam arrested for the beatings, and the other things he liked to do with some of the boys. State said if I testified, I’d get a reduced sentence, so I agreed. In the end, the family backed down. Didn’t want any light shone into their family closets, so I never told the story, just got sent to Lancaster, then here.”

The other three men stared at him, and Tex felt his jaw shaking. The part of him that liked watching bad TV reruns had hoped that telling the story would take some weight away from him, but the space where the secret had lived just felt empty.

“Fuck, man, that’s fucked up.” Tijuana shook his head slowly.

For once, Burger seemed short on words. After a moment, he managed, “Yeah, dude, I’m sorry that happened.”

Tex nodded. “I am too.” He looked across at Burger, Kam and Tijuana, and the cold fear that they wouldn’t meet his eyes wasn’t realized. His mouth was dry, and he forced himself to swallow.

“You can only fuck with someone, can only starve them for so long before they’re not in charge of what they do about it anymore.”

Tijuana nodded, then looked up. The guard was walking towards the group, and Tex wondered how much he’d heard.

“Chow time’s over, boys,” the guard said, stretching. His joints popped loudly.

All four of the men at the table stood up, routine taking over as they returned their trays and followed the guard back to the bunkhouse.

Tex was still hungry.

Rot

It wasn't my idea to write this out. The university counselor said I should, in her white-walled office that smelled like fake incense. After the police, the crime scene techs, the campus security officers were all gone, she pulled me in. Said she was sorry for what happened, sorry for all of it. When she was sitting there drowning in her own sorrow, I didn't say anything, just sat with my head down. After a while, she started talking about how *survivors* often found writing about their experiences cathartic, even if they weren't ready to talk. She gave me this notebook, promised no one had to see it if I didn't want them to. I'm not sure. I'm not sure what I want. All I wanted back in her office was for her to stop talking, to be out of that room, to hide from the being seen that always meant my life was about to get worse. It's not even that I find talking about it upsetting. I just know there's no point. I'm the type of person whose truths are decided by other people.

I don't regret what I did. I want to be really clear about that. The university counselor said that this is my chance to tell my story, my chance to be heard, and in my story, I don't regret what I did. I do regret what happened. I don't think that's going to go away.

I'm not a victim. Maybe in the legal sense, in the as-far-as-the-university-is-concerned sense, but I'm not a victim. I did what I did so that I would never be a victim again. Maybe *it* would happen again, but I could fight back, could leave a mark, could have some proof so it wasn't just my words, weak vapor against all the powers that be. So that, even if just for a single second, I could feel safe in my skin.

What horror do we make in trying to feel safe?

When bad things happen to you, a rot starts to live in your body, and the longer you try to ignore it, the more it spreads. When that rot sets in before a certain age, you forget what it was like to live without it. The rot is a part of you, a phantom limb that spasms and burns at the worst times, twisting you into something that you never should have been, that no one ever should have been. Most people can't see it, not for what it is. They see the extra space it takes up, the mishappen nature of you as you stumble through the world, and they wonder why you're so...strange, so...off. That's what it is. You're off, and it scares them even if they don't know why, and if you're lucky, you end up alone.

I say if you're lucky, because some people can see that rotten limb, they can smell the decay like a vulture, and they circle you. They have rotten limbs too, so they recognize you in

an instant. All they know is the rot, so it's all they can give, and they give that rot and they take more of you until you're so deformed that even they don't want you anymore.

I don't know how rotten Brendan Howe was when he came into my room that night, but I do know how drunk he was. The first recorded use of distilled ethanol is as an antiseptic, to clean out the rot that's set into a wound, stop it from spreading, save the host. Even before I learned that fact, in an Islamic history class, I knew the principle. If you don't live with the rot, you might think those of us who do get used to it, learn to live with it. We do, because we have to, but that doesn't mean we don't feel it festering. There are many painkillers in this world, and we know them well. Ethanol does not stop this rot – I think for Brendan, it made it worse – but it stops you feeling it for a while, and you learn to convince yourself that that's the same thing.

Jenny Sage, my roommate, threw a lot of parties, so I was used to drunk people stumbling in if I forgot to lock my door, and once, even when I did. I didn't like the noise, but Jenny prided herself on never leaving a guest thirsty, so I found ways to cope.

At this point, you have to decide what you want to believe, or rather, whom. Belief is a strange and terrible thing: what we believe is made real, and what we don't simply goes away. I don't want to litigate the great injustices of our existence here, but I have to point out the irony. I did what I did so that I would always be believed, and yet somehow, the faith of others still escapes me.

It's going to be a lot easier for you to believe a certain version of this story: that I was drunk, way drunk, too drunk, past the point of fun and into that cold fear, sedated so heavily that I couldn't count on my chest rising to pull in a breath. So far gone that I don't remember, or only know the flashes, memories made in retrospect from the marks a ravenous want leaves on someone else's body. It's easier for you to believe that I'm crazy, or to be trauma-informed, *experiencing dissociative amnesia*. Easier to believe that the bugs were mined from my subconscious, the ramblings of an addled, liquor-soaked brain, or that I'd heard the rumors and filled in the gaps in an especially fucked-up way.

But that isn't the truth.

During Jenny Sage's "October" party, I was buzzed, not drunk, listening to music alone in my room and riding the chemical high that masked the rot for a moment. This party was, of course, unsanctioned by the university, so it kicked off quickly, and at the last minute. One second, the apartment was empty except for the two of us, and the next, it was suffocatingly full. I don't know why I forgot to lock the door. That's the thing my mind kept

going back to as it was happening, how stupid I was to leave the door unlocked. But I did, and so, without any warning, preamble or grace, Brendan Howe stumbled through the doorway and into my room.

One of the things the rot changes in you is your fear, and not in the way other people would expect. Yeah, sure, sometimes it cranks it up so high you can't even think, scared of every shadow until you can't even tell what's real and what's just the mind-killer of that rot. But other times, most of the time in my experience, it turns it way, way down. When the worst has already happened, it's too much effort to be afraid. Even when you're back there, staring the horrors of the past square in the face, you're too tired to run. So, you don't. You just stay still.

The counselor talked a lot about consent. I know it's important, but I don't know that it's for people like me. How do you say "no" to the inevitable, to what happens to you like the tide because other people can smell that rot inside your body? How do you say "no" to the only touch you deserve, the only grace you'll ever be given by another person? Give it long enough, and you start to think you want the bad, because the not wanting hurts too much.

I think I knew what he was going to do before he did it, and I knew it wouldn't be as bad if I went along. Doesn't that mean I wanted it? That I deserved it? I don't know. I know that I wasn't drunk, because I remember. The gin-juniper of his deodorant. How his musty, off-white t-shirt hung down into my face. The water stain on my ceiling. The bird bones of my body that refused to cooperate with the path of least resistance, limbs wild, a wire cage that was only bondage, never safety.

In the moment, I didn't think, but I can now. Weeks earlier, when Jenny made me her offer, I thought she was full of shit. I thought that generally. She was always talking about esoteric stuff that I didn't care about, like "gaze theory", and she looked like Stevie Nicks and smelled like clove cigarettes, so I thought the magic was bullshit like everything else about her. Jenny knows the rot too. Not like me, but it's there for her too, and she told me she could do something that would keep me safe, give me something I could use if it ever happened again. She was intentionally vague about what exactly it was, what exactly would happen, but somehow, that made it all the more interesting. And the candles, the incense, the words I'd never told anyone scrawled on paper and pushed down my throat. It was weird and fun, in a *Practical Magic* kind of way. Getting everything out and then taking it back made me feel stronger. Less sick. Less rotten.

Like I said, in the moment, when Brendan Howe was there with me, I didn't think. I just felt. I felt the rot more in that moment than I ever had before. It swelled and grew,

burning through my blood, filling my lungs, breaking my ribs until I was nothing against it. For the first time, it was bigger than me, it *was* me, and whatever had been outside of it was gone. That phantom limb spasmed and reached out and grasped for something to destroy, the violence a need like breathing.

So I kissed him, bigger than God. I don't think he was expecting it, but he didn't pull away. I was expecting to feel something, a crawling in my mouth, or some change in the rot, but I didn't. All the love and hate that I'd kept, locked away and bound up in my body for years, rushed out of my mouth and into his.

And when it was gone, I only felt empty.

I don't know exactly what happened next, because I wasn't there. I only know what the police and the counselor told me. How Brendan roomed alone and had abysmal attendance, so no one noticed when he didn't show up to class the next day, or the day after that. How Sam Watson, the Sisyphean head of the campus A.A. group, had gotten a strange call in the middle of the night from a number that turned out to belong to Brendan. How there was no voice on the other end of that line, no breath even to call out, rasping against the dark, only quiet that brought a dread worse than any words. How the R.A. who found his body three days later still hasn't been discharged from the psych unit of Northwestern General.

Obviously, no one wanted me to see the crime scene photos, but someone leaked them online, Instagram first. The content moderators took them down right away, but the internet is forever, and no one on campus could sleep that night. The university dragged out Dr. Burgh, head of the comp-sci department, to convince everyone that the photos were A.I.-generated, a deepfake from some horror engine. Everyone's eyes glazed over when he started talking about pixels and generative algorithms, but belief is a strange and terrible thing. What we believe is made real, and what we don't simply goes away. Everyone wanted this to go away.

Officially, Brendan Howe died of acute alcohol poisoning. It was a warm October, and the air conditioning for his dorm was out, so he rotted with "exceptional speed" during the three days before anyone found him. Sure, the maggots were concentrated unusually, spilling out of his mouth, bursting out of the soft flesh of his neck and down to his ribcage, a wide black swath of viscera opening down his torso. "The possibility", the coroner's report reads, "of animal involvement in the breaking of the ribcage and the exposure of the chest cavity cannot be ruled out." There are, after all, a lot of raccoons on campus, and they have come through windows before. Unusual, yes, but not unheard of. Not impossible to believe.

Jenny's getting a lot of flak for this, more than she deserves. Brendan is hardly the first alcoholic to die after a college party, and he won't be the last. I'm sure he was drinking before he showed up at the apartment, and a lot of people brought alcohol that night. Yeah, she did the ritual with me, but the university can't discriminate based on sincerely held religious beliefs. And I chose to kiss him, chose to unleash it, not Jenny.

I haven't been assigned a new roommate since she was expelled. I don't think I will be. They're trying their best to protect me, but word gets around, and it's not like I was winning "most popular" before, anyway. I like the quiet in the apartment, the wide berth in the hallways and the three-desk radius of empty seats around me during lectures.

Some mornings, I wake up to find the maggots crawling along my pillow or down my neck. Their bodies are small and soft, and if you didn't know what they were, you'd never be afraid of them. You'd never believe that they could do what they do. I keep them in a jar by my bed.

The phantom limb is strong now, and it's nice to have the extra hand, if I ever need it.

Seventeen

Sara Advecki could feel the holster pressing against her hip, the Glock 17 it held hard and unforgiving, its plastic case seeking the softness of her body with what felt like hunger. This was sixth period special ed math, Mrs. Kapinski's class, and the only good thing about being stuck in here for an hour each day was that by the time Sara showed up, all pretense of teaching the impaired youth of America was gone. Mrs. Kapinski usually wiled away the period watching TikTok videos on her phone, disembodied audio fragments sometimes finding their way to the very back of the room, where Sara folded herself behind her desk and tried to go unnoticed.

Three desks ahead, Bella Gordon, Katerina Kovalenko and Mercedes Sandoval were huddled around a phone, giggling. Sara's face reddened as she realized what they were talking about.

Katerina was holding the phone, gesturing to the screen. "No, see, this is the cop. I think his name is like, Steve or something, but he's so hot, right? I think I could pull him." The video was of Sara's dad, a sergeant in the Martinsville P.D., doing a TikTok dance alongside two students she didn't recognize. He waved his black baton in the air, as though it was a prop in some bad comedy act. Stephen Advecki was the department's unofficial head of P.R., who kept up with the latest internet trends even though he was in his late 40's and never passed up an opportunity for a selfie or a dance video while on the beat. The fact that he was now working Sara's school and doing those things, and the idea that other students saw him as attractive, made her want to vomit up cafeteria tater tots and live as a hermit underground forever.

"There's so many of them. I mean, I know why, but I'm really hoping I don't run into that one bitch who busted me at the smoke shop." Bella, still clad in pajama pants, was using her front camera to add more liquid eyeliner to the impressive amount she was already wearing.

"None of them give a shit about that now." Mercedes opened her aggressively scented hand sanitizer and squeezed half of it onto her manicured hands. "They're looking for a sex killer, not a teenager with a vape."

Bella capped her eyeliner. "Whatever. I hope they find who did it. It's so creepy thinking he's probably still around here."

Sara reached down to her holster, fingers tracing the edge of the magazine.

Shoot them.

Shoot yourself.

These thoughts came from outside of her, but that didn't mean they scared her any less. Each time they whispered in her ear, she wanted to stamp them, shove them down like an overflowing garbage can, physically crush them and the terrifying impulses she feared they would awaken.

"You bored to death yet?" Sara looked up and saw Matt Williamson, the boy who sat in front of her, turned all the way around, his face twisted into a smirk. "I mean, unless you like listening to those three suck up to our new overlords."

Despite herself, the corners of Sara's mouth curled up into a smile. She made it a habit to keep her head down while at school, not speak to anyone unless she absolutely had to, and most of her classmates were all too happy to allow her to fade into the background. Matt was different, friendly to her even when she gave nothing back, shielding her from his usual sarcasm and sullen, mumbled replies. Whatever he saw in her, he was mistaken, but these interactions did have a way of making her body feel just a bit lighter.

Matt's eyes darted to the three girls and back again. "If we're lucky, they'll be too busy making fan edits of their favorite cop to pass target practice."

Two weeks ago, McKayla Vice, a senior who Sara was only barely aware of, had been stabbed to death on one of the football fields; the killer still hadn't been caught. Coming as this did on the heels of not one shooting threat but two, the school board had decided to start taking student self-defense seriously, partnering with the Martinsville P.D. and the Canyon County sheriff's office to put guns in the hands of the next generation. The board held gun safety to be sacred, so every student had to pass a written test and at least five hours of training to be given a sidearm. Her father had gotten this requirement waived for her, so Sara had been carrying a gun at school longer than almost everyone else. Some vague part of her hoped it wouldn't feel so cold inside her chest once the other kids started wearing holsters, but as the days had passed and more firearms filled the hallways, her unease didn't go away.

Matt was looking at her for a response, so she shrugged. "You don't have yours yet, either."

Matt looked down at his waistband, also empty of a holster. "Yeah, I don't want one. I'm not a trigger-happy asshole hell-bent on revenge."

Sara pulled her hand away from her gun, and Matt noticed the movement. Immediately, his face reddened.

“Sara, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. You—”

Without even looking down at her digital watch to check the time, Sara grabbed her backpack and stood up from the desk. A few people turned their heads at Matt’s protest, but none of them seemed to notice her walking out the door.

Ever since McKayla’s body was discovered, the campus had been crawling with cops and drowning in rumors. Sara didn’t need to believe rumors because she had the real thing, straight from the source. Her dad spared her no details. Not how the stench of death had already started to burst from her body by the time it was found, not how there had been flies and maggots crawling over her smooth, waxed skin, not how her Lulu leggings had been left around her ankles, stained with blood.

That kind of gory detail wasn’t particularly unusual, especially not lately. In public, Sergeant Advecki was friendly, helpful, part of that thin blue line protecting honest American citizens from lawless chaos, but behind closed doors, he was the law. He believed in instilling his daughter with a fear of the outside world, the fentanyl dealers, the carjackers, the rapists, the cold-blooded murderers, and she’d grown up on stories from his case files. She’d also grown up watching her father get angrier and angrier, especially after her mom left them. He gulped down InfoWars, Fox News, Turning Point, Andrew Tate, a constant supply of rage streaming first from his radio, then the TV, then his phone. He had never told her to be afraid of that.

Most of the cops were her father’s coworkers, city police in starched, dark blue uniforms with shiny silver badges, but some of them were Canyon County sheriff’s deputies, recognizable by their khaki uniforms and John Wayne cowboy hats. Sara could feel fear of McKayla’s killer radiating off her classmates, even off the teachers, poorly masked by their endless scrolling and put-on apathy, but it wasn’t so simple for her. When she was little, she’d loved seeing her dad in his uniform, and there were endless pictures of her wearing his sergeant’s cap, comically too big and falling over her face. More and more though, the sight of him had just been a reminder to straighten her back, follow his ever-growing list of rules and try not to be noticed. It was hard to be scared of just one person when she was surrounded by an army of her father’s clones, eyes and ears who would snitch on her without a second thought.

The hallway outside Mrs. Kapinski's classroom was empty, oddly so, the depressing grey floor carrying the day's buildup of Converse prints. At least she didn't have to jostle past sophomores fresh from P.E. and allergic to wearing deodorant. Or dodge another officer.

A locker slammed on the wall behind her, and she jumped, more startled than she wanted to admit. She whirled around, but there was no one. She shook her head and kept walking. She wasn't afraid of the boogeyman.

She saw two Martinsville cops walking through another hallway, about 20 yards up, their voices blurred to meaninglessness by the distance. She slowed down, flattening herself against the wall, but they passed quickly, unaware of or unconcerned with her.

Sara reached the intersection and noticed one of those cheesy character trait posters peeling off the wall; this one said INTEGRITY in all caps, like it was a threat. Suddenly, the skin on her arms pricked up in goosebumps, and she stood ramrod straight, unable to move. Her heart was pounding and the air felt thick, charged with some threat she couldn't see.

The hallway around her was darkening, like the bulbs in the overhead lights were slowly fading, a last gasp before blinking out forever. No, that wasn't it. The room was filled with something like smoke, but there was no smell, no scream of the fire alarm. Why couldn't she move, run to the green glowing EXIT sign that was even now fading against the dark? Why wasn't anyone else coming down the hallway to see this with her?

The black was a wall around her now, the tiles, the lights, the lockers, the stupid posters on the walls were all gone beyond it, wiped away as though they had never existed. The darkness had some form, some swirling mass, some energy of its own, and it roiled before her as though it was alive. Tears fell from her eyes, pushed out by a deep, yawning pit of panic that filled her entire being. The black roared with its own noise, loud and punishing, metallic static clawing at her ears, and faintly, she heard something almost like a human voice calling out from the void. She needed to run, but where? The dark was everything, the entire universe shrunk down and pressing all around her in the black, and her limbs were frozen. When it came down to fight or flight, most people chose freeze. Perpetrators knew this. She squeezed her eyes shut, clenched her teeth, balled her fists, bracing for some impact; it was coming, closer, closer, she could feel it down against her skin—

The bell rang, the loudest sound she had ever heard, and Sara jumped a mile. Her eyes flew open, and the dark was gone, the new-old brightness of the lights hurting her eyes. The tiles, the lockers, the posters, everything was the same, and now she could hear students streaming out of the classrooms around her, filling the hallway with the echoing mass of their

voices. As the first few reached her, she saw they were buried in their phones, headphones blasting. Oblivious.

She ran out of the hallway and didn't stop until she was four blocks away.

By the time she reached her street, her heart had stopped pounding enough for her to hear other noises, and she listened, ears straining for any advance warning from her house. The squad car was parked in the driveway, squeezed in next to the lifted white Ford truck her dad couldn't really afford. The garage was closed, and the single-story house looked so ordinary, with its patch of dying lawn out front and small, square windows staring out at her.

The garage door opened and she walked in, the empty space where her mom's van had parked years ago almost crowded out by the encroaching walls of junk. Mismatched planks of wood, decaying tennis racquets, a faded Blue Lives Matter sign called out of the mess as she walked towards the house. Her dad was standing in the doorway, hand poised to close the garage door as soon as she was inside. His other hand held his phone, which blared his new favorite podcast; this one spared no energy insisting that a man was the head of his household, a pissed-off feedback loop her dad definitely didn't need.

He looked at his watch. "Huh, you're early today, at least for you. Finally learning to tell time at 17? Shit, maybe my taxes do go towards something useful after all."

Sara shrugged, willing the time that she had never understood to pass without her breaking some invisible rule. Her clothes were appropriate, no slutty short shorts and a hoodie that hid her chest. She hadn't spoken to anyone during the day except Matt, hadn't posted anything on social media that made him or the force look bad, hadn't accessed NPR or another one of his banned websites.

"You discharge your firearm today?"

"Only in target practice." After the guns showed up at school, P.E. was replaced by sidearm training two days a week, the lessons run by a rotating cast of Martinsville P.D. officers.

He nodded, and she chanced a look up at him. The friendly officer from the online videos didn't live in her house; her father's face was usually set in an unreadable mask, some outburst or cutting remark permanently lurking just below the surface.

She tried to step past him to walk into the house, but he put an arm out, blocking her path. Her muscles ached from the effort of standing so still.

"Sara, I want to talk to you about something." He paused for a brief moment, just long enough for fear to close up her throat. "This case, it's a tough one. No physical evidence, no

witness statements. No one wants to talk to the grown-ups, I guess, but kids talk to each other.” He stared her straight in the eye, and his gaze felt like it had some physical weight. “I need you to promise me, if you figure out who it is, that you’ll use that weapon on the perp.”

Sara’s entire body felt cold, despite the warmth of the spring afternoon, and it took her a few seconds to process that her dad was expecting a response. She nodded stiffly.

“Good!” he said, loud enough to make her jump. His arm was no longer blocking her way, but she still felt frozen.

“One more thing,” he said, looking down at her. “I don’t want you walking to school and back anymore. I’ll get the boys to give you a ride, and you can tell ‘em if you’ve seen anything during the day. God knows you’ll probably forget otherwise.”

Sara nodded again and hurried into the house, its walls closing around her the moment she entered.

Time rolled on without asking her for permission, mornings and afternoons in squad cars with Officer Jackson, Miller, Aliaz, Detective Burns, Yakeda, Kim, even a sergeant or two when her dad could call in favors. It didn’t matter; they were all the same, big next to her, filling out the driver’s seat and not leaving enough room for anyone else, listening intently to the constant squawking of the radio, eyes on the road, always searching. A few tried to make conversation, asking if she’d seen anything that day, but she was a bad partner, sullen and quiet, though she knew it would get back to her dad. Despite the squad cars, marked and unmarked, lining the streets around the school for two blocks in each direction, every day, her ride pulled up to the front of the building and watched her like a CCTV camera until she disappeared inside. Her cheeks burned with the knowing that everyone was watching her, that even in all the chaos she still stood out. She had been the dumb girl who could barely count or use paper money, now she was the cop’s kid, the one who couldn’t come to school without an escort.

Immediately after the body was discovered, new posters started growing in the hallways and on bulletin boards: IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING and KEEP YOUR FRIENDS SAFE, CALL THE TIP LINE, with the anonymous number printed below. They had been jarring at first and then blended into the background like everything else high schoolers didn’t care about. But as the days mounted without a firm suspect, more and more grew out of the walls, sprouting like mushrooms from rotten wood, until one day, as she was walking to homeroom, Sara looked up and saw the entire wall above the lockers covered with Martinsville PD posters. There were so many that they overlapped each other,

cutting off the words so that in places it was actually hard to read what they said. It seemed somehow like they made the hallway smaller, like they were pulling the walls closer to her skin. Her father's words had been a weight around her neck ever since he'd spoken them, but now they felt almost unbearable, suffocating in a way that even the heavy police presence hadn't ever been.

She looked up and saw the line of cops, including her dad, standing against the lockers. They must have been pulling double shifts, because she recognized almost the whole force, faces drawn and unreadable, eyes scanning the crowd. She hurried past her dad without saying anything, making sure not to make eye contact with any other students. As she passed him, his eyes were cold, following her down the hallway like ice between her shoulder blades. A bulletproof vest bulked out the form under his uniform, and she noticed that he'd pulled his holster to the front of his belt, positioning his gun and taser so they could clearly be seen. Every officer she walked past had done the same, and some even stroked their sidearms, like the guns were old friends and they were trying to make up for lost time.

Later that day, as she was walking from fifth period geography to Mrs. Kapinski's class, the inevitable happened. Actually, she was surprised that it hadn't happened earlier, given how strung out everyone was. She was flowing along in a mass of students, nose overwhelmed by Axe deodorant, sweat, and Bath and Body Works spray, when she heard a shout from somewhere in the crowd ahead of her. She tried to press on, head down, but suddenly the mass of people in front of her parted, and she could see her father and Yakeda arguing with some boy—oh God, it was Matt.

"I didn't kill her, you fucking fascist! I wasn't anywhere near the school."

Her father jerked Matt's arm back roughly, and he yelped, the sound higher and more disturbing than she would have thought he was capable of.

"You've been identified as a person of interest. If you don't come with me, that'll be resisting arrest." A flash of silver, her father's handcuffs popping open.

"This is bullshit—Sara!"

Somehow, she'd ended up with a front-row seat to all this, and Matt's eyes found hers, as desperate as her mother's used to be when her father came home after a bad day. She froze, willing, wishing, praying that she could disappear. Her father's head snapped towards her, his gaze turning her blood to ice.

For a half-second, Matt kept staring at her, waiting as though she could do anything about this. His face fell, and she felt nauseous as he hardened towards her, towards her

inaction. Then, faster than she ever would have thought he could move, he jerked away from her father, sprinting through the crowd, the one loose handcuff banging against lockers and backpacks.

Time slowed then. Sara heard her father shout, and knew before he started the motion that he would pull out his gun.

Pop, pop, pop. The shots were deafening as they echoed off the lockers and the tiled floor.

Immediately, the bodies around her were a hurricane, arms flailing, backpacks slamming into her face, fear as thick in the air as the smells had been earlier. The three shots, and the many more that inevitably followed, had dulled her hearing, but shrill screams broke through the auditory fog, and some deep-voiced authority was shouting to be heard among the din. Her first instinct, drilled into her by her father, was to throw herself to the ground, out of the way of any more bullets, but there was no down in the mass of frightened bodies around her, only forward. All around them, the cops sprang into action, Jackson, Aliaz and Kim running past her, Burns and a rookie she didn't recognize ushering the students forward, away from whatever they wanted to hide. Grasping fingers, slingshot arms, they could move people like it was nothing. She felt Burns' iron grip on her arm, and with a single hand, he almost lifted her off her feet. In a blur, he said something to her, but she'd lost the ability to understand any language aside from the pounding of her heart, the crashing of blood through her ears. The hallway was darkening around her, and the buzzing terror under her skin got louder and sharper than she thought was possible. Once was just the dumb girl hallucinating, just nerves and bad horror movies thrown in the blender of her brain and making a monster, but twice, twice was a bad sign.

Something outside of her turned her head around, and she saw Matt's body, limp on the floor, red pooling under his head. Yakeda pinned him by the neck, and her father pulled out his baton and brought it down on the boy's ribs with a crushing force. She desperately wanted to look away from the bright blood staining the floor under the boy's mouth, and the wet in his hair. On the wall above them, an HONOR character trait poster sneered down at the scene. She was frozen as her dad stood up, towering over the boy. He was dark around his edges, just like she knew him.

Her father didn't come home until almost 9 p.m. that night, stomping through the door and muttering angrily, podcast blasting the fear of Antifa and cartels into the house. Despite the late hour, she knew she needed to stay and eat dinner at the table like normal. Traditional

values were the only thing keeping society together in times like these, and it would be so much worse for her if her father came home to a dark house. The podcast kept blaring as her father sat down, thundering into his seat and clanging his silverware as ads for home security systems and creatine interrupted the only honest media network. His silence was like being strangled.

“He’s not the fucking perp,” her father mumbled, shaking his head. Sara cut up a piece of pork loin, dry from hours staying warm in the oven, chewing it so she wouldn’t have to speak.

“Kid lawyered up the second we got him in. Turns out he has a goddamn alibi and he’s suing us for police brutality. Fucking snowflakes. They all want to abolish the police until one of their kids is raped and murdered, and then they still won’t let us do our jobs. We barely touched him.”

Often, when he got into a mood like this, he would rant on for so long that no response was necessary, but now there seemed to be a pause in the deluge. “I’m sorry,” she said, gentle and small. “You just have to keep trying. He’s out there somewhere.”

“He’s not out there, I know right where he is. In that school, walking around like he’s king of the world. I tell you, it’s the transgender ideology they’re pushing, a man can become a woman, why can’t he kill one? They’re screwing with our kids’ morals.”

Sara’s hunger was gone, her stomach filled with dread burning like frost. The podcast was still going, an officer stabbing in San Francisco, and her father was ranting along beside it. As silently as she could, she set her silverware down on her plate and eased the wooden chair back. It scraped against the floor, tattletale, and her father’s head jerked towards her.

“Did I say you could leave this goddamn table? Sit here and finish your food. I pay for it.” Slowly, the room was getting darker.

“I have to go to bed for school tomorrow. It’s late.” She addressed the half-full plate, as though moving her head to look down would save her.

“Oh, you know what time it is? It’s a goddamn miracle. Look, my daughter knows how to tell time!”

“Please...” The word tried to come out of her mouth with an edge, some authority, but it was just a whimper.

“No, no, if you know how to tell time, we should celebrate. What does that clock say? And don’t look at your watch.” He reached over and yanked the digital watch from her wrist, long, red streaks growing over her hand where the plastic scraped against the skin.

Sara turned and looked at the clock on the wall behind her, nauseous with knowing. The dark was growing by the second, just like it had those times in the hallway, but even if the noon sun had been shining onto the clockface, it wouldn't have helped. She stared, focusing on the circle of numbers, the hands, one big and one small, willing herself, begging her stupid brain to just work, please, just this once, to see the pattern that everyone else could find so effortlessly. Her mouth was dry as the silence stretched on.

Her father sucked his teeth, shaking his head. "That's what I thought. Fuck, who's going to want you if you can't even read an oven timer?"

All her meager power was focused on not letting the tears spill from her eyes, hands shaking with the effort of keeping as still as possible, freezing as solid as she could so maybe he would forget she was even there.

The traitor of her voice refused to be silent. "I can't help it. It's not my fault."

With astonishing speed, her father picked up his plate, still half-full with pork loin and rice, and hurled it at her. He missed, and the plate smashed against the far wall, the lump of meat sliding down slowly to join the shattered blue and white ceramic on the floor. Sara hadn't even had time to react, to put her arms up, to try and move out of the way. She just sat there, shaking, eyes as wide as the plate had been before it broke. When it came to fight or flight, most people chose freeze. Perpetrators knew this.

He stood up with such violence that his chair clattered to the ground, and the sound made Sara jump. The room around them was so dark now, the air heavy and thick, like breathing in water. The papered walls, the windows out to the front yard, the light across the street were all gone. Only the dark, alive with its own terrible power, was swirling around them.

"Hours and minutes, it's not that hard. But no, of course you can't do it; you can't do anything, not even help me catch a murderer that sits next to you all fucking day! God, you would be nothing without me. You need an alpha male."

He kept shouting, but the harsh, metallic noise of the swirling darkness drowned him out. It filled her ears, it was the only noise that had ever existed, and in the background, a whisper like her deepest fear, if only she could make it out—

"Sara!" His voice boomed through the noise, and suddenly, the darkness was gone, and she could see the faded pink roses on the wallpaper, the ring of light from the lamp outside. Her body could move now, and she looked up at him, face wet with tears.

"Clean this up."

In her sleep that night, the monster swirled around her, pressing into her body and melting her face like wax.

During her ride to school the next morning, Detective Yakeda made no attempt at conversation, and Sara couldn't have answered him even if he did. When he pulled up to the front of the school, he didn't watch her walk inside, instead peeling away, tires screeching. She looked back at the noise and noticed crime scene cars in the parking lot, officers she didn't recognize opening the trunks and pulling out big, black cases. Was that a SWAT truck where Principal Nader usually parked? She turned back, like not looking would make it go away.

The moment she stepped inside the school building, she was battered with a pressure that felt like it would knock the air out of her lungs. There were more cops, CSI or SWAT, she guessed, and some of them wore full, black body armor and carried guns she'd only seen in *Call of Duty* playthroughs. As she took off her backpack and holster to walk through the metal detector, she could barely breathe. The hallway was absolutely silent, except for the shuffling of feet and the occasional crackle of radios. None of the students were talking; the walls pressed so close that it was impossible to get a breath in. As she stepped out of the metal detector's cage, she heard the loudspeaker come to life. P.E. would be moved indoors, to the gym until further notice. She flowed along, propelled more by the mass around her than her own footsteps, and her hair stood on end as she heard the rattle of metal tags and the deep, booming bark of a K9 unit. The noise reminded her body that she was just prey.

Early that morning, the police department made an official statement on the shooting. Since her father was involved, some other officer whose name she didn't know had to stand in front of the local news cameras and refuse to answer any of their questions. Officially, "an unknown firearm" had been discharged in a crowded hallway, damaging four lockers and injuring two students. One injury was superficial and the other was critical. Names were not released.

Of course, this bland response, barely even an acknowledgement of what had happened, only fanned the flames of rumor and anxiety, which spread amongst the students like wildfire. The current story was that someone had tried to run from one of the cops, leading him to pull out his gun and fire. Accounts differed on whether he hit his mark and how many times, with some claiming the runner had gotten away unscathed and others insisting that he was on life support, or that he'd been killed at the scene and the department

and school board were covering it up. One thing that stayed consistent amongst the rumors was that a girl had been taken to the hospital for some kind of stray bullet wound. A Roladex of names and potential injuries blurred together in Sara's mind, but by fourth period, even the teachers were reporting that the girl had been Bella Gordon, and that her injuries had been fatal.

In math class Sara was shocked to see that Matt was sitting at his usual desk in front of her, one row from the back. Back in the hurricane of the hallway, she'd thought he was dead, body limp, blood pooling under his mop of brown hair, but now she realized that the bullet must have just grazed the side of his head. His head was wrapped in a mass of white gauze, his shaved scalp an eerily similar color. His lip was split and swollen like an Instagram influencer's, and the purple-black around his right eye was still settling in. Whatever alibi he'd come up with obviously didn't mean shit to her classmates. Eventually, when the late bell had rung and there were still four empty seats around him and four girls, including Katerina Kovalenko, lined up against the wall, Mrs. Kapinski had to get up from her slack-jawed scrolling and force them to sit down, threatening to call one of the officers in from the hallway if they didn't comply.

"I don't care what he says, I know he killed McKayla, and if he had just turned himself in in the beginning, Bella would still be here."

The entire class was stock-still and silent. Mrs. Kapinski started to repeat her threat, but Matt cut her off, standing up and looming over Katerina.

"I didn't kill McKayla, and if you'd get your head out of your ass for five seconds, you'd be able to figure out that Bella isn't my fault either."

Sara hadn't realized that Katerina had her carry license, but immediately, her gun was against Matt's chest, and one of the other girls started screaming.

"Don't shoot! Katerina, put the gun down!" Sara had never seen Mrs. Kapinski so animated. She looked around and realized that everyone else looked wild with fear, but her chest felt still.

Matt leaned closer, until his face was almost touching Katerina's. "Do it," he said, the words defiant and hard-edged. "If you're going to shoot me, just shoot me."

Katerina's eyes were dinner plates, and Sara watched the shaking travel down her arm to her hands and fingers. All of time passed in a second, and then Mrs. Kapinski lunged forward, knocking the gun out of Katerina's hand. Katerina stepped back, dazed as though she was the one with a head injury, and Mrs. Kapinski started shouting for an officer. Burns

ran in, breathless, wrapping Katerina in a bear hug and pulling her out of the class. Mrs. Kapinski took a deep breath and picked up Katerina's gun, which she locked inside her desk.

"Sit down. We're starting class now," she said.

The girls reluctantly slumped into their desks, backpacks thudding against the floor and bodies leaned as far from Matt as possible. Suddenly, as though he could feel Sara's eyes on him, he turned around and stared at her, the full glory of his battered face filling her vision. He glared at her, gaze burning into her body, and she ducked away, nausea rising in her throat. Next to Matt, one of the girls was playing a TikTok video of Sara's dad, dancing wildly against the backdrop of the lockers. Even from two desks away, she could still see the gun in his holster.

The afternoon sun was unusually hot for April as Sara waited for the squad car to pull around the front of the building. Her ride was always perfectly on time, usually waiting for her promptly as the last bell rang, when her digital watch read 3:15. But today the bright red numbers said 3:23, and still, no car had pulled up to its usual spot outside the front office. The crowds of students were thinning out now, everyone in a hurry to not be last out of the building, and she wondered what punishment she would get for being late.

A swirl of laughter pulled her head to one side, and she saw Mercedes Sandoval and a group of other girls she didn't recognize, all clustered around a Martinsville cop, their phone screens pushed up to his face like offerings. The officer moved to take a selfie with Mercedes, and Sara did a double take as she realized that he was her dad, smiling like the 4th of July.

He caught her eye and nodded, and she struggled to read his face, his body, anything for a clue as to how careful she had to be, how close the anger lay under his skin. He handed the phone back to Mercedes, who giggled and made sure her fingers touched his during the handoff, and then he turned and jogged towards Sara, hand up in a small wave.

"Hey, sorry I'm late. Just got caught up with some fans. Some people still appreciate the sacrifices we make as first responders." His eyes still carried the shape of a smile, but Sara couldn't bring herself to relax. All she could see when she closed her eyes was the lump of meat sliding down the wall. In the past, her father had ripped up her slutty clothes, shattered her demonic vinyl records and ripped down posters of groomer pop stars from her bedroom walls, but he had never tried to hurt her directly. It had never been as scary as it had been last night.

They were walking towards the car now, and Sara scrambled for an appropriate response, something that would keep him up, not make the ride home any worse than it had to be, but her dad filled the silence.

“Yeah, probably a little embarrassing having your dad at school every day like this, making internet videos and whatnot.” He opened the passenger door and she got in, stiffly taking a seat. He got into the driver’s side but didn’t start the car.

“Sara,” he said, and she looked at him even though it was the last thing she wanted to do. “I’m sorry I’ve been such a hard ass lately. It’s important to follow the rules, but you know that. You’re an obedient kid. This case is just getting to me. Close to home, I guess.”

He reached out and put a hand on her knee, and she tried to remember the last time they had touched. She couldn’t. She felt the strength in his hand and was so small again, a little girl wearing her father’s sergeant cap, looking up at the man who could do no wrong, who was everything in the whole world that was safe. It was hard to stay angry at him. After all, what did she know? She couldn’t even tell time, couldn’t even recognize a simple pattern. His rules were so rigid that she didn’t have to think, only to do, and if she did what he wanted, last night would never happen again.

She looked up at him and nodded, and he smiled, starting the car. On cue, one of his podcasts started blaring, yelling about the female hormone cycle and how feminism was making women crazy.

“Actually,” he said, turning the volume down a few ticks, “and this is off the record, of course, but I think this’ll all be over soon. We’ve been mapping the whole school on different social media networks, and we have a very strong suspect based on the algorithm. Not that I understand all that tech shit, but I have a good feeling about this one.”

He kept talking, but Sara couldn’t hear him. Her body was cold, despite the heat inside the car with the windows closed. The road through the windshield was darkening, disappearing. Everything around her was growing dark, the black mass filling the inside of the car, blocking out everything except her dad. The sound it made was so loud now, louder than anything she had ever heard, and that voice, that human voice, if she could just make it out—

Submit.

Submit.

Submit.

She'd heard it in the hallway that first time, she'd heard it in the kitchen as her father's rage smothered out all her light, and she heard it now, in his squad car. She couldn't breathe through the black, couldn't think; it was all pressing down around her.

It would be so easy to give in, to give herself over to him fully. She was almost there as it was. Her clothes, her music, her room, her food, it was all exactly as he wanted it. Her life was a shell, carefully crafted to avoid his notice, to avoid that dark that had been roiling inside him for so long. The image of Matt's face, staring back at her in math class, struggled towards her through the darkness. The black of his eye, the bulk of the bandage over his shaved head, dried rust of blood on his lower lip.

Sara. The cop's daughter. The dumb girl who couldn't count or tell time or use paper money. Maybe she was so stupid that she couldn't even talk. All the world was a great, swirling pattern, and it was meaningless to her. She couldn't see it.

But now, she could see this. Her father's dark, no, that small piece of the bigger darkness that he'd made it his mission to carry, she could see it burrowing into her body, eating away at anything that had ever been hers and hers alone. A whole lifetime filled with Matts, with Bellas, with shattered vinyl records and last night's meal congealing on the wall as that dark took over everything, every inch of this world.

For the first time, when she pulled the Glock 17 from her holster, it felt light. And when she pointed it at her father's head and pulled the trigger, it felt even lighter.

Deep Blue

The late July sun burned through the trees, its low, golden angle hitting the main pool of the Green Oak Athletic club just in time for high school practice. This was the light craved by teenagers, the light that didn't go out until after eight p.m., which allowed for drives and secret meetings and smoking something life-changing when coach left the deck to go back inside. That light made you wish just a bit to be caught, because that light made you brave, it meant you were free and fuck anyone who said different.

Olivia Martin did not live in this light anymore. However, she could still feel it, shining on her back as she flowed down the lane, the power of her sweeping butterfly stroke leaving a wake which her weak kicks did little to disturb. The light was like water in her goggles, an irritation that stayed with her for hours, burning her eyes, burning her chest with that empty ache she could never seem to get rid of. That light brought things back, even through the heat in her muscles and the fire in her lungs, memories rushing past like relay swimmers. The guilt lodged in her throat, the knowing like nothing else that she didn't deserve even the struggling movement she could make, even the burning muscles after a long practice –

Stop. Her fingers hit the wall, right where the smooth tiles met the rough, grey concrete, and she had to stop for a second to take a breath. She had barely pulled herself upright when she felt Claire Heimdahl's arms smack into the middle of her back, her driving butterfly stroke finishing its arc against her spine. The pain took a second to reach her, and Olivia realized that she had just been lapped. Claire didn't react behind purple-blue reflective goggles, just kicked off the wall in the other direction.

Olivia did not get bullied. She had explained this multiple times to her mother, to Coach Jen, the head coach, and Coach Tai, who ran the high school group. Bullying involved... something. A broken arm, a stomach sore from a punch, group chats, rumors clouding the air like the humidity in the indoor pool. People who were nothing were not bullied, because they were not seen. These things did not happen to Olivia, and she was grateful. Most of the time.

She shook her head, which was starting to ache from her cap and goggles. She couldn't remember where she was in the 5 x 50 butterfly set, but when she looked around, she couldn't see anyone. She blinked, pulling the goggles up to her forehead. She was at the six-foot end of the pool, and the light shone directly into her eyes.

There was no one in the pool, and no Coach Tai on the deck. She felt an ancient fear, cold and sick in the pit of her stomach. No one was here, and she would drown.

Where the fuck were they? Had he called them all out for some reason? Olivia would have heard that, surely. Coach Tai had a loud voice and an even louder whistle. He also ran practice like he was training Navy SEALs, which meant he had no idea how to handle a girl with cerebral palsy except to pretend that she was normal and look annoyed when she didn't keep up. Olivia couldn't see any blood in the water, and Tai only packed up early when someone got injured.

The inside of her arm scraped against the rough concrete, the huge blue sky pinwheeling above her, and then she was under, pulled down, something slimy around her ankle. The motion was so sudden she hadn't been able to take a breath. Instinctively, she inhaled, her nose and throat burning with the chlorine and the water. Her eyes stung, but she could make out the dappled sunlight above her, the surface of the water rippling like a dimpled sheet of glass. Frantically, she tried to drive herself up towards the surface, but whatever was pulling her down to the bottom was so much stronger than she was. Her ears hurt. Her mother would be all alone now.

Up above, far up above like it was in another world, a sharp whistle, and suddenly the force around her ankle was gone. Olivia swam upwards desperately, pricks of pink and black light swarming in front of her eyes. Her chest hurt so much, and every cell in her body ached upwards, up towards the air, up towards the breath—

She felt the heat of the sun before anything else, and water spewed out of her mouth. It was only after a minute or so of coughing that she realized Coach Tai was hovering above her and that his face was wet from her hacking. She was also lying on the deck. She gasped, breath cutting razorblades against her lungs, and looked around. Everyone else was out of the pool, and everyone else was looking at her, seated figures looming.

She tried to sit up, and Coach Tai helped her. She realized after a second that he was talking to her, his loud, rough voice cutting against the air between them.

“Martin! Do you know where you are?”

Olivia blinked, processing. When she spoke, the voice was not her own, made crackly by the water. “Swim practice. Green Oak Athletic Club.”

“What day is it?”

“Uh...Wednesday, August 10th.” Jen and Tai alternated coaching days, so she was pretty sure of the day of the week at least.

Coach Tai nodded to himself, and she was about to stand up and leave when he shone a small, bright light into first one eye and then the other. She squeezed her eyes shut, but the fireball was burned onto the back of her lids.

“What’s going on? Why did I just go down like that?”

Coach Tai raised an eyebrow. “That’s what I need to ask you, Martin. Shane said you just dropped, like someone was pulling you to the bottom.”

Olivia turned and looked at Shane England, who now had a reason besides the craters in his skin to be embarrassed of her attention.

“The only time I’ve seen something like that happen,” Coach Tai continued when she had turned back, “was a concussion, knocked out cold. But,” he said, peering at her from behind dark brown eyes, “I don’t think you hit your head. Do you?” He was giving her that look that she hated more than anything, that pitying re-evaluation of her competence and humanity which she would never be able to come back from. The slow girl was at it again.

She shook her head, which hurt even more now. She pulled off her goggles and cap, the damp mass of her ponytail falling down her back. “No. My head hurt though, before it happened.”

This was not the right answer.

Hours later, and after an MRI, an x-ray, an EEG, a CAT scan, cardiac and lung tests and more lights flashed in her eyes, Olivia was finally allowed to leave the emergency room. Her mother had been insisting on a spinal tap, but Olivia managed to escape it after describing how Claire hit her to three separate medical professionals. Everything was clean. No concussion, no evidence of seizures, spinal damage or a brain bleed. No answers.

Olivia was exhausted and just wanted to sleep, but even at three a.m., her mother couldn’t sit still. Olivia half-listened to her, watching the overpasses spiral above them as they drove the empty freeway back to the suburbs.

“You know, I don’t think that doctor was taking you seriously. You have a neurological history, and your back pain—”

She rolled her eyes. “I told you, Claire Heimdahl smacked into me because I was slow. And CP doesn’t get worse over time.”

“But it does give you a higher stroke risk, plus your dad—”

“I didn’t have a fucking stroke, mom.”

“Then what happened, Olivia?” Her mom’s eyes came unglued from the road and stared at her. She couldn’t read their expression. “You almost drowned, in a pool, where you’ve been swimming for nine years. That is not normal. And don’t fucking swear at me.”

Olivia turned away to stare out the window. “I told you, I don’t know.”

Her mom was silent, and she rubbed her ankle. Somehow, in all the chaos of that night, the doctors and nurses had missed the ring of new bruises forming there, which looked suspiciously like they had been made by fingers grasping knuckle-white.

At her mother’s insistence, Olivia didn’t attend practice the next day. She spent the evening with the blinds closed, hiding from that light. But it loved to taunt her, sneaking in between the slats and burning her eyes. All at once, she was back there in that evening, the body turning cold in the recliner, screaming and screaming though she couldn’t hear the sound.

The lines of red cut into her stomach made that go away for a few minutes.

The day after that was bad from the start, hollow body filled with a burning tension, an energy she wouldn’t have been able to dissipate if she’d swam twenty miles. Her mother went back to work, and the house was cloyingly empty. Her limbs ached to move, but the thought of sitting in the claustrophobic box of the car, her mother radiating nervous energy from the driver’s seat, made her want to explode.

The walk to Green Oak athletic club was only a mile or so, and even though she was hopelessly bad at cross-training, by the time she reached the pool, that energy had only grown worse. It was totally empty, the water glass, and she slipped off her shorts and tank top, folding them neatly into her tote bag. Fear twinged in the back of her mind, but it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. As she was putting on her swim cap, she heard a noise from the second floor of the clubhouse. She turned and saw four of the girls from the high school group: Claire Heimdahl, Katie Feldman, Bailey McGregor and Kira Shim. Bailey was showing them something on their phone, and their laughter displayed some expensive orthodontic work. They did not see her.

Fuck it.

Olivia dove into the pool, the cold water shocking against her sun-warmed skin, especially the delicate new scabs on her stomach. She swam hard, freestyle, arms and legs pumping, willing the wall towards her. The burn in her muscles couldn't expand far enough to fill the hole in her chest, and even underwater, her own cruel voice echoed through her head. What if she smashed into the wall at the other end? Who would care? Not Claire Heimdahl, who probably knew that she deserved it, not Coach Tai, glad to be rid of an incompetent drag, not her mother, so wrapped up in her own fear—

She felt something grasp around her ankle, a hand, fingers like ice, and the coolness of her own fingertips as they stood above the surface of the water for a second. Then she was under. The pulling down, down, down, like her whole body was as heavy as it felt, stone insides yearning to surrender to gravity, to surrender to the deep. And still she fought, legs thrashing, trying to kick the thing away from her, trying to claw her way upwards towards the light, towards the air, towards the life. Her chest burned and against her will, she gasped, water rushing into her lungs. Cruel irony.

Down, down, down. She felt cold, and she could barely see the glassy surface of the water above her, the light just a pinprick. Her ears ached, and for the first time, she was really afraid they would burst. The pool wasn't this deep. Where the hell was she?

Rough against the soles of her feet, a harder impact in her shins than the water should have allowed, and the hand let go. Olivia scrambled, pushing off the bottom, expecting to accelerate upwards, arms dragging through the water, pushing her towards the air. But she only made it a few inches at most, falling back down as though she had jumped on land. She tried again, arms thrashing with such terrible form that Coach Tai probably would have disowned her immediately if he had seen it. She knew that she was still underwater, she could feel the resistance as she moved, the weight down against her skin, but she was tied to the bottom of the pool as though she were still on the surface.

Olivia knew how to swim. What was all this shit worth if it couldn't even save her life when it counted? She pushed off the bottom again, heart pounding with the unthinkable. This couldn't be it. It wouldn't be. Her breath quickened—

She stopped, heels scraping back down against the white cement. Her chest wasn't burning anymore. She looked at her watch, but the digital face was dark. Definitely deeper than six feet. She could hold her breath for ninety-four seconds, three seconds more than Katie Feldman and thirty seconds less than Claire Heimdahl, but even Claire wouldn't have survived this. Olivia put a hand to her chest and realized, with a surreal sense of horror, that it was rising and falling. Somehow, she was breathing underwater.

The cold pit of panic in her stomach, trying to claw back what it was too late to undo. Had she already died? Was this the watery purgatory she was sentenced to?

The blue murk in front of her moved, almost imperceptibly at first, the motion becoming more definite over a second or two. She couldn't see and yet she thought she could, was that the fluttering of a pool towel? Against the nothingness deep blue, the kick of training fins? Her head spun and her stomach bottomed out, the deep pit of fear, god, she was really losing it. If this was what happened when you got high, it was totally overrated. And then...no, it couldn't be.

She was dead, she had to be because her father was dead and yet she was staring him in the face. As he came closer into the dim light which still reached them from the surface, her head stopped spinning, and his form became definite, no towels or fins or anything which she couldn't possibly be seeing. She reached forward and her fingertips met his chest, rising and falling just like hers. The texture was different, scale-shaped ridges where smooth skin should have been. He smiled and took her right hand in his left, and she could feel his old strength.

All of the bad in Olivia's life had started when her father got sick. He had two strokes in quick succession which paralyzed his left side, and a third which led to his cremation and the scattering of his ashes on a beach in Washington state. And yet, here he was, walking, holding her hand, staring at her with a clarity he hadn't known for months before his death. He was her dad again.

"Hey Livvy," he smiled, "missed you."

She hugged him with a desperation that was more than she had known to breathe. She missed him too, missed him more than anything, like a part of her body had been ripped out and left a hollow in her chest, and now he was back, and strong and whole like she remembered. She could hear his heart beating, the rhythm an ancient comfort. His hands were slimier than she remembered, and she shivered despite herself. Only for a moment.

"You're back." She had never cried underwater before, but the tears didn't sting like she was used to.

"I am. It's great to see you swimming. Your form looks really good. You've been practicing."

Olivia nodded, the first time she felt enthusiastic about anything since her dad died.

Slowly, his smile faded and he looked up towards the surface. A dark dot floated far, far above them, and as she squinted closer, she saw that it was her. Not moving. God, it would finally be over. She was weightless.

He looked back down at her. “Well, you won’t have long left now. It’s been almost three minutes.” He shrugged, his tone carrying the same matter-of-factness as though he had just told her trash day would be on Tuesday instead of Wednesday. Still holding her hand, he turned back towards the murk he had emerged from, but Olivia didn’t move.

“Well come on, you don’t want to stay down here forever. It’s cold.” Their locked hands were the only tether in the endless dark blue. The slime of his touch confused her, went against everything she needed him to be.

“Where are you taking me?”

Her dad smiled, big like he’d just thrown their next-door-neighbor’s empty beer cans back over the fence and hit the asshole straight on the head. “I’ll show you. It’s great, you really need to see it for yourself.” That smile, his blue eyes, every cell in her body yearned to go with him as it had once yearned to breathe. And yet, that ancient fear of the water, the fear which should have been silenced with him around, was buzzing louder than it ever had before. The texture of his fingers made her want to vomit.

She didn’t move.

“Olivia, come on. I don’t have all day. Let’s go.”

“But then I’ll…”

He turned back to her, a little annoyed now, all the warmth gone from his voice.

“Isn’t that what you want?”

The words echoed out in the empty water, far louder than they should have been. They were edged with contempt, a hatred even, that Olivia had never known from him in life, and as he spoke, his image wavered, like a glitch on a computer screen, and her head started to spin again.

Tears forced their way out of her eyes, and her face burned despite the deep dark. Unexpected heat built on her stomach, and she looked down. Dark wisps, smoke against the water, were trailing through her swimsuit, flowing out and dissipating into the deep.

“Yeah,” her dad said, looking down at the blood, “I know everything.”

A few months after her dad died, Olivia had stopped crying. The cold decay of emptiness that she felt day in and day out didn’t get smaller, rather it seemed to grow too big for even tears. Some pain was so far beyond expression that one had to find other methods. But now, as he stared down at her, worse than the worst things she had ever thought about herself, she cried freely, sobbing like a child.

He let go of her hand and walked a circle around her, hands in his pockets. “Guess it was just too much taking care of your old man, eh?” Suddenly it was so dark, she could barely understand which way was forward and which was back. Her dad’s outline was just a memory now, fading in and out. “Even with all the time I spent on you, everything I gave you, you still couldn’t take it. What a waste.”

Olivia wanted to die, wanted it more than she ever had before. The driving, freight-train motion of her want was more than anything she had ever experienced; her father’s voice was thunder in her head.

“You know, it should’ve been you. I was a real athlete, I had a real chance, almost made it to the Pan-American champs, but you were just fucked up, just a waste of my time. Training some crippled kid, god, just flailing and half-drowning all day but oh no, you were *so good!* And then I lost it all and you were still limping around, talking, living your pathetic life. You didn’t have anything to lose, but I did, and still it was too much for you, *you, you—*”

There was no remnant of her father now. She heard him, she knew he was there with a terrible, panicked prey instinct, and yet she was trapped in the dark, strips of ragged cloth floating in and out of the murk, taunting her. At her back, under her feet, everywhere and nowhere all at once, the sliminess of those hands was on her body, and she whirled around, dizzy with mortal terror. She couldn’t see anything now.

Wasn’t this what she wanted? Wasn’t this what she had prayed for, sitting in the hospital bed, that the tests would come back with something terminal? Now she had a way out, and a painless one at that. An end to the hollow, chest-bursting numbness that ached all the same, pricking and spasming at the worst moments, an emptiness that felt bigger than she was. She could slip away and no one would notice, no one would care. The world up there would go on turning minus one sad, useless teenage girl. All she had to do was give in. It would be so easy.

Up above, in another world, the light of the sun flashed and sparkled on the surface of the water for just a second, but Olivia caught it. Her father was still ranting, still retching up the poison that echoed her own thoughts, but the light pulled her away, to a different time.

The memory was soft and pleasant, golden, untinged by sorrow. Another pool, her neighbors’. Her father was there too, but the monster was gone, and he cradled her small body in the water.

“Come on Livvy, kick, kick, kick!”

The movement was awkward at first, a jerky struggle, and the fear of that water was so strong in her stomach, nauseous and tight. Her dad held her up so her feet broke the surface, and she felt it then, the exhilaration of movement in a way that was safe, the water a world where she wasn't constantly tottering on edge and struggling to stay upright. She kicked harder, and her dad laughed, a buoyant cloak around her, protection from everything bad.

"Yes! I knew you could do it!"

The sun was warm on her back, and all her fear was gone.

"Olivia!" She was ripped away from the soft golden sunlight of that memory, back down into the deep and dark. Her father, or the thing that spoke with the sharp-edged version of his voice, was inches away from her face, a swirling, glitching void of shapes she knew and yet could not recognize.

"Are you even listening?" he was almost yelling, so loud she knew he would burst her eardrums. He didn't need a response.

This was wrong. She had known it all along, somehow. This thing wasn't her dad, and even if it was some fucked up, Pet Semetary version, she didn't want to go with him. He wouldn't have wanted her to follow.

"You know this is what you want," he said, and if she squinted, she could see her father again. More measured, more calm, the assuredness of a parent speaking to a child. "Let's go." He stuck out his awful, slippery hand to her. It wasn't an invitation.

How dare he? How dare this thing steal her dad's form, use him against her. The anger she had never allowed herself to feel, buried under guilt and rotted away to something noxious inside of her, began to burn with an intensity she hadn't felt since before he got sick.

The spring in her thighs, the rough of the bottom under her heels, and suddenly her palms collided with something in the dizzying dark abyss, a cracking sound booming through the water. Blue light shimmered and bloomed out from her palms, and she could just make out the faint, barely human shape. The impact knocked air out of the monster, bubbles rushing up to the surface, just a pinprick far above. Strips of cloth and rotten seaweed reached out, seeking revenge, and the darkness turned green with scum. She remembered those long, aching afternoons wiping drool from her father's mouth, sweat from his skin. She even used his old pool towels, their stripes repurposed for the slow death of her family's new reality.

The same nauseating weakness that lived in her had taken hold in him after the strokes, and all she wanted was to recoil. All she wanted was for it just to be over.

Fuck this thing for thinking he could control her. Fuck it for trying to take her life. And in with all the grief and guilt and sadness, for the first time, fuck her dad for dying and leaving her just a shell.

Olivia pushed off the bottom, the force pulsing through her heels, and she headed towards the surface, arms and legs pumping, desperate like she had never been before. Her lungs were raw with the need to breathe, muscles like wet noodles, barely able to move the water, but she had to try.

A death-cold grip around her ankle, that thing's slimy, webbed fingers squeezing her so tight it stung. She kicked at it, searching for something hard to shatter in the deep, but it didn't let go.

Down, down again, and this time there was no breathing underwater. The thing was so strong, so fast, it felt impossible to fight against it, but she thrashed and thrashed. If it was going to take her, it would have to fight. The pinprick of light at the surface was rushing away from her, and the pressure against her ears and head was overwhelming.

Olivia looked down. The monster had grown dark and bloated, and it had some horrible form now, its great sides expanding to swallow the universe. Its scales shimmered like thousands of insects buzzing over a corpse, too large to see at once, just death pulling her down. It turned to look up at her and bared rows and rows of needle-sharp white teeth in some sick approximation of a human smile. It didn't even have a face, just a mouth gaping twisted and rotten, aching to swallow her whole.

Down, down, that thing was still so fast even without looking where it was going. It didn't have eyes, but she felt its sight locked on her, ice dread on the back of her neck. Her vision was starting to go dark around the edges, and every cell in every muscle felt so weak and starving, each screaming to take a breath. With all the strength she had left, Olivia kicked down at the monstrous dark, and she felt a crack reverberate up through the bones of her leg. Something slimy stuck to the sole of her foot, and she felt a sharp pain in her heel as it broke several of the teeth.

The freezing fingers let go, slowly unwrapping her ankle, the skin clinging a moment after the bones let up. With a last rush of adrenaline, she swam desperately towards the surface, legs kicking harder than they ever had, burned on by that screaming need to breathe. The glassy square of light was still so far from her, and she ached towards it through the endless water.

The cool of air on the tips of her fingers, and she gasped before her head was above the water, sucking in chlorine and a sip of air. She thrashed, panicked, coughing up water and inhaling more in its place, arms and legs wild and pointless until suddenly, she smacked into the hardness of the wall. Olivia grasped at it, hauling herself up onto the deck, barely able to understand which way was up or down. She coughed, lungs burning and spewing watery black bile onto the deck. That couldn't be a good sign.

She pulled off her cap and goggles and collapsed onto the warm concrete, gasping and gasping like there wasn't enough air in all the world to fill her. This went on for a lifetime, until finally, her breath slowed. Olivia sat up and looked around. The pool was empty. She looked next to her, and the black bile was gone, the darkness on the concrete only from water. Her heel wasn't bleeding, but it was speckled with deep, pinprick bruises, and layers of purple, green and yellow wrapped a ring around her ankle.

A wall of noise pushed out from the clubhouse and towards her ears. Olivia looked up and saw the high school group trickling out of the building, followed by Coach Tai, hauling the huge digital clock. He called out to her across the water.

"Martin's already warming up, love the hustle. England, Travers, maybe you could learn something from her."

Olivia picked up her cap and goggles and began walking to join the group. Claire and her friends were on the deck, and Claire nodded at Olivia. Olivia nodded back.

Agnes, Agnes

In another life, I never would have known about the other Agnes Murray, the one who died in 1661 in Nairnshire, northern Scotland. I read about her, just a single paragraph in a badly water-damaged book in the university library, *On Witchcraft, Demons and Other Curiosities*, published in London way back in 1852. How that book made its way to my public university in California, which was in no way known for its courses on religious studies or European history, is beyond me. I shouldn't have even been reading it; I was putting off editing my final project for my documentary filmmaking class, a portrait project of another girl I met at the neuro clinic. The book caught my eye because of how old it looked, nestled in amongst modern editions of books like *A Brief History of Spiritualism, 1840-1929*, with laminated covers and digital typefaces. This book was bound in leather, stained a deep maroon, with faded gold lettering. I pulled it out and, at random, opened it to the page on the Scottish Agnes Murray.

I call her the Scottish Agnes Murray, because my name is Agnes Murray too, but I was born in California. I was named after my grandmother, a woman named Agnes Catherine Sullivan Field, who I've never met and who by all accounts was mean and distant before she died when my mother was seven. Family lore records that she would smack her kids if they didn't eat the slop she put in front of them, lock them alone in a dark house so she could go out to bars, strike fear into tiny bodies with just a look. But somehow, my mother remembers my grandmother as a good mom, one who put food on the table, who kept everything together after her husband decided a wife and kids wasn't really what he wanted. Maybe the good stuff made up for it. Or maybe my mom's just forgotten the bad, even if she still knows the stories.

The Scottish Agnes died in 1661 in Nairnshire when she was crushed to death under a wheel, and she was crushed to death under a wheel because the people in her village said she was a witch. She was, according to the author, "prone to violent fits and visions, clear evidence of her pact with the devil." After she was crushed, her body was burned. Then the book talks about the trial of another woman in Edinburgh. Nothing more about Agnes, and I couldn't find anything about her on the internet either. Not surprising, given who she probably was and how she definitely died, but I couldn't stop thinking about her.

Seizures can be caused by stress, lack of sleep, high blood pressure or nothing. I had a seizure a few days later, when I was working on my project in one of the computer labs. I'd

probably been staring at Premiere Pro for too long, but one second I was trimming B-roll and the next it all got fuzzy fuzzy long rows white computer banks falling down down down body not my own fuck I'm by myself cut to black.

I came to slowly, a long swim back up from wherever I go when I'm not here anymore, and I saw Becca Davis and Piper Tran leaning over me. I knew they were talking, sounds coming through, but it took a long time for them to turn into words that I could understand. I have a bracelet on my wrist that tells people I have epilepsy, not to call an ambulance when they see me having a seizure, and the first coherent thought I remember having was that I hoped Becca and Piper had seen it and that I wouldn't have to pay \$1,200 for something I didn't even need. But by the time I was aware enough to talk, no paramedics had appeared, no stretcher to take me away. Becca drove me back to my dorm, Piper in the backseat. The whole way there, they were going on about a party they'd been to a few days before, the guys they'd met, the unique flavors of Jello shots they'd imbibed. No one said anything to me. It was just as well. I was trying and failing to remember whether or not I'd taken my medication that morning.

I thought about Agnes when I was lying in bed, alone in my dorm. I've never really decorated it, even though I'm in my junior year, so it's easy for my thoughts to come to life on the blank walls, like I'm some kind of psychic projectionist. If Agnes really did have epilepsy, what did seizures feel like for her? How did she explain them, centuries before an EEG? When I was looking for more information about her, I came across another book on European witch hunts. The things these women – they were almost all women – confessed to are insane. Witch's sabbaths, hundreds of naked women dancing with the devil, fucking him, eating babies, flying through the air, selling their souls to a black goat or a black dog or a black wolf or a handsome stranger, usually for almost nothing. The book said that some of them, maybe most, would have been tortured, stabbed with pins, starved, stripped down and had every inch of hair shaved off their bodies in search of "witch marks". Others were so old they probably had some kind of dementia, but what about all the rest? What about Agnes? Maybe she was just telling her interrogators what she thought they wanted to hear. Did the stress cause seizures, and they took from that what they wanted? Or maybe Agnes really believed that she did those things, really thought she was bad enough to be demonic. Was her memory that fallible? Could you have convinced me that I did something like that when I'd just had a seizure? I wasn't sure that the answer was no.

Sometimes I think about whether or not I'm a good person. My grandma wasn't, and I have her name. When you grow up as a sick kid, knowing doctors and hospitals and needles and tests before you know how to multiply, you get a lot of leeway. If I'm being generous to myself, I can say that I was scared, traumatized, that my brain was literally malfunctioning and for a long time no one knew why. But I've also broken my mom's wrist, rage beyond rage taking over my body like I was possessed, making me do things that I didn't want to but didn't regret enough afterwards. I know that the things I said hurt her more, and those were too calculated to just be neurons misfiring. I don't remember everything I said, I don't want to, but I remember the way her body used to curl into itself when I came into the room. I was a hard edge and she was something soft I could hit over and over and over again. We don't really talk now.

My aunt, my mom's older sister, was 12 when Grandma Agnes died, and she loved to remind everyone how their mom never would have tolerated me, would have hit me until I complied. My mom never hit me; she would never do what I did to her. She just took everything, from her mom, from me, from my aunt who more than subtly implied that she wasn't a good parent. Where does all that live in her body? Maybe in her dreams, she hops on a broomstick and flies somewhere far away from here, all her problems vanishing at the other end of a well-constructed spell.

One time, shortly before I started college and in one of the last conversations I had with my mom, she told me one of her memories of Grandma Agnes. It was one of the last ones, from right before she died. Mom was woken up one night, staring out into the pitch-black bedroom she shared with my aunt and hearing the customary bangings and muffled swears that meant Grandma Agnes was back from the bar. But this night was different, because instead of staggering to her room like normal, Grandma Agnes ended up in my mom's room, mumbling and calling out for her daughters. My mom huddled down into her blankets and pretended to be asleep, terrified of the punishment she would get for being awake so late at night. But there was no yelling, no fists flying. Instead, Grandma Agnes sat on the end of her bed and stroked her leg, the most tender thing my mom could ever remember her doing. And then, she started to cry, really cry, the kind of tears from an adult that scare a kid because grown-ups are supposed to have it all together, and she told my mom she was sorry. Sorry for being such a drunk, for being so mean, for being a bad mom. She said she wanted to get better, wanted to be better. My mom didn't move, didn't say anything,

just lay there and pretended to be asleep. She was only seven, what the hell was she supposed to do? After a while, Grandma Agnes got up and left.

She died of a sleeping pill overdose a week later. My mom had never spoken to her about that night.

After a few days, I was well enough to start working on my project again, and my professor gave me an extension. She wasn't exactly happy about it, since it was my third one of the semester, but I was too distracted to care. My grades in everything were slipping, and I needed to finish the project to pass documentary class. I got it done, but it wasn't very good, and not just because I ran out of time.

I had my neuro clinic appointment the same day I turned in my project, and they weren't thrilled that I'd had a seizure for no apparent reason. The doctors and nurses at the neuro clinic are supposed to be really good at their jobs, like world-class, but whenever I go, I feel more like a lab rat than a person, just another data point for their studies. I'm sure they have to read my chart to even remember my name. The only reason I even went was to thank my subject, Samantha, for letting me make a documentary about her, and lie that it turned out really great, but she wasn't there. When I asked my neurologist where she was, he just said she wasn't in the program anymore, never lifting his eyes from my latest EEG reading. I'd only done one shoot day with Samantha, and we'd coordinated everything in person, when we met each week at the clinic. No one there would give me her number.

For our last class meeting of the semester, my documentary professor screened all of our projects, and had the class vote on their favorites. It was like a little film festival, she said, an opportunity to get feedback from our peers. We had to stand up and introduce our films, what they were about and why we chose that subject. I hadn't planned what I was going to say; I'd forgotten that I'd even need to make a speech. As I stood up there, staring at the classmates I'd barely gotten to know over the last sixteen weeks, my body got hot with the realization that I barely knew anything about Samantha, other than the fact that she had a rare seizure disorder and was willing to let me make a documentary about it. No one voted my film as their favorite. Becca and Piper collaborated on a piece about A.I., and even though some of their visuals were A.I.-generated, everyone loved it. My professor said they should enter it in a statewide competition for university students. I barely got a passing grade. I barely noticed.

I went back to the library after class, to try and find the book on Scottish Agnes. I'd been thinking about my grandma, wondering if Agnes left any kids behind. It was probably hard to be a good mom when you were a starving peasant from the 1600's. Did her kids think she was a witch too? I couldn't find the book again. I looked everywhere for it, not just next to *A Brief History of Spiritualism, 1840-1929*, but it wasn't on the shelf. I asked one of the librarians, and she couldn't find it in the system. I never checked it out, so there was no record of it associated with me. I told her that it was super old and had water damage, and she said that maybe it had been destroyed for health and safety reasons. I asked her if I could find the book anywhere else, but it turns out you can't buy it online.

I haven't shown my film to anyone outside of my class, and I can't find Samatha on social media. It doesn't help that I don't know her last name. I failed two of my classes this semester. I'm not sure if I want to come back in the fall. I don't have much to show for three years studying film, just a few mediocre shorts and a bunch of professors that remember me as the girl with seizures, if they even remember me at all.

The drive back to my mom's house takes longer than I remember, far out of the small city with its glittering glass buildings and writhing mass of freeways, through the suburbs and their endless blocks of same. I grew up far out into the country, all dirt roads and trees that press down against them, the whole world so green it crackles like electricity. I haven't told her that I'm coming. I don't know what I'll say when I knock on the door.

I remember the last time I saw Samantha, our final shooting day. Everything was going wrong: my light gave out halfway through, and no matter how much I fiddled with the knobs and dials on the side of the camera, all my sound came through warbled, like I was playing a gramophone underwater. I'd packed a lav kit, but I wasn't good at using them, and Samantha wasn't good at making her clothes not make noise.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" she asked as I adjusted the tiny microphone clip for the tenth time. "I've watched behind-the-scenes videos, and it never takes them this long to set things up."

I could have said a lot of things in response to Samantha's statement. I could have laughed and admitted that I wasn't very good at the thing I'd spent years of my life learning. I could have gone with snark, asking her if she saw a \$40,000 Arri camera and two sound assistants behind me. I could have said nothing, and in truth, maybe I did, because I don't remember what happened next. Time skipped ahead like I'd taken belladonna, like the world was a damaged silent movie reel, and the next thing I know, Samantha was out of her chair,

pressed against the back wall, the cage of her ribs cutting into the stone of my palms. The look on her face reminded me of my mom. I let her go, set her down, my heart pounding so fast I was terrified I'd have a seizure right then and there. But I didn't. Samantha ran out of the room, and I started packing down my equipment. My body felt like a machine, cold and numb and divorced from any of the emotions I was supposed to feel. There was just a buzzing in my skull, a hot writhing desire to launch myself through a window, for death to find me as I splattered onto the sidewalk below. That feeling has been with me for as long as I can remember. I realized too late that Samantha still had my lav mic, but I knew by then that it was a lost cause. The film department's equipment manager already hated me anyway.

I round the last bend, and my mom's house comes into view. It's two stories, with a damp basement and an unfinished attic, faded white clapboard, New England-style. This is where my mom grew up with Grandma Agnes, and then without her. If my life was a shitty horror movie, I'd say the house could pass for creepy, the setting for some ghost story or possession tale. But life isn't that simple. My mom's house isn't haunted, not by ghosts anyway. Memories were always a clunky metaphor.

I've been thinking about Anger the whole way here, just like I do most of the time I'm awake, and all of the time that I dream. She was probably angry, at least at the end. Not being able to vote or own property or decide what happened to your own body must have built up a good store of rage in her cells, and then the witchcraft thing and imprisonment to top it off.

I've read that witchcraft was a kind of displaced power, a transfer of harm from a witch to her victim, or maybe from a witch to some object, like a doll, and then to her victim. Maybe over the generations, we've gotten less subtle, more rock than ballistic missile. Maybe now, we've forgotten the middleman, the spell, the charm, the doll. Maybe now, all we remember is liquor-soaked words, a fist against skin, palm against a cage made of bone.

I park the car and get out, walking towards the door courtesy of some force that doesn't come from within my body. Years ago, the tree in the front yard got struck by lightning. It's dead, but it didn't fall, it's rotting black insides visible through a huge rent down its front. People aren't so simple.

I haven't lived with my mom in years, but that doesn't matter. I'll knock on the door, and she'll still be there, like she always was, soft where I am sharp. I'll take my medicine and have more seizures and dream of Agnes floating above my bed every night. Maybe we're all just empty places where memories go to disappear.

The Soul of Sybil Jane Armstrong

The devil came to Sybil Jane Armstrong after thirteen years and one hundred and eighty-four days in hell. The Lucius County Asylum was a wound that had coiled round her since she was seven years old, when she had grown too heavy for her mother to lift and too useless to ever take care of herself and became, in the eyes of the state of Alabama, not a citizen, but an invalid.

The day the devil first came to the asylum was hell-hot. The air stretched and groaned under the August heat, wet cotton wool into her lungs with each breath. It was made even worse by the vats of boiling water in the asylum's laundry which had been Sybil Jane's penance for many years. She sat, stirring frothy sheets, the steam heating the arms of her stainless-steel wheelchair until they burned her skin, first to a rouge pink and then to angry, red welts that never seemed to go down. She was forced also to listen to the two nurses, the airheaded Marion Betts and the slut Vera Hallowell. All that appeared to live in Marion's mind was the man who was sure to propose to her, the dress she would wear, the house she would live in, on and on, and Vera Hallowell paid little attention. The two nurses sat, smoking out a window that was broken enough to open and let in the mosquitoes, oblivious to their charges.

So oblivious, in fact, that they didn't notice Alice Cottey, the mute, sluggish idiot who was Sybil Jane's workmate, drop the sheet she had half-pulled out of the vat and scald Sybil Jane's right arm. Immediately, Sybil Jane smacked Alice hard across the face and watched with some satisfaction as she stumbled back and fell into a large wicker basket, bumping her head on the side. There wasn't much to damage. Alice started crying, her screwed-up face and pathetic, almost hysterical tears like those of a child, despite her being older than Sybil Jane. The racket brought the nurses' attention.

Vera Hallowell crushed her cigarette and ran over to Alice. "Oh goodness, Sybil Jane, what have you done?"

"She's gotten her all worked up now. We'll have to take her to the matron for a sedative," Marion Betts sighed, taking Alice by the underarms and roughly hauling her to her feet. Alice, still wailing, brought a hand to the back of her head, and Marion gasped.

"Oh, she's cut her head! It's all right Alice, settle down." There was little tenderness in her tone.

Sybil Jane had no response, and none was needed. For such a minor infraction, and witness by such lazy incompetents as Vera and Marion, there would be no official punishment. Marion led Alice out of the laundry, and Vera followed a few steps behind. When she reached Sybil Jane, seated halfway between the back wall and the door, she kicked one of her wheels with her high-heeled shoe. Sybil Jane's leg jerked out uncontrollably from the impact, muscles writhing like cottonmouths coiled under her skin. She wanted to die as Vera smirked at her and then sashayed away on her perfect legs.

No, she wanted Vera Hallowell to die.

Sybil Jane's arm throbbed as she sat in the hallway outside the laundry, sweat and tears mingled on her cheeks and stinging her eyes. But worse than any physical pain was her shame, the burning and condensing into something unspeakable, a white-hot molten mass which could rip through her ribs and end her if she allowed it. She was turning the afternoon over and over in her mind, so much so that she almost missed the man striding down the hallway towards her.

Dr. John Clay Maddox carried no sweat on his brow as he strode down the hallway towards Sybil Jane, and no soaked cotton wool in his mouth and lungs as he wished her, "Good day, miss." He was the light and the breeze and the pounding of running feet she would never get to feel in a place of burns and wicked words and all nothingness. The devil was beautiful, with sharp brown eyes and a square-set jaw which guaranteed obedience without needing to demand it. The second she saw him, she knew he was her salvation.

The moment passed as quickly as it came, breath caught useless and silent in her mouth, but three steps out from her, Dr. Maddox stopped, as though she had said something after all.

"Excuse me, miss," he said, turning back, "might you be so kind as to direct me to the matron's office? Every door here looks the same."

Sybil Jane knew the answer, but in that moment all her body could think to do was pull the sheet over her legs in a hasty, jerking motion, a shroud to shield the doctor's eyes, protect him from the fact that she was only perfect from the waist up. The rough cotton scraped the raw skin of her right arm, and she winced. The doctor's eyes caught it. He took her hand, and Sybil Jane would not have cared if the whole world burned hell-hot forever.

“Oh no, and on such a perfect arm too,” the doctor drawled, dabbing at the edges of the burn with a pure white handkerchief and smiling down at her, his perfect white teeth like something out of the pictures. “My name is Dr. John Clay Maddox,” he said, giving her hand a gentle shake. “I’m to head this place, since Dr. Jackson has so recently and tragically departed from this earth.”

“Sybil Jane Armstrong,” she answered, startled out of her stupor by his gentle pumping of her arm. “The matron is just before the infirmary, on the right.”

“Much obliged, Miss Armstrong, and take care of yourself. It’s not every day one sees such a perfect specimen.” He smiled again, grinning at her like a schoolboy, and walked down the hallway, whistling a tune she couldn’t place.

Sybil Jane looked down at her arm. The burn was gone.

The lowest level of hell was the asylum’s recreation room. Here gathered all its demons and wretches, their twisted limbs and stupid, drooling mouths a punishment for some sin too deviant to name. Everyone was on display tonight, all the twitching, glass-eyed epileptics and malformed mumbling idiots and useless schizophrenics sobbing over nothing. The worst part of hell was the neighbors.

The staff in their dresses and hats and suits made a garish tableau next to the mass of bath robes and nightgowns, stained and torn from long use and little notice. Sybil Jane was different, she was more real and so she wore a dress, its long blue skirt draped over anything unmentionable, its flapper sleeves cut off at the shoulders to fight the sticky August night air. The matron rang a bell, which had little effect on most of the assembled, but it drew Sybil Jane and a few of the more competent patients near to the front of the room.

Near to him.

Dr. John Clay Maddox wore a sharp, expertly tailored suit that blissfully began its life somewhere very far from Lucius County and was brought there at a high price. Sybil Jane was so close to him, in fact, that she saw her own face, pale and ringed with dark curls tired from the humidity, staring back at her atop his shiny black shoes. He smiled at her as the matron droned on about the greatness of the day, the special privilege of a dance for everyone and wasn’t the new doctor so enlightened and kind as to allow it? Yes, he was everything.

As the first notes of Louis Armstrong’s “Body and Soul” filled the room, someone pushed Sybil’s chair and broke her away from Dr. Maddox. The eerie scene swam lazily by as though it too was immobilized by heat, and at last, she was deposited in front of Charlie

Galloway, a schizophrenic in a battered suit jacket who, in his lucid moments, provided the possibility of passable conversation. He was also Vera Hallowell's half-brother, and Sybil Jane struggled to hide her dislike of him.

"Miss Sybil Jane," he said, offering a thin, sweaty hand. "Would you like to dance?"

She took Charlie's hand reluctantly. "I don't make a very nice partner."

"Neither do I. Come on." He smiled down at her shyly, and with an unceremonious jerk began slowly spinning her in a lopsided circle. She saw Dolly Anderson, a manic-depressive, dancing with William Smollett, an idiot with the strength to have broken her in half, and Muriel Johnson, an apathetic nurse, struggling to tolerate an epileptic partner. Sybil's left knee ached, the sinews having recently pulled too tight for her to move it on her own, and she wanted the night to be over.

Again, Charlie spun her around, and a sick pit bloomed in her stomach as she saw Dr. Maddox closely laughing with Vera Hallowell. Vera Hallowell, with her long mascara eyelashes like spider's legs, Vera Hallowell, with pencil-thin brows and red lipstick that never moved, Vera Hallowell, their very own Jean Harlow, who could dance and dance on her perfect, straight legs, who could stand up on her own to look Dr. Maddox in those big brown eyes that could give the whole world if only he wanted to.

"Have you met the doctor yet, Miss Sybil Jane?" Charlie's thin, watery voice called out, and Sybil Jane moved slowly away from the pit in her stomach, dug down and down with all the pleasure she found in despising Vera.

"Yes I have, in the hallway, a few days ago," she answered.

"Oh, isn't he swell?" Charlie's face lit up, his thin arms alive with the doctor's electricity. "Miss Sybil Jane, he's got this new treatment from Germany, something that can cure schizophrenics real easy. It's called insulin shock therapy, and he says I've got a great prognosis with it and that I might even be able to go back home once it's done. Isn't that just swell?"

Charlie was spinning her faster and faster in his enthusiasm, so quick that Sybil Jane feared he might shoot her off into some corner of the room, when suddenly he stopped and her fear was almost realized. Following his eyes, she saw Vera Hallowell walking briskly towards them, closely followed by Dr. Maddox. Charlie gave Sybil Jane a doubtful look.

"You know my sister's a nurse, and I don't think she's too excited about insulin therapy. But Maddox is a doctor, right? He knows what he's doing?"

Even if Sybil Jane had cared to respond to Charlie, she was too busy watching Dr. Maddox and Vera Hallowell. He took Vera's hand and spoke to her; Sybil Jane cursed the

awful racket from the gramophone and her inability to hear what they said. To her horror, she saw Dr. Maddox caress Vera Hallowell's cheek, and then Vera nodded and stepped away, while Dr. Maddox walked towards her and Charlie.

"Miss Armstrong, I see you've met Mr. Galloway. He's a very promising young man."

Sybil Jane nodded, and any possibility of remark vanished as Charlie began gushing at the doctor.

"We've known each other quite some time, Dr. Maddox, and I was just telling Sybil Jane about the new treatment you and I are going to start—"

"Ah, yes, insulin therapy is an incredibly exciting development in psychiatric medicine, and Mr. Galloway and I are at its frontier, aren't we, Charlie?" Dr. Maddox smiled at the young man, cutting him off, and then turned to Sybil Jane. Bending down slightly, he brushed his hand against her skirt, smoothing a wrinkle she had stupidly overlooked.

"This is a lovely dress, Miss Armstrong." His hand came to rest on her left knee, the pressure soft and steady on her skin. "If you'd wear it more often, I think I'd make these dances a regular occurrence."

"I'd love that, sir," Sybil Jane breathed, and Dr. Maddox smiled like the moon.

"Well, I'm much obliged to you then, Miss Armstrong." Dr. Maddox patted her knee, then stood up and addressed Charlie behind her.

"You should get to bed, Mr. Galloway. We have a big day tomorrow."

"Oh yes sir, oh I will," Charlie answered, almost breathless. Dr. Maddox led him away, and the soul of Sybil Jane shone out from her body with the greatest blinding light. It was only after a minute or so of basking in this pleasant coolness that she realized the pain in her left knee was gone.

Sybil Jane Armstrong was not afraid of the dark, coming as it did in the form of a gentle summer twilight, but she was afraid of leaving her room after eight p.m. No exception had been made to Lucius County Asylum's strict curfew policy after Dr. Maddox's dance, and punishments were severely enforced.

She was not afraid of the growing shadows grasping out at her from the asylum's endless windows, trees and gutters and the night watchman morphing into wraiths to steal her back to bed. Back to bed or worse, throw her in The Pit for disobedience, The Pit where there would be no Dr. Maddox for many, many days.

She was not afraid of getting lost in the endless corridors with identical doors leading to identical rooms. She was not afraid of losing her sense of direction, losing her memories of hell built over the last thirteen years. She was not afraid of what that would mean, of what that would reduce her to, of how it would make her indistinguishable from all the wretches who were lost to this gaping wound forever...

There. The door to the director's office, nearly identical to all its dark wooden siblings, but with spiderweb cracks in the middle. In 1929, Edward Metters, a hopeless shell shock, ran into it again and again until his head was a bloody mass and he was dragged away by the matron and two orderlies. The intention had certainly been to replace it, but the crash two months later put that out of Dr. Jackson's mind.

Sybil Jane slowly wheeled herself up to the door and grasped the handle. It was unlocked and squeaked only slightly as she turned it.

The room was dark, paneled wooden walls matched by a giant, wooden desk which the overhead light and small, art nouveau lamp were struggling to illuminate. Hundreds of books, more than Sybil Jane had ever seen together at one time, were stacked neatly on built-in shelves. *Our secrets*, she thought, *the reasons why we're wrong*.

"I wondered to myself whether you would come, Miss Armstrong." Sybil Jane started against her will, body stiffened like an alleycat. Dr. Maddox still wore his suit, though the jacket was removed to the back of his chair and his tie was undone. He turned towards her as he spoke, casually restoring a book to its place. "Most in this hospital would hardly notice such little tricks as I've played on you."

"Who are you?" Sybil Jane asked. The question was thunder in her heart, but she was barely able to pull her voice above a whisper. The air carried the electricity of a coming storm, and, despite the heat, she felt ice run down her spine.

"I have gone by many names. John Clay Maddox suits this place, don't you think? The voice took longer to get right. Alabama people have a peculiar way with words, especially this far into the country. I met a man in Mobile, a cotton picker and a guitar player with a beautiful voice. That's been quite helpful to me recently."

"Are you some kind of holy man, some preacher with the gift to make the crippled walk and the blind see?"

Dr. Maddox chuckled softly. "I have been a doctor, a preacher, a soldier, take your pick. I have walked about."

The doctor opened his mouth no more, but a voice rang in Sybil Jane's head, as clear as though he had spoken to her aloud, and it was impossible to know whether these were her

thoughts or his. *“Be sober, be watchful: your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.”*

The realization came all at once, and every hair on Sybil Jane’s body stood on end with the electricity of knowledge such as Eve herself might have known. Her heart surged, and all the fear was gone from her. Outside, rain began to fall against the windowpanes.

Sybil Jane wheeled frantically around the desk, the ferocity of the motion almost tipping her over as she rounded the corner. For the first time, she didn’t care whether the oriental rug would crumple together and stop her, throw her body to the wooden floor. She did not notice as her knuckles scraped against the desktop on one side and the bookshelf on the other, did not care as the metal of her chair seared scars into the wood. It was only when her face was inches from the doctor’s that she could voice the words that had been growing and bursting against her chest all night.

“You can heal me. You can make me a real person. Fix me so I can leave this place.”

Dr. Maddox smiled and reached up to caress Sybil Jane’s cheek. “I can bring forth wonders you could never imagine, Miss Armstrong. But they come at a heavy price.” Easily, as though it were nothing, as though it were the most natural thing in the world for a man as perfect as him to touch a woman like her, his hand moved down, across the softness of her neck, the curve of her breasts, the contours of her ribs, and she was light, and breeze and the pounding of running feet; feet she would have gladly gone without forever if only it meant she could feel like this.

His hand moved further down, past her knees, and a single finger hooked the edge of her nightgown, pulling it up. The world between them was broken. Sybil moved to stop him, but his strength against hers was terrifying, and so she was still. Dr. Maddox pushed the skirt up until her thighs were fully exposed, and he looked at her legs. Her horrible legs, thin and wiry, the feet twisted in the wrong directions. At his touch, her left shin spasmed and kicked out, and the shame was so intense that she wished he would strangle her, wished the floor would open up to swallow her, wished that she could die instead of being so exposed. Hell went deeper than she had ever imagined.

Dr. Maddox looked up at her. “You asked for two things, Sybil Jane, to be cured and to leave this asylum. But you have only one soul to give me, should you be so inclined to sell it, of course.”

Sybil Jane hastily pulled the skirt of her nightgown down over her knees, and she struggled to swallow the lump in her throat. She had been stupid, been so, so stupid to think that there was any answer here, to think that the gaping mouth of the Lucius County Asylum

would ever spit her out, that she would ever have a chance to be anything other than a burden and a secret. She scrambled to get away, but her hands shook and so she steered herself backwards into the desk, a sharp corner pressing through the wheelchair's cloth backing and into the tenderness between her shoulder blades. "No. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come."

Dr. Maddox put a hand on her knee, and she was still. He looked at her as he had when they first met in the hallway, looked at her like he could see into the depths of her soul as easily as the color of her hair. "Sybil Jane, I told you that I can bring forth wonders you cannot imagine, and I did not lie. I can give you a new pair of legs, if you'd like, but is that what you really want? Way deep down in your heart and soul?"

Sybil Jane couldn't answer. All that she wanted, to be a part of the world, to be real, to be a person, lay on the other side of her terrible body. To have her own room in her own house, peaceful and clean, quiet when she wanted and not punctuated by random screams or soul-deep sobbing. To eat what and when she wanted, to sleep and wake of her own accord, to ride in cars, to feel the sun and rain and wind on her skin. To feel the soft rise and fall of another's breath beside her when she woke from dreaming, to find that they were really still there. She had never believed that she would have that. Tears that she couldn't explain welled in her eyes.

Dr. Maddox smiled. "So, there it is. All that you really want. I have to say, compared to most, it seems very little. You remember that guitar player from Mobile?" Dr. Maddox leaned closer to her as if sharing a great secret. "He wanted to be the best guitar player this world had ever seen." Dr. Maddox whistled. "My, my, that took some doing."

Dr. Maddox leaned back in his chair, contemplative. "Sybil Jane, I have lived a long life. I have travelled to many places and seen many, many different people, but you are a special woman. A rare type. Someone, I might even say, almost equal to myself."

Sybil Jane felt a girlish warmth rise in her cheeks, and she chastised herself. A woman almost equal to Dr. Maddox wouldn't blush so stupidly. "Sir, I don't know what you mean."

He shook his head. "Oh, but you do. I can go anywhere I please, be anyone who suits me. Why do you think I came here, to this place that wishes it could remember when something of consequence happened?"

He paused, and Sybil Jane shook her head. Dr. Maddox leaned forward again, so close to her face he could have leaned in to kiss her. "It was you. The soul of Sybil Jane Armstrong drew me here. It is a mighty soul, and I want it, I want it bad. In return, I will give you the life you want. A ring for your finger. A place to lay your head at night, a home all your own. What do you say?"

Her heart had never beat so fast, her body had never hummed with such an electricity of joy and terror. To be the wife of John Clay Maddox, who could go anywhere and do anything. To keep his house, to feel his body next to hers in the dark, to give herself to him completely. All the years she had been forced to submit, and now she would do it willingly. Yes, she would still be trapped in this awful body, still be broken and crippled, but she would have her freedom. She would have him. Sybil Jane's mouth was dry, and she swallowed before she was able to speak.

"Yes," she laughed a sound of disbelief. "Yes, I would like that very much, sir."

Dr. Maddox clapped his hands together and laughed, a boyish, unrestrained laugh, the most joyful sound she had ever heard. "I'll be damned. Sybil Jane, you are wonderful."

Sybil Jane began to laugh too, big and joyous in a way that she had never been able to feel before. She was light, she was floating above her body, above this place, above the drudgery and hatred of the future that had seemed inescapable just hours ago. She was free.

The doctor began rummaging in his file cabinet, thumbing through yellowed reams of paper. "Well, Sybil Jane, you have much to think about. A man is no one to plan a wedding." Finally, he found the sheet he was looking for. "August is too terribly hot, I think, but October is beautiful, I hear." He opened one of the drawers of his desk and clattered around until he pulled out a pen, sliding it and the sheet of paper in front of her. "What do you think?"

The paper was old, ancient, maybe, certainly older than any document Sybil Jane had ever seen. It was covered from corner to corner in tiny print, written with such exaggerated flourishes and loops that, possessed of the written word as she certainly was, Sybil Jane could barely read it. She squinted down at it, leaning forward, but Dr. Maddox stopped her.

"Oh, don't worry about that, Sybil Jane. It's quite legalistic, but rest assured, I'll take care of everything. Just sign at the bottom."

Dr. Maddox tapped at the signature line with the pen, presenting it to her. She took it, but her hand tightened around it, unsure. She looked up at the doctor.

"And I'll get what you promised me?"

"Every little thing."

"We'll get married, and I'll live in your house, be a proper lady?"

"I am true to my word," Dr. Maddox said with a reassuring smile.

Sybil Jane nodded and brought the tip of the pen almost to the surface of the paper. Before she could begin, Dr. Maddox spoke, his face more grave and serious than she had ever seen it.

“Sybil Jane,” he looked her dead in the eye, “this contract is for all eternity. Once you sign that page, your everlasting soul is mine. You can beg and cry for it all you want, but I will never give it back.”

Sybil Jane nodded slowly. One day, when she had still been living with her mother on the pine road stretching far out of Talladega, a round-faced, white-suited man had come to the door, promising eternal salvation in a small, leather-bound black book. Though she had been only six years old, she could still remember his talk of salvation and damnation, the pure, cool breeze of heaven and the burning fire of hell hotter than anyone could imagine. And then, Dr. Maddox, his kiss and the heat in her thighs and the hope that once felt, she would kill to keep alive. She pressed the nib to paper, and signed her name, the color of the ink something curiously like her own blood on a sheet.

Dr. Maddox smiled and quickly rolled up the paper, taking the pen from her hand. “It’s all settled then, Sybil Jane. You’ll be out of here in no time at all.”

She smiled, then laughed, a quick, involuntary sound. Her hands shook like they never had before, and her face ached.

“Oh,” Dr. Maddox said, as if just remembering something. “There is just one more thing I’d like to ask you. Not on the order of a soul, no, no, no, just a little favor. Something I can’t do myself.”

Charlie Galloway was easy to convince - something about the moral weaknesses usually associated with schizophrenia, according to Dr. Maddox. The doctor had arranged for Sybil Jane to visit Charlie in the morning, before his treatment was to begin that afternoon. In preparation, Charlie had moved from the dormitory where he had slept for the last five years and ninety-four nights, into a private room suitable for observation. Dr. Maddox had allowed her to wear the blue dress from the night before, and Charlie’s eyes lit up when he saw it.

She took his hand and listened to his fears, fears of progress and the future and the goodness of medicine that could make him whole. Sybil Jane told him she wished there was such an easy cure for her malady, and Charlie looked a bit sheepish. After he agreed to the first course of treatment, Sybil Jane turned to go, but he put a hand on one of her handles.

“Miss Sybil Jane, uh...” he trailed off for a moment, looking shyly down at his shoes and wringing and wringing a handkerchief he didn’t hold. “Well, I’ve been thinking, about this treatment and all. If it really is successful, and I really do get to go back home after, well,

gosh... would you come with me? I think I'm strong enough to do just about everything that you need, and I've always been fond of you."

Sybil Jane blinked at him for a moment, unsure how to respond. A day ago, the suggestion would have been repulsive, not least of all because it would have brought her into even closer contact with Vera Hallowell. However, since she had made her arrangement with Dr. Maddox, she found herself enveloped by a strange and soft calm, an assuredness that she had never known before, the first wonder the devil brought forth. She smiled at Charlie, who looked so hopeful.

"I'd like that very much, Mr. Galloway."

He smiled as though he would never need a cure to be happy.

The second wonder the devil gifted her was sight. The first time it happened, the terror of madness coursed through her blood, so convinced was she that her mind had finally shattered and begun spinning lies. But the clarity of it all, the faces and rooms she recognized reassured her. All at once, on a Wednesday afternoon, she could see more, see beyond what she should have been able to. At times, she could see what Dr. John Clay Maddox could see, and this was how she saw the miracle.

Charlie Galloway was the first one she saw, but there were others, six schizophrenic men in total who received the first treatments at the Lucius County Asylum. Little happened of interest, aside from sweating and a pallor of the skin, until the sixth day of Charlie's injections. Dr. Maddox had never explained the procedure to her, and the attending nurses and orderlies had gained that knowledge at some time outside her view, but Sybil Jane understood quickly. The past five days were just preparation, just readying for the true purpose of the work. Dr. Maddox administered the insulin, and Charlie began to sweat and grow pale, eyes wide despite his richness of experience. Then, slowly, something new happened. His eyes closed and his body became lax, as though asleep, and then, convulsions rolled through him, arms and legs spasming like the worst of the epileptics, thrashing against some invisible enemy, a nightmare made real.

Sybil watched through the doctor's eyes as blood filled Charlie's mouth, as the tube was shoved down his throat and the medicine slowly stopped the convulsions and brought him back, made him real again. And after minutes and hours, he could answer questions, speak without that horrible nervousness he always carried around, speak to what was real and not the dream world he was so often trapped in. Despite herself, Sybil Jane felt tears well in her eyes. There wasn't supposed to be such beauty in hell.

She told no one, not even those too stupid to understand or speak the secret back to anyone, what she had done, how she had been chosen, and the knowledge of that night with Dr. Maddox burned at her. In moments, Sybil Jane found herself drifting away, choosing the color of the curtains she was soon to buy or the delicate blue florals of the china set to be displayed behind glass that she would soon gaze at with pride; and then Alice Cottey would drop a sheet in the laundry, or Vera Hollowell would whisper behind her hands to Marion Betts, and the unbearable horror of her reality would come crashing back down into her, harsh enough against her body to break each bone to dust.

Slowly, as August turned to September and then to October and she was still stuck in hell, the soft calmness, the buoyant joy which had carried Sybil Jane ever since that night in Dr. Maddox's office began to wear away. What was left in its place was made sharper by the bitterness of disappointed hopes, of a knowledge of what might have been, of the shame found only in believing. Dr. Maddox paid less attention to her, was more absorbed in his treatments, and she tore herself in half over it. If only she could have been stone cold silent to him, indifferent and alone, but each time he looked at her, each smile she was allowed was a blessing to her starving heart, and she hated herself for the joy she felt.

Hatred grew in her too for Vera Hollowell, the slut who tucked her skirt up when she heard the doctor coming, who sprayed perfume when she thought no one was looking and who every day shared more and more looks with the doctor which concealed nothing they were meant to. Paranoia rushed through her with a ferocity that Sybil Jane had never known. *Does he have her soul too? Has he gone behind my back? He'll leave me here forever, I know it.* She considered confronting him, but who was she to do so? Those beneath her bore the brunt of her rage; in her bitterness, she hated the awful specimens around her more than she ever had before.

The world ended on October 22nd. Sybil Jane and Alice were carrying a load of clean sheets back to the infirmary, Sybil Jane's basket balanced precariously on her knees as she carefully rolled down the hallway. Suddenly, she heard Dr. Maddox's voice. Her heart jumped for a moment, then sank twice as fast as she heard Vera Hollowell's stupid, airy laugh. Sybil Jane crept closer, for once glad that Alice couldn't speak. As they rounded a corner, Sybil Jane glimpsed the doctor first, and then Vera.

Sybil Jane was still unmarried, but she was not naïve. Thirteen years did not pass in hell without transmuting some understanding of the wants of men, and sometimes women.

She had heard and seen things that even as a small child, she knew were unwanted. What she and Alice saw happening between the doctor and Vera that day was far from unwanted by either party.

Vera saw them first, eyes growing wide in panic, and she tried to push Dr. Maddox away and pull down her skirt. Dr. Maddox turned to look behind them, and when his eyes met Sybil Jane's there was nothing in them. Nothing at all. He turned back to Vera and pulled up her skirt again. If Sybil Jane had been able to run, she would have charged at them both and beaten them until they were nothing but the pulp of Edward Metters' head against the office door back in 1929. Instead, she turned away, burning and burning and burning with all the love and hate she felt for John Clay Maddox.

When her mother had appeased the bible salesman and finally bought his book, Sybil Jane had read it, cover to cover. She had been too young to truly understand the stories it contained, taken instead with snakes in gardens and giant whales and oceans that could part and drown at will. Once she had been brought to hell, she attended the Sunday services because she had to, but even as an adult, the pastor's sermons meant very little to her. The apostles had never known a place like this, so what good were their lessons? Good and evil were left at the door of the Lucius County Asylum. Here, there was only survival.

If Sybil Jane had paid more attention to the verses and psalms, she might have had a greater understanding of what was happening to her. Might have stood a chance. Might have known, or remembered, that the devil is more cunning than any man alive or dead. Might have known she could not outsmart him.

Might have.

Sybil Jane's arms burned as she raced down the hallway towards Dr. Maddox's office, vowing to beat it down if he refused to let her in. She knew she was more real, more human than Edgar Metters because she was not crazy, but there was no space for that thought amongst all her rage. As she approached the door, she prepared to ram it, knees tensing, but to her surprise, it was unlocked, and a sliver of pale evening light glowed out into the hallway from its open edge. This unexpected development took some of the wind out of her sails, and Sybil Jane hesitated a moment before slowly entering the room.

The windows were open, and the gauzy, pale curtains fluttered with a soft breeze, but Dr. Maddox sat at his desk, sweating. It dripped down his forehead, and as he lifted a hand to wipe his brow, Sybil Jane saw that his shirt was soaked at the underarms. The sight made her

shiver involuntarily; had she been drenched in sweat in such weather, she would have been freezing.

“What do you want?” Dr. Maddox asked, and though she recognized the voice, it did not belong to the man she knew. That voice had been suave and confident, commanding, the song of a visionary and a world-changer. Now it was weak, debased to irritation. He was terribly diminished, and for a moment, Sybil Jane forgot all her anger and felt only sympathy, even alarm.

Only for a moment.

“You lied to me!” she rolled up to his desk and leaned over as far as she could, the sharpness of the wood digging into her ribs, “You promised me you would take me away, and now you’re going on with that idiot slut Vera Hallowell.”

Dr. Maddox sighed deeply. From this close vantage point, Sybil Jane could see lines on his face, deltas from the corners of his eyes and stock-straight canyons from the edges of his mouth to his chin. Had they always been there?

“Small people,” the doctor said, his voice tired. “I’m surrounded by small people every day.”

“What do you mean? We had a deal.”

“God, you think I care about your deal?” As he said the last word, Dr. Maddox slammed both hands down on his desk with terrible ferocity, and Sybil Jane jumped and spasmed severely, kicking herself back from the desk and almost out of her chair. The doctor too bolted out of his seat and began pacing the office with a manic energy that she had never seen before. She was terrified.

“It’s not enough, it’s never enough! Day after day after day, and so many of them, and still, it does nothing! All my work, all my life has been put into this, and to what end?”

Dr. Maddox stopped pacing all at once, the motion simply gone from him, and turned to look at Sybil Jane.

“Have you forgotten the miracle, Sybil Jane?”

Sybil Jane resented few things more than being pushed, given that she was perfectly capable of moving on her own, but she knew she could do nothing against Dr. Maddox. As it was, he moved so quickly down the hallway that he was almost running, the endless doors blurring past, the motion like that fateful ride in an automobile, her last day of freedom before the asylum swallowed her. She was unsure whether it was the motion or the fear in her heart which made her nauseous.

In only a moment, they reached the door to the observation room where the insulin patients were kept, and Dr. Maddox pushed her inside and shut the door. For one horrible, panicked second, Sybil Jane was afraid that the unthinkable would be done to her, but then she heard the squeaking of a gurney and the low murmur of voices, and the door opened again. She turned around and saw Dr. Maddox maneuvering a gurney overflowing with a massive patient, into the room.

“Now, I know it’s not the usual time for our sessions, Charlie, but we have a very special guest today. Look who it is.” As though nothing had happened, the old Dr. Maddox was back, at least in voice. He was calm and confident, already sure he would get what he wanted so having no need to ask.

The figure on the gurney turned to face her, and shocked, Sybil Jane realized that it was Charlie Galloway. His thin, wiry frame had ballooned enormously, the fat bulging out from every surface of his body until she could barely recognize him. His eyes were different too, glassy and dull like Alice’s, and it took far longer than it should have for him to recognize her.

“Hello...Sybil...Jane,” he drawled slowly, like every word was being pulled up from riverbottom mud. He smiled. It seemed genuine.

Sybil Jane had watched the treatment through Dr. Maddox’s eyes, but nothing compared to seeing it in person. The sting on her nose of the alcohol pads, the rubber smell of the tubing, the thrill of her physical closeness, not even behind glass! Dr. Maddox drew up the insulin, talking here and there with all his old assuredness about how well the treatment was working, how it had been so long since Charlie saw floating bright lights and knew beyond anything else that there were radio broadcasts coming from behind his walls. Charlie agreed in his way, slow nods and affirming sounds that weren’t quite words. The injection, painless as far as she could tell, the sweating, and then the falling unconscious, the great and terrible spasms which shook the gurney, the blood coming from Charlie’s mouth.

But something new happened this time, something she had never seen before with Charlie or any of the other men. Something that the devil wanted her to see. Charlie spasmed and rolled for longer than any patient she had observed, and then slowly, his wild limbs were calm, and his lips took on a blue tinge.

“Come on, come on, come on! Come on Charlie.” Dr. Maddox, who had been watching the proceedings intently and occasionally making notes, jumped up and grasped the rubber tube with a shocking intensity. “I don’t have a nurse; I’ll need you to help me.” He

addressed Sybil Jane as though she knew what he wanted her to do. Yes, she had watched the intubation before, but those patients had been breathing and observing through someone else's eyes was far from the real thing.

"Sybil Jane! Pinch his lips so they open!" Sybil Jane started heavily, her foot kicking the gurney, but once she regained herself, she did as she was told. The blood around Charlie's mouth was colder than she expected and had already started to gel together. It was awful and slippery on her fingers, and she grasped his lips several times before she was able to open his mouth. She touched sharp, hard pieces, what was left of his teeth. Dr. Maddox shoved the rubber tube down Charlie's throat and administered the medicine.

"Come on Charlie, this will do it. Come back. Come back and show them all that you're better."

Nothing. Dr. Maddox began pressing on Charlie's chest, leaning his entire weight onto the man's newly massive frame. Frantic pulses.

Nothing. "God damn it!" Dr. Maddox yelled, pressing faster on Charlie's chest. Sybil Jane heard dull cracks, and his ribcage no longer looked as it should. This was not how it was supposed to go.

With a last pulse, Dr. Maddox let go, arms falling limp at his sides. Sybil Jane was in a frenzy, unable to process what she had just witnessed. There were many deaths in the Lucius County Asylum, some natural, most not, but this was far beyond all that she had seen before. Suddenly, almost imperceptibly, something began to rise from Charlie Galloway's corpse, with its beginning in his broken chest. It was...a light? A swirling, golden light which rose slowly from his body and melted into Dr. Maddox as he leaned over the man. As the light entered him, Dr. Maddox began to change, straightening up, growing somehow, not in stature, but in presence. His back straightened, his hands and arms gripped tighter, his eyes shone out clearer. The lines on his face disappeared.

Dr. Maddox yawned and stretched, his joints popping. He turned to Sybil Jane and smiled, and he was that man she had met in the hallway, the man who could heal her, who could save her, who could make her whole and real and human.

"Now," Dr. Maddox said, as self-assured as she had ever seen him, "I trust that you'll understand the importance of my work, Sybil Jane, and that you won't be too melancholy over the loss of your friend, Mr. Galloway. Sacrifice is important in scientific endeavors."

Sybil Jane nodded, and it was at this moment that she began to formulate a plan.

The morning of October 23rd was unusually hot as Sybil Jane headed towards the laundry, feeling the insulin syringe sitting in her worn pocket every time she wheeled herself forward. Her head rushed with every thought possible in such a situation; she was not as cool as she had hoped. There were so many opportunities for failure, so many random, unknown obstacles this place could throw at her. What if one of the epileptics had a fit before she could do it, and Vera Hallowell was called away? What if her hand shook and the stick wasn't true? What if Vera Hallowell, a nurse, recognized the feeling of a hypodermic going into her skin, never for a second thinking it was a mosquito? What if—

There was no more time. Sybil Jane had reached the door to the laundry, and Vera Hallowell and Alice Cottey were already inside. The heat and humidity were a punch to the face, and for a moment, she struggled to breathe. Sweat pricked at her palms, and a new fear of dropping the syringe grew up next to all the others. Next to Sybil Jane, Alice began pouring laundry soap into her vat, the sour smell of tallow blooming up with the steam. She was humming today, too idiotic as she was to understand the value of silence, the horrible droning noise hammering inside Sybil Jane's skull. Soon it would all be over. She would be free, never have to hear it again, if only she could keep her nerve.

Marion Betts resumed her daily torrent of pointless information, the wedding cake recipe she had seen in that week's *Good Housekeeping*, her beau's new cologne and how it smelled of the ocean, though she herself had not gone there yet, why the fall was the best season to get married, on and on. Sybil Jane watched her and Vera Hallowell out of one eye while she emptied a basket of urine-soaked sheets into her vat. But Vera Hallowell was listening to Marion even less this morning than she was apt to, instead patting the pockets of her dress, looking for something.

"Leave them in your purse, hon?" Marion asked, and Vera Hallowell answered yes before huffing out of the laundry. Sybil Jane turned back to the vat and stirred, the stench of urine rushing up to sting her eyes. She looked back at Marion, who was now staring out the window, fresh cigarette between her lips. She wouldn't see, not if Sybil Jane was smart enough to do it right. She set the wooden pole down and grasped the syringe in her pocket with one hand. *One one thousand*. Vera Hallowell could walk quickly on her perfect legs. *Two one thousand*. She would hear her before she saw her. *Three one thousand*. How long did it take to get a carton of cigarettes from the break room, only yards away? *Four one thousand*. She would die if she had to wait too many moments longer. *Five one thousand*.

The clicking of high-heeled shoes in the hallway, and Sybil Jane forgot how to breathe.

“I miss anything?” Cigarette smoke carried Vera Hallowell’s words into the room before her body.

“The animals must be hibernating today,” Marion said, and Sybil Jane’s face burned. “The trees are turning early this year,” Marion continued. “Jackson says he’ll get a car soon and take me on a drive up to the old mill.” She giggled and smirked. “I hope he can keep his eyes on the road.”

Vera Hallowell was almost next to Sybil Jane now, headed towards Marion and the window. She turned back, a devilish look on her face. “You dreamin’ of something like that instead of working, Sybil Jane?” More smoke into Sybil Jane’s eyes and mouth. Vera Hallowell leaned in close, her voice a whisper. “I’ve been in his car. He drives real fast, you know.”

Vera Hallowell turned back towards Marion, and time slowed in a curious way which Sybil Jane had never guessed was possible. Later, as her vision began to grow dark around the edges and she felt her body beginning to shake uncontrollably, she would remember a feeling that her arm moved of its own accord, stabbing the syringe hard into Vera Hallowell’s thigh, through her skirt and stockings, as far as it would go, pressing down until there was nothing left inside.

Vera Hallowell cried out, and Sybil Jane pulled her hand back, the syringe falling to the floor and shattering. Vera Hallowell pressed a hand to the back of her thigh and whipped around. When she saw the glass, a hatred grew in her eyes such as Sybil Jane had never seen in thirteen years in hell.

Vera lunged at Sybil Jane. “You deformed fucking spastic bitch!” She reached out, red nails clawing for eyes, cheeks, the softness of flesh only a sharp point knows. Sybil Jane propelled herself forward, arms pumping as tears of rage squeezed from her eyes. Her knees tensed, then slammed into Vera Hallowell’s perfect, straight shins. Her left leg spasmed out, but she could no longer feel agony, only a joy as she watched Vera Hallowell’s eyes cloud from the sharp clarity of a predator to the scrambling panic of prey.

Vera Hallowell’s body tipped back, tottering on high-heeled shoes, and she fell into the next vat, empty of sheets, but boiling all the same. A sick, wet crack filled the laundry as her head hit the back rim, and a strangled, strange scream clawed its way from her throat as her flesh began to steam. Her peroxide-blond hair was tinged pink, and her raw fingers, bones peering out from ribbons of flesh, scraped at the iron sides. Her noise didn’t stop. Sybil Jane got two hits to Vera’s stomach with the heavy laundry pole before a sharp pain in her

head sent her crashing to the floor. As she hit the ground, she saw shiny shoes and pinstripe pants in the doorway. A piece of glass cut her cheek, and then she stopped seeing anything.

Vera Hallowell died three days later. The Lucius County Asylum was a long way from anywhere, and so she was never taken to a hospital. According to Dr. John Clay Maddox, she succumbed to blood poisoning due to her infected open wounds. She was buried in the family plot in Masterson, eighteen miles outside of hell.

Sybil Jane Armstrong took longer to die. Perhaps, without a soul, her body clung more fiercely and jealously to the world of the living. Dr. John Clay Maddox had never administered insulin shock therapy to a woman before, not least of all one who was spastic. In the 32 days of Sybil Jane's treatment, he learned much about the boundaries of human suffering, and little of any medical importance.

When she sold her soul to the devil that rainy night in August, Sybil Jane had not feared the consequences. Two-thirds of her life, she believed, had already been spent in hell, and she had suffered there all physical and spiritual tortures which could be imagined. The richness and the beauty of the life she was promised was far worth the discomforts her soul might experience.

She was so terribly mistaken.

Second Sight

The day he first saw the things, the sun burned down and made diamonds on the surface of the ocean. June was often cloudy over the beach, the air pressed heavy against skin, swollen with mist and threatening to burst into rain at any moment. The soft, grey light of an overcast day would wrap around Promontory Rock, wisps of cloud like velvet against the pines, which stood stubbornly upright, even as the surf stole more and more of their footholds. The skeleton trees, visible only at low tide, melted into the sky, rock-fossil forms soft and dissolving into the mist.

Not so on the day the things came.

Jack Peterson, insurance number 1070832455, of room two at Seacrest Independent Living Solutions, first saw them while looking out the rec room window and thinking that it would be such a great day to ride a bike. He was, of course, not allowed to ride bikes anymore. Ever since the 2022 Ram 2500 slammed into his body while he was riding his blue Giant Contend SL 1 bike down the 101 highway, he was not allowed to do much of anything. Though some residents were allowed to ride adult-sized adaptive tricycles, the liability of further head injuries meant Seacrest Independent Living Solutions absolutely prohibited Jack from bike riding, along with motorcycle riding, tractor driving, skiing, skydiving and bungee jumping. At 25, he was in an early, and exceedingly boring, retirement.

Jack was considering the inherent unfairness of this policy and watching the parks employees dig bonfire holes for the 4th of July fireworks, when he noticed them. The things looked small, stark black rectangles against the razorblade of the horizon. At first, he thought they were ships, although the only ships he knew of in that shape were barges, and they couldn't sail the Pacific. But as he kept looking, he saw more and more of them, stretching out in both directions. To the north, they disappeared to pinpricks, tiny dots like sesame seeds at the edge of his vision, and to the south, the coast curved away around the bluff and blocked his view. There had to be at least a hundred, maybe more.

This could not be good.

Jack looked down and saw the village of Lawrence stretched out below him, the neat grid of streets in the center sprawling out into curving access roads, blocks of vacation rentals

and a few empty lots which were the last bastion of resistance against development at the edges. There was the striped red and white ice cream van crammed with tourists, the Lawrence Trading Co. general store and its knockoff Haida formlines, the tiny, concrete elementary school and the few roads of gingerbread-style houses in quaint, pastel colors. At their only coffee shop, one of those new cops he didn't recognize was checking his phone, one of the ones with no badge, just a tactical vest and the bandana pulled over the lower half of his face. The weekend support workers whispered about them taking people away. On the outside wall of the coffee shop, the tsunami evacuation sign gestured the route away from the great, taking sea.

How many times had Jack raced through the town on his bike, icecreamvan generalstore oldschool coolhouses all blurred together in a mass of color and shape and the exhilaration of that motion, forward, forward by the burn of his thighs.

Now the village was static, and he was worlds away up on the lonely cliff, and those things were coming.

The main door to the rec room squeaked loudly open, startling him from his self-pity. Before Jack could turn around, Luz was inside the room, dragging the ancient vacuum cleaner, followed by Rachel, who was speaking to her in Spanish.

“-sí, sí, yo se. *Y ella encanta la playa, es muy bien para ti y su esposo* – Hi Jack! Are you ready to go?” His sister's voice was less irritating when she spoke Spanish, probably because he couldn't understand what she was saying. Every time she addressed him since the accident, her voice was full of energy and exuberance, as though *this, right now*, was the best thing that had ever happened. Luckily for her, Rachel didn't rely on responses to keep the conversation going, so the fact that Jack couldn't speak back didn't affect her at all.

“It's such a lovely day, isn't it? Gosh, this weather isn't like Oregon at all, look at that sunshine, I guess I'll need to wear my sunscreen before we go, won't I?” Rachel pulled her sunglasses down over her eyes and looked out the window over the sparkling ocean.

The natural beauty did the room few favors, serving to highlight the chipped, puke-green paint, amoeba-shaped water stains on the ceiling, balding carpet and flickering fluorescent lights which sometimes made his head ache. The space's ugliness was outdone only by its lack of any recreational activities. An ancient ping-pong table collected dust in the corner; one TV blared a rerun of *Cops* to a man with Down Syndrome who hadn't moved in

the past six hours, and another revealed the imminent dangers of immigration at the southern border to two glass-eyed support workers.

“—these criminals are coming here, bringing drugs to your kids, and they’re destroying our way of life!”

“Hope Luz has her papers,” one of the workers mumbled robotically, not moving from the rapture of the screen.

The residents were growing moldy, just like the old house.

Luz turned on the vacuum cleaner, and the loud whine filled Jack’s ears as he realized that Rachel hadn’t noticed the things on the horizon. He pointed, suddenly frantic, only able to manage small noises when he wanted to scream.

Rachel looked concerned and eyed Luz, who was pretending not to notice. “Yeah, it’s a really nice day and we’re going to go to the beach. Jack, are you all right?”

He pulled out his laminated card, one half red and the other half green, no and yes, and tapped frantically at the red side and then out the window. Rachel’s eyes were wild with confusion, darting back and forth and still unable to comprehend.

The edge was always, always right there, and that scared people, although they could never have been more scared than Jack. The edge like the cliff on Seaview Road, running, running along it in the burning sun, the last time he ran before the accident, and if he wasn’t careful he would fall and that would be the end. Rachel’s face started to melt and swirl around the edges, and blinding sunbursts of light exploded across his vision. He could just make out the rectangles, bigger than they should have been—they would have to move faster than the whole world to get that close in so short a time—and then he hit the floor.

There had been too many hospital visits over the last six months for this one to be memorable. Jack’s mind was water anyway after the episode. Floating in and out, Rachel, with her real face, their dad, drawn and exhausted, so small in this vast white room, though he normally made ceilings afraid. White coats, the black box of the brain and all its wonderous and terrible mysteries. Rachel, oh it must have been the vacuum, we’ll have to tell Luz she can only clean it when he’s out.

No one asked him any questions.

And after years that were seconds all blended and ran together, he was back in his room, the blinds drawn tight, no summer sun into his eyes. No rec room desolation. None of

those huge ocean monoliths to monitor. Though he knew they were there, and still coming closer.

It was three more days before Jack was allowed the outing that he had missed, to Lawrence Beach for ice cream with Rachel. Their dad came too, maybe out of an abundance of caution, but it was more supervision than Jack needed. He still knew the way, and the town was too small for the van owner, the cousin of his eighth-grade teacher, to screw him over on the price and live out the rest of the day. Jack was the only one who still knew this.

Jack was lucky, oh so lucky, everyone said. He survived being hit by the truck with only shattered ribs, a broken collarbone and a serious brain injury. A serious brain injury, which according to the top neurologists in the state, should have left him with the consciousness of his mangled bike, stuffed into the shed because his dad couldn't bear to get rid of it. And yet here he was, walking around and capable of some basic understanding of what was happening in the outside world. A voice wasn't very much to lose compared to all that, was it?

"Okay Jack, honey, which one do you want?" Rachel pulled him back to the present. "There's Eighth Birthday Cake, Colossal Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough, Salem Summer Strawberry, Vanilla Old Fashioned, wait, that's not like the cocktail, is it? Excuse me, the Vanilla Old Fashioned doesn't actually have old fashioned in it, right? Excuse me, he can't have alcohol, the vanilla doesn't actually have alcohol, does it?"

The stoned teenager working the van looked at Rachel as though she'd just asked him to pour her a cup of jet fuel, and Jack rolled his eyes. Their dad looked incredibly uncomfortable, his mouth opening several times with the weak idea of interrupting her, but he had been powerless in his silence against Rachel since she was five years old and developed the habit of correcting the adults around her. Their father's silence wasn't forced like Jack's—he did occasionally speak—but it was a silence like the ocean, large and constant and comforting only in the sense that you missed it when you were far away.

The ocean.

Jack had looked, of course he had looked, it was impossible for him to spend a single second thinking about anything else. There had been the deep ache of dread in his chest as he pulled up the blinds that morning to find the sun still burning down on the ocean, its reflection almost blinding him, and those huge rectangular monoliths now more than halfway

to the shore. A vague, naïve hope like a prayer had been living at the base of his skull, whispering soft comforts that those invaders were just figments of his imagination, just fried synapses firing at will, that they were just as fake as Rachel's melted face and those migraine sunbursts. But he was still seeing them, and they behaved like they were real for everyone, not just for him.

He looked again, standing by the red and white striped ice cream van not 100 yards from the shore, and they were still there, closer now, looming over the town like great towering cliffs, like long-lost islands that had decided only now to announce themselves to the mainland. Even in the summer heat, Jack shivered. Every time he looked at them, he knew death, in the same way he had known it the second before the truck collided with his body.

Jack looked down the beach and saw two workers, clad in yellow hi-vis vests, clearing driftwood off the sand. A fire hazard. Lawrence's fireworks were legendary up and down the Oregon coast, and they drew hundreds of tourists to the tiny town each Independence Day. Hundreds of people who would be right there tomorrow night when those things came to the shore, and whatever they were carrying burst out onto the beach and that would be it. Oh god. He felt like throwing up.

"—alright, thank you. My gosh, was that really so difficult?" Rachel turned away from the ice cream van, to which she had used her powers of speaking to summon a manager only marginally older and less intoxicated than the employee. Stuck out in both hands were two waffle cones loaded with double scoops. "Here Jack, this is the vanilla. I got a cup and a spoon too, in case you need it. God, you would think with all these tourists they'd train their people better. I mean it was just a simple question of ingredients, some people have dietary restrictions for crying out loud. Anyway—"

The trio began to walk down the boardwalk, which was really just two restaurants, a bar and a cracked and potholed strip of asphalt which was significantly harder to navigate than the sand underneath it. Jack felt like his head wasn't attached to his body, limbs lead with fear. Up ahead, vacation houses and the small motel dominated the shoreline, but the beach was still public access, narrowly preserved at the last town council meeting. Rachel saw someone she knew down by the water, dragging a wet and sandy child by a reluctant hand, and ran down to greet them. "Oh my god, Donna, I haven't seen you since—"

Jack and their father continued walking, the silence a comfortable companion. After a few moments, his dad stuck out his ice cream cone.

“Salem Summer Strawberry. You like that better than vanilla, right?”

This brought Jack back for a second, away from those monoliths. He nodded vigorously and the two cones swapped hands with no incident. They walked for a while longer, enjoying the ice cream and the option of quiet, passing two cops along the way, tactical gear on despite the heat.

Even with the growing distance, they could still hear wisps of Rachel’s conversation, steady like the tides in the same way their father’s quiet was. He finished his ice cream, the cone crunching, and then observed: “Back in the day, the phone company charged texts by the character. Worst day of my life is when I came home to a \$300 bill from your sister talking to her friends at all hours. I made her pay it, too. Maybe that’s why she always makes me split the bill now.”

Jack chuckled quietly, soft in the absurdity and truth of the story. He hadn’t been fast enough with the ice cream, and it was melting down his hand, sticky pink, blood and cream. He bent down to lick away the mess, and his dad caught his eye.

“You’re still in there, aren’t you?”

Jack stopped walking, and his dad stopped too.

Two months after the accident, Jack woke up from a coma and confirmed the medical suspicion that he was unable to speak. About a week later, when he could stay awake for more than an hour, one of the endless army of people who now invaded his world to keep him alive brought in a device like a tablet, which, through some technical magic far above him, understood what he was looking at and spoke words in return. This was the answer, at least until things got better, and Rachel firmly believed they would, but in the meantime, he could be a part of the world again.

Through the double vision he could see the screen, split into a green “yes” and a red “no”. The speech pathologist asked him, “Is your name Jack Peterson?”

He knew that the answer was yes, and he stared at that green rectangle with all the desperation of a man awaiting the result of his death penalty trial. The machine spoke his answer, a grating, cruel, metallic voice that was nothing like Jack, and then the edges were pulled away from the world and shapes began to melt into pools of bleeding color. His head was ripped apart and blinding spots of light burned through like matches to a piece of paper. Then, everything went dark.

“In a very small percentage of people,” the doctor told his father and Rachel later, “mechanized voices trigger migraine attacks, and even seizures.” Given the severity of Jack’s injury, and the fact that there were more attacks soon after, triggered by noise or exhaustion or nothing, they decided the risk was too great to keep trying.

No one asked Jack. The accident took his ability to read and write, so even if they had asked, he would have struggled to answer.

Back on the beach, tears wanted to spill out of Jack’s eyes, and that scared him more than all the rest because his dad was more useless at dealing with emotion than he was at understanding the surgeon’s complicated neurological terms. For a moment there was possibility between the two men, the chance of some understanding after all the months. Jack stared out at the monsters on the horizon and pointed. His dad turned to follow his outstretched finger.

“Sky over the ocean sure is beautiful, kid. I’m glad you can still appreciate that.”

No, no, no. No hope. Jack took a shuddering breath, and all the warmth that had filled him at his dad’s halting realization was gone. His dad couldn’t see them either. Fuck what anyone else said, those things were real. He looked at the horizon, at the terror of the unknown future, and his father sighed. Putting a hand to Jack’s shoulder, he turned them around, towards Rachel and her noise of oblivion.

The adaptive trike was easier to steal than Jack had suspected. The shed which housed it, tucked into a shady corner of the backyard at Seacrest Independent Living Solutions, wasn’t even locked, and though it was much heavier than a regular bike, Jack was able to walk with it easily. The helmet in its basket was tight across his forehead, and for a moment after he put it on, the terror of the sparks was across his vision, and he was ready to collapse and be caught and have it all done with, just a stupid idea. But those huge monsters were almost at the shore now, and hundreds of people would be gathered up and down the beach to watch the fireworks. He had to try.

In summer, the curfew was extended to 8 p.m., the daylight still stretching long in purple strips across the town, through the trees, down to the backyard. Jack knew that the night security guard would come on duty when it was mostly dark, with only a whisper of pink left in the western sky. Most of the staff, minus Luz, who had disappeared, and an elite corps of the residents would be down there, already setting up beach chairs and roasting

marshmallows. By his calculations, that's where his risk of being discovered would be the highest, but he was banking on the dark and the large amounts of alcohol he knew would be consumed down there to be on his side.

The cheap plastic door of the shed caught on a rock embedded in the dirt, and Jack froze as the sound echoed across the yard. It could well have been a whisper, but it felt to him like a firework booming across the water. He didn't dare to breathe, ears straining, but there was no disaster, no doors slammed open, no voices calling out. Jack adjusted his backpack and pulled the pale blue trike out into the twilight. No going back now.

The backyard saw so little use that the two loose fenceposts near the shed had never been repaired, at least not while Jack had been living there. He'd seen squirrels and feral cats chase each other through the small opening, but his passage wasn't as graceful. He shoved the trike through, wishing all the time it had only two wheels and a light carbon fiber frame; next, the backpack, and finally himself. Jagged breaks of timber scratched at his spine, ribs twinging with the memory of another impact.

Jack stood up too quickly in the exhilaration of transgressing, and the world swam before he clutched onto the trike. No time. It was only a few yards to the chain-link fence, and beyond that the construction site with its fluorescent spray paint and taped off skeleton, half-finished and sweating like everything else in the heat. He hoisted the trike over the fence, shocked at how useless his arms had become, and tried three times before he could get his legs to vault over the fence. His knee twinged as he landed. No time.

He strapped the helmet onto his head and jumped on the trike when he hit the gravel access road. This thing was cumbersome, heavy and hard to steer, worlds away from his lithe, speeding chariot, just a blur down the track. He shifted gears as his legs found the familiar thrill of pumping, and pinetrees, oldshed, tractortires began to smear past him. The feel of the wind whipping past was euphoric, enough to drown out the worries of another cracked skull, more gravel embedded in his shins. No, he was still in there. He could still do this.

Jack made it down the cliff unscathed, but he nearly toppled over in shock at the line of cars, bumper to bumper on the highway, stretching as far as he could see and dead-ending in the tiny town. No, no, no, no, no, not all these people. Up ahead, lights flashed red and blue against the asphalt, and Jack squeezed the brakes and took off into the thick stand of pines. After a few yards, he abandoned the trike. Easier to hide on foot, anyway.

The crackle and screech of police radio sounded in his head as though he were right next to the checkpoint. *Alpha Romeo, it's a no go down the main street now. Okay, sending*

four-wheel drives to the creek. Fuck it's hot out here, but he passed the two police cars without incident. It didn't matter what happened to him after, he just had to get down to the water, had to make them see, somehow, before it was too late. Suddenly, a firecracker exploded, shaking his bones, and Jack reached frantically into the backpack for his noise-cancelling headphones. Even after he donned them, he could still feel the explosions, and the quiet was a minefield, every second carrying something vital he might miss and then he would be caught and it would be the end—

Oh no.

Lawrence beach was packed full, even though the western sky was still tinged purple-blue with the last surviving daylight. Jack saw two state police in uniforms, and three more sheriff's deputies he recognized in plain clothes spread evenly amongst the crowd. The air was too hot, hotter than it should have been off the Pacific at dusk, but still, all these out-of-towners had come from Salem and Eugene to spend their 4th of July at the beach. The sweet smell of bonfires, with their usual accompaniments of roasting hot dogs and burnt marshmallows, was strong in Jack's nose, as was the lingering acid of gunpowder. He scanned the crowd, but he couldn't see Rachel and his dad among the throngs of people.

The way down to the sand was steep and rocky, and Jack slipped twice on his way. A gaggle of school kids, dragged along by a panting border collie, passed him on the way up, but they were too enthralled by the dog and the freedom of the night air to notice him.

Sand filled his tennis shoes the second they hit the beach, and he pulled them off, the pain of broken glass better than the torture of grit against his socks. He dropped the socks and his New Balances, no time. He squinted towards the waterline. Oh god.

Running, running, weaving, dodging, falling and raising back up because there was no pain like the terror, like the knowing that he was running out of time. Past families all decked out in Gap hoodies, Yeti coolers and Stanley cups, manicured fingers reflecting the firelight. Past designer oodle dogs and kids waving lit sparklers a foot away from their faces, the light trails staying in Jack's eyes long after the sticks had gone out. Through the headphones, all the noise was a blur, and yet some of them were so loud he could catch snippets of their conversations,

“—well, the cleaning service has gotten so much more expensive and the usual girl—”

“—I wanted to put Baxtley into water polo this year, but his dad—”

“McKayla really needs a new phone, everyone else has—”

Talking, talking, always talking about nothing.

And then he was there, and there was nothing to distract him. The massive black form, the size of a skyscraper, loomed almost directly in front of him, not 50 yards away from shore. He had to crane his neck to look up at it, and even in the summer heat, his stomach was made of ice. Each day, he had watched these grow closer, moving not with the wind or the tide but with some force all their own, their motion as inexorable as glaciers, and now they were here. Looking down the beach in both directions, they were massed like an infinite line of sentries, blocking out all the world.

The flickering of many fires illuminated the huge, hulking boxes, but they were darker than the growing twilight dark, each so black it was like looking at a hole in reality, like looking at nothing. But in the golden softness of the firelight, Jack noticed something he hadn't before. From a distance, the things looked solid, with no visible texture, no sign of seams or fastenings to indicate they could open. Up closer, however (and the flickering light didn't help), he thought he could see water flowing out in a rectangular shape on the front face of each monolith. He leaned forward, squinting, no, it couldn't be—

The sky above him boomed and crackled, and pink and red sparks exploded over the sea as the first firework shone out in the dark. A cheer rang out from the beach behind him, a hundred kids squealing in delight, and a few starting to cry. More and more fireworks boomed, and Jack could feel them inside his head, though the sound was muffled. Green, red, gold, blue, silver, pink, a million stars born and dying away in seconds. Their light was infernal against the black sky, and he couldn't tell if the showers of sparks across his eyes were real or a sign that he was about to fall off the cliff. He fumbled in the backpack and pulled out the sunglasses, the shades blocking out nearly everything except the fuzzy glow of bonfires and the showers of fireworks. Dazed, he stumbled back and fell to a seat on the damp, brown-sugar sand, one headphone knocked from its place. Out of the rushing wall of sound, he could hear,

“Jack? Oh my god, Jack, is that you? What are you doing? How did you get out?” Rachel was running over to him, their dad and his bad knee following a few yards behind. Jack was dizzy and nauseous, but he pointed frantically out to sea, some last-ditch hope that he could make them know what was about to happen, save at least his family if no one else.

Rachel reached him and knelt down, pulling off his headphones and sunglasses. “Jack, can you hear me?!” The full noise of another firework drowned out the sound, but he’d been in this situation before and knew that was always the first thing she asked. She waved a hand over his face, but he struggled to follow it, memories of spark showers clouding his vision. Their dad reached him, panting. Rachel said something to him. Jack’s head ached, and he knew he was right on the cliff’s edge. God, he had been so close—

Everything that happened that night, in Lawrence and in countless other towns and cities like it along the west coast, could have been prevented. The tens of thousands of casualties, billions of dollars in property damage, the rending of time into *before* and *after*, all of it could have been prevented, or at least mitigated. The things that emerged from the ocean that night were mortal, could be killed by human weapons despite their terrifying size, their inexorable forward movement, the way their gaze (could it be called that when it wasn’t clear whether they had eyes?) froze some of their victims, leaving them helpless to the great destruction rolling towards them. Jack had been the first to see them, but he was far from the last. Those who saw and were not frozen soon realized that these beings were not aggressive, at least not as one might have feared. They did not lash out with that mass of writhing limbs, did not grasp at people or cars or supermarkets with empty shelves that were just out of their reach. They simply moved forward, forward, forward, as though following orders so far above human understanding that they may as well have not existed.

Once their path became clear, straight across the country, through the heartland and back into the water when they hit the Atlantic (or the Great Lakes, sparing much of New England), plans were put in place. Soldiers were deployed to the ever-encroaching front line, but it seemed they were particularly vulnerable to being frozen mid-step and unceremoniously crushed. What was left of the armed forces evacuated whole swathes of land in the path of the destruction; those who could not leave were blamed for their own stupidity, as though luck played on the same field as intelligence. Survivors called it the Second Coming, the earth cleansing itself of undesirables, the natural solution to overpopulation. It was blamed on feminism, gender reassignment surgery, immigration, coal mining, lithium mining, the internet, secularism, terrorism, everything and nothing.

Jack Peterson, insurance number 1070832455, formerly of room two at Seacrest Independent Living Solutions in Lawrence, Oregon, never got credit for being the first to notice the impending invasion, the first to feel the danger in his bones. He survived that night

on the beach and was evacuated with the rest of his neighbors, first to a section of Kansas that the destruction had totally missed, and then to another small town in New Hampshire. He was moved to room eighteen at Choice Pines Residential, a group home negligibly different than Seacrest. He lived there until his death at age 48 of heart failure.

Everything that happened that night, the great shattering of a nation, ripping apart of its land and its people and all the monuments they had made to their own arrogance, could have been prevented, and Jack was the only one who knew this. Perhaps the stress caused his heart to fail prematurely. Whatever the case, the warnings of one young man with a serious brain injury, unable to talk and prone to hallucinations and seizures, went unheeded. After all, heroes have a certain image to uphold, and Jack didn't fit. Who would listen to the ravings of a lunatic, to the misfiring synapses of an invalid who, let's face it, was probably better off dead?

Would you?

